

Rural development challenges in Mwenezi District, Zimbabwe By

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Abstract

Zimbabwe, like other developing countries is experiencing numerous development challenges. The development challenges are mainly concentrated in the rural areas of the country. The main aim of the current study is to examine the rural development in Mwenezi district of Masvingo province, Zimbabwe. A total of 160 questionnaires were administered to collect data from the residents of the district. Three interviews were conducted with Agricultural extension officers in the district order to supplement the data from the questionnaire responses. It emerged from the research that development challenges in Mwenezi district are multifaceted. They range from poor transport services, poor health facilities, poor educational facilities, limited electricity access, drought and shortage of water and shortage of markets for rural commodities. Based on the findings, a number of recommendations were suggested to mitigate the impact of the challenges.

Key Words

Rural, Mwenezi, Development, Zimbabwe and growth point

Introduction

Rural areas, particularly, in developing countries face serious development challenges. Development as used in this paper refers to the process of economic, social and political change which enhances the wellbeing of the inhabitants of a region. Development challenges in developing countries are multifaceted and result from a combination of economic, social, political and environmental factors (Moyo, 2010: 11). The development problems of developing countries are much worse in the rural areas. Numerous researchers (Conyers, 2001; Ministry of Health and Child Welfare, 2007 and Chazireni and Harmse, 2006) have confirmed that, in developing countries in particular, urban areas have less development problems compared to their rural counterparts. Zimbabwe, a developing country in Southern Africa, currently faces numerous rural development challenges. Mwenezi is a district in the rural area of Zimbabwe. The current article examines the nature of rural development experienced in Mwenezi district in Masvingo province of Zimbabwe.

Study area

Mwenezi district derives its name from the Mwenezi River, which provides irrigation water to the sugarcane plantations in and around the Rutenga Business Center. Mwenezi is a rural district located in the southern part of Zimbabwe. The district is located 160 km south of Masvingo City. The mean annual rainfall is about 350 mm and rainfall is received between November and April (summer). The mean temperature is 19^o c with mean maximum and minimum temperature of 28.0^o c and 16.8^o c respectively (Mugabe *et al.*, 2008). Mwenezi is one of the driest districts in Masvingo Province (Musanga, 2009: 22). Mwenezi lies in regions four and five of Zimbabwe's natural farming regions. As the district is prone to droughts and experiences low mean annual rainfall majority of

households in Mwenezi depend on agricultural production, like livestock rearing. According to ZIMSTAT (2012: 2), the population of Mwenezi is about 166 993. Figure 1 shows the location of the district in Zimbabwe.

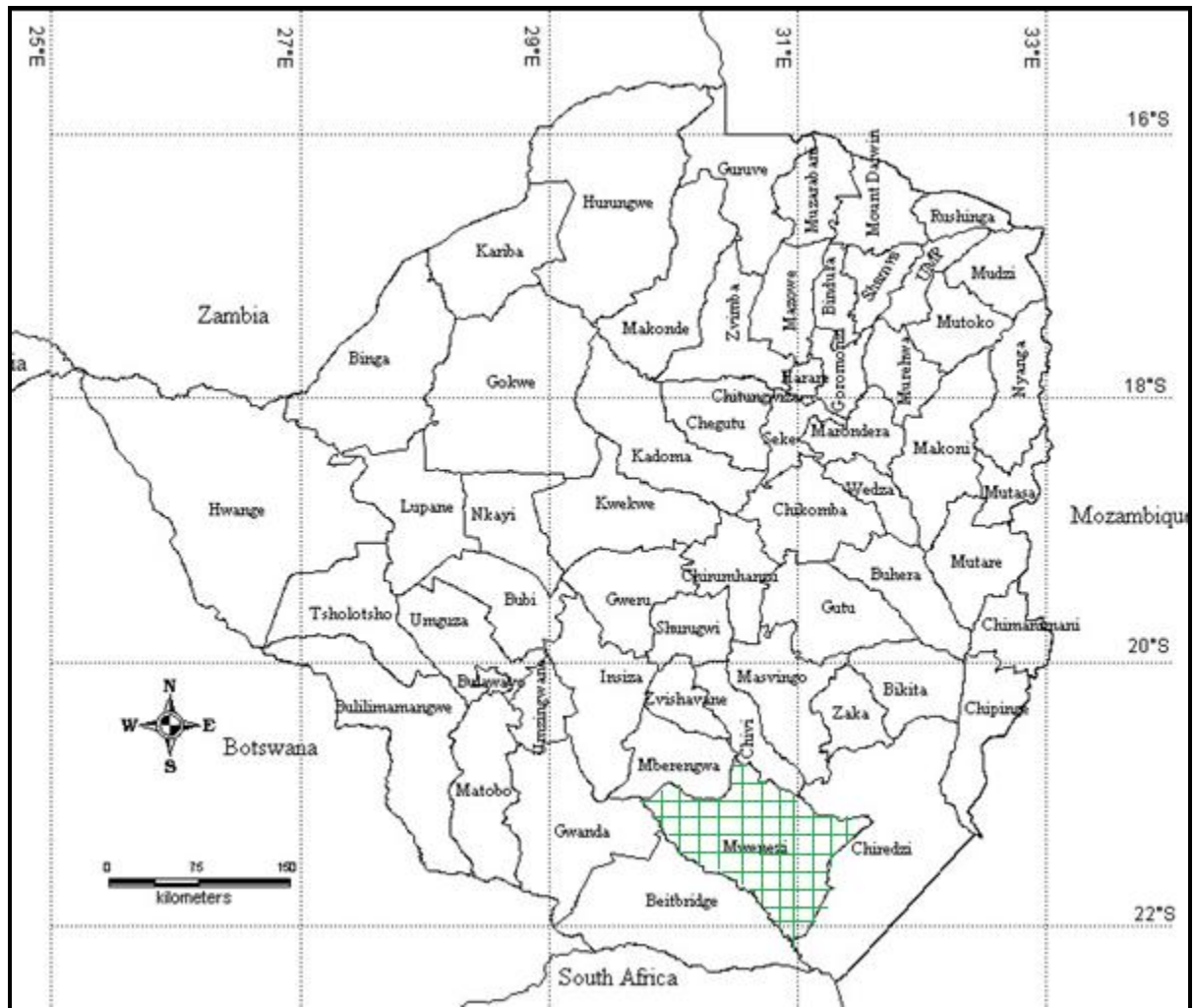


Figure 1: Administrative districts in Zimbabwe and location of Mwenezi district
(Source: Adapted from Central Statistics Office, 2002)

Methodology

To ensure that data collected was representative of the whole of Mwenezi district, questionnaires were distributed to all the 20 wards in the district. It was however not possible to involve everyone in the ward so a sample of 6 respondents was chosen for each ward. Simple random sampling was used to locate the respondents in each ward. People's identity numbers available at the district administrator's office were entered into Microsoft Spread Sheet and simple random sampling applied. Since there are 20 wards in the district, a total of 120 respondents were selected to complete the questionnaires.

To supplement data from questionnaires, interviews were conducted with two district senior council officials, two agricultural extension officers in the district and one senior official from

the district administrator's office. Some judgmental sampling technique was applied in this regard since the choice of who to interview depended on the researcher. The interviewees with their wealth of knowledge and experience were chosen to respond to the interview questions.

Results and discussion

A number of development challenges were pointed out to be affecting rural development in Mwenezi district. From the questionnaire responses, the following development challenges were cited: poor transport services, poor health facilities, poor educational facilities, limited electricity access, drought and shortage of water and shortage of poor markets for rural commodities. The responses are presented in Figure 2. It is evident from Figure 2 shortage of water for agriculture was the leading development challenge in Mwenezi district. There were 110 respondents who indicated drought and shortage of water. It is not surprising that drought and shortage of water was mentioned as the leading development challenge in Mwenezi. As alluded to earlier in this paper, Mwenezi is found in the driest part of Zimbabwe and therefore drought and shortage of water, for example, for agriculture and domestic uses become serious problems.

It is also depicted in Figure 2 that poor educational facilities, health and transport facilities had 105, 100 and 88 respondents respectively. According to the questionnaire responses, although poor health and transport, educational facilities are strong development challenges in the district, they pose less challenge to development than drought and shortage of water. The severity of the problems education, health and transport can, among other factors, be linked to the resettlement programme that started in the late 1990s. According to Scoones (2013), Mwenezi district experienced the greatest movement of people to the newly resettled areas. Such areas had no health facilities and transport networks.

The lowest number of respondents (40) was that indicating limited electricity access. Although electricity is essential in the development process, it is generally not regarded as a priority in most rural areas in Zimbabwe. The low number of respondents that mentioned the electricity problem was, therefore, not surprising. Like many other rural areas in developing countries, a large proportion of the rural population in the district depend on subsistence economic activities and this explains why comparatively low number of respondents (60) indicated that shortage of markets is a development challenge in Mwenezi. Markets mainly affect people who more into selling of commodities but rural dwellers in Mwenezi do little of that, with the exception of the few agricultural products.

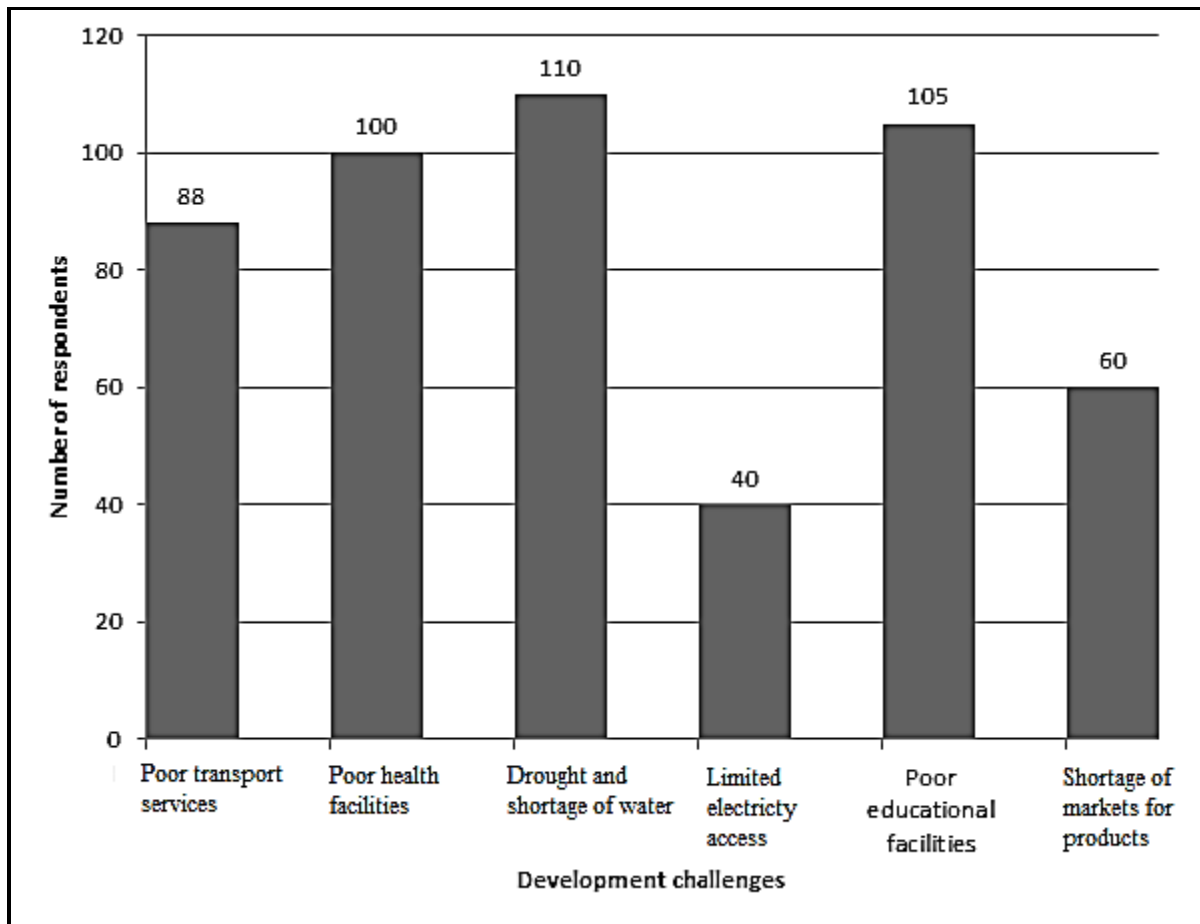


Figure 2: Development challenges in Mwenezi District (Source: Field generated data, 11-06-2015)

Generally, there was consensus among both questionnaire and interview responses on the development challenges in Mwenezi. Interview responses concurred with questionnaire responses that poor educational facilities and shortage of water for both agriculture and domestic uses are the leading development challenges in the district. Poor educational facilities, limited electricity access, drought and shortage of water and shortage of markets for rural commodities were also generally mentioned as development challenges. The only exception was the response from two interviewees who indicated that there serious cases of stock theft that are being experienced in the district. Such stock theft is a very unfortunate scenario because livestock rearing is a major source of livelihood in Mwenezi since the region is generally too dry for crop farming.

Recommendations

From the foregoing discussion it is recommended that more improvement is needed in educational and health services. The central government should prioritise education and health expenditure in the national budget. This would then enable the government to acquire enough educational resources such as the textbooks, educational personnel such as appropriately qualified teachers and enough classrooms and equipment. More schools should be constructed in Mwenezi district so that the distance that the children move to access educational services becomes reduced. Mobile clinics can be introduced to improve people's accessibility of health services. More health personnel should be employed to minimise congestion at hospitals and clinics.

Transport is not only essential for the movement of the people but also for the delivery of commodities to the markets. It is recommended in this study that because of the significance and centrality of transport in the lives of people, the Central government should urgently inject financial resources for the improvement of the bad state of gravel roads in Mwenezi. Construct more roads particularly in the resettlement areas. When the transport situation is improved, access to health services by people in the rural areas of Zimbabwe would improve, access to markets where the agricultural products are marketed also improves.

To curb the problem of drought and water shortage, it is suggested that government and other development stakeholders such as Non-Governmental Organisations should attempt to supply more irrigation services in the district. The district is drought prone, therefore, irrigation will go a long way in the facilitation of crop production. Water conserved for irrigation can also be used for domestic purposes and for making the livestock rearing more intensive. Cattle would have to be moved shorter distances to access water.

Conclusion

The study has demonstrated that there are numerous development challenges in Mwenezi district of Zimbabwe. The challenges are grounded in social, physical and economic conditions that exist in the district. The major development challenges that were identified in this study are: poor transport services, poor health facilities, poor educational facilities, limited electricity access, drought and shortage of water and shortage of poor markets for rural commodities. A critical analysis of the findings of this research suggests that the current development problems in Mwenezi district leave much room for improvement. Numerous recommendations were made for the development of Mwenezi district. If the recommendations are taken on board there should be improvement in the standard of living of people in Mwenezi district.

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