Livelihood change in rural Zimbabwe over 20 years

Josphat Mushongah and Ian Scoones


Abstract

This paper explores the changing livelihood strategies among a group of rural households in southern Zimbabwe across 20 years. The study uses a combination of a household survey, in-depth biographical interviews and wealth ranking to examine livelihood change. The households studied in 1986-87 were all traced two decades on, and the pattern of livelihood transitions was analysed. In addition, ‘secondary households’, offshoots of the original ‘primary households’, were also traced, revealing important changes in livelihood opportunity for the next generation. The paper reflects on the methodological challenges of exploring longitudinal livelihood change. In conclusion, the key dynamics of livelihood transitions over this period are highlighted, along with the implications these have for rural development and agrarian change.

Introduction

Most insights into rural livelihood change are based on snapshots. Yet livelihoods are always dynamic, involving transitions between different strategies (Ellis, 2000). Any study of rural livelihood change must capture this diversity, focusing on on- and off-farm income, the individual and household material asset base, social connections and relations, health and disease status, among other variables (Conway and Chambers, 1992; Bebbington, 1999; Scoones, 1998). These variables, in turn, are influenced by different drivers, whether demographic, environmental, economic or political (Carney, 1998). Over time, a number of livelihood change processes can be distinguished. Dorward (2009) contrasts processes of ‘stepping up’ (accumulating household assets and improving income and well-being through local production), ‘stepping out’ (diversifying income sources, including off-farm work) and ‘hanging in’ (surviving through a mix of local farm production, labouring and off-farm income earning). Mushongah (2009) adds the category ‘dropping out’ to encompass those who are destitute, reliant on external support or in the process of migrating away.

Using Dorward’s framework to analyse long-term livelihood change in Mazvihwa communal area in southern Zimbabwe, this paper assesses the effectiveness of combining a repeat household survey with in-depth biographical interviews and wealth ranking, to illuminate the complex dynamics of livelihood change over a 20 year period. The paper contributes to a growing body of literature on methods for understanding livelihood change. For example, longitudinal panel surveys, life history interviews, sustained ethnographic studies and some participatory appraisal methods have all been tested (Davis and Baulch, 2009; Whitehead, 2002). In different ways they offer important insights into poverty dynamics (Addison et al., 2009), and in particular the role of asset thresholds in livelihood transitions (Carter and Barrett, 2006). Much work recognises the importance of combining quantitative and
qualitative methodologies, while acknowledging the challenges (White, 2002; Kanbur, 2003). This in turn is allied to a long tradition of holistic approaches to livelihood analysis, encompassing diverse methodological traditions (Murray, 2002).

A unique opportunity to contribute to this debate arose as part of a long-term study in Zimbabwe. This work complements a number of important panel studies looking at changes in poverty and livelihoods in Zimbabwe’s rural areas; both more broadly through repeat surveys (Alwang et al., 2002; CSO, 1998) and in the resettlement areas through a long-term panel study (Gunning et al., 2000). The study allowed a highly focused assessment of livelihood change over 20 years – from 1986-87 to 2006-07. The study site is situated in Zvishavane district in the Midlands province of southern Zimbabwe. Mazvihwa communal area is a dryland smallholder farming area, where crop farming combines with livestock rearing, and off-farm activities. As with most nearby communal areas, migration to work in towns, mines and farms has been characteristic of people’s livelihood strategies (Potts, 2000). Over many years, livelihoods in this region have been marginal, with extensive and entrenched poverty (Campbell et al., 2002).

There have been some major shocks and stresses which have impinged on people’s livelihoods over this period. For example, there have been significant droughts, often decimating crop production and causing large livestock mortalities (notably in 1982-4 and 1991-2), resulting in shifts in livelihood strategies, including the adoption of illegal off-farm activities such as gold panning and cross-border trading to South Africa (Scoones et al., 1996). From the 1990s the HIV/AIDS epidemic hit rural populations hard, peaking in the late 1990s, with major impacts on household structures, labour and gender relations (Feeney, 2001). From 1991 structural adjustment had dramatic effects on the formal economy, with reductions in employment opportunities and a retreat in state support (Marquette, 1997). This pre-figured the economic decline which started in the late 1990s, the result of fiscal indiscipline, political patronage and economic mismanagement which accelerated through the 2000s, resulting in hyperinflation and ultimately the almost complete collapse of the formal economy (Bond and Manyama, 2003). Land reform was an important part of government policy from Independence (Moyo, 1995), but the resettlement programmes of the 1980s and 1990s had little impact in Mazvihwa, although substantial out-migration to frontier areas in the Zambezi valley was important (Nyambara, 2001). From 2000, the land invasions and the subsequent ‘fast-track land reform programme’ had significant ramifications (Scoones et al., 2010). The political and economic crisis in the period from 2000 has had a huge impact on the country in terms of macro-economic indicators, provision of state services and indicators of human development (Raftopoulos, 2009).

Over this 20-year period, therefore, there have been a range of drivers – ecological, economic, social and political - affecting livelihoods in different ways. In this paper we want to ask a set of simple questions. What happened to people’s livelihoods over this time? What factors, at different times, influenced livelihood change, influencing patterns of ‘stepping up’, ‘stepping out’, ‘hanging in’ or ‘dropping out’? And finally, and briefly, what implications does this have for rural development and agrarian change?
Tracking households

In 1986-87 a small sample of 71 households (made up of 721 individuals) was defined. This was selected across a series of household clusters in a way that represented a range of different households, stratified by cattle ownership (Scoones, 1990; Wilson, 1990). Comparing with wider survey data (e.g. Jackson and Collier, 1988), the sample was broadly representative of the rural population in communal areas in this part of the country. Being a small sample, intensive interaction was possible over a sustained period. Indeed, contact with many households was maintained over 20 years until the re-study in 2006-07 (Mushongah 2009).

In this paper we term the original sample households, ‘primary households’. In the re-study much effort was invested in tracing all of these. While five households had dropped out because of deaths and a lack of a next generation to maintain them, all others were traced. Thus the re-study had a sample of 66 primary households, representing 979 individuals. Because of the relatively small sample size and the good contacts with people, the problems of tracing households and sample attrition, which so often undermine other longitudinal studies and panel surveys, was substantially reduced (Rose, 2000).

By 2006-07 most of the original primary households were were still resident in Mazviwha (78%), but others had moved to frontier districts as part of informal migration to new rural areas (4%), to pre-2000 resettlement schemes (1%) and to the new resettlement areas as part of land invasions and fast-track land reform (10%). Unsurprisingly, there had been a substantial demographic shift. The average age of the household head in the 1986-87 study was 49.5 (range 29-93 years), but by 2006-07 it was 62.4 (with an even larger range of 18-90 years). In some cases the household had been taken over by a son, especially when the father died. In three such cases, the mother was still resident and the household retained its unity, although with a different composition.

In order to have a sample linked to the original one, but of a more comparable age profile to the primary households in 1986-87, a group of 173 ‘secondary households’ was defined. These were all households established by male children, or other male extended family members, who had been resident in the original primary households. Daughters were also traced but only male-origin households were included in the definition of secondary households, as households are usually established by men on marriage because of patrilocal and patrilineal descent systems.

The tracking data showed the wide dispersal of next-generation secondary households, including abroad in the diaspora, notably in South Africa (8.1%), Botswana (1.2%) and the UK (1.7%). Secondary households also took up resettlement opportunities, both before (5.2%) and after 2000 (6.9%), and some moved to other districts as part of informal rural-rural migrations (7.5%). While overall 36.4% of secondary households established rural homes close to their parents (32.9% with +independent fields), a similar number (32.9%) had established homes in Zimbabwean towns and cities, without a rural home base.
For the study of livelihood change in 2006-07, there were therefore two samples – the primary households (N=66) and a sub-set of all secondary households who had established new homes with independent home fields in Mazvihwa communal area (N=57), plus five households with independent home fields in a ‘fast-track’ resettlement area immediately adjacent (total N=62). Some emerging secondary households in both sites, while having a separate home, shared the primary household’s home field, and so were not included in the sample. These 62 secondary households had an average age of household head of 32.7 years (range 21 to 71)

Understanding long-term livelihood change

The study used a combination of three methods to understand livelihood change over the 20 year period: a standard household survey, applied to both ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ households; in-depth biographical interviews; and wealth ranking. We start with a discussion of the application of wealth ranking, and show how this complemented the survey and interview work.

Wealth ranking is a simple, participatory research tool that evolved from the 1980s alongside the growth of participatory rural appraisal (Grandin, 1988; Guijt, 1992). It has been widely used to gain qualitative understandings of patterns of social differentiation within communities, and as a complement to survey techniques (Hargreaves et al., 2007). The method involves a group of local informants first discussing what they mean by the term ‘wealth’, in ways that tease apart the multiple meanings and nuanced implications through an in-depth dialogue. Then cards, on which are the names of all households derived from a household list, are sorted into different groups.

The 2006-07 ranking workshops followed the same methodology as used in 1986-87 (Scoones 1995). Workshops were held separately with men and women and started with an extended discussion of ‘wealth’, followed by a household ranking. Participants included people with a diversity of livelihood strategies and who were knowledgeable of the whole area. In 2006-07, 17 men and 21 women were involved, while in 1986-87 there were 13 men and 10 women. In both groups there was some continuity in participation between the two periods.

In discussing the term ‘wealth’, the vernacular Shona translations which consistently emerged were upenyu hwakanaka, kugara zvakanaka and mupfumi; all composite terms/phrases meaning ‘good life’, ‘relating to one’s happiness and well-being’, or ‘being rich’. Upenyu hwakaipa, kutambudzika and kushushikana have the connotations of ‘ill-being’, ‘vulnerability’ or ‘bad life’; all associated with suffering due to scarcity in material and non-material terms, also linked to deprivation or unfulfilled psycho-social needs, defencelessness or lacking in strength to meet the uncertainties and stresses of life, including the death of family members. Causes of ‘bad life’ ranged from droughts, diseases, unemployment, inflation to social relationship problems caused by intra-household tensions emanating from unequal power relations and being accused of witchcraft, among others. As in 1986-87, these were lively workshops lasting over several hours, involving much good humour, but often heated debate. No-one seemed to shy away from the discussion. Indeed, beyond the utility of the final ranking,
it was often the discussion that proved particularly insightful. Four ranks were produced in each case – from relatively richer (rank 1) to relatively poorer (rank 4).

How have perceptions of ‘wealth’ changed between the two periods? A number of criteria emerged in the 1986-87 workshops, including: number of cattle owned; crop production; income from remittances; rural non-farm income; type of house; education of children; and groceries (bread, tea, margarine). Cattle ownership featured prominently in the 1986-87 discussion. As one participant from the men’s group noted ‘these days cattle are fewer, so there is less sharing. A rich man can own just a few cattle, or even donkeys’. Another man summed up his perception; ‘wealth is being a successful farmer, having access to money, making good use of your assets, educating your children and building a fine home’.

The generational dynamics were discussed in the women’s group: ‘in the past, the older people were richer… wealth was determined by your background and reliant on inheritance.. [but] younger people can be rich these days, because of work in town’ (Scoones, 1995, p. 72). Yet it was also more intangible factors, such as status, conduct and social relations, that were important too. For example, a man with 25 cattle who never sent his children to school could not be regarded as ‘rich’ by the women’s workshop (Scoones, 1995, p. 76).

In 2006-07, many of the criteria were the same, but there was a different emphasis. The main criteria were: number of cattle owned; land size and crop outputs; good health; children’s education; off-farm income (including remittances); farm equipment owned; ownership of ‘modern gadgets’; and hiring of farm labour. While assets and outputs associated with the core livelihood activity of farming remain dominant, other aspects were also mentioned. Health, for example, although discussed in 1986-87, was a dominant theme as in 2006-07, reflecting in large part the impact of HIV/AIDS. ‘Utano upfumi (good health) is, by definition, an indicator of wealth’, observed a participant in the women’s workshop. Another commented, wealth is ‘… having a family where you live in peace and harmony and in good health in an era of ‘the disease’ [HIV/AIDS]. Such a life is even more important than a household which owns a lot of cattle…’. (Mushongah, 2009, p.59). In 2006-07, children’s education was mentioned very much together with access to off-farm income and remittances. Education was most definitively seen as a route to ‘stepping out’ and, although remittance flows were less significant overall, those who had managed to educate their children so that they were able to get decently paid jobs were ranked consistently high. For example, a widow and household head, was placed in rank 1 because she had educated her children. ‘Despite being a widow, she managed to raise and educate her children …she now has a good life…her children are now looking after her…’, one participant commented (Mushongah, 2009, p.57). While the quality of the house, and notably its roofing material, was used as an indicator in 2006-07, other material items were also mentioned, notably cotton sprayers, tick insecticide sprayers, mobile phones, solar panels and cars; none of which were part of the discussion 20 years before.

The 2006-07 men’s workshop offered a definition of a ‘wealthy’ person. This was associated with land, livestock and educated children and the economic support these children provide their parents: ‘A wealthy person/household is one with enough land and about 12 cattle and above, plus chickens, goats…he/she has educated children such as agricultural extension workers, teachers, managers,
doctors, soldiers and policemen.’ (Mushongah, 2009, p.53). In the women’s workshop, a woman in her 60s again emphasised the importance of land-based livelihoods: ‘Wealth is all about the soil…the land…that is, working on the land, being passionate about farming. Farming generates wealth…when there is hunger or food scarcity in the household, there is no wealth to talk about!’ (Mushongah, 2009, p.53).

Non-material factors were again important in the 2006-07 discussions. As in 1986-87, education was repeatedly mentioned, as was status and standing in the community. Even someone’s social habits were sometimes brought into the equation. For instance, an individual’s poor public image, notoriety and disapproved of pursuits would attract a lower ranking. For example: ‘He has no reputation at all…the few who know him say he is just a hopeless drunkard…he has no time to work in the fields…he spends most of his time involved in gold panning in Runde river… Definitely group 4 material!’ (Mushongah, 2009, pp.52-53).

Over time, then, perceptions of wealth have shifted. By 2006-07 there was more of an emphasis on good health, as well as ownership of a range of material goods, and a reduced focus on cash income earning because of hyperinflation and economic collapse. At the time of the 2007 workshop, inflation was running at 2000 per cent, but a year later it had risen, in some estimates, to a staggering 231 million percent. Yet having core assets, notably land and cattle, remained essential and an important hedge against such rampant inflation, and thus indicators such as a ‘good home’ persisted. This was highlighted in an exchange in the men’s workshop between the local headmaster who argued: ‘Bill Gates is the richest man in the world…so money definitely is important’ (Mushongah, 2009, p.54). This was countered by others, one saying: ‘There is enough proof in Zimbabwe that having money can be worthless as witnessed by our currency which has lost value due to inflation… [But] having assets such as cattle and land enables us to embark on crop and livestock production, from where we will meet our basis needs. This is the most important thing to us.’ (Mushongah, 2009, p.54)

**Comparing rankings with survey data and in-depth interviews**

How, then, do the composite rankings relate to the survey data and in-depth biographical interviews collected? Table 1 presents survey data on a range of parameters included in the household questionnaires. These are related to the different wealth ranks, both over time and between primary and secondary households.

The data show a strong association between wealth rank and measures across the range of criteria. Ordering of ranks and survey data averages is highly consistent. Wealth ranks are closely related to farm asset ownership (livestock, roofing, equipment). In terms of field areas and crop production, there is a discontinuity shown between wealth rank 1 and others in 1986-87 and between ranks 1 and 2 and others in 2006-07. Overall for primary households there is less of a skewed distribution of both production and assets in 2006-07, although around a lower mean; while for secondary households it is only wealth rank 1 households who own significant assets (notably livestock), although this does not translate into crop production.
Table 1: Relating wealth ranks to survey data (averages, with standard deviations in brackets)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ranks</th>
<th>1986-87</th>
<th>2006-07</th>
<th>2006-07</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Primary households</td>
<td>Primary households</td>
<td>Secondary households</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 N=</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field area (ha)</td>
<td>7.8 (3.8)</td>
<td>4.2 (2.2)</td>
<td>4.7 (2.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cereal production 1984-85 and 2005-06 (t)</td>
<td>11.2 (9.4)</td>
<td>3.8 (2.4)</td>
<td>3.7 (2.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maize sales 1985 and 2006 (kg)</td>
<td>3379.1 (4079.9)</td>
<td>297.3 (665.6)</td>
<td>210.7 (346.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cattle owned (N)</td>
<td>14.1 (14.3)</td>
<td>4.6 (3.2)</td>
<td>3.4 (4.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goats owned (N)</td>
<td>31.5 (19.5)</td>
<td>17.6 (20.7)</td>
<td>14.0 (16.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roofing</td>
<td>1.6 (0.49)</td>
<td>1.35 (0.49)</td>
<td>1.35 (0.48)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equipment (N)</td>
<td>2.7 (0.47)</td>
<td>1.9 (0.66)</td>
<td>1.75 (0.72)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Field area refers to the main outfield; cereal production is the sum of maize, sorghum and millet production; cattle ownership includes all animals owned, including those loaned out, but not those held but loaned in; roofing refers to tin/asbestos roof on the main dwelling and the response average of yes (=2) and no (=1); equipment relates to the average of the sum of numbers of ploughs, cultivators and harrows. Data sources: Wilson (1990), Scoones (1990) and Mushongah (2009).

Table 2 shows the ranking of the top ten off-farm cash income levels in the two periods according to the surveys. Some new income sources are evident in 2006-07, including gold panning and cross-border trading, while others have disappeared, such as savings clubs (due to a lack of cash) and hunting (due to the resettlement of the former farms). Twenty years ago, income associated with successful crop production – such as piece work labour and beer brewing – were more important, while today people focus on ‘off-farm’ production activities such as poultry rearing and gardening, including the cultivation of marijuana. As Table 3 shows, there has been a dramatic decline in labour hiring for all agricultural activities overall. Off-farm activities are differentiated by gender and wealth rank. Women, for example, are heavily engaged in gardening, trading and beer brewing, while men specialise in building, hunting/fishing and gold panning. Wealth ranks 3 and 4 engage more in piece work labouring, gold panning and craft work, while wealth ranks 1 and 2 are more engaged in poultry rearing and cross-border trade, where some start-up capital is required. There have been some switches in focus too, with gardening, for example, being more associated with poorer groups in 1986-87, while in 2006-07 it was wealth ranks 1 and 2 who earned more income from gardening.
Table 2: Ranking of rural off-farm income sources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Off-farm income sources</th>
<th>Ranked source of cash income, 2006-07</th>
<th>Ranked source of cash income, 1985-86</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gardening</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gold panning</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Piece work/hired labour</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local trading</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Craft work</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cross-border trading</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poultry sales</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beer brewing</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ox cart hire</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Savings clubs</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hunting/fishing</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Mushongah (2009: Appendix 3) and Scoones (1990)

Table 3: Percentage of primary households hiring labour for various farming activities: 2006-07 and 1986-87

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Farming activity</th>
<th>2006-07</th>
<th>1986-87</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Weeding</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ploughing</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harvesting</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coppice cutting</td>
<td>7.6%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fencing</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Herding cattle</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thatching</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Detailed biographical interviews were also undertaken to explore the dynamics of livelihood change across all households which changed wealth rank over time (21 increases and 18 decreases, see below, Table 4). These in-depth interviews took place with multiple members of the household with the aim of piecing together the story of what had happened over the intervening 20 years. This qualitative life history interviewing proved enormously valuable for exploring complex causal relationships. Below two cases are offered as illustrations.

Case study 1: A household which increased its ranking in the past 20 years
Marwei Chikwanda’s household was in wealth rank 3 in 1986-87. At that time his father, Tonono Chikwanda was a migrant worker at Zimasco mine, in neighbouring Shurugwi district but was estranged from his family. In 1992, Tonono was pensioned off due to old age. He returned to his family
in Mazvihwa, almost a pauper. In the meantime, a relative had sponsored Marwei’s education until he graduated as a teacher in 1993. From 1993 Marwei was effectively the household head. By then he was a married man. He was now looking after his parents. Access to remittance income earned from his teaching job enabled Marwei to improve his household’s welfare. From his remittance income, Marwei built a modern, asbestos-roofed four-roomed house at the family homestead in 1994. In the same year he bought a cow. He also bought an ox-drawn cart (1996) and replaced the brushwood fencing of the family homestead with a steel fence (1998). He also bought furniture, a TV and a radio (1999).

Meanwhile, in the early 1990s, he gave his wife, Winnet, start-up capital to embark on cross-border trading to South Africa and Botswana. These were the early years of structural adjustment. Winnet’s cross-border business was quite lucrative. With some of the profits generated, supplemented by Marwei’s remittances, she expanded their portfolio of non-farm activities by opening up a chicken project. There was a ready market for poultry and eggs at schools in the area. They also continued with farming activities and Marwei financed crop inputs and wages for a farm employee. He was also able to pay school fees for his siblings. By 2000, Marwei was content with his household’s progress:

> Around 2000, I was comfortable because all one needs are possessions which allows one to have a decent living…that is livestock, capital [money], equipment such as a plough…even good health…remember being-able bodied these days is wealth…my household was also food secure. (Interview, Mazvihwa, April 2007)

Marwei stressed that his household made this progress in the 1990s, thanks to the lower cost of living and an enabling economic environment at the time. He regrets the post-2000 economic decline, the ill-health and subsequent death of his mother in 2002 and of late his wife’s ill-health, as factors which have arrested his household’s further development. Despite these setbacks, his household was clearly on the ascendency and from rank 3 to rank 2 in 2006-07.

**Case study 2: A household which declined in the past 20 years**

Muza’s household epitomises a household which descended significantly - from wealth rank 1 to wealth rank 3. Muza was a successful farmer (*hurudza*) of great repute 20 years ago. Agricultural extension workers even used to hold ‘Look and Learn’ meetings at his farm, just to showcase his successful agricultural work. Taking advantage of the agro-ecology of his farm which had good, *dambo* (valley wetland) soils, he was able to grow crops all year round. His yields in crops such as groundnuts were exceptionally high and had a ready market in Zvishavane town.

The polygamous Muza considered his children’s education unimportant and family (child) labour was a key factor of production in his agricultural-based livelihood. His marriage to a young wife, Chipiwa, who had previously been married to a cousin in the late 1980s created long-standing inter-household tensions. When the young wife later entered into an adulterous relationship, the conflict degenerated into a tragedy when he killed her in a fit of rage. After serving his prison term for this offence, he never managed to recover to his *hurudza* status. An uncle confided:
Muza died mysteriously in 1996...his death was linked to the avenging spirit (ngozi) of his young wife, Chipewa, whom he killed...it was also clear that two young women he later married never managed to bear any children because of the work of this avenging spirit. It is unfortunate that Muza persistently refused to repay the avenging spirit (ngozi) of this murdered woman. He thought he had paid his dues by going to prison...he died a miserable man...Later, as a family elder, I played a leading role in ensuring that Muza’s household repaid this ngozi in line with our tradition...As settlement, the murdered wife’s family demanded 23 cattle...the whole of Muza’s herd of cattle went toward this payment (Interview, Mazvihwa, April 2007).

Soon after his death, Muza’s two younger wives returned to their parental homes. Maidei, his senior wife, died in 2003. Two of his daughters returned home soon after they divorced and by 2006, they had both died of HIV/AIDS related illnesses, leaving their young children at Muza’s home. Two of his sons established their secondary households in the same village and none of them has been keen to take over Muza’s homestead, as is sometimes the customary practice. The other son, Thomas, is a border-jumper to South Africa where he spends most of his time. It is alleged that mysterious happenings occur at Muza’s homestead and there are fears that it is haunted. Muza’s youthful nephews, particularly Edmore, have been the custodians of the household for the last few years. In early 2007, Edmore also joined the border-jumping activities to South Africa. Only young relatives (23 year old and 17 year old wives of Muza’s South Africa-based son and nephew, respectively) lived at Muza’s farm in 2007 and they could only manage to plant 2.2 hectares of crops compared to the 13 or more hectares planted in the 1980s. This resulted in a paltry 0.2 tonnes of cereal production, compared to the 33 tonnes, and 11 tonnes of sales recorded in 1984-85. In 1986-87, the household had a herd of 15 cattle, and the number had declined to one by 2006-07. Without a key asset (cattle), the household had little chance of recreating earlier success.

The first case illustrates the important link between off-farm income (‘stepping out’) and local accumulation (‘stepping up’). In this period, Marwei was able to build his asset base, and invest in new economic activities (such as trading and chicken production) since he was in gainful employment during the early 1990s. A diversified livelihood strategy was pursued, with clear lines of gender differentiation, but on the back of a strong household unit and much cooperation. Investment in this crucial period has stood them in good stead, particularly as a result of the chicken project which generated a good income stream, as well as employment for a worker. Despite the economic woes and ill-health of late, they have been able to weather the storm. The origins of this success, however, can be located in the investment in education during the 1980s; in this case by a relative who paid school fees. This meant that from humble beginnings, Marwei was able to accumulate and invest, and improve the household’s ‘wealth’.

The second case, by contrast, shows how decline can often be sudden, the result of catastrophic, highly contingent events, exacerbated by multiple, interacting factors. In the 1980s, Muza had been on a ‘stepping up’ trajectory, and was perhaps the most successful farmer in the area; able to hire labour, and invest in his farm enterprise and home. The dramatic family dispute which ended in tragedy and his subsequent imprisonment and later death meant farm production collapsed. Ill-health and continued
family tensions resulted in rapid social and economic decline to a situation of only just ‘hanging in’. These tragic events took place at a time when opportunities were declining on many fronts. Dependents had to seek alternative livelihoods and migrated. Instead of reliance on substantial local farm production and crop sales, derived from access to good soils and water availability as well as significant farming skill, Muza’s family members were forced into fragile, vulnerable livelihoods, such as illegal border jumping and temporary employment in South Africa, linked to limited farm production at home.

Livelihood transitions

Combining the household survey and ranking data, together with in-depth biographic interviews with households who changed ranks, we can look in more depth at the patterns, causes and consequences of livelihood transitions. Starting with the ranking data (Table 4), we found that:

a) 40.9% (27 households) remained static (ten households remained in rank 1; three households remained in rank 2; six households remained in rank 3 and eight households remained in rank 4).

b) 27.1% (18 households) decreased their rank moving down one or two ranks over the period.

c) 31.8% (21 households) increased their rank, moving up one or two ranks over the period.

Table 4: 1986-87 and 2006-07 primary households’ ranking compared (numbers)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2006-07 Primary households</th>
<th>Rank 1</th>
<th>Rank 2</th>
<th>Rank 3</th>
<th>Rank 4</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rank 1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>17 (25.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rank 2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>15 (22.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rank 3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>20 (30.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rank 4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>14 (21.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td>17 (25.8%)</td>
<td>17 (25.8%)</td>
<td>19 (28.8%)</td>
<td>13 (19.7%)</td>
<td>66 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thus in a period of 20 years, nearly 60% of households had changed rank, representing a substantial dynamism in wealth status. What were the causes of these transitions? An examination of the survey data, combined with the interviews from the 39 households who had changed rank, highlighted a number of recurrent patterns.

A transition to a lower rank (higher number) involved, for example, a death or extended illness of one of the household heads. This was particularly so in five households where the household heads’ spouses also fell ill and subsequently died. Across all individuals identified as members of the primary households in the 1986-87, 123 people had died by 2006-07, and of these 53% had reportedly died of HIV/AIDS-related illnesses, including eight primary household heads (Mushongah 2009, pp. 150-151). This pattern reflects both an ageing population, but also one exposed over the last two decades to HIV infection, even if incidence has been declining in the past decade (Halperin et al., 2011). Long-term illness and the consequent medical expenses were often a significant burden on households, on many fronts. Equally, deaths often required the further deployment of assets at funerals.
The primary households represented an ageing population. By 2006-07, 52.2% of male household heads were over 60. This resulted in a combination of infirmity and ill health, resulting in less ability to work in the fields. In the past, older households would rely on the next generation to support them through either on-farm production, or more likely remittances. However, as discussed above, those secondary households resident in Mazvhiwa were often asset poor and not producing significantly, as so often were unable to help out. In addition, those who had migrated to towns in Zimbabwe were often as vulnerable, if not more so than their rural relatives, given the economic crisis. It was only those in the diaspora, with access to high value currencies who were able to provide this sort of remittance-based social security.

Loss of critical assets, notably livestock, was also linked to a decline in wealth rank. Those whose ranks declined over this period all had fewer cattle holdings than they did two decades before, declining from an average of 6.1 (SD: 9.8) in 1986-87 to 3.2 (SD: 2.4) in 2006-07, and the same pattern applied to goats and donkeys. Cattle in particular were hit hard by the 1991-92 drought. In previous droughts, those unable to move animals to new grazing had the highest mortalities. This was usually the poorer households without labour or the ability to pay for lease grazing (Scoones 1992). In the 2000s, cattle populations were again affected by drought (notably in 2000-01 and 2004-05, although more modestly than the dramatic declines of 1991-92), and mortalities increased due to an increase in tick-borne disease caused by the lack of dipping, as veterinary facilities declined.

Other assets declined too for this group, including land area – often parcelled out to sons establishing new homes, with those whose ranks had declined having on average 6.5 ha (SD: 2.7) in 1986-87 and only 3.1 ha (SD: 1.1) in 2006-07. In some cases house quality and equipment ownership decreased, as people were unable to maintain these assets. And finally loss of external income was often important. This was particularly an issue during the 1990s as structural adjustment hit hard, and people lost jobs, and especially so post-1997 as the economy imploded.

Looking at those who moved up ranks (lower numbers) over time, there were again a variety of causes. Demographic change was important. Many of these households were young, starting out and establishing their homes often with young, dependent children in 1986-87. By 2006-07, they had been farming for 20 years; some had returned from periods of work, sometimes with windfall packages from retrenchments, and children had often grown up, providing remittances and other forms of support. The secondary households linked to this upwardly mobile group of households were more likely to be non-resident, having moved away from Mazvhiwa and in gainful employment, sometimes abroad. These were the children who benefited from post-Independence education investments, and now in their 20s and 30s were able to manage the economic shocks of the period better than others.

Increases in rank were usually associated with accumulation of assets, again cattle being a key indicator. For this group, cattle holdings increased from 2.7 on average (SD: 3.4) in 1986-87 to 8.1 (SD: 7.4) by 2006-07. Land area did not increase significantly for those who remained in Mazvihwa, but 20 percent of those whose ranks increased had acquired new land in the frontier areas or the old or new ‘fast track’ resettlement areas. By 2006-07, the 11 households which had moved out had more land
for crop production: 4.0 ha (frontier areas, N=3), 5.0 ha (old resettlements, N=1) and 4.4 ha (‘fast-track’, N=7) compared to those who remained in Mazvihwa (3.6 ha). Of these households, only one had declined in rank (a household in the frontier areas), while four had increased in rank (two from the ‘fast track’ resettlements, one from the frontier area and the one household who had been resettled before 2000). All others had maintained their earlier rank. Resettlement – formal and informal – has thus been an important opportunity for some, with the new land assets being the basis for increasing ‘wealth’.

In these movements up and down the ranks, can any thresholds linked to asset ownership, for example, be identified? This is actually rather difficult to pinpoint. As the ranking workshop discussions highlighted, the threshold level is different for different people, and interacts with other variables. For example, having plenty of cattle may be significant, but becomes less of a wealth generator if there is no labour to herd it. Thus young households, without farm and herding labour, while asset-rich, may actually end up relatively income poor, and so are ranked low. Clearly there are key thresholds in asset ownership for farming activities. Having sufficient animals for a draught team (four cattle, or in combination with donkeys) is vital for timely ploughing and planting, which is in turn critical to agricultural success in a dryland area. Similarly, having enough basic farm equipment (especially ploughs and scotch carts) again offsets the need to borrow from others.

However, it is the combination of assets, linked to other features of people’s lives and livelihoods that are important. Very often temporal patterns are highly significant too. As emphasised above, the sudden impact of a death, a retrenchment or a drought may have the biggest impact, moving a household from a trajectory of ‘stepping up’ to a more precarious ‘hanging in’ strategy, with some ultimately ‘dropping out’. The ability to withstand shocks and stresses is substantially enhanced either through asset accumulation, notably of cattle (‘stepping up’), but also by ‘stepping out’, particularly through the provision of remittances across generations. Indeed, it is the holistic combination of material, social and other factors over time that the biographical interviews and wealth rankings capture, emphasising how different factors combine over time, creating ‘ratchet effects’ influencing vulnerability levels (Chambers, 1989).

The demographic cycle, as already discussed, makes a big difference. Table 5 relates the primary households to their Mazvihwa-based secondary household offshoots with the rankings from 2006-07. If secondary households exactly reflected the rank of the primary household with which they are associated, all households would appear along the diagonal of the table. But this is not the case, as there are 34 such secondary households whose ranks are lower, while only eight are higher than their ‘origin’ primary households. This reflects the asset poverty of these new households, including 14 secondary households in ranks 3 and 4 who were associated with wealth rank 1 primary households.

This suggests that the support formerly offered through ‘household cluster’ arrangements, which in 1986-87 was the focus of asset sharing relationships and other forms of mutual aid, are less prevalent. New secondary households are more individualised and reliant on their own, often very limited, resources. The eight secondary households who were ranked higher than their parents include: four
who are engaged in successful entrepreneurial trade (ranging from the buying and selling of goats to the illegal sale of marijuana), two who had continued access to remittance flows, one who had recently received a retrenchment payout and one who gained new land under the ‘fast-track’ resettlement programme.

Table 5: 2006-07 primary households and 2006-07 secondary households ranking compared (numbers)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2006-07 Secondary households</th>
<th>Rank 1</th>
<th>Rank 2</th>
<th>Rank 3</th>
<th>Rank 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2006-07 Primary households</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rank 1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rank 2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rank 3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rank 4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Given the generational shift over the last 20 years, one ‘control’ for this would be to compare the secondary households today with the primary households from 1986-87. Table 6 offers this comparison. 36 secondary households of 2006-07 are ranked lower than their 1986-87 primary household equivalents, while only 10 households were higher in rank. 16 households were categorised in the same rank. As indicated before, secondary households in 2006-07 were ranked lower overall, with 72.3% in the lowest two ranks.

Table 6: 1986-87 primary households and 2006-07 secondary households ranking compared (numbers)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2006-07 Secondary households</th>
<th>Rank 1</th>
<th>Rank 2</th>
<th>Rank 3</th>
<th>Rank 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1986-87 Primary households</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rank 1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rank 2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rank 3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rank 4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These comparisons suggest that the next generation, at least those resident around Mazvihwa, are not prospering. A lack of household assets, limited access to off-farm employment and a decline in cluster-based support from others, all contribute. With a few exceptions, the next rural-based generation is slipping deeper into poverty, and the trajectories of positive change observed for those primary households who have increased their rank level over 20 years are no longer available for most. As we discuss in the conclusion, this has major implications for rural development policy.

Conclusion

What patterns of livelihood change have been observed over this 20 year period in Mazvihwa? What processes are at play in influencing livelihood transitions? And, more generally, what lessons can be drawn from the application of a combination of survey, in-depth biographical interview and wealth ranking methods for understanding long-term livelihood change in rural Africa?
A number of patterns and processes are evident in the Mazvihwa study. Here we return to the Dorward (2009) framework for understanding livelihood change. First, accumulation of assets is often reliant on a combination of both ‘stepping up’ and ‘stepping out’ livelihood strategies, and dependence on one, whether farming or off-farm employment, is always risky. A diversified livelihood strategy is common in Zimbabwe, bridging on- and off-farm income earning, and rural and urban spaces. Access to land has been a constraining factor for many in the communal areas, and resettlement – either through informal resettlement in the 1980s-90s or the ‘fast-track land reform programme’ from 2000 – has offered an opportunity for some. This has resulted in a trajectory of livelihood improvement for most new land recipients. Second, livelihood improvements may take many years, with small gains made each year from crop sales or employment savings, and is highly dependent on stability in livelihood opportunity and intra-household cooperation; although, as we have seen, often with many ups and downs over time. Long-term investment may only pay off in the next generation. For example, the investment in education following Independence resulted in a highly educated work-force, able to seek remittance earning opportunities in the last two decades, particularly abroad. Third, declines to a position of ‘hanging in’, or even ‘dropping out’, can be very sudden: often the result of a combination of factors, precipitated by a chance event, such as an illness, a retrenchment or a season of crop failure or high livestock mortality. Fourth, leaving the rural areas, and a reliance on agricultural production, may be an important livelihood strategy. Over this period, there have been substantial exits from the rural home area, in search of opportunities in Zimbabwe’s urban centres or in other countries. Successful farm-based production and accumulation, which characterised wealth rank 1 and some of rank 2 in 1986-87, is increasingly constrained. Those secondary households who have established a rural base are finding it difficult to make a living, and the type of mutual aid cooperation within household clusters that allowed people to get going in the past is on the decline. Finally, the improvement of livelihood status, and in particular the accumulation of assets, is highly dependent on wider contextual factors. ‘Stepping up’ or ‘out’ may be possible in periods of wider economic prosperity, but may be very difficult when the broader economy is in decline, such as in the 2000s or following structural adjustment in the 1990s. Equally, extended periods of drought, such as in the early 2000s, give rise to very difficult livelihood conditions, especially when combined with political crisis and economic collapse. Whether stages of the demographic cycle which allow off-farm employment, or older children to provide labour for example, coincide with patterns of good or bad rainfall or economic boom or bust, make a huge difference to people’s livelihood trajectories, with consequences that stretch across generations.

What overall assessment can be made of this study area, based on the longitudinal data? Is this a failing rural economy, where the prospects for development are minimal, and development efforts should be focused on seeking alternatives, probably in other areas? This dismal view is one that has been forwarded by others working in nearby areas (Frost et al., 2007), and particularly in the context of the dire economic setting of the mid-late 2000s, has some justification. But the patterns of decline are not universal. There are some who are doing well, even in such difficult circumstances, among both primary and secondary households. Can the key elements of this success be built on? A core element of local agrarian success (‘stepping up’) has been, as discussed above, linked to new access to land and so a shift back into farm-based production. This was only a small group in this sample, but it was striking
that increased land area resulted in boosts in farm production and accumulation of assets, a pattern seen more widely in the neighbouring province of Masvingo and elsewhere (Moyo et al., 2009; Scoones et al., 2010). Remittance income, particularly from abroad, remains significant as a ‘stepping out’ strategy, and sustaining and facilitating links to allow remittance flows to reach rural settings such as Mazvihwa remains critical (Bracking and Sachikonye, 2008). Such remittances are often invested in farm-based assets, such as cattle and equipment, and these asset investments may help shift a household over a threshold and into an upward trajectory, with implications for the design of social protection interventions (Ellis et al., 2009). Another important lesson is the significance of health and education. Ill-health, as we have repeatedly seen, is a major factor in livelihood decline, and education of the next generation has been critical in providing a route out of poverty. The decline in health and education provision in Zimbabwe over the last decade has been dramatic, with the quality of rural service provision now very poor across the country (Nyazema 2010), suggesting another urgent rural development priority.

These results are an important reminder that any development interventions must take account of the complex processes that influence livelihood outcomes over time. Grappling with such complexity requires a multi-method approach. The combination of household surveys, with in-depth biographical interviews and wealth ranking, has proved helpful in identifying the patterns and exploring the processes of longitudinal livelihood change. Yet such approaches have their limitations. For example, a focus on households as a unit potentially ignores many important intra-household relations, and results sometimes in the emphasising of male livelihood activities, to the exclusion of women and young people (Guyer and Peters, 1987; O’Laughlin, 2007). Relationships among households within ‘clusters’ can also be under-emphasised (Drinkwater 1993). Wealth ranking methods have been specifically critiqued (Adams et al., 1997). For example, the notion of ‘wealth’ is seen potentially as too narrow. Some have preferred to use a more generic criterion, such as ‘well-being’ (Gough and McGregor, 2007) or ‘success’ (Scoones, et al., 2010). Others have argued that group-based participatory methods can result in exclusions and biases (Mosse 1994). However, we argue, that using a combination of methods, including individual, household and group based approaches, both qualitative and quantitative, can reveal deeper insights, allowing for triangulation between different sources.

Dorward’s categorisation of livelihood transitions is suggestive of broader processes of class formation and agrarian change, with ‘stepping up’, relating to processes of ‘accumulation from below’ (Neocosmas, 1983), and the formation of a class of petty commodity producers, while ‘stepping out’ relates to a process of accumulation more firmly linked to off-farm activities, and including a class of ‘worker peasants’. Those ‘hanging in’ or ‘dropping out’, by contrast, include a wider group of ‘footloose labour’, linked to a ‘semi-peasantry’ unable to socially reproduce (Cousins et al 1992; Bernstein 2004). Such a structural political economy analysis, linked to detailed livelihood data, can help us understand the pattern of livelihood strategies in a broader context of agrarian change. Any such analysis, as Marx (1973:101) reminded us, must be rooted in the detailed understandings of the particular setting – the ‘rich totality of many determinations’ - in order to comprehend ‘the concrete’ – and broader, structural political-economic processes. Thus a combined methods approach, linking
survey methods, in-depth biographical interviews and wealth ranking can, we argue, be a useful contribution towards such analysis.

Endnotes

1 In this paper two periods of study are referred to – 1986-87 and 2006-07. This is when the field data referred to was collected, while the ranking exercises were held in early 1988 and mid-2007. The two studies were undertaken as part of the PhD studies in the same area, working with the same sample of households (Scoones 1990; Wilson, 1990; Mushongah, 2009). The wealth ranking methodology was used in the 1986-87 study and reported in Scoones (1995). Exactly the same approach was used in the repeat study, including involving the same workshop facilitators and many of the same informants.

ii Adult mortality peaked in the period from 1996-2005, depending on age group, with female adult mortality peaking later (Ken Wilson, pers. comm., 7 March 2011). This suggests a later onset and tailing off of the epidemic compared to data from other regions of Zimbabwe.

iii While mostly easily recognisable as units, ‘households’ in Mazvihwa are often not the units of asset ownership (very often individuals), consumption (kitchens linked to particular women, particularly in polygamous households) or the loci for long-term decision making and asset transfer (usually shallow patrilineages, operating in clusters of households). As Wilson (1990) showed, data on individual women and their kitchens and the wider lineage relationships were the best predictors of child welfare outcomes. Thus the household unit used here for the wealth ranking and survey data must be qualified by insights from other scales of organisation.

iv The re-study was made easier as the author of the 2006-07 study had worked during the 1990s in local government in the area as an assistant district administrator, and so already knew many people.

v Only one household proved very difficult to locate. They had migrated to Hurungwe district, around 500 km away. They had completely lost contact with close relatives, including those who remained in Mazvihwa. No-one knew anything about them, let alone their whereabouts. The household head was eventually found in a commercial farming area, but he had just lost his job as a farm worker, although he had been given a temporary residence and a piece of land at a neighbouring farm, in exchange for his labour.

vi The ‘household head’ is usually the eldest male associated with the rural home, even if absent. The definition thus recognises the patriarchal and patrilineal system of household organisation and inheritance in this setting. Where the male household head had died and a woman had taken over and was recognised as the household head, the data refers to this individual.

vii There were two outliers (aged 71 and 61) affecting the average/range who were living with their brothers in the 1980s, and subsequently set up separate homes. All other secondary households were from the next generation.


ix There are only two exceptions: field area for 1986-87 and maize sales (although not overall cereal production) for primary households in 2006-07.

x With rising inflation in 2006-07, many cash transactions shifted to barter exchange. In this case an imputed cash value was estimated.

xi All names have been changed.

xii An unpublished study from 1993, five years after the original ranking showed that even by then 40% of households had changed ranks. Those who had improved their status were more often located in the ‘sandveld’ areas, while those who had declined were more likely to be in the ‘clay’ soil zone of the study area, reflecting in large part ability to respond to drought shocks (Ken Wilson, pers. comm., 7 March 2011). The ecological dimensions of these changes were not so evident over the 20 year period (Mushongah 2009).

References


