
Zimbabwe: Demystifying the role of "the poor" in forest destruction

The image of the last tree in a dry region of Africa being cut down by a poor peasant --ultimate responsible for environment destruction-- is widespread. Nevertheless, such image is more based on propaganda than on empirical evidence. On the one hand, reliable data on key environmental resources in this continent is scarce, and on the other hand quantitative studies --for example of West African forests and in Kenya-- have shown that the assumption of systematic environmental degradation is wrong, and that smallholders actually improve their environmental resources through investments in natural capital.

Rural households in the South use environmental resources quite extensively. Their renewability and spontaneous occurrence, and the fact that they are often held under communal tenureship patterns make environmental resource use --among which products resulting from gathering and hunting in the forest-- different from other economic activities. Since conventional economy analysis ignores them, little is known about their value in terms of rural household welfare.

In Zimbabwe rural households are located in the Communal Areas (CAs), which hold the poorest soils and conditions of only 650 mm of rainfall a year. The native population was forcibly resettled by the former colonial government and things did not change much with independence. Additionally, their cash income is very low, so that they can be considered poor by conventional economy.

A research study by William Cavendish ("Empirical Regularities in the Poverty-Environment Relationship of Rural Households: Evidence from Zimbabwe", February 2000) in a typical rural county of Zimbabwe --the Shindi ward-- in the mid 1990s found that on average each family derived over 35% of their income from freely-provided forest products. Around three quarters of all income comes from a wide range of other natural products. It was demonstrated that the poorest households depend the most on forest products. Even so, in absolute terms the richer households consume more forest products. While men do most of the hunting and wood related activities, women sell wild vegetables and fruits, and collect firewood.

The results of the research admit interpretations from several points of view. Concerning forests, the study shows how important the so-called "minor forest products" or "non-wood forest products" are for local communities of low incomes in a harsh environment. The hegemonic vision of forestry focused exclusively on wood production does not take this into account. Additionally, the research shows that the idea that the poor are responsible for the degradation of the forests is not only false but also absurd, since forest destruction would mean the end of a "hidden" but substantial income, which can make the difference between life and death.

Article based on information from: "Southern African forests - the poor people's safety net" by David Kaimowitz, 31/8/2000; e-mail: d.kaimowitz@cgiar.org ; Cavendish William, "Empirical Regularities in the Poverty-

Environment Relationship of Rural Households: Evidence from Zimbabwe", February 2000;

