

# Decentralized Natural Resource Management in the Chiredzi District of Zimbabwe: Voices from the Ground

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## **Abstract:**

State-level and other external actors often turn out to be the ones defining the nature and extent of power to be assigned to lower level actors in most decentralization interventions. Such interventions predictably fall short of thoroughgoing empowerment because state-level and other external actors tend to retain meaningful sets of power. The aim of this study was to use empirical evidence from a decentralization initiative, which appeared to be largely demand driven, to test the generalization that decentralization is likely to result in more complete empowerment if it is demand driven. Should states retire themselves entirely from the business of the local, and can the local go it alone? This study reveals that decentralization, even if it is demand driven, is still no panacea for the problem of empowering local communities. Even armed with a clear road map of how they can initiate decentralization processes at the local level, rural communities cannot go it alone. They still need assistance in one form or the other from the district-level organizations from whom they are trying to emancipate themselves and other external stakeholders. It is, therefore, imperative that the district-level organizations should be active facilitators of decentralization at the local level but not hijack the process from the locals.

**Key words:** decentralization, empowerment, local communities

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The call to put people first in environment and development initiatives has been advocated for some time (Chambers, 1983). Although the merits of seeking to put people first are now more readily appreciated and understood, in practice the community empowerment rhetoric has

seldom been matched by real action. Putting people first, by and large, still remains of symbolic significance in rural development research. There is a dearth of documented experiences in which communities have expressed their own visions and aspirations in their own terms, and through their own voices. This report presents a 'bottom-up', local stakeholder perspective on a decentralization process in which power was reached for from below, rather than 'granted' from above. It presents a community representative's own experiences and interpretations of a community-driven decentralization initiative in a Zimbabwean social forest. This narrative and the lessons derived from it are from the Chizvirizvi resettlement area, which lies some 40 km east of Zimbabwe's south-eastern lowveld town of Chiredzi. The total area of Chizvirizvi is about 23,440 hectares.

After almost 15 years of state-inspired land use planning initiatives, the community in Chizvirizvi abandoned the existing system of consolidated villages, in which densely settled villages are clustered together, and separated from distinct grazing and cropping areas. The government pioneered this system of settlement in the post-independence era as part of its reconstruction and development policies. It was thought such a zoning plan would help alleviate population pressure in the surrounding communal areas, while easing access to centralized services and amenities. Although the merits of the latter objective were appreciated, they were flawed by the failure of the government-sponsored plan to decongest settlement. The need to decongest the consolidated villages saw communities implementing a new settlement plan based on 'private' and more spacious plots. Consequently, communities have been putting demands on the district-level government, requesting formal titles over the plots and resisting payment of taxes until the council delivers on essential services. Communities have also demanded to have authority over local wildlife resources vested directly on the community instead of being vested on the Rural District Council (RDC), as has happened in other wildlife-rich districts in Zimbabwe. For purposes of brevity, this report will mainly consider issues pertaining to land use planning and access to resources.

The narrative of events relating to the community-driven resettlement plan relies on a variety of sources including community representatives, district level officials, and other stakeholders including a local commercial concern—the Malilangwe Conservation Trust. The Trust provided

funding support for the implementation of the community plan. The interpretation of the extent to which the new bottom-up as well as the abandoned top-down plan were seen to empower the local community is based solely on the views and opinions of the senior author, who is the community leader who introduced the new vision of settlement based on self-contained plots and facilitated its wider acceptance. Before we consider the chronicle of events leading to the vision, we provide a brief background of Zimbabwe's forest context and the manner in which decentralization policies are unfolding within various forest settings.

## **2. FOREST CONTEXT AND DECENTRALIZATION EXPERIENCES IN ZIMBABWE**

Zimbabwean forests fall into what is commonly referred to as the dry forest zone, which is dominated by miombo woodlands. Miombo woodlands are dominated by the genera *Brachystegia*, *Isoberlinia* and *Julbernardia*. The forest falls into three major categories in terms of tenurial status. The first category is State forests. Traditionally, the main form of management is exclusion management enforced by the state forestry agency, the Forestry Commission (FC).

Woodlands on alienated land including small-scale commercial farms and commercial farming areas are considered to be the private property of owners of such land. State regulation of woodlands in the private domain is of a limited nature, being mainly restricted to controls against clear felling for purposes of commercialization. In practice such restrictions remain largely unenforced through lack of capacity resulting from resource constraints.

The third category comprises woodlands in communal areas. Resettlement areas also fall in this category. The main difference is, however, that resettlement areas are a product of the post-independence government policy to acquire commercial farms for resettlement of landless communal farmers. Tenants in resettlement areas, unlike those in communal areas, are supposed to be issued with permits by the government, which entitle the settlers to use the land and resources on the land. In the case of Chizvirizvi, no such permits have been issued as yet. In general, communal forests are often seen as a domain for open-access resource use but in real terms there are sub-categories of use and control. Trees and woodlands at homesteads and in

crop fields fall under a *de facto* traditional freehold category, beyond which there are grazing and woodland commons. Use of grazing areas and woodlands is governed mostly by informal community rules, which may differ from place to place. In addition government departments in particular the FC and the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) also enforce government policy on how woodlands may be used. For example, as a conservation measure, the government forbids cultivation within 30 meters of a river bank in any area. DNR enforces this policy.

Decentralization in Zimbabwe's forest sector has been varied depending on the tenurial status of the land on which the woodlands are found. In protected forest zones, collaborative resource management regimes have only recently been introduced. Collaborative resource management is a variant of decentralization in which communities residing at the margin of state forests can access a limited set of products from the forests. But the significance of such arrangements is still to be felt. Resentment among participating communities is largely due to the fact that access and use rights granted to them do not cover high-value resources (Wily 1995). Moreover, the significance of the forest margin zone is minor when compared with other woodland types in the country and their importance for livelihoods. The significance of collaborative resource management arrangements is thus restricted to the few communities at the immediate borders of the state forests.

Decentralization in the communal domain has tended to follow the contour of broader natural resource governance settings. A variety of laws with decentralizing orientations have recentralized power at the Rural District Council level. The Communal Lands Act of 1982 makes the councils *de jure* land authorities with powers to allocate land in communal areas that fall under their jurisdiction. The Communal Lands Forest Produce Act of 1987 vests control over indigenous woodlands in communal areas in such councils as well. Through such legal entitlement, councils with commercially valuable timber species are given enhanced access to the benefits of such resources at the expense of communities in communal areas. The Parks and Wildlife Act of 1975 bestows on the councils what is commonly referred to in Zimbabwe as 'appropriate authority status'. Such authority vests custodianship of wildlife resources in councils where the wildlife is found. Through such authority councils in wildlife-rich areas have been able to control and manage wildlife and benefits accruing from it at the expense of local

communities. CAMPFIRE guidelines specify that producer communities be entitled to 50 percent of revenue collected from wildlife and other natural resources (Dzingirai 2003; Murombedzi 1992). Thus, the overall effect of decentralization in the communal domain has largely resulted in re-centralization of power at the district level (Murombedzi 1992; Mandondo 2000). No law appears to decentralize powers to other levels of social organization, particularly those that are closer to the citizens.

In principle there should be nothing wrong with decentralization that focuses powers at the district level. The district is, in fact, the lowest unit of local government that encompasses popularly elected grassroots structures including Village Development Committees (VIDCOs) and Ward Development Committees (WADCOS). In practice, local-level planning is supposed to start at the village or VIDCO level. The VIDCO is presided over by an elected chairperson, and it comprises of 100 households on average. (Roe 1995). VIDCO plans are then consolidated into a WADCO, which consists on average of about six VIDCOs, with slight variations from area to area. The WADCO is presided over by an elected councilor, who then becomes the ward's representative at the district level. In championing community rights at the district level, the mostly peasant councilors have to engage with a variety of other stakeholders including government bureaucrats and technocrats, who have superior literacy levels and negotiating skills. Although District Councils have community representatives, the structuring of accountability at the district level is such that the significance of community representatives gets impaired. Most effective decisions at the district level are made within the Rural District Development Committee, which is dominated by bureaucrats and technocrats at the expense of community representatives.

Overall, decentralization has tended to be championed by the government and other external actors but it has largely remained a form of conditional empowerment that does not lead to complete empowerment. The Chizvirizvi case marks an interesting departure from the norm in that it was community driven. Next we turn to the historical background of how the initiative evolved.

## **2.1 Historical Background**

Colonial land alienation and apportionment policies that were crafted in the early 1930s left a deep imprint on present day patterns of land tenure and settlement in the Chizvirizvi area. Chizvirizvi adjoins a private wildlife conservancy and a national park, the Malilangwe Conservancy and Gonarezhou National Park, respectively. Decongestion, and reconstruction and development policies in Chizvirizvi were partly played out through the implementation of a government-driven resettlement scheme based on a system of consolidated villages. The scheme was established on land purchased by the government from adjoining commercial farms for purposes of resettlement. The consolidated villages were based on a system of land use planning that divided landscapes into clustered villages, grazing areas, and cropland. Each household was allocated five hectares of arable land and grazing was communal. It was hoped that the centralized settlements would enhance peasant access to a variety of services, including water, electricity, road networks, schools, clinics, beer halls and grinding mills.

In total, 10 villages, each presided over by a village chairperson were established, with all the villages falling under the control of a government paid resettlement officer. In total there were 283 households in the 10 villages. Most, if not all, of the households were of the Shangaan tribe having been displaced earlier from the same area. The Shangaan people migrated from South Africa during the Nguni uprising before the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The Shangaan group in question has been able to stay together and maintain their culture as a tribe but they have mingled with other tribes through intermarriages. Intermarriage in particular has resulted in some tribes, especially the indigenous Karanga tribe of Masvingo Province. Traditionally, Nguni tribes are more livestock farmers than crop growers. However, over the years they have gradually embraced crop farming in large part because frequent droughts repeatedly decimated livestock. Under this set up, each household was allocated five hectares of arable land while the remaining land (about 22,000 hectares). The crop fields were situated in one area, away from the village compounds. Livestock was grazed in the remaining area, which was owned communally. Firewood and other woodland-based resources were also collected from the communally owned forests. Because all the area outside of arable fields was communally owned, farmers from neighboring rural communities could also access grazing and other forest resources from Chizvirizvi.

Modest progress was achieved in providing services and basic infrastructure within the consolidated villages. Over time, however, people became disillusioned by the scheme's failure to decongest the settlement as well as its propensity to worsen social ills. Some of the most commonly reported problems were: deprivation of individual and family freedom and autonomy; prevalence of misunderstandings and fights; jealousy; increases in theft; suspicions of witchcraft; and increased incidences of adultery. The five hectares arable land allocated per household was not sufficient for most households to grow enough food even for the sustenance of the immediate family (some families are polygamous). Annual rainfall in Chizvirizvi and Chiredzi is generally too erratic and unreliable to support rainfed agriculture. Though soils around Chizvirizvi are highly fertile in most areas, rainfall is the main determinant of crop output in this dry area.

In Chizvirizvi, one way farmers compensate for the low yield per area in dry years is by increasing the area under crops. Local farmers surreptitiously increased their crop fields beyond the five hectares they were allocated by the resettlement officer by encroaching on the communal woodlands. The additional fields were colloquially called *matavanda*. Social pressure thus became one of the major drivers that inspired the search for alternatives and galvanized action within the villages. Additional concerns included perceptions of rampant degradation of woodlands in areas surrounding the consolidated villages. This wanton destruction of woodland resources was carried out both by the locals and people from surrounding communities. There was no monitoring of the pattern of use of woodland resources in the area, despite the existence of village heads. Since they were not given specific mandates to oversee the way local forests were used, a five-member committee of scheme residents became the vehicle through which such concerns could be articulated. The idea for the committee and for self-contained plots was advanced by the principal author of this paper. I am District Chair of the Zimbabwe Farmers' Union (ZFU), which is a powerful national organization that represents and champions the rights of all black farmers in the country. Because of this my position in the ZFU, I was able to interact with people at higher levels and in different foras. I also received training in a number of development-related areas. I proposed the idea first to a few influential people in the community, who readily accepted the idea. Later, together with other village elders, they consulted the general community who were also agreeable to the plan. I became the director of

the Development Committee that was to be elected by the community to help the community achieve its vision. The local farmers subsequently elected four other members to this committee.

## **2.2 Towards a Demand-Driven Land Use Planning and Natural Resources Conservation Model**

Community concern about congestion and environmental degradation around government-initiated consolidated villages in Chizvirizvi peaked around 1987. Such concerns marked the beginning of a community-led and demand-driven vision of land use planning and natural resources conservation based on self-contained lots as opposed to overcrowded cluster villages.

The community, through the Chizvirizvi Development Committee, solicited the support of the Department of Natural Resources for a more dispersed resettlement scheme based on a system of individual plots in which the plot-holders would be ultimately responsible for most resources within their plots. Under the proposed model, plot owners would have exclusionary rights over their plots that would deter the wanton destruction of resources currently occurring in the communally owned woodlands.

Most people were supportive of this proposal but a few farmers were skeptical about the success of the project, especially since the community had to negotiate with high-ranking government officials. These farmers were especially doubtful of the ability of local representatives to articulate local interests at high levels such as the province level. Similar support was solicited from the Ministry of Lands and Agriculture in 1989. Although both government agencies were supportive of the idea, rampant destruction of the natural resources in areas close to the clustered settlement continued unabated. The support, nevertheless, gave impetus to scheme residents to put in place temporary mechanisms for apprehending violators and protecting their resources. Such measures included collective monitoring and policing of resource use.

Meanwhile, the Chizvirizvi Development Committee enlisted the support of the local chief and the chairpersons of the 10 villages in question. This led to local-level endorsement of the plan, with signatures of endorsement being attached to the plans. The plans were subsequently

formally submitted to the government through the provincial Lands Office. Although the community received a favourable response from the government in 1995, it was indicated that the government did not have funds to support the implementation of the plan. Through my links with the Zimbabwe Farmers Union, and as chair of the Chizvirizvi Development Committee I was able to meet with the Minister of Agriculture to open up avenues for funding. Although no financial support could be obtained from the ministry, the committee was able to secure ministerial endorsement that enhanced access to alternative funding pathways, including donor support. On the advice of the Chiredzi District Administration, the community's donor outreach strategy emphasized building lasting partnerships with potential local donors. The strategy was mainly meant to avoid the 'projectization' and the time-bound nature of externally funded projects. Thus, building strategic partnerships was key as the community forged ahead with their vision of decentralized land use planning and conservation of natural resources.

### **2.3 Building Tactical Partnerships**

After these initial community overtures for funding, a meeting, was organized by the Malilangwe Trust on the theme 'Group versus Individual Settlement'. The meeting brought together 49 community representatives and 15 visitors, mostly from the University of Zimbabwe and foreign visitors from Zambia (1), Malawi (2), South Africa (2), Botswana (2), and the United States (1). The Malilangwe Trust committed Z\$100,000(US\$2,632) for surveys, mapping and demarcation of plots. However, not all the potential partners were willing to commit the required assistance. For instance, a request for technical support in surveying and demarcating plots was reportedly met with derision and cynicism from the local office of the national agricultural extension and research services (Arex). The Arex officers reportedly pointed out that they only implemented plans on the basis of instructions from above and not on the basis of instructions from below. Consequently, the community opted to approach the provincial level as the appropriate target institution for their request. A survey team was subsequently assigned to the area in June 1999. In forging ahead with the surveys the communities had to consider whether it was prudent to permanently sideline the Arex officers or whether it was in their own interest to bring them on board. The latter option prevailed as it was realized that cross-scale collaboration and diffusion

of skills was essential for sustainability and continuity. The local councilor was also co-opted into the process on the basis of this consideration.

## **2.4 Overcoming the Inertia of Getting Started**

A planning meeting was held at Malilangwe after the community secured the technical and financial support noted above. Attendees at this meeting included community representatives, support teams from the local and provincial levels and the District Administration. Of the total financial package received from the Malilangwe Trust, the community set aside Z\$25,000 (US\$658)<sup>1</sup> for the survey and planning team. The money was handed over to the District Administration to disburse to the team in stages as agreed tasks were completed. It was recognized that the survey team would need some means of transport. The Malilangwe Trust repaired a broken down Landrover available at the provincial level at a cost of Z\$12 000, and made available an additional cash donation of Z\$4,000 for fuel.

However, much to the community's dismay, no survey work had started several months after the resources were made available for the survey team. On investigation, the community was shocked to learn that none of the resources were actually given to the team. Speculation has it that the money was invested in some financial scheme, with the proceeds being used for self-benefit. The Landrover, was also later discovered overturned under a bridge where it was abandoned after being used for purposes completely unrelated to the business at hand. In order to ensure progress and some form of accountability, the community decided to return the funds and resources to the donor for allocation to the survey team against claims to be submitted by the team for tasks performed.

## **2.5 Finally Getting Started**

The survey and demarcation work started in late 1999. Further logistical support, including food for the survey team, was required for the project to be fully underway. The community committed itself to providing mealie meal and labour, whilst the Malilangwe Trust pledged four

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<sup>1</sup> Exchange rate was 1US\$: Z\$38 in 1999.

kg of beef per day for the entire period. There was an extended delay in the occupation of plots after the survey and demarcation exercise was completed. The delay was reportedly attributed to power plays in which several actors, including the District Administrator (DA) and local leaders purportedly vied for credit, recognition and influence. The delay unfortunately saw some of the pegs being destroyed, thus necessitating the need for the community to make further investments in repair and maintenance. The allocation of plots in turn got underway on 14 March 2000. Other than community members, the event was witnessed by the DA, the member of parliament for the area, and two representatives from the President's office .

## **2.6 The Allocation Process**

A total of 294 plots, each measuring 85 hectares in size, were to be allocated to each household from the 10 consolidated DERUDE resettlement schemes. Allocation was done through a raffle in which people randomly picked cards whose numbering corresponded to numbers assigned to plots. This method of allocation was used earlier by a local farmers' group to share fairly among themselves cattle of varying sizes and ages. The organization that funded the procurement of cattle proposed this method. Each of the cattle had a unique ear tag, which was recorded on a piece of paper that was then placed in a jug. Farmers each picked a card and got the animal with the ear tag corresponding to the number on the card.

## **2.7 Micro-Politics of Land Allocation in Chizvirizvi**

First preference to take up the new plots was given to people formerly residing in the government-consolidated villages. Some of these people were initially reluctant to move into the new plots because they had made a lot of infrastructure investments at their homesteads. These people joined the last-minute rush for the plots, when ownership of the plots was opened to anyone willing to own such plots. The rush grew in volume after good crop harvests were secured by the pioneer group of settlers. There was a diverse array of power plays as various people asserted claims to the land. A group of teachers at one of the local schools was one strong constituency that had been left out of the initial allocation process. They are reported to have clandestinely instigated the local village worker to mobilize people in two of the villages to

revolt against the scheme purportedly because they had been allocated infertile plots. In the hope of limiting the ensuing conflict, the DA unilaterally took over control of the unassigned plots. The custodianship did not last long, neither did it dampen the conflict. Realising the futility of intervention, the DA later capitulated and re-vested control in the committee that had hitherto overseen the allocation process. To break the impasse, the Malilangwe Trust organized a multistakeholder meeting to which the various adversaries were invited. At that meeting most stakeholders' concerns were amicably addressed with some of the teachers getting plots.

In August 2000, the land allocation committee was reportedly approached by a group of 16 liberation war veterans, who felt they were also being left out of the entitlement process. The chair of the land committee decided to enlist the support of the chief in deciding how to handle the issue. For fear of squaring up against the veterans, it was quickly decided that they should be allocated land as soon as possible. But the problem was how to allocate the seven plots still remaining among 16 veterans. With the concurrence of the veterans, it was decided that the plots would be allocated through an elimination raffle. Each veteran would randomly pick cards marked either YES or NO. Those who picked a card with 'NO' on it, relinquished their claims to the plots. Although the raffle had the initial support of all concerned, the losing veterans did not honour the raffle verdict, with the majority of them grabbing plots that were already allocated to other people. One of the war veterans annexed the plot that was assigned to the DA, where he promptly started development.

The ensuing conflicts assumed legal dimensions in one instance when a certain woman annexed plot number 83, which had earlier been allocated to the youth. She enlisted the support of lawyers to resist her eviction from the plot. The ensuing process saw four members of the land allocation committee being sued despite their resolve to remain steadfast in endorsing the youth's claim to the plot.

Intra-family conflicts over land ownership have started to surface in Chizvirizvi. Such wrangles usually emerge after a plot owner dies and the question of inheritance arises. In one case, a couple divorced and the wife chased the husband away from the plot. The plot is registered in the wife's name. At the time the plots were allocated, only people who were not formally employed

were eligible to apply. Unfortunately the man in question could not apply for the plot because he was employed in town. He asked his wife to apply on behalf of the family, which the wife did and succeeded on the strength of having previously received training in basic farming practices.

Farmers from neighbouring communities are also claiming access rights (especially to graze livestock and collect woodland resources such as firewood) to the self-contained plots. They argue that they have been enjoying such user rights since the farm was privately owned through to the time the current farmers were living in consolidated villages. They also allege that some farmers from drier and rocky sections of Chizvirizvi cross over to the communal areas to get resources such as water and fertile fields, which gives the farmers from neighbouring villages the right to access resources from Chizvirizvi, in the spirit of 'reciprocity'. The situation is complicated further due to the fact that some, if not most, of the plot owners have ties with farmers from the neighbouring communal area since both groups of people are of the Shangaan tribe. It is therefore very difficult from a social point of view for the plot owners to deny 'their brothers' access to woodland resources.

Some kraalheads on the other hand feel that the Development Committee in Chizvirizvi overstepped its role. The kraalhead for village 10, for example, reported that in the resettlement area kraalheads are less powerful than their counterparts in the communal area. In particular the kraalhead rued the opportunity and 'power' to allocate land to people seeking land, and the loss of subsequent kickbacks from the land seekers in the communal area. The kraalhead also complained that in the resettlement area kraalheads are not accorded the same respect and recognition as in the communal area. When farmers settled in Chizvirizvi, government officials allegedly told them that there would be no traditional leaders in the scheme. The kraalheads were only selected by the chief soon after his installation.

Neighbouring rural communities also view the programme of self-contained plots as an 'African' attempt by the plot owners to deny those communities access to God-given woodland resources. In any case, they feel they have longstanding ties of kinship that date back to their place of origin, South Africa and should therefore share the little they have as brothers. There are a number of plot ownership cases being contested in Chizvirizvi, precipitated by the death of the

male plot owner. The community has proposed that where the plot is registered in the husband's name, the spouse automatically becomes the heir of the land should the husband die. However, some plot owners are not happy with this arrangement because they fear and argue that a widowed woman can remarry an outsider and the new husband will take over the plot, thereby denying the deceased's relatives an opportunity to inherit the land.

All in all, the locally initiated decentralization planning has not been a smooth flowing process. The community encountered several challenges from inception of the idea of self-contained plots through to the final allocation of plots. The community also learned a number of lessons from the locally initiated land use planning model of decentralization. The section that follows highlights some of the perceived benefits of decentralization as well as lessons learned by the Chizvirizvi community.

### **3. EXPERIENCES/ DISCUSSION OF LESSONS LEARNT**

#### **3.1 Land Use Planning**

The Chizvirizvi case presents a very interesting case in which we, the communities, opted to move from a top-down, government-sponsored system of settlement in favour of a bottom-up and community-driven model of settlement. The experience should serve as a poignant reminder to government and other external actors that no matter how well intentioned, top-down plans that do not accord with people's priorities and aspirations are bound to fail. Among other things, the consolidated villages were meant to enhance access to services and amenities and to bring some order to the pattern of rural settlement. These state-envisaged benefits, however, were at variance with what we experienced. Despite marginally improving access to services, consolidated villages, in fact, aggravated a range of social ills, including increased incidence of conflicts, adultery, theft, jealousy and witchcraft. The dense settlement also led to rampant destruction of woodlands and resources around the village sites. We valued the autonomy and independence associated with self-contained plots more than the order and neatness as well as access to services that the government sought to enhance through consolidated villages. The emerging lessons is that for any initiative to endure it must be relevant, and to be relevant an initiative must be based

on people's felt needs and priorities. It also shows that there is a higher likelihood of initiatives enduring if they are bottom-up and community driven rather than when they are top-down and government driven. We have realized that our collective will and resolve are assets through which we can empower ourselves, and we have started asserting our interests over a wide range of areas, including the need for the council to match with the provision of services what they extract from us in the form of taxes.

### **3.2 Taxation within a Decentralized Setting**

We, the farmers in Chizvirizvi, are refusing to pay taxes to the Rural District Council because there is no parity between the tax collected and services provided by the RDC to the community. In particular we are irked by the fact that even as the RDC seeks to collect taxes from us they are failing, if not refusing, to assist us obtain title deeds for our plots. Title deeds will ensure a high degree of security, giving farmers a legal document to exercise exclusionary rights on resources in their plots. We have realized that if we are united at the local level we have power to force institutions at the district level to be accountable to us. Through local leadership structures and the ward councilor, we can try to influence how taxes collected from us are used. But this is only possible if we feel empowered to engage district-level stakeholders. Unfortunately the district-level stakeholders seem to be reluctant to accede to our requests. The RDC seems to be vengeful to the Chizvirizvi community for its refusal to pay tax. The RDC is allegedly blocking potential donors from assisting the Chizvirizvi community because they consider us 'self sufficient'. In addition to demanding parity between taxes and service delivery, decentralization has also accorded the community an opportunity to assert its interest in wildlife, particularly in regard to conferring appropriate authority directly upon us.

### **3.3 Wildlife Management within a Decentralized Setting**

Decentralization in one area can provide a lever through which community interests can be staked in a wider range of arenas. Our present thrust is to ensure that entrustments from decentralization initiatives are conferred on other levels of social organization rather than on districts alone. We want to ensure that entrustments, which are vested in bodies that are far from the citizens, are subject to debate and tenorial and use pressure. The owners of resources should

also be the users and managers of such resources. Decentralizations in which a cascade of roles and responsibilities are left hanging at a variety of levels do not result in empowerment. Presently, we manage wildlife through sacrifices to our crops, only for Malilangwe Conservancy and the RDC to reap the benefits without suffering any significant costs. More often than not we are not even compensated for the losses we incur from damages by wildlife. We are therefore requesting for appropriate authority over wildlife to be conferred on us so that we can decide how benefits from wildlife can be used. When devolving authority to local communities such as authority over wildlife, it is important that appropriate local institutions are identified for the specific task. As the next section reveals, decentralization can result in the creation of new local-level institutions.

### **3.4 Institutions at the Local Level in the Context of Decentralization**

Decentralization is usually accompanied by the creation of new institutions to spearhead the decentralization initiative. The new institutions are in addition to existing ones, which might lack capacity to tackle the issue of decentralization. Creation of several institutions usually results in conflicts. In the case of Chizvirizvi, the government came up with new structures such as the Resettlement officer, and village chairpersons while we, the local people, came up with the Chizvirizvi Development Committee after realizing that the existing structures; in particular VIDCOS and village heads were not competent enough to guide the community in its attempt to initiate and implement a locally derived land use planning exercise. The ruling party has also superimposed its own party structures in the area to safeguard and promote party policy. The creation of several institutions at the local level has resulted in feuds especially between the village heads and kraalheads who seem to be duplicating each other's role. The new Wildlife and Development Committee under the chairmanship of the ward councilor has literally usurped the roles of the Chizvirizvi Development Committee, which we created to spearhead the implementation of the new resettlement scheme. Because of the prevailing political climate in the country, most local institutions, even those that would traditionally have a development mandate, have been politicized and are more conduits to spread party propaganda than agents of development. We believe that our committee had a focused developmental mandate, and that it was not as politically tainted as the new Wildlife and Development Committee, which is led by the war veteran councilor, who happens to be a well-known ruling party cadre. No wonder most

of the time he is championing the political agenda for the ruling party. When power is devolved to local communities it is therefore important that new institutions with a development mandate are formed to spearhead development. Alternatively existing structures should be capacitated to handle the new roles that come with decentralization. However as the next section will show, continuous creation of institutions results in the overcrowding of the local institutional landscape.

### **3.5 The Theme of Conflicts**

We readily acknowledge that our experience, though community driven, was not entirely smooth sailing. We experienced a variety of conflicts at the community level as well as district level. We are aware that the conflicts mostly arise from jostling for benefits, influence, recognition and legitimacy. At the local level, most conflicts were over prime land and resources during the allocation of the plots. We also experience routine boundary conflicts among plot-holders, as well as between plot-holders and residents of the adjacent communal area. Contentious issues that appear to put us in conflict against the district level include what we perceive to be the failure and reluctance of officials at this level to formalize entitlements to our plots as well as to vest us with direct authority over wildlife resources in our area. We realize, however, that conflicts are an inherent feature of most communities, and that they are likely to emerge whether decentralization is top-down or locally driven. We believe that there is need to put in place mechanisms to amicably deal with such conflicts. Suppressing conflicts is deferring a problem to a later date when the problem will resurface. We see conflicts at the community level as being best solved through approaches that seek to clearly define the roles of the different institutions. We believe that politically inclined institutions are not the best champions of developmental agendas. We also believe that there is scope for engaging other external actors in resolving the various conflicts.

### **3.6 Alliances with External Organizations/Autonomy**

The Chizvirizvi initiative was essentially community driven from inception to implementation. But, one question that I and my research partner (Witness Kozanayi) considered is to what extent can community members go it alone in planning and implementing community-driven decentralization initiatives? Although it was our vision, and although we mobilized the

communities to gain wider acceptance for our plan and organized local labour for the pegging of plots, we realize that we could not have gone it alone without the support of other stakeholders. As the District Chairman for ZFU, prior to the decentralization process, I received training in leadership and project management and attended a number of workshops where I interacted with different people, which helped me a lot as director of Chizvirizvi Development Committee. We received financial support from the Malilangwe Trust, which also helped mediate conflicts within the community as well as between us and other stakeholders. We benefited from technical support from relevant government departments, and legitimating support came from a range of politicians including a vice president, minister of agriculture, and provincial and district administrators. My feeling is that in initiating decentralization and other rural development initiatives, there are many roles that can be taken up by other external actors, but the agenda should be set by the community members.

#### **4.0 CONCLUSION:**

Decentralization initiatives that are demand driven seem to be enduring at the local level. Firstly the community should have a common vision of what its members want to achieve. The community should be led by visionaries who may not necessarily be part of existing leadership structures. Even though decentralization initiatives are started and driven by the rural communities, the communities should also be assisted by other external organizations including the RDC from which the communities are trying to emancipate themselves. However, external actors should only be facilitators and not hijack the whole decentralization initiative.

Decentralization can also result in a plethora of conflicts at the local level as new responsibilities and opportunities arise with the devolving of new powers to the community. Conflict resolution mechanisms should therefore be put in place to resolve the conflicts as they arise or better still roles of institutions should be clearly defined and explained to all the institutions.

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