

Effective Livelihood Strategies in Distressed Environments: The Case of Mudzi District of Zimbabwe

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Abstract: This study looks at rural livelihoods in semi-arid and arid rural areas in post-2000 Zimbabwe. The decade-long socio-economic recession coupled with recurrent droughts presented a myriad of challenges to rural households in Zimbabwe. Taking Mudzi, a rural district in Zimbabwe, as a case study, the study explores the livelihood conditions and how households have managed to organize and cluster their assets to foster a living. Coping and adapting a cocktail of political, economic, climatic and social vulnerabilities in severely low economic potential communal areas of Zimbabwe requires elaborate skills in clustering, sequencing and reorientation skills in a broad range of activities. Using three basic livelihoods research methodologies namely retrospective, circumsperspective and prospective approaches, the research revealed that livelihood diversification in few effective strategies allows coping and even accumulation in distressed environments. Petty business, livestock rearing and networking are the core strategies being employed while crop farming and taking relief food are intermediate strategies. The study demonstrated that given appropriate rural development policy, households are capable of constructing their own robust sustainable livelihoods. Government policy constraints and inconsistencies in social and economic spheres and political violence are the greatest impediments to resilient livelihoods. There should be wide reforms on the political, economic and social sectors in the rural areas if poverty is to be reduced and household coping and adapting strategies are to be enhanced.

Keywords: Assets, resilience, rural development policy, sustainability, vulnerability context

INTRODUCTION

Over the past post-2000 decade, Zimbabwe suffered enormous economic and socio-political challenges. The national economy slumped, declining to less than 1950s levels (Muleya, 2007). This was being fueled by fiscal indiscipline and poor monetary policies that led to astronomical levels of inflation and Gross Domestic Product (GDP). The country's GNP fell from US\$620 in 1998 to as low as US\$268 in 2008 (Human Development Report, 2008). Official Inflation rose from 49% in 2000 to 231,000,000% in 2008 (Gono, 2008). Unemployment rose to above 80% and social indicators like life expectancy dropped to 37% (Human Development Report, 2008). While this scenario has been taken as representative of the entire country, it was in rural Zimbabwe where socio-economic conditions were most catastrophic. This is largely due to the fact that in Zimbabwe, rural communities are not only heavily sidelined from the mainstream policy formulation and debate but also from attention of the central government. Despite the fact that over 60% of Zimbabweans, live and work in the rural areas and in most cases are key constituencies

of political legitimacy and election victory, they are generally on the receiving end of urban biases.

The problem this study seeks to address is the disruptions of rural household's livelihoods by physical and socio-economic stress and shocks especially the post 2000 period in Mudzi District. The risks to livelihoods viability are due to the failure of macro-socio-economic policies implemented in rural areas tied with physical environments disruptions due to climatic changes. Thus the collapses of social services and infrastructure, recurrent droughts, rural economic stagnation and recession have rendered previous rural livelihood strategies ineffective. Establishing effective livelihood strategies applicable to distressed environments is the hallmark of this paper.

Rural environments in Zimbabwe are mainly semi-arid to arid with limited agricultural potential. Agriculture remains the mainstay of the rural economy, though it is being seriously challenged by non-farm activities in the wake of climatic changes. The Zimbabwean economic structure is based on agriculture and mining, followed by a small manufacturing industrial sector and a booming service industry. The fabric of this economy was destroyed by a myriad of

socio-economic and political challenges. During the last decade, the country was increasingly being isolated at the international level and balance of payments support and international development aid were drying up. These socio-economic conditions increased the vulnerability of both urban and rural households but with more catastrophic effects to the latter.

METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The research used three major approaches in livelihoods research namely the retrospective approach, the circumspective approach and the prospective approach (Murray, 2002). The retrospective approach entails looking back in the past experiences of the household` life trajectories to understand long term changes in livelihoods. However in this paper research lens are casted back to post 2000. The circumspective approach is central as it provides what the households are doing currently to survive and cope with economic shocks and food shortages. Future trends of livelihood strategy decisions are captured by way of the prospective (looking forward) approach to livelihood studies (Murray, 2002). Overallly the research was pinned down to the circumspective approach and the other two approaches were adapted sparingly.

The research used the household as the basic unit of observation, analysis and source of information. A household in this case, is defined as a social group which resides in the same place, shares the same meal and makes joint or coordinated decisions over resource allocation and income pooling (Ellis, 1998). The household head is the respondent for the selected households. Village heads were interviewed and administered to some questionnaires to verify household data and look for trends and to provide for verification of data. Unstructured interviews and questionnaires were the basis of data collection to get critical and statistical data respectively. The research used purposive random sampling in selecting households respondents for administering both in-depth interviews and questionnaires. Focused group discussions were used to aggregate livelihood strategies returns and trace trends and discontinuities in effective activities.

Theoretical framework: Rural development has been pregnant with theoretical underpinnings which have sought to explain not only rural underdevelopment but also the pervasiveness of rural poverty and the rising vulnerabilities of rural households. A number of approaches and paradigms have been proffered to reverse this negative trend through policy interventions. This paper considers the dominant approaches which are at interplay in rural areas and how they inform measures and policy in reducing the vulnerabilities of households. It provides an overview of approaches which have shaped the rural context and deliberate on

the sustainable livelihoods framework which is the culmination of previous efforts to redress rural poverty. It discusses livelihood diversification as the emerging preoccupation in rural development policy and practice and went on to posit effective livelihood strategies as the new way to go.

The transition from the 1950s to the present day has been characterized by paradigm and policy shifts as a result of the changing themes and approaches to the problems of rural areas particularly the pervasiveness of poverty as noted by Ashley and Maxwell (2001). The dominant approach throughout the late half of the twentieth century has been the small farm efficiency orthodox (Ellis and Biggs, 2001). There was a general consensus among rural development practitioners that agriculture growth based on small farm efficiency paradigm could stimulate economic development. Subsequent approaches to rural development like the community development approach, the integrated rural development approach and participatory approaches were all based on this small farm efficiency paradigm. However as Ellis (1998) notes, the growing evidence that the rural poor tend to depend on non-farm (and often non-rural) sources of income to sustain livelihoods is a key issue that may contribute to a re-appraisal of the validity of the small farm orthodox. The small farm orthodox did fail to grasp the inequalities and multi-realities of poverty in rural areas.

The entitlement approach, though proffered to explain famines and food-security analysis by Amartya Sen, can also provide valuable insights in the vulnerabilities of rural people as well as how they can cope and adapt stress and shocks such as famines (1981). The entitlement approach has a number of facets which make it an appealing framework for livelihood research. Sen (1984) views entitlement as a set of alternative commodity bundles that a person can command in a society using the totality of rights and opportunities which they face. Also Devereux (2001) expounds this view by positing entitlement as a, "system of beliefs, created in political practice about who ought to get what under what circumstances,... and the embodiment of those beliefs in legal and economic process". The nuts and bolts of the entitlement approach are crucial to the analysis of livelihoods because they are important to livelihood formulation and engagement as they provide the policy and context setting of livelihood activities. Thus as much as a person`s ability to command food, also constructing effective livelihoods depends on what they own, what exchange possibilities are offered to them and what is given for free as well as what is taken away from them.

Sustainable livelihood framework: A cross-sectoral and multi-occupational approach: The inadequacies of the previous approaches especially on engaging

multi-realities of poverty and the search for a cross-sectoral and multi-occupational approach resulted in the promulgation of the sustainable livelihoods approach with its main proponents as Carney (1998), Chambers (1983, 1992) and Scoones (1998). The Sustainable Livelihoods (SL) approach challenges the once dominant small farm paradigm and on the other hand being entirely compatible with a whole range of bottom up approaches of the 1960s up to the 1990s including work on famines and food-security by Sen (1981). The SL approach is used as a framework for the research for it takes an open view of the combinations of assets and activities that turn out to constitute a viable livelihood strategy for the rural family. "Such an approach is crucial to the analysis of what the poor themselves do to survive in various environments. It provides a conceptual guide to think about objectives, scope and priorities of rural development, as a framework for designing policies and practical interventions and their subsequent evaluation in poverty reduction (Rakodi and Loyd-Jones, 2002).

The livelihoods approach to rural development provides valuable insight tools for understanding rural households' poverty and their subsequent processes and actions in pursuit of development (Chambers and Conway, 1992; Ellis, 1998, 1999, 2000; Ellis and Biggs, 2001; Carney, 2002; Rakodi and Loyd-Jones, 2002; Scoones, 1998; Bryceson, 1996, 1999, 2000, 2001). The livelihoods approach has also become a paragon of development policy for international development agencies such as Department of International Development, UK (DFID), Overseas Development Institute, the United Nations and many others. According to Benedikz (2002) a livelihood system frame is a way of looking and analyzing the system of a household's internal and external factors that affect its socio-economic survival. It looks into livelihood strategies of people in a given vulnerability context (the frame conditions). People have access to six forms of capital assets (natural, physical, human, social, political and financial). These are the resources, which people can make use of and combine in order to carry out livelihood strategies and achieve certain outcomes. These outcomes have positive as well as negative impacts on the livelihood (feedback loops). Assets and economic portfolios are the pillars of all livelihoods as they determine the type of livelihood strategy a household may engage as well as level of returns derived. Each category of assets generates a stream of benefits and has key indicators which are used to achieve livelihoods objectives (Thennakoon, 2004).

Ellis (1998) views a livelihood as one encompassing income both cash and in kind as well as social institutions, gender relations and property rights, all required to support and sustain a given standard of

living. Social and kinship networks as well as access to and benefits derived from social and public services provided by the state make up and determine livelihoods, (Lipton and Van De Gaad, 1993; cited in Ellis, 1998). How the rural people in Zimbabwe are constructing their livelihoods in the absence of most state services and a plethora of other negative economic and environmental conditions remains of great concern for researchers and is at the centre of this study.

LIVELIHOOD STRATEGIES: A CASE FOR DIVERSIFICATION

Livelihood strategies are what people do to obtain a living. They include activities done by households and individuals that earn them income in cash or kind. Scoones (1998) defines livelihood strategies as comprising of agriculture intensification or extensification, livelihood diversification and migration. Livelihood strategies can be viewed as coping or adapting strategies, (Scoones 1998; Benedikz, 2002). Coping strategies are activities that redress short term surges in stresses and shocks while adapting strategies are long term and tend to be more resilient (Benedikz, 2002). As with literature on livelihood assets, livelihoods strategies continue to be generalized and assumed to be following the same trends on depeasantisation and diversification, (Bryceson, 1999, 2000, 2001; Ellis, 2000).

These strategies are mediated by various socio-economic conditions and institutional processes, should be viewed in a holistic manner including their context, assets, institutional processes, organizational structures, strategies and outcomes. It is imperative to understand what combination of assets is essential for the pursuance of a chosen strategy in a given locality (Scoones, 1998; Carney, 2002; Thennakoon, 2004). In continuous stresses and shocks, there is need to question how exactly poor people can combine the various strategies to foster a living.

In pursuance of effective livelihood strategies, there is need to revisit the vast literature on livelihood diversification, agricultural and demographic strategies, (Bryceson, 1999, 2000, 2001; Ellis, 1998, 1999, 2000; Ellis and Biggs, 2001; Bebbeington, 1999; Carney, 1998; Chambers and Conway, 1992). Livelihood diversification can be defined as the process by which rural families construct a diverse portfolio of activities and social support capabilities in order to survive and improve their living standards (Ellis, 1998). Livelihood diversification comprises a number of activities which are on-farm or off-farm and income generating or non-income generating. As noted by Ellis (1998) livelihoods diversification can be for survival or accumulation with the former done by the poor and the latter by the rural

Table 1: Land distribution and precipitation by natural region and tenure type

		Commercial											
		Large scale				Small scale		Resettlement		Communal		Total	
NR	Rainfall	Area	%	Area	%	Area	%	Area	%	Area	%	Area	%
1	>1000 mm	338	3	7	0.5	28	0.9	115	0.7	488	2.6		
2	700-1000 mm	3223	28.6	249	17.8	664	21.5	1423	8.7	5559	14.5		
3	650-800 mm	1972	17.5	531	37.9	1270	41.1	2797	17.1	6569	20.1		
4	450-650 mm	2840	25.2	517	36.9	771	24.9	7785	47.6	11912	35.6		
5	<450 mm	2896	25.7	97	6.9	358	11.6	4236	25.9	7587	27.2		

Ashworth (1990)

Table 2: Land distribution by class, race and tenure

Type of tenure	Class (%)			Race (%)		
	Rich	Middle	Poor	White	Black	Other
Communal	1	13	86	0	100	0
Resettlement	8	65	26	0	99	1
Small scale commercial	45	55	0	72	26	2
Large scale commercial	76	24	0	93	6	1

Government of Zimbabwe (1997)

rich. A household may pursue a range of activities for a living which include but not limited to agriculture and or non-agriculture. The engagement of strategies is also determined by a number of factors including seasonality, differential labor markets, risk strategies, coping behavior, credit market imperfections and intermittent investments and savings. These factors also influence choice and effectiveness of strategies. These factors are not thoroughly pursued vis-à-vis other stresses and shocks which curtail the ability and capability of a household's strategy choices.

The vulnerability context of Mudzi households: The vulnerability context of households in Mudzi District are shaped and continually mediated by a number of issues which in the past decade have contributed to the large pool of livelihood shocks and stresses which has hampered them. These have defined the nature and severity of the impacts of the physical and socio-economic conditions prevailing in the District. Notably among such stresses and shocks are various ad hoc government policies (including monetary policies from the central bank), politics, macro-economic conditions, climatic conditions, demographic conditions and prevailing local terms of trade. These contextual conditions have defined the working environment of the rural poor.

Government rural development policy: Rural development does not happen in policy vacuum, so does rural livelihoods activities. In developing countries, agricultural policy is often taken to mean rural development policy, while empirical evidence have suggested an increasingly share of non-farm activities in the rural economies of between 40 to 50%, (Ashley and Maxwell, 2001). Even the formulation and implementation of such agriculture policy is one of paralysis and uncoordinated. This is has been aptly

evidenced by the agricultural related bottlenecks raised by the households.

Government policy on rural development and policy reactions to the unfolding socio-economic crises has been an ad hoc policy pronouncement of which most households view as detrimental and retrogressive to their livelihood activities and welfare. Government policies in agriculture, business sector, public service provision and third sector operations are seen as having negative effects to livelihoods and have significantly contributed to stress and shock basket of the households while at the same time undermining households' strategies. In view of rural development most of these major policy trajectories and decisions are viewed negatively as they decapacitate households' livelihood construction.

In agriculture, the land reform policy, farm input and output marketing were cited by 76% of household respondents as critical impediments and negative factors in efforts to cope and resile. Land policy in Zimbabwe has vast direct and direct implications to rural livelihoods. Prior to the recent land reform programme of the Government of Zimbabwe (2000) the prime land which is fertile and located in favorable ecological regions have been in the hands of little white population. Though the size of the communal land (50.9%) is huge in terms of share of total land in Zimbabwe, most of communal lands are located in low rainfall ecological regions 4 and 5 which do not support intensive agricultural practices. Table 1, is an exposition of the land situation in Zimbabwe before 2000.

Furthermore the above land ownership characteristics are embedded in deep seated racial and class structure which favors the rich citizens and white races in terms of land sizes and agricultural land potential. The low agricultural potential areas with

small land sizes are mainly occupied by the poor black citizens (Table 2).

It can be seen from the above statistics that the land policy in Zimbabwe is fraught with racial imbalances and sought to undermine the livelihoods of the rural people in particular those who were in the communal land. Despite the fact that agriculture used to contribute about 16% of GDP in 1995, it was also a major employer (about 70% of employees in the country and have an export share of 40 to 45%, (World bank, 1995). However such contributions leave about 60% of the country's population who live in communal areas like Mudzi. Attempts by the government to redistribute prime land to communal farmers were largely unfruitful to the majority as the process becomes mired by violence and corruption that the intended objective of decongesting the communal areas was largely unmet. While the land reform programme benefited some black people in the country, the majority beneficiaries were government officials and the urban and rural elites who were able to canvass for support and engage the bureaucratic application processes. Most households in Mudzi feel that their land plight has not been addressed and link the land reform programme to other indirect shocks and stresses which have disrupted their livelihoods.

On a larger scale, government policy on land has been hampered by huge farm disruptions which have induced shortages of agriculture commodities on the market like maize, milk, beef and beans. The reasons for these shortages were varied depending on the source. Government officials argued that the new resettled farmers did not get input subsidies as has been happening prior to the land reform and banks are unwilling to advance them loan so lack of capital has led to low production and subsequent food shortages. On the other hand households interviewed and civic groups argues that the new resettled farmers lack the expertise and will power to farm productively and require land for political reasons. However as households has pointed out, these agricultural products were short in market after the land reform. The programme also disrupted maize seed production a very crucial staple diet input for most rural households. This has negatively affected households maize yield as for an example 60% of the respondents used uncertified seeds for the agricultural season of 2006/2007. They greatly attributed the low yields to the seed shortages.

Generally, rural livelihoods have been negatively constrained by government policy especially on produce marketing, the inefficiencies and unfair price structures of the state's sole grain buyer Grain Marketing Board (GMB) and deprived access and information to markets. Government policy on farm produce and input marketing in Zimbabwe particularly in the decade in question has also contributed to the

vulnerability of rural households. Most of the households of Mudzi are maize growers for subsistence and for commercial purposes. Farmers argued that they were buying their agricultural inputs from the parallel market which is expensive and later forced to sell their produce to GMB at controlled low prices. The prices of GMB are considerably low and do not account for input costs on the parallel market, nor do they account for the hyperinflation in the economy. Besides the GMB has other payments huddles as it has unnecessary red tape which always made the farmers the losers. About 68% of the households did not want to sell their maize and groundnuts to GMB if there was alternative option. GMB has also been dented with other transparency problems and its failure to be efficient as noted by Chattopadhyay (2000).

Government's economic policies were also cited by 40% of the households as one which has negative implications on their survival and has effectively reduced their capacity to construct effective strategies. The past decade have seen the Zimbabwean government adopting structuralist and interventionist policy approaches in the economy. However most of these policies which the government introduced were reactive to the prevailing challenges rather than being more pragmatic and proactive to the economic planning approaches. Moreover these policy issues need to be understood against the background of a country which has implemented a land reform programme which has thawed investments and also hyperinflationary environment, coupled with restrictive measures by key international institutions to the government. Respondents also attributed the hyperinflation economic conditions in the country to central bank policy on financial and monetary policy. For example the central bank engaged in quasi-fiscal activities as from 2003, activities which led to money supply growth, a recipe of inflation. The central bank also put most financial institutions on curatorship thereby locking depositors' funds in bank accounts for longer times. This resulted in livelihoods being constrained as financial flows from urban to rural areas were curtailed.

As from 2000, the government adopted a command economy approach by devising various control measures which were exactly the opposite of the free market conditions which were operating in pre-2000 era. Such activities included the various price controls (price ceilings and price floors) which were enforced by the government in the post 2000 period. It could be said here that the demerits of price controls are inducing market shortages and thereby pushing commodity prices at artificially high prices which further expose rural people to vulnerable conditions. In Zimbabwe the effects of price controls were catastrophic as most basic commodities like mealie-meal, rice, sugar and cooking oil disappeared from retail outlets, only to reappear on

the parallel market at extremely higher prices. Households revealed that the price controls affected by the government to reign on profiteering business were detrimental to their livelihoods as commodities became scarce and often three times expensive than in urban areas. Moreover the study found out that 95% of the public transport routes which were operational before the year 2002 were now redundant as most bus operators cited unsustainable fares and high fines by traffic police as unattainable in business. This has wide ranging implication to livelihoods of Mudzi which sometimes involved transporting agriculture produce to Mbare Musika-the country's biggest agricultural market which is about 240 km from Mudzi. On another dimension 40% of households whose husbands were working in urban centers cited that their remittances declined in the past decade due to rising living costs in urban areas.

Overallly attempts by the central government to produce economic blueprints like the Zimbabwe Poverty Reduction Strategy (ZIMPREST) (Government of Zimbabwe, 1999) and the National Economic Development Priority Plan (NEDPP) (Government of Zimbabwe, 2004) were restrictive of private sector operations and did not have sufficient safety nets for emergencies especially in the rural setting. It is also imperative to note that the implementation of such policies were either piecemeal or discarded opting for ad hoc economic policy measures. In fact as noted earlier, rural livelihoods are private sector livelihoods where households make economic decisions on alternative activities for survival. Restricting the private sector in economic policy is tantamount to restricting private rural activities which are the hallmark for sustainability and resilience in complex emergencies like inflation and droughts.

In some instances, government policy measures on economic management became so harsh, that there was continued lack of investments particularly in agriculture resulting from policy inconsistency and disrespect for private property rights. This has also wide ranging negative impact both to the government and livelihoods (urban or rural). Eventually the government's revenue base was so low that social welfare benefits and public services were compromised and in some cases made obsolete. In distressful times rural communities look up to central government for relief as with drought relief of 1992, but the prevailing conditions removed this safety nets for livelihoods. The responsibility of social services and emergency relief was thus relegated to the third sector. Despite this huge burden on donor and aid agencies for relief, the government also imposed stringent operating requirements and interference which sometimes went against international donor agency policies of non-partisan and non-political for relief aid.

For example in 2008, the government through the Ministry of Labor, Public Service and Social Welfare issued a ultimatum ban on all the activities of donor agencies except for Red Cross International. This resulted in severe levels of starvation and vulnerability.

Politics: The political environment which was emanating in Zimbabwe during the past decade also led to intermittent shocks and stresses to the rural people of Mudzi. Due to Mudzi's geographical location near Mozambique where most activities of the liberation struggle (1975 to 1979) was launched against the colonial regime, the district is heavily aligned to the liberation movement party of ZANU (PF). The advent of opposition politics in the district through the formation of the MDC in 1999 stoked political tensions in the district.

Nationally the polarization among political parties in the country during the past decade led to a number of impacts which effectively undermine livelihood construction of both urban and rural households. This polarization on national politics led to Zimbabwe being isolated on the international level and thus led to further capital from the country. The international community led by Britain and US imposed restrictive measures to the government which were later translated to financial sanctions from Britton Woods institutions like International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank. Such measures led to high political tensions between the feuding political parties in Zimbabwe which has always degenerated to political violence each time elections were held (2000, 2002, 2005 and 2008). Though the restrictive measures and sanctions have indirect impacts to rural livelihoods, it is political violence in politically tense districts like Mudzi which have notable impacts to households' livelihoods.

Political violence cases took a surge in 2000, 2002, 2005 and 2008 with significant decreases in-between the years of elections. It is worthwhile to note that elections in Zimbabwe occur in March (with the exception of June presidential runoff of 2008) and political campaigns usually start in October of the previous year. This is noted in the context of an agricultural rainy season which normally starts and end at the same time with elections. During peak periods of election campaigns, rural households in Mudzi attend rallies weekly and sometimes twice a week, thereby effectively decreasing the number of working days on the fields. This has widespread impacts to livelihood assets and activities of the rural people as shown in Fig. 1.

As the Fig. 1 clearly depicts political violence led to considerable loss of working days in critical period of the agriculture season. Violence included beatings,

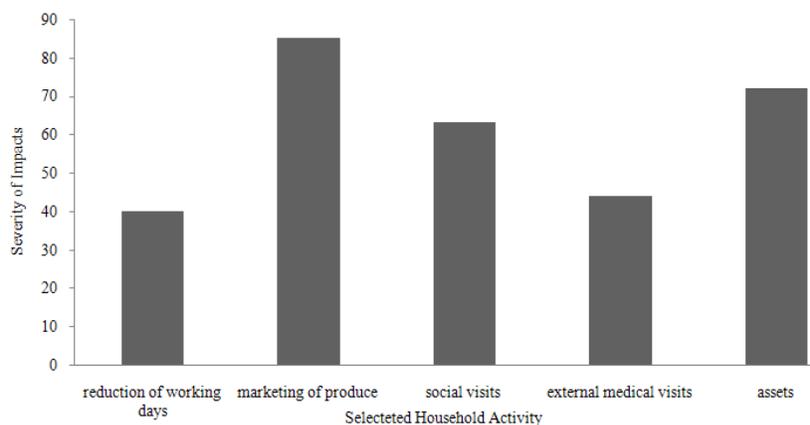


Fig. 1: Percentage negative impact of political violence and meetings (Fieldwork December, 2008)

torture, abductions and destruction of shelter and also associated with persistent persecution and loss of assets to political opponents. The study shows that 40% of the respondents have lost their assets or know a close relative who have lost such in election periods. For example in 2008 80% of the respondents noted that political victims were beaten an average of 20 lashes and then forced to pay torturers about 20 kg of groundnuts and 20 kg of maize meal together with a goat as part of compensation for supporting another party. Movements of both people and goods outside the village were also outlawed as pass documents were supposed to be sought from local politicians to control the flow of political materials and news.

Climate: Climate entails to the average weather of a place over a longer period of time. In general, Mudzi is a semi-arid region which receives annual rainfall of between 40 to 650 mm. The district experience high temperatures especially in the wet summers where average temperatures are about 26°C. These average climatic conditions presented challenges to rural households of Mudzi. During the past decade, 80% of the respondents argued that the climatic condition has dramatically changed. First there have been seasonal climatic changes which have become highly unpredictable. The rain season in Mudzi usually starts in early October and end in April but households have indicated that the rainy season has been starting late December and ending in early February. This effectively reduces the number of cropping days. Superimposing the average length of the rainy seasons on the average cropping days for various crops requirements for full maturity reveal dire results.

Rainfall requirements for full maturity of cotton and maize crops were not met in the past decade. Maize is the staple crop of Zimbabwe so low production effectively set off famine conditions. Cotton is also a

cash crop which can bring substantial income to households but in all the seasons the rainfall falls short of its full maturity days. Respondents have noted that over the past decade all rainy seasons were marked by severe dry spells in between thus making severe crop failure for crops which require to be fed with continuous rainfall like maize. This calls for alternative farming of other crops which are drought resistant like small grains (rapoko, millet and sorghum). Extremely high temperatures in between the dry spells during the agricultural season implies that some crops will undergo permanent wilting, thus crop failure even after rains falls again.

Mild to severe droughts which were experienced in the past decade by households in Mudzi which have severe consequences to household resilience especially to crop failure and livestock loss (De la Fuente, 2008) (Fig. 2).

The percentage value loss of livestock is high because most households lost cattle which are expensive livestock. Though small livestock like goats and sheep loss were minimal, cattle loss was severe because the dry spells did not support meaningful pasture growth and unavailability of water sources resulted in loss of livestock. Crop failure was also high because maize crop was the major crop grown by households, yet it required longer effective rainfall season which is also distributed evenly throughout the season. Households also indicated that the aforementioned droughts constrained other livelihood strategies like vegetable gardening. Gardening is crucial for subsistence consumption as usually households grow leaf vegetable which they consume up to August and dry the leaves for relish. The staple diet sadza (maize mealie porridge) can only be consumed with relish such as beans, rape, cowpea and meat. Thus failure to engage in vegetable gardening results in negative consumption practices which induce poor health.

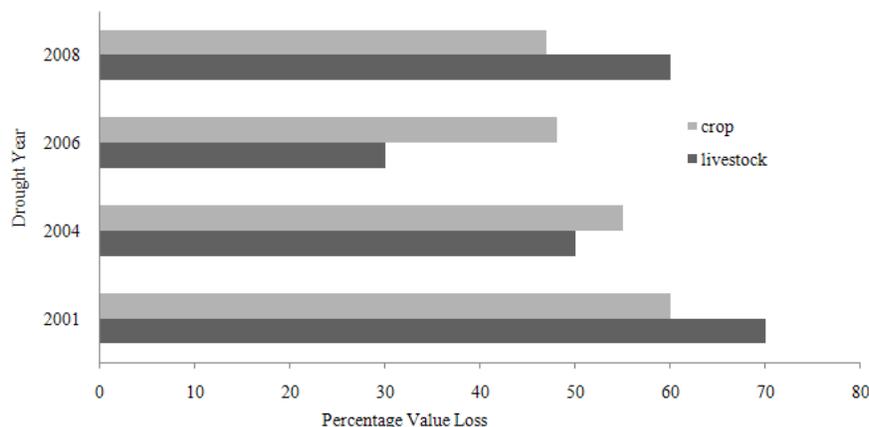


Fig. 2: Percentage crop and livestock value loss to droughts (Fieldwork December, 2008)

Table 3: Diversified livelihoods strategy patterns

Strategy type	Households engaged (%)
Loaning grain and cash from neighbors and relatives	80
Adjusting meals (lean consumption)	95
Selling of household productive assets	43
Selling livestock for cash or grain	75
Non-farm labor sales	45
Taken famine foods	100
On-farm labor sales	40
Petty cross-border trade	26
Migration to other areas	8
Market gardening	35
Crop farming	100
Rural based industrial activities (beer brewing, cobbler, blacksmithing, brick molding)	65

Fieldwork December (2008)

Diversified livelihood strategies: The research showed that households in Mudzi are diversifying their livelihood strategies among different asset combinations and activities. The Table 3 shows the various activities which households are engaging in to cope the various stresses and shocks:

There were a number of income sources which were identified by households and these provide relative effectiveness of strategies. Table 3 shows the major income sources in the past decade of surveyed households:

Income sources vary to the locational setting of the village as well to the leadership qualities of village leaders, especially whether they can lobby for improvements of government services from the local council. This is a result of micro-conditions and assets endowments of villages. Also households showed varied dependency levels to different income sources and livelihoods strategies. Interestingly households clustered their strategies in terms of fully dependant (principal dependent), partially dependent (intermediate strategies) and sparingly dependent (minor strategy). This was based on how much a particular strategy was able to rise in terms of value (cash or the number of months consumption can be allowed from such income). Thus it is crucial to have a detailed discussion

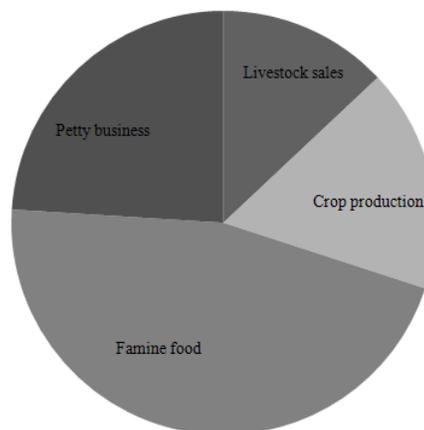


Fig. 3: Principal strategies mix (Fieldwork December, 2008)

of the various strategy levels that the households have raised.

Principal strategies (fully dependent): Households revealed that most of their income (including material returns) is from few activities which they have organized for survival in these turbulent conditions. These activities include crop production, livestock selling, petty business (especially cooking oil pressing and pounding) and relief aid. Households attributed 70% of their continued resilience these principal strategies for survival. Figure 3 shows the relative mix of the principal strategies in an average household.

As shown in the Fig. 3, households are depending more on food aid than in any other activity for survival. This has been necessiated by the deterioration of the natural resource base due to persistant droughts which in turn have eroded grain stocks. Petty business particularly making cooking oil from sunflowers and nuts has also significantly allowed minimum consumption levels as well as access to other forms of capital. Livestock selling has been identifies as the most effective strategy to ameleorate hunger and other suden

shocks like the death of close family members. However the livestock herd has dwindled in the past decade due to poor pastures and diseases. Thus households highlighted that if livestock production is revitalised smooth consumption can be allowed for at least 5 months after sale of cattle.

Intermediate strategy (partially dependent):

Households identified activities which they view as partially dependent and which they usually adopt in combination with principal strategies for coping shocks and stresses. These intermediate strategies cannot guarantee smooth consumption so they are taken either as fallback strategies or supplementary ones. However in some villages these strategies are clustered as principal strategies especially to those villages that have infrequent donor food supplies and lack vital raw materials for pressing cooking oil. Intermediate strategies which were identified include brick moulding, firewood trade, basket weaving and fishing. It is evident that most of these intermediate strategies are natural resources based and are usually traded locally resulting in low prices and income being realised for such activities. Rural Transport services (RTI) were also cited as intermediate strategies to those households with transport assets like scotch carts and bicycles as they provide business opportunities in remote areas where public transport is scarce.

Minor strategies (sparingly dependent):

These are strategies on which villages spent very little resources and also recoup unreliable and often small income. Households identified strategies like begging, labour sales (both on and off-farm) and vegetable gardening. On-farm labour sales were generally lower than in previous decades because the demand has weakened as a result of decreased farm output and income. In fact 60% of the respondents argued that those who used to hire them for seasonal wage labour like weeding crop fields are no longer able to pay due to hyperinflationary environment. Vegetable production was cited as a strategic activity especially in villages which surround dams and perennial rivers. However 45% of households cannot practice vegetable gardening due to water shortages, despite the fact that leaf vegetables constitute their daily diet.

Towards a new dispensation for effective livelihoods:

The range of factors which are at interplay in Mudzi requires a more pragmatic approach to livelihoods as conditions are continuously deteriorating with an increasing number of people living in absolute poverty. Such an approach should seek to investigate not only the livelihood strategies but their current applicability in the current setting and their effectiveness in creating robust and desired livelihood

outcomes. Effective livelihood strategy is defined here as the degree or level that a particular strategy achieves a desired livelihood outcome such as adequate cereal stock up to the next farming season. Effectiveness of livelihoods requires analysis of what contribute efficiency such as the choice by the household or individual or due to technological advancement changes (Brown *et al.*, 2006). The fact that a livelihood strategy encompasses not only activities that generate income but many other choices including cultural and social choices that came together to make the primary occupation of a household brings the conceptualization of effective livelihood strategies difficult (Ellis, 1998). The question which then arises is how the appraisal of livelihood strategies can include these social value choices. Most scholars on livelihoods have classified livelihoods strategies, but fall short of appraising them.

It is evident from prior discussion that scholarly work has provided the basis for livelihood analysis and conceptualization for rural households. Issues of livelihood resources, strategies and outcomes have been central to current debate on rural development (Ellis and Biggs, 2001; Ashley and Maxwell, 2001). However there is need to siphon specific livelihoods strategies which have defied odds in creating desirable livelihood outcomes for greater attention and policy. Households and development agencies need to know which particular strategies are applicable and can guarantee acceptable consumption levels in extremely difficult circumstances and emergencies like in Mudzi.

CONCLUSION

Rural development is continuously changing, perhaps more in ecologically vulnerable communities. Past development narratives seem to falter as new shocks and stresses surface and resurface in rural areas. Decades of negative macro-economic conditions and physical changes have added to the vulnerability basket of the poor. The sustainable livelihoods framework has shown to be robust, multipurpose and multi-locational in offering hope to the thousands of rural people who continue to live in absolute poverty for their lifespan. There is now a tendency of shock and stress clustering, which is threatening the viability of rural livelihoods. Perhaps the answer lies in pursuing diverse and few effective livelihoods challenges which show high levels of sustainability and resilience. This calls for continued research on what the poor are doing to cope, adapt or manage their own risks and shocks to have shared livelihood learning in Zimbabwe.

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