AFSA
ALLIANCE FOR FOOD SOVEREIGNTY IN AFRICA

LAND CASE STUDY

Community conservation of land and sustainable utilization of biodiversity in Zimbabwe.

Summary

By eliminating unwarranted opening of new land for farming, indiscriminate cutting of trees and bushfires, woodlands are regenerating, wild mushrooms can be harvested again and small wildlife like bushbucks are returning. Tortoises and snakes including the much feared black mamba cobras are reoccupying their original habitats. The degraded environment and soil health is improving. But by far the most important and lasting success is the change in the mind-set of Mutseta villagers who have embraced biodiversity conservation, management and sustainable utilization of land as a way of guaranteeing availability of these resources to future generations. An agreed and signed constitution governing the collective management of the village natural resources bears testimony to this.

Context

The Manga community inhabit Mutetsa Village in Guruve District, 150kms north of Zimbabwe's capital, Harare. This used to be a sacred place with forests that produced fruits, mushrooms, small game, caterpillars and necessities like firewood, thatching grass and bark string.
The unprecedented wave of destruction of trees and the environment due to population pressure and as people sought timber for various uses has led to a catastrophic led to a catastrophic shrinking of the wilderness. The ever increasing population is leading to more land being cleared for planting crops. This has led to massive degradation of grazing land which cannot meet the increased grazing pressure. Also, there is a pressing need for timber for making household items such as pestles, wooden cutlery and roofing timber. Local manufacturing of agricultural implements such as yokes and scotch carts put a lot of strain on timber resources. Tobacco, the main cash crop, is increasing strain on the already depleted forest because of its high energy requirements and bark string needs. Tree cutting for firewood (of *Maturi, Ngoma and Majoki* varieties) as well as herbal and medicinal use, also contribute significantly to deforestation and land degradation. The indiscriminate fires caused by honey gatherers and hunters of small game have a profound effect on the already dire situation.

As a direct result of this overexploitation, once pristine forests and woodlands are now degraded wastelands and have lost their capacity to self regulate and to sustainably meet the communities' needs. In many villages today, firewood is a major problem. Wild fruits and mushrooms are becoming rare. Conflicts over forest resources and land grabbing are not uncommon and cases of poaching in the adjacent forested commercial farming areas are on the rise. Furthermore, it was noted that an intense battle was raging with a neighbouring village that grabbed a large piece of Mutseta Village in the 80s and 90s and

were now claiming the Manga forests in their expansionist drive.

Even to a first time visitor to the communal part of Guruve District, it is clearly evident that most of the trees and vegetation have been wiped out in the district due to overexploitation.

The Manga Hills conservancy project idea was born from the realisation that Manga Hills was one of the few remaining pockets that still had considerable trees, vegetation and biodiversity in the whole communal part of Guruve district. Consequently, during a meeting in 2015, the Manga community agreed on a framework to manage the forest in a way that sustainably meets the household and commercial needs today and in the future. The current initiative was proposed as a strategic economic intervention that engages rural communities in a mix of activities that provides food related timber and non-timber forest related products and leisure within the community.

Response

The project initially focused on preserving and increasing the density of remaining indigenous trees, other flora and fauna in Ward 8 of Matetsa Village, gradually increasing the tree cover, flora and fauna in adjacent almost treeless neighbouring villages/wards, and in the medium term extending the realised benefits of the initiative to Guruve District as a whole.

In June 2015, nine members of the Mutseta village community representing all resident households, under the auspices of their village head, Mr Bernard Mutseta, convened a meeting to discuss ways and means of responding to the challenges of climate change and agricultural biodiversity loss in the village and surrounding areas. The stated objective of that meeting was given as *"Conservation of Manga Hill/mountain with the aim of maintaining its flora and fauna and guarding against environmental degradation.''*

Main activities

- Developing a constitution for Natural Resources Conservation and Management in Mutseta Village
- Engaging local authorities to resolve the issue of land grabbing involving a neighbouring village: A written description showing that the Manga hills conservancy area belongs to Mutseta Village obtained and signed by the local chief (Chipuriro) after involvement of surrounding village heads
- Stopping indiscriminate cutting of trees
- Controlling veld fires
- Fighting land grabbing

Results

The uniqueness of this initiative lies in the fact that it combines ecosystem restoration/ conservation and sustainable development so that the livelihoods of people depending on these degraded ecosystems can be sustained. The results can aptly be summarised as follows: *By excluding unwarranted opening of new land for farming; intensifying sustainable agricultural activities in existing farmlands; and reducing indiscriminate cutting of trees and bushfires; woodlands are regenerating, wild mushrooms can be harvested again and small wildlife like bushbucks are returning. Tortoises and snakes including the much feared black mamba and cobras are reoccupying their original habitats. The degraded environment and soil health is improving.*

Mr Leminice Gengezha of Mutseta Village had this to say about this initiative, *"At first I was sceptical about getting our land back from Munyoro people but through community action we were able to get help from the Chief who was able to give us a written paper showing our original boundaries. We now have access to our ancestral graves which is very important in our Shona tradition. In addition, through caring for our environment and protecting the vegetation*

from wildfires we are now seeing certain plants, herbs and insects that had disappeared and when you are moving in the bushes you know you are not alone and the air is fresher than before."

Quantitative changes in the number, size, density of trees and companion species including small game are clear to see when compared to adjacent similar lands. The benefits which people in Manga Hills realise include provisioning services such as food (mushrooms, indigenous vegetables, edible termites, grasshoppers and crickets) and

reduced soil erosion/ increased nutrient recycling and water evaporation leading to higher water tables and streams/wells flowing and retaining water respectively much longer. Qualitative changes include improved cultural services such as spiritual (traditional and Christian places for praying and meditation) and recreational (places for relaxation and picnics).

Lessons learnt

In Zimbabwe, there is no specific policy calling for the restoration of the degraded, damaged or destroyed ecosystems particularly in communal areas where the majority (70%) of the population lives. Besides, the role of traditional chiefs as custodians of natural resources' and heritage is undermined by laws inherited from the colonial era, which sought to reduce their power and influence on community ecological governance. It is for this reason that most of these areas are now looking like deserts and can no longer support the whole spectrum of human and animal needs. Much of government and donor resources in Africa are focused on supporting national parks and such similar places even though there is a growing realization that the world will not be able to conserve the earth's biological diversity through the protection of critical areas alone. This case study showcases what communities at local level can do to restore the ecosystem.

Challenges for scaling up

Given the important function of forests in Zimbabwe, it is clear that communal areas require forests in order to maintain ecological and social sustainability. Unfortunately, the growing population in communal areas has run into the limits of the available land, and thus increased the pressure placed on the communities to clear their woodlands in order to maximize short-term food production and material needs. Lack of clear land tenure policies and enforcement mechanisms governing communal lands exacerbates the situation by creating a tragedy of the commons scenario.

Conclusion

Documenting the Manga Hills initiative showcased how much biodiversity can be conserved using simple inexpensive community based methods, and what communities can do to fight local land grabbing using Traditional Knowledge Systems. Measures stopping unnecessary opening of new land for agricultural purposes, and consolidating use and intensification of practices on existing land have seen the regeneration of a new ecosystem and landscape. However, the new landscape and ecosystem is under constant threat from people inside and outside the community who want access to woodland resources that are now almost extinct in their areas. This, coupled with vague and often conflicting laws covering land ownership and occupation is causing conflicts among villagers, with those connected to political elites wanting to grab land from those that are not connected or do not have resources to fight in court.

1. There is need for harmonising communal land tenure to avoid local land grabbing using loopholes in the laws and statutes.
2. There is need to strengthen the powers of traditional leadership with regards to ecological governance. This will help to reduce the 'tragedy of the commons' that is leading to serious environmental degradation and destruction of ecosystems and habitats.
3. Using agroecological farming practices could work hand in hand with ecosystem restoration
4. Putting communities at the forefront of environmental management gives better results than top down approaches.

Manga hills burned down and depleted of trees and vegetation before conservation.

Smiling residents after Manga hills conservation projects.

Community members marching to create a fireguard

A well forested homestead.

Women and youth are a very important part of the conservation projects.

A well forested homestead.

Controlled burning using a knapsack sprayer to create a fireguard.

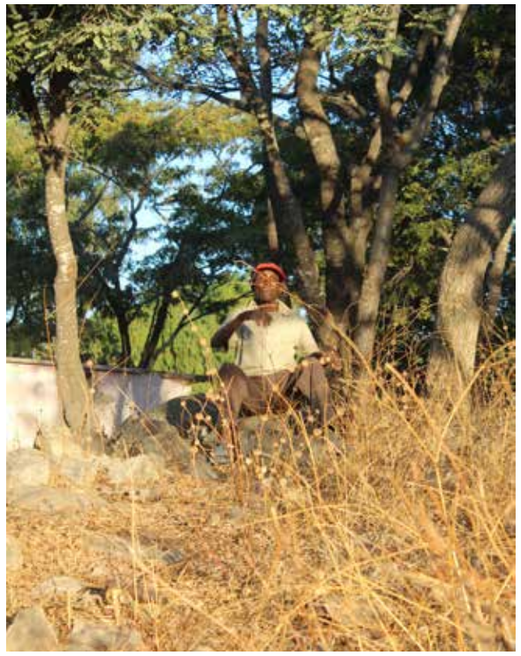
A well forested homestead.

High density of trees achieved through conservation.

One of the elders explaining the importance of conservation.

Mrs L Mutseta has conserved her trees since 1978

Sunset over Manga hills



MR B Mutseta , the village head sitting amongest some of the oldest trees in the village.

Authors: Mufaro Mupetesi and Thomas Mupetesi,
New Hope for Children Trust (NHCT), Zimbabwe.
Email: mufaromupetesi@gmail.com, thomasmupetesi@gmail.com

Who is AFSA?

The Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa is a broad alliance of civil society actors who are part of the struggle for food sovereignty and agroecology in Africa. It is a network of networks, currently with 34 members active in 50 countries. Its members represent smallholder farmers, pastoralists, fisher folk, indigenous peoples, faith-based institutions, women's and youth groups and environmentalists from across Africa. The core purpose of AFSA is to influence policies and promote African solutions for food sovereignty.

Supported by a grant from

11TH HOUR PROJECT
THE SCHMIDT FAMILY FOUNDATION