

## **Subsistence farming a way of life in Zambia**

CBC News Viewpoint, March 14, 2006

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Mary Sampuo reluctantly hands me the axe and starts laughing.

"I want to help out," I plead, trying to prove that a city-born muzungu (foreigner) from Canada can hold his own when it comes to manual labour. After all, her 12-year-old son is furiously hacking down a tree just a few metres away.

I walk over and start chopping at the tree next to him, signalling that we are in a race. I have clearly underestimated my opponent, who beats me handily. The blade from my axe flies off after a poorly timed stroke, drawing another round of laughter. After fixing the blade and finishing off the tree, the laughter turns to applause. But I pay the price with a bruised ego and giant blister on the palm of my hand.

Sampuo is a subsistence farmer in Makononga village, a small collection of scattered households in a rural area of southern Zambia. She has offered to give me a glimpse into her livelihood. Strictly speaking, subsistence farming means that Sampuo only eats what she grows and, if there is a surplus, earns what she sells.

She is much more the rule than the exception in Zambia, where the vast majority of the country's rural population survives this way. She is also the target of foreign aid – be it food aid when she is hungry or development aid to increase her yields.

Yet how much do we, as Canadians, actually understand what it means to be a subsistence farmer in Africa? And if we could understand a little more, would we be more inclined to help?

Today, Sampuo is showing me how she prepares her land at the beginning of each farming season. She awakens me at first light following the cock-a-doodle-doo of the village alarm clock. After grabbing a dull axe and a pack of matches, she lifts a bundle of thatch on her head and we head along the thin, dirt footpath to her field. Sampuo has half a hectare of land scattered with thorn bushes and tree stumps that must be cleared before she can begin planting. Her only tools are her hands, an axe and fire.

Land preparation is tedious work and the entire family is involved. For Sampuo, that means she and her two sons. Her husband died a few years ago. It usually takes them

three weeks to clear this field and they are racing against time to be prepared for the early rains in late November.

After the second rainfall, they begin plowing, but there are no tractors in rural Zambia. Subsistence farmers rely on oxen for this task. However, livestock diseases have devastated the area and claimed Sampo's oxen. This year, she plans to borrow from her brother, but she will have to wait until he finishes plowing his field. Late planting is the most common cause of crop failure in southern Zambia, and woman-headed households are particularly vulnerable.

When Sampo's seeds are finally in the ground, she is at the mercy of the rains. Although she is within walking distance of the world's fourth longest river, the Zambezi, she has no means to use its water for irrigation. The infrastructure does not exist and she has no money to help develop it.

"God determines how much food I have to eat," Sampo says. "I can only pray for good rains."

Last year, her prayers were not answered. The worst drought in a decade wiped out Sampo's entire harvest. She was forced to sit idle as her maize stunted, turned yellow and died. Literally thousands of combined hours of manual labour went without reward. And to further drive home the suffering, she must do it all over again this year on one meal a day. This is the price she pays when she is unable to grow enough food to last until the next season's harvest.

Drought is one thing Sampo has in common with farmers in Canada. A severe drought swept across the southern part of my home province of Alberta a few years ago. However, while it threatened many farming livelihoods, it did not threaten lives. In fact, many people who weren't farmers were completely unaware that there had even been a drought. The grocery stores were still stocked with food from all over the world. In Zambia, drought means hunger or, in extreme cases, starvation. There is no time to rest and no social safety net to fall back on.

Somehow, through all of this, Sampo never stops smiling and laughing.

"You are a very hard worker," she tells me. I roll my eyes but I can see she is serious. I think back to my comfortable life in Canada and am amazed that someone in her position can still live life with a smile.

"We are used [to it]," she says when I ask how she deals with the adversity of subsistence farming. Judging by the blister on my hand, I am certainly not.