

# The Women's Beekeeping Project, Monze, Zambia: a report on progress.

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## Introduction

I have just returned from Monze District, located in the Southern Province of Zambia, where I was helping to evaluate the first one-year phase of the project, initiated last year by the late Roy Dyche, and to launch the second one-year phase. I was also wanting to carefully assess the capabilities of our local partner there, the Sustainable Rural Development Agency (SRDA), a small NGO with whom Bees Abroad (BA) has successfully worked with in the past.

The main aim of the three-year project is to introduce modern beekeeping, using top-bar hives, to approximately 120 women in six groups as a source of much needed income. Each group will have been carefully selected following an interview process by SRDA together with representatives from the local Forestry Department.

The beneficiaries of the groups are all subsistence farmers, many of them are unmarried or widowed, with sole responsibility for the wellbeing of their households, which contain on average eight members. Monze District is recognised as one of the country's least developed districts in which the levels of poverty are very high. In recent years their situation has become even more precarious as a result of the reduced rainfall causing crop failure.

## The ongoing drought

As I drove around during my stay I could quite clearly see evidence of the drought and its adverse effects on crop production. As with many smallholder farmers in the district our group members tend to grow only maize, a crop which is particularly dependent on rainfall.

Articles in the local newspapers talked about a significant reduction in crop production (38% over the past eight years) and the need for the country to diversify and adopt new methods of agriculture.



Crop failure, an all too common sight

One particular article caught my attention which talked about "embracing crop diversification" and highlighted the story of a local farmer that had not only started to grow other crops such as cassava and millet rather than just maize but was also involved with beekeeping and fish farming.

During my stay I had conversations with clinicians working for local hospitals and aid workers who were very interested in Bees Abroad's project, especially as the success of such an enterprise was not so directly dependent on rainfall. Quite clearly, as well providing an income for our beneficiaries, the production of honey would become more important in terms of food security within the rural population.

## SRDA

Having not met with Phillip Nsakilwa before, I felt that it was important to meet with the director of our local partner at the earliest opportunity to ensure that our working relationship got off to a good start.



Meeting with SRDA director, Phillip Nsakilwa

I shouldn't have worried, as both Phillip and I enjoyed a most productive and relaxed first meeting arranged to briefly review Phase One and to go over itinerary arrangements for the week.

### **Phase One: a summary of main features**

My evaluation is based not only from observations made during my stay but on the very full reports that Phillip has sent me throughout the year.

Over the next two days I visited the apiaries of the two phase one groups: Kabwenbala and Chobaana East.



A well constructed apiary

At the start of the project, each group had been helped to set up an apiary equipped with eight hives and had been given all they needed to manage their hives, for which they had to pay a proportion of the cost: a smoker, protective gear, gum boots, and food-grade, airtight containers. They had also received basic training in beekeeping. During the year SRDA's field officers had visited the groups on a regular basis to view progress and to offer any additional support.

I already knew from regular email communication with Phillip that the Chobaana East group would likely meet the targets/success indicators so clearly laid out in the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for Phase One, namely, that by the end of the phase: (i) most of a group's eight hives will have been colonised, (ii) each group will have a core of members able to open and harvest the hives without any reliance on SRDA, (iii) each group will have begun to earn useful income from its honey sales, and (iv) the

groups will have been using their income wisely to develop their enterprises or begin new ones.

The more immediate challenge was to try and get to the bottom of the problems experienced by the Kabwenbala group – failure to colonise more than two hives during the year – and to find solutions.

Kabwenbala: Ten of the 16 members were present at the apiary meeting, led by Judith who was present despite clearly being quite ill. I was pleased to see that the apiary was being well maintained, water was available, but disappointed that still only two of their eight hives had been colonised by bees. The empty hives were generally clean and well baited although some had quite large gaps at the gable ends due to warping of the wood, an obvious port of entry for unwanted pests. Phillip did not see this as a major problem and was of the opinion that the poor colonisation rate – a common challenge with African beekeeping – was more likely to be due to the location of the apiary, although there appeared to be ample forage in the area. It was also noted that some of the members appeared to be losing interest not only in the beekeeping project but also in their maize grinding co-operative group activities.

However, despite the disappointing slow rate of colonisation of their hives it is noteworthy that attendance at monthly technical backstop meetings during the year with SRDA has been good (typically >80%).



Looking back on an apiary through a living fence!

By the end of the day the ladies had clearly been re-energised by our visit, as much to motivate and give encouragement as to

discussing the ongoing challenges with the beekeeping. On reviewing the day on our drive back to Monze I agreed with Phillip and his team that it was quite possible that the ladies were suffering not only with the hot, dry conditions but also with a general lack of energy due to reduced food intake, one of the outcomes of the ongoing drought.

In terms of the agreed aforementioned targets/success indicators, these had clearly not been achieved. However - and this is very important in terms of the long-term sustainability of the project - the group clearly had a core of members able to open and harvest the hives, as demonstrated later that week, without any reliance on SRDA. Detailed discussions were had with Phillip on how to increase the number of colonised hives in the apiary as soon as possible and these were detailed in a MoU for Phase Two.

Chobaana East: Thirteen of the 15 members turned up for the meeting. This was very encouraging; the two missing members were attending a funeral. The apiary contained eight well constructed hives which had all been colonised for some time. Four of the hives were to be harvested within a couple of weeks of my visit. This made perfect sense bearing in mind that the current honey flow was not expected to end until the end of June.

### **Honey harvesting**

The writing of this report was delayed so that it could include some preliminary information on the harvesting of honey. Raw honey (honey plus comb as cut directly from the top-bar) has been successfully harvested but has yet to be processed into semi-processed honey (comb removed but honey still requiring filtering) at which stage SRDA will then purchase from the groups as part of their buying and selling operation at a price of approximately 19 kwacha per kilogram, paid on purchase.

Kabwenbala: harvested 10 kilograms from one hive.

Cabaana East: harvested a total of 51 kilograms from four hives.

Using an exchange rate of 15 kwacha = 1 GB pound, this initial harvest should provide the Kabwenbala group with the equivalent of

about £13 and the Chobaana East group with £65. This amount of money might not seem much but it will buy considerably more in rural Zambia than it would in the UK.

### **Phase Two**

Having satisfied myself that, with the exception of the poor colonisation rates of the hives managed by the Kabwenbala group, that Phase One had by and large gone well and that a good working relationship had been established with all members of SRDA, it was time to venture further out into the field to meet the members of the two new groups. Getting to their apiaries required a most demanding 1-1.5 hour drive, further than for the initial two groups, along a network of tracks which all looked much the same to me and tested the navigational skills of our driver to the full. Despite having visited the groups before on a number of occasions we still managed to lose our way on more than one occasion which added to the excitement.

### **The new groups**

On arrival it was very pleasing to see that with the help of SRDA both groups had already made themselves well constructed apiaries each with eight well made top-bar hives. None of the hives had been baited but this was addressed in the initial training.



Priming the top bars with melted bees wax

Because one of the two swarming seasons was already well underway the importance of baiting hives as a matter of some urgency was emphasised, as was the watching out for swarming/absconding bees and methods for their catching and re-homing in their hives.

Haamupande: a rather slow start to the training session taking a good hour for eleven of the 18 members, led by Tabitha, to arrive and settle.



Ladies of the Haamupande group

Interestingly, we were joined by a gentleman called Cornelius, the village headman, who would report directly to the traditional village chief. I'm pleased to say that the training, delivered using a participatory approach to ensure that all the ladies were fully engaged, went very well and we all had great fun. I'm confident that the village chief will have received a favourable report.

Mulube: Again, a rather slow start to the day but in the end ten of the 16 members, led by Zalos, attended. They were a slightly more reserved and quieter group. Work was still required to cut down vegetation on the ground and that hanging down and making contact with the hives, as well as adding a source of water. That a swarm of bees had already arrived and clustered in one of the trees in the apiary was viewed as a good omen and generated great excitement and hope for the future.



A swarm of bees in an apiary

### **The training apiary**

Located a good 45 mins drive on good roads from central Monze the visit to SRDA's training apiary was quite a sad affair. It was clear that plans made last year to convert the building on the site into a classroom were no longer realistic. The site had been owned by a Canadian company called Family Farms Ltd., opened in 1983, but it had been abandoned for the past 20 years and nature had taken advantage. The five top-bar hives, still to be found in deep bush, all appeared to contain strong colonies ready for harvesting.



One of the hives in the training apiary

The fate of the training apiary was subject to much discussion with Phillip over the coming days and it was eventually decided to close the site and move the hives, after harvesting, to other sites including a proposed new training apiary site nearer to the centre of Monze and also to Kabwenbala's group apiary.

### **The new training apiary site and plans for a honey processing plant**

We briefly visited the site of SRDA's proposed new training apiary site. Phillip was hopeful that the required paperwork to confirm ownership of the land would be completed within the next month or so allowing a start on the clearing of thick vegetation. Ten new top-bar hives have already been purchased and are currently being stored waiting to go onto the new site. Phillip has quite grand plans for the site which will obviously be dependent on securing additional funding. A first step will be building a new honey processing plant to serve our project

beneficiaries as well as other beekeepers in the area. We currently have some money allocated in the Phase Two budget to get this idea off the ground, and SRDA will contribute 25% of the cost.



The site (on the left) of SRDA's proposed new training apiary and honey processing plant

### **Impromptu meeting with group from the first project**

By chance, on driving back to Monze from the training apiary, we happened to meet up with some of the original members of the first project that BA had run with SRDA (between 2011– 2015) selling vegetables on the roadside. It was very encouraging to hear their story that after almost 8 years they were still involved in beekeeping and that the income generated had helped with school fees.

### **Meetings with the Forestry Department**

In the afternoon, having returned from the training apiary, and again the following day, Phillip and I met with high-ranking employees of the Forestry Department for the Southern Province. The department had worked closely with SRDA in identifying the groups for the new project so it was a good opportunity to thank them for their help and to develop our working relationship. Mention was made that the project would end after a total duration of three years and that the continued involvement of the Forestry Department together with SRDA was important in terms of helping to ensure the sustainability of the groups. All in all it was a very positive meeting but only time will tell if words are supported by action!

### **Extending the project, and future opportunities**

At the end of my trip Phillip and I sat down with other SRDA officers to discuss the MoU for Phase One and to agree a comprehensive MoU for Phase Two including future targets, milestones and success indicators. In addition, we had quite a lengthy discussion on ideas we might want to consider for future expansion, each with growing complexity. These were captured and included in what was to become quite a lengthy MoU for Phase Two.

I left Zambia feeling quite exhausted but very satisfied that it had been a most enjoyable and productive trip, building on the sound foundation laid the previous year by my dear friend and mentor Roy Dyche.

**Stuart Andrews**

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