

Back to the local - no more borrowed concepts

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The Zimuto area in Southern Zimbabwe is situated near one of the colonial agricultural institutions, which for decades has promoted market oriented conventional agriculture. Consequently, the communities in the Zimuto area were stimulated to adopt 'modern' agriculture. This, however, was done without analysing traditional 'agri-culture' and the local conditions. Many farmers made an abrupt shift from organic soil management to the utilisation of chemical fertilisers, which over the years has led to soil degradation. Many development agencies that came subsequently into the Zimuto area also rejected indigenous knowledge and replaced it with 'scientific' knowledge. They did not try to understand the culture of the communities in Zimuto either. Despite such external pressure, several traditional methods of farming that are combined with expressions of spirituality have remained alive.

A process to heal the land

The authors of this article were freedom fighters who operated 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 traditional leaders (chiefs, spirit mediums, influential elders etc.) 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 position of the traditional leaders. In fact, the laws passed in the early 1980s 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. These actions 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 reform, worsened the problem.

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, in reaction to these developments, a group of traditional leaders and war veterans decided to start a process that would try to 'heal the land'.

AZTREC founded

During the first year, local consultative meetings were held in 7 districts, during which traditional leaders, who were also farmers, met to discuss the issues of ecological degradation, lack of land and food security. They discussed a new strategy that would take into account indigenous practices in natural resources and land use management.

At a general gathering held a year later in Masvingo, the chiefs, spirit mediums and war veterans decided to found the indigenous development organisation AZTREC. Their major objective was the conservation of the environment taking woodland management, wetland management, agricultural land

use, reforestation and cultural survival as the basic elements of their strategy. Indigenous knowledge, culture, norms and cosmovision are the strongholds of all the activities, which are guided and presided over by the ancestral spirits. 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 advice the organisation.

Woodland management as a starting point

It was decided to take woodland 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 to most people who cannot afford western medicines and fees for hospitals, and live in places where adequate western medicine is not even available.

To start with the improvement of woodland management, the traditional leaders talked to the village chiefs, or 'kraalheads', in their respective areas. They discussed traditional rules and regulations, and stressed the importance of re-installing and enforcing them again. Together they started to identify the woodlands, springs and wetlands (vleis), as well as the sacred sites in their area, and the rules and regulations that were used to protect them. The chiefs held meetings with their communities to discuss these issues. Soon, 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. Nurseries with indigenous tree species were started in the 7 districts under the guidance of the spirit mediums.

Initial resistance from the government

As had been expected, this initiative experienced considerable resistance from the government at different levels, for example



Paying respect to the spiritual world at Lamafina wetland spring to recreate the balance between the spiritual, natural and human world.
Photo: AZTREC



A nursery for indigenous trees. Photo: AZTREC

the Forest Commission officials. Matters reached a climax 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 to give due 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.

From tree nurseries to commercial centres

In this way tree planting became a central element in AZTREC's activities, and the tree nurseries the centres of local activities. Once AZTREC was officially recognised, donors could be approached for financial support and extension staff was based in the nurseries. Each community analysed its situation and brought the seeds they considered necessary for the next season. Schoolchildren would come to dig soil, fill pots and prune roots. At tree planting time, the community would take the seedlings to their homes or to the community orchards and wood lots.

This work developed over the years. AZTREC now manages 12 central tree nurseries, and planting is no longer limited to the national tree planting day. The nurseries together provide some 50,000 seedlings each year, with 75% indigenous species and 25% exotic fruit trees, like mango. Since 1985 a total of 500,000 seedlings have been planted in some 280 communities. Moreover, AZTREC gradually took over all the government run tree nurseries in the region from the Forest Commission. Now, many of the wood lots established in the early days have matured, and are providing fruits, medicine, honey, and construction materials. These products are used for home consumption and for marketing. The central tree nurseries have become the commercial centres where these products are processed, stored and sold. These centres also contribute to bio-diversity conservation through rehabilitation of sacred woodlands, wetlands, vleis and springs.

Transformation into 'eco-cultural villages'

Over the past 6 years the tree nurseries have gradually been transformed into 'eco-cultural villages'. They have become centres for training and experimentation with organic farming, cultural promotion and 'eco-cultural tourism' and clinics of traditional health care for humans and animals. A local committee called 'Assembly' guides the transformation process of each eco-cultural village. Chiefs, spirit mediums, as well as representatives of farmers, women and youth groups have a seat in the Assembly. 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 resource management, and income generating projects.

Localised organic agriculture

The concept of organic agriculture is filtering into the communities, as the external inputs for conventional agriculture have become unaffordable. Nearly 40 farmer innovators are developing local ways of organic agriculture by combining indigenous and external knowledge. They are experimenting with and demonstrating the techniques on their own farms around each of the 12 eco-cultural villages.

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

The farmer innovators working on dry land farming are carrying out experiments with organic manure, non-toxic herbal pesticides and inter-cropping for the staple crops finger millet,

bulrush millet and maize. Traditional ceremonies are 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. Yields have been good; farmer innovators have harvested between 2.5 and 3 tons on half an acre of each crop where earlier the yields were minimal.

Initially, 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 the results for themselves. Slowly, extension staff from the government also became convinced of the value of organic agriculture. Now, they are being trained in organic agriculture by AZTREC.

Healthcare and culture

Apart from their role in natural resource management, agriculture and marketing, the eco-cultural villages have several other functions. In the field of healthcare, demonstrations, exchange activities and clinics on traditional human and animal medicine have been organised. The terrible HIV/AIDS epidemic that has affected great numbers of young and middle-aged people makes activities in the health sector an urgent necessity. The eco-cultural villages actively function as health clinics and traditional pharmacies for the majority of the communities in the area. Patients receive treatment based on plant medicine and payments are made in the form of fieldwork or gifts of a chicken or goat.

Another major objective of the eco-cultural villages is cultural promotion. Many communal activities and festivities take place, including music, songs, folk tales, the use of traditional instruments, as well as an analysis of specific proverbs. Communities also organise meetings to discuss specific problems. A community with a problem, an increased incidence of rape for example, can discuss the situation and analyse how it can be improved. This process is guided by a spirit medium.

In several centres small libraries are being installed in which information on local indigenous knowledge is collected.

Eco-cultural tourism

A new concept is the promotion of educational eco-cultural tourism. National and international researchers come to carry out research on the local cultures. The Zimuto eco-cultural villages are regarded today as 'centres of excellence' of African indigenous knowledge systems, culture and cosmivision. Groups of tourists visit the centres to experience African culture. This venture is being expanded and developed through a relationship established with a tourist organisation in the Netherlands. It sends small groups of 18-20 tourists to stay for one week. The tourists 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 new ideas, which are selected using spiritual guidelines and fused with local knowledge and experience.

The successful concept is spreading

The concept of eco-cultural villages has been very successful. Apart from ecological regeneration and cultural rehabilitation, the centres are helping to reduce the employment problems amongst the local youth. New jobs are being created in processing and commercialisation of forest and agricultural products, like honey, vegetables and sunflowers, which are brought to the centres. Tourism provides jobs for local groups of dancers and musicians and for youngsters who work as tourist guides. As a result, migration to the towns has been considerably reduced.

In spite of former problems with the government, AZTREC is now officially recognised and supported both at the national and international level. As a non-political organisation, AZTREC has not 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. However, AZTREC was appointed by the government Community Based Resettlement Approaches and Technologies programme 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. Christian 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 the approach taken by AZTREC contradicting the Christian philosophy. Communities in Zimbabwe and other African countries, however, have reacted positively 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 and economic problems, taking their own cultures and indigenous knowledge systems as points of reference.

"The methodology described here is based on a very sustainable form of agriculture and natural resource management, in which indigenous knowledge and external concepts are combined. Because of the high price of external inputs, our own seeds and medicines got a chance to be tried again and to be proven worthy. Of late we feel that even the younger generation has come to realise the beauty of our own indigenous resources, and is deeply involved in all activities. We are convinced of the importance and good results of this strategy. You cannot build development on borrowed concepts - you need cross-fertilisation!"

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Training in organic gardening. Photo: AZTREC



The ENIAKA initiative

Enhancing Indigenous Agricultural Knowledge in Africa



Spirit medium in Iganga, Uganda, explains how the flora and fauna influence healing and farming practices. African organisations met in Uganda to discuss ENIAKA Enhancing Indigenous Agricultural Knowledge in Africa, May 2000. Photo: COMPAS

The African organisations involved in the international Compas programme (see ILEIA Newsletter Vol.14, No.1, pp.26-27), 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 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 to 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 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 own 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 upscale the Compas initiative in

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

Searching for 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 time a literature search was carried out in the major English language databases in Europe. The result was 1663 titles, most of them quite recent. These studies on indigenous knowledge 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. A regional co-ordinator was appointed for each region. Plans were made for national and regional follow-up activities.

In May 2000, a national workshop was organised in Uganda. Some 20 NGOs carried out case studies on indigenous knowledge on the basis of a checklist. 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, and agreed that it was necessary to address a number of national policy issues. 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 African 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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Compas - Comparing and Supporting Endogenous Development

The Compas Network is a collaborative effort of 22 development organisations in South America, Asia, Africa, and Europe to support endogenous development. Documentation of indigenous practices and cosmovisions are taken as the starting point to revitalise indigenous knowledge systems. Together with the communities, the changes in the knowledge system and the interaction with other sources of knowledge are identified. Options for endogenous development are analysed thereafter and translated into community based activities. The learning processes are exchanged through meetings, the 6-monthly Compas Magazine and a website (www.etcint.org/compas). Free copies of the Compas Magazine can be requested from compas@etcnl.nl or P.O.Box 64, 3830 AB Leusden, the Netherlands.