

# Incentivising Effective Indigenous Ecosystem Restoration Practices: A Synopsis of Perceptual Approaches to Local Climate Action in the Barotse Cultural Landscape

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## **Author's contribution**

*The sole author designed, analysed, interpreted and prepared the manuscript.*

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## **ABSTRACT**

The study was premised on a generic hypothesis that attributes the status quo vis-à-vis increasing ecosystem degradation to communities' stage-managed negligence fueled by the state's decision about sixty years ago to start incentivising, unsustainably though, previously voluntary environmental consciousness and associated actions by the communities. Rural livelihoods are generally threatened by climate impacts, particularly for agrarian and pastoralist communities, like the study area. Although extreme weather events have always been there, the frequency of their occurrence has risen and the exposed populations have been growing. A concise illustration of the

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conjectures of the study is reflected in the findings which have established the contributions of indigenous ecosystem restoration efforts and general prudent environmental management under the decentralized indigenous governance system. It has further been established that the indigenous systems that flourished in the pre-independence era were curtailed by governance system shifts from the decentralized indigenous governance system to the state controlled centralized governance system effectively alienating the people from their sacred duty of directly managing their ecosystems. Further, a general neglect by the local people in ecosystem restoration has been attributed to three main factors bordering on the state's earlier pledges, alleged corruption in contract management processes, as well as the urgency of addressing household food needs which is usually subordinated to public works like ecosystem remediation. Arising from the observed impediments to locally-led ecosystem restoration efforts, the study has recommended to intentionally incentivize indigenous ecosystem restoration efforts using the proposed modalities as outlined herein.

*Keywords: Sustainable development; political independence; terrestrial ecosystems; ecosystem restoration.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Sustainable Development Agenda 2030 permeates all United Nations member states and their respective communities. It is an ambitious roadmap that requires realistic attention to key leverage areas as well as inhibiting factors that would translate to success and/or failure respectively in attaining the desired scenarios in all sectors by the target period. This calls for a broadened overview of all possible ingredients in the success formula. One such dimension to pay special attention to is rural poverty, with its associated signatures of declining local capacity to respond to and cope with the ever rising climate change impacts, resulting in high fragility of livelihood systems to mainly weather-induced extreme hydro-meteorological and geophysical events (Ministry of Finance and National Planning 2022). The question of poverty rising has remained valid to date as indicators point to notable regression as reflected in the Global Sustainable Development Report (UN, 2023).

This paper is therefore a responsive attempt to reveal salient issues inherent within indigenous communities in the context of their latent and observed capacities to contribute to climate mitigation and adaptation efforts towards disaster risk reduction, loss and damage and overall alertness in anticipation of impending extreme events. The study was premised on a generic hypothesis that attributes the status quo vis-à-vis increasing ecosystem degradation to communities' stage-managed negligence fueled by the state's decision about sixty years ago to start incentivising, unsustainably though, previously voluntary environmental

consciousness and associated actions by the communities. The study further took cognizance of the realisation, at global level, of the value of indigenous knowledge practices, inclusive of their ecosystem restoration dimension, as catalysts of local climate action (Reyes-Garcia, 2019). This realisation is evidenced by the decision to dub the December 2023 COP 28 the Local Climate Summit, highlighting the essence of the local level whose actions largely thrive on indigenous knowledge. (UNESCO, 2023; WMO, 2024). This appears to be a perfect fit for SDG 13 on climate action. Additionally, references to the value of indigenous knowledge practices in climate action, encompassing mitigation and adaptation, inclusive of ecosystem restoration, abound (Carm, 2014). For instance, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction has explicitly stated in one of its principles (g) that traditional knowledge should be an integral component of a multi-hazard approach for risk-informed decision-making necessary for supporting disaster risk reduction (UNISDR, 2022). Unfortunately, indigenous knowledge, despite being acknowledged now, still receives insignificant attention at practical level and is rendered more or less a future option Mbah, et.al. (2021).

To salvage its apparent relegation to a remote option more evidence of its practical implications in a diversity of areas ought to be highlighted. This is because culture, which is the currency of indigenous knowledge, is a crosscutting factor that can hardly be ignored as it anchors and integrates human experience within different components of the natural environment. Flint et.al. (2013) vividly exemplified its importance by considering that:

*The interconnection of atmospheric, hydrologic, and climatologic environmental components with cultural aspects reflects how human society and belief systems have adopted and manipulated the essence of mutual need. Thus, further digging into the investigation helps in bringing out the facts and internalisation of the approach followed*

*by humans in different periods.*

It is perspectives of this nature that help to bring indigenous knowledge systems to their right place in development discourse, policy direction and proactive mechanisms in addressing climate change impacts and associated ecosystem restoration and local resilience building. This is why even global instruments like the Sendai Framework have incorporated recourse to indigenous knowledge practices in their principles. This study has thus attempted to highlight the value of this knowledge as well as the implications of undermining its practical application.

## 1.1 Background to the Study

The study area possesses a unique geopolitical history within the Republic of Zambia which is a former British colony. However, the region encompassing the study area (Barotseland) was not a colony but an autonomous British Protectorate that did not require any independence but elite actors from Barotseland were deeply intertwined in the Northern Rhodesian struggle for political independence from the British towards the creation of an independent state called Zambia. Top among the pre-independence negotiations included the request by the Northern Rhodesia side to have Barotseland joined as an integral part of the new country. The negotiations culminated into a treaty dubbed the Barotseland Agreement 1964 signed in London in May 1964 between Kenneth Kaunda as Prime Minister of Northern Rhodesia and the King of Barotseland Sir Mwanawina Lewanika III, KBE. This treaty paved way for the amalgamation of Northern Rhodesia and Barotseland into a new Republic of Zambia whose official independence was endorsed five months later in October 1964 (Barotseland Agreement, 1964).

Prior to Barotseland joining Northern Rhodesia and becoming part of Zambia, the Barotse Governance system relied exclusively on decentralized indigenous mechanisms of

managing natural resources, with every component of the environment covered under the jurisdiction of an Induna (Counselor / Minister). There were Indunas responsible for managing the terrestrial ecosystems, mainly forests, others were for aquatic ecosystems, including waterways and various water sources and their use, others were for livestock, wildlife, hunting permits whereas public works were also under specific Induna's office and labour was 100% voluntarily provided as an honourable duty for a citizen to contribute to improving any situation they are called in to (Induna Imutuko, personal communication, 2024).

In view of the scenario described above, all public works and assets, natural and man-made, received regular maintenance and kept in their optimum standard for the provision of public goods and services. However, this management mechanism was curtailed at the forming of a unitary state called Zambia as the central government usurped what were previously local voluntary responsibilities with promises of monetary incentives for previously voluntary duties. Local Government Authorities (Councils) under the new republic were charged with the responsibility to provide the services that were previously a voluntary preserve of the decentralized local structures of the Barotse indigenous governance system. This was a development that could be attributed to neo-colonial influences that inadvertently served to undermine indigenous systems. The amalgamation of Barotseland and Northern Rhodesia that gave birth to the Republic of Zambia brought with it significant governance system shifts on the part of Barotseland and paved way for the introduction of a relatively strange, highly centralized and state controlled governance system, This did not only undermine the decentralized governance system that had been in force but also interfered with and disrupted the existing public administration and governance mechanisms that were effective in galvanizing community engagement in public works such as ecosystem maintenance which was more pronounced than restoration. Prospects for continued benefit from indigenous knowledge systems were shattered.

The new government of the independent Zambia inherited a Barotseland characterized by pristine ecosystems that were soundly managed using indigenous knowledge covering environmental management, climate change mitigation,

adaptation, and local economic development. As revealed by Banda, et.al. (2015) local people in Barotseland had developed advanced local knowledge systems they relied on in a diversity of life activities such as adaptation. These are the knowledge systems that fell victim to changes in the governance environment leaving the formerly main actors in ecosystem maintenance and restoration activities hanging in a structural vacuum in which they had no recognised role to play as their undocumented knowledge and skills were assumed non-existent. Consequently, when the state's over ambitious pledge to solely undertake regular maintenance of the aquatic ecosystem could not materialize in a couple of decades after this pledge, the resource remained unmaintained and gradual deterioration was set in motion. Further, central government intervention also served to delink the people from their resources as the former claimed ownership by operation of legal and regulatory frameworks, effectively exposing the once sacred communal resource to over exploitation and general negligence, leading to the current scenario where restoration initiatives are desperately needed.

## **1.2 Statement of the Problem**

Rural livelihoods are generally threatened by climate impacts, particularly for agrarian and pastoralist communities, like the study area. Although extreme weather events have always been there, the frequency of their occurrence has risen and the exposed populations have generally been growing even at a global scale (IRC, 2024; OCHA, 2024, CRED,2024). This has led to increased loss and damage, a scenario that retards local development, sending many exposed households into adopting negative coping mechanisms. These coping mechanisms, in turn, worsen the already overwhelmed and stressed ecosystems, undermining their replenishment capacity and expediting the rate of their degradation. Degraded ecosystems lose their ability to insulate exposed livelihoods from extreme weather-induced events, leading to more losses, reduced yields, reduced household income, and increased household food insecurity and widening physical, social, and economic vulnerabilities. This is why there is a noted regression in the performance of SDG 1 on ending poverty despite notable progress in SDG 9 where an increase in research and development spending has been observed as per the 2023 global sustainable development report (UN, 2023).

For local communities that survive directly on ecosystem services, the impacts are more pronounced now than they were in the past. This is because the local people employed their inert indigenous knowledge practices in managing ecosystems, forecasting extreme events and remedying any notable changes to the ecosystems induced by such extreme events. This refers to the indigenous knowledge of local communities derived from centuries of prudent ecosystem management and restoration, knowledge, practices and skills that have been passed down to successive generations, the present one inclusive, mainly orally or through cultural practices. Further, there are visible signatures of the current generation being in possession of unique indigenous knowledge as selected components of the said knowledge are periodically exhibited in different ways such as through annual cultural rituals. The striking observation here, in view of the noted existence of this unique knowledge in the current generation is the apparent neglect by contemporary local communities in activating the same knowledge that worked before. It is therefore of interest to ascertain the impediments to activating their inherent indigenous knowledge and skills to restore essential degraded ecosystems. This is an aspect that requires skillful interrogation and therefore constitutes a gap in knowledge, especially that ecosystem maintenance and restoration were regularly carried out by communities using their local knowledge in the past. It is thus a warranted concern to attempt to appreciate what has changed now when such skills are more urgently needed than before.

## **1.3 Rationale of the Study**

The study was premised on the need to unveil the intricate relationship between public policy direction and public perception in order to reveal a case for remedying any undesirable outcomes of such relationships. Generally, the study sought to examine the reasons behind local communities' apparent indifference to ecosystem degradation more so that they rely on the same deteriorating ecosystems for their livelihoods. A study like this helps relevant stakeholders to review concerned policies as well as devising alternative mechanisms of addressing the drivers of ecosystem degradation and identifying and promoting community-led workable options for remediation.

## 1.4 Objectives of the Study

The study had three specific objectives which were:

- i. To find out indigenous aquatic ecosystem restoration mechanisms employed in the past by communities in the study area;
- ii. To identify the reasons why communities are no longer using traditional restoration mechanisms.
- iii. To explore alternative mechanisms, in the context of the status quo, of ensuring ecosystem restoration is activated and sustainably embraced in the study area.

## 1.5 Research Questions

- i. Which indigenous methods were used in the past to restore aquatic ecosystems and maintain their functionality
- ii. Why are communities not employing the same mechanisms that were used in the past to restore and maintain functional ecosystems?
- iii. What should be done to ensure the degraded ecosystems are restored and maintained?

## 1.6 Description of Study Area

The study area was Mabumbu ward, one of the political administrative zones under Mongu Municipal Council that oversees Mongu District which is the administrative capital of Western Province of Zambia or Barotseland as it is historically and locally known. It is also part of the Barotse Cultural Landscape envisaged by UNESCO to be inscribed on its world heritage sites list. It sits in a transition zone between two ecosystems, that is, the terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems. It therefore encounters climate change impacts associated with both ecosystems. It has a population of at least 2,207 people as at the last census of 2022. The main livelihoods are predominantly farming and trading of agro-produce while those with technical skillsets find temporary or permanent jobs in the main town (Zamstats, 2022).

Among the notable signatures of anthropogenic influences that add value to the cultural landscape's outstanding uniqueness is a centuries old artificial canal network that crisscrosses the region, linking the two ecosystems through a surface hydrological regime that maintains seasonal balance in discharge thereby permitting perennial water supply for a plurality of uses and at the same

time cushioning the anticipated impacts of extreme hydrological or lithospheric hazards (floods or droughts / prolonged dry spells). Mabumbu area is traversed by one of the over 120 years old canal system that once played economic, transport, recreational and aesthetic roles as it ecologically functions as a freshwater. A resource whose functional elements have been curtailed by non-maintenance and continued deterioration. Further, the early settlers carefully wove their settlements by erecting mounds in the flood plains on which they built villages and planted trees as wind breaks and for water erosion abatement. The villages some of which were established in the 17<sup>th</sup> century still stand and inhabited. Additionally, heritage summer palace complex was built using the indigenous architectural philosophy of passive infrastructure where the local materials used allowed modification of temperature extremes. The latest palace buildings were completed by 1890 under the supervision of an indigenous architect and builder named Nawa Nalumango. Further, the mega landscape is also home to Liuwa Plains National Park renowned for its annual wildebeest migration. This is one of the oldest national parks in the Southern Africa region having been established by the King in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century as a royal hunting ground.

The landscape is characterized by carefully selected bird sanctuaries, hunting grounds, fishing zones, livestock management protocols, forest management regulations, water courses management mechanisms, among others, which helped the people to survive sustainably on the same resource which they are failing to now. (Berry Nawa, personal communication, Mabumbu, April, 2024).

This is the same uniqueness that attracted UNESCO's attention and community consultations had been ongoing using the traditional community engagement and feedback mechanisms.

## 1.7 Definition of Key Terms

- i. Hazard – a potential danger to humans and their welfare
- ii. Risk – the probability of hazard occurrence. It denotes the chance factor that a feared hazard would occur
- iii. Disaster - a catastrophic situation that undermines society's functional capacity to provide goods and services to its residents, mainly ignited by extreme events that overwhelm societal systems.

- iv. Vulnerability - a measure of risk of incurring damage and loss or inconvenience arising from loss of capacity to cope with or effectively respond to external stimuli affecting the social, economic or physical conditions the affected live in
- v. Perception – a framework within which local communities interpret phenomena and draw conclusions that influence action or inaction arising thereof.
- vi. Restoration – a deliberate process of helping a system retain its lost functionality by undertaking several measures that facilitate such return to normalcy.

## 1.8 Study Limitations

- Time – owing to the distance from the researcher's residency to the study area which lies over 500 km away and considering other concurrent responsibilities time appeared inadequate to deeply explore the hinterland of the core-study area.
- Accessibility - The timing of the study coincided with seasonal flood regime that curtailed access to areas that were outside the study area but important as they were ecologically linked to the study area.
- Cultural and Societal functions - the study coincided with some important cultural festivities that kept locals readily available but too busy to be held up in lengthy focus group discussions.
- Financial constraints - being a self-sponsored study finances appeared constraining in terms of extension of study period in the field.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a synopsis of documentary perspectives on livelihoods and climate change impacts as well as people's adaptive mechanisms under such scenarios. It traces human perception in the face of climate change from global, regional and local levels and further contextualises such insights to the study area from the perspective of indigenous knowledge systems.

### 2.2 Indigenous Ecosystem Restoration Practices

The subject of local livelihoods and how they regularly get affected by climate change impacts

is a live arena that keeps receiving new but similar insights. What has been lacking, though, is the adequate coverage of the contribution of indigenous knowledge to such issues as climate change response. Yet it is not uncommon to find communities that quietly survive on account of the same indigenous knowledge systems that are seldom included in public discourse. It is, however, worth noting the growing attention to indigenous knowledge systems as their contribution is increasingly being revealed. For instance, a 2019 study by the Instituted of Environment Science and Technology at Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona observed that ecosystem restoration registered noticeable success when local people are actively involved because it is through them that indigenous knowledge comes to the fore. This is even more pronounced in disaster risk reduction mechanisms where devising relevant context-specific approaches appears to directly benefit from integration of indigenous knowledge.

There are verifiable cases where indigenous knowledge has proved useful in informing local action because it is described as being interdisciplinary, often drawing insights from a whole system approach. In disaster risk reduction and early warning systems, for instance, IKS have earned for themselves a reputation for reliability and life-saving practical applications. One of the good examples to illustrate the potency of IKS is that of the Moken people whose capacity to read and interpret animal behavior helped them to predict impending hazardous extreme events like earthquakes and tsunamis (Mallapaty, 2012).

This characteristic of indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) provide for local relevance of those key elements that constitute a basis for decision-making and livelihood planning. It is therefore tenable to appreciate the influence of IKS in local level processes, including in the management of natural resources and specifically ecosystems that play a central role in sustaining local socio-economic and cultural lives of the people. This is why even the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction acknowledged, among its guiding principles, the value of indigenous knowledge as reflected in principle (g) where its integration is recommended as a necessary compliment to conventional science-based systems (UNEP, 2015).

In terms of local strategies for ecosystem restoration, a UNEP supported study that

covered four African countries established specific sectors where IKS proved useful. These included food security, human and animal health, disaster management, and natural resources and environmental management. The latter encompasses ecosystem restoration. For the study area, indigenous natural resources governance system assigned specific mandate to identified portfolios within the legislative and administrative public administration structures with each sector or resource falling under the jurisdiction of a particular counselor who coordinated local communities in more participatory co-management mechanisms that thrived on voluntary collaboration. Through such mechanisms, indigenous knowledge practices could flourish as each person endowed with unique skills or knowledge had a wide latitude to display such and teach others. A recent demonstration of inert geo-hydrological knowledge of locals emerged during the construction of the road that traversed the Barotse flood plain connecting the two districts of Mongu on the east of the Zambezi River and Kalabo to the west, the first such major structural configuration of the plain. Earlier efforts by contracted Engineers failed as they kept ignoring local people's advice on the multidimensional flow nets of the surface and ground water regimes that created lateral and vertical motions, gradual but consistent enough to dislodge any substructure imposed into the subsurface and cause eventual dislocation of superstructures. The last team of Engineers that hid the advice of the locals succeeded and a beautiful road was finally constructed across the flood plain (Mwanang'ono, 2012).

### 2.3 Theoretical Framework

The question of indigenous knowledge, in any field of practice it is brought in, will often be located within some theoretical underpinnings. This study drew practical insights from the *Socio-Ecological Model* which has been found more appropriate in disaster management where it provides for an in-depth interrogation of the logical linkages between an individual, community as well as the societal factors that sustain such relationships. A careful review of such relationships unveil the inherent factors that account for exposure to risks and hazards by individuals and communities. The model further attributes the processes devised to champion disaster risk reduction planning, preparedness, response and recovery mechanisms to the said dynamic linkages (Gunderson and Holling 2002). The question under investigation borders on perception derived from lived experiences that also influence individual and community interpretation of phenomena. The model is more suitable in appreciating underlying currents that formed the basis for strongly held views the locals use to justify their indifference to ecosystem restoration. It can further be applied in ascertaining the prospects for individuals' introspection regarding alternative incentivised ecosystem remediation modalities.

A concise illustration of the conjectures of the study is reflected in the below conceptual framework which traces indigenous knowledge contributions to enabling governance and policy environment anchored on mutual respect, trust and sustainability ideals.

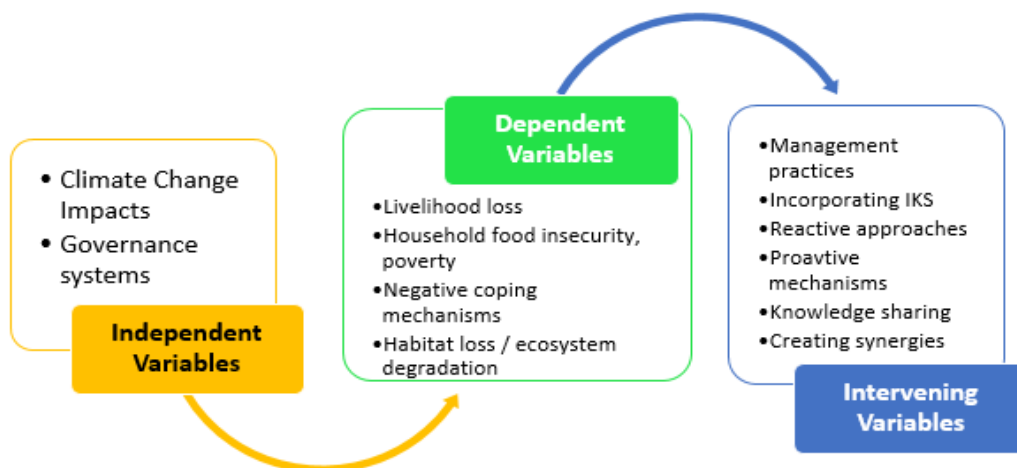


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework

The framework highlights climate change and a dominant governance system as overriding variables within which ecosystem restoration mechanisms exist. Any limitations attributed to these variables have a bearing on the exposed communities' livelihoods and their coping capacities. Coping deficiencies lead to the adoption of negative mechanisms, further accelerating habitat loss and degradation. Restoration of degraded ecosystems requires alternative or additional avenues to supplement conventional systems under whose watch ecosystem degradation has been deteriorating. Such alternative mechanisms include the incorporation of IKS. Most importantly, an interrogation into the factors that curtailed local communities from invoking their IKS to save the ecosystems need attention. Thus, the sharing of knowledge with provisions for creating synergies point to incorporating IKS. This was the gist of the study.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

The study adopted two research approaches namely appreciative inquiry and abductive approaches. Appreciative inquiry seeks to decipher the positive elements embedded in a particular system, that is, what works rather than focusing on its weaknesses. This guided the study in establishing positive influential elements of indigenous systems. Abductive approach, on the other hand, combined the strengths of inductive and deductive approaches to locate the key themes from both hypothetical and evidence dimensions. Qualitative design was chosen owing to the nature of the data that were to be generated for they primarily focused on non-numeral perspectives. This was further informed by ethnographic and phenomenological considerations that helped to capture cultural and lived experiences of the communities.

Non-probability sampling techniques were employed, particularly purposive and convenience. Sample size consisted of 69 respondents accounting for 15.6% of the total households that numbered 441. Respondents were composed of three different categories representing elders, males, females, and youths. Key informant interviews and focus group discussions were used, including non-participant observation that was focused on appreciating visual impressions of land cover change, ecosystem damage and realities of fragile livelihoods attributed to climate change impacts. Thematic and content analyses were employed

to generate grounded perspectives reflected herein. Non-participant observation involved transect walks in accessible sections of the study area with keen interest paid to corroborating the verbal narratives gathered from respondents' testimonies. This tool served to triangulate information sources.

### **4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

This study had three specific objectives the first of which was to identify indigenous aquatic ecosystem restoration mechanisms employed in the past. The second objective sought to find out factors that would explain the communities' apparent indifference or failure to use the same indigenous ecosystem restoration mechanisms that were applied in the past whereas the third objective was focused on devising alternative mechanisms of ensuring ecosystem restoration efforts were activated. The findings presented herein have been arranged in accordance with the above objectives. The striking feature of the findings is that indigenous knowledge systems have been tested and found helpful in building local resilience to climate impacts, prudent ecosystem management and supporting sustainable livelihoods. This is a dimension that calls for proactive policy discourse to embrace and save this diminishing knowledge. The findings underscore the essence of indigenous knowledge which has found more effective and reliable than conventional science in other areas like early warning as Mallapaty (2012) observed.

#### **4.1 Indigenous Aquatic Ecosystem Restoration Mechanisms**

The application of Indigenous Knowledge significantly enhances ecosystem restoration

As it is already generally acknowledged, communities that have survived in a particular ecosystem for centuries have nurtured intricate relationships with their host environment and developed mechanisms for mutual survival, taking care of their own interest and that of nature. This explains why they sustainably lived in the same environment without either them or the environment getting undermined. However, this mutual relationship was sabotaged by modern knowledge and its socio-political systems that brought in a monetized centralized governance system that propitiated economic prosperity that has been detrimental to the vitality of ecosystems. The result is the worrisome status quo of continued ecosystem degradation.



Notwithstanding these historical trends, the study sought to identify such indigenous mechanisms communities in the past used to maintain such an ideal relationship with nature that ensured ecosystems flourished as humans derived their livelihoods from them.

At least half (50.72%), that is 35, of the respondents were in the category of elders whose youngest was 71 years old and lived in the study area for at least 54 years. The study purposively targeted those that had lived in the study area for at least 30 years by the time of the study. This was necessary to ensure only those with uninterrupted interaction with their environment for at least three decades, long enough to have observed any major changes in climate patterns, were interfaced with. 29 respondents accounting for 82.86% of the elders' group shared common insights about how ecosystems were prudently managed in the past. It was revealed that ecosystem management was mainly mechanically undertaken in a manner that facilitated ecological functions to flourish. A summary of their perspectives are hereunder outlined.

- Each village conducted regular dredging of the water channels (canals) for the portion of their village land and in each village every farmer drained his portion of the canal adjacent to one's field. This regular maintenance ensured unrestricted water flow and prevented clogging of water or flooding of farming fields. Free flow of water also helped to prevent water borne diseases and sabotaged any possibilities of creating conducive breeding grounds for malaria causing mosquitoes.
- Construction of natural weirs using selected aquatic plant species that helped to retain water in dry seasons. This was used to maintain minimum soil moisture in line with specific crops' soil moisture requirements. The retained water could be allowed to seep gradually for continuous moisture supply into the fields during dry seasons.
- Communal joint operations for public water channels not falling under the jurisdiction of any specific village. The Induna (Counselor) in-charge of water resources management would announce the date and time for the public (men) to assemble at designated points to collectively work on clearing clogged portions of public streams and canals. The works were to be

inspected and certified as satisfactory by specialized persons chosen.

- Women from different villages, on the other hand, would prepare food for the men that would have joint meals at work sites. At the same time they would be allowed to follow with their fishing baskets to catch fish in the cleared portions as the dredging works would increase turbidity and drowse the fish. Generally, these works were a preserve for men. Canal portions falling under the voluntary work jurisdiction of single females or elderly males' fields were taken care of by energetic young males.

In summing up the old ways, one key respondent emotionally described what he called the glorious old days as:

*'you guys would never understand how sweet life was when working for ourselves with mother-nature was not only an honour but a duty. Now you have destroyed our lives, our land, our water, our animals, our birds, and our forests. Nature was both our mother who breastfed us and at the same time our workmate. It's really annoying. And you call yourselves educated and modern'.*

The system described above was responsible for maintaining well-managed ecosystems at no financial cost on anybody. Further, the use of communal resources like rivers, bird sanctuaries, hunting grounds, grazing areas, lagoons and forests were self-regulated. Some identified wildlife and tree species were prohibited from being harvested and there were no exceptions, unlike under the modern governance systems with its monetized regulations that permit harvesting once one pays for a license. The questions that beg for answers are how this harmonious system was lost and why communities appear not eager to revert to such effective and communal collaborative efforts. Section 4.2 below attempts to provide some explanations.

#### **4.2 Factors Explaining Community Failure to Use Indigenous Ecosystem Restoration Mechanisms**

What are the impediments to utilisation of indigenous ecosystem restoration mechanisms in the study area?

What the locals described as the glorious old days enjoyed by earlier communities was long gone. They approximate the period of the demise

of their effective indigenous systems to around 1969, five years after Zambia gained her political independence from the British. The year 1969 appears to be vividly remembered because according to the local old folk it was the year the then Zambian President Kenneth Kaunda unilaterally abrogated the Barotseland Agreement 1964 and initiated legislative mechanisms that eroded the authority and legitimacy of the Barotse indigenous systems (The Barotseland Agreement, 1964). The government went further to introduce and strengthen a generic Local Government system applicable countrywide through the operation of District Councils which, for Barotseland, were made to absorb the functions of the indigenous systems.

The new Councils were manned by salaried technical staff and they were charged with the responsibility, among others, of providing services and carrying out functions that were previously voluntarily provided by locals under indigenous systems. People were advised their caring government would take up such functions through the Councils and they no longer needed to labour freely as before. This view was strongly held by 71% of the respondents whereas 29% argued that while it was true that the Zambian government destroyed the once effective indigenous systems it was no longer justifiable to keep pointing fingers at the government and its failed systems when the people could still reinvigorate their old working systems. Among the reasons cited by a few from among the 29% for their position was the national decentralisation policy which the government adopted because the policy is locally-inclined as it recognizes the power of the people. They felt the policy environment was conducive enough for people to take charge of their local issues, particularly development.

In an effort to decipher the underlying factors accountable for the apparent failure to make the old systems work again in the face of accusations against the government systems, the following is a summary of the issues raised by the respondents.

As indicated in the above table the notion that government has money to procure labour for ecosystem restoration efforts was held by the majority (43.5%) of the respondents, particularly among the elderly. This appears to be derived from the promises made by the government shortly after political independence and the old folk still holds government accountable for its voluntary pledge. The other notable factor strongly held by 20% of the respondents, predominantly the youthful cohort, was that of contract management modalities of outsourcing the services of private sector players to undertake public works. They made reference to instances where works had been tendered and contract awarded to a contractor who would get paid but either abandons incomplete works or does shoddy works. They argue that if they used their initiatives to help do the work the contractors with connections in government would walk away with hefty payments for their free labour. And lastly, a sizeable number of respondents accounting for 24.6% attributed their indifference to household food insecurity and poverty, a scenario that compelled them to dedicate their time and energies to looking for food to feed their families since their farming efforts could no longer provide them with enough food like it used to be in the past. They further blamed their poor yields to changes in nature (climate change impacts) leading to prolonged dry spells and prolonged inundation of fields due to non-maintenance of canals.

**Table 1. Underlying factors for community indifference to revitalizing indigenous systems**

SN	Underlying Factors	Frequency	%
1	Government has money for labour	30	43.5
2	Government gives out contracts to private sector to do the works but they disappear after being paid, so if we do the work freely someone will be paid for our free labour in form of a contract.	20	29.0
3	We spend nearly all our time looking for food, no time to spare for works that are not directly related to putting immediate food on the table	17	24.6
4	Changes in land tenure systems where anybody with money can buy even family land depriving the owners	2	2.9
Total		69	100

Generally, only two factors have come out strongly from community perspectives and these are expectations for government to provide financial and material support to undertake ecosystem restoration works they used to voluntarily provide before. These expectations were openly created in the people by government. Secondly, the rising poverty levels and the almost perennial household food insecurity. The second reasons is both a driver and a consequence of ecosystem degradation as poverty and climate-induced food insecurity directs people to adopting negative coping mechanisms that fuel ecosystem degradation. This is a viscous cycle that requires strategic mechanisms to break. The next section, 4.3., is attempting to address this concern.

### **4.3 Exploration of Alternative Mechanisms to Incentivising Indigenous Ecosystem Restoration**

The challenges associated with continued ecosystem degradation and the call for restoration are not new. The government has provided clear policy guidelines that point to the resolve to seriously consider ecosystem restoration as communities strive for survival. For instance, the Ministry of Agriculture adopted Ecosystem-based Adaptation (EbA) as an approach that is restoration-inclined. Among the notable policy and legislative provisions that would be described as proactive in augmenting ecosystem restoration efforts are as follows:

#### **4.3.1 Constituency Development Fund (CDF) climate action**

The Government of the Republic of Zambia enacted the Constituency Development Fund (CDF) Act No. 11 of 2018 and revised it to Act No. 1 of 2024 to provide for the fund that should be used for addressing locally driven development aspirations (Constituency Development Fund, 2024). Part II section 5 of this Act establishes the CDF committees consisting largely of local residents in the administrative jurisdiction for which the fund applies whereas section 6 stipulates the functions of the committees and an outline of local projects' processing procedures. These sections have awarded considerable powers to the local level, a provision that can be leveraged for incorporating indigenous knowledge as all inputs are envisaged to be community driven (GRZ, 2024).

This facility is a potentially promising vehicle by which to imbed incentives targeted at igniting local ingenuity in ecosystem restoration approaches especially that among the recommended projects are those to do with disaster risk reduction, resilience to climate change impacts, water for production purposes as well as food security and livelihoods. In view of the above, it became necessary to interrogate community perspectives regarding the opportunities provided by the CDF. Respondents affirmed the potentials of CDF and expressed gratitude for government's resolve to allocate significant amounts to the fund compared to the past regimes. The current administration raised CDF allocation to approximately US\$1,140,000 per constituency from the previous US\$80,000.

The positive accolades were, however, met with pessimism derived from the observed access bottlenecks carefully woven within the fund administration processes resulting in many applicants failing the eligibility requirements. For instance 19, accounting for 27.5% of the respondents, bemoaned the requirement to access the fund through forming cooperatives, claiming that groups formed haphazardly for the purpose of accessing funds but not anchored on a common agenda are bound to fail if at all they access such funds because each one has their own priorities and reaching consensus is problematic. One of these respondents argued that:

*'...they tell us to form cooperatives so that we access the money and use it together. Now, us we are farmers and each one has his or her own personal land in our different Villages. How do we work together when we do not share a common piece of land? They should have allowed even individuals that have good plans to get this help and improve their condition and eventually help others. Otherwise CDF can be a game changer if it is appropriately administered...'*

From the general views of the respondents CDF is the most happening facility that both government and locals can leverage on to incentivize ecosystem restoration and once they are restored indigenous governance systems could be encouraged to augment such efforts for sustainability. For the purpose of this study, however, it should be clarified that the enhanced CDF is only about two and a half years in its implementation and no mid-term evaluation has so far been conducted to generate lessons. As

such, there is currently no empirical evidence to substantiate the purported significance of the facility save for the anticipated potential in view of the excitement it generated among the citizens largely owing to dedicated public media coverage of CDF micro projects none of which are on ecosystem restoration.

#### 4.3.2 Disaster management act – Disaster trust fund

The Disaster Management Act No. 13 of 2010 provides, under Part V section 30 (1), for the National Disaster Relief Trust Fund including the mechanisms of funding this facility and utilisation of the funds as stipulated in sections 30 (2) and 32 respectively (National Assembly of Zambia, 2016). This fund is envisaged to be applied for disaster preparedness and response interventions. Preparedness activities are more inclined to risk reduction which encompasses ecosystem restoration. This is another potentially effective modality of providing strategic incentives for specific interventions by communities. By the time of the study, this fund was not yet activated or operationalised. It, however, remains a worth alternative to pilot. It can to a large extent answer to some of the expectations expressed by communities through the respondents that government should consider deliberate interventions to cushion the burden on local populations in their efforts to remedy the observable climate change impacts like habitat loss and continued deterioration of ecosystems that are a backbone for their livelihoods.

The potential of the facility calls for specific modalities to facilitate its actualization. Among the alternative modalities to bring this provision into fruition would be:

- a) **District Hazard Mapping and Risk Profiles:** It is recommended that each of the 116 districts should undertake localised hazard mapping and development risk profiles that should clearly highlight the risk index to guide preposition of finances and other disaster response materials using evidence-based anticipatory approaches
- b) **Downscaled Climate Information / Early Warning System:** The hydrometeorological service providers should be supported to generate and dissemination place-specific forecasts to provide a basis for climate information

users base their programming on evidence.

- c) **Trigger Definition:** It is important to have agreed thresholds or a trigger protocol for forecast hazards using verifiable parameters to signal the release of funds from the trust fund.
- d) **Vulnerability Assessments:** These can be conducted whenever the forecast is issued to ascertain possible impacts of anticipated extreme events and help in disbursement decision-making and preposition of support.

#### 4.3.3 Urban and regional planning act

Another enabling legislation is the Urban and Regional Planning Act No. 3 of 2015. Of direct relevance to the subject of discussion are sections 13(1) and subsection 2(b) and section 19(1) which compel Local Authorities to prepare Integrated Development Plans (IDPs). Further, sections 20(1) and 20(2)(a) call for surveys to inform planning processes and explicitly demand that evidence of the process having involved locals and final product informed by local priorities are critical to appreciating the extent to which this planning legislation is locally-inclined. This is yet another legislation that has provided compelling opportunities for locals to champion their aspirations in government plans. The reported complaints of having inaudible voices can ably be remedied by these provisions if they are to be complied with by planning authorities. In addition, the Local Government Act has also bestowed upon Local Authorities over sixty statutory and delegated functions some of which cover environmental management and climate change, areas that encompass ecosystem restoration.

#### 4.3.4 Multi-stakeholders coordination forum

A combined force of state and non-state actors operating in a well-coordinated fashion premised on shared aspirations can help to lubricate obstacles associated with acting in silos when addressing almost similar challenges. Since the mandate of government is crosscutting in all sectors through specific ministerial or departmental mandate holders, non-state actors can align with state agencies whose mandate is of direct relevance to the non-state actor's focus areas. This synergy can bring resources and expertise together for impactful interventions. Communities would eventually benefit in real terms. Other than complaints against

government's negligible attention to local thorny issues, 15.9% (11) of the respondents registered concern on account of absence of non-state actors like NGOs in their area that would have helped where government fails.

#### **4.3.5 Food for assets initiative**

The most vivid option that the majority 53 (76.8%) of the respondents strongly demanded was what the author would summarise as Food for Assets. This is a mechanism where government or any other non-state actor would provide food to food insecure households where energetic members of such households would provide labour in ecosystem restoration interventions. The respondents alluded to past experiences where government would make staple food available to those that would avail themselves for public works like dredging of drainage channels or construction of weirs or fire breaks.

#### **4.3.6 Incentivised livelihood and ecosystem restoration initiatives**

The options suggested above appear effective especially in lean periods when most households are food insecure. Notwithstanding the above, the study deduces from a plurality of responses that a deliberate initiative to incentivize local engagement and application of indigenous knowledge practices and skills in aquatic ecosystem restoration is necessary. This is premised on the observation that the above mentioned opportunities have been there but they have not been taken advantage of. As such respondents were asked about what they thought would ignite local interest to apply their local knowledge. A proportion of 42%, that is, 29, of the respondents argued that awarding personal effort would be more effective where external support should be based on an individual's willingness or verified seriousness to be measured by what someone has done at his portion of the canal. That is, if person A has shown efforts to protect to canal section of his land then he can qualify to receive external support. They strongly believed this would entice everybody to do their best individually, a scenario that is likely to produce common goodness for the benefits of the entire community and nature.

To avoid subjective complications in the proposed interventions, a Level of Effort (LOE) scale would be devised to measure an

individual's contribution and remunerate him or her either in-kind or monetary. Previous efforts involving Food for Work (FfW) or Food for Assets (FfA) were successful where government or non-state actors made provisions for food in food insecure communities for the energetic to contribute labour for public works such a clearing drainage or solid waste. This could be modified to address the current situation. For canal dredging, for instance, stream mean depth and width as well as length could be parameters to be used and a monetary value attached to a defined quantity. For example, dredging a canal length of 100 metres at a mean depth of 1.5 metres with a width of 5 metres would be worthy US\$x.

## **5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **5.1 Conclusion**

As alluded to in preceding sections of this report, the study had three objectives. The first sought to identify indigenous ecosystem restoration mechanisms employed by local communities whereas the second wanted to find out the reasons behind the observed indifference shown by the people towards application of the indigenous knowledge and the third adopted to proactive outlook focusing on what can work to restore toe utilisation of indigenous knowledge in that regard.

The study has established that the status quo vis-à-vis ecosystem degradation and restoration potential is a dual function of trends in the governance systems over the years and perceptual inclinations of local communities in the study area. Personal accounts of senior citizens who lived in the study area for at least three consecutive decades and those that have been there from pre-independence era could attest to some effective indigenous natural resources/ ecosystem management systems they employed in the past which could also work in the present. True to their testimonies and claims, the failure to maintain the ecosystems in the study area and elsewhere in the country has coincidentally witnessed a rise in preventable diseases like malaria. This could be attributed to the noted failure as clogged water makes conducive breeding grounds for malaria causing mosquitoes. Currently malaria is in the top two causes of mortality in Zambia (GRZ, 2024, WHO, 2023).

It has further been ascertained that the monetization of previously voluntary public duty eroded the pride that was derived from freely contributing to the betterment of conditions in one's locality. The profiteering motive has become almost the sole motivation for engaging in any community work even if the work is meant to directly benefit the same people. This is partially held as a decision-making accountability viewpoint where individuals vying for elective public office, especially in the legislature and executive would voluntarily commit themselves to making certain things happen that would address people's aspirations. And people would expect that to be fulfilled.

Thirdly and lastly, the study has outlined some potentially workable modalities of incentivising community-based ecosystem restoration. A large number of the modalities are already provided for in the cited legislations. Their activation, however, calls for decisive and proactive interventions.

## 5.2 Recommendations

Owing to the key findings around the three specific objectives of the study, it is hereby recommended that;

- i. Deliberate efforts to explicitly include disclosure of any indigenous knowledge skills and practices by communities among the criteria for such communities receiving external support and such provisions for indigenous knowledge should be incorporated in existing policies and legislations;
- ii. Further to the apparent indifference exhibited by communities in providing voluntary support and local knowledge, it is recommended that indigenous knowledge should be incentivized just like modern knowledge. To augment local willingness but not necessarily to over monetize local operations, all projects for local interventions be awarded to groups of locals, formally registered or not, if such groups have empirical evidence showcasing their competences and reliability.
- iii. Additional alternatives be explored and identified modalities of incentivising ecosystem restoration be piloted to ascertain their effectiveness and for drawing lessons.

## DISCLAIMER (ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE)

Author hereby declares that NO generative AI technologies such as Large Language Models (ChatGPT, COPILOT, etc) and text-to-image generators have been used during writing or editing of this manuscript.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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