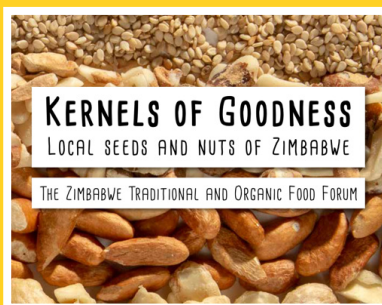




SEEDS AS REPOSITORIES OF LIFE AND CULTURE IN ZIMBABWE



trōcaire



Figure 1:
Women
processing
the (sorghum/
millet) harvest.
Photo source:
Grains of
Goodness

Farmers in Zimbabwe believe that the seeds of wild and traditional foods have been given by their ancestors over the centuries and passed down for many generations. Seeds are more than a source of food but the foundation of life, a repository for future evolution and of the history and cultures of the Zimbabwean peoples. All farmers have an inherent duty to protect them and to pass them on to future generations.

In Zimbabwe, women are considered to be the principal custodians of traditional seeds. Most pulses and small grains such as ground nuts, round (bambara) nuts, cow peas and finger millet are saved by women. Female farmers believe in the power of managing seeds and are producing and saving their own seeds especially small grains (finger millet and sorghum), legumes and tubers that are open-pollinated and drought tolerant. The women have the power to decide what is planted and when, drawing on their indigenous knowledge systems.

Seeds hold a special place in the struggle for food sovereignty. Local cultures in Zimbabwe treat seeds, not as a commodity, but as a farmer's basic right. Nevertheless, seeds' sovereignty in Zimbabwe, as in many other countries around the world, is under threat.

The pressures of globalisation and governmental incentives currently favour industrial scale farming over so-called 'subsistence' farming. Hybrid and genetically modified seeds are promoted over the farming of diverse crops for domestic self-sufficiency. Farmers are encouraged to produce more of the few common staple/starch crops and are pushed into producing food for sale rather than for family consumption. Maize, which is not native to Zimbabwe, nor drought resistant, has come to replace many traditional grains in recent years. Hybrid and genetically modified maize seed need to be purchased annually which results in a dependency on multinational seed companies. Local crop species and varieties which farmers have traditionally grown such as sorghum and finger millet, do not require annual seed purchase from seed companies, are more resilient to local climatic conditions and provide greater dietary diversity to families and local communities.

It is in this context that Trócaire and partners have been working to support the abilities of women farmers to defend their seed rights as custodians of seed and food security.

COUNTRY CONTEXT



Zimbabwe is a land-locked country in Southern Africa with a population of 15.6 million people.



Zimbabwe ranks 150 out of 189 countries on the Human Development Index (HDI) with 63% of people living below the poverty line and 27% of children are malnourished.



Approximately 70% of people in Zimbabwe rely on agriculture with the majority of Zimbabwe's food being produced by smallholder farmers. Nevertheless, these farmers often struggle to feed themselves and make a living from farming.



Climate change has caused rising temperatures and worsening droughts, leaving many farmers without harvests while the destruction caused by Cyclone Idai damaged crops, livestock production, and agricultural infrastructure.

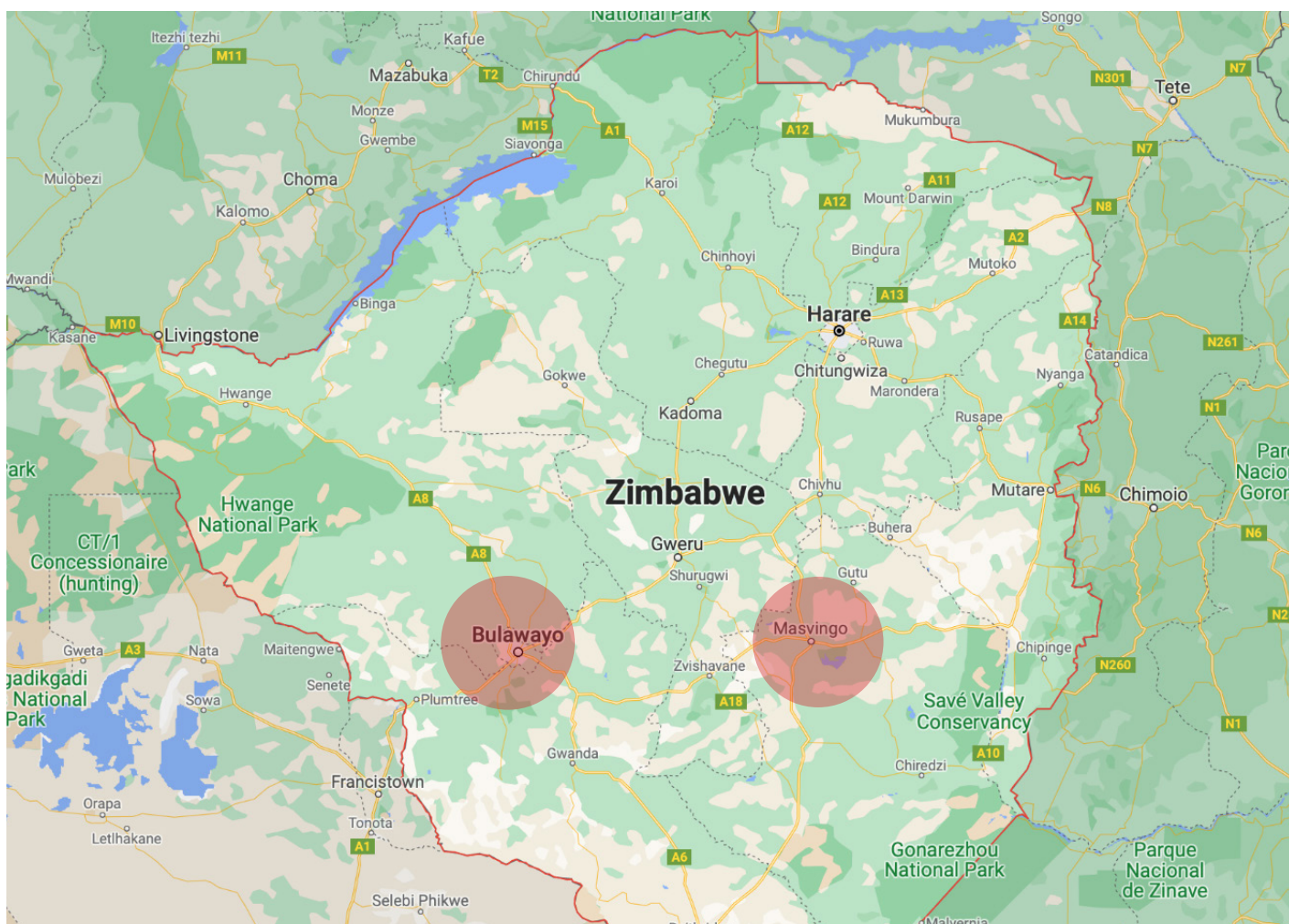
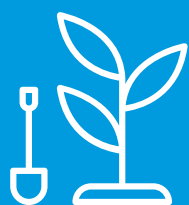


Figure 2: Map of Zimbabwe showing Trócaire areas of intervention. Source Googlemaps.com



TRÓCAIRE PROJECTS IN ZIMBABWE:

Trócaire works to ensure poor smallholder farmers, particularly women, enjoy greater food security through projects focusing on agroecological approaches to farming which incorporate the growth, consumption and commercialisation of diversified traditional food and seed varieties. Trócaire works primarily in the drought-affected areas of Matabeleland South and Masvingo in the south of the country, as well as the Eastern Province of Manicaland.

How does Trócaire and its Partners recover and protect wild and traditional foods?

Working with local partners, including Caritas Bulawayo, Caritas Masvingo, Dabane Trust, Zimbabwe Project Trust (ZimPro) and technical partners Fambidzanai Permaculture Training Centre and Zimbabwe Environmental Law Associated (ZELA) Trócaire supports families and communities to tackle the chronic water, food and income shortages exacerbated by the impacts of climate change. These efforts include:

1. Creating Culinary Repositories;
2. Promoting Exchanges Between Farmers;
3. Building Community Seed Banks;
4. Advocating for the Protection of Wild and Traditional Foods.



1. CREATING CULINARY REPOSITORIES

Trócaire is a member of the Zimbabwe Traditional & Organic Food Forum (ZimTOFF), which has been developing a series of annual publications on the nutritional and medicinal benefits of wild and traditional plant species and varieties. These include information on harvesting and processing practices as well as recipes for the different foods.

Titles include 'Kernels of Goodness' (focusing on nuts and seeds) and 'Brewing Good Health' (focusing on medicinal plants and teas) and 'Small Grains, Big Gains' (focusing on millet and other small grains). ZimTOFF also provide cookery demonstrations and classes so families can get hands-on experience in preparing meals from foods which have fallen out of use. These publications are available [here](#).

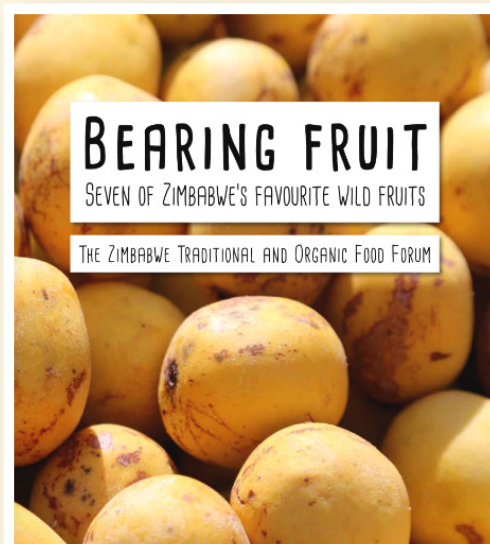
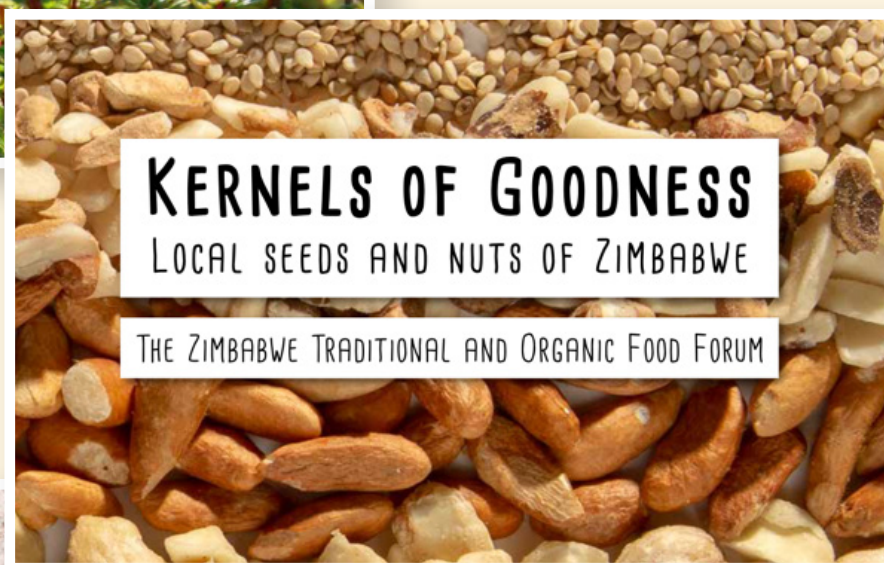


Figure 3. Covers of some of The Zimbabwe Traditional & Organic Food Forum publications



2. PROMOTING EXCHANGES BETWEEN FARMERS

Trócaire and its partners have been participating in the annual national Good Food Festival which presents multiple opportunities for participating farmers to exchange seeds across provinces, buy and sell commercialised 'added value products', learn from the successes of other farmers in producing and selling food, and engage in culinary exchanges.



Figure 4: Food fair display Zimbabwe (Photo courtesy of Trócaire, Zimbabwe)

3. BUILDING COMMUNITY SEED BANKS

Community Seed Bank organisations are essential for developing repositories of wild and traditional foods as well as ensuring families and communities have secure and reliable access to affordable seeds each year. Four Trócaire partners, Caritas Bulawayo, Caritas Masvingo, Dabane Trust and Zimbabwe Project Trust have been working to develop community seed banks across the communities participating in the programme. Trócaire and partners have also trained AGRITEX (government extension) Officers on the importance of seed banks, an understanding of seed systems, and how to support communities in establishing independent seed banks.

4. ADVOCATING FOR THE PROTECTION OF WILD AND TRADITIONAL FOODS

It is not enough to support farmers through practical initiatives for growing and harvesting wild and traditional foods, the policy environment must also change to ensure there is broader support for these initiatives through markets, government institutions and even legislation. Fambidzanai, another partner, collaborates with networks such as the Seed and Knowledge Initiative and the Zimbabwe Seed Sovereignty Programme (ZSSP) which is an alliance of NGOs working towards greater seed sovereignty in Zimbabwe on advocacy initiatives.



WILD FOOD FOCUS

Marula Nut: The marula tree (*Sclerocarya birrea*) is famous for its delicious fruits from which the Amarula liqueur is produced. The tree grows at low and medium altitudes in open woodlands across Zimbabwe, especially in hot, dryland areas. Marula fruits can be gathered between January and March, and the pulp is sometimes used to make traditional beer or jelly. After the fruits are eaten, the hard, inner nuts are cleaned, dried and stored, waiting to be cracked. In the shell, marula nuts store quite well since insects cannot get through the notoriously hard exterior.

Traditionally, marula nuts are pounded and used to flavour relishes, greens and meat dishes. The oil from the nuts is sometimes used to coat and seal meat before it is dried to make biltong. The kernels have higher protein and oil content than other popular nuts (including walnut, hazelnut, and almond) and are rich in magnesium, phosphorus and potassium. The oil is highly nutritious and very stable, containing a large proportion of unsaturated fats, vitamins C and E, and antioxidants. It is highly valued as a skincare ingredient.

Source: Kernels of Goodness



Figure 5: Marula nut harvesting and processing – Photos from the ‘Kernels of Goodness’ publication

IMPACTS



87% of households participating in the programme have adopted agroecological practices including the use of diversified traditional species and seeds.



68% of female headed households (FHH) and 72% of male headed households (MHH) are growing diversified traditional seed varieties, with nearly 80 families growing more than nine crops on their plots.



Wild and traditional food species and their varieties being produced include small grain (sorghum, pearl millet, finger millet) and legumes (beans, groundnuts, groundnuts and cowpeas), sweet potatoes and yams. There are also a number of other traditional varieties (seed varieties passed on from generation to generation) and lost species, adapted to these agroecological regions, which are grown in some gardens but are no longer readily available.



Families participating in the programme have, after three years, managed to increase their average additional household income from the sale of surplus produce to 42 USD for FHH and USD 53 for MHH per season.



A total of 408 participants (304 females and 104 males) are currently members of four community seed banks established by the programme. One seed bank has already stored seed from the 2019/2020 crop.



As a result of training in agribusiness and participation in the 2019 Good Food Festival at national level, farmers in Matobo Ward 09, working with Caritas Bulawayo managed, to secure a market for Amarula and water melon seed, selling a total of four tonnes of seed at US\$1.50 per kg.



Seed fairs are organised across all four districts on an annual basis.



The programme trained 16 District Agriculture Extension Officers and supervisors (5 females and 11 males) across the four districts in agroecology.



Cereals, legumes and other crops that provide oils and vitamins are now contributing towards improved household diets and provide farmers with options for both short and long season cropping plans.



A recent Trócaire study further demonstrated that the production of small grains (pearl millet, finger millet and sorghum) ensures that families have a harvest, even during periods of little rainfall. The same study found that in the Bikita district farmers growing small grains were much more food secure during drought periods than those who relied on maize only.¹



In Zimbabwe, the COVID-19 pandemic helped many farmers understand the need for a greater diversity of foods, both in consumption and production for both health and resilience, in the face of disruptions to global supply chains. Many people returned to wild and traditional foods, particularly traditional seeds and wild fruits. This was bolstered by the fact that the Ministry for Health was encouraging people to return to eating traditional foods, wild relatives of green vegetables, including Black Jack (*Bidens pilosa*), in rural and urban areas.

PARTNER WEBSITES:

Caritas Bulawayo: <http://www.caritasbulawayo.org>

Dabane Trust: <http://dabane.org>

Fambidzanai Permaculture Training Centre: <http://fambidzanai.org.zw/index.php>

Zimbabwe Environmental Law Associated (ZELA): <http://www.zela.org>

Zimbabwe Project Trust (ZimPro): <https://www.zpt.co.zw>

REFERENCES/FUTHER REOURCES

1. Trócaire 2019, 'Striving for Resilience: lessons learned from experiences of drought and Cyclone Idai in Zimbabwe.'

The Zimbabwe Traditional & Organic Food Forum (ZimTOFF) publications: <https://naturallyzimbabwean.com/publications/>

Trócaire 2021, Fixing the Food System Farmer First



ZELA (Zimbabwe Environmental Law Association)

Protecting the rights of communities and conserving the environment and natural resources



Caritas
BULAWAYO



Fambidzanai
Permaculture
Centre



Dabane Trust

