

ABSTRACT

Zimbabwe has for the past three decades prioritised land reform as its broad and long term strategy to reduce poverty and inequality among its citizens. However, during the Fast Track Land Reform Programme (FTLRP) in 2000, national parks and forest reserves, (the principal habitats for Zimbabwe's biodiversity in plant, tree and wildlife species) were acquired and re-allocated under 'A1' and 'A2' farming models. In terms of its approach, the FTLRP was predominantly guided by agricultural considerations, despite the latter's dwindling contribution to the Zimbabwe's Gross Domestic Product. The interaction of land reforms with other land-based economic activities like community-based ecotourism and wildlife management has been overlooked or neglected by land reform authorities in the country.

The aim of the study is to explore the impact of the FTLRP on community-based ecotourism initiatives, with particular reference to the Masera community in Beitbridge district, located in south eastern Zimbabwe. The Beitbridge district is a dry region and potential for agriculture is very limited. Prior to the FTLRP, this district had substantial commercial farms engaged in various wildlife protection programmes. The acquisition and re-allocation of these farms under small-holder agriculture threatened these programmes that were in place to protect biodiversity and endangered species.

The Masera community was purposively identified as a case study area because of the beneficiaries' initiative to protect natural resources under their jurisdiction and at the same time benefitting from their use. Many land reform beneficiary communities have not achieved the same degree of organisation and cohesion and land reform initiatives and natural resources in their areas have suffered irreparable damage. The study sought to describe and assess the current status of this initiative where community-based ecotourism is being promoted as a development strategy. The study is intended to enhance the capacity of community-based ecotourism as an important development strategy for balancing economic growth and conservation and thus contribute to the sustainable development of the region.

The study concludes that community-based ecotourism is seen as a way of bringing financial benefits for households as well as biodiversity conservation, although economic growth for the community has been very limited. Both beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries interviewed at the study site support the initiative for conservation and are optimistic that ecotourism benefits will meet intended results once proper planning mechanisms are put in place.

Recommendations are proposed based on the study findings and the literature on land reform, sustainable development and ecotourism. Results and recommendations could inform planning and management processes, and thus enhance the capacity of ecotourism to generate benefits at least at the study site and possibly elsewhere around the region.