



Making a Livelihood Against the Odds

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"I finally got the answer to stop starving after spending decades of years working tirelessly without production in my field. I thought dryland cropping is a waste of time, with this disastrous climate change which is destroying many people and important resources," says Mwadaro Chieza, a farmer living in Shati Village in Ward 2 of the Chimanimani District.

Managing to eke out a livelihood in this semi-arid part of Zimbabwe is a continuous struggle for its population of rural farmers.

Chieza was about to give up dryland cropping when he came across PORET, an NGO based in Chaseyama, Jinga Village, not far from where he lives. Standing for *Participatory Organic Research Extension and Training Trust, PORET* has grown from a homestead project to a professionally run non-profit organisation working with 25 villages across four wards in the district. It is run by Julious Piti and his team of outreach officers whose aim is to share knowledge about agroecological methods of farming, working with nature to deal with issues of pests and soil fertility, rather than reaching for expensive chemical inputs.

With an average of 300-400mm of rainfall a year, the farmers in this area are hard pressed to get a good harvest. Years of poor land management has also led to desertification in the area. The soil is rocky, dry and largely infertile. To deal with these challenges, PORET runs a wide variety of courses to enable farmers to learn techniques to support their livelihoods. This includes the annual in-depth 5-day *Permaculture Design Course*.

Permaculture is a design system that aims for food production to be sustainable and regenerative. Over 40 participants flock to PORET's Learning Centre for the course, a combination of class-based learning and practical in-field lessons. Armed with the knowledge they gain, farmers return to their villages to share the techniques with others.

PORET's focus on *farmer-saved seed* is a central element of its work and its annual Seed Fair offers a valuable opportunity for farmers to meet and exchange seeds. Seed is crucial for sustaining the livelihoods of agricultural communities. Food security is dependent on seed security. A food processing workshop, held

prior to the Fair, trains farmers on how to add value to their products.

PORET was also instrumental in setting up the *Chaseyama Permaculture Club (CPC)* in 2006, starting with 32 farmers. CPC members carry out a wide range of projects designed according to their needs, including:

- seed production
- nursery skills and management
- land use designs
- soil and water management,
- holistic livestock and watershed management.

Each village runs its own CPC led by village chairpersons. The village CPCs then give updates on their plans to the 7-member central committee as well as on any matters that arise within their areas. The central committee

take actions if they can, or they share the issue with PORET to find a suitable solution. There are now 385 CPC members in the 25 villages.

The CPC is, essentially, the engine of PORET. It is critical for project implementation. PORET staff assist with technical support. CPC members also organise field days, carry out resource mobilisation to support their work, and conduct exchange visits to learn from others in and outside the district.



(Above) On-site training and learning how to make biofertiliser, Bokashi



(Left) Class based learning during the permaculture design course 2019

Now a CPC member for the last two years, Chieza says, *"I will never stop agroecological farming for I have proved its success on my own. This has improved my living, food sovereignty and diversity through learning and organic farming. It has transformed the quality of my life from the bottom of my poverty. This is a step to minimise dependence."*

Images provided by PORET

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