



Meet Queen

QUEEN MANJOKWIRO (BIRIRI VILLAGE, CHIMANIMANI, 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. **Queen Manjokwiro is a role model farmer practicing agroecology in Biriri Village, Chimanimani District in Zimbabwe**, a country where almost 70% of the population relies on agriculture as a source of livelihood.¹

The livelihoods of Queen 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 Biriri, 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.

Because of the variety of cropping Queen practices, she can always rely on her produce to put food on the table

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 Chimanimani (Manicaland Province) and Mashava Districts (Masvingo Province) and in Mozambique, in Sussundenga District (Manica Province).



Queen in front of VSO sign on her farm

Meet Queen Manjokwiro

Queen is a small holder farmer who has lived in Chinhuwa Ward 17, Biriri since 2017. Her village is in region three of Chimanimani District, a zone characterised by moderate rainfall (500–750mm annually), mid-season dry spells, and high temperatures, making it an appropriate area to harvest drought-tolerant crops.

Queen lives with her children in her homestead, who all go to school or have a job. One of her sons helps her

on her farm, a land of 3 hectares, where she engages in agroecological practices such as small grain harvesting, small livestock integration and bio-fertiliser production.²

Climate change poses many challenges to smallholder farmers, the effects of which Queen has experienced firsthand. The increasing shortage of water and unpredictability of rainfall patterns as a result of changing climatic conditions have led her to endure multiple harvest losses over the years. Last year, in particular during the El-Niño-induced drought, the community water source dried up. **Queen increased her commitment and belief in the importance of water management**, and has since tried to encourage water conservation across her community. She admits that she still finds it challenging to convince her neighbours to maintain the water source which requires a collective effort to optimise its use.

As is common in any agricultural farming system, Queen's harvest depends on the year's climate. However, because of the variety of cropping she practices, she can always rely on her produce to put food on the table and sell the surplus. **She was unable to specify her yield in measurable terms but one thing is clear, she finds it increasingly difficult to meet customer demand.** Farmers from the village and across the neighbouring wards come to her farm, or she goes to the market, to sell her harvest. She even has returning customers. Queen tells the story of one

farmer she met in Harare who liked the first seed she sold him so much that he requested her to plant a variety of pigeon pea seed and sell it to him once it has been harvested.

Changes since Queen met VSO

When she moved to the area, Queen was introduced to Towards Sustainable Use of Resources Organisation (TSURO) Trust, a community-based organisation that VSO has partnered with, which has worked in Chimanimani District for over twenty years to strengthen the capacity of rural communities. One of her most formative experiences in her years of being a smallholder farmer was the opportunity to join a farmer visit organised by TSURO and VSO to Shashe Village in Masvingo province to meet other smallholder farmers and learn from their practices. While she was used to conducting visits to other wards locally, she never thought there would be the opportunity to visit another District altogether. Despite the geographical distance, Queen learned valuable tips for her agroecology farming in travelling to Mashava District, which is in a similar agroecological zone to her own ward and where she could observe farmers engaging in similar practices.

From the visit, she learned about the importance of establishing a seed bank and the value of water harvesting to preserve rainwater for farming purposes.³ After returning to Biriri, **Queen was inspired to take on**



A community seed bank placed in Queen's farm



A fish pond in Queen's farm



A variety of seeds in the community seedbank

² Livestock integration involves combining crop and livestock production on the same farm for synergistic benefit.

³ A seed bank is a facility to store seeds in low humidity and cold conditions to ensure their viability.

a leadership role in her community by organising a group of friends, smallholder farmers, in creating an informal space where they can share lessons from their own farming practices. The group makes bio-fertiliser together and helps each other with issues that come up in their farming, building a sense of collaboration, unity and support.

Queen attributes her commitment in promoting the benefits of agroecology to other farmers to VSO. On a personal level, **VSO volunteers have helped Queen feel confident that she will be able to feed her family and send her children to school from the income she earns selling her surplus harvest.** Before VSO, she admits, she was only sustaining the immediate needs of her family, without being able to cover the school fees of her children.

"The volunteers with VSO magnified agroecology [in my community]...They are always available...[which is] different than how other organisations work... [farmers] can get assistance any time [from VSO volunteers]."

The biggest "game changers" for Queen were the training VSO facilitated, and the smallholder farmers and customers she was introduced to during her visit to Shashe and at the Regional Agroecology Conference in Harare, contacts she nurtures to this day. At the Conference, which VSO hosted in July 2024, Queen displayed her seeds and met other farmers who have since asked her to plant specific crops for them. Queen

offers an example that the farmers trust her by showcasing a seed (see photo below left) whose sale she has secured even before harvest: **the groundnut will bring her a harvest of 50kg at \$1 per cup, which will provide her with a total sale income of \$150.**

At the Conference, Queen met Elizabeth Mpofu from Shashe, another leader farmer in her community who promotes agroecology as a sustainable farming practice. They exchanged drought-resistant seeds and Queen was able to harvest a new seed, finger millet, on her farm, further diversifying her crop production.

"The regional [agroecology] conference uplifted me...[and] opened a huge market base [for me]."

Apart from the visit to Shashe Village and the Regional Agroecology Conference, Queen credits the training she received from VSO in helping her develop her agroecology farming by "opening doors" for her to discuss issues with the Department of Agricultural, Technical and Extension Services (AGRITEX) extension officers. Her engagement with local government leadership led to her referral and subsequent invitation to two other Districts to train other smallholder farmers on producing bio-fertiliser.

Queen's biggest achievement to date is the partnership she was able to strike with Farm Fresh, a national chain of supermarkets in Zimbabwe. She was recognised by the government for her active leadership role in her community

with AGRITEX extension officers recommending her to Farm Fresh. **She has started producing tomatoes in a greenhouse that she has had to build on her farm, and hopes to receive up to \$12,000 from this contract.**

What does the future hold?

Queen is confident that she will no longer need to seek out market opportunities to secure her livelihoods. The connections she was able to make and nurture through her engagement with VSO will be long lasting.

She continues to go to seed shows in the region (a practice she was encouraged to try by VSO) where she displays traditional seeds and meets potential customers. **She is currently the only farmer in her village who people come to asking to buy seeds or organic pesticides.** The seed bank her community was able to construct on her farm with the support of VSO has allowed her to store seeds and, on multiple occasions, she was able to go back and plant another crop of groundnuts or sunflowers after the original seed was lost due to drought conditions. The need to do that will only increase in the future with changing climatic conditions which are already causing prolonged dry periods and uneven rainfall patterns.

Queen's stronger resilience in facing such shocks also has the potential to uplift the livelihoods of other members in her community. Already, she is able to employ labour from her village to bring her surplus produce down to the



Queen among her groundnut crop



Queen in front of her farm's greenhouse

market, up to 2km walk down a dusty uneven trail. While Queen's harvest allows her to meet demand within her community and existing customer base, she looks forward to expanding her production further.

"The market is not a challenge...people call me [on the phone] from across the whole district...[but] my goal is to expand harvest to sustain my family and meet demand."

The challenges she still faces relate to storage and branding. Queen sees a gap in her knowledge on how best to store seeds and would appreciate further support from VSO or other organisations in helping her upskill herself. She currently does not have access to a shed which she can use to brand the fertilisers and pesticides she produces, which impacts on her ability to expand her sales. She wants to create a recognised brand that she can feel confident selling on the market. This, Queen feels, will also contribute to the spread of the agroecology movement. Currently, fewer than 100 farmers out of 750 in her Ward practice agroecology but she is confident that the practices are spreading, not least because of the current climate conditions which make it challenging for farmers to sustain themselves and their families year on year.⁴

"There are many [agroecology] principles but there is a general acceptance within the community...even with government extension officers because of the economic conditions."

Queen's story is one of commitment and resilience, and an example of the positive changes agroecology can bring to the lives of smallholder farmers if the right support is provided to magnify the spirit and skill that already exists.

VSO recognises the catalytic role they can play in expanding their success with smallholder farmers like Queen across the country and wider region.

The biggest achievement for VSO will be instilling a sense of agency, voice and empowerment in communities so that improvements in farmer livelihoods from the adoption of agroecology practices are sustained even after VSO leaves an area.

⁴ While Queen made an estimate of around 30 farmers who practice agroecology, the AGRITEX government officers provided a figure closer to 100.

