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TOWARDS RURAL SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS: AN ANALYSIS OF EFFORT FROM A POOR COMMUNITY IN ZIMBABWE

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Abstract

This study though at a micro-scale, is an analysis in the context of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and target number one on eradicating extreme poverty by halving the proportion of people whose income is less than one dollar a day. In this context a rural people initiative from within is hereby presented not as an ultimate in itself but as an attempt to complement global efforts in eradicating poverty. A leaf can be borrowed from this venture especially where the rural poor have embarked on such a project without any loans, formal schooling in the venture and without any external support. A case is therefore presented from a study of 45 small-scale door-manufacturers at a rural service centre creating a counter urbanization scenario. It is thus argued in this paper that once such efforts are locally and internationally recognized then MDGs number one and number Seven (ensure environmental sustainability) can be a reality in this community. This study however can be criticized for thriving on a deterministic approach to development, but the results are worth a closer analysis as they might benefit other Less Developing Communities (LEDCs) of the world.

Background

Livelihoods refer to the social means necessary to make a living as it focuses not on technology, overall food production, but on social means by which employment, incomes, resources are shared, allocated and accessed (Forsyth, Green, and Lunn, 2006). Livelihood strategy also includes local trading in goods, services e.g. sewing and wage-labor during agricultural off-season. Literature has noted several factors to effect

livelihood such as education, practical skills, good health, ability to work, land, water, forests, biodiversity, transport, shelter, communications,

savings, credits, remittances, pensions, networks, .relationships of trust, feelings of protection, affection and being free (Ibid). The small rural community of Muchena village of Zimbabwe is found in the Manicaland province with a population of over 500 households. Their livelihoods are based mainly on the commercial timber plantations where they work and survive on. Both women and men have an open opportunity to work in the nearby timber industry whilst they return to their villages every evening. Because of constant electric power cuts and resumption of power at night, the majority of the villagers now work on a shifting basis with some attending the daytime duty and others at night. Working from the timber industry has taught the villagers quite a lot of 'silent' lessons, that they can still have their own village gum tree plantations which in future could provide both export potentials and timber not just for firewood but furniture making. Thus in the 1999 the villagers embarked on small-scale door manufacturing using hand-tools. The introduction of massive rural electrification after the year 2002 exposed these villagers to a new challenge, as they had to use electric powered machinery, which improved on the quantity and quality of doors. Door manufacturing in this case has been made easy, because of accessibility to raw materials. This can be criticized for thriving on a deterministic view towards development where the community thrives on its immediate environment. But, however as long as the community has come to realize its potential to sustainably exploit the immediate environment for the benefit of both present and future generations as advocated by the Brundtland Commission's Report, 1987, then it can be worth the attempt. The study thus opens up opportunities

assets and capitals, which can enhance strategies for livelihoods in the rural poor. All in all this community has the opportunity for choosing what can sustainably develop their lives without degrading the environment.

General objective

The general objective is to analyze opportunities for possible sustainable livelihoods in rural communities from empirical evidence.

Specific objectives

- To investigate on the various opportunities the environment offers.
- Explain livelihood at a micro level especially from a rural perspective.
- Appreciate the effort poor people are doing to make their livelihoods
- Sustainable as they contribute unconsciously to the achievement of MDGs goals 1 and 7.

Methodology

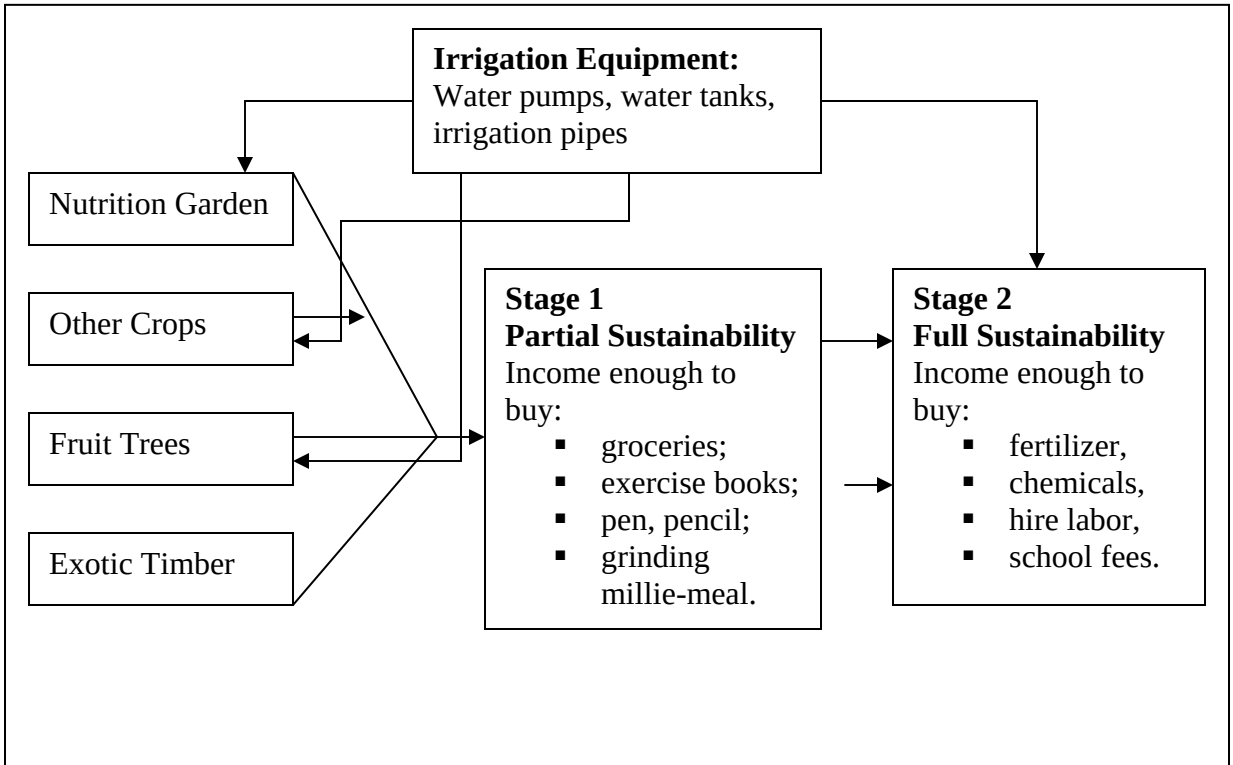
Detailed interviews were done with the 35 small-scale door manufacturers in this small village. Direct observations also complemented the qualitative data collected. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with other key stakeholders in the village were heavily used when trying to triangulate on what the small-scale door manufactures were claiming to have been their achievement. Use of triangulations in case studies is viewed as a process whereby the researcher could guard against the accusation of researcher bias and subjectivity or the accusations that the research resulted from a single methodology and a

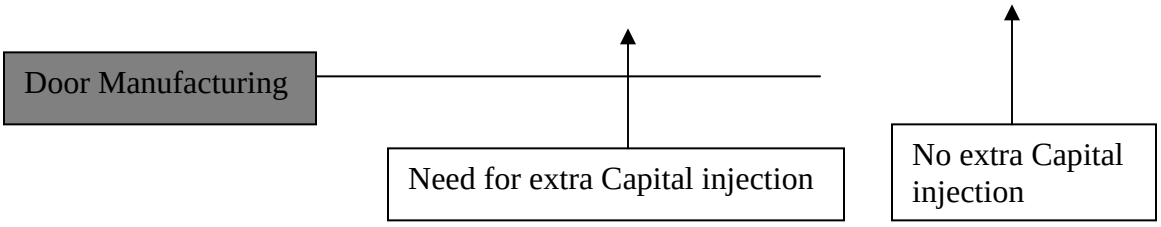
single source (Denzin, 1978; http://www.tele.sunyit.edu/trainqulation.htm). Thus all carpenters were interviewed at their various small backyard workshops whilst the community leaders were interviewed from their respective homes.

Conceptual framework on sustainable livelihoods

Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS) describes country's macroeconomic, structural and social policies and programs to promote growth and reduce poverty, as well as associated external financing needs (Community of Practice Newsletter: April/May 2007). In this study poverty reduction is hereby regarded as mechanisms used to reduce rural poverty. This encompasses issues of sustainable agriculture as facilitated by viable farming methods. These include crop rotation, permaculture, contour ploughing, afforestation and reforestation, pruning and selective cutting of trees as it all combats sol erosion and improve on soil fertility, hence sustainability. Figure 1.1 is an attempt to illustrate the envisaged stages of sustainability in an effort to reduce rural poverty.

Figure 1.1 Envisaged stages of sustainable livelihoods





Stage 1 is regarded, as the partial (pseudo) sustainable stage is where by the homestead is able to raise some income from the nutrition gardens, fruit trees, exotic trees and other crops such as beans, maize and nuts. These are seasonal in nature and are done at a very small scale. Very little cash is raised hence the need for extra capital injection from other sources such as remittances. The little cash raised is good as supplementary income and this can be used to fund some 'low-order goods and services', such as bread, milk, butter, flour, soaps, stationery for school going children such as exercise books, pen, pencil and basic health and medication such as provision of drugs for coughs, malaria and headache. The income is not enough to pay for 'high order-goods and services', such as school fees, school uniforms and shoes, not enough to buy seeds, fertilizers, chemicals or do reparation work within the household and neither can it be used for specialized medication and health consultations. All these specialized demands external income outside the household immediate system hence the term partial sustainability. *Stage 2* is the final sustainability stage whereby irrigation is introduced. This demands external capital to buy the water pump (petrol driven), building of water reservoirs. This is suppose to be a one off aspect unless the pump is stolen or vandalized or Irrigation together with the mounting of water reservoirs and the provision of water pipes marks the final stage of full sustainability. With irrigation, crops are provided throughout the year, fruit trees and the nutrition gardens also benefit from this perennial production. With all

systems under irrigation, there is continuous capital injection from the project itself, which is subsequently used to buy all the 'high-order goods and services'. There is no need for any external capital as the project reaches its final stage of sustainably. Even with all this in place it is important to note that there is need for a continuous evaluation of the project in order to maintain the sustainability.

Door manufacturing was singled out as the only of the rural activity that had the potential to realize final sustainability bypassing the (pseudo) partial sustainable stage to final sustainability without compromising the quality of the environment. This was viewed as the one of the activity that was resilient to any form of shock.

Rural electrification and sustainable livelihoods in Zimbabwe

After the year 2000 Zimbabwe embarked on a rural electrification venture. This was to augment the efforts that were earlier done in trying to bring the bright lights to the rural areas. In rural areas electricity was found in some rural service centers, growth points, health service centers and educational institutes amongst others. These were isolated cases. Many schools both primary and secondary remained in the dark for decades before and after independence. Rural electrification has a counter urbanization effect whereby it helps to repel the zeal of the young from emulating migrating to urban areas. This indirectly reduces rural to urban migration (Waugh, 2000). Table 7 shows the number of institutions that were electrified between the year 2000 and 2007.

Table 1.1 Percent distribution by rural institutions electrified

Name of Institution Electrified	Number of Institutions	Percent
Primary Schools	1,345	26.4
Secondary Schools	742	14.5
Business Centers	818	16.0
Rural Health Centers	427	8.3
Small Scale Farms	485	9.5
Villages	452	8.9
Chiefs' Homesteads	167	3.3
Irrigation Schemes	93	1.9
Boreholes	51	1.0
Work in Progress (Different Inst)	521	10.2
TOTAL	**5,101**	**100**

Source: The Rural Electrification Agency (in New Ziana, The Herald, 3rd September, 2007

Rural electrification on its own is a developmental venture in itself. In Zimbabwe a country where almost 60 % are rural dwellers electrifying the rural areas has the following foreseeable advantages especially a$ observed in the community studied:

- The potential to curb rural-urban migration.
- Brings about development in rural areas through small-scale industries like the popular door manufacturing of Muchena village in this study.
- Work is not restricted to subsistence agriculture but commercialized through irrigation.
- Work is liberated of time as it can be done at any time of the day as long as there is electricity.
- Health services improved as there is electricity hence complex cases can be operated on whilst mortuaries can be built and used in rural health centers, decongesting the major urban health centers.
- Pass rate in rural areas is likely to increase as students get enough time to study in the evenings.

- Those students who failed exams can get the opportunity to study at night whilst they supplement for their exams.
- At a small scale, rural electrification improves on communication that is people can now buy radios, televisions, cell phones which can powered by electricity.
- With improved electronic media communication, the rural areas are likely to develop faster than when there was the absence of electricity.
- Dissemination on of policies on development becomes easy, as the rural dwellers are well informed; they no longer lag behind in terms of what's taking place in the country.
- The fight against HIV/AIDS is also made easy as the rural folks are well informed of any developments in line with how to curb the menace through adverts on TV and radio.
- The notion that 'urban is forward' and 'rural is backward' is slowly varnishing, as some rural dwellers with electrified services seem to be making a lot of money more than some of the working urban dwellers in a month.
- The rural folks with electrified services at their disposal have also managed to send children to school without asking for handouts from well wishers, whilst some have managed to buy expensive gadgets associated with the urban dwellers such as TVs and DVDs which are both powered by electricity.
- Doubtless irrigation is one of the tried and tested panacea to a sustainable agricultural economy, thus with 485 Small Scale farms and 93 irrigation schemes electrified, there is a likelihood that the agricultural economy is likely to be sustainable in the far and near future.

- Rural health is also enhanced where 51' boreholes were electrified and these had a capacity to augment the irrigation schemes already electrified.
- At a small scale, services such as beauty salon, furniture manufacturing, millie-meal processing are now readily available in the rural centers with some having computer and Internet services.
- With 1345 primary schools and 742 secondary schools electrified in the rural areas between 2000 and 2007 with a projected 2 164 more primary schools to be electrified in the near future, then the availability of computers in rural day primary and secondary schools 'makes' a lot of meaning.
- The rural child is no longer lagging behind in terms of computer knowledge as at least they are exposed to the gadget anywhere they are in the country.
- To augment on this development, the University of Zimbabwe's Faculty of Education grills all training undergraduate and postgraduate teachers into an ICT course so that once they finish then they go back into the rural areas and teach with the aid of computers from rural schools with both the computers and the electricity available.
- There is now a possibility that most rural folks are likely to install electricity in their homes from the service centers as their own initiative.
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Foreseeable Challenges:

- Feeding all the rural areas on the national grid can be very expensive hence the experienced power cuts due to power shortage.

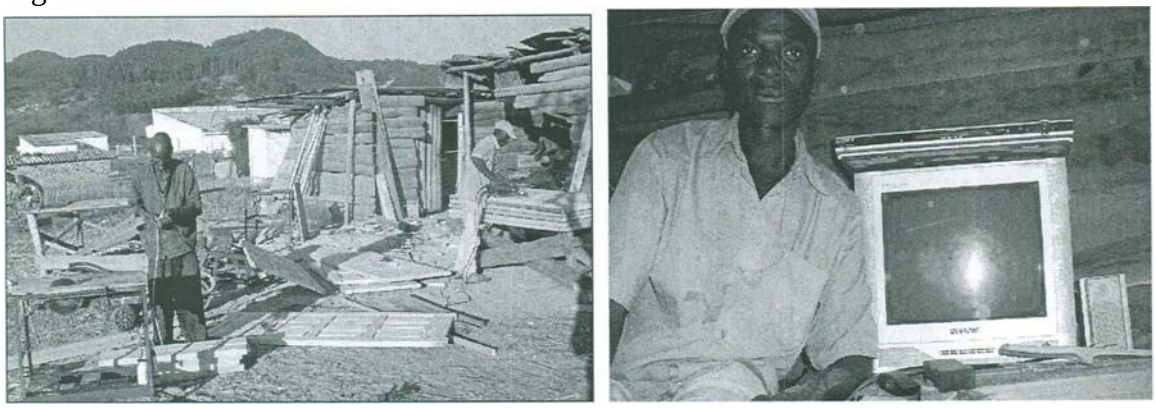
- A lot of Forex is needed in the event of supplementing the power using external sources.
- Not all rural dwellers do use the electricity to the maximum to achieve sustainability as most resorts to domestic uses only.
- Not all trained personnel in computers go back to rural areas despite the availability of computers and electricity.
- Paying electricity bills by the rural folks is likely to be a challenge for the national electricity supplying company as it is a challenge in the urban areas already.

Research findings and discussions

Small-scale door producers

Taking advantage of rural electrification, the Muchena small scale door manufacturers shifted from the manual hand driven machines to electric mortars in all their manufacturing ventures. In all there are 35 small-scale carpenters who specialized in the manufacturing of doors in particular.

Figure 1.2 The small-scale door manufacturers and some of their achievements



As noted earlier on in this research, commercial forest areas surround Muchena village. Forestry Commission of Zimbabwe in the east and to the north, west and south,

there is Baringa Group of Companies (Mutare Board and Paper Mills). All these forest areas around this small village are potential suppliers of timber for manufacturing furniture and doors in particular. According to one interviewee a Mr. Simba Chidawanyika, he started manufacturing doors in the year 1997 and all was manually done. He learnt about door manufacturing from observing and working for and with experienced door manufacturers. He only graduated from this site-based informal training (education system-learning by participation) after gaining much experience and he started his own venture with his own team of 'apprentices'. Today he is a proud employer of 13 other youths from his village in his Door manufacturing venture at the local rural service centre.

The shift to electrical machines with the coming up of rural electrification program was a mammoth task. A lot of capital was needed as well as adjustment to the new skills where electrical mortars were involved. According to the detailed interviews with the door manufacturers, full electrical powered door manufacturing started in the year 2006 after having amassed some of the much needed machinery. The machinery that delayed the prompt shifting to full electrical manufacturing of doors included the radial arm saw, and such had to be imported. Quality of door manufactured depends on the number of machines available such as the heavy spindle moulders for moulding panels and so forth. The problems according to the interviewees, faced by these small-scale door manufacturers were that they started as unknown entities and it was not easy to break into the market. Today they claim that as small-scale door manufacturers they are now failing to meet demand from within and without the rural area.

Problems faced by the small-scale door manufacturers

Working as individual manufacturers is good but has the following noted limitations:

- Quality is difficult to monitor.
- Big consignments take a long period to accomplish up to a period of 4 months and that drives away customers.
- Learners were said to cause problems when they were accused of selling poor quality products thereby sending a wrong signal onto the market
- Customers failed to distinguish doors from learners and those from experienced carpenters hence opted just for the cheaper door at the expense of quality.
- Faced with that dilemma according to the interviews with the major stakeholders, the experienced door manufacturers have to push down their prices too so as to compete economically with the less experienced manufacturers making the business suffer.
- It was also emphasized that the need for accuracy and quality is important when they try to venture into external markets and this needed better machinery, which were said to be beyond the reach of many.
- At the meantime they felt if they could get enough machinery and knowledge to repair them, then they could be a sustainable lot.
- These door manufacturers also lamented the individualism approach that they were taking and they wished if all the door manufacturers could team up and do a collective manufacturing as a big force in doors.
- Such a big force would be better organized as it would involve some marketing personnel and quality controllers.

- A much organized and bigger force could secure loans easily and could repay loans with much ease too hence the issue of lack of machinery would be a thing of the past, they lamented.
- The interviewees also lamented the lack of skills in the manufacturers as they advocated for the opening up of a school of carpentry to enhance on what little skills they have.
- Apart from it being accessible in terms of distance, sawn timber was said to be very expensive. Timber worth manufacturing a single panel door was valued at $2 700 000.00 *Z) N* (July 2007) cost. To effect labor per door and other input costs would make the door very expensive much to the disgruntlement of the customers hence the venture offers less incentives to starters. In fact as the manufacturers argued, once one attains a certain number of doors per month, it was difficult to breakout of it into a higher figure. Chances were that one remains static on the initial number as long as he can still break-even.

Advantages enjoyed so far

The small-scale door manufacturers have enjoyed the following:

- Income which by rural standards was appreciably better than most of the formal employment within the rural area and outside.
- The majority has managed to buy televisions and multi-player systems.
- Sending children to school has been made easy whilst ownership and use of cell phones amongst these door manufacturers has been a common feature.

- The community amongst other things has benefited a lot from the accessibility to good road network, telephone network and better radio and television reception for information on various markets.
- Access to communication also benefited development in this rural area as information dissemination and the diffusion of innovations is made easy. This is good for sustainable development.

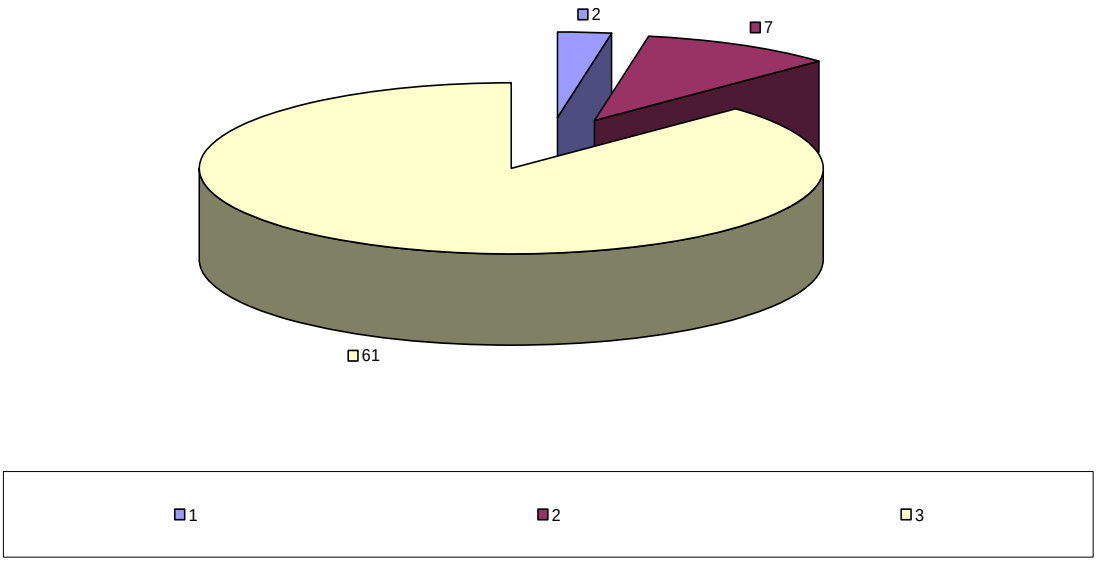
Results from the Small Survey on Door Manufacturers

All in all there were 15 contractors in the field of door manufacturing with an average of 5 employees per contractor. The average age of contractors was 33 years and their average level of education was the ordinary level with one contractor having attained tertiary education. Each of the contractors interviewed stated that he got the skill by working under an experienced manufacturer, more of an apprenticeship and never underwent a formal training. On average the contractors produced 50 doors a month and each door was valued at $2 million ZW (value as July, 2007) and thus each contractor pocketed $100 million ZVV (value as July, 2007) before all costs are deducted. Very few formally employed jobs could pay that much as in July 2007. The cost of timber and labor defeated the whole purpose of profit making as timber was said to be very expensive.

The majority of the contractors noted that door manufacturing was their only source of income with two having other sources elsewhere outside the manufacturing of doors. The marketing process was a mammoth task. The contractors noted that they had to look for local market, Mutare, Harare and Bulawayo markets. This involved a lot of travelling, which was expensive. Transport was often unreliable and had ever-changing

fares hence they ran the risk of making a loss by trying to hunt for a market outside the rural community. It was interesting to note that there were some door manufacturers who lacked electrical machinery and these relied on hiring from colleagues at a fee not exceeding $100 000 ZW (July, 2007 value). Figure 1.3 shows another aspect of how this venture has helped the community by showing the number of dependence in the sample of which 9 were orphans.

Number of Dependents and In and Out of School Orphans



The interviewed door manufacturers also noted that they were taking care of a number of dependence. Ordinary dependence such as old aged parents and minors numbered up to 61. There were also orphaned children and these were those whose parentis were dead (Central Statistical Office, 2002). Seven of the orphaned children noted were attending

school as a result of the proceeds from the door-manufacturing venture whilst only 2 were not attending school not because of a lack of money but because of sickness.

The door manufacturers' vision on sustainable livelihood

All in all the door manufacturers argued that since timber was expensive, what they needed was pulling their resources together and buy heavy rip saws that can rip timber apart into planks. This was only possible once the community as a whole realizes that their small gum tree plots can be used as a good source for timber processing by their children doing door manufacturing. To achieve this the timber has to be left untouched until they are 25 years and above. What is the importance of such a venture? Gum trees within the rural community will remain untouched for 25 years thereby conserving soils from massive erosion. Such a venture can also sustainably improve on rural livelihoods as the villagers sell not just ordinary timber, but processed planks to the door manufacturers. This also has a multiplying effect with more villagers involved in tree conservation in the hope to sale at a profit. To show their appreciation of this idea of having their own timber processing industry that is village based, two of the door manufacturers have already acquired a heavy-duty mortar for that purpose, whilst they are now looking for other parts in order to assemble the venture one day. If only there could be well-wishers to assist then the venture can be a reality in sustaining both livelihoods and the environment.

Summary and conclusion

Agriculture on its own is good for crop production and food sustainability. Agriculture without irrigation is still void of the ability to sustain rural livelihoods hence

the need for some form of manufacturing. Manufacturing of doors has been singled out as an early stage of development and possible urbanization in the near future. The rural youths have been removed from the traditional farming plots to onto the rural service centre (growth point) for some possible capitalization. Such a liberation of the rural labor into manufacturing is also viewed a possibility for development hence the [potential for sustainable livelihoods. The youths find no motive into migrating to the urban areas, as they are better off in rural areas where they can still enjoy if not better facilities and income than their urban counterparts. Thus the existing policies under the Communal Land Forest Produce Act which seeks to prevent outsiders from gaining access to timber and removing it from communal areas (Moyo et-al, 1993), has very little impact on this village as the villagers opt to sale processed products (doors) and not timber. Thus it can be concluded that once the villagers appreciate the strength of numbers such that they work together for better quality doors and marketing strategies then the village can be a force to recognize in pioneering development from within. Thus the study attempted though at a small scale, to bring about efforts by the poor to meet the MDGs numbers 1 and 7.

Recommendations

The study recommends the following:

- Consultation with the door manufacturers to recognize the need for quality and marketing strategies.
- Funding is needed so that the villagers can build proper workshops and not backyard (makeshifts) types.

- Provision off capital goods especially in machinery that can be used in timber processing so that the villagers utilize their own small gum plots within the village rather than buying timber from commercial manufacturers.
- The cooperate world can also assist in technical skills to these youths as well as in the funding for gum seedlings so that the venture remains sustainable for life

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