

SDG: #2, #5, #8, #13, #15, #17

Building the capacity of key Zimbabwean institutions to effectively and sustainably manage natural resources for rural development



Nearly 70% of the population of Zimbabwe lives in rural areas. Rural communities depend highly on renewable and non-renewable natural resources. Many live off the land and water and have an income through agricultural, forestry or tourism endeavours. However, these livelihood sectors are not paying off. Approximately 80% of the country's rural population lives in poverty. These poverty rates have led to uptakes in illegal and unsustainable use of natural resources. It is feared this unsustainable use of natural resources will only drive poverty rates in Zimbabwe higher.

The National Development Strategy of Zimbabwe seeks to turn the country into a prosperous and empowered upper middle-income society. Climate resilience, natural resource management, institutional alignment and governance are central components of this strategy. With funding from the European Development Fund in Zimbabwe, the country has started the Natural Resource Management (NRM)

Programme, to which NIRAS is providing technical assistance support. In the long run, the NRM Programme aims to have profound effects on the sustainable livelihoods of many Zimbabweans.

NIRAS is helping to revise policies holistically and improve capacities of key institutions, namely the Ministry of Environment, Climate, Tourism and Hospitality Industry (MECTHI) and parastatals Environmental Management Agency (EMA), Zimbabwe Parks and Wildlife Management Authority (ZIMPARKS) and Forestry Commission (FC). MECTHI is the umbrella organisation of the three parastatals, and thus the primary beneficiary of the project. EMA is mandated to ensure sustainable utilisation of natural resources and protection of the environment. ZIMPARKS protects, manages, and administers the wildlife of Zimbabwe. Lastly, FC regulates, conserves, and enhances capacity in sustainable management and utilisation of forest resources.

Support to reinforce the institutional framework through clear mandates and accountable internal governance

NIRAS' institutional strengthening efforts are based on recommendations from EU-funded performance reviews, conducted between 2016 and 2019, which focussed on the reinforcement of the institutional framework of NRM in Zimbabwe. NIRAS supports EMA, FC and ZIMPARKS in the prioritisation and implementation of these recommendations.

"We have done a lot of capacity building with the governmental institutions. Now we are working on getting a joint vision in place. We have mapped out all the elements. When these elements come together, this project will be tremendous," says Andreas Brogaard Buhl, Green Finance Expert at NIRAS.

One of the priorities of EMA has been the improvement of strategic planning. NIRAS experts are assisting in developing a strategic planning cycle. Capacities for the development of logical framework approaches have been strengthened and used to develop strategic plans for long-term objectives. For example, to ensure that ambient water is not polluted, an ambient water quality monitoring strategy has been developed. Between 2023 and 2030, the aim is to increase number of water samples analysed by 2060.

For FC, NIRAS' assistance pertains to the strengthening of organisational structure, planning and income generation and improving HR management and capacity building. Activities that form part of this support include the drafting of a new forestry policy, aiding in the establishment of an in-house policy and planning unit, and developing capacity for strengthening business models and income generation. To fill some necessary positions in FC, job descriptions have been formulated and advertised and recruitment is underway. In addition, a survey was conducted, which demonstrated what knowledge is needed to execute certain functions in FC. NIRAS experts consequently developed course outlines to upgrade the basic capacity of FC employees.

ZIMPARKS receives assistance from NIRAS in defining and developing its organisational structure, identifying and strengthening institution-wide frameworks and their components, and identifying and formulating a plan for capacity strengthening and monitoring. Central to improving ZIMPARKS monitoring and evaluation (M&E) efforts, a logical framework was developed in work group sessions with ZIMPARKS to ensure implementation of their mandate. This framework allows for testing of planning ZIMPARKS projects, which now have to demonstrate their adherence and contribution to the logical framework of the strategic plan. To strengthen knowledge sharing, a reference information hub has been proposed, wherein data is stored and sorted by theme. This hub is designed to aid in M&E processes.

Support to achieve legislation and policies that are coherent and aligned with the new constitution and international multilateral environmental agreements

The alignment of environment and natural resources policy, regulatory instruments, strategies, constitutional plans and multilateral environmental agreements is instrumental to achieving the desired outcomes of institutional strengthening. Without aligned and harmonised policies, there will still be major gaps in the implementation and continuity of the plans designed in the project. Working closely with MECTHI and the other parastatals, NIRAS experts have created broad policy analyses and compared them to other African countries.

One of these outputs is the draft for a new National Forest Policy and a consequent implementation plan. In May 2023, Information Minister Monica Mutsvangwa publicly announced the new policy, though still under development, which includes efforts to promote community participation in forest management. In her statement, she shared the importance of the policy and its implementation for rural communities, stating engagement in community-based NRM is intended to improve their welfare.

Our work in the Savé Valley Conservancy

The Savé Valley Conservancy was established in 1991 in the south-east of Zimbabwe. By conjoining large ranches as one interrupted wildlife area of 3.442 km², one of the largest game areas of Africa was established – without internal fencing! However, in 2000, the Government of Robert Mugabe started its fast track land reform programme, in which land was redistributed to promote black and indigenous land ownership, and consequently 33% of the conservancy became settled by subsistence farmers, with further encroachment happening. As a result, conservation efforts are failing, land tenure is fragmented and human-wildlife conflict is rising.

The EU has requested a feasibility study to be conducted in the conservancy to address social and environmental issues and possible solutions to thereof. NIRAS has contracted Zimbabwean experts to prepare a set of recommendations as part of the study with the eventual aim of bettering livelihoods and conservation efforts in the Savé Valley Conservancy. "The idea was to reverse this development. To get wildlife back. And to make sure local people get something in return," says Brogaard Buhl.

A central part of this study is how to establish a viable business model for biodiversity conservation. There is money to be made in several forms of wildlife-based tourism. And those benefits can have very meaningful contributions for rural development. But for that to happen, benefits must accrue to local custodians and the wildlife needs to be preserved.

"If you don't have an alignment of interests, it is really hard to get going," says Brogaard. "The landowners need to speak with one voice and government needs to create a common policy to agree on a desired outcome. Government, local communities and larger private landowners also need to be aligned. And then you can ask for international finance."

