



ECONOMIC CHANGE, POVERTY AND THE ENVIRONMENT SOUTH AFRICA

MACROECONOMICS FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM OFFICE

M/P/O

Strengthening policies and institutions for community based ecotourism

PROJECT PARTNER ORGANIZATION:

The Group for Environmental Monitoring (GEM)

1. The local poverty-environment dynamic

Riemvasmaak is an area of about 75,000 hectares in the Northern Cape Province of South Africa. It borders Namibia to the west, the Orange River to the south, and the Kalahari desert to the north. Although Riemvasmaak is arid, isolated, and far from markets, it holds an important place in the country's post-1994 policymaking. In the first resolution of a land restitution case in South Africa, Riemvasmaak was taken back by its pre-1974 inhabitants. As such, it represents the challenges faced by a growing number of communities that

have benefited from the recent land reforms in the country. When this community was forcibly moved in 1974, the South African Defence Force took over the land and later handed it to the National Parks Board, which owns the adjacent Augrabies Falls National Park.

Riemvasmaak's inhabitants live mainly in two settlements that have been constructed over the past few years. The majority (77 percent) live below the poverty line of R900 (South African rand) net annual income per family. The main source of income is wage labor at nearby commercial farms, such as the irrigated grape farms on the Orange River. Livestock rearing is the other major income source. The community receives financial support through the Community Development Trust, which receives all land transfers and financial aid on behalf of the community. The government, international NGOs, and donors (which established the Trust and helped with land restitution) have given substantial financial support to the community. South Africa's Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism

regards Riemvasmaak as having scenic value and a high environmentally sustainable development index, which indicates low population pressure on a valuable environmental resource base. The area's key resources include the Orange River, scenic landscape, unusual flora, wildlife, and several natural springs, including a perennial hot mineral water spring. It also has some rich alluvial soils and mineral deposits. At present, however, Riemvasmaak is inhospitable, arid and isolated. Land use is limited largely to subsistence rearing of livestock, leading to overgrazing and consequent pressure on the surrounding environment and wildlife.

2. Operation of meso level institutions

In linking the local conditions to broader institutional and policy conditions and search for win-win options, showed us that the responsibility for development support in South Africa has been shifting from the national to the provincial and local government levels. However, provincial and local governments face considerable human resource and budgetary constraints. Because local governments

are especially dependent on the local resource base for revenue, their financial needs can sometimes conflict with the livelihood needs of communities. The problem of local institutions having to take on more responsibility with inadequate resources and/or capacity needs to be addressed.

Capacity-building investments are needed to make these institutions strong, democratic, and accountable. Weak community institutions, such as the Riemvasmaak Community Development Trust, not only fail to provide adequate community services, but also hinder effective linkage between local needs support from meso institutions, within an overall favorable policy environment for them. Riemvasmaak's unresolved land dispute with neighboring Augrabies Falls National Park, is an example of weak functioning of local institutions, unable to fully benefit from the policy changes intended to benefit poor communities by moving beyond past antagonisms and building a mutually beneficial community-park partnerships.

3. The national policy setting and international influences

South Africa began overhauling its policies and laws in the early 1990s, with sweeping legislative, electoral, and political changes and revamped land ownership rules. The new constitution of 1996 sets out responsibilities for three levels of government (national, provincial, and local) and its Bill of Rights includes environmental protection, social and economic rights, and the overriding principle of equality before the law. Three sets of national policies have primary relevance to the poverty and environment situation in Riemvasmaak. They relate to economic reform, land redistribution, and natural resource management and conservation.

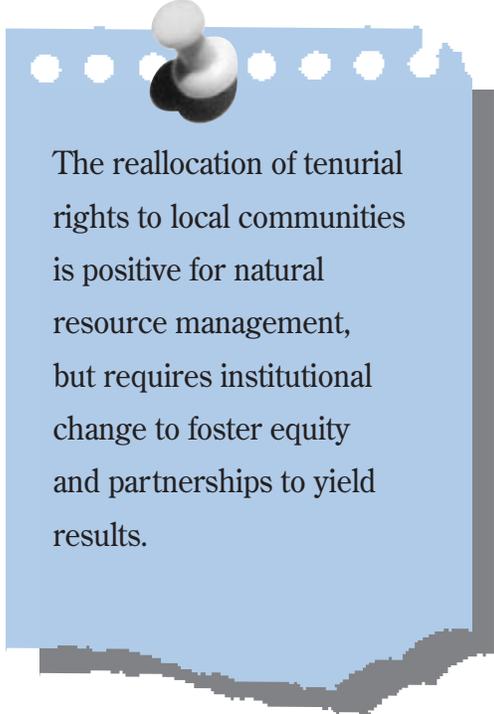
Economic policies since 1996 have moved towards an investor-friendly, market orientation, accompanied by the usual fiscally stringent, anti-subsidy priorities. This has marked a significant shift away from the earlier focus on a reconstruction and development program that sought to redress inequalities and "[attack] poverty and deprivation."

Land reform policy in South Africa is demand-led, meaning that government puts in place programs that communities can access if they wish. The Riemvasmaak land restitution and its Community Development Trust are outcomes of this policy. Although land reform allows communities to make claims to land, it provides them with little assistance in purchasing the land and establishing residential and economic infrastructure. As a result, progress has been slow. Considerable NGO and donor support is needed to help the communities to realize any benefits from this new policy.

In the past, nature conservation policies were based on practices that excluded communities from any benefits. Parks and reserves confiscated community land without any consideration to the displaced people, a policy that sowed the seeds of distrust and hatred toward conservation authorities. Even though this policy has officially changed, many of the old perceptions remain.

4. From assessment to action—selecting options strategically

Existing national policies and the meso institutional environment for Riemvasmaak offer several opportunities for simultaneous poverty reduction and nature conservation. Local assessment by GEM, WWF's partner in the area, has determined that community-based ecotourism offers the most reliable means of achieving these twin goals, and that this approach would also drive investments in a broader set



The reallocation of tenurial rights to local communities is positive for natural resource management, but requires institutional change to foster equity and partnerships to yield results.

of economic and income-generating activities through enhanced demand for agricultural products, services, and crafts. Success in achieving these goals depends on: strengthening the Riemvasmaak Community Development Trust to effectively tap capital investments for infrastructure investment and local capacity building; resolving the land dispute with Augrabies Falls National Park to establish a working relationship with them; and finally, linking up with other similar efforts in the country to consolidate lessons and best practices for facilitating this and other efforts.

