

Abstract

The aim of this paper is not just to inform readers about another case of failed development in Africa. The strength of the paper lies in its attempt to examine how the various actors have responded and are strategising and finding ways to deal with the economic crisis that has impacted negatively on the well being of conservancies in Zimbabwe. While the focus is on Zimbabwe's conservancies a regional focus is pursued since the study has implications far beyond a single country. Discussions throughout the paper use the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region as its backdrop. Zimbabwe is renowned for its abundance of wildlife natural resources. Up until the recent upheavals caused by the unplanned fast track land reform programme in Zimbabwe, the country had a wildlife resource endowment considered as adequate to support eco-tourism development. In the 1980s conservancies were successfully used for the protection of endangered species such as black rhino. As land and resource authorities, conservancies functioned as collaborative co-managed units concerned with wildlife conservation, utilisation and management. The successful story of conservancies is summed up by de la Harp's (1994:138) observation that "conservancies present opportunities for enhanced economic activity, new job creation and regional development". Conservancies were beginning to pose as engines for sustainable economic development through the establishment of viable eco-tourism infrastructure. However, this success story was very short lived. This paper seeks to show that glimpses of the potential have been nipped in the bud as evidenced by the negative impact on conservancies of the political instability dating back to 2000. The political crisis has generated economic chaos and instability that has decimated the otherwise vibrant wildlife driven eco-tourism ventures in conservancies. In a way the case of conservancies in Zimbabwe is yet another story of the vulnerability of Africa's economies to civil and political crisis. Abundance of natural resources in this case wildlife resources is no guarantee for sustainable and successful development. One hopes that ways and means would in the long term be found to ensure the rise and promise of a wildlife driven eco-tourism development strategy. Despite the sharp decline in the contribution of conservancies the paper seeks to show that there are constructive responses to vulnerability and crisis. The reaction of local communities, employees and the various stakeholders with regard to conservancies is of interest in the paper. Local responses whether destructive or constructive will be examined in the light of structural and legal constraints