

Improving disaster risk reduction capacity of District Civil Protection Units in managing veld fires: A case of Mangwe District in Matabeleland South Province, Zimbabwe

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This article analysed disaster risk reduction capacity of District Civil Protection Units (DCPUs) in managing veld fires in Mangwe District of Matabeleland South Province, Zimbabwe. Veld fires have resulted in unnecessary material, environmental and economic losses. Communities' livelihoods and property have been destroyed, and the natural environment depleted. The research sought to improve disaster risk reduction capacity of DCPUs in managing veld fires, through new intervention strategies and a new model. The objectives of the study were to investigate the main causes of veld fires; to analyse their impacts; to examine the effectiveness of the current intervention strategies; and to identify challenges in implementing these interventions. Furthermore, the study sought to recommend new possible intervention strategies. This mainly qualitative study employed self-administered questionnaires, interviews and focus-group discussions. Questionnaires were used to investigate members of the DCPU's ideas, views and experiences, interviews solicited perceptions of community leaders and their subjects, whilst focus-group discussions assisted with information from members of the District Civil Protection Planning Committee. Veld fires in the district are mainly caused by human activities, and they are prevalent during the months of September and October. They affect livelihoods and the natural environment the most. This study found that DCPUs are not prepared to manage veld fires and therefore recommended new strategies and adoption of the community-based disaster risk reduction model. The new strategies include involving community leaders and members of the communities in DCPUs; regular training and workshops to members of DCPUs on veld fire management; creation of fire protection associations; regular campaigns and rehearsal of emergency drills by the DCPU personnel; the introduction of competitions and incentives in veld fire management; vigorous public education on the erection of proper fireguards around homes, cattle pens, crop fields and vegetable gardens; and the imposition of stiffer penalties for carelessly or deliberately causing veld fires. Policy-makers, governments and stakeholders would benefit from the new intervention strategies. The community-based disaster risk reduction model would benefit researchers and disaster risk reduction practitioners.

Introduction

Disaster risk reduction capacity entails measures employed to deal with any hazard, and veld fires are no exception. Veld fires are increasingly occurring on a regular basis in Mangwe District in Matabeleland South Province in Zimbabwe. The district shares its boundary with the Republic of Botswana in the west, Matobo district in the east and Bulilima district in the north (Figure 1). Its population is estimated at 66 218 based on the 2012 census (Zimstat 2012).

Most of the veld fires in Mangwe District are seemingly caused by human activities, such as uncontrolled and indiscriminate burning of vegetation and by sparks emanating from passing trains. As observed by Mkhwananzi (2007), human beings have contributed to most of the veld fires, and it is believed that they are responsible for 95% of all forest and veld fires. Nkomo and Sassi (2009) also note that veld fires outbreaks in southern Africa have resulted mainly from human activities such as land clearing, hunting, pasture management and crop production. During land clearing activities, some farmers start destructive fires, which have had negative effects by damaging the environment. Veld fires are therefore an environmental problem, with human activity at the epicentre. In addition, people's wealth, such as livestock, crops, pastures, wild fruit and game, are put in jeopardy by devastating veld fires. Veld fires in Zimbabwe destroyed 950 905 hectares of farming land in 2009; 1 152 413 in 2010; 713 770 in 2011 and 1 320 325 in 2012 (Environmental Management Agency [EMA] 2011), thereby threatening food security of