INTRODUCTION
The interconnectedness of biodiversity and sustainable livelihoods for many societies around the world is constructed by the complexities of vulnerability and resilience. Society is faced by a plethora of challenges that include poverty reduction, health improvement, conflict resolution, biodiversity protection, retaining cultural diversity and achieving sustainable livelihoods. By understanding the interface of livelihoods and biodiversity, we can holistically assess the vulnerability of livelihoods and how this can be reduced through improved policy capacity, awareness of the need to conserve and preserving biodiversity. This includes securing income for people in marginalized rural areas. In South Africa, the importance of understanding this interface is all the more critical due to the high premium placed on agriculture and resource utilization for socio-economic development.

BACKGROUND
The European Union funded LiveDiverse project is a three year multi-country, multi-partner project that focuses on the interface between livelihoods and biodiversity. The project team engages people in rural communities who live in or close to a biodiversity “hotspot” to produce knowledge that will contribute to improving and assessing value based strategies that promote sustainable livelihoods and the protection and preservation of ecosystems. The Vhembe District in South Africa, as part of the Greater Kruger Area, is one of project’s four case study areas.

EMPLOYING A MULTIDISCIPLINARY AND PARTICIPATORY METHODOLOGY
The CSIR team selected five villages, namely Thondoni, Beleni, Thabzvane, Mashelelo and Muthithe, in the Vhembe District Municipal Area as case study sites. The multidisciplinary approach included household surveys, interviews, group interviews and focus group discussions to understand livelihoods and the protection and preservation of ecosystems. The Vhembe District in South Africa, as part of the Greater Kruger Area, is one of project’s four case study areas.

Preliminary findings
Preliminary findings indicate that in conditions of wide-ranging poverty and unemployment with hardly any infrastructure in place, communities members rely heavily on agriculture and livestock. Support from traditional leadership or government structures for agricultural activities seems to be limited. People rely on individual and community resources, particularly when dealing with natural disasters such as floods and droughts.

Another finding is that the VhaVenda culture is changing rapidly as Western ways of life are penetrating rural Limpopo. Despite the fact that certain elements of VhaVenda culture, such as the oral transmission of legends and beliefs, are suffering, others remain strong. For example, the belief that outsiders have the sacred VhaVenda site, Lake Fundudzi is still widely held.

Despite the considerable socio-economic challenges many VhaVenda villages face in their day-to-day survival, a number of them want to change things for the better. Examples include revising the arts of woodcarving, traditional dancing and needlework, and constructing an open-air museum or cultural village that showcases VhaVenda culture.

WAY FORWARD
The connection between biodiversity and sustainable livelihoods rests on the utility of natural resources for daily life. Because of their dependence on critical resources such as adequate water supply for agriculture, communities are often vulnerable to drought and flooding. The degree to which communities in the Vhembe district have been able to overcome socio-economic challenges is closely linked to the legitimacy of traditional leadership, support of local government, as well as the ability to reconcile more traditional ways of living with the ever-infiltrating Western and urban lifestyle. Poverty alleviation and sustainable development efforts need to consider the complexity of the institutional and political landscape that governs communities to understand the power relations and dualities at play.

The LiveDiverse project is currently in its second of three years. Data analysis will be followed by bringing together the combined knowledge from the four different countries into a cohesive whole. This will facilitate an understanding of how the vulnerability of livelihoods can be reduced, especially in rural areas, while conserving biodiversity and improving livelihoods for people in these areas. While engagements with communities in the four countries continue, efforts are being made to understand the legal and policy frameworks around biodiversity conservation and how to overcome barriers to implementation. Members of the research team are also building relationships with relevant government departments to promote the uptake of the community-friendly policy recommendations that the project is aiming to produce and to discuss a way forward. During the last six months of the project, the team will provide feedback to the stakeholders and communities who were so generous in giving their time and knowledge to help meet the objectives of the LiveDiverse project.

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The European Union’s LiveDiverse project – interplay between livelihoods and biodiversity in the South African case study area

NI FUNKE, I JACOBS, K NORTJE, M CLAASSEN AND M STEYN
CSIR Natural Resources and Environment, PO Box 935, Pretoria, 0001, South Africa

Email: nfunke@csir.co.za – www.csir.co.za

Local woodcarver from Mashelelo village at his stall at a serving spoon for stirring pap (porridge)

Empowering a multidisciplinary and participatory methodology
The CSIR team selected five villages, namely Thondoni, Beleni, Thabzvane, Mashelelo and Muthithe, in the Vhembe District Municipal Area as case study sites. The multidisciplinary approach included household surveys, interviews, group interviews and focus group discussions to understand livelihoods and biodiversity. Effective engagement with traditional leaders and community members was identified as key for providing governance and traditional leadership, natural disasters and the management of biodiversity. Effective issues were explored: spiritual beliefs, history, socio-economic context and livelihoods, medicine, perceptions, attitudes and values relating to sustainable livelihoods and biodiversity. The following household surveys, interviews, group interviews and focus group discussions to understand beliefs, the Greater Kruger Area, is one of project’s four case study areas.

 livestrong.org

The LiveDiverse project components and their interactions

Livhuwani Dzivhani (wearing the yellow shirt), an interpreter on the CSIR team, points and explains while translating an interview question from English into Tshivenda.