Tilling new turf: Farmer Patricia Lumano is the backbone of a project to fight hunger in her drought-ridden country -- and plant the seeds of self-reliance

Mike Quinn, Special to The Journal
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LIVINGSTONE, Zambia - How Patricia Lumano is unfazed by the excruciating heat is beyond me.

In the two days I've spent with the 57-year-old grandmother, wandering the parched soils of drought-stricken southern Zambia, I have yet to see her take one sip of water.

Meanwhile, my water bottle is empty and the bees swarm around it as if it were a Coke can. I'm so thirsty I'd drink river water and risk the dysentery, but the rivers are all dry. Already sunburnt, I drag my feet in exhaustion.

"I think I need to go back," I tell her. "I might collapse if I don't drink some more water soon."

Lumano looks cool and comfortable in her colourful wraparound skirt, second-hand cotton blouse and a white headscarf. "Your people are not used to the African sun," she laughs.

I have left my home in Calgary on an 18-month contract with Engineers Without Borders, an international charity that sends young engineers abroad to work in developing countries. My challenge is to persuade Zambian farmers to stop growing maize and switch to sorghum, a more drought-resistant crop.

Last season's drought was the worst in a decade and these chronically hungry farmers are more open to the idea that crop diversification may be the key to their survival.

Lumano, a local farmer, is leading the fight against hunger in this rural area of Zambia known as Sikaunzwe. She is also my guide.

A foreign development worker in rural Africa is a lost soul without both a cultural informant and local champion to take ownership of a project. Lumano is my backbone, my motivation and my defence against the heat. When I talk to her, I feel that extraordinary change is not only possible, it might be just around the corner.

It will not be easy.

Memories of failure

We are battling four decades of government policy that promoted maize as the only national crop, creating a cultural preference for it. We are also fighting local discontent over the failure last year of a sorghum project run by CARE International, the non-

governmental organization that Engineers Without Borders has partnered me with in this year's attempt.

Yet there are glimmers of hope.

Lumano has spent her entire life as a subsistence farmer in rural Zambia. When I ask her age, she looks at the sky and ponders for a moment.

"I think 1948," she replies. I calculate that she is 57 years old, 24 years older than the average Zambian, whose life expectancy has declined because of the ongoing HIV/AIDS pandemic.

Despite being a woman in a male-dominated society, she has an extraordinary list of achievements. She is the elected chairwoman of the Area Management Committee, which oversees development projects and the distribution of food relief in Sikaunzwe's three dozen villages. She is vice-chairwoman of the Sikaunzwe Multi-Purpose Co-operative, the local partner in the sorghum project. On top of all that, she is a mother of six and the only wife of an elected politician in the local government.

She takes me to her home village of Zambwe, 90 kilometres from the town of Livingstone and the thundering Victoria Falls. It is typical of rural Africa. Thatched-roof huts made of mud and sticks are clustered amid scattered trees on the cracked farmland.

The signs of drought are everywhere -- empty grain silos, scrawny dogs and a general absence of life. The lack of water has forced most people to migrate with their cattle to the Zambezi River, 20 kilometres away. They will return in the coming weeks when the rains start, missing the crucial early precipitation and relying on fate for a decent harvest in May.

Life is slow and simple, yet those people who have stayed seem busy. Women wash clothes, prepare meals and sweep the dirt in front of their huts to the sound of a singing radio. Chickens wander mischievously before a human hand threatens to smack them away.

Proud of her field

Today's program begins at Lumano's farm, just a stone's throw away from one of Zambia's four paved highways. Her face beams with pride as she shows me her two-hectare field, nearly ready for planting. A mirage forms off the black soil as we race towards the only shade, provided by a lone mukwa tree in the centre of the field.

The heat is nearly audible, as if an electrical power line were overhead. Otherwise, the backdrop is devoid of people, sound and colour. Everything is brown and dead.

"How do you manage to find time to spend in your fields with all your other commitments?" I ask. "I mean, you seem to always be at community meetings and

entertaining visitors like me, yet you are weeks ahead of all the other farmers we have visited."

Most have yet to start clearing the brush from their fields while Lumano is only waiting for the first rain to harness her two oxen to her plough.

"I want to set a good example for other farmers," she replies. "When I go to the farm, I make sure I really work. I start early, at 4:30 a.m., and I also work in the afternoon when others are resting."

We walk across her field to a nearby household where some farmers wait for us under a tree. They are separated along gender lines, with the women sitting on the ground on one side and the men, on plastic lawn chairs, on the other.

I have a prepared presentation on the contract Zambian Breweries has signed with the co-operative to buy 100 tonnes of sorghum for its new Eagle beer. This is a modest amount the co-operative farmers can produce and only a fraction of the total demand.

I speak the local language called Lozi poorly, and the farmers hear only basic English. So Lumano fills in the gaps, speaking elegantly and passionately. There is silence when she speaks.

Women in rural Zambia lead a harsh life. They do the majority of household and farming chores, while carrying babies on their backs and in their bellies. Their voices are usually repressed. But Lumano's rings out loud and clear.

In the early stages of the project, when we were signing up volunteer farmers to participate, a group of men demanded that they be placed on the list to receive free seeds, even though they had consciously ignored the initial sign-up period. Before I had a chance to respond, Lumano jumped in front of me and refused their demand.

"We will not consider you until everyone on the list has received seeds and you prove to us that you are serious farmers," she told them. It wasn't what she said that was groundbreaking; it was the fact they listened to her.

Our biggest challenge becomes apparent with the first question after our presentation. An old, toothless man asks, "Why have we not seen you in the past month?"

I plead with him that the fuel crisis in Zambia has left my motorbike gas tank empty and grounded me in the office in Livingstone. But I can tell he remains skeptical. The lack of trust that plagues Sikaunzwe after broken promises and failed projects could derail everything.

Even with sufficient trust, persuading farmers to grow sorghum is no easy task. Zambians love their maize. It is the sole ingredient in their staple food, nshima, a lumpy porridge made from mixing maize flour with boiling water. My neighbour in Livingstone turned

down a pasta meal I made for the Zambian family I live with because I failed to prepare nshima.

It wasn't always like this. Sorghum was the traditional crop in Sikaunzwe prior to independence in 1964. Kenneth Kaunda, who led the first post-colonial government, wanted to unite Zambia's 73 tribes, so he picked English as the common language and maize as the common crop.

He achieved his goal of unity. Zambia has never experienced a coup or war, unlike most of the neighbouring countries. But he did not achieve food security.

Maize policy stumbles

Farmers abandoned their traditional crops with the dream of becoming rich from maize. The government indulged them by handing out free fertilizer and seeds and setting up a massive, state-run infrastructure to buy and store maize.

Years of economic decline followed. Market liberalization halted the subsidies and climate change reduced rainfall. The result is that farmers can no longer rely on the maize crop and must diversify.

The second question at the village meeting comes from a tough grandmother with a blue headscarf and penetrating eyes. "What you say today will be different tomorrow," she says. "CARE will cheat us."

The grandmother is rightfully concerned. Last year, these farmers were involved in a project that failed because they couldn't sell the sorghum they produced. Farmers were encouraged to grow before a guaranteed market was secured. When a buyer was found, the price was low and most of the sorghum was rejected because of poor quality.

The co-operative was also bypassed in favour of an informal farmer's association that was not properly trained in quality control and accountability. Farmers grew angry when they weren't paid. Accusations of corruption circulated within the farmer's association. One of its leaders was even jailed for a week.

Lumano confidently steps forward and offers motherly assurance. She explains how the co-operative, not CARE, will buy the sorghum from the farmers and that I have come to help them become more self-sufficient and no longer reliant on food relief. She does her best to convince them that the price of sorghum is guaranteed in a contract and that CARE will be providing free, early-maturing seeds and training in cultivation.

I follow up with a personal promise of honesty and stress that it is each farmer's choice whether to participate in this project. We will not force anyone to grow sorghum, but whoever does will have a guaranteed buyer.

I thank the tough grandmother for her question using my primitive grasp of Lozi. Laughter breaks out, followed by applause. It appears our message is heard.

After the presentation, we walk another kilometre to the village of Bbilibisi to see Geoffrey Nawa, a farmer who Lumano says is important to the project because he sees the potential for sorghum.

Nawa greets us and fetches plastic lawn chairs so we can sit in the shade next to his mud hut. His wife snatches an unlucky chicken and leaves us to prepare a meal.

I'm not sure what to think of Nawa. His eyes are bloodshot and his breath smells strongly of alcohol. He continues to drink the opaque, local beer during our meeting. But he surprises me with his insightful comments about the culture of dependency in rural Zambia.

"If you give me an airplane for free then I'm going to accept it, but this doesn't mean I want it or know how to manage it," he offers, referring to the development industry's tendency to solve complex problems with simple technological handouts. "What I really need is a bicycle because I know it costs 20 pin (20,000 kwacha or $5) for a tire and I know how to repair it. But if you give me an airplane I won't refuse."

He says our project is a bicycle, because we're giving him free seeds and as a farmer he knows what to do with them. He has seen how well sorghum grows in Sikaunzwe. And he's eager to make the switch, after a disastrous harvest in which he did not get even a single cob of corn. It seems he and many other farmers are willing to give sorghum a chance, despite the failure of last year's program.

We won't know for some time whether our program has worked. This year's growing season stretches into April. And I've been told by more experienced colleagues at CARE that it will take three consecutive years of success before the local farmers will be convinced to diversify from the traditional maize crop.

In the meantime, Lumano and I are working with the farmers to ensure they meet the requirements demanded by Zambian Breweries. I am also teaching simple business skills to Lumano and the co-operative executive so they can market their own crops without outside help. Our aim is to give the farmers in Sikaunzwe more control over their lives. So far, the signs are positive, but I worry constantly about our chances. When I ask Lumano whether she thinks it will all work out, she flashes her trademark smile. For her, things are simple.

"The price is fair and CARE is giving them the seeds," she says. "They will grow it."

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