
The SAFIRE MITI Programme – A New Approach to Natural Resource Management in Communal Areas of Zimbabwe

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Abstract

In the past ten years in Zimbabwe, there has been an increasing commitment at the policy level to decentralised management of natural resources (seen particularly in the CAMPFIRE programme) and to the process of economic empowerment of rural communities. The belief that the optimal route towards environmental sustainability is not through rehabilitative measures aimed at restoring and preserving the natural resource base, but through a commercialisation of those resources in such a way that they become valued commodities, has become widely accepted. This has resulted in the burgeoning of development programmes which have income generation from indigenous natural resources as their base.

SAFIRE (Southern Alliance For Indigenous Resources) is a Zimbabwean development agency dedicated to the development of rural self-sufficiency through the improved management of natural resources. In its new MITI (Managing our Indigenous Tree Inheritance) programme, which extends the scope of community-based natural resource management in Zimbabwe beyond the wildlife arena, it seeks to build on the achievements of CAMPFIRE, and to promote economic development in communal areas, based on sustainable and productive use of natural resources. It has woodlands and trees as its primary focus. In this paper, an innovative approach to commercialisation of natural resources is described.

Introduction

Zimbabwe, like many developing countries, is locked into a paradoxical cycle of poverty and environmental degradation. A growing population, more than two-thirds of whom depend on agriculture for the bulk of their annual income (Katerere

et al., 1993), is competing for survival on a declining resource base. Ultimately, it is believed that export-led economic growth will break the cycle, reducing the dependency of rural populations on agriculture by developing other means of generating incomes and raising standards of living. But, and this has been the greatest hindrance to date, what products can Zimbabwe export that do not contribute to the decline of its natural resource base, do not increase its dependency on external inputs, and from which the poorest communities will benefit directly?

To date, the need for foreign capital has driven Zimbabwe to develop an export industry that is heavily dependent on unsustainable exploitation of its natural resources. Minerals and cash crops leave the country in huge quantities. They are exchanged for machines and implements that enable the resource exploitation to proceed at an even quicker pace. External dependency is increased, and for much of the population, the poverty cycle continues. Compounding the problem is the fact that the majority of the rural population live on land of already marginal agricultural potential, with low rainfall and poor soils. This is land that is being steadily squeezed dry.

The agricultural sector is divided into a large scale commercial sector and a smallholder sub-sector, the division of land reflecting Zimbabwe's colonial past. The smallholder sector comprises small scale commercial farming, communal farming and a resettlement farming sector. Poverty is a serious problem among people engaged in the smallholder sub-sector and income is as low as US\$ 100 per capita per annum. People in this sector are also heavily dependent on the utilisation of resources from natural woodlands, including among others, fuel, construction wood, medicines, leaf litter and wild foods (Campbell, Grundy and Matose, 1993). Approximately 10 million hectares of woodland are found within the communal and resettlement farming areas, and these provide rural households with 90% of their energy needs (Katerere *et al.*, 1993).

CBNRM in Zimbabwe

One alternative to this ailing development paradigm revolves around the notion of community-based natural resource management (CBNRM), where existing natural resources within an area are managed as a commercial enterprise at community

level in a sustainable and productive manner. Although this has obvious ecological benefits, it also makes sound economic sense by maximising on the resources that are available, and reducing the reliance on external inputs.

Zimbabwe's first forays into the field of CBNRM came in the late 1980s with its CAMPFIRE (Communal Areas Management Plan For Indigenous Resources) programme. Initiated by the Zimbabwean Department of National Parks and Wildlife Management, this programme sought to decentralise the management of natural resources, particularly wildlife, to rural communities. Lauded internationally for its successes in enabling communities to derive a sustainable livelihood from wildlife management, the programme has achieved a great deal in terms of setting the stage for CBNRM in Zimbabwe. But many of Zimbabwe's communal areas are largely devoid of wildlife, and the search is now on for other natural resources that can be profitably, and renewably, commercialised. Perhaps, in the shorter term, this diversification into the exploitation of an existing and renewable resource base might serve to break the poverty-degradation cycle.

There are four important prerequisites for successful community-based natural resource management initiatives. These are: a) the recognition of local community rights to ownership of natural resources; b) the empowerment of communities with the operational and technical capacity to initiate and implement resource management initiatives; c) the recognition and incorporation of existing indigenous knowledge and practices which are community specific (from Murphree, 1993); and d) an empowering and conducive legal framework.

The institutional framework

Natural resources in Zimbabwe fall under the remit of the Ministry of Mines, Environment and Tourism. Within the Ministry, there is a Department of Natural Resources, tasked with regulating natural resource use nationwide, and a Department of National Parks and Wildlife Management with overall responsibility for wildlife. A separate parastatal, the Forestry Commission, manages large expanses of commercial forest, as well as providing forestry extension services to rural communities. The Commission is also given, under the terms of the Communal Forest Produce Act (1987), a regulatory role for forest products in communal areas.

Each district within Zimbabwe has a Rural District Council (RDC), made up of elected Councillors representing each Ward in the district. The RDCs form the local government, and have been progressively given a greater degree of authority over local level governance, administration and development activities. The RDCs are especially important in that, legally, they are the owners of communal lands falling within their districts. With dispensation from the appropriate government departments, they can thus also become the owners of the natural resources in those communal lands.

Approximately 70 % of Zimbabwe's estimated 10.4 million people live in state-owned communal farming areas (Katerere *et al.*, 1993). The government institutions related to environmental management in these areas are sectorally based, preoccupied with land use prescriptions, and often have conflicting interests. As a result, the laws governing natural resource use are bureau-centric, suffer from a lack of hierarchy, and are sometimes overlapping or conflicting. They also reveal a clear paradox between regulation and incentives (Scoones and Matose, 1993). At village level, traditional land management has been undermined by the imposition of more recent local government structures which are not equipped to assume this responsibility. There exists, therefore, a large discrepancy between the prerequisites for successful and sustainable community-based natural resource management, and the current legal basis for such management. This is both a constraint and an opportunity for an innovative development programme to attempt to address some of these important issues.

SAFIRE's MITI Programme

SAFIRE (the Southern Alliance For Indigenous Resources) is a Zimbabwean NGO dedicated to the development of rural self-sufficiency through the improved management of natural resources in communal and resettlement farming areas. It has recently launched a new initiative that seeks to extend the scope of CBNRM in Zimbabwe to other natural resources. Called MITI (Managing our Indigenous Tree Inheritance), this programme seeks to build on the achievements of CAMPFIRE, and to promote economic development in rural areas that is based on sustainable and productive use of natural resources. It has, as its primary focus, woodlands and trees ('Miti' in the local Shona dialect means 'trees'), these being one of the dominant natural resource types throughout the country.

The MITI programme has been initiated in five districts along Zimbabwe's eastern border with Mozambique: Rushinga, Nyanga, Chimanimani, Chipinge and Chiredzi (Figure 1). These districts cover a wide range of natural resource endowment, population density and agro-ecological potential, between them representing a large proportion of the variation found in Zimbabwe's communal farming areas, and thus enhancing the chances of replicability of the programme elsewhere.



Figure 1: Map of Zimbabwe, showing the provincial boundaries. Shaded areas indicate the location of SAFIRE's MITI project.

Woodlands are the dominant ecological system in Zimbabwe. They are not only critical for community based development, but also for the sustainability of other natural resource systems and ecological processes (Bradley and Dewees, 1993). Woodland constitutes 59 % of the nation's total area, and just under half of it is found in communal lands. Three major woody vegetation types are found in the communal areas on Zimbabwe's eastern borders, depending on the altitude and mean annual rainfall. In wetter, higher areas, miombo woodland (characterised by

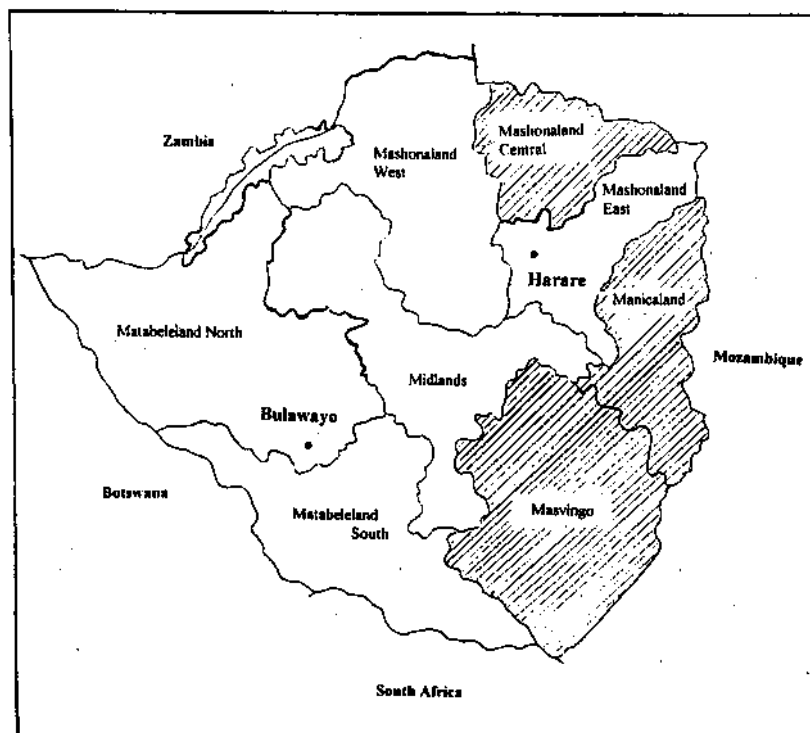


Figure 1: Map of Zimbabwe, showing the provincial boundaries. Shaded areas indicate the location of SAFIRE's MITI project.

the leguminous tree genera *Brachystegia* and *Julbernardia*) is dominant, while in the drier areas it is the *Acacia/Combretum/Terminalia* formations, interspersed with mopane woodlands (dominated by *Colophospermum mopane*) on shallower clay soils and in drainage lines.

Objectives of the MITI project

The project's overall goal is the economic development of communal and resettlement farming areas based on sustainable, productive use of natural resources, with a primary focus on woodlands and trees. To attain this goal, the project has four main subject areas, each with its own sub-objectives. These include increased food security through improved use and management of natural resources; strengthening of local natural resource management institutions; improvement in both community and district councils' abilities to plan, manage and execute environmental management plans; increased participation of women and the disadvantaged in rural development; and raised awareness of environmental issues at all levels, including nationally. It is not expected that all the objectives will be achieved in all districts. The distribution, volume and content of activities in each district will be determined by the opportunities and apparent success of project activities.

SAFIRE staff and project communities will be involved in a wide variety of activities based on the sustainable utilisation of commonly managed natural resources, including enterprise development, micro-irrigation, ecotourism, institutional strengthening, tenure debates, rehabilitation of degraded areas, biodiversity conservation, and the development of participatory extension techniques, among many others.

Funding to the communities

There are two main components of funding in this programme:

1) Group or individual loans for natural resource enterprises (District Loan Fund)

On production of acceptable business plans, which are inspected and approved by SAFIRE, the Natural Resource Sub-committee of the Rural District Council (RDC) and a commercial bank, funds are lent to groups or individuals using a loan finance scheme piloted by the Intermediate Technology Development Group. Loans are

provided via SAFIRE through the bank, with the RDC putting up collateral against project failure. Interest from the collateral is re-invested. This scheme gives the RDC a strong incentive to ensure the success of any project they recommend. The loan is administered by the bank, with the usual requirements for repayment.

2) District Environmental Funds

A special fund is housed with the RDC to fund activities such as village resource management strategies (particularly rehabilitatory programmes) and participatory technology development for new enterprises, from which no immediate monetary benefits can be expected. Applications for finance from this fund are assessed in a similar manner to the District Loan Fund, but do not need the bank's approval. Although the finance originally comes from SAFIRE, the fund is managed and controlled following standard RDC procedures.

Project implementation

At present the MITI programme is still in its pilot phase. A 'scoping' exercise was carried out in each District to ascertain the level and range of available natural resources, as well as to assess the interest in the project at all levels. From this, 'clusters' of resources which could be exploited by the rural communities were identified. With community involvement, several pilot clusters were chosen and communities in these areas were asked to submit proposals for possible income generating programmes based on sustainable natural resource management. This is an on-going process, with the resources being assessed by SAFIRE before groups or individuals are encouraged to develop concrete business plans for submission to the RDC. After the end of the pilot phase, the programme will be expanded to incorporate other resource clusters, which will be developed with the experience gained from the preliminary exercise.

Comparisons with the CAMPFIRE programme

There are numerous complementarities between the CAMPFIRE and MITI programmes. Both have broadly similar objectives, and are based on the same general assumptions with regard to the potential for CBNRM to contribute to breaking the poverty-degradation cycle. However, there are also several fairly fundamental differences. The MITI programme has been able to incorporate many of the lessons learned from CAMPFIRE, and, perhaps, design a process that is more directly empowering at the community level.

One of the CAMPFIRE programme's main obstacles has been the heavily centralised legislative framework and the fragmentation of responsibility for natural resources among several distinct government departments. Its most significant early achievement was an amendment of the wildlife legislation that allowed RDCs to be given management authority over wildlife in their districts. This has led to a considerable shift in the focus of power from central to local government (Maveneke, 1995), and the creation of a much more enabling environment for MITI. Woodlands, like wildlife, are legally owned by the State, and their utilisation for commercial purposes in Communal and Resettlement Areas requires agreement from the relevant State institution which manages them (Katerere *et al.*, 1991). In many cases the relevant authority is the RDC, in conjunction with the Forestry Commission. Where possible, the MITI programme works through the existing CAMPFIRE committees, which are made up of community representatives and coordinated at district level.

CAMPFIRE income has been largely derived from sport hunting revenues. RDCs, on behalf of the communities they represent, negotiate concessions with hunting operators, and these fees, along with trophy fees for each animal hunted, are then paid directly to the RDC for subsequent onward distribution to the communities. Ultimate decisions over allocation of CAMPFIRE funds to the communities rest with the Council's Finance Committee. A major criticism of this approach is the lack of transparency within the RDCs accounting system from the community's perspective, a lack of representation of community interests amongst the decision-making committees, and the retention of funds at district level (see Hasler, 1990). The overall effect of this system on the communities who live with and conserve their wildlife resources is one of demotivation, since they see little reward for their efforts. In addition, sport hunting revenues are often not seen as income generation by a community, but as compensation for the extensive costs that accrue from living with wildlife. These are not enterprises over which they necessarily feel they have direct control and from which they feel they derive direct benefits. Here MITI has a distinct advantage. Working directly with communities, and individuals in those communities, to establish natural resource-based enterprises, it is promoting activities from which communities see more direct financial benefits.

Another area of contention within the CAMPFIRE programme is that of channelling direct investment into communities to facilitate resource management. Where funds have been invested, they have almost always been in the form of

grants that do little to develop and strengthen the financial and business management capabilities of both the RDC and the communities involved. Often the communities themselves see little of the investment.

MITI has tackled these problems through the establishment of district level loan and grant funds. These financial resources are lodged directly with the RDC, but are invested in the communities on SAFIRE's behalf. Benefits visibly accrue to the individual communities, and not to the RDCs. Cash, according to Murphree (1993), is the most effective development extension agent of all. In a wide-ranging, demand-driven, training programme, SAFIRE will both facilitate communication between communities, councillors and RDC staff, and develop the skills required in each group to manage a finite resource for financial gain.

It has always been the long-term objective of the CAMPFIRE programme to diversify its rather narrow focus on wildlife to encompass other natural resources (Martin, 1986), although in practice this has been slow to happen (Thomas, 1992). Until the recent inclusion of SAFIRE, the Forestry Commission, and the Department of Natural Resources into the CAMPFIRE Collaborative Group (the mixed NGO/government committee that steers overall CAMPFIRE activities) few of its members had had any experience in fields other than wildlife.

Observations from the MITI programme to date

One of the major issues which has emerged as the MITI programme unfurls is that of the tenure of the resources to be used. Murphree (1993) maintains that communities can only become effective institutions for sustainable resource management if they are granted genuine proprietorship over resources. This gives them the access to, and rights to utilise, resources in a way they may determine; the full benefit from their use; and the ability to determine the distribution of such benefits. In principle, both the MITI and CAMPFIRE programmes work towards combining production, management, authority and benefit at community level. In practice, however, the law delegates proprietorship and responsibility for resource management to the RDCs, who are neither producers nor managers (Murphree, 1993). In addition, in some cases, the MITI programme may support primary retailers, thereby only having an indirect effect (through market forces) on the primary producers.

These complex situations pose interesting challenges in terms of institutional development, long-term resource use planning, access to resources and conflict management. The situation may be further complicated by the differing values placed on common property resources by different sub-groups within the same community. In a heterogeneous cultural environment, one section of the community may place a high value on the existence of woodland areas for spiritual reasons, while others may view the resource in a more mundane, utilitarian manner. Thus the granting of use rights by the appropriate authority to one group may inadvertently compromise the other. By focussing their support largely on the use of common property resources by whole communities or community groups rather than by individuals, SAFIRE hopes to minimise conflicts over access and utilisation of resources. In adopting a strategy of participatory planning, monitoring and evaluation leading to reassessment and adaptive management, SAFIRE will attempt to address each of these challenges as and when they arise.

The second major issue of concern with the MITI's approach to development is that of loan repayments. In a climate dominated by donor funding for development projects, and non-payment of agricultural loans, this may prove difficult. By working with the Council, the community as a whole, and specific user groups within the community, SAFIRE will however endeavour to foster a culture of responsibility, in both resource and financial management, to achieve its objectives.

Economic viability is dependent on the richness of the resource base and the demand for woodland products. The CAMPFIRE programme focussed originally on wildlife, a renewable, high value product with a quick turn-over rate and relatively well developed markets. Hardwoods are also high value, but within the woodland types found in communal areas, are rare and slow-growing. Other non-timber products may be abundant and fast-growing, but are frequently made into low value products. For communities working within the MITI programme, often living in remote areas, success depends on their ability to identify high value products, based on renewable resources, which can be locally produced.

A fourth issue is that of reconciling the economic viability with the ecological sustainability of natural resource-based enterprises. The overall goal of the programme is to promote economic development that is at once sustainable and productive. Yet the means for assessing the ecological sustainability of enterprises remain limited and poorly developed. What is sustainable on one level (two or three

households marketing palm products, for example) may be entirely unsustainable at a larger scale (an entire village marketing palm products from the same resource base). SAFIRE would clearly not wish to promote the degradation of the very resource base on which user groups are dependent. Here, the challenge to SAFIRE lies in developing the capacity of RDCs to monitor and control resource use and exploitation within their districts, based on a clear understanding of the potentially adverse environmental impacts of resource-based enterprises.

Conclusion

SAFIRE's MITI programme, like CAMPFIRE before it, is based on a hypothesis that is as yet largely untested. The hypothesis is that rural communities can break the poverty-degradation cycle by investing in income-generating enterprises that are based on sustainable and productive natural resource use. Both the hypothesis, and many of the assumptions that go with it, may prove to be false. However, if they are proved true, or at least form the basis for a more refined and accurate hypothesis, the benefits that stand to be gained are enormous.

Whether MITI can take CAMPFIRE forward (and SAFIRE's inclusion in the CAMPFIRE Collaborative Group suggests it can) remains to be seen. It certainly faces a number of the same constraints: communities lack the technical and entrepreneurial skills to maximise returns from a resource, have limited capital investment capacity and access to markets, and limited capacity to enforce collective management decisions (Steiner and Rihoy, 1995). This time, however, it is a programme devised with the benefit of hindsight.

Acronyms

CAMPFIRE	Communal Areas Management Programme for Indigenous Resources.
CBNRM	Community-based natural resource management
MITI	Managing our Indigenous Tree Inheritance (SAFIRE's CBNRM programme)
RDC	Rural District Council, made up of Council members who are elected from each Ward in the District, and Council employees

SAFIRE Southern Alliance for Indigenous Resources
(Zimbabwean non-governmental organisation)

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