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Walking the Village

LiveDiverse – Sustainable Livelihoods and Biodiversity in Developing Countries.

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University of Venda graduate Livhuwani Dzivhani (in yellow) facilitating a focus group discussion with local community members in the Mushithe Village, while Lisette van Marrewijk (Free University of Amsterdam) takes notes - Photographer Karen Nortje

When I was doing research in the Eastern Cape a few years ago I was invited to the house of a local leader in the community. The one thing he told me, which has stayed with me throughout my career as an anthropologist is that the only way one can truly understand people is to “walk the village”. “You have to be here” he said, “feel the wind in your face and wipe the dust off your shoes”. It is with this ethos in mind that the CSIR (Council for Scientific and Industrial Research) research team, as a part of the EU (European Union) funded LiveDiverse project have approached their work in the Vhembe District in the Limpopo Province.

LiveDiverse is a multi-year, multi-country collaborative research project that focuses on the interface between livelihoods and biodiversity of people in rural communities who live in or in the vicinity of a biodiversity ‘hotspot’. The Vhembe District in South Africa, as a part of the Greater Kruger Area, is one of four case study areas in which the project operates. The other three case study areas are the Ba Be National Park and Na Hang Nature Reserve, which are located in the north east of Vietnam, the Warna River Basin in Maharashtra State, India, which includes the Warna Dam and the Chandoli National Park, and the Terraba River Basin, which is located in the south Pacific region of Costa Rica, close to the Panama border. The project team aims to involve communities and together with them produce “knowledge

that will contribute to improving and assessing value based strategies that promote sustainable livelihoods and the protection and preservation of ecosystems” (see LiveDiverse information pamphlet at www.LiveDiverse.eu). What makes LiveDiverse such an exciting project to work on is its key philosophy: to recognise and integrate knowledge and understanding from a range of disciplines and actors, with a strong emphasis on dissemination.

How do we walk the village? In a big project such as this, the first step is to narrow down the focus area of the project. In order to do this for the South African case study, five villages were chosen across the Vhembe District Municipal Area, where multidisciplinary research was conducted in the form of household surveys, interviews, group interviews and focus group discussions. The following villages were chosen: Thondoni, Beleni, Tshivha, Mbahela and Mushithe. The second step is to foster a close working relationship with the local leadership of these villages. Continuous communication in the form of one-on-one meetings between the leadership and the team, and regular feedback and updates from the team from the very start of the project has been key. The third step in walking the village is to

harness as much local knowledge as possible. In order to achieve this goal, the CSIR team has recruited local graduates from the University of Venda to assist them in the field with the fieldwork and translation. Although they are not from the same villages, the local knowledge these graduates bring to the team by virtue of the cultural heritage they share with the locals has been invaluable not only to building a good relationship with the villagers but also to the quality of the research.

The last step in walking the village creates space for community members to contribute to and own part of the research process, rather than only being 'knowledge providers'. As part of CSIR's contribution to the Live Diverse project, which deals with understanding local beliefs, belief systems and attitudes towards biodiversity and livelihoods, the local community members were given the opportunity to direct the research focus through action research type interaction. During these interactions, community members were given the opportunity to suggest the types of questions that should be asked as part of the research process. In this way a truly insider's perspective is gained and the research develops holistically and in a way that multiple voices are heard.

This project has not just been about the research itself; a significant part of it focuses on the capacity building of young researchers. Firstly, as already mentioned, local students were recruited to assist with the fieldwork. The five students are Peter Mulea, Tiny Nemaguvhuni, Jeffrey Manthakha, Livhuwani Dzivhani, Mosley Mahaulula. Each of the students paired up with a researcher and these pairs proceeded to hold interviews, focus groups and conduct household surveys in the different villages. Secondly, the CSIR collaborated with the Vrije Universiteit (Free University) of Amsterdam to host three of their students and also help them design their Masters Research projects and facilitate and direct fieldwork for these projects. The three students are Lisette van Marrewijk, Yelena Perunicic and Johanna Medvey. Each of these students had the opportunity to work with CSIR researchers in the villages in order to collect the data needed for their projects. This learning-by-doing approach creates an excellent platform for students and researchers alike to learn from each other. The local students had the opportunity to learn research techniques and share experiences with CSIR researchers and students from different countries. At the same time, these researchers and students had the opportunity to learn from their Venda counterparts who shared their unique cultural knowledge.

Lisette van Marrewijk describes her experience as follows:

"During the period of April to June 2010, I had the wonderful opportunity to participate in the LiveDiverse project, in which I discovered the beauty but as well the sadness of Vhembe District in South Africa. Beautiful because of the people which were friendly, strong and welcoming, sad because they lack the means to reduce their socio-economic vulnerability which is reflected in a degradation of their direct natural environment. This has been a full learning experience for me in every aspect. The CSIR team represents an ecosystem of expertise, simply because their knowledge is in a variety of different disciplines and this combination stimulates the adoption of a mixture of perspectives, which leads to an optimal research output. Of course we cannot forget that this research project has been made possible by the Venda people, who were willing to share their time and knowledge with us."

In the next year the LiveDiverse CSIR team will continue walking the village. The project is currently in the second year of its three year period. The next steps will be data analysis and bringing together all we have learned from the four different countries into a cohesive whole that will help us to understand how the vulnerability of livelihoods can be reduced, especially in rural areas, while at the same time conserving biodiversity and securing income for people in these areas.

This year I have come to be very proficient at scrubbing the village dust off my toes, but I will be there soon again to take back the learning we have gained during the project, and my toes will be dirty once more from the dust I collect as I walk the village – but I don't mind.

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- 2010 Annual Meeting Minutes