



Meet Elizabeth

ELIZABETH MPOFU (SHASHE VILLAGE, MASHAVA, ZIMBABWE)

Introducing VSO's regional agroecology programme in Zimbabwe

VSO works with the most marginalised and vulnerable groups to ensure no one is left behind in the development process. **Elizabeth Mpofo is a role model farmer practicing agroecology in Shashe Village, Mashava District in Zimbabwe**, a country where almost 70% of the population relies on agriculture as a source of livelihood.¹

The livelihoods of Elizabeth and millions of other farmers like her are increasingly being threatened by changing climatic conditions, resulting in prolonged droughts and uneven rainfall patterns, as well as economic instability leading to price fluctuations of agricultural produce and low confidence in formal markets for smallholder farmers. Agroecology is widely recognised among academics and development practitioners as a valuable community-based solution to the challenges of climate change and food insecurity. It addresses a multitude of needs, from ability to pay for health services and school fees, to promoting equitable access and sustainable use of resources.

In order to build on the success of its activities in Shashe Village, VSO's regional agroecology programme, which works across three countries (Zimbabwe, Mozambique and Eswatini) with plans to expand to a fourth (Zambia), hopes to improve the livelihoods of rural communities in the most vulnerable areas of the region.

Elizabeth was able to produce around three tonnes of produce, mainly due to her sorghum harvest

VSO's regional cross-border agroecology programme

The regional cross-border agroecology programme within the FCDO-funded Active Citizenship Through Inclusive Volunteering and Empowerment (ACTIVE) programme (2022–25) works across Zimbabwe, Mozambique and Eswatini and is largely focused on livelihoods, with a particularly strong focus on agroecology, climate smart agriculture, disaster risk reduction and youth empowerment.

This story of change is part of a deep dive research study conducted in January to March 2025 by Triple Line. The research study examines the extent to which VSO's agroecology work is effective in generating positive changes for vulnerable rural communities in Zimbabwe and Mozambique. In Zimbabwe, the agroecology programme is implemented in Chimanmani (Manicaland Province) and Mashava Districts (Masvingo Province) and in Mozambique, in Sussundenga District (Manica Province).



Elizabeth poses with one of her awards (Charlotte Maxeke African Women Leadership Awards: Women in Community Service)

Meet Elizabeth Mpofu

Elizabeth is a small holder farmer who has lived in Shashe Village since the early 2000s. The village is in an agroecological zone characterised by low rainfall (less than 650mm annually), uneven topography and poor soils, making it particularly inappropriate for high input crop production. To put food on the table, Elizabeth has turned to agroecology as the solution. She engages in agroecological practices such as small grain harvesting and seed multiplication, small livestock integration

and manure production, as well as aquaculture and water harvesting, amongst others.²

Elizabeth lives with her mother and employs five helpers on her homestead, a land of 16 hectares. She has three fish ponds, one seed bank, and a recently installed biodigester gas stove. The stove was a donation from Co-operation for the Development of Emerging Countries (COSPE) to her and five other families in the village.³ She grows around eight crop types with more than 13 varieties, and produces up to six tonnes of harvest in a good year. During the severe El-Niño-induced drought in 2023–24, she was able to produce around three tonnes of produce, mainly due to her sorghum harvest, an essential small grain seed on her farm. This far exceeded the harvest of other farmers in the village who suffered yield losses and poor harvest two years in a row as a result of their non-drought resistant crop production. **With income from her surplus sale and with help from her daughter who is a police officer in Mashava, Elizabeth is able to regularly pay each of her helpers a monthly sum of \$100.**

A leader in her community, Elizabeth was the first woman coordinator and spokesperson of **La Via Campesina** between 2013–21. This is an international farmers' organisation founded in 1993 by 182 organisations in 81 countries with the goal of advocating for family farm-based sustainable agriculture. In 2017, Elizabeth founded the **African Women's Collaborative**, an

initiative led by rural women from nine countries (Burkina Faso, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ghana, Kenya, Senegal, Swaziland, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe) to promote food sovereignty, healthy food systems, economic justice and human rights. Currently, she is the chairperson of the **Shashe Agroecology School** (part of the La Via Campesina's network of over 40 agroecology schools around the world) and runs her own "centre of excellence" on her homestead, where she hosts international students and farmers from around the country interested to learn more about agroecology. The growth of the school would not have happened without VSO financial support and their encouragement of lead farmers like Elizabeth in running "centres of excellence" which have contributed to an increase in the adoption of agroecological practices in the village and beyond. **There was an increase from 45 farmers in 2022 to 220 farmers in 2024 exhibiting and selling at the seed fair** demonstrating the influence of the school in attracting farmers from the region interested in exchanging learning on agroecology practices.

Elizabeth is committed to promoting the principles of agroecology within her community and beyond, and is often invited to speak at national, regional and international events. **Those who stay in her homestead are welcome to "grab" a book from her library** which she keeps to entertain and educate the guests.



Fish pond on Elizabeth's farm



Seed bank on Elizabeth's farm



A recently installed biodigester

² Seed multiplication is the systematic process of increasing the quantity of quality seeds from an initial batch. Livestock integration involves combining crop and livestock production on the same farm for synergistic benefit. Aquaculture is the farming of aquatic organisms in controlled environments.
³ COPSE is an Italian NGO that promotes sustainable agricultural practices in 30 countries.

Changes since Elizabeth met VSO

The potential of agroecology to address food insecurity in the areas most vulnerable to climate change is promising. The changes it has brought to Elizabeth's life are a small example of what is possible. She has transformed her household, taking control of her and her family's future by **making them more resilient to shocks related to climate and other unpredictable events.**

When VSO came to Shashe Village, they talked extensively with farmers about their needs and how best to work together. VSO was honest in what they could support the community with (e.g. capacity strengthening) and what they could not directly provide (e.g. access to market). Other organisations would often charge community members to participate in training events, an approach VSO avoids by working with community and national volunteers to provide hands-on support to farmers.

"VSO chipped in with [soil] solarisation... [which] encouraged agroecology."

While Elizabeth had been a farmer for years before she met VSO, she benefited profoundly from the trainings and financial support VSO provided, which contributed to an increase in her productivity especially during drought years. This included training on seed harvesting and preservation and establishment of demonstration plots. This allowed her to **improve her living conditions, including being able to**

pay a monthly subscription to have internet access.

"Last year [during the drought] I was happy because of the sorghum (3 tonnes of harvest)...[which] was one of the highest [harvests] in my village."

Because of the recent droughts experienced by farmers in this part of Zimbabwe, crop yields of farmers who did not grow drought resistant crops were poor, leading to widespread malnutrition and school dropouts, as fees could not be met. In contrast, the benefits of agroecology on people's lives in Shashe Village is tangible; farmers who practice agroecology were able to produce a harvest despite the dry conditions in the last two years. **Before VSO came to the area, Elizabeth observes that her neighbours and other villagers, especially the youth, did not see much value in practicing agroecology** due to its labour intensive and time consuming nature. The recent droughts changed things, unintentionally accelerating the shift in community mindsets toward more sustainable farming.

"Because of the drought, people who didn't want to produce small grains saw value in it...others who were doing small grains could sell sorghum to a large number and people wanted to buy it... now more people started [practicing agroecology]."

Empowerment is at the core of VSO's approach to promoting resilient livelihoods. By working to strengthen the agency, voice and decision-making

power of women and youth in particular, VSO hopes to instil a sense of ownership that can guarantee changes are sustained, even when they leave the area.

Elizabeth sees VSO's unique value in successfully engaging with youth, who are often disinterested in farming as an occupation, preferring instead to leave their families and look for a job in the urban areas. In a country, where youth unemployment is pervasive and job opportunities are limited, agroecology presents itself as a sustainable farming approach and livelihood source. VSO, in partnership with the Zimbabwe Smallholder Organic Farmers Forum (ZIMSOFF),⁴ has organised activities such as sports competitions to engage youth while delivering educational messages on community issues such as climate change, gender-based violence and sexual and reproductive health rights.

These activities contributed to an increase in the youth adoption of agroecology practices.

"Two birds with one stone...[we] didn't know how to mobilise youth before...[out of the farmers engaged in agroecology] around 2% were youth, now participating young families [represent] around 15%."

VSO's work in Shashe has demonstrated the power of sports as a tool for youth engagement and community engagement. Nevertheless, social and cultural norms continue to present a barrier for people, especially youth, to adopt agroecology, an area for VSO to focus on going forward.



TV set, sound system and Wi-Fi connection



A library in Elizabeth's homestead

⁴ ZIMSOFF is a national network of 19,000 smallholder farmers who lobby stakeholders on issues affecting farmer livelihoods. There are 320 farmers in Shashe Village, up to 200 of whom are members of ZIMSOFF.

What does the future hold?

With an increasing risk of extreme weather events, it is imperative for people who rely on agriculture as their main source of livelihoods to be cognisant of the effects of climate change on their production. For Elizabeth, this means being aware of the region you live in and the appropriate crops to harvest according to its specific conditions. Zimbabwe has five agroecological zones, each with their own rainfall patterns and soil conditions. Agroecological farming recognises the complexity in our agricultural and food systems.

"Climate change will remain...for us as farmers, our only solution is to practice agroecology."

In order to expand the adoption of agroecology practices in her community and region, Elizabeth sees a need to further mobilise and educate farmers on their benefits. VSO's aspiration is to make farming a business for smallholder farmers but currently, Elizabeth agrees, her surplus is not "well-planned." She uses her harvest mainly to feed her family and livestock, but sees potential in the already established local markets where she and other farmers could sell their produce. This needs to be supported by an enabling policy environment which VSO has helped to shape with their inputs into the development of a national Agroecology Policy, currently awaiting approval by government.

"The implementation of the policy will protect [people who practice agroecology]... then it won't be difficult to establish a market...now there is still competition with existing markets [even though] we know our seeds are healthy."

This will not only require an enabling policy environment that puts a premium on organic produce, but capacity strengthening to support farmers with packaging, processing and labelling; all areas Elizabeth sees as lacking in her community. Agroecology is a movement that is here to stay, working on multiple levels from contributing to better nutrition and food security to protecting the environment. Through its engagement of volunteers and close collaboration with local partners, VSO plays a unique role to support women and youth in reaping the benefits of agroecology for years to come.

Zimbabwe is a complex country and Elizabeth's story is a fragment of what needs to happen. VSO has begun to see an opportunity to transform barren lands into food baskets and a scalable solution that addresses the interrelated problems of crop failure in drought years and livelihoods being put at risk.

VSO recognises they can play a catalysing role in expanding their success in Shashe Village across the country and wider region. However, the biggest achievement will be what communities are able to achieve by themselves: better nutrition, health, and education for themselves and their families, mitigating their risks in farming with better climate adaptation and ultimately leading to reduced poverty.

