

## Engaging the Community

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### *LiveDiverse FP7 – Livelihoods and Biodiversity*

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On a warm Venda afternoon in May, Mr Wilson Mundzunga, resident of the Mbahela village in Venda, tells LiveDiverse team member, Karen Nortje, the story of the “man from outside” who came to visit Lake Fundudzi (sacred lake to the VhaVenda) and how “very bad things” happened to him because he did not ask the Chief permission to visit the lake – if he had, none of the bad things would have happened. At closer inspection one will realise that Wilson’s story is not just a scary story, rather it links diverse issues such as culture and conservation, beliefs and science to form a holistic picture of a people and place that may operate in a modern, Western influenced world but still finds its roots in its traditions of old.

As part of the LiveDiverse South African case study, extensive fieldwork is being conducted in the rural setting of the Vhembe district in the Limpopo Province, on cultural and spiritual beliefs and attitudes relating to sustainable livelihoods and biodiversity. Led by the social science oriented Water Governance research group at the CSIR, transdisciplinary research and engagement are currently taking place. Collaborative partnerships with translators and the local authorities are being established, and this is providing valuable access to communities that are both physically remote but also socio-culturally difficult to penetrate. Project teams are therefore able to set out into the remote villages of Thondoni, Bileni, Tshiavha, Mbahela and Mushite and engage with community elders and members in one-on-one interviews, focus groups and household surveys.

Preliminary findings show that in order to address the challenges of biodiversity and sustainable livelihoods, expertise from a diverse set of interdisciplinary backgrounds is needed. Creating a balance between technical, natural and social science is critical to developing relevant and impact driven analytical frameworks and solutions to better understand the role of beliefs, values and attitudes in perceptions of biological, socio-economic and cultural-spiritual vulnerability. This transdisciplinary approach fosters ownership at the community level and helps to produce relevant and community-friendly policy recommendations.

The project team members are engaging people about their traditions, spiritual beliefs, food patterns, interaction with nature, and have gained considerable insights into VhaVenda culture. Specifically, they are discovering firsthand the dilemma between VhaVenda traditions that were upheld in days gone by, such as asking the Chief permission to visit the lake, and how these struggle to survive under modern, Western influences. Similarly, findings also reveal the need to advance academic understandings of what it means to be vulnerable, as the substantial entrepreneurial nature of rural people is coming to light. As explained by LiveDiverse team members, Nikki Funke and Maronel Steyn, some women in Thondoni for instance, have taken the initiative to construct an open-air museum or cultural village that showcases VhaVenda culture in the form of crafts and traditional dances. In so doing, they are overcoming socio-economic challenges by promoting a socio-cultural belief system and providing sustainable

livelihoods for a community. As LiveDiverse team member, Dr Marius Claassen observes, "There is an interesting co-existence of traditional culture and modern ideas and also "African" religion and Christianity. Traditional leaders and community members were very open and most helpful in the research."

Photos:

Photo 1: Focus group meeting with women of Thondoni responsible for the cultural village initiative and Mutele B Cultural Dancers (picture taken by IVM student, Jelena Perunicic)

Photo 2: Culture becomes livelihood commodity for the Mutele B Cultural Dancers as they perform for tourists (picture taken by IVM student, Lisette van Marnewijk)