

Community capacity building, tourism and environmental conservation: The case of the Honde Valley Bamboo Crafts Project, Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

Production of bamboo baskets for the Zimbabwean mass market resulted in the depletion of the bamboo grass which threatened the livelihoods of the Honde Valley community who derived their income from selling bamboo crafts. The objective of the study was to assess the impact of community capacity building programmes on stakeholders' attitudes towards environmental conservation, changes in livelihoods, creation of new bamboo basketry products and opening up of new markets. The study used the qualitative methodology. Face-to-face interviews were held with community members in the Honde Valley. A review of related literature was undertaken and annual reports of the NGO working with the community were also accessed. The study found out that after initial training community members realised the advantages of producing high quality high value bamboo basketry for the tourism industry as compared to producing high volume low value products for the local mass market. The study further found out that the new products demanded low volumes of bamboo material which resulted in sustainable use of the resource. Finally, the study observed general improvements in the livelihoods of community members in terms of increased household income, increased technical skills and exposure to the tourism market through national and international network linkages. The study concluded that the programmes enhanced the practical skills of the community members in bamboo basketry making, improved their livelihoods, expanded their mental and social horizons and created new markets for their products. The study recommends expansion of the capacity building programmes to include business management and entrepreneurship, expansion of the market linkages and targeted exposure of the products to the tourism industry.

Key words: Capacity Building, Tourism, Environmental Conservation, Bamboo Basketry.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Honde valley is situated at the foothills of Inyangani Mountain in Mutasa Rural District (RDC) in the eastern part of Zimbabwe. The area experiences a tropical climate and was originally dominated by tropical vegetation which included woody bamboo grass. The location of the study area is indicated in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Location of the Honde Valley study area



Source; Google maps

The bamboo is a versatile plant. Within the Honde Valley, bamboo has been used as raw material for building, for making fish traps, for making a wide range of household baskets and for crafts making. An increase in demand for bamboo baskets in the country led to the depletion of the resource. The development threatened the future of a large part of the community whose livelihoods depend on the sale of bamboo crafts on the domestic market.

One of the country's non-governmental organizations, Sustainable Tourism Enterprise Promotion, (STEP) identified the challenge that the Honde Valley community were facing and decided to engage it with a view of minimizing the depletion of the bamboo resource and at the same time, maximizing community benefits from the resource. This was in line with the organization's vision and mission. The vision and mission of the organization are spelt out as follows:

Vision

To be the leading agent for sustainable Community Based Tourism in Southern Africa.

Mission

To advocate for, and promote, sustainable tourism enterprise for the disadvantaged rural and urban communities in Southern Africa.

STEP Zimbabwe focuses on ensuring that tourism becomes a meaningful tool for enhancing the livelihoods of disadvantaged local communities. Its activities, which are aimed at supporting the local communities, include the following;

- enterprise and product development;
- market entry of community based tourism and services;
- promoting community based tourism as a local action for sustainable natural resource management;
- promoting community based tourism as an adaptation action against climatic change; and
- promoting community-based tourism as a local action for preservation of cultural heritage.

In order to assess the challenges that the community was facing, and to seek stakeholder consensus on what needs to be done, STEP undertook a needs assessment study of the area in 2010. The study was carried out in four wards of the district; Chikomba, Zindi, Mandeya and Muparutsa. The criteria used to select the wards were high concentration of bamboo vegetation and presence of large numbers of households weaving bamboo basketry products.

Out of an estimated 500 people who participated in the needs assessment study, a total of 200 people were screened for participating in the project (STEP, 2011). The group was made up of 120 women and eighty men. The choice of the participants was based on their basketry-weaving skills and entrepreneurial potential.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objectives of the study were:

- to examine the impact of community capacity building programmes on stakeholders' attitudes towards environmental conservation;
- to identify the changes that have occurred in the livelihoods of the project participants;
- to assess the creativity of bamboo basketry products; and
- to analyse the opening up of new markets for the bamboo basketry products.

3.0 REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Globally, the bamboo vegetation is found in the tropical and subtropical parts of the world. Currently, 65% of the resource is found in Asia with China and India accounting for largest concentration of the resource.

Africa accounts for 7% of the bamboo vegetation (Ghimire, 2008). The woody plant has a wide range of uses (Sharma Bhattacharya, 2010) which include the following:

- building material for houses;
- building material for poultry and domestic animal cages;
- construction material for durawalls around homesteads;
- manufacturing of household furniture;
- manufacturing of baskets, mats, storage containers;
- manufacturing of a multiplicity of crafts; and
- timber for construction of bridges.

The versatility of the plant's usage has given rise to its special association with community livelihoods. For example, in China, it is referred to as "the poor man's timber", in India it is referred to as "the friend of the people" and in Vietnam as "the brother" (Ghimire, 2008: 6-7). The multiplicity of use of the plant has led to its over exploitation in different parts of the world. For example, the Environmental Bamboo Foundation, in its proceedings in 1995 in Indonesia, highlighted the challenges that were then being encountered in the depletion of the resources. Ghimire (2008) noted a similar problem in his study in Nepal where 70% of the farmers involved in bamboo crafts manufacturing had resorted to planting their own bamboo woodlots to ensure constant supply of the raw material. In their study on green design utilizing bamboo material, Chen, Tu and Gaung (2013) advocated for the adoption of the 6Rs concept (Reduce, Reuse, Recycle, Replace, Recovery and Repair) in the use of the bamboo resources. They believed that the adoption of the concept would help halt the depletion of the resource globally and hence lead to its sustainable use.

In many parts of the world where communities have taken up bamboo crafts manufacturing as a livelihood option or as a supplement livelihood option, a number of common challenges have been observed (Ngo and Duc, 2005; Kalita, 2010; Ghimire, 2008 and Wei, 2013). The challenges include quality of products, market access, inadequate skills, limited product range, resource depletion and limited government support in facilitating the growth of the community businesses.

Before the intervention of STEP in the Honde Valley, communities involved in the bamboo basketry craft faced similar challenges. In order to ensure that they had an income that would sustain them, the communities resorted to production of high volume low value baskets for sale on the domestic market. The approach led to the depletion of the bamboo resource in the area and therefore threatened the sustainability of the community's livelihood base.

4.0 METHODOLOGY

The study used the qualitative research method to collect data on the project and its impact on the livelihoods of the Honde Valley community. The strategies used to conduct the research included face to face interviews with 20 participants in the community project in the study area and the director of STEP at her offices in Harare. Further, direct observation was made on the livelihoods of the community members who were involved with the project and those who did not participate in the project. A number of indicators were used to make the comparisons, for example, type of houses owned, households assets and possession of a passport. A review of related literature was undertaken in order to obtain a global perspective on the use of bamboo as a source of livelihoods, tourism development and resource conservation. Minutes of STEP board meetings and its annual reports were consulted with the objective of getting a clear view of the dynamics that drove the project.

5.0 FINDINGS

STEP sourced and accessed funding from the Global Environment Fund (GEF) through the GEF Small Grants Programme to implement the bamboo crafts and natural resources management programme. In broad terms the project included the following activities;

- community capacity building,
- product marketing and promotion;
- natural resources conservation; and
- livelihoods improvements.

5.1 Community Capacity Building Programmes

The needs assessment study identified a number of training gaps within the stakeholders that had been selected to participate in the project. These included, among others, poor basketry weaving skills, limited product design knowledge, lack of product pricing and poor marketing and entrepreneurial skills.

The first training programme was a three day workshop conducted at Hauna growth point, a service centre in Honde Valley in 2011. It was conducted by two Indian basketry weaving experts that had been sourced by STEP through the Indian embassy in Harare. Participants were taught a number of ways of improving the quality of their products. Basic business skills in bookkeeping, marketing and sales were also imparted during the workshop. Furthermore, participants were also exposed to different types of bamboo products manufactured in other parts of the world.

Subsequently, a one day follow up training programme was conducted at each ward in the area. Besides assessing how far the participants were using their newly acquired skills, the ward-based training programme also gave the STEP facilitators the opportunity to assess livelihood changes in project members as well as natural resources utilization in each ward.

Exchange programmes were arranged within the country where some members of the community visited other community based projects in Masvingo and Matabeleland provinces. The visits exposed participants to different ways of conducting business and strategies of sustainably using natural resources.

The second training programme entailed members of the Honde Valley project travelling to India. STEP, with the assistance of the ministry of Small and Medium Sized Enterprises, engaged the Indian embassy in Harare and secured funding for some project members to travel to India for a two-week exchange training programme. The programme was undertaken through India's International Craft Exchange Programme. Twenty members, ten men and ten women, travelled to Tripura province in India where the training took place. A STEP staff member and an official from the Mutasa Rural District Council accompanied the participants on the trip.

The third major training programme was the British Council coordinated European Union National Institutes of Culture Network (EUNIC) project which was conducted in 2013. The project was aimed at building the capacity of basket weaving communities in the country through interacting with local and international buyers, training experts, designers and visual artists. Participants were drawn from basket weaving communities from rural areas of Lupane and Binga in Matabeleland North province, Bulawayo province, Masvingo province and Honde Valley in Manicaland Province. A total of 35 weavers from the Honde Valley project participated in the programme which was hosted by Zimbabwe National Art Gallery in Harare.

Finally, in 2014 STEP secured funding from the Chinese embassy in Harare to send two project members on a 45 day bamboo products skills training programme to China. The training was conducted in Zhejiang Province at the Provincial Cultural Centre.

The capacity building programmes that the project stakeholders have participated in since the inception of the project in 2010 has enriched them with technical, business and new social skills. Participants have been able to improve the quality of the standard bamboo crafts such as "the carrying basket", "tswana", "rusero" and "chitengu" which they sell on the domestic market. The improved products are competitive in the market and hence are fetching a good price, for example, the standard "carrying basket which used to be sold for US\$2 is now fetching a price of US\$4 in the rural areas and US\$6 in urban areas. The increase in revenue per unit has reduced the pressure to mass produce the products. The overall harvesting of the bamboo has therefore been reduced and this has helped to improve the regeneration of the natural resource.

5.2 Marketing and Promotion

The products from the Honde Valley community have been promoted at both the domestic and international markets through the facilitation of STEP, utilizing different distribution channels.

Firstly, STEP participated in a number of exhibitions held annually in the country at which it was able to showcase basketry products from the Honde Valley community. The exhibitions included the Zimbabwe Agricultural show held annually in August, the Sangana/Hlanganani travel expo held annually in October, and the Harare International Festival of the Arts (HIFA) held annually in May in Harare.

Secondly, STEP, in association with other NGOs that had participated in the EUNIC training programme, were offered the opportunity to mount an eight-month exhibition at Zimbabwe National Art Gallery. The exhibition known as "Basket Case II" (British Council, 2014) was again coordinated by the British Council. It showcased basketry crafts from different parts of the country including those from the Honde Valley project to local and international markets. The exposure of the crafts resulted in orders for some of the products. For example, one of the community members was ecstatic about the sales that he made from the exhibition. *"I received orders for lamp sheds and office dustbins worth US\$800. I had to call in my friends to help me with the order. This is the largest amount of money I have ever made in two weeks in my life!"* In January 2015, the whole exhibition in the National Art Gallery moved to Frankfurt in Germany under the auspices of the European Union National Institute of Culture Network.

Finally, STEP secured an agreement with the National Handicraft Centre through which the latter agreed to distribute products from the project on a commission basis. A number of other partners were secured for the distribution and sale of the products, including some hotels in the country.

5.3 Natural Resource Conservation

When community members joined the project, they undertook to participate in the national tree planting day which is held at the beginning of December each year. The commitment has been honoured since the project became operational. In 2013, the community members had planted a total of 6000 trees (STEP, 2014). The trees planted included both indigenous and exotic ones. In order to accelerate the natural resource conservation of the area, STEP secured a piece of land in Zindi ward where it established a nursery from which project members accessed seedlings for planting in their wards (STEP, 2016).

5.4 Livelihoods Experiences

A visit to the project area revealed a number of changes that had occurred in the livelihoods of the project participants. The changes were noticed through observations as well as through comments and information that were given by project members through face to face interviews.

Project members pointed out that income from the sale of their basketry crafts had improved as they were now selling high quality products to different market segments. Members whose homesteads were visited showed off new assets they had acquired as a result of their improved income. These included, among others, household assets such as bedroom suites, dining room suites, solar lanterns and wheel barrows. The view expressed by one of the participants, a single mother with three children, summarized the general outcomes of the project; *"In the past I was unable to pay school fees for my children, but now I have managed to enrol my five year old daughter in nursery school without any fear of failing to pay for her school fees"*. Several members in the five wards had constructed two or three bedroomed brick houses which were roofed with asbestos sheeting.

Ownership of mobile phones has become universal to members of the project. This was partly in response to STEP's awareness programmes at the beginning of the project which highlighted the role of mobile phone in effective networking. The high level of mobile phones ownership was also a result of improved incomes of the project members.

The majority of the project members had been able to acquire passports through the encouragement and facilitation by STEP. For the members who participated in the exchange programmes to India and China, the experience had been the highlight of their lives. It changed their view of the world. The view was summarized by one of the participants who said:

I had never thought of applying for a passport in my life. What STEP did changed my life and my view of the world. I can never forget the day I received the passport and I was told that I will be travelling to China in two weeks' time. The day is the highlight of my whole life.

5.5 Current status of the project

The project has moved into a stage where participants are establishing a factory at Hauna growth point which will be used for manufacturing some of their products using machinery sourced from India. The factory will also be used as a warehouse and retail outlet for some of the products of the members of the project. Funding for the current phase of the project was secured from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). Further, the new stage of the project will expand the activities of the project members to include ecotourism, indigenous food processing, natural resource conservation, biodiversity improvement and bee keeping. These activities will offer additional livelihoods alternatives to the project members.

6.0 DISCUSSIONS

6.1 Capacity building outcomes

Ghimire (2008) noted in the case of the Nepal community that training led to the improvement in the quality of products manufactured by the weavers. A similar development occurred within the Honde Valley community. Technical skills acquired during the training sessions both at home and outside the Honde Valley area have resulted in the improvement of the design and presentation of the crafts. Further, knowledge acquired in Harare, India and China has enabled project members to create new products. Product improvement has further been enhanced by the use of simple machinery which was donated by the government of India as part of the exchange visit programme. The new products range has opened up new markets for project participants. These include hotels, offices and high income residential areas. Products being targeted for the new markets include bamboo lamp shades, bamboo dustbins, bamboo office trays and bamboo fruit containers. The international tourist market has also been a target for the new products.

The business knowledge and skills gained has enabled project members to make sound business decisions in terms of allocation of their time to different livelihoods activities. The knowledge has also helped them to decide on the type of basketry products to concentrate on and type of market to target.

The proceedings of the Environment Bamboo Foundation (1995) noted that afforestation programmes implemented by some national forestry authorities had helped to encourage local communities to conserve their forest plantations in different parts of the world. Within the Honde Valley community, participation in the annual tree planting activities as well the development of homestead bamboo lots has increased community awareness of the value of natural resource conservation, which is resulting in the sustainable use of the bamboo grass. The development was confirmed by one of the participants who said:

I have stopped making big baskets which I used to sell at Mbare market in Harare. I now produce baskets for offices and hotels which are used as dustbins. I only go to Harare and other towns to deliver what would have been ordered. This has given me time to do other income generating activities at home such as tending to my banana plantation.

6.2 Marketing and Promotion

Ngo and Duc (2008) pointed out that communities involved in bamboo crafts in rural areas of Vietnam were unable to depend fully on the activity for their livelihoods because of lack of effective marketing. For

Honde Valley, the situation has been totally different. Their attendance of trade exhibitions in Harare and their participation in both local and international exchange programmes helped them to understand the needs of different market segments. Furthermore, the networking opportunities that were created by the project have enabled community members to diversify their markets and improve their product distribution networks. In a number of cases, members are now able to use social networks to promote their products in identified markets. Technology has therefore helped these rural communities to leapfrog into the global village. The net result has been a general increase in household income, which has led to overall livelihood improvements.

6.3 Natural resource conservation

The establishment of homestead bamboo woodlots has given project members an assured source of raw materials which they are able to manage. A similar observation was made by Ghimire (2008) in his study of a project in Nepal. Once the ward community bamboo woodlots were established, the communities had a guaranteed renewable source of raw material for their basketry weaving activities. In Zimbabwe, the homestead and ward bamboo woodlots will, in the long term, make a major contribution towards the prevention of soil erosion and general environmental degradation in the area. Further, the annual tree planting activities being practiced in the area have helped to re-green the whole of Honde Valley. The area's biodiversity is, therefore, gradually improving and this has led to discussions between STEP and the Zimbabwe Birding Association which are aimed at reintroducing some of the birds that were no longer available in the area as a result of habitat loss. The current developments in the area reflect the 6R concept that was advocated for by Chen et al. (2013), which emphasises the need to reduce natural resource use through replacement and other methods.

Given the scenic nature of Honde Valley, it is envisaged that the improvement of its natural resources would lead to the development of cultural and ecotourism. Already, there are nascent tourism activities which are based on white-water rafting along the Pungwe River. This development will offer the communities an additional option for their livelihoods as well as provide incremental potential market segments for the bamboo products.

6.4 Livelihoods outcomes

The introduction of the capacity building project in Honde Valley positively changed the economic and social lives of the communities in the area. The sale of high quality products to the domestic market improved household income. Incomes were further improved by selling of new products to new market segments in urban areas. Besides being able to buy new assets for themselves, the communities were able to meet their social obligations without asking for assistance from relatives or government. For example, payment of children's school fees and payment for health services is no longer a burden it used to be in the past. The Honde Valley case differs in many respects from that of Khipon Barodur which was investigated by Sari and Suwarno (2009) who concluded that the poor quality of the crafts produced made them unattractive to tourists. The rural people were therefore not able to use bamboo craft making a viable source of livelihoods.

Training in basic business management has helped a number of the project members to plan their economic and social activities. They are now able to make informed decisions on how much time to devote to the different income-generating activities that are open to them. Further, a number of the participants have become teachers to their neighbours who are not part of the programme. This has increased their social standing in the community with the result that their advice on environmental issues is now being taken more serious than was the case before the start of the project.

Acquisition of passports, mobile phones and other symbols of modern life have helped to improve the self-image of the majority of the project participants. Those that were able to travel to India and China are looked upon with envy and admiration by their neighbours. In essence, the majority of the project members

are now socially part of the global community.

7.0 CONCLUSIONS

Discussion with project participants and observation of the products that are currently being sold clearly showed that the participants had acquired new technical skills which they were using to design new products. It was also evident from the way the participants were running their businesses that they had gained valuable marketing and business management skills. New material assets that were on display at the homesteads of members visited during the field study were a clear testimony of the improvement of households' income. Travel outside the local area had broadened members' horizons of the world and this has boosted their confidence in their activities. Further, the production of high quality products and the establishment of homestead bamboo woodlots have helped to ensure sustainable use of the bamboo grass and the overall improvement of the area's biodiversity. Finally, biodiversity improvements have created potential for the development of cultural and ecotourism in the whole of Honde Valley.

8.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that STEP find partners who are able to fund additional capacity building programmes. Given the technical skills that members have acquired to date, the training programmes should focus on business management, entrepreneurship, marketing and sales and basic bookkeeping. Another key area to focus on for further training is natural resources management.

STEP needs to engage schools in the four wards with a view to introduce bamboo clubs for children at the schools. Parents who are involved in the bamboo weaving programmes would be encouraged to volunteer to impart their skills to the children at set times at the schools. Besides getting useful skills, the programme will also help to increase the children's awareness of the need to conserve the environment, especially bamboo grass.

It is further recommended that STEP, in collaboration with Zimtrade, and Zimbabwe Tourism Authority (ZTA) facilitate the access of the products from the project to regional and international markets. ZTA should consider showcasing these products at all travel expos that they participate in, for example, Indaba in Durban, South Africa, World Travel Market (WTM) in London, and ITB in Berlin, Germany.

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