

**IMPACT OF POVERTY ON THE ENVIRONMENT IN
SOUTHERN AFRICA**

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Introduction

This paper addresses the link and impact of poverty on the environment in southern Africa and also looks at causes of poverty, poverty/ resource utilisation. Finally it addresses policy/strategies for poverty alleviation in southern Africa/ Southern African Development Community (SADC) region.

The future of the environment in southern Africa is in the hands of its people numbering about 136 million expected to double in the next 24 years (Chenje, 1994). Poverty in southern Africa/SADC region has been described as “one of the root causes of environmental degradation” and poses a threat to human health. Poverty is both the cause and result of environmental degradation. Rapid population growth in a situation of limited livelihood options is a major factor in growing poverty and environmental degradation in the whole of the southern African region. Once a community is subjected to poverty, there is a vicious poverty-environment circle, which is difficult to break. It is generally believed that poverty and environmental degradation are linked in vicious circle in which people cannot afford to take care of the environment and lack clean water and sanitation.

Poverty is a major cause and consequence of environmental degradation and resource depletion that threaten the SADC region. Major environmental challenges include deforestation, soil degradation and desertification, declining biodiversity and marine resources, water scarcity, and deteriorating water and air quality. Urbanisation is an emerging issue, bringing with it the range of human health and environmental problems well known in urban areas throughout southern Africa and the world at large. Growing “environmental debts” in many countries are a major concern because the cost of remedial action will be far greater than preventative action.

What is poverty?

Poverty may be defined in several ways depending on the point of focus. It relates to income, social and economic relativity, and social indicators. From an income point of view, people are poor when they are in a state where, “their income (or consumption) is less than that required to meet certain defined needs.” This definition however, does not adequately address society’s capacity to achieve a socially acceptable standard of living that may entail having some education, information, legal rights and infrastructure.

People or a country can be poor in relation to the level of development of the immediate environment. Poverty relates to lack of resources for production to afford a decent standard of living. Inability to access basic, but essential goods and services leads to both physical and mental dearth. It is important to state that female-headed households in most SADC countries, are especially

disadvantaged due to lack of access to productive resources or because they are denied their rights to own resources such as land.

Causes of poverty

The main causes of poverty in the southern African states and in Africa in general, include but not limited to:

- Inadequate access to employment opportunities.
- Inadequate access to land and capital, and limited access to credit by the poor majority.
- Inadequate access to the means of supporting rural development in poor regions.
- Inadequate access to markets where the poor can sell goods and services.
- Low endowment of human capital.
- Limited choices to livelihood options.
- Overdependence on one form of economic activity, in particular agriculture, whose performance is governed by water availability.
- Natural disasters such as droughts and floods, for example, the February 2000 floods in Mozambique, parts of Botswana, South Africa and Zimbabwe. These destroyed the livelihoods of over a million people, leaving them with no food or shelter and other essential infrastructure.
- Destruction of natural resources, leading to environmental degradation and reduced productivity.
- Inadequate assistance for those living at the margins and those victimised by transitory poverty.
- Lack of participation by and failure to draw the poor in the design of development programmes.

It is however essential to note that limited available land has seen increases in population densities due to rapid population growth in the whole of the SADC region. The average population density is about 17.7 people per sq km (SARDC, 1994), but this masks serious overpopulation in some areas. However, a number of points should be borne in mind:

- The present density is relatively higher if the natural resource endowment and economic possibilities for intensification are considered.
- Present distribution of land-rights means that some areas are highly utilised and others are under-utilised in relation to potentials.
- If the present growth rates of population are sustained, the population will double within the next generation.

It is also generally accepted that economic reform programmes that are being undertaken by most countries in southern Africa have contributed to increased poverty levels and pressure on the environment. Structural adjustment programmes have, in some cases, resulted in massive lay-offs and

unemployment, forcing people to seek alternative survival activities/strategies. These include extensive resource use and exploitation. In Zimbabwe for example, the majority of the rural people have gone into gold panning, forestry products harvesting, wild fruit gathering, hardwood carvings for sale to tourists, soft wood products and pottery.

The above activities use natural resources. Inadequate access to land is another major contribution to poverty and is further compounded by high population growth rates. Access to land resources is perceived to be critical in countries like Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia and Zimbabwe and to a lesser extent South Africa. In Malawi, for example, land policies are being reviewed with a view of land distribution or redistribution.

A new and significant threat to human development in the region is the AIDS pandemic. On average, the HIV-infection rate among adults in the SADC region is 12 percent and rapidly rising. Countries like Botswana and Zimbabwe, with estimated quarter of the adult population living with HIV/AIDS, are now the hardest hit in the world.

Slowing down the population growth would take some pressure off natural resources and give some “breathing space” to tackle environmental problems. The conventional policy for slowing population growth is through family planning, although success stories in reducing birth rates are almost invariably tied to an increase in standard of living. It is generally accepted, therefore, that the best way to decrease population growth is to reduce poverty and increase standards of living.

Poverty and resource utilisation

The relationship between poverty and the environment has not been given serious consideration it deserves. The poor are both victims and unwilling agents to environmental change.

Poverty is one of the main causes of forest and woodland degradation in southern Africa and it is both a consequence and a cause of this degradation. In the SADC region national forests are also being exploited for homestead construction materials. The destruction of forests that results contributes to land degradation processes and alters the soil water regimes. Pulp and paper manufacturing, furniture and the building industry are other large consumers of wood in the region. Industrial timber is mainly obtained from commercial stands in forest estates.

A degraded environment produces less, so people become more vulnerable, for example, to water borne and other diseases. Poverty is one of the most urgent issues affecting women and children in the SADC region, according to a study by UNICEF. For example, a National Nutrition Survey conducted in Lesotho in 1992,

showed that, among children under five years of age, 40,000 were underweight, 80,000 were chronically malnourished and 6,000 were severely malnourished mainly due to poverty in that country.

A driving force behind environmental pressures in southern Africa is poverty linked with population growth. When people lack adequate financial as well as other resources, they often have little choice but to take what they can from the natural environment to meet their needs, without consideration for the future.

Clearly, improvements in environmental quality should help reduce poverty. When people lack adequate financial and other resources, they are left with no choice but to turn to unsustainable use of natural forests and woodlands to meet their basic needs. It becomes a vicious circle.

Rural poverty and the environment

A large and growing population of rural people struggling to survive in a limited land resource base has led to the overexploitation of the environment. Crop production is seriously affected by unreliable rainfall. Yields have been falling due to loss of soil productivity. Land under crop cultivation has been increasing due to increasing population and efforts by farmers to increase total production. Mountain slopes and riverbanks are now under cultivation in most rural areas.

Firewood is a major source of energy for people in the rural areas. Firewood extraction from indigenous forests is causing widespread deforestation in rural areas. Firewood is a cheap energy source for rural households especially the poor.

Within the SADC region in some countries like Zimbabwe, some households in the rural areas exploit river bed gold deposits, resulting in channel geometry and large amounts of silt that ultimately collect in dams, thus reducing their holding capacity. Lives have been lost after the excavations collapsed, trapping the miners/panners underground.

Urban poverty and the environment

Urbanisation can be beneficial to human health, but this depends on good environmental management. The most severe environmental health problems are closely interrelated and found predominantly in low-income homes and neighbourhoods. These include poor access to water, bad sanitation, contaminated food, uncollected waste, smoky kitchens and a range of insect vectors.

In urban areas the poor are engaged in urban agriculture, which has resulted in the destruction of green belts. Stream bank cultivation has contributed to the siltation of the urban drainage systems.

Most urban poor to very poor households use firewood for cooking. Illegal sales of firewood are increasing. The energy needs of peri-urban communities are of great relevance in resource use and management in the SADC region. As the number of people grows, so does the demand for energy. People invade forests, mainly near urban areas, to collect fuel wood to meet their energy needs. While the poor cannot easily afford the energy sources that are readily available to the middle and upper class, they often have no alternative but to log forested areas for fuel wood and charcoal. Malawi for example has a deforestation rate of about three percent annually although the use of the harvest is not entirely for firewood but also for curing tobacco.

Most of the urban poor live in unplanned squatter settlements on the periphery of urban centres, where their lack of illegal status and inadequate service provision make them extremely vulnerable. That vulnerability is made worse by insecure, low-wage employment. The vast majority of the urban poor work in the informal sector in a variety of activities, including petty-trading and casual labour. There has been an increase in the number of "street kids" who run away from poor homes to fend for themselves on the streets of major centres such as Lusaka (Zambia) and Harare (Zimbabwe).

Urban residents generally consume more renewable resources than rural people, placing heavy demands on the environment. Large concentrations of people also generate huge volumes of waste, resulting in pollution and health problems. Cholera and other water-borne diseases are often found in water contaminated with untreated human waste and sewage. In the SADC region more than 171,000 cases of dysentery were reported in 1994 for Malawi, Mozambique and Zimbabwe, with at least 600 lives lost.

Some of the challenges of urbanisation in the SADC region today include, among other things, proper urban planning, provision of safe drinking water, infrastructure, waste handling and other services. Many of these are often sacrificed due to unplanned settlements.

Policy responses to poverty issues

A policy is a set of government or corporate objectives and guidelines deliberately chosen to influence future decisions.

Agenda 21 realises that while managing resources sustainably, an environmental policy that focuses mainly on the conservation and protection of resources must take account of those who depend on the resources for their livelihoods. Otherwise it could have adverse impact both on poverty and on chances of long-term success in resource and environmental conservation. Equally, a development policy that focuses on increasing the production of goods without addressing sustainability of the resources on which production is based will

sooner or later run into declining productivity, which could also have an adverse impact on poverty.

An effective strategy for tackling the problems of poverty, development and environment simultaneously

Strategies for Poverty Alleviation

To achieve poverty reduction and steer towards prosperity, there are several action items that SADC countries need to consider. According to the World Bank, these include:

- Fostering efficient macro-economic and sectoral policies for sustained growth and poverty reduction.
- Establish a forum for poverty reduction at which stakeholders discuss, evaluate, and coordinate efforts to reduce poverty. In particular, establish opportunities for listening to the poor.
- Carry out regular reviews of public expenditures as the basis for a pro-poor public investment programme that can be supported by Donors.
- Shift actual expenditures on social services from urban to rural areas.
- Decentralise government decision-making, especially on public expenditures and promote community participation in design, implementation and monitoring of programmes that are essential to successfully reduce poverty.
- Monitor poverty through, for example, collection of household data to assess the difficulties faced by both men and women and to evaluate the progress made.
- Governments and donors should build a consensus on a strong vision for and commitment to poverty reduction.
- Assistance, except for clearly humanitarian aid, should be related to the government's commitment to poverty reduction.
- Donors must demonstrate greater flexibility and openness with each other in coordinating assistance programmes better for a concerted attack on poverty.
- Donors should reduce the bias in assistance programmes towards urban and high-potential agricultural areas and seek a balance of programmes that are more pro-poor.

It is important to note that the above principles and actions are not a panacea for poverty alleviation; countries and governments in the SADC region must blend these with the requirements of their resources and the needs of and aspirations of their people. The web of poverty is linked to all sectors of the economy and all groups of society. There are inter-linkages between the major factors that create the poverty-environment circle. The prime objective of poverty alleviation and

eradication programmes centres on the desire to create economic growth that permits social and economic conditions acceptable to and desirable by all, and leads to a lifestyle that harmonises different cultures and fulfils the aspirations of the people.

Policy challenges for southern Africa

The southern African countries identified the focus and direction needed policy change in their *Policy and Strategy for Environment and Sustainable Development*:

“ Changes for greater equity and sustainable development are needed, for example, to shift the emphasis and priorities:

- In economic development policies focused largely on the informal sector toward policies supporting the much larger informal sector which is the main source of jobs, income and affordable goods and services for the poor majority.
- In agricultural policies, promoting large-scale production for export of food and horticultural crops toward policies focused on the food security of poor rural and urban households and fair returns for small-scale farmers.
- In land tenure laws and policies excluding women toward policies recognising and expanding the rights of women to inherit and own land.
- In health policies, which allocate a disproportionate share of the budget to, specialised medical services and hospitals toward policies focused on primary health care services, which are affordable and accessible for the poor majority.
- In human settlements policies which emphasise more planning, research and delivery of unaffordable housing toward policies giving top priority to lethal shelter, water and sanitation problems of the poor majority in urban and rural settlements.
- In wildlife and parks policies where local people bear many of the costs toward policies which give local people and a greater voice in wildlife management and a significant share of the benefits of wildlife-based tourism.
- In international lending policies, especially structural adjustment policies which adversely affect the poor majority first and most, toward UN system-wide policies and programmes of economic reform for greater equity and sustainable development.

Although many African countries are implementing new national and multilateral environmental policies, their effectiveness is often low due to lack of adequate staff, expertise, funds and equipment for implementation and enforcement. It is important to note that current environmental policies in the SADC region are mainly based on regulatory instruments but some countries have begun to consider a broader range, including economic incentives implemented through different tax systems.

There is growing recognition that national environmental policies are more likely to be effectively implemented if an informed and involved public supports them. Environmental awareness and education programmes are not expanding almost everywhere while indigenous knowledge receives greater recognition and is increasingly used. Environmental information systems in the SADC region are still weak.

Conclusion

The *past* is our heritage, the *present* our responsibility and the *future* our challenge. Poverty and environmental degradation are linked in a vicious cycle in which the poor people cannot afford to take proper care of the environment since they have no alternative but to use environmental resources unsustainably for their basic survival. For example within the SADC region forests are being decimated at unprecedented rates, faster than the natural regeneration, resulting in environmental problems. People become more vulnerable, both socially and economically, because degraded environments are producing less resources.

Policies that entrench unequal distribution of resources, lack of tenure and low commodity prices drive the poor into marginal environments, causing more poverty. To address poverty and curb environmental damage, more attention should be paid to degraded environments, promoting public expenditure, empowering communities and building their capacity to own and manage initiatives aimed at improving their wellbeing. Finally, rapid changes in the number of people in a particular area may cause environmental change and degradation.

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