

The Weir (Dam Conservation) Project Report

BACKGROUND

For years the people of Bedza and neighboring communities in Buhera endured years of agricultural uncertainty. With global warming and climate change making rainfall unpredictable droughts and years of food insecurity became frequent. As a result, humans and animals suffered a lot. People especially children of school-going age had to drive their livestock long distances in search of water and the long drives left the animals tired and worse off. In the droughts of 1983, 1992, 2008 and 2014 the community lost about $\frac{3}{4}$ of their livestock. The problem was made worse by the fact that the community streams had no pools to hold water when it rains. So all the rain water flowed down stream leaving no water at all for cattle, sheep, and goats to drink. In a community where people used cattle to till their land this had a disastrous effect and the result was the community was now subjected to perennial food shortages and had to depend on donor aid for food and thereby lost their food sovereignty.

SOLUTION

The solution to these problems was to have water throughout the year, but how were we going to do it if our streams didn't have pools that hold water through the dry season? The answer to the problem was to build a weir or what some call a gravity retention wall. It is a wall that is built across a river channel to collect water flowing in the river, to put it

simpler, it is a small concrete and masonry dam. However, with the villagers being so poor and with the country in the middle of one of the worst famines, there was just no way we could raise funds needed to build the weir. People were struggling to get food to survive.

Kulanu has been working with the Lemba Jews in Zimbabwe since 2010, and with the Harare Lemba Synagogue since its inception in 2013. When the members of the HLS faced starvation in 2016, Kulanu came to our aid. Now with Kulanu's guidance we are proactively trying to protect ourselves from future catastrophes.

It is for that reason that with the help of [Kulanu](#) we applied for a grant from the 2016-2017 Marin/San Francisco and North Peninsula Jewish Teen Foundations of the San Francisco Jewish Federation. The people were so positive and hopeful that we were going to get the grant that they started gathering rocks from the hills and mountains by hand and placing them at the building site.

A committee was elected and the villagers organized themselves into teams and each team had a day that was allocated to them to report to work. This allowed the villagers to work at their fields as well as at the weir project. At first some people were skeptical that anything was really going to come out of it: however, when we finally got the grant, people started to really believe that this was a serious project and the project was nicknamed "*sekutamba sekuseka*" in Shona. Loosely translated the nickname means something that started small; like a joke but later became a life changing project.

When the building material arrived, more and more people started to report to work. Initially only two villages were involved, Zvakavapano and Maeresera villages, but later on other neighboring villages came to

help with the work to make them a total of 5 villages. The 3 other villages that joined were Charuka, Mangezi and Makonya villages. What started as a project for the Lemba Jewish community grew to become a project for many villages with many people of different religious, tribal, social, and political affiliations. The coexistence and cooperation displayed by the communities in a country where people are polarized and divided according to religious and political affiliations was nothing short of a miracle. Fresh from a terrible famine, people put their differences aside to confront a common enemy: water shortage. It is for this reason that when we try to quantify the social impact of the grant we got from the Marin/San Francisco and North Peninsula Jewish Teen Foundations, we cannot adequately quantify how much their sponsorship positively affected our community. Suffice it to say the social and economic impact is monumental.

On Wednesday, the 12 of July, I joined the team that was tasked to break rocks to make aggregate stones to be used to make concrete. Mr. Victor Zvakavapano, the gang leader of this team which was commonly known as the Wednesday shift, is the oldest grandson of Zvakavapano, the founding headman of Zvakavapano village. As we used hammers to break rocks the talk naturally drifted to how this project was going to change the people's lives. Some of the people present remembered all the droughts and famines that ravaged our community from 1983 to date.

The community had large heads of cattle and they lost 90 percent of their cattle to droughts, the worst of them being the 1982-83 one. I remembered that one too, my family had more than 60 cattle then. In January in 1983 it just stopped raining, the crops in the fields and the still tender grass in the pastures withered and were blown away by dry

winds. No water had collected in the stream at all. By mid-1983 cattle had started dying of thirst. It was really the lack of water that killed the cattle more than lack of grass. There still were some tree leaves for the cattle to forage; it was water shortage that was a problem. We had to drive our cattle for long distances to a perennial river 15 miles away, the long drives took their toll on the frail animals. Some died on the way, and some could not make the long track back home. Instead we didn't go back home - we stayed with the cattle for 3 to 4 days a week close to the source of water. So many cattle dying meant that hyenas and jackals had a lot of meat to eat and their population grew and it became easy for them to kill the weak and defenseless cattle, and we lost a lot more to these wild animals.

For us little boys having to stay with our cattle close to the river for 3 to 4 days meant that we had to skip school. So one can only imagine how this must have psychologically affected us. We have a habit of naming our cattle, we knew each and every one of them by name, we were fond of them and every cattle we lost left a psychological scar in us. Gilbert Matsimba, another member of the Wednesday shift remembered how his cousin fell ill, and when he went to the clinic the nurses said he was eating too much meat from the dying cattle and no carbohydrates at all. For those who ate the meat from the emaciated animals this became their main food source since there was a severe shortage of grain and other foods.

We had a recurrence of droughts in 1992, 1995, 2008 and 2014-15 and every time, the people were ill prepared to deal with water and food shortages and each of these times cattle and even people died. This weir then became the first time the community made an insurance for themselves and their animals against droughts and famine. This was the

first effective infrastructure that was going to have mitigating effect on droughts and famine. As Mr. Victor Zvakavapano the Wednesday shift gang leader said, “this weir is going to be both a good inspiration and a lesson to ourselves and others that we as human beings don’t need to just sit and wait for rain and hope for the best. Harvesting water for the dry season and drought years is going to give us more control of our lives as well as our environment “

Pikela Marandu is 19 and he only remembers the 2008 and the 2015 droughts. However the two droughts he experienced were enough to convince him he didn’t need to experience anything like that again. “In 2008 people and cattle trekked long distances in search of water and people survived on *chakata* (a wild fruit). We should think beyond just having water for cattle, we can also put fish in the dam”

On Sunday I caught up with the masonry team working at the weir. This team was made up of Lemba Jews, African traditionalists and Muslims, since Christians do not work Sundays. The gang leader, Mr. Lawrence Zvakavapano, is a bricklayer by profession. He said the work he was doing and the time he contributed to this project was the most fulfilling of all the work he had ever done. He called it “hedging ourselves against natural disasters” Also present was Mr. Esmond Zvakavapano, the project chairman, who is brother to mason Mr. Lawrence Zvakavapano. Mr. Esmond, who is also a teacher at a local school, is a respected pillar of the community who is an avid supporter of development projects. He sees this project as a start of many good things to come. “This is a start but doesn’t need to be the end, we can have 3 more weirs in this stream, and we can start a fishery and a vegetable garden. We need to have

something to occupy ourselves with; even in the dry season. Most men for lack of nothing else to do, spend the whole dry season drinking beer and loafing around. Young people even leave the villages for the city, so hopefully if we get something to gainfully occupy ourselves with throughout the year then it will restore our dignity and pride as people”

For Priscah Mutava, a mother of 3 who belonged to the food team whose duty is to cook for the builders, the weir will mean that her kids won't have to skip school to drive the family cattle to the nearest watering hole. “I am happy that my children will find more time to study and just to be children and play like children their age should do.”

Towards the end of the day when the people were about to pack their tools, headman Abisha Zvakavapano came to inspect the work of the day. He said he was happy this was happening during his time. This will be a good legacy for the younger generations. He said to thank Kulanu and the Marin/San Francisco and North Peninsula Jewish Teen Foundations for making this possible.

It is clear the weir is the greatest thing ever to happen in the community, in a country with a depressed economy, political unrest, and general despondency this gave people a big psychological boost. What made it easier was the people's willingness to come together to work in this very difficult project. We however needed to be careful to make each representative of the 5 villages feel they were equally important. To make people feel this was their project we encouraged people to contribute maize meal, chicken and goats for meat, vegetables and other foodstuffs for the working teams.

The project attracted the attention of the Zimbabwe national water authority: a government organization that is responsible for regulating water use as well as water rights. The engineers were amazed by the amount of work the villagers had done and they inspected the wall and made some recommendations on how we can make the wall stronger and safer. Buoyed by this successful project, the community made a commitment to build a second weir in one of the 5 villages that took part in the current project. As I am writing this report the villagers are gathering rocks and material, stocking them at the building site for the second weir

We faced several challenges, the main one being inflation. Prices kept on increasing and we were forced to buy all the equipment as fast as possible before prices increased. The other is we found the prices for the disc harrow and the trailer to be very expensive in Zimbabwe and we had to buy them in South Africa. The dealer promised to deliver the equipment in 3 weeks but now has changed the delivery date to second week of December when he has a load full of equipment to be delivered to Zimbabwe. The delayed delivery meant that people had to carry rocks for the weir using ox drawn scotch carts. We also set up a committee to work to protect the weir from siltation. Siltation is when sand and soil will be deposited into the dam. The committee is working to stop people from cultivating on the stream banks. In some instances the committee faced resistance from people who didn't want to stop ploughing their fields on the banks of the stream. They had to get help from the government environmental agency who threatened to take action on people who violated environmental laws.

Kulanu is helping us fight hunger through emergency food, irrigation, water and soil conservation. With Kulanu's support, we are also

developing a thriving Jewish community in Harare. We welcome visitors, especially for Shabbat services and kosher meals.

Modreck Maeresera

Harare Lemba Synagogue

Harare, Zimbabwe