Traditional Medicines Project- Lessons Learnt

6. The Terminal Evaluation identified the following lessons that have been learnt from the implementation of this project.

Stake holder participation in the planning and implementation of projects is an important tool in ensuring that projects address beneficiaries’ concerns and needs. This ensures project ownership by beneficiaries.

Projects involving cultivation of indigenous trees require a long period for full results to be realized. The five year period for the project was just too short for this component of the project.

The Ministry of Environment and Tourism and all the other instituions working with community groups on this initiative need to continue nurturing the close links that have been developed with the donor community and national institutions (government and non-governmental) so they can continue to mobilize additional resources for other national initiatives and to explore innovative financing mechanisms for channelling such support. More importantly, all opportunities for local level (community) investment into the project should be exploited as this is the surest way of ensuring that the project becomes sustainable.

Some traditional medicinal practitioners hold the view that cultivated species are less effective compared to those growing in the wild while others are happy to use cultivated species and have even gone to the extent of growing some medicinal plats around their homesteads for their own use.

While knowledge of plants with medicinal value is the domain of elders and traditional practitioners, lessons from project implementation show that communities with youth involvement perform better in areas of project implementation, record keeping, providing secretarial support at workshops and meetings and documentation of experiences and information. Youth involvement also ensures project sustainability and passing of knowledge on medicinal plants and their use from the elders and traditional practitioners to the youths.

The slow growth rate of most indigenous plants with medicinal value means that there are no immediate benefits from cultivated medicinal plants resulting in beneficiaries losing interest in such projects. Cultivation of medicinal plants seems to do better where the activity is integrated with other activities that provide immediate benefits to participating communities. These lessons seem to suggest that projects aimed at the conservation of biodiversity need to have a production component that provides immediate benefits to participating communities if they are to be successful.

It is difficult to mobilize traditional practitioners to work as a group to establish enterprises for processing and marketing of medicinal plants products because to most practitioners it is a taboo to mix traditional medicine from different practitioners. This is particularly so among the lowly educated traditional practitioners. Such enterprises tend to perform better where beneficiaries are not traditional practitioners but are community members with knowledge and interest in traditional medicines.

Marketing of medicinal plants products is difficult in rural locations. Communities seem to prefer sourcing of traditional medicines from their family practitioners. In addition people in rural areas prefer to collect medicinal plants products from the wild for their own use. Of the three enterprises established under the project, two are located in rural areas and one is located in an urban location. The one located in the urban area is able to market its products while those in the rural areas have difficulties in marketing their products

Some plants studied have potential global benefits since they were found to have potential of treating AIDS related opportunistic infections. But more time and resources are required to support further studies to establish their full potential and effectiveness.

Local communities demonstrated that given the opportunity they are able to mobilize locally available skills to facilitate project implementation. The Nemaramba community, in consultation with an engineer from the District Development Fund, constructed a weir using local skills (builders). The weir is intended to provide water for their medicinal plants nursery. Locally available skills were also used in fencing nursery sites woodlots and none use areas.

Experiences from implementation of the project demonstrated that constant project monitoring, provision of technical back stopping and community mobilization by extension officers are required to ensure successful implementation of projects. This is particularly so in biodiversity conservation projects whose benefits in most cases are in the distant future.

Finally, an appropriate political and economic environment is necessary for the successful implementation of projects. The implementing partners in the NGO sector failed to implement their planned activities as they were not allowed to visit rural communities for political reasons. On the economic front purchases of materials required for project implementation could not be effected due to the high inflation which resulted in the daily changes of prizes making quotations sourced meaningless. During the final year of the project all payments had to be suspended during the forth quarter as the UNDP system failed to accommodate the zeros resulting from the depreciation of the Zimbabwean dollar.