

Eco-cultural villages in Zimbabwe

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In Zimbabwe environmental degradation is rampant and threatens the livelihoods of the most marginalised groups of society. In this article the experiences of the Association of Zimbabwe Traditional Environmental Conservationists (AZTREC) is described. This indigenous organisation has been involved in the process of healing the land and its elements guided by traditional leaders and spirit mediums. AZTREC's activities are centred around 12 eco-cultural villages, where many income generating activities are taking place.

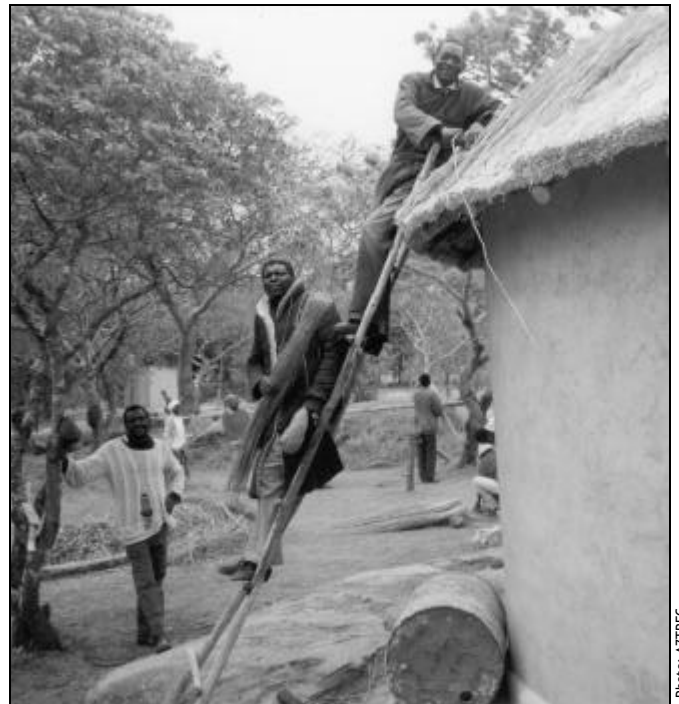


Photo: AZTREC

Building the Zimuto eco-cultural village

The Zimuto area in Southern Zimbabwe is situated near one of the Colonial Agricultural Institutions, which for decades has promoted conventional, market oriented agriculture. Hence, the communities in the Zimuto area were stimulated to adopt the conventional system of modern agriculture. This was done without looking at traditional farming methods; their cost effectiveness, productiveness and sustainability under local circumstances were not taken into account.

In the process many farmers made an abrupt shift from organic manuring of the soil to the utilisation of chemical fertilisers. Over the years this led to soil degradation. Many development agencies that subsequently came into Zimuto also cast aside indigenous knowledge and put in its place modern scientific methodologies. They did not try to understand the culture of the Zimuto community. Despite this external pressure several traditional methods of farming, that are combined with expressions of spirituality, have remained alive in the rural communities.

How did AZTREC begin

AZTREC is an indigenous organisation that started in a small way in the Zimuto area during the armed liberation struggle in the 1970s. During this struggle there were concerted efforts to improve environmental conservation for livelihood self-sustenance. The communication and interaction between chiefs, spirit mediums and the freedom fighters were frequent, and especially significant when it came to caring for nature.

In 1980, the new revolutionary government was installed. Initially, this government did not address the most pressing issues that the people had been struggling for, such as land ownership and the posi-

tion of the traditional leaders. In fact, in the early 1980s laws were passed which withdrew the power of the local chiefs, and failed to recognise the role of the spirit mediums. Instead, the government appointed local councillors in the communities and this led to a dramatic loss in the quality of woodlands, wetlands and other natural resources. The traditional rules and regulations that had protected them were no longer enforced by local leaders. Population pressure and land scarcity, due to the lack of land reforms, worsened the problem.

The authors of this article were freedom fighters who operated in the Zimuto area during the armed struggle. In this position we frequently discussed these issues and concerns with traditional leaders, like chiefs, spirit mediums, influential elders and war veterans in the Zimuto area. There was a general feeling of unrest, because the development agenda of the new government failed to take indigenous practices and institutions into account. In 1984, a group of traditional leaders, spirit mediums and war veterans decided to start a process that would try to heal the land and its elements.

AZTREC's methodology

During the first year, local consultative meetings were held in 7 provinces, where local authorities, like traditional chiefs, village heads, spirit mediums, who were also farmers, met to discuss the issue of natural degradation, lack of land and food security. They discussed a new strategy for Zimbabwe, which would take into account indigenous practices in natural resource and land use management.

After a year a general gathering was held in Masvingo, and the chiefs, spirit mediums and war veterans from 7 districts

decided to form AZTREC. Their major objective was the conservation of the environment, taking woodland management, wetlands management, agricultural land use, reforestation and cultural survival as the basic elements of their strategy. The influential spirit medium Mrs Ambuya Nehanda, was appointed as the patron of the new organisation. Since 1985 these general meetings of the traditional leaders are held twice a year, to guide and advise the organisation.

Start with woodlands

It was decided to take woodlands management as the starting point for activities. This was because of the obvious importance of the woodlands for the farming families. In traditional culture, the woodlands are considered to be the habitats of the spirits, and they provide a place where rituals can be performed. In economic terms, the woodlands are important in the provision of meat from game and birds, materials for construction and crafts, and natural medicines. This is important in a situation where fees for hospitals are too expensive for most people, and where adequate western medicine is unavailable.

In order to start woodland management improvement, the chiefs talked to the local leaders or kraalheads, in their respective areas. They discussed traditional rules and regulations, and stressed the importance of re-installing and enforcing these again. Together they started to identify the woodlands, springs and vleis, as well as the sacred sites in their area, and the rules and regulations that used to be there to protect them. Each chief held meetings with the communities to discuss these issues. The village chiefs began to take over responsibility for the natural

resource management, though officially this task was still in the hands of the government appointed councillors, who did not have the full backing of the population. In addition, under the guidance of the spirit mediums, nurseries with indigenous tree species were started in the 7 districts.

Initial government resistance

As had been expected, this process was met by considerable government resistance at different levels, like for example the Forest Commission officials. Matters reached a head when, in 1989, AZTREC decided to become an officially registered organisation and therefore required government approval. At first this request was rejected. Then AZTREC offered indigenous tree seedlings from their nurseries for the national tree planting day. Forest Commission officials, who had initially refused recognition to AZTREC, went to see the nurseries of indigenous tree species. They were very impressed, because they had considered it impossible to grow indigenous tree seedlings in a relatively short period.

The indigenous seedlings were used during the national tree planting day on condition that the local chiefs would perform all the necessary rituals in the communities during the planting activities. The ceremonies were conducted and the activity was highly successful. This was the start of the formal recognition of AZTREC by the government.

Indigenous tree nurseries

In this way tree planting became a central element in AZTREC's activities, and the tree nurseries the centre of local activities. Once AZTREC was officially recognised and donors could be approached for financial support, extension staff was based in the nurseries. The villages around

the nurseries brought in seeds; each community would analyse their situation and bring the seeds they considered necessary for the next season. Schoolchildren would come to dug soil, fill pots and prune roots. When the time came to plant the trees, the community would take the seedlings to their homes, or to use them in community orchards and wood lots.

This work developed over the years. AZTREC now manages 12 central tree nurseries, and planting was no longer limited to the national tree planting day. The nurseries together still provide some 50,000 seedlings each year, with 75% indigenous species, and 25% exotic fruit trees, like mango, for example. Since 1985 a total of 500,000 seedlings have been planted of the wood lots in some 40 communities in each of the 7 districts. Moreover, AZTREC has gradually taken over all the government run tree nurseries from the forest commission. Many of the wood lots established in the early days have now matured, and are providing fruits, medicine, honey, and construction materials. These products are used for home consumption and for marketing. The central tree nurseries now have become the commercial centres where these products are processed, stored and sold.

Eco-cultural villages

Over the past 6 years the tree nurseries have gradually been transformed into eco-cultural villages.

These centres do not only act as commercial centres for forest produce; they also play a role in bio-diversity management, like the rehabilitation of sacred woodlands, wetlands, vleis and springs. In the ecocultural villages activities such as training and experiments with organic farming, a clinic for traditional health care for humans and animals, cultural promotion activities, and eco-cultural tourism

also take place. All these activities have created jobs for young people in the area.

The transformation of the nurseries into eco-cultural centres has been, and still is, a process guided by a committee of local leaders, called the Traditional Assembly. Chiefs, spiritual mediums, as well as representatives of farmers, women and youth groups are involved in this organisation. Each Assembly formulates policies and an annual strategic plan for its eco-cultural village. It also presides over cultural events, like rain-making ceremonies and the management of sacred woodlands in the area.

In the surrounding areas the kraalheads are responsible for translating the policies into action. They have formed implementation committees, and in each zone these are divided into project committees and project subcommittees headed by local farmer innovators and practitioners. These subcommittees are active in organic agriculture, traditional health care, natural resources management, and income generating projects.

Organic agriculture

Other activities in the eco-cultural centres include experiments and training activities in organic agriculture. The concept of organic agriculture is now filtering into the community. Farmer innovators, who have specialised in new ways of applying indigenous knowledge and organic agriculture, are demonstrating these techniques in their own farms. Now some 40 farmers around each of the 12 eco-cultural villages have established organic agriculture in their own fields.

The farmer innovators have divided themselves into two groups: one group works with vegetable gardens using organic manure as fertilisation, the second group focuses on organic dry land crop production. In the 13 vegetable gardens traditional pest control measures are used, like growing colourful and aromatic flowers to attract the predators that feed on the pests that infest the vegetable plants. Non toxic herbicides are sprayed and some farmers use solutions from specific flowers for this purpose. The vegetable gardens have generated considerable income for the families and have led to improvements in their nutritional status. The incidence of protein-shortage related diseases has declined in the communities.

A group of innovator farmers working on dry land farming has carried out experiments with finger millet, bulrush millet and maize based on organic manure, non toxic herbicides and inter-cropping techniques. Traditional ceremonies were held to ask the ancestors to protect crops from pests and diseases. It was found that organically produced crops could withstand drought better than chemically produced crops. There was a good harvest. On half an acre of each crop, farmer innovators harvested between 2.5 and 3 tons, where



Photo: AZTREC

A workshop with spirit mediums (center) on indigenous agricultural techniques

earlier harvests had been minimal.

First there was a lot of resistance from neighbouring farmers as well as extension staff from the Ministry of Agriculture. This started to change when the results became visible, both in yields and pest management. Local farmers were invited to see these results for themselves. Slowly extension staff from the government also became convinced of the value of organic agriculture. In fact, they are now being trained by AZTREC.

Health and culture

Apart from their role in natural resource management, agriculture and marketing, the eco-cultural centres have several other functions. In the field of health, demonstrations, exchange activities and a clinic on traditional human and animal medicine have been organised. The terrible HIV/AIDS epidemic that has affected a great number of young and middle-aged people makes activities in the health sector an urgent necessity. Many people cannot afford to pay for the conventional health services. The eco-cultural villages actively function as a health clinic and traditional pharmacy for the majority of the communities in the area; patients receive treatment based on plant medicine and payments can take the form of field work or the gift of a chicken or goat.

Another major objective of the eco-cultural centres is cultural promotion. A wide array of activities are take place at the centres. These are decided by the committee of traditional leaders, spirit mediums and representatives of youth, women and farmers groups. In the centre communities can also organise specific meetings to discuss specific problems. A community with a problem like, for example, an increased incidence of rape, can discuss the situation and analyse how it can be improved. This process is guided by

a spirit medium.

In the eco-cultural centres many communal activities and festivities are taking place, including music, songs, folk tales, the use of traditional instruments, as well as an analysis of specific proverbs. In several centres small libraries are also being installed in which information from students, who have done research on local indigenous knowledge systems, is systematised.

Educational tourism

A recently developed concept is the promotion of tourism to the eco-cultural centres. On the one hand national and international researchers come to carry out research on the cultures of people. The Zimuto eco-cultural village is regarded today as a centre of excellence of African indigenous knowledge systems, culture and cosmovision. Groups of tourists also come to visit the centres to experience African culture. To encourage this a relationship was established with a tourism organisation in the Netherlands, who send small groups of 18-20 tourists to stay for one week. They are received and guided by the community and the traditional leaders, and have to abide by the traditional rules set by the spirit mediums. They also contribute ideas, that are selected and fused with local knowledge and experience. Some tourists offer managerial and administrative skills and sometimes these have been adopted in the cultural village.

Basis of methodology

The eco-cultural centres have been the basis of the AZTREC methodology in the Zimuto area. Over time the centres have helped to reduce the problems amongst youth in the area, because jobs were created. Forest and agricultural products, like honey, vegetables and sunflowers, are

Results achieved by AZTREC

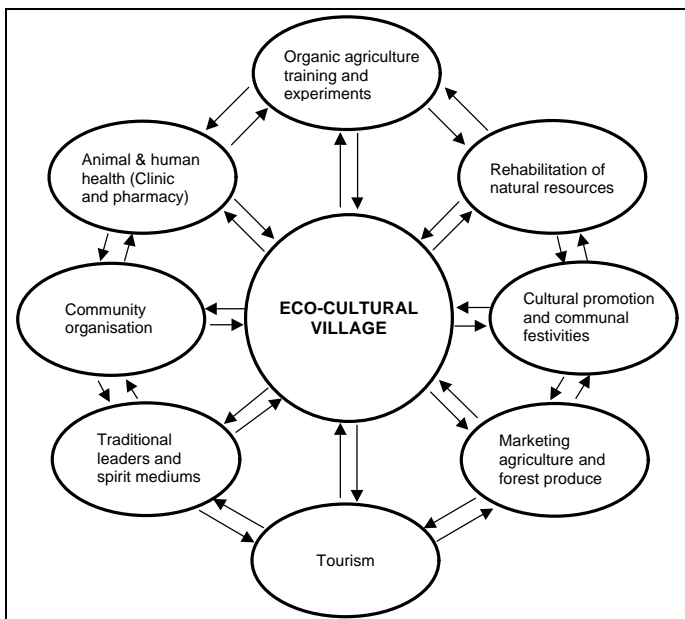
- 12 Regional tree nurseries
- 500,000 Seedlings planted in 280 communities over 16 years
- Traditional practices on natural resources and organic farming documented
- 12 Eco-cultural villages established
- 40 Farmer innovators involved in organic farming
- Experiments on vegetables and organic dry land farming
- Clinic and pharmacy for traditional health practices in humans and animals
- Reduced migration to cities due to increased income-generating activities
- Improved nutritional status due to vegetable growing and organic farming
- Community organisation and the role of traditional and spiritual leaders strengthened
- Eco-tourism activities generate work and income
- ENIACA PanAfrican meeting in Zimbabwe, December 1999

taken sides in the recent political unrest in which land-hungry Zimbabweans forcibly took back the land that had been confiscated by white settlers during the colonial era. AZTREC was appointed by the government Community Based Resettlement Approaches and Technologies programme, however, to assist in land resettlement activities. More than 50 farms have been designated, and AZTREC is involved in structuring resettlement schemes in conjunction with the Ministries of Agriculture and Local Government.

No more borrowed concepts

AZTREC has a strong network with other like-minded non-governmental organisations. Churches strongly oppose AZTREC's work, however. They shun initiatives that consider the traditional leaders and spirit mediums as the authentic custodians of the natural resources. Church leaders consider that the approach taken by AZTREC is not holy, and contradicts with the bible philosophy. Communities in Zimbabwe and other African countries have reacted positively, however, to the work of AZTREC. Some organisations in Zambia, Malawi, South Africa and Swaziland have started to establish similar eco-cultural villages to address environmental problems, based on their own cultures and indigenous knowledge systems.

In spite of former problems with the government, AZTREC is now officially recognised and backed both at the national and international level. As a non-political organisation, AZTREC has not



The linkages between Zimuto eco-cultural village and the community activities

Enhancing Indigenous Agricultural Knowledge in Africa - the ENIAKA initiative

The African organisations involved in Compas, CECIK and AZTREC, have several years of experience with endogenous development based on African culture. The partners agreed that in large parts of the African continent the picture of is quite consistent: despite decades of development activities, food shortage and poverty are still widespread and in some cases have even increased. The majority of the rural people are still loyal their own knowledge, belief and value systems. Though often hidden from the eyes of outsiders, the decisions on farming, health care and use of natural resources are, to a large extent, based on traditions, and traditional leaders play an important role.

For decades schools, extension services, development programmes and churches have attempted to introduce new concepts that would be a substitute rather than build on these traditions. This development approach has often ridiculed and rejected traditional values, and development workers seem to have acquired modern attitudes. The rural people have developed skills to speak the language of the officials, while maintaining their traditions. Most development professionals live in a dual reality: the African and the Modern.

In order to enhance the effectiveness of development interventions, the African Compas partners have emphasised the need to bridge the communication gap between the rural people and development workers. They have decided to up-

scale the Compas initiative in Africa in order to introduce the approach to other countries and to influence agencies into taking indigenous knowledge and values serious. This was the start of the project called Enhancing Agricultural Indigenous Knowledge in Africa, ENIAKA.

Where is the information?

During the initial phase of this project country studies were carried out in Ghana and Zimbabwe. Small teams of local researchers reviewed and analysed the existing information on indigenous knowledge. In both countries less than 100 documents could be found on indigenous knowledge and practices related to soil and water management, crops, animal husbandry and food processing. Meanwhile, during a national workshop development experts were able to identify more than 50 practices of rural people about which no written information is locally available.

At the same a literature search on the same subject was carried out in the major English language databases in Europe. The result was 1663 titles, most of them quite recent. These studies are only available in Western based databases; African national-based development workers have very limited access to these resources. During national workshops in Ghana and Zimbabwe plans were made to fill these gaps. Teams were formed to visit farm families and to document existing indigenous knowledge and practices. The implementation of these plans, however, was delayed by an initial lack of funding.

A pan-African initiative

In December 1999 a pan-African meeting, with representatives of 12 African countries, was organised in Mazvingo, Zimbabwe. It was decided to form three regional clusters for the further enhancement of the initiative: East Africa, Southern Africa and West Africa. For each region a regional coordinator was appointed. Plans were made for national and regional follow-up activities.

In May 2000 a national workshop was organised in Uganda. On the basis of a checklist some 20 NGOs carried out case studies on indigenous knowledge. During the workshop they discussed the outcome and the implications of this for development strategy.

They reached the general conclusion that endogenous development has great potential. It is necessary to address a number of national policy issues, however. Proposals for country workshops in Kenya and Tanzania have also been made. At the moment, however, lack of funding has inhibited these workshops and other follow-up activities in Uganda.

Proposal for five years

A five year plan has been formulated for the Southern Africa region. The activities include in-depth research on the agricultural and environmental knowledge of the rural people, improvement of capacities of NGO staff, establishment of a network for the exchange of information on indigenous knowledge, interregional and international exchange between farmers and rural leaders, and efforts to address national policies on technology development and the role of traditional institutions. Raising funds is the next step in the initiative for the Enhancement of Indigenous Agricultural Knowledge in Africa. AZTREC in Zimbabwe is co-ordinating the ENIAKA activities for Southern Africa, CECIK in Ghana for West Africa and CIOF in Uganda for East Africa.



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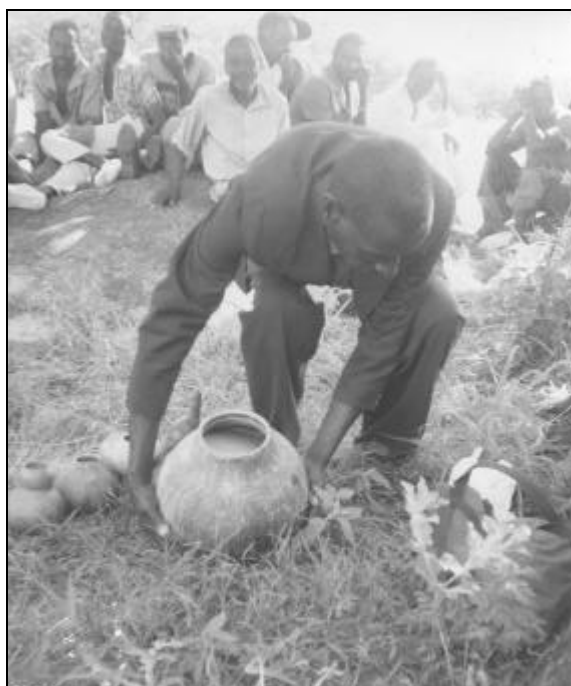


Photo: AZTREC

Traditional beer at rain making ceremonies in Zimuto, Zimbabwe