

# The European Union's LiveDiverse project – interplay between livelihoods and biodiversity in the South African case study area

N FUNKE, I JACOBS, K NORTJE, M CLAASSEN AND M STEYN

CSIR Natural Resources and Environment, PO Box 395, Pretoria, 0001, South Africa

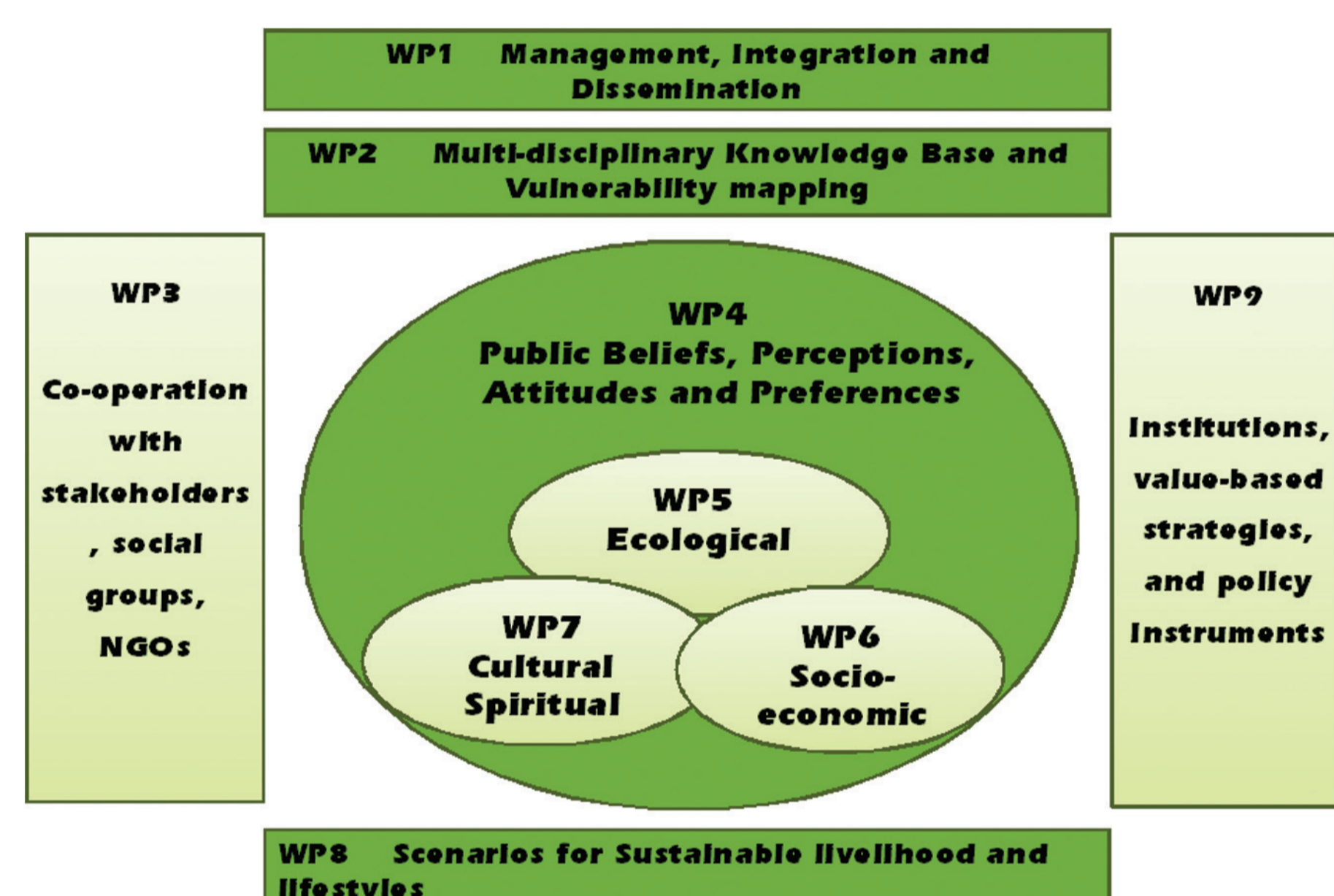
Email: nfunke@csir.co.za – www.csir.co.za

## INTRODUCTION

The interconnectedness of biodiversity and sustainable livelihoods for many societies around the world is constructed by the complexities of vulnerability and resilience. Society is faced by a plethora of challenges that include poverty reduction, health improvement, conflict resolution, biodiversity protection, retaining cultural diversity and achieving sustainable livelihoods. By understanding the interface of livelihoods and biodiversity, we can holistically assess the vulnerability of livelihoods and how this can be reduced through improved policy capacity, while at the same time conserving and husbanding biodiversity. This includes securing income for people in marginalised rural areas. In South Africa, the importance of understanding this interface is all the more critical due to the high premium placed on agriculture and resource utilisation for socio-economic development.

## BACKGROUND

The European Union funded LiveDiverse project is a three year multi-country, multi-partner project that focuses on the interface between livelihoods and biodiversity. The project team engages people in rural communities who live in or close to a biodiversity "hotspot" to produce knowledge that will contribute to improving and assessing value based strategies that promote sustainable livelihoods and the protection and preservation of ecosystems. The Vhembe District in South Africa, as part of the Greater Kruger Area, is one of project's four case study areas.



LiveDiverse project components and their interactions

## EMPLOYING A MULTIDISCIPLINARY AND PARTICIPATORY METHODOLOGY

The CSIR team selected five villages, namely Thondoni, Beleni, Tshiavha, Mbahela and Mushithe, in the Vhembe District Municipal Area as case study sites. The multidisciplinary approach included household surveys, interviews, group interviews and focus group discussions to understand beliefs, perceptions, attitudes and values relating to sustainable livelihoods and biodiversity. The following issues were explored: spiritual beliefs, history, socio-economic context and livelihoods, medicine, governance and traditional leadership, natural disasters and the management of biodiversity. Effective engagement with traditional leaders and community members was identified as key for providing valuable access to communities that are physically remote and socio-culturally complex. This has helped to build trust between the researchers and communities and to obtain community buy-in.



Marius Claassen and Karen Nortje from the CSIR team meet with Chief Mamatsharaga from Mbahela village



Livhuwani Dzivhani (wearing the yellow shirt), an interpreter on the CSIR team, points and explains while translating an interview question from English into TshiVenda

The CSIR team has worked on building a relationship with tribal authorities and chiefs by making a concerted effort to understand and co-operate on the basis of local customs and practices, providing background information on the purpose and objectives of the project, and understanding and recognising the role that traditional leaders play in communities today. One-on-one meetings with the traditional leadership of the five villages and regular feedback and updates by the team have been key.

Another way of effectively engaging rural communities is by harnessing as much local knowledge as possible. This has been done by recruiting local graduates from the University of Venda to assist with fieldwork and translation. The local knowledge these graduates have brought to the team, as a result of the cultural heritage they share with the communities, has been invaluable for relationship building and for conducting good quality research.

## PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Preliminary findings indicate that in conditions of wide-ranging poverty and unemployment with hardly any infrastructure in place, community members rely heavily on agriculture and livestock. Support from traditional leadership or government structures for agricultural activities seems to be limited. People rely on individual and community resources, particularly when dealing with natural disasters such as floods and droughts.



Local woodcarver from Mbahela village shows his skill at carving a spoon for stirring pap (porridge)

Interestingly, community responses to questions of trust or belief in traditional leadership have been mixed. For some, the chief is regarded as "the Legend." As one interview respondent claimed, "The big chief is in charge here. He does a very good job." However, other respondents complained that the chief "keeps information away from the people" and "doesn't listen to anyone". Despite the range of attitudes towards traditional leaders in communities, the influence of traditional leadership cannot be denied. Importantly for the purposes of this research, some chiefs also play a vital role as regulators of pro-environmental behaviour by enforcing rules around firewood collection and fining people who cut down living trees.

Another finding is that the VhaVenda culture is changing rapidly as Western ways of life are penetrating rural Limpopo. Despite the fact that certain elements of VhaVenda culture, such as the oral transmission of legends and beliefs, are suffering, others remain strong. For example, the belief that outsiders have to ask the chief for permission to visit the sacred VhaVenda site, Lake Fundudzi is still widely held.

Despite the considerable socio-economic challenges many VhaVenda villagers face in their day-to-day survival, a number of them want to change things for the better. Examples include reviving the arts of woodcarving, traditional dancing and needlework, and constructing an open-air museum or cultural village that showcases VhaVenda culture.

## WAY FORWARD

The connection between biodiversity and sustainable livelihoods rests on the utility of natural resources for daily life. Because of their dependence on critical resources such as adequate water supply for agriculture, communities are often vulnerable to drought and flooding. The degree to which communities in the Vhembe district have been able to overcome socio-economic challenges is closely linked to the legitimacy of traditional leadership, support of local government, as well as the ability to reconcile more traditional ways of living with the ever infiltrating Western and urban lifestyle. Poverty alleviation and sustainable development efforts need to consider the complexity of the institutional and political landscape that governs communities to understand the power relations and dualities at play.

The LiveDiverse project is currently in its second of three years. Data analysis will be followed by bringing together the combined knowledge from the four different countries into a cohesive whole. This will facilitate an understanding of how the vulnerability of livelihoods can be reduced, especially in rural areas, while conserving biodiversity and securing livelihoods for people in these areas. While engagements with communities in the four countries continue, efforts are being made to understand the legal and policy frameworks around biodiversity conservation and how to overcome barriers to implementation. Members of the research team are also building relationships with relevant government departments to promote the uptake of the community-friendly policy recommendations that the project is aiming to produce and to discuss a way forward. During the last six months of the project, the team will provide feedback to the stakeholders and communities who were so generous in giving their time and knowledge to help meet the objectives of the LiveDiverse project.



CSIR team members Maronel Steyn and Nikki Funke, with interpreters Livhuwani Dzivhani and Ndivhuwo Mathaulula interview a group of women from Thondoni village

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