



## Income status of selected rural households in Zimbabwe: Through the lance of the current socio-economic crisis

Tanyaradzwa Chigonda

Department of Geography and Environmental Science, Great Zimbabwe University, Masvingo, Zimbabwe

### Abstract

The study sought to comparatively assess the sources and levels of income in two rural communities (communal and resettlement) in south-eastern Zimbabwe, in light of the current economic challenges facing the country. A questionnaire was self-administered with the help of research assistants through simple random sampling, with households used as sampling units. The study highlighted agriculture to be the main economic activity and income earner among the households in both study areas which, however, was being practiced on a purely subsistence basis due to various attendant challenges including unsuitability of agro-ecological conditions and resource constraints. The current economic environment in the country has further constrained farming through the unavailability or unaffordability of modern agricultural inputs, as most input manufacturing companies have either downsized or closed business. The inefficiency of agriculture has forced the majority of households to resort to other income sources for survival, with the major ones in both study sites including fishing, selling of crafts, selling of non-timber forest products, selling of firewood and brick moulding. However, the alternative income sources are based on the natural environment, which poses a serious threat to environmental sustainability in the study areas. With the loss of remittances from urban areas due to the current economic decline in the country, which had become an important income source for most rural households in Zimbabwe, it is not surprising to see many households resorting to the natural environment as a source of income. The study recommends that government, in partnership with other rural development agencies, should take measures to strengthen agriculture, as it appears to be the major livelihood activity in both study areas. A transformed and revitalized agriculture would remove the precarious dependence upon natural resources for livelihood among households in the study areas, thereby guaranteeing environmental sustainability in these areas.

**Keywords:** rural household income, communal area, resettlement area, non-timber forest products, poverty

### 1. Introduction

In spite of some new evidence on the urbanisation of global poverty, poverty is still predominantly a rural phenomenon <sup>[1, 2, 3]</sup>. Recent poverty estimates suggest that approximately three quarters of the world's poorest people live in rural areas, which is well above the overall global population share of about 58% living in rural areas <sup>[4, 3]</sup>.

In September 2000, the Member States of the United Nations resolved to halve by the year 2015 the proportion of the world's poorest people by adopting the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) <sup>[5]</sup>. Current global estimates put the number of people living in extreme poverty at 1.1 billion, with the majority of them living in the rural areas of developing countries <sup>[6, 5]</sup>. However, progress in poverty reduction has not been satisfactory <sup>[7, 6]</sup>. With the 14-year timeline of the UN MDGs having come to an end in 2015, it is apparently clear that these goals have failed to reach their target of eradicating extreme poverty and hunger in the majority of the developing countries. At current rates of economic growth, population growth and poverty reduction, poverty is likely to remain high on the global agenda in the foreseeable future, particularly in the rural areas of the developing world <sup>[8, 9]</sup>. Despite projected gains in poverty alleviation, over 60% of the world's absolutely poor will live in rural areas by 2025 <sup>[10]</sup>.

As a developing country, Zimbabwe also mirrors the rural 'face of poverty' outlined above. The first comprehensive Poverty Assessment Survey (PAS) carried out in 1995 revealed that about 75% of the rural population were poor and 25% were non-poor, while in the urban areas the poor and non-poor were 39% and 61%, respectively <sup>[11]</sup>. Zimbabwe carried out its Second PAS in 2003 which indicated that poverty had increased considerably between 1995 and 2003, with the proportion of very poor households increasing from 20% in 1995 to 48% in 2003 <sup>[12]</sup>. The percentage of the very poor was higher in the rural areas (63%) than in the urban areas (41%), though there was a higher percentage increase of poverty in urban areas than in rural areas between 1995 and 2003 <sup>[12]</sup>. Another Poverty Assessment Survey approximately a decade later in 2011/2012 estimated 78% of rural households to be poor, <sup>[13]</sup> indicating a further decline in living standards in the rural areas of the country when compared with the 1995 poverty figures.

Rural poverty in Zimbabwe is linked to the country's colonial history where the pre-independence social, economic and political climate bestowed economic and political benefits on whites, who lived in urban and commercial farming areas, as opposed to blacks, who were crowded in rural communal areas <sup>[14]</sup>. Rural households in Zimbabwe are located in agro-ecologically fragile areas receiving less than 650 mm of

rainfall per annum and characterised by poor soils [15]. This has led to a situation whereby, while agriculture is the main economic activity in the country's rural areas, it has failed to meet the livelihood needs of the many people dependent upon it due to the above noted physical constraints. Given the socio-economic challenges facing the rural areas of Zimbabwe, various researchers [16, 17, 18, 19, 20] have looked into the livelihood dynamics of households in these areas.

Since the year 2000, Zimbabwe has been going through very difficult socio-economic and political challenges. These challenges have mostly been felt in the rural areas due to the colonial legacy of neglect earlier noted, thereby further derailing efforts towards sustainable rural development in the country. Few studies have, however, looked into the impacts of the current socio-economic challenges to the country's rural areas. Therefore, the impact of these challenges upon rural livelihoods is still largely unknown. The aim of this study is to comparatively determine the sources and levels of household income in two rural communities in south-eastern Zimbabwe (communal and resettlement), and how these have been impacted upon by the current socio-economic decline in the country.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1 Study sites

The Mahenye communal area is located in Chipinge District of Manicaland Province (Figure 1). Mahenye has an approximate total population of about 5000 people from about 800 households, with a population density of about 20 persons per km<sup>2</sup> [21]. It is bordered by Gonarezhou National Park to the south-west and Mozambique to the south-east.

Mahenye receives an annual average rainfall of between 450-500mm. The low rainfall, coupled with infertile sandy-loam soils and high temperatures, makes the area unsuitable for farming, with local communities largely confined to subsistence agriculture. The vegetation of Mahenye consists mainly of mixed mopane and combretum woodland with some dense riverine forest occurring along rivers [22].

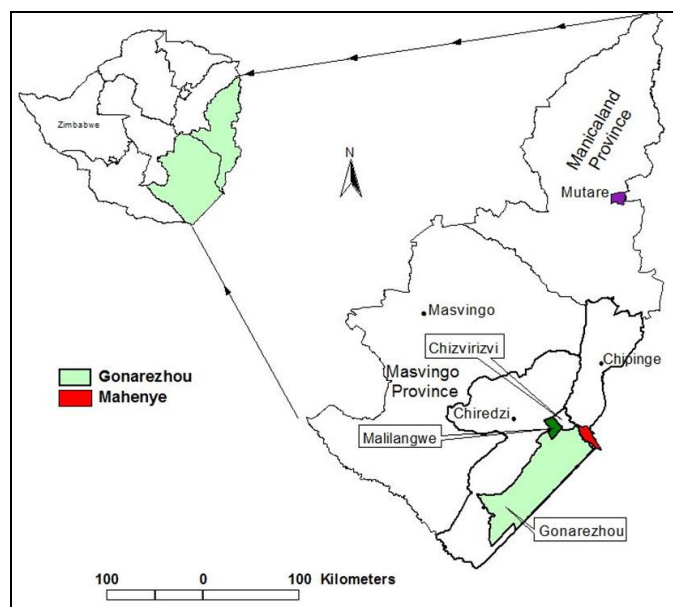


Fig 1: Location of Mahenye and Chizvirizvi [23]

Chizvirizvi is a resettlement area in Chiredzi District of Masvingo Province (Figure 1). It shares a border with Malilangwe wildlife reserve to the south-west, Gonarezhou National Park to the south and Chipinge District to the north-east. The resettlement area is made up of 292 large self-contained plots averaging 85 hectares each, with each plot adequate for both arable farming and livestock grazing. Like Mahenye, however, the area also faces the same physical constraints of aridity and poor soil fertility.

### 2.2 Data collection and analysis

A questionnaire was employed in gathering primary data for the study. The questionnaire was self-administered by the researcher with the help of some research assistants, and targeted the residents of the study areas. A similar questionnaire was administered in both study areas to enable a comparison of collected information.

The questionnaire solicited for information on the income sources and levels of respondents, and how these were being impacted upon by the current unfavourable economic situation in the country. Households were used as sampling units, and were selected using simple random sampling made possible by the availability of full name lists of household heads kept by community leaders. Names of household heads in each study area were written on small pieces of paper and then randomly drawn from a container. One hundred and fifty (150) households were selected for questionnaire interviews in each of the study communities.

Responses to the questionnaire on income sources and levels were tabulated into percentage frequencies. These were then used in discussing the income status of households in the study areas.

## 3. Results and discussion

The study sought to establish the sources of household income among study respondents. Respondents indicated various income sources, with farming cited as an income source by all (100%) respondents in both study sites (Table 1).

Table 1: Sources of household income: multiple responses

Household income sources	Mahenye (n=150)	Chizvirizvi (n=150)	Total (n=300)
Farming	100	100	100
Monthly salary	11.2	9.1	10.2
Working in people's fields (weeding etc.)	31.0	43.0	37.0
Remittances	16.7	10.0	13.3
Pension	5.8	7.2	6.5
Fishing	63.7	51.3	57.5
Selling of crafts	55.3	59.0	57.2
Selling of non-timber forest products (NTFPs)	66.0	61.0	63.5
Run mini-tuckshop	4.5	-	2.3
Second-hand clothes flea market	8.7	-	4.4
Shoe repairing/tailoring	5.3	9.4	7.4
Selling of fuelwood	37.0	48.0	42.5
Brick moulding	26.7	31.3	29.0

With farming emerging as a major, and universal, income source, the respondents were further asked about the specific

types of farming they practiced. The overall response for the two study sites indicated subsistence crop and livestock production (86%) to be the main type of farming practiced, while the other respondents (14%) were practicing subsistence crop production (Table 2).

**Table 2:** Type of farming practised

Type of farming practised	Mahenye (n=150)	Chizvirizvi (n=150)	Total (n=300)
Subsistence crop production	28.0	-	14.0
Subsistence crop and livestock production	72.0	100	86.0
Total	100	100	100

Agriculture is the main occupation for the majority of people in the communal and resettlement areas of Zimbabwe, and is mainly practiced on a subsistence basis due to lack of resources and the unsuitability of agro-ecological conditions [16, 19]. While farmers in resettlement areas like Chizvirizvi may seem better in terms of farm size and, to a limited extent, agro-ecological suitability compared to communal areas, they also often lack the same key farming resources such as cash and machinery, with the majority of them farming on a subsistence basis. Various challenges to farming were identified by the respondents in both study areas (Table 3).

**Table 3:** Challenges faced in farming: multiple responses

Challenges in farming	Mahenye (n=150)	Chizvirizvi (n=150)	Total (n=300)
Shortage of land	58.7	-	29.4
Lack of farming skills/knowledge	48.0	41.0	44.5
Lack of resources	84.0	78.7	81.4
Destruction of crops by wildlife/pests/diseases	95.3	57.4	76.4
Aridity	87.3	99.3	93.3
Poor soil fertility	97.1	88.3	92.7

The above challenges to farming have forced the majority of farmers in the study areas to farm on a purely subsistence basis for their immediate needs. The challenges to farming have further been worsened by the unfavourable economic conditions in the country. For example, many agricultural input manufacturing companies have been forced to either downsize or close completely due to the harsh business environment currently prevailing in the country, thereby making many agricultural inputs either unavailable or unaffordable to most poor rural farmers. During the hyperinflationary period between 2004 and 2007, for instance, the price of a 50kg bag of top dressing fertiliser rose dramatically from Z\$80 000 during the 2004/2005 agricultural season to Z\$7 000 000 during the 2007/2007 season, while that for a 50kg bag of certified seed rose from Z\$64 000 to Z\$6 300 000 during the same time period [24], forcing the government to adopt a multicurrency regime in 2009 in an attempt to stabilise prices.

However, while most people in the study areas were subsistence farmers, some interviewed respondents, particularly in Chizvirizvi, noted that they occasionally produced some surplus for sale during good seasons. It is this surplus produce, albeit small, which will then add on to family

income. Some of the households also practice horticulture on a small scale, with watermelons, tomatoes, cucumbers and various other kinds of vegetables sold for cash income. In addition, with a sizeable number of respondents in both study areas owning livestock, other agricultural income sources identified included the selling of milk, and also the occasional selling of live animals (cattle, goats, sheep and chicken). The importance of livestock rearing as an important economic activity among rural households has been highlighted by various scholars. For example, one researcher noted that communal farmers in Zimbabwe keep mixed-species stock as a survival strategy [25]. Similar studies, elsewhere, for example one in East Africa [26], also revealed that rural communities survived by keeping multispecies of livestock, with small stock such as goats and sheep occasionally sold for cash income.

The foregoing clearly indicates that farming on its own is not adequate to support the income needs of households in the study areas, which has forced them to search for other livelihood sources. Table 1 lists other major income sources among households in the study areas, namely, fishing, selling of crafts and the selling of non-timber forest products (NTFPs.). 63.7% of respondents in Mahenye and 51.3% in Chizvirizvi relied on the selling of fish for household income. 55.3% and 59% of respondents in Mahenye and Chizvirizvi, respectively, sold various kinds of crafts for income, while 66% of respondents in Mahenye and 61% in Chizvirizvi cited the selling of NTFPs as an important income source. The selling of crafts in both study sites has grown into an important business for the local people due to thriving ecotourism ventures which have attracted both domestic and foreign tourists. Among the various NTFPs that are contributing to household income in the study areas include mushrooms, wild fruits and honey, which are often sold on road-sides or in nearby towns. There is growing evidence that NTFPs contribute significantly in maintaining livelihoods in the rural areas of developing countries [27]. Over 800 million people around the world depend on forest resources for their daily income, with these resources contributing nearly US\$100 billion value of NTFPs to human society globally [28, 29]. Other important sources of household income in the study areas include earnings from working in people's fields, brick moulding and fuelwood selling.

Table 1 reveals an overdependence on resources derived from nature among households in both study areas for the generation of income. These include fish, crafts, NTFPs, fuelwood and also brick moulding (which relies on wood for brick curing), and these are apparently the major sources of income in both study areas. The current economic challenges in the country have forced many rural households (including some also in the urban areas) to resort to nature and the natural products derived from it for livelihoods [30, 17]. This has come as a result of many people losing their jobs due to the closure of a large number of industries in the urban areas. This has also resulted in the dwindling of the contribution of remittances to household income in the rural areas, which used to be an important income source.

The increased reliance on natural resources for livelihoods in the study areas has serious implications on environmental sustainability. Poverty presents a particular challenge for

environmental management as the poor, in search of means to sustain themselves, often unintentionally engage in activities that damage the environment [31, 32, 33, 34]. The relationship between poverty and environmental degradation in Zimbabwe was clearly demonstrated by the Second PAS of 2003 which showed that while the very-poor were found to be more aware of environmental regulations than the non-poor, they were, however, implicated in many environmentally damaging activities as they struggled for survival [17].

An analysis of the number of income sources among sampled households was also conducted, and the results are presented in Table 4. As Table 4 indicates, the minimum number of income sources per household in both study sites was four. 55.3% and 64.7% of interviewed households in Mahenye and Chizvirizvi, respectively, had four income sources; 34% and 25% of interviewed households in Mahenye and Chizvirizvi, respectively, had five income sources; while 8% and 9.8% of households in Mahenye and Chizvirizvi had six income sources, respectively. Another 2.7% of households in Mahenye had seven income sources, while no household in Chizvirizvi had seven or more income sources. The majority of the interviewed households in Mahenye (55.3%) and in Chizvirizvi (64.7%) had four income sources. The reported maximum and minimum number of income sources among the households in Mahenye was 4 and 7, respectively, while this was 4 and 6, respectively, in Chizvirizvi.

**Table 4:** Number of income sources per household

Number of income sources per household	Mahenye (n=150)	Chizvirizvi (n=150)	Total (n=300)
1	-	-	-
2	-	-	-
3	-	-	-
4	55.3	64.7	60.0
5	34.0	25.5	29.8
6	8.0	9.8	8.9
7	2.7	-	1.3
Total	100	100	100

Rural households in Zimbabwe have been reported to rely on various sources of income as a survival strategy and the results in Table 4 seem to confirm this. While agriculture plays a vital role as an income source among rural households, the contribution of non-farm income sources and activities based on environmental resources has increasingly been recognised particularly among the poorer households [19]. Other scholars [28] further highlight the above observation by noting that agricultural production from tribal lands is inadequate as it just maintains a household at subsistence level, and hence communities look for additional livelihood sources.

The study went further to establish levels of income among sampled households in the study areas. The majority of the households in Mahenye (67.3%) and Chizvirizvi (62.7%) had a monthly household income of less than US\$50. The average monthly household income in Mahenye was US\$72.7 while it was US\$75.1 in Chizvirizvi. With large average household sizes of 7.9 and 7.5 persons in Mahenye and Chizvirizvi, respectively, this would translate into very low daily per capita income levels. In addition, 77.4% of the respondents in

Mahenye and 71.4% of the respondents in Chizvirizvi indicated that they were living under conditions of high poverty. This means that a large majority of the residents of the two study sites, therefore, fall within the 1.1 billion people across the globe living in extreme poverty [6, 5, 35]. The high number of income sources among the households in the study areas is, therefore, an indication of poverty, with households requiring to pursue various income sources simultaneously for them to survive. This is in clear contrast with urban areas where a huge majority of households usually survive on a single income source.

#### 4. Concluding remarks

The study has revealed that, while agriculture was the most common economic activity and income source, households in the study communities pursued various other livelihood avenues for the generation of income. Due to various challenges to farming, including agro-ecological and resource constraints, agriculture was acutely inefficient, with the large majority of farmers in the study areas practicing it on a purely subsistence basis. The current economic crisis in the country has added new challenges to agriculture among the poor rural households by making modern farming inputs such as inorganic fertilisers and certified seeds either unavailable or unaffordable. Other major income sources being pursued by households in the study areas to augment earnings from agriculture included fishing, selling of crafts, selling of NTFPs, brick moulding and fuelwood selling. However, all these add-on income generating activities are based on the natural environment, thereby highlighting an overdependence on nature for livelihoods among the study respondents. With many people laid off their jobs due to the economic challenges prevailing in the country, it is not surprising to see many people switching to the natural environment for survival. This, however, has serious environmental sustainability implications for the study areas, and the rural areas of the country in general.

In spite of the many livelihood pursuits in the study areas for the generation of household income, very low levels of income were revealed among households. The study recommends that measures should be adopted by government, with help from other rural development partners, so as to strengthen agriculture among rural households, as this has emerged to be the main economic activity in the study areas. The enhancement of agriculture could be achieved through, inter alia, input support schemes, irrigation development support, livestock production and the marketing of produce. With the ongoing land reform in Zimbabwe, some of the households could be resettled in agro-ecologically suitable areas. This would transform agriculture into a sufficient and standalone livelihood support base for rural households, thereby removing the noted rising dependence on the natural environment for survival in the study areas posing a serious threat to environmental sustainability.

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