Saving lives and land in Zimbabwe

Earlier this year we completed a two-year programme in southern Zimbabwe, in a region experiencing severe land degradation and water scarcity, posing a huge threat to the livelihoods of the rural poor and to the environment.

Delivered in partnership with our long-term partner, the Dabane Trust, the programme supported two communities in Gwanda District to each construct a sand dam and implement a range of environmental protection measures.

Sibongile Siziba (pictured right), was one of the community members who took part in the project. Here, she recalls the difficulties the community used to experience in pursuit of water.


Sibongile Siziba

"In our region we are always experiencing recurring droughts. Before this sand dam construction programme, we would walk for about 10km in search of water. The situation was more difficult for our livestock because it meant embarking on a 2-3 day journey for them to have a drink. The process was very time consuming and not helpful at all because by the time we would arrive back home they would be thirsty again, due to the long distances we would have travelled."

Sibongile recalled how in 2019, members of the community came together and deliberated about possible ways they could be assisted to access water at a close proximity. Sibongile says:

"We wrote a letter to our councillor asking to be assisted with a water point that would be closer and reliable, regardless of seasons of intense drought. Soon after we met with the Dabane Trust who introduced the idea of a sand dam to us as a community."

With support from the Dabane Trust the community constructed their first sand dam, which already is providing a source of clean, safe water close to their homes.

"I don't even know how to express my joy and happiness. We now have surplus water that is sufficient to last until the next rainy season. This dam is not only for us, but it is our heritage for generations to come."

With water readily available Sibongile is now looking forward to starting a small nutrition garden.

"What motivates me the most is that with the nutrition garden up and running, it will become an income generating project, plus a way of attaining a balanced, healthy diet."

In addition to constructing their sand dams, the two communities also received training on a variety of environmental protection techniques, to raise awareness about how these measures could be used to help create a healthy and enabling environment.

"All these lessons were an eye opener to me because I was able to see that we were contributing to land degradation."

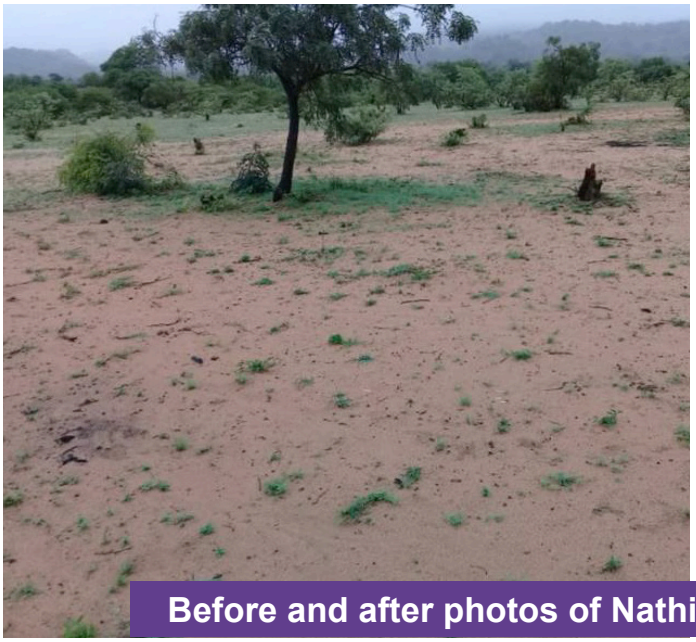
Pictured right, community members are constructing stone gabions – just one of the environmental conservation techniques used to help reduce soil erosion and restore the degraded land. In total the communities constructed 80 gabions, totalling 370m in length.

Gabion mid-construction

These measures, combined with the impact of the sand dams, have already helped improve vegetation growth, leading to re-greening of the surrounding areas. Measured using a Normalised Difference Vegetation Index (NDVI) score which is on a scale of -0.1-1, where a higher value refers to healthy and dense vegetation, the average across both sites increased from 0.23 to 0.53 – an increase of 130%!

Deforestation in the region had also been a contributing factor to environmental degradation. To help overcome this the communities established community woodlots near the sand dams to further help increase vegetation cover and improve natural regeneration of Mopane woodlands – an important native tree species across southern Africa.

Below are photos from the Nathi catchment woodlot, before and after the area was fenced and protected. After just one year the area is already flourishing, with 10 different species of grass now growing; all of which have naturally regenerated since the area was fenced off and grazing stopped.



Before and after photos of Nathi catchment woodlot, Zimbabwe

Already, the impact of the communities' hard work is striking, improving their water security and creating a healthier environment which can sustain their livelihoods. Sibongile concludes:

"I am positive now that if drought persists, I am prepared enough to counter the effects. This has been made possible by the establishment of the sand dam and also learning about new farming methods."