

Irrigation transforms lives in southern Zimbabwe

GWANDA: More than a million people will need food aid in Zimbabwe this year. As the government looks to boost agriculture production, one rural community is leading the way by using irrigation schemes to improve food security and income.

Tabiso Dube and her neighbours in Patana village grow food year round thanks to an irrigation scheme.

Her home in Matabeleland South's Gwanda district is among the least food and water secure areas in the country. Given the arid climate, most people here rely primarily on livestock for their livelihoods. The few who dare focus on growing maize or wheat are extremely vulnerable to erratic rainfall.

But cattle farming has been hit hard by years of drought-induced losses; many have been forced to slaughter animals for lack of grazing.

"Matabeleland is cattle country and it was a challenge to get many communities to buy into irrigation farming as a means of livelihood," Velenjani Nkomo told IPS. "We have persisted and after 10 years, villagers are growing vegetables, wheat and green maize, earning income and having enough to eat."

Nkomo is director of Pro Africa - a development organisation working to use water as a pathway out of poverty. Over the past 10 years the NGO has invested \$1 million in building 48 gravity-fed irrigation schemes around 52 government-built dams in Matabeleland South, characterised by low annual rainfall, droughts and food scarcity.

The irrigation schemes have been built with funding from international donors, while local communities have provided labor and collected stones and the sand used in the construction of canals. Communities are responsible to maintain the infrastructure once it's constructed, usually with money they earn from the increased produce or have collected.

Dube, a smallholder farmer who still keeps a few goats, relied on food aid for the last four years like many others in this water-stressed region of Zimbabwe. Since Pro Africa built an irrigation scheme, Dube has not only been able to feed her family, she has enough to give to extended family members and needy neighbours.

"I do not worry about school fees anymore as our project has ensured I have enough food for my children and extra cash fees and for developing my home," said Dube, a mother of four.

The Madema irrigation scheme covers 8.8 hectares. Its 57 members are those who responded when Pro Africa convened community meetings to introduce the concept of irrigation in the area. The gravity-fed irrigation scheme has helped Dube and her neighbours add an assortment of vegetables to their main crops of wheat and maize, ensuring a more diverse diet and extra cash with the sale of excess produce.

The dam that feeds Madema was built in response to the devastating drought in 1992. The government responded by building 52 small dams in the two Matabeleland provinces in collaboration with a consortium of NGOs. The earthen dams - many have since been reinforced with stone - however lacked any additional infrastructure until Pro Africa stepped in to fill the gap.

"My wish is that we can double the size of the project to 16 hectares so that we have more land to grow fruits and earn more money."

Members are planning to stock the dam with fish and expand into cattle fattening to further widen their income base.

While members would not give exact earnings from produce sales on a monthly basis, they are earning enough to be confident they can maintain their dam and irrigation canals. The scheme's members will soon spend the equivalent of \$640 to repair a leak in the dam wall following heavy rains last season.

While the schemes have enabled individual communities to become food sufficient, access to wider markets - which would extend the benefits more widely - remains a challenge. Most of the produce from the current total of 200 hectares under irrigation in Matabeleland South province is sold in the immediate area: to neighbours, nearby schools and government institutions.

Zimbabwe's second largest city, Bulawayo, is a beckoning market. But given poor roads, lack of refrigeration and high fuel costs, transporting perishable produce 250 kilometres is a logistical nightmare. Ironically, most of Bulawayo's fresh produce travels as much as 700 kilometres over much better roads from farms in South Africa.

Zimbabwe is turning to range of measures in search of long-term solutions to food security and poverty reduction. Improving farmers' access to markets, subsidised seeds and fertiliser and extending irrigation to reduce dependence on rainfall each have their part to play.

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