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Zimbabwe's environment under serious threat

This note focuses on the serious current threat to the environment in Zimbabwe. The country's natural heritage is a world asset. Urgent action is needed if irreversible damage is to be avoided. This is a matter not only of national but of international concern. The current dramatic onslaught on the Zimbabwe rhino is testimony of a very serious situation.

Zimbabwe is known worldwide for its natural heritage. The country has been, in the past, at the forefront of developing good practices in the area of wildlife management. It has been demonstrated that wildlife exploitation, in its various forms, is the best economic option for large parts of the country due to their arid or semi-arid nature. The natural heritage of Zimbabwe should be a main driver of the country's strategy to achieve accelerated economic growth.

Zimbabwe's natural assets could provide a basis for the country's sustainable development. These resources, until recently, constituted the foundation for economic growth in the country, through agriculture, the transformation industries based on agricultural products, mining exports and tourism as well as professional hunting. They are today in critical danger, with serious and far reaching negative consequences, especially for rural communities which are more sensitive to the depletion of the country's natural resources. An overview of the state of Zimbabwe's natural resources is annexed.



The fast track land reform programme as was implemented has been a main reason for the Zimbabwe's agricultural and economic collapse, and for the related uncontrolled exploitation of the country's natural resources. Small holder farmers, both from communal and resettled areas, have been forced to use all the available resources at their disposal in an unsustainable manner. The negative impact of the resulting degradation is escalating so rapidly that social, economic and environmental resilience is becoming more and more difficult and costly to maintain.

From an environmental point of view, many specialists argue that a point of no-return is rapidly approaching. Degradation would then become irreversible and the natural capital irremediably lost. Zimbabwe would lose any opportunity to regain its key advantage as regards to tourism.

The magnitude of the crisis calls for immediate action, before a social and environmental catastrophe becomes an irreversible reality.

Since the proper use of natural resources is crucial in relation to sustainable development and poverty reduction, all Zimbabweans must seek to reverse current trends in the depletion of their national assets, and support economic recovery through improved natural resource and environmental management. The new political dispensation in place in Zimbabwe, since February 2009, as a result of the signing of the Global Political Agreement, offers an opportunity to do just that. There is a danger, however, that appropriate resource management policies will be neglected and not recognised as essential in the current economic and political context. But once lost, there will be no going back and many recovery opportunities will disappear forever.

This is particularly true for the wildlife population as can be seen from the eradication of wildlife in many other African countries. Their disappearance, as presently happening to the rhino population in Zimbabwe, will limit the recovery opportunities in general; and, more specifically, will undermine the tourism sector, which was recently of major economic importance accounting for about 10% of the GDP, as well as providing a major source of forex revenue. It is even sadder, considering that Zimbabwe was at the forefront of wildlife management and integration of local communities in the benefits of that industry.



One particularity, and strength, of Zimbabwe They account for 2% of the national territory, but have significant economic potential. Today, conservancies are being badly damaged, as has been the case with the commercial farms. But the consequences of their destruction could be even more significant, due to the irreversibility of environmental degradation.

This need not be the case. Zimbabwe could still regain its place in the forefront of the countries seriously committed to protecting their natural assets and making the best economic use of them. But time is running out as environmental degradation becomes impossible to reverse.

It is of crucial importance that all Zimbabweans unite to address these concerns. It is also essential that the international community mobilises itself to establish a substantive dialogue with the Zimbabwean Government on such matters.

The international community should encourage the adoption of policies designed to protect Zimbabwe's environment and begin a meaningful and concrete dialogue with the international community on these issues.

Background information on trends in the state of the environment in Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe benefits from significant natural resources, such as large potential agricultural areas, important mining opportunities, exceptional wildlife, fisheries and forest resources. These natural resources, which were at the heart of the country's development, are being overused, and severely misused. In particular:

- The population of Zimbabwe has doubled in the last 30 years (from 6 to 12 million) and almost 70% of the population live in rural areas and depend on land and its resources (soil, water, wood, forests, wildlife) for their food security and livelihood;
- A large portion of the land (approx 60%) is subject to recurrent droughts and under constant risk of desertification. The climate change problems are not improving that situation;
- Deforestation is increasing dramatically because of the opening of new agricultural land following the land reform and because of the crumbling economy as a result of which firewood has become the number one source of energy (cooking, heating and lighting and more recently to dry tobacco). FAO estimates that, from 1990 to 2005, 30% of wooden land (10 million Ha) has been lost;
- There are between 300,000 and 500,000 seasonal and uncontrolled gold panners (unemployed men, women and children), with subsequent land, river and forests degradation. More recently, this has also taken place in the diamond fields;
- Poaching of wildlife is now uncontrolled and the animal population is fast disappearing. Rhino conservation is an example of a key specie representing the trend in wildlife population management. Following an efficient management plan, the extremely endangered rhino population of the 80s saw a strong increase in numbers in the late 90s. Thereafter, rhino numbers have been declining again, due to an intensification of country-wide poaching, particularly over the past three years 2006-2008 and now into 2009. It is estimated that at least 100 rhinos are killed every year. If this trend continues, the rhino population will disappear in a few years and with it its specific attraction for tourism.
- Private wildlife conservancies are under serious threat through the indigenisation process in a final push to acquire all land in the country. Compulsory partnership will not lead to any improvement in their management and will further limit the tourism recovery of the country, as it is especially dependant on wildlife. In addition, forced indigenisations will not promote foreign investment, which is a priority of the GNU.
- Soil depletion is a major problem all over the country both in intensive commercial farming where "conventional tillage practices lead to soil structure deterioration, loss of nutrients and erosion" and "in the smallholder sector where continuous nutrient mining with little or no mineral or organic fertilizer application has exacerbated soil fertility decline".¹ FAO surveys show that erosion hazard is medium to high in 40% of the soils.
- While the country as a whole cannot be considered as an arid one, arid and semi-arid regions are largely present in the southern and western portions of the country. As a consequence, water shortages both for domestic consumption and for agriculture are widespread in rural and urban areas. The unavailability of reliable sources for domestic water has particularly increased the vulnerability of rural communities. The majority of rural communities rank "water" as their main problem. The scarcity of water has dramatic consequences in term of environmental hygiene and public health (dysentery, diarrhoea, cholera, intestinal infections diseases). Water and Sanitation problems have seriously increased in urban areas due to the rapid urban population growth, the sharp decline in public water supply and in the sewage systems for lack of resources and maintenance.

¹ " A fertilizer strategy for Zimbabwe" , FAO / African Centre for Fertilizer Development, Roma, 1999