

An Analysis of Nyaradzo Funeral Service's Tree Planting Programmes in Rural and Urban Areas: Insights from Zvishavane Urban and Chivi Rural Communities

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Abstract

The study sought to establish the perceptions of communities on tree donations, with specific reference to Zvishavane urban and Chivi rural areas. Through interviewing a sample of 60 households in Zvishavane Urban District and Chivi Rural District communities, this study analysed Nyaradzo Funeral Services' (Friends of the environment-FOTE) tree planting programme. The study contends that despite the negative belief associated with tree planting by the deceased families, the practice is now being overwhelmingly endorsed by both rural and urban communities. Results from the study indicate that apart from the Environmental Agency of Zimbabwe (EMA), the FOTE Programme by Nyaradzo Funeral Services (NFS) has probably become the single largest private sector player in environmental issues and that NFS often give a tree to bereaved families as a symbolic gesture of condolence and remembrance. The study also established that NFS's tree planting gesture is overwhelmingly positive. Many people in Zimbabwe view it as a thoughtful and meaningful way to honour the deceased, while also contributing to the wellbeing of the environment. Overall, the gesture is seen as a beautiful way to celebrate the life of the deceased while also giving back to the community and protecting the environment. In light of these findings the study recommends the expanding of tree species to cater for different environmental conditions and cultural preferences, community engagement to foster ownership and ensure long term sustainability. The study further recommends for the development of a system to regularly monitor and maintain the trees to ensure their health and survival.

Keywords: Nyaradzo Funeral Services, Friends of the environment, corporate social responsibility, tree planting programme, rural and urban communities

1. Introduction

In an attempt to gauge the perceptions of communities on tree donations by Nyaradzo Funeral Services (NFS) that come with each funeral, this study interviewed 60 households in Chivi about NFS's Friends of the environment (FOTE) program. The FOTE initiative focuses on setting up tree seedling nurseries and donating these for planting at funerals of its clients and their beneficiaries. FOTE consists of environmentally like-minded individuals and corporate entities championing the re-greening of Zimbabwe through tree planting. The initiative was pioneered in 2010 when NFS started planting a tree with every burial it undertook. FOTE is thus part of NFS' corporate social responsibility (CSR). In the process, the study assessed the impact of the programme in environment management in the district in order to suggest alternative CSR strategies informed by beneficiaries' contribution as well as indigenous knowledge systems.

Friends of the Environment was born out of this need and like-minded companies were mobilized to join and today there are many companies that are partners to NFS. The companies are OK Zimbabwe, Stanbic Bank Zimbabwe, Old Mutual Zimbabwe, Seed Co Limited, EMA, Zimplats, WWF, Tanganda Tea Company Limited, Innscor, Freight World, Standard Chartered, Pacific, ZB financial Holdings, Forestry Commission, Bain, Grand Thornton Astra Industries, Fossil Contracting and many others.

FOTE has three main objectives: firstly, to create awareness about tree planting. The second objective is to establish nurseries and the third is to plant trees.

In 2016, Friends of the Environment set themselves a target to plant 500 million trees by 2026. One thing led to another, and they soon realised that for this target to be a reality, they needed to put up their own nurseries from where they would get seedlings for the trees and a target of 100 nurseries was also set for 2026.

The key idea behind CSR is for corporations to pursue other pro-social objectives, in addition to

maximizing profits. CSR is geared towards sustainable socio-economic development. As Kotler and Lee (2005:2) note, "corporate social responsibility is a commitment to improve community well-being through discretionary business practices and contributions of corporate services". The discretionary in the above definition is not referring to activities that are mandated by law or that are moral or ethical in nature and perhaps therefore expected. Kotler and Lee (2005: 2) aver, "Rather we are referring to a voluntary commitment a business makes in choosing and implementing these practices and making these contributions". In other words, corporations' obligations go beyond the stockholders, that is, shareholders. Companies must not only focus on the core business of making money for the shareholder but must also consider the environment in which they operate. It is also clear from the definitions above that CSR can also aid the marketing function of an organization as it assists in brand development.

Furthermore, CSR is not a once-off thing; it is a commitment which means that it is long term. The focus of this current work is the 'NFS's FOTE programme' that was launched in 2010 and has thus been in motion for over a decade. The intention of the study therefore is twofold; firstly, it aims to interrogate the nexus between CSR (a western business concept) by NFS and death — a phenomenon that is contextual in as much as it is universal. Death is universal in the sense that it happens to everyone anywhere in the world but contextual in the sense that various communities have different beliefs about death. Similarly, different communities and players have different roles or rites they perform during bereavement periods. Tree-planting was certainly not one of the rites performed by Zimbabwean communities during a burial ceremony in general and where it was and is performed, for example amongst the Danda people located on the border of Zimbabwe and Mozambique (in Chipinge Rural District), it is a spiritual thing. Superstition has it that the Danda people plant a tree on the grave of a slain relative and when that tree starts growing and shedding off leaves, relatives of the

murderer(s) die each time a leaf falls. In this study therefore, the researchers sought to interrogate the views of the communities and NFS's marketing and communications staff on this programme. Secondly the study seeks to suggest alternative public relations (PR) strategies tailor-made for corporate entities in the global south, particularly Zimbabwe.

2. Background to the Study

An article in an The Herald newspaper of the 13th of May in 2010 in the Midlands State University Library about a successful inaugural walkathon that year which saw people walking from Gweru to Harare, a distance of approximately 280kilometres ignited the researchers' interest to embark on this study. The walk advocated for environmental protection in the country through tree planting. Unfortunately, that walkathon did not realize a sufficient supply of tree saplings to meet the huge demand created by the environmental awareness campaign.

Since then, environmental management in Zimbabwe has taken a centre stage in contemporary efforts to mitigate ecological challenges posed by human beings' activities on the environment. This has led some organisations in the country to embark on programmes aimed at minimising and or compensating for environmental damage. This is in line Dahlsrud (2006)'s five dimensions of CSR which is "a cleaner environment, environmental stewardship and environmental concerns in business operations." In some cases, these programmes have been legislative as is the case with the Environmental Management Act (Chapter 21:05) and other statutory instruments that prescribe what organisations are supposed to do in order to mitigate environmental damages they cause in pursuit of their business objectives. In some cases, the environmental management programmes are a result of some organisations' own initiatives through their corporate social responsibility (CSR) as is the case with Nyaradzo Funeral Services' Friends of the environment programme.

While globally, deforestation has turned out to be one of the chief ecological tragedies of modern times, in Zimbabwe it is not an exception. Regrettably, it continues at an even more alarming rate fuelled by the global demand for timber, paper, land preparation for agriculture, veld fires and energy requirements.

Deforestation is considered the second leading contributor to carbon emissions worldwide after the burning of fossil fuels. As forests disappear, so too does wildlife, flora and fauna, aquatic life and river eco-systems. Forests serve as value stores for biological diversity, balance of ecosystems and as stabilizers of the global climate.

Unfortunately, our forests are depleting much faster than nature can replenish on its own including current reforestation efforts. According to the Forestry Commission report (2015) in Zimbabwe alone, 330 000 hectares of forests are destroyed annually. At this rate our forests will be completely wiped out in 52 years. It is a sobering statistic and quite mind numbing. Much of our rural landscape lies desolate. Our country is faced with a creeping desert. It will never be able to solve the climate change crisis without seriously engaging in reforestation while at the same time stopping deforestation. Furthermore, the scourge of deforestation is not only restricted to Zimbabwe alone, but is affecting the whole SADC region. It is hoped that suggestions offered to NFS' FOTE project will usher a green revolution as well as an inclusive corporate social responsibility attitude in Zimbabwe in particular and globally in general.

3. Research Methodology

The study is premised on both secondary and primary data. Secondary data involved reviewing empirical findings on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in other parts of the world and Zimbabwe in particular. Primary data was collected from a sample of 60 key informants from both rural and urban communities of Chivi Rural District and Zvishavane Urban. These informants included a Nyaradzo Funeral Services official of the Zvishavane Branch, community leaders (both elected and traditional, including leaders of faith-based organisations) as well as ordinary members of the specified communities.

The study was carried out in three phases namely: i) the first phase involved the review of literature on corporate social responsibility in general and in Zimbabwe in particular, ii) the second phase involved a preliminary visit to Zvishavane Urban and Chivi Rural districts. In Zvishavane two councilors and twenty-eight residents from Mandava and Maglas high density suburbs were interviewed and the same

numbers of informants in Chivi from around Nyanningwe Growth Point. The preliminary visit was aimed at sensitizing the key informants of purpose of the study. Subsequent trips were dedicated to information gathering from key informants. The researchers used interview guides, observation, focus group discussions as well as narrative cases of specific incidences/experience. The information was captured in both audio and video forms. Analysis of all qualitative data was done using thematic content analysis.

4. Research Findings

A major finding of the study was that apart from the Environmental Agency of Zimbabwe (EMA), the FOTE Programme by NFS has probably become the single largest private sector player in environmental issues. The Chief Executive Officer of NFS pointed out:

“As management we realised that the company uses timber but there was need to manufacture products sustainably hence the establishment of the FOTE Secretariat given the amount of work to be done. Since then, Nyaradzo started issuing out a tree to plant for every burial or funeral.” (Telephone interview with NFS Chief Executive Officer on 30 April 2024).

The above quote portrays the concern that NFS has for degradation of the environment through replenishing the cut timber by growing more trees which augurs well with Smith (2011:59) that the “environmental degradation caused by humans as a result of our over-utilization of resources cannot persist.” In support of the interview above, the NFS Group Financial Director further pointed out the company’s humble beginnings as a responsible corporate citizen:

Nyaradzo Funeral Services became pro-active in environmental issues when it acquired ‘Kalundike’-an entity that was into the manufacturing of caskets in 2003. Kalundike further expanded into the manufacturing of office furniture, kitchen units and bedroom suites for export. It is then that the idea of planting trees came about followed by the formation of Friends of the Environment in July 2010.

Anything made from timber means cutting down trees and if this is done on a large scale, there is need for afforestation. This is what led Nyaradzo to embark on this tree planting

exercise. This concurs with the argument by Edelman (2011) that profit, and purpose of a cooperation must benefit society. According to Moyo (2018), a 66-year-old widow who received these trees from Nyaradzo was quoted saying:

“People from Nyaradzo told me they were sorry I had lost my firstborn son, saying they were also sorry that his death dented the environment as they would bury him in a coffin carved from a tree and therefore they had to replace the tree.”

She was given an avocado tree. Moyo (2018) goes on to state that the distribution of free seedlings and promoting planting in cemeteries as well as homes is a way “to help restore a parched country- and offset their own use of timber.” The issuing of a tree saplings for planting by NFS to bereaved families is perceived differently by the beneficiary families. The responses were quite varied across the urban- rural divide. There were those who appreciated the programme and those who were sceptical of the programme.

4.1 Beneficiaries’ Perceptions of the Programme

Perceptions to the program were quite varied across gender, age, qualification as well as geographical location of the respondents. The responses transcended from those who were adequately informed about the program and those who were not. Those who appreciated the programme were predominantly urbanites. They indicated online and printed media as their sources of information about the FOTE program. On the other hand, those rural respondents who indicated scepticism was due to lack of information as to the motive behind the program. The responses from the key informants from across the urban and rural divide can be categorised into those who viewed NFS’s tree planting program as an honour and tribute to the deceased, those who literary saw it as a way of making people plant trees as well those who were sceptically superstitious of the programme.

a) Honour and tribute to the deceased

The majority of the respondents viewed the tree planting gesture as a beautiful way to honour the person who has passed away and create a lasting tribute to the life of the deceased. These respondents spanned across both gender and across both rural and urban environs. These respondents were able to articulate the symbolism of tree planting to the deceased

person.

b) A strategy of making people plant trees

Quite a sizable number of the respondents literary took the tree planting gesture as a way of encouraging people to plant trees. Of this number, the majority were from the rural community and were mostly elderly people.

c) Sceptically superstitious

Some respondents showed scepticism about the reason why trees are planted in honour of a loved one who would have passed on. Bulawayo 24 (2014) wrote, "Scepticism is emerging around the Nyaradzo Funeral Services' Tree of Remembrance initiatives." The nomenclature portrays that the purpose of planting trees is for remembering the dearly departed. In addition, the news channel went on to note that superstitious people have started raising concerns at the distribution of these trees. This research also noted that some interviewed people took this practice as culturally improper. One respondent said:

Ini hangu ndakanzwa kuti pane mhando yemuti unosimwa paguva remufi kana akapondwa or kufa zvisina tsananguro kuitira kuti apfuke. Handizivi kuti hazvisiri izvo zviri kuitwa neNyaradzo nemiti yavo iyi. (I have heard of a special type of a tree grown on the grave of the deceased if he or she was murdered or died due mysterious circumstances so that he or she avenges her death. I don't know if this Nyaradzo tree is not meant for the same purpose.)

This quote is double barrelled in the sense that the respondent is questioning the type of tree as well as worried about why the tree is planted if not for the purpose of avenging. This means that there is no need to plant the tree if the dead's demise is not shrouded in suspicion. Reiterating this line of thinking, an elder from a church said:

Muti uyu ini hangu handisati ndamboona paunodzvarwa. Vanhu vanoignowa nekuti muchivanhu muti unodzvarwa paguva pemunhu afa zvisinganzwisiki kuti atsivive. Ndounonzi Mumvuko but handizivi muti wacho chaiwo. Saka pachivanhu vanhu havavimbani, saka anomudzvara ndiani? (I have never seen where this tree is planted. People ignore planting it because it is believed by the Shona people that a tree is planted on the grave of someone who dies mysteriously so they can avenge. It is called

Mumvuko but I don't know the actual tree. Shona people don't trust each other so who plants the tree?)

The above quotes associate planting of trees for the dead in relation to *ngozi* (avenging spirits). In concurrence, a teacher by profession said:

Miti ye Nyaradzo (These trees) according to them vanoti patinochera guva paya (they say when we dig the grave) we are displacing a number of trees so ivo (they) as way of promoting kudyarwa kwemiti vanoti endai modyara muti (the planting of trees they say we should go and do so) either aside guva (grave) or on top of the grave but generally people are sceptical about the trees coz vamwe vandakanzwa vaiti hanzi panokura muti iwoyo (I heard some people argue that when the tree is growing) or if it happens kudonhedza (to shed) a leaf, panofa munhu (a person dies).

As a result, some of the trees given in good faith are abandoned as the process is regarded as spiritual. It is the belief of some respondents that Nyaradzo is merely trying to boost their business instead of accommodating people's culture. Respondents who harboured these beliefs claimed that if the tree is planted at home, family members die one after the other thereby giving Nyaradzo business.

The research noted that maintenance of the trees is also a problem as one respondent stated:

Kuchengetedzwa kwayo kunonetsa nokuti vanhu kashoma kuenda kuguva kwacho saka pekupedzisira inofa nekuti hapana anoidiridzira. (Maintaining the trees is problematic because people rarely visit the gravesite so eventually the tree dies because no one waters it.)

This then defeats the whole process of replenishing trees cut to make coffins as the beneficiaries are not well educated on the importance of taking care of these trees.

4.2 Types of Trees Given for Planting

Informants indicated receiving fruit trees and non-fruit trees. In some cases, some highlighted that some of these trees were either indigenous or exotic as indicated by one respondent:

Nyaradzo Funeral Assurance Company provides avocado and mango tree seedlings to grieving families. Other types of trees planted by the company include gum trees and pine trees.

The gum tree type was confirmed by a Chronicle correspondent (2014) who wrote, "Nyaradzo were giving gum trees to those who were going to bury their relatives." This resulted in trees being planted in some areas where climatic conditions were not suitable for particular species leading to the loss of donated saplings.

4.3 Beneficiary Involvement in the Programme

The FOTE programme as indicated earlier on was the brainchild of Nyaradzo Funeral Services which was presented to communities for their buy in. As highlighted above some trees are being planted in harsh climatic conditions resulting in the loss of such saplings before maturity.

4.4 Implementation of the FOTE Programme

Results indicated that bereaved families were only given a tree sapling upon leaving the funeral parlour. The beneficiary is not consulted on the type of tree they prefer whether exotic or indigenous or fruit tree or non-fruit tree. Neither are the climatic conditions of the geographic location of the beneficiaries considered. The only thing that matters to NFS is giving the bereaved family a tree. Where the tree is going to be planted and how the tree is going to be for the beneficiaries to decide. It was noted that some respondents believe that the tree is planted at the gravesite and as it grows, it represents the enduring memory and spirit of the deceased. Asked where these trees should be actually planted, the general consensus was that the given tree can be buried anywhere. However, one respondent raised a different view:

Muti uyu unogona kudyarwa payard kana kuri kumusha woita mumvuri. Ndozvandakanzwaavo pandakaupiwa wamai vangu. Hanzi makazorora pasi pawo muchirangarira gore ramakaradzika hama yenyu. Ende ukatarisa muti uya ishrub hombe rinokura kuita muti rinowedzera kunaka pamusha. (That tree can be planted in the yard if it's in the rural areas for shade. That's what I heard when they gave me the tree when my mother passed on. They said you reminisce about your relative as you rest in the shade. And the tree is a big shrub that grows into a tree that adds beauty to the home.)

Some people took the trees from Nyaradzo and actually take care of them.

4.5 Monitoring and Implementation of the FOTE

Program

NFS has no monitoring and evaluation frameworks for its programme. No follow up is done or made to see that the tree saplings are used for intended purposes. In some cases, these tree donations are forgotten at funeral parlours as the burial entourages leave for the burial sites. An interviewed mother had this to say:

Due to the confusion and pain I experienced during the bereavement, I forgot the tree at the funeral parlour! Noone reminded me about it and even NFS did not follow with the tree.

Because people would not be aware that they should be given a tree, some do not even ask about it. Others forget as they would be preoccupied with travelling arrangements. The findings also established that the donated saplings in some cases are forgotten after the burial and left to wilt in the sun.

5. Conclusions

The findings of this study underscore the evolving relationship between cultural beliefs, environmental conservation, and community-driven sustainability efforts. Despite deep-rooted traditional perceptions associating tree planting with misfortune, there is a notable shift toward widespread acceptance of the practice, facilitated by environmental education, community engagement, and economic considerations. The Nyaradzo Funeral Services (FOTE) initiative has not only redefined funeral rituals but has also positioned itself as a leading private-sector force in Zimbabwe's afforestation efforts. However, for the program to reach its full potential, targeted interventions must be implemented to address ecological suitability, cultural sensitivities, and long-term sustainability of planted trees.

Based on the above findings, we can safely conclude that funeral homes like Nyaradzo often give a tree to bereaved families as a symbolic gesture of condolence and remembrance. This tradition is rooted in the following reasons.

- **Symbolism:** Trees represent life, strength and resilience which can comfort grieving families. They also symbolise the cycle of life, reminding us that life goes on even in the face of death.

- **Memory and remembrance:** Planting a tree serves as a living memorial to the deceased, allowing the family to honour their loved one's memory and legacy.
- **Growth and renewal:** As the tree grows, it represents the family's ability to heal, grow, and move forward despite their loss.
- **Nature's beauty:** Trees bring beauty and serenity to the surroundings, providing a peaceful reminder of the loved ones' presence.
- **Environmental significance:** Planting a tree contributes to the environment, symbolizing the continuation of life and the family's commitment to the future.

By giving a tree to plant, Nyaradzo Funeral Services offers a thoughtful gesture that helps families cope with their loss and creates a lasting tribute to their loved ones. NFS's tree planting gesture is overwhelmingly positive and has been received by both rural and urban communities. Many people in Zimbabwe view it as a thoughtful and meaningful way to honour the deceased, while also contributing to the wellbeing of the environment. D'Amato et al (2009:1) contends, "Organisations are being called upon to take responsibility for the ways their operations impact societies and the natural environment." Overall, the gesture is seen as a beautiful way to celebrate the life of the deceased while also giving back to the community and the environment.

The following are key takeaways from the study.

- 1) **Cultural Shifts in Funeral Practices** — The study highlights how traditional beliefs surrounding tree planting are evolving, with increasing acceptance due to awareness and changing economic realities.
- 2) **Environmental and Economic Benefits** — Afforestation initiatives tied to funeral services provide both ecological advantages and cost-effective alternatives to conventional grave markers.
- 3) **Role of Awareness Campaigns** — Community education plays a pivotal role in shaping perceptions and fostering greater participation in environmental initiatives.
- 4) **Need for Species Diversification** — Expanding the variety of tree species ensures ecological resilience and accommodates cultural preferences.
- 5) **Community Involvement for Sustainability** — Active participation from local leaders, religious figures, and environmental agencies is crucial for the long-term success of tree-planting initiatives.
- 6) **Importance of a Monitoring System** — Establishing structured maintenance programs ensure tree survival, enhancing the overall impact of the initiative.

6. Recommendations

From the above findings and conclusions, the following recommendations may enhance FOTE's environmental impact, community engagement, cultural significance and making it more meaningful and sustainable.

- **Expanding tree species:** NFS should consider offering a variety of tree species to cater for different environmental conditions and cultural preferences.
- **Community engagement:** NFS should involve local communities in tree planting and maintenance to foster ownership and ensure long term sustainability.
- **Education and awareness:** NFS should also provide workshops or materials to educate families and communities about the environmental benefits and significance of the trees.
- **Maintenance and monitoring:** A system to regularly monitor and maintain the trees should be developed to ensure their health and survival.
- **Collaborate with other environmental organisations:** NFS should partner with other local environmental groups to amplify FOTE's impact and leverage expertise.
- **Digital tracking and mapping:** A digital tracking and mapping platform should be developed to track and map the trees allowing the families to locate and monitor their loved ones' trees.
- **Involve the youth:** NFS should involve or engage the youth in tree planting and

maintenance, teaching them about environmental stewardship and cultural heritage.

- **Scaling up:** NFS should explore opportunities to expand the tree planting program to other regions or countries, sharing best practices and adapting to local conditions.

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