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25 July 2022

Regulatory challenges on cross-border mopane worm trade affects livelihoods in southern Africa

Until now, not much has been known about the importation of mopane worms (*Masonja*) into South Africa as a massive business which attracts many harvesters and exporters across many communities in Botswana and Zimbabwe.

Despite the numerous benefits of the trade, the regulation is often cumbersome, confusing, and debilitating for impoverished individuals who wish to enter the trade, according to a study by University of Cape Town's (UCT) doctoral graduate, Dr James Sekonya.

This cross-border trade is regulated through legal, informal, and traditional rules, norms, and practices. Harvesters, exporters and traders have to navigate the constraints that result from the regulatory tools and take advantage of the gaps in the regulatory systems.

"Significantly, the unintended consequence of using different regulatory approaches simultaneously forced the harvesters, exporters and traders to develop ways to adapt to the constraints and costs that were difficult to navigate," says Sekonya.

Using their resourcefulness, some actors resorted to varying levels of informality in which people complied with the regulations only where no alternatives existed, or they were guaranteed to gain more benefits. This strategy relied heavily on the notion of agency (people taking initiative and responsibility) of the actors. Nonetheless, influential, powerful, and wealthier actors were less constrained by the regulatory duplications and overlaps across the trade between Botswana and South Africa.

During his masters, Sekonya studied the impact of environmental change on mopane worm livelihoods in the Limpopo province, South Africa. "It was during this research when I learned of the growing importation of mopane worms from Zimbabwe and Botswana. I decided to dig deeper on this phenomenon but from a governance angle which I expected to be more prominent given the international borders that actors must cross to facilitate the trade".

Globally there is a growing energy to farm edible insects because they offer alternative protein at much less carbon and water footprint as compared to conventional meat. However, commercialisation of these resources has a potential to spill over to the wild populations in contexts where commercial farming is not feasible.

"I find it fascinating that resources are not simply good to be utilised, but in using these, people create meaning which connect us, enrich our experiences, and get intricately intertwined with our identities. In the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) region mopane worms are one of the prominent resource which are intricately linked to people's cultures and identities. It made a lot of sense to write this important piece of academic work on this important resource."

The goal of his research is to stimulate a debate and realisation that some of the strategies that are presently used to regulate mopane worms and many other similar resources may be the causal factors that drive the degradation of the same resources.

"Of course, the wider social factors may exacerbate this. However, by solving wicked governance problems and continuously adapting the regulatory regimes to the changing ecological and social contexts we can then ensure that people's livelihoods and wellbeing are secured," he says.

ENDS

Issued by: UCT Communication and Marketing Department

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