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Why rural electrification won't fix deforestation in Zimbabwe

By Ellen Fungisai Chipango

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Reliance on biomass such as fuelwood for energy in rural areas has a strong bearing on Zimbabwe's environment. Rural communities in Zimbabwe meet 94% of their cooking energy requirements by using traditional fuels, mainly fuelwood, and 20% of urban households use wood as the main cooking fuel.

Image source: www.pexels.com

For this reason, unsustainable fuelwood use patterns are driving deforestation. Estimates are that deforestation has been high in the country, peaking at 330,000 hectares of forests destroyed between 2010 and 2014.

Policymakers attribute deforestation to human activities such as the clearing of land for agriculture, tobacco curing, infrastructure development and household use of wood because of electricity shortages.

The crux of the problem is that the policymakers believe that deforestation is a threat to the economy, while on the other hand, ordinary citizens believe that environmental degradation is an outcome of the ongoing political and economic situation.

Policymakers, therefore, believe that deforestation can be addressed by increased electrification. I conducted a study to look into the belief that the country's environmental problems can be fixed by quick and technical policy solutions, such as rural electrification. The study sought to establish how the environment was embedded in the political economy.

The research

I used the Buhera district in Manicaland province, south-eastern Zimbabwe as a case study. I found there were various factors that forced people to use their environment in a way that degraded it. One participant captured it best:

> *"Poverty has gotten into our woodlands. We no longer fetch wood to use in the kitchen only, but for burning bricks for*

sale… ”

> These are energy-intensive activities and usually require wet wood from indigenous trees such as mopane and acacia. In local lingo, participants alluded to the practice of kukiya-kiya, or “making do” with short-term solutions under the circumstances.

From an environmental perspective, this phenomenon can be paralleled with “desperate ecocide”. This line of thought argues that there’s a reciprocal link between poverty and environmental forces where poor people cause environmental degradation because of their poverty and desperation. In turn, environmental degradation worsens their condition.

For instance, they cut wet wood to use for cooking because they don’t have an alternative. And they need income for their survival, which forces them to cut wood for sale. These practices can contribute to deforestation, which then affects them negatively.

With this as a basis, I concluded that household access to electricity per se will not automatically be an antidote to deforestation. The problem is too complex to be analysed at household-level without teasing out a chain of explanation behind the degrading use of the environment.

More often than not, conservation analysts have discovered the “degrading” activities of the poor, but rarely acknowledged that such problems are rooted in the broader political economy, which forces many rural societies to increase their pressure on the environment.

Why most interventions are flawed

When the state is confronted with deforestation, it logically follows that it has to act. But when the problem has not been framed correctly, there’s a likelihood of instituting flawed interventions.

One such intervention is an admonishing of the poor for their “lack” of environmental consciousness and their irrationality. This happens without exploring the reasons why people are practising desperate ecocide. As a result, social factors are not adequately addressed in environmental policies. What normally results is the tightening of rules and regulations.

In another research paper, I emphasised that it would be judicious for the policy elite to realise that laws must be developed and function in context. Otherwise, criminalising the cutting of wet indigenous wood worsens the rural communities’ plight.

Fuelwood is indispensable in the rural energy economy – criminalisation of a means of survival jeopardises livelihoods.

Due to asymmetrical power relations, poor people cannot challenge the government’s policies. Instead, they resist them. And due to the state actors’ failure to realise their policy failure, they misconstrue the resistance as ignorance. Efforts in implementing the flawed policy are then strengthened.

Another intervention stemming from a conservationist perspective focuses on tree planting. This is believed to overcome climate change effects such as water shortages and floods.

For such interventions to work, they must be tailored to the social–ecological context, or more problems may be created.

For instance, planting trees in historical grasslands and savannas can harm native ecosystems and species. Also, the view that forests increase rainfall has remained tenuous. Likewise, the debate over the effect of deforestation on flooding is partly inconclusive.

Going forward

Politicians, policy akers and development agencies should save the economy first. This would in turn save the woodlands. Quick fixes such as electricity access for households alone don't save the woodlands.

A political-ecological framework is needed to address rural energy needs and deforestation. Only when underlying factors are addressed will interventions such as rural electrification and renewable energy technologies have an impact.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ellen Fungisai Chipango, postdoctoral research fellow, University of Johannesburg