

Journal of Rural and Community Development

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Citation:

Nyamwanza, A. (2014). Bridging policy and practice for livelihood resilience in rural Africa: Lessons from the mid-Zambezi Valley, Zimbabwe. *The Journal of Rural and Community Development*, 9(4), 23-33.

Publisher: Rural Development Institute, Brandon University.



Editor: Dr. Doug Ramsey

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Bridging Policy and Practice for Livelihood Resilience in Rural Africa: Lessons from the Mid-Zambezi Valley, Zimbabwe

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Abstract

Building and enhancing livelihood resilience in most rural African communities is becoming a complex policy issue since the principal characteristics of most of these communities in contemporary times have become their increasingly differentiated nature and high socio-economic and environmental uncertainty due to multiple and reinforcing stresses and shocks. A major problem has been the glaring gulf between national policies and realities on the ground with a uniform approach being taken in the interpretation and implementation of general development and livelihoods policies on the ground in most countries. Yet the standard one-size fits-all policy approach is not possible as situations have become increasingly dynamic and conditions continue to differ from community to community. Utilising examples from the mid Zambezi Valley area of Mbire district in Zimbabwe, this paper argues that national policy frameworks should allow ample room for innovation, experimentation and knowledge exchange in local livelihoods. In the same vein, policies and policymakers should exhibit a profound appreciation of the complexity of contemporary, dynamically vulnerable environments and livelihoods therein through increased local stakeholder participation in policy interpretation and implementation as well as in reconceptualising ‘sustainability’ and viewing it through local lenses.

Keywords: livelihood resilience, policy, practice, stresses, shocks

1.0 Introduction

In recent years, communities in rural Africa continue to face increasing cycles of crisis as a result of reinforcing and interacting political, social, economic and environmental stresses and shocks. Livelihood resilience, defined as “a process linking the capacities of households and communities to respond to, recover and learn from changes and disturbances, and to reinstate, renew and reinvigorate their earnings and livelihood patterns disturbed or compromised by changes and challenges in the social and/or physical environment” (Nyamwanza, 2012a, p. 4), has become central in responding to this state of affairs (Marschke & Berkes, 2006; Nyamwanza, 2012b; Oparinde & Hodge, 2011). One of the major shortcomings in building and enhancing livelihood resilience in various communities, however, has been the glaring gap between national policies and realities on the ground in as far as the management of and access to livelihood resources (on one hand), and the constitution of livelihood activities (on the other hand) is concerned. This paper seeks to contribute towards ideas around closing this gap and improving the ability of people to respond to stresses and shocks as well as enhancing their adaptive capacity and other enabling conditions for livelihood resilience in these contexts. Using examples of selected livelihood processes from the mid-Zambezi Valley area of Mbire district in Zimbabwe, the paper establishes clear priorities for bridging policy and practice towards

building and enhancing livelihood resilience in complex rural African vulnerability contexts. Following this introduction, the paper is organised around five main sections, with the next section outlining the methodology used in collecting and analysing data for this article. This is followed by a discussion of the main areas of disjuncture between policy and practice vis-à-vis livelihood resilience in rural African contexts. Section 4 focuses on the two interesting cases of livelihood processes in the mid-Zambezi Valley communities of Mbire highlighting these areas of policy-practice disjuncture. The fifth section proffers ideas towards bridging this policy-practice gulf for livelihood resilience, followed by the concluding section.

2.0. Methodology

The article draws on fieldwork carried out (by the author) in the mid-Zambezi Valley for a study exploring the role of resilience and adaptive capacity in livelihoods inquiry. The fieldwork involved key informant interviews with officials from various government and non-governmental entities in Mbire district, observation of key livelihood processes in the area, transect walks, life histories, focus group discussions and 45 semi-structured interviews with local community members. The semi-structured interviews and life histories were carried out with randomly selected long-term residents in the district. Livelihood resilience characterises a system's ability to deal with change and dynamic adverse situations over time thereby subjecting itself to a temporal, longitudinal (historical) perspective in analysis (Ifejike Speranza, Wiesmann, & Rist, 2014). The (long-term resident) life history and semi-structured interview with respondents were, therefore, purposively defined as elderly people who have continuously stayed in the area at least in the last twenty years preceding the research. These were deemed to have stayed long enough to have experienced local vulnerability and livelihood response dynamics, critical events and other complexities impinging upon livelihoods and livelihood resilience in the area over the years. Data from semi-structured interviews was arranged in Microsoft Excel and, together with data obtained through other techniques, analysed thematically. Thematic analysis focuses on grouping data collected through various techniques into identifiable themes (and sub-themes) towards addressing set aims and/or objectives. The themes (and sub-themes) are examined and critically explored to capture finer nuances, in this case, towards understanding the disjunctures, complexities and possible solutions in bridging policy and practice vis-à-vis livelihood resilience in the case study area.

3.0 Disjuncture between Policy and Practice and Complexities for Livelihood Resilience

An effective, representative and responsive policy environment is critical for livelihood resilience and resilience programming in general. Policies may broadly be defined as the sum of government activities, including political decisions for implementing programs to achieve developmental goals (Cochran & Malone, 2005). In rural (African) communities, these may include environmental policies (involving such natural resources as land, water and forests), marketing policies (involving e.g. output pricing and access to input credit) and social policies (e.g. around health, education and social welfare). Policy has the overall objective of providing an enabling framework for the development and implementation of legislation in an integrated and harmonious manner, and the implementation of policy can be as much about agenda-setting, decision-making and negotiation between multiple actors over time as about execution of decisions (Manjengwa, 2006). The process of livelihood resilience

involves activities allowing for (a) *anticipating* livelihood challenges and the potential for surprises (b) *reducing* the effects of present stresses and shocks (c) *recovering* from the effects of past and present stresses and shocks and (d) *thriving* even in the context of a difficult livelihood environment (Nyamwanza, 2012b). Responsive policies are, therefore, important for livelihood resilience in that they enable households and communities to timely access and/or negotiate for adequate or appropriate resources, technology, skills, markets and information critical for greater adaptive capacity in the face of livelihood challenges.

There are two main areas that have exposed the gap between policy and reality in many rural African communities, consequently impacting negatively on livelihood resilience. The first concerns the gulf between formal and traditional governance systems and arrangements in as far as such critical livelihood processes as resource management and the definition and administration of property rights are concerned (Frankenberger, Spangler, Nelson, & Langworthy, 2012). Formal governance systems in this case refer to those systems created by law in administering and enforcing rules and/or policy positions by the state. In most of Africa, and to be precise in Zimbabwe in the context of this discussion, these include such local government authorities as rural district council officials (including elected councillors) and the by-laws they institute and enforce. The traditional system, on the other hand, alludes to that system made up of local authorities consisting of a prescribed hierarchy of officials whose power and legitimacy primarily originates from custom such as chiefs, headmen, village heads and spirit mediums. The formal system is usually guided by policy provisions that are formulated at the national level and/or provincial government level, provisions which are often tied to bureaucratic processes that stifle their involvement to catch up with the continually changing social, economic and natural environments. The traditional system, on the other hand, rooted in custom and more valued locally is usually informed by everyday developments in communities and more often operates in a relatively consensual, flexible and pluralistic fashion (Mohamed-Katerere, 2001).

When it comes to such critical livelihood processes as resource management and the definition and administration of property rights in rural communities, traditional systems of management and practices are also quite complex and they vary from locality to locality, making it impossible to generalise about their content and to identify a set of uniform rules and laws even in the same country (*ibid*). Yet this is precisely what formal governance systems seek to do. Regulations as administered by formal governance systems thus almost always tend to be uniform across communities (within countries), and consequently fail to take into consideration unique economic, cultural, historical and social systems and values inherent in different communities. In Zimbabwe, for instance, national policy frameworks particularly with respect to natural resources management do not provide adequate room for different stakeholders to innovate and experiment in local legislation and by-law formulation to match and adapt to local realities, due to wider policy and bureaucratic constraints. For example, though forest and woodland areas in communal areas are described as common property, the main policy position is that they are primarily managed under state property rules. Even the much celebrated Communal Areas Management Programme for Indigenous Resources (CAMPFIRE) initiative in the country, which focused exclusively on incentives and financial benefits for and the participation of local communities living adjacent to or within wildlife habitats in decision making structures of wildlife management and control as a way of aligning wildlife conservation with community development objectives, has faced criticisms vis-à-vis the policy framework within which it was initiated.

Mandondo (2000), for example, posits that the initiative was premised on the “deep ethos and values of a global environmental discourse and scientific culture (of) participation (exclusively for) environmental conservation”, a ‘scientific culture’ which (he argues) is top-down, insular, domineering, conditional and offers limited space for local communities and the traditional leadership to offer alternative suggestions and contributions of what they view as locally sustainable “without green strings attached” (Conyers, 2002).

A second area exposing the disjuncture between policy and practice vis-à-vis livelihood resilience in most rural African communities revolves around the concept of ‘sustainability’. Most policy formulations in recent years have been constructed around the concept of ‘sustainability’—a concept which has dominated livelihoods thinking in particular and development practice more widely over much of the last two decades. The most popular definition of ‘sustainability’ in development policy and livelihoods discourse is the one proffered by Scoones (1998) (borrowed from Chambers and Conway’s 1992 seminal paper on livelihoods) as describing livelihoods (and/or policies) which are able to “respond to...stresses and shocks...both now and in the future without undermining the natural resource base” (p. 5). Most livelihood and development policies have thus been sold as integrated packages of environmental, social and economic ‘best practices’, yet in practice, responding to dynamic vulnerability changes and challenges as well as livelihood risks and uncertainties in most rural African communities has almost always involved and/or resulted in social and environmental trade-offs. As practical examples from mid-Zambezi Valley communities highlighted in this paper will show, it is clear that conventional understandings around ‘sustainability’ in rural Africa need to be adapted, broadened or even abandoned depending on context (Behan, 2002).

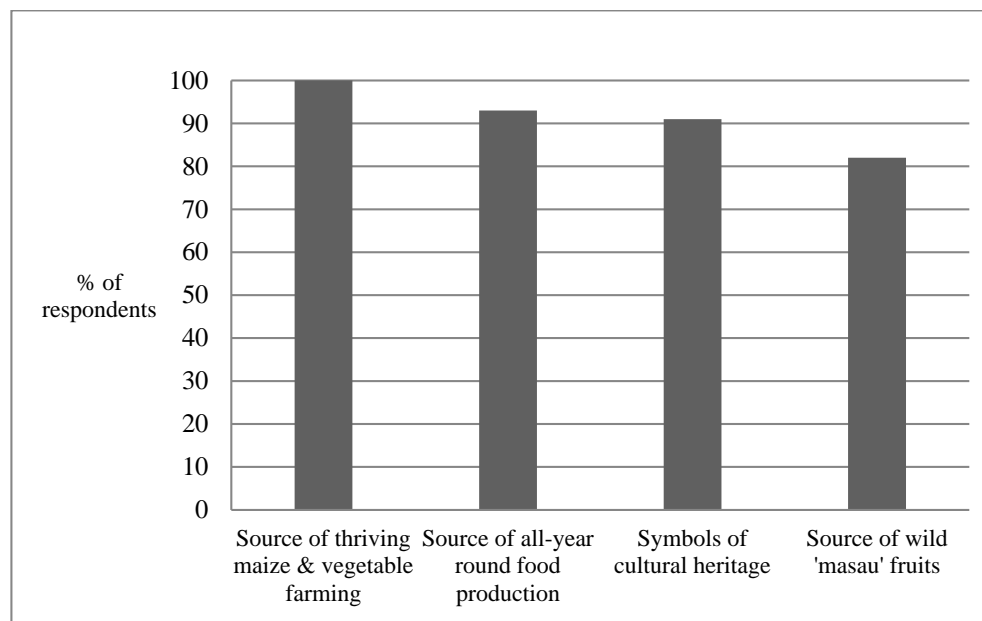
4.0 Cases from the mid-Zambezi Valley

This section discusses practical examples of livelihood processes highlighting the gulf between policy and practice objectives for livelihood resilience in the mid-Zambezi Valley communities of Mbire district in Zimbabwe. The Mid-Zambezi Valley is part of the Zimbabwean lowveld and it particularly refers to lands lying north of the Zambezi escarpment and bordered by Mozambique to the north and east, and Zambia to the north-west (Mupangwa, Nyabadza, Mberengwa, & Chaipa, 2006). Mbire district forms the major part of the low lying mid-Zambezi Valley in Zimbabwe’s Mashonaland Central Province. It is a semi-arid remote area listed in the country’s agro-ecological zones IV and V characterised by high temperatures of up to 40° C during the summer and very low and increasingly irregular and unpredictable rainfalls averaging 450-650mm annually. Most of the many vulnerability factors in the area are linked to low rainfalls and increasing drought cycles, poor markets and infrastructure, wildlife and tsetse-fly, malaria and HIV/AIDS as well as dramatic population increases over the years (Nyamwanza, 2012b). Livelihood resilience and the facilitation of effective resilience programming is, therefore, very critical in the area due to these interacting and reinforcing vulnerability factors. The two cases discussed in this section revealing the gulf between policy and practice objectives for livelihood resilience in Mbire connect with both the two areas (of policy/practice disjuncture) highlighted in the previous section, i.e. formal versus traditional governance system operations and the conceptualisation of ‘sustainability’.

4.1 Case 1. Riverbank farming and modification of the National Stream-bank Cultivation Regulation

Riverbank farming is the most enduring crop production system in Mbire and has a long history going back to 5th century farming communities there (Pwiti, 1996). It is very popular as the riverbanks form the most arable lands in the area, being characterised by rich alluvial soils which store residual moisture from the rainy season into the dry season thereby allowing villagers to conduct farming in these fields the whole year round. Crops grown in riverbank fields include maize, green vegetables, tomatoes and onions – which are quite valued and important for food security in the area but do not thrive in the dry upland fields. Riverbank fields also come with an added advantage of the popular wild *masau* fruit trees which are dotted in and around many of the fields, and which are sold for extra household income at nearby business centres and/or used to supplement food during the many drought periods experienced in the area. Traditional authorities in the area view and treat these fields as people’s private property, deciding to have no say on them and allowing that they be passed on from generation to generation within families. There was, however, a new dimension to riverbank farming in the area with the advent of the National Stream-bank Cultivation regulation policy of 1991 that made it illegal to cultivate land “within thirty metres of the naturally defined banks of a public stream” (GoZ, 1991). Villagers in interviews and life histories recounted clashes with authorities from the 1990s to as late as 2007, as they had been continuously told to stop their farming practices in these fields by Rural District Council (RDC) officials, who threatened to slash their crops and implement the regulation almost every year. They, however, strongly resisted being moved from these fields, arguing that the fields represent their economic and cultural heritage as these had been their forefathers’ fields since time immemorial and that, most importantly, they were central in as far as food availability and well-being in their homes was concerned. (Figure 1 summarises the value of riverbank fields in the area according to (semi-structured interview) respondents). It was only in 2007 that the villagers, with traditional leaders on their side, managed to strike a deal with the RDC that they could be allowed to continue farming in these riverbanks unhindered provided they do not use ox-drawn ploughs or any other farming implement besides the hoe.

Figure 1. Value of riverbank fields in the area



4.2 Case 2. Demographic changes and massive expansion of upland fields

There has been a dramatic population increase in Mbire district over the years due to a number of factors. Among these (factors) are the influx of migrants from other parts of the country following the introduction and popularization of cotton farming (and the attractive revenues accruing from cotton sales) in the area just after the country's independence in 1980; the intensive clearing of tsetse-fly in the area from the late 1980s into the early 1990s ridding three quarters of the district of the fly and making most hitherto uninhabitable areas habitable and suitable for farming; and the chaotic national fast-track land reform programme of the early 2000s which displaced a lot of farmworkers (most of whom were of foreign origin) in nearby farms up the escarpment, who then came down the Valley into Mbire looking for somewhere to stay. There were thus, for instance, massive percentage increases in the district's population and numbers of households between 1992 and 2012, 127% and 78.8% respectively (see Table 1).

Table 1. *Population trends in Mbire district (1992-2012)*

	1992	2002	2012	% Increase
Population	36,074	71,096	81,908	127%
No. of Households	10,142	14,509	18,130	78.8%

Sources: CSO, 1992; 2002 and ZIMSTAT, 2013

One of the major and most visible consequences of this population increase in the area has been a squeeze on and subsequently scarcity of natural resources, one of which is arable upland fields. This has seen people inevitably clearing and opening up more woodland and forest areas to create space for more farming areas which remains their main source of livelihood. Whilst these upland field expansions have received full support from traditional leaders (particularly village heads), who, in interviews, pointed out the inevitability of such developments given the influx of people in the area over the years, officials from formal government departments, particularly the RDC and the Parks and Wildlife department, were unanimous in denouncing these expansions as 'unsustainable'. RDC officials, for example, argued that this had fuelled deforestation in the area, whilst Parks and Wildlife officials pointed out that people were encroaching into wildlife habitats leading to the permanent migration of most wild animals into neighbouring Mozambique.

5.0 Reconciling Policy and Practice Objectives for Livelihood Resilience

The cases discussed reveal the problems around the formulation, interpretation and/or implementation of policy without informed and active consideration of practical realities within communities, particularly those communities characterised by a multiplicity of interacting and reinforcing vulnerability factors. A crucial lesson from the discussed cases is that policy should be formulated and, most importantly, interpreted and/or implemented within an understanding and acceptance of local realities. Only then can it become a success, and provide meaningful contribution to people's livelihoods. As the case on riverbank farming has shown, even the application of a national regulation or law is affected by local cultural, social and economic context. Thus, as Mohamed-Katerere (2001) articulates, it is only at the level of practice and local relationships that the lived reality of policy and law affecting people's

livelihoods can and should be ascertained. This is notwithstanding the fact that national policies, laws and regulations, in some instances, may assist in protecting livelihoods in other communities (e.g. downstream communities) from activities in upstream communities.

This paper puts forward two main points towards reconciling policy and practice objectives for livelihood resilience. The first concerns a significant re-thinking of the usage and conceptualisation of the term 'sustainability', particularly with regards to social and environmental integrity vis-à-vis livelihoods in rural African communities. The main problem with 'sustainability', as projected in various policy positions, is that it carries connotations of what are 'good' and 'bad' livelihoods and, therefore, in the context of this analysis, 'good' and 'bad' strategies in responding to livelihood stresses and shocks. This projection of 'sustainability' is also implicitly based on normative notions of equilibrium and predictability where livelihood activities and responses to challenges should be conscious of both current and future generations' assets and capabilities. In the context of contemporary vulnerability trends and patterns in most rural African communities however, in which increasingly worsening and reinforcing stresses and shocks generate unpredictable outcomes, these notions of sustainability fail to hold up. The main thread that should link policy and practice objectives vis-à-vis 'sustainability' for livelihood resilience, therefore, is that its notions should fit into and be operationalised within the broader picture of social justice, place-based dynamics and cultural diversity. In essence, people in different communities should be able to identify with the theory and practical application of 'sustainability', as its success or failure ultimately depends on the willingness of people to adopt what it stands for (Behan, 2002).

A refocusing towards 'local sustainability' supported by subjective assessments of well-being is suggested in the analysis as well as the bridging of policy and practice designs regarding livelihoods and responses to livelihood stresses and shocks in the dynamic vulnerability contexts of the 21st Century. The two cases highlighted in the previous section are clear examples where the conventional definition and conceptualisation of 'sustainability' have been abandoned to suit and reflect local realities. Going forward however, in as far as the two cases are concerned, there may be need for integrated scientific and local historical assessments on the viability of both activities in the long run (i.e. retaining riverbank farming and continued expansion of farms into previously wooded areas), vis-à-vis such aspects as continued viable crop production, long term soil fertility and down-slope water regimes. The results of these assessments may then form the basis for constructive dialogue, continued engagements and knowledge exchange between formal authorities, traditional authorities and local community members on the best way forward vis-à-vis viable innovations in local livelihoods, that take into account the various local social, cultural, economic, historical and ecological factors, including prospects for extensive diversification into more non-farm and off-farm livelihood activities.

A second point towards reconciling policy and practice objectives for livelihood resilience involves the active participation of local stakeholders (particularly those making up traditional governance systems) in the interpretation and implementation of policies affecting livelihoods in their communities. Participation basically alludes to the involvement of stakeholders in the shaping of a society's policies, projects and developments as well as their having the capacity to direct and influence decision-making (Viera, 1991). Much has long been written on the advantages and positive role of stakeholder participation in livelihoods and development policy at large (e.g., Beetham, 1992; Borrini-Feyerabend, Pimbert, Farvar, Kothari, & Renard, 2004; Midgley, Hall,

Hardiman, & Narine, 1986; Nelson & Agrawal, 2008; Shackleton, Campbell, Wollenberg, & Edmunds, 2002), suffice to say it (participation) allows the use of local knowledge, values and aspirations in policy and practice designs (Mohamed-Katerere, 2001). It also allows communities to adequately understand and/or appreciate national policies as well as properly align them with rights to local stewardship, local resource rules and regulations, local procedures of resolving disputes and problems and local monitoring and enforcement procedures (Mohamed-Katerere, 2001)—processes which are all central in livelihood resilience and resilience programming.

It is important to note that advocating for stakeholder participation in this instance is not akin to asking for a drastic retrenchment of state role and responsibilities in the formulation and implementation of policy affecting and/or regulating livelihood resources and activities in different areas, more so given the much documented weaknesses of traditional authorities and community-led structures particularly in natural resources management mainly around such aspects as elite capture and the ensuring of the rights of ethnic minorities as well as women and girls vis-à-vis access and control (see e.g. Child, Muyengwa, Lubilo, & Mupeta-Muyamwa, 2014; Labonte, 2011; Nemarundwe, 2003; Shackleton et al., 2002; Zulu, 2008). Rather, the basic concern in light of increasingly multiple and reinforcing stresses and shocks is to reshape state policy interventions towards institutionalising collaborations between formal state players, traditional authorities and community members in different areas, thereby averting counter-productive situations whereby stakeholders are pitted against each other as antagonistic actors in resource regulation and other processes central in local livelihoods (Baland & Platteau, 1996). In the case of Zimbabwe, policymakers should, in this regard, invest in integrated and flexible policy frameworks that assist in creating more space for collaborative environments, institutional norms and legislative instruments that promote innovation, knowledge exchange and experimentation as later happened in the modification of the National Streambank Cultivation regulation in Mbire in the context of this discussion, after many years of friction between RDC officials and local community members. As noted in this paper, this is because building livelihood resilience in contemporary rural African environments requires policies, plans and strategies that are responsive to the specific challenges and opportunities that local communities face.

6.0 Conclusion

Most policy positions in Africa, in as far as livelihoods in rural communities are concerned, are failing to capture the dynamics characterising the realities of life, especially where it concerns adequately responding to multiple stresses and shocks in these communities. As argued in this paper, policymakers should take into account local values, aspirations and practices particularly when formulating, interpreting and implementing national policy vis-à-vis livelihoods in rural communities. In the case of Zimbabwe, from which the case studies used in analysis are drawn, the paper calls for flexible policy frameworks that allow for innovation, knowledge exchange, collaboration among stakeholders and experimentation in the formulation of local legislation and by-laws that match livelihood realities in different localities. As Vetter (2013) articulates, policy needs to provide for plurality in ecological, historical and economic realities in different contexts, and this can be realised through thinking around 'local sustainability' in policy formulation, interpretation and implementation as well as actively involving local stakeholders particularly in the interpretation and implementation of national policies in various communities.

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