

Miriam's story

Miriam Sila is a member of the Katelembu Mazingira Initiative self-help group (SHG); a group of community members living in the village of Kithatu in southeast Kenya. The SHG approached the Africa Sand Dam Foundation (ASDF), our partner in Kenya, in 2015. Fast forward to now and they have since constructed two sand dams and 'graduated' from a programme of climate-smart agriculture support.

ASDF recently returned to Kithatu and spoke to Miriam about her experience. Miriam started by sharing what life was like for the community before they built the sand dams.



“Before we started working on the sand dam project, life was very difficult. I had to wake up early in the morning to walk to the river at Nzele which was very far away. By the time I arrived there would be a long queue, so I could spend three or more hours collecting water. It was very time consuming, and by the time we got home we were exhausted.”

Once at the river, they would have to dig down into the riverbed to find water which they could scoop out, digging deeper and deeper during the dry seasons.

“The riverbeds were very dry, so we had to dig deep scoop holes to fetch water. The wells we dug would be so deep that we would be very scared when inside them. It was very challenging those times, but we just had to cope as that was how life was back then.”

With only the water that they could carry on their backs across long distances, they had to ration how they used the water.

“We rarely bathed, and we were unable to wash our clothes. Also, the water was not good because often when we drank it, we would be ill after. Regularly you would hear of community members getting ill with diseases like typhoid.”

The daily chore of fetching water also took up precious time for other activities, as Miriam recalled.

“It was difficult to fetch water and then get back home to do other activities such as farming, because we were very tired by the time we got back home. Sometimes our children would miss school or get there late as they would be helping out in the chore of collecting water.”

Like the majority of people in her community, Miriam is a small-scale farmer, relying on the food she can grow to be able to feed her family and make a living. But without enough water to use on her farm, growing crops wasn't easy.

“Before we built the sand dams we really struggled to grow food. Our farms were very bare. You wouldn't find any crops because they would wither due to there not being enough water. So once the rainy season would end we had to rely on the food stored in the granary, and when that had run out, we had to use other means to get food to survive on again until the next rains.”

Today though, things couldn't be more different for this community, thanks to the time and effort the Katelembu Mazingira Initiative SHG invested in constructing their sand dams. Miriam said:

“Life has changed now for the better! We no longer suffer or struggle to get water during the drought periods. Water is readily available at the sand dam at any time of day, and it takes very little time to fetch water now as it is so close. Even when the rains end, we still have water here!”

No more do community members have to drink dirty river water. Instead, they have access to clean drinking water.

“My health and that of the community has improved. Rarely do we hear of complaints of water related diseases because the water we have is now safe to drink. My children are happy too because they are always clean.”

Throughout their time working with ASDF, SHG members worked collectively, determined to overcome the food and water shortages and to improve life for the community.

“When working as a group, it’s easier to progress. I was unable to dig terraces by myself but through this project I have been able to dig terraces not only on my farm but also on other members’ farms too, because we help each other.”

Their hard work has really paid off. By constructing the sand dams and continuing to implement the climate-smart farming techniques which they learnt, they have been able to create a healthy environment in which they can thrive.



Miriam collecting water (left) which she uses for her crops and trees (right)

“The environment has really changed. It is green, serene and cool. We have trees and we can now relax well under the shade of the trees. Our farms are always looking healthy, and we always have food due to the constant availability of water at our sand dam.”

Miriam said the crops on her farm are now flourishing. She is growing a range of fruit and vegetables, including maize, papayas, sugarcane, bananas, mangoes and tomatoes. As well as ensuring a healthy, varied diet for her family, she now grows enough to be able to sell her produce at local markets.

“Last season I was selling my tomatoes, making sales of up to 500 Kenyan Shillings per day for two months. I made around 20,000 Kenyan Shillings in total [approximately £130].”

Miriam has used the money she made from the sales of her crops to pay for her children’s school fees, as well as to buy a chicken, and hopes to buy a cow or goat in the near future. The sense of achievement amongst the community is clear. With clean water close to home, they have been able to transform their own lives.

“We are living much better lives now. I am clean, I am healthy, and I am proud of what we have achieved.”