

‘At first they laughed at Me’

By Servaas van den Bosch

“The neighbours asked me why I am playing with my land,” recalls Fukuile Tashiya laughing. “They said the field looked excavated. ‘Can you even grow plants in these big holes?’ they teased me.

It’s not hard to see why Tashiya draws the ire of his fellow farmers. The 30 by 40 metre plot directly in front of his homestead vaguely resembles a playground for elephants.

However, a closer look reveals a coordinated plan in the ripped earth. Deep furrows, alternated with dark heaps of freshly dug up earth, run over the length of the plot.

Although the field looks out of place among the sandy top soils of Namibia’s Omusati region, Tashiya knows that at the end of the growing season he will be the one laughing.

“Instead of just planting the crops on top like we always do, last year I sowed my mahangu (pearl millet) in these lines and the result was great,” he explains. “My yield was much better and the size of the grain was big compared to other plots,” says the old farmer.

Tashiya, whose gathering of clay and straw huts is situated some thirty kilometers up the road from the northern town of Outapi, is one of the farmers that took part in a conservation agriculture pilot project.

Through the Climate Change Adaptation project (CCA) of the Country Pilot Partnership (CPP) hundred demonstration plots were ploughed all over the region to show farmers how they can have a better yield while using less water and saving on labour.

In Tashiya’s case the project assisted him with ploughing and weeding and with fertilizer and seeds. “Also the project explained to us the benefits to farm in this way. It sounded interesting, but I wanted to start with a small plot first because I did not know if this new method was going to work,” says Tashiya.

After overcoming the initial skepticism, the CCA pilot project under the Country Pilot Partnership (CPP), an alliance of seven Ministries¹ in Namibia supported by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Global Environment Facility (GEF), farmers are warming up to the idea, says project manager Andreas Shilomboleni.

“Instead of conventional disc plows, rippers are used,” he explains. “These dig narrow and deep furrows. The project has one mechanized ripper available that farmers can use. The only disadvantage is that they need a tractor. In the future we plan to distribute animal-drawn rippers because many small-scale farmers don’t have access to tractors.”

Because of its precise tilling with minimal disturbance to the soil, conservation agriculture sequesters more carbon in the earth than normal plowing.

But for Tashiya, who has fourteen mouths to feed, the increased yield – he estimates production is up with about 10 percent - are more important. “The plants on this plot have much stronger stalks,” comments the farmer who grows sugarcane, millet, sorghum and maize on his eleven hectares and keeps cattle, goats and sheep to diversify his livelihood options.

¹ Ministries of Agriculture, Water and Forestry; Environment and Tourism; Mines and Energy; Lands and Resettlement; Regional, Local Government, Housing and Rural Development; Finance; and the National Planning Commission

“The roots penetrate better which contributes greatly to the stability of the plants. Very important is that the furrows keep the water in, so it mixes nicely with the fertiliser and nutrients. In the other plots the water just washes off the land taking all the fertiliser. Here, the water seeps into the soil reaching the roots easily.”

In the driest country in sub-Saharan where annual rainfall is a paltry 300 millimetres and 83 percent of rain evaporates as soon as it hits the ground, water scarcity is a real problem. “The past years it is getting hotter and hotter,” says Tashiya who has no problem recalling fifty years of global warming from his ageing memory.

“This year we are still waiting for the rain,” he explains pointing at the sky as evening falls outside his homestead. “It’s already a month late.”

Some fifty kilometres in the other direction in an Oshana, or dry lake, an old woman shares her worries. “At this time, at least the wild spinach should have been harvested but we have not been able to harvest anything because of the lack of rain,” says Aini Paavo from Onaniki village who grows pearl millet and grain for her family.

All in all, rainfall is getting more unpredictable, she laments. “Sometimes it’s dry for a long time and then all of a sudden there is too much rain.”

Rain variability has led to devastating floods in Namibia since 2008. “We have been living here for forty years, but only in the past three years has our house been inundated and our fields destroyed,” illustrates Paavo.

And it is getting hotter. “We used to be able to work the fields in the morning before it became too hot, but nowadays we start to look for shade at 07h00 in the morning.

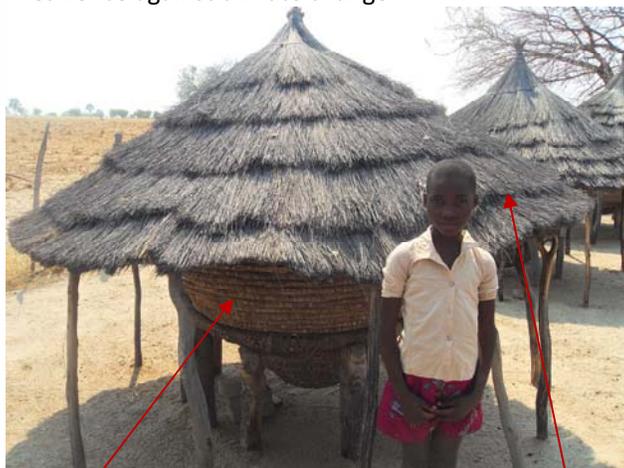
“This is especially a problem for the women who do multiple household tasks: work the field, collect firewood and water. Perhaps it would help if we had fuel efficient stoves.”



'Meme' Aini Paavo is happy with her plastic grain storage which keeps the grain safe from floods and pests. Credit: Servaas van den Bosch

Through the CCA project Paavo’s family who lives in a homestead of straw huts and small cement buildings, received a plastic granary which is more resistant to floods and pests and as such helps her adapt to the changed climatic conditions.

As an experiment, the CCA distributed seven of these improved granaries to households in the region to see how they boost resilience against climate change.



A traditional granary is made from Mopani trees and significantly contributes to deforestation in the north central regions of Namibia. Plastic granaries are alternatives to address deforestation and also to cope with impacts of climate change. To protect the stored items during rainfall seasons or floods, additional resources like thatch grass, time and labour are needed. Credit: Martha Mwangi

“We are piloting measures that help communities to cope with the now as well as positioning to deal with the predicted effects in the future,” says Andreas Shilomboleni. “It is a big improvement,’ Aini says tapping the plastic grain storage that has received a place of honour next to the family’s woven traditional granaries, eight of which

are lining the side of her house. “The pests cannot enter and if there are strong rains or floods the grain won’t be affected.” It is one alternative measure to help lessen worries.

And there is another advantage. “I am getting too old. I don’t have the energy to be making more of these traditional granaries,” laughs Paavo.



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