

Policies must reflect why Zimbabwe's small tobacco farmers use trees for firewood

April 18 2022, by Ellen Fungisai Chipango



Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

Zimbabwe is the largest tobacco producer in [Africa](#) and in 2018, the

crop accounted for about [10%](#) of the country's gross domestic product. Zimbabwe's hopes to become an upper middle-income [economy](#) by 2030, therefore, depend quite [heavily](#) on the tobacco sector.

But the process of curing tobacco uses a lot of energy—something that is often unavailable in Zimbabwe. Power is [unaffordable](#) for many and is frequently [cut](#).

For small-scale tobacco farmers, the prices of inputs have increased while the market prices of their product have [remained](#) the same or declined. This is due to unfavorable political-economic conditions.

For instance, government ordered that only [60%](#) of sales would be paid in U.S. dollars and the remainder in local currency. Further, many [small-scale farmers](#) are into contract farming. Too often, farmers' proceeds are eroded by [paying off their debts](#) with local contract companies that supply them with farming inputs at the beginning of the season.

Financially pressed and sometimes lacking electricity, farmers have to look for alternative sources of energy—and cutting down [indigenous trees](#) is one. This creates environmental degradation.

Tobacco farmers are estimated to account for 60,000 hectares of deforestation each year, around 20% of the country's total forest loss of close to [300,000](#) hectares a year.

Leaving the farmers at the mercy of the market isn't sustainable. This is a situation where the state should intervene, for the well-being of the farmers and the environment.

I conducted [research](#) into how a lack of access to energy informs farmers' decisions about their environment. To explore the issue I looked specifically at the dilemma of tobacco farmers who are faced with both

[energy poverty](#) and environmental degradation.

Zimbabwe's small-scale farmers, especially tobacco farmers, have been [labeled](#) ecological destroyers by government and its agencies. But, as my research shows, [poor farmers](#) are forced to burn fuelwood because they can't afford to pay for electricity. Cutting down trees is therefore not something to be condemned.

The state [controls](#) and regulates small farmers' environmental practices without addressing what forces them to follow these practices.

The state's only intervention is to encourage growing of eucalyptus woodlots so that farmers have access to fuelwood. But this doesn't solve the real problem.

My study illustrates that poor people's energy poverty is an outcome of a web of relationships between the state and the market, where there is an unequal exchange. It is beyond a poor farmer's control.

Energy poverty is a market condition

I conducted interviews with residents of the Zingondi Resettlement Area in Manicaland province of Zimbabwe. I also interviewed [government officials](#) and reviewed pertinent policies and literature. My main question to the farmers was: why they were energy poor in their region? From the government actors, I sought to understand how they were addressing the farmers' dilemma of being energy poor and having to protect the environment.

Around the 1980s, the area was initially established as a farming cooperative. Later, the government dissolved it as part of the land reform program—a strategy aimed at enhancing access to land for more people. Under the program the state allocated each household three hectares of

land. The local residents depend on subsistence farming and most of them grow tobacco as a cash crop.

For this population, energy poverty is a market condition. This community cannot afford electricity connection because they are poorly remunerated for their labor and produce.

People I interviewed said they had been forced to [cut](#) indigenous trees to burn for tobacco curing. They were criminalized and [punished](#) for ecological "destruction."

On top of that, the quality of their produce was affected by using inefficient energy sources. And they had to work harder to produce it.

Government's approach

What the government actors told me show that government is blind to the farmers' plight. Asked how the poor should cope, an official from the Environmental Management Agency retorted, "Let them use coal!"

Some officials held the view that poor farmers weren't environmentally conscious as they harvested fuelwood unsustainably. They said this underscored the need for the government to intervene and [regulate](#) the use of fuelwood.

Another solution the [government](#) and the [private sector](#) have proposed is the establishment of sustainable [woodlots](#). This, they argue, will meet the farmers' energy needs while protecting the environment.

In my view this leaves the skewed market relations intact. The reproductive cycle of the farming households is tied intimately to the market. But this relationship is skewed against the farmers when there are [decreased](#) returns for their labor.

When the government fails to address these market failures, which affect the poor while encouraging [export-led economic growth](#), the winners are [tobacco](#) buyers and the losers are the sellers.

What to do about it

There are three fundamental issues to consider.

First, there needs to be an understanding that energy poverty and environmental degradation are tied to the socio-economic conditions farmers find themselves in. The problem must be framed correctly.

In this case, the problem is not a poor farmer. It is the [unequal](#) relations in the market place. The predicament of poor farmers can't be viewed in isolation and must be understood within the context of global processes beyond their control.

So what are the solutions?

Policy makers need to look beyond proximate causes of energy poverty and [environmental degradation](#) to discover the inextricable links between the social, political-economic and environmental factors. This approach addresses the underlying problems and not mere symptoms of energy poverty.

Another solution would be to persuade people to use electricity and renewable energy technologies. But this requires careful and flexible economic policies to cushion rural livelihoods and the buying power of consumers.

In addition, policies must stop attempting to solve the problem as though it's one caused by poor farmers. Rather, they should take on board the fact that socio-ecological fixes such as woodlots don't work.

Nature, economy and society are inseparable. Environmental laws and policies should approach them as such.

More information: Ellen Fungisai Chipango, Political ecologies of energy poverty in Zimbabwe, *GeoJournal* (2022). [DOI: 10.1007/s10708-021-10566-4](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10708-021-10566-4)

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Policies must reflect why Zimbabwe's small tobacco farmers use trees for firewood (2022, April 18) retrieved 7 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2022-04-policies-zimbabwe-small-tobacco-farmers.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.