

ZAMBIA

Partnership Manager: Dr Stuart Andrews

Monze Women's Beekeeping Project

The project has been implemented in three yearly phases with two groups being recruited each year:

- Phase 1: Kabwenbala and Chobaana East
- Phase 2: Haamupande and Muloube
- Phase 3: Lusumpuko and Nakambala

All groups are located in Monze District and their members are mainly subsistence farmers, many of them unmarried or widowed, who have sole responsibility for the wellbeing of their households, which on average contain eight members. Comprising between 13 and 25 members, each group was carefully selected following an interview process by our local partner together with a representative from either local government, or from the local forestry department.

Each group has a core of trainee beekeepers, and hopes that the income raised through beekeeping will help improve their livelihoods and resilience. They hope that increasing honey production and access to good markets will improve their nutrition and health. This is especially important in times of drought, when reduced rainfall has a significant effect on subsistence farming. The area has a high level of poverty made worse in recent years as a result of reduced rainfall which has caused crop failure and created an environment in which there are fewer bees.



Road to one of the group apiaries – easy to get lost! - photo: Stuart J. Andrews

The Local Delivery Partner is the Sustainable Rural Development Agency (SRDA) led by its director, Mr Phillip Nsakilwa. SRDA is a small rural-based NGO registered in 2006. The Director has a Diploma in Forestry and significant beekeeping experience. He is supported by two field officers with beekeeping and social work experience. For each phase of the project, SRDA contributes 25% of its profit from its own honey-buying and honey-selling operation.

Sustainability is firmly built into this project. They plan to have a core of members able to open and harvest hives without any reliance on SRDA, and thus be able to earn useful income from its honey sales to develop their enterprises or begin new ones.

Much of this work could not have happened without the generous support of the Ida Davis Foundation, Zoetis UK, Kent Beekeeping Associations, and Bees Abroad, for which the team is extremely grateful. The continued support of the local community in Blean, near Canterbury, is also much appreciated.

Activities in 2020

Two new groups – Lusumpuka and Nakambala – were enrolled onto the project. The SRDA increased their visits to all six groups to help maintain the motivation of group members during these difficult times and to ensure that each group maintains their apiaries and each of their eight top-bar hives (for which they paid a small financial contribution) in top condition.

By January 2021, only the Kabwenbala and Chobaana East groups had managed to harvest any honey from which they gained some income; honey was harvested from two hives in Kabwenbala, and from four hives in Chobaana East. Most of the other hives have remained empty for much of the year; Haamupande currently have no hives colonised with bees, Muloube only have three hives colonised, Lusumpuka only has one hive colonised, while women from the Nakambala group still watch over eight empty hives.

The reasons why so few hives have been colonised this year are complex and as yet not fully understood. The women themselves are convinced it is linked to the climate crisis. There were signs of bees returning to the area early in the year following the seasonal rains during 2019/2020, which led to the decision to proceed with Phase 3, but their return appears to have been short-lived. The impact of the drought last year is still being felt, and has created an environment in which there are fewer bees to colonise the hives. Many of the colonies kept by some of the women in local (traditional) hives have also absconded this year.

A significant number of interventions have been tried to address these challenges including:

- (i) increasing the number of advisory visits by SRDA to the groups
- (ii) maintaining apiaries and hives in good condition
- (iii) providing additional water and supplementary food
- (iv) using swarm-catcher boxes
- (v) using small log hives to help attract swarming or absconding bees.

None have been particularly successful.

In terms of capacity building of SRDA, a number of options have been discussed during regular WhatsApp video calls and email exchanges; these include more interaction with the Cooperative Department (Ministry of Agriculture), and the Forestry department, as well as with other beekeeping associations and NGOs in the district.

Just four weeks before a planned visit to Zambia, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office advised against all but essential international travel, due to Covid-19. The onus fell on SRDA to continue reviewing Phase 2 and launching Phase 3. With typical efficiency and commitment SRDA took over the enrolment of the two new groups onto the project and their training.

The major success achieved this year is the strong and developing working relationship with SRDA. Despite all the setbacks, it is heartening to hear from SRDA that the women continue to show a real commitment to the project.



Priming some top-bars – a nice team activity - photo: Stuart J. Andrews

Into the future...

The project comes to an end in April 2021. Any future plans regarding beekeeping activities will largely depend on whether the seasonal rains fall the year 2020-21, and if this leads to an improvement in the local habitat and environment that will attract bees back to the area. The first expected swarming period of the year between March and May 2021 will be carefully monitored.

SRDA have proved to be a most worthy local partner and discussions will continue as to how best Bees Abroad can assist with their ongoing sustainability and capacity building into the future.