

Abundance through Mulch and a Hoe: Conservation Farming in Zimbabwe

“No father would like to see his family go hungry because they did not till the land, when there is such a simple and affordable farming method that can produce tremendous results.”

—Sihle Tshuma, volunteer conservation farmer, Nkayi District, Zimbabwe

Christian Care, a United Church partner in Zimbabwe, is part of an exciting project that is empowering farmers to both produce more maize on less land and work independently of the global farm corporations. All that’s needed is mulch and a hoe.

These farmers are facing three challenges:

- increasing drought (there were three droughts between 1911 and 1970, but seven between 2001 and 2009)
- decreasing soil fertility
- dependency on chemicals and hybrid seed

Commercial seed corporations have been marketing hybrid seeds vigorously, claiming they improve yields. However, hybrids—the first generation of two different “parents”—are often sterile or fail to produce what the parent did. This benefits the market, not the farmers who need to buy new seed every year. The alternative is open-pollinated seed: traditional varieties that have been grown for millennia, and do well without chemical fertilizers and herbicides. They may have lower yields, but they have better flavour, are hardier and more adaptable than hybrid seed, and can be saved and shared.

The poorest farmers can’t plant at the best time of year, because they need to rent their wealthier neighbours’ oxen after they’ve been used. They also depend on free or cheap hybrid seed, which is often “donated” by companies that want the farmers to become dependent on their products, and isn’t consistently available. Up to 80 percent of the households in the project area have needed food aid donations in recent years to survive.

Transformative Results

However, the Christian Care conservation farming program has drastically changed the situation for over 500 families. The program has

- trained farmers (69 percent women) and their spouses at community workshops in open-pollinated seed production, and given them follow-up support
- organized farm exchange visits to the successful and exemplary farmers, as well as those that had made less progress
- organized community seed banks
- raised awareness and enthusiasm through community and district celebrations

In the first year the program gave chemical fertilizers and seed to the farmers. In the second year seed was provided and manure was substituted for fertilizer. In the third, the farmers had saved their own seed, as well as donating a portion to a seed bank for new project members.

The results were extraordinary. The farmers participating in the project multiplied their average yield by 10, had a better chance of producing crops even in drought conditions, and no longer needed to borrow oxen. The amount of seed that was shared with others was also extraordinary. The seed banks gave

- 500 kg of seed to new farmers in the first year
- 3,500 kg in the second year
- 4,280 kg in the third year—enough for a completely new program for 250 more farmers

Natural, Local, and Empowering

The techniques for this fantastic yield were simple: creating an organic layer of mulch 3 cm deep and covering 100 percent of the plot, fertilizing with manure, and preparing the fields well in the dry season for planting. The mulch, manure, and hoes were all locally available, not imported from other countries.

Saving their own seed, rather than ordering it from elsewhere, was an empowering activity for the farmers. So was the farmer-to-farmer visit program that built support and community, and participation from the local officials, head-men, and chiefs who grew their own plots and worked on community field days.

Canadian Partnership

Collaborating with Christian Care in this project was the Canadian Foodgrains Bank (CFGB), an ecumenical coalition of 15 Canadian denominations whose mission is to help end global hunger. Each year dozens of United Church congregations across Canada raise and donate \$850,000 to CFGB. The funds are raised in a number of ways including through community growing projects, where a crop is grown with the help of local churches and volunteers and then sold, with the money donated to the CFGB.

In turn, the donated funds, like funds raised by other CFGB members, are used to support food aid and food security projects in many of the world's so-called developing countries. Several CFGB members, led by the United Church, have been contributing funds donated by their respective congregations for "conservation farming" projects in Zimbabwe.

Paul Hagerman is a former United Church overseas personnel in Jamaica and the Cayman Islands, and is now the CFGB policy manager. He says that these kinds of investments in agriculture are "focusing on people's right to food rather than just using food as a commodity, or land as a commodity, for those with the means to control it."