

## **FFM setting the standard of meaningful empowerment**

Friends For Matibi (FFM) is a Swiss-founded international development agency registered and operating in Zimbabwe. It operates 3 programmes namely Sustainable Livelihoods Intervention (SLI), Enhanced Educationalisation Assistance (EEA) and Comprehensive Healthcare Support (CHS) in a community of over 10,000 people contained in nearly 3000 households and in 17 villages (Mwenezi Rural District Council Statistics, 2018). The organisation stunned many stakeholders with the stories of change witnessed in Matibi community, which change is largely attributed to FFM. In this particular story we recount the early outcomes of SLI whose story spans from year 2014. The SLI project aims to facilitate community empowerment by supporting home-grown livelihoods and innovating sustainable initiatives which graduate the underprivileged villagers out of extreme poverty.

### **Baseline**

Matibi community had been known as a hub of poverty, being especially notorious for natural catastrophes that made it difficult for locals to realise normal livelihoods. Serious droughts, devastating floods, crop and animal pests - the list goes on. In Matibi, droughts have generally frustrated the commonest livelihood strategy in the country - the growing of staple crops in the summer/rainy season. This is because the area is not only un-arable (too infertile for agriculture) but also arid (drought stricken). Yet good soils and ample water are key factors if meaningful agriculture has to take place.

As doom might have it, the only moments when the area received rains, such rains often turned out to be dangerous floods.



Worse, the community had inadequate infrastructure in place to either control the floods or to tap the deluges of water for later use during drought time. The small and few interventions by

government such as small dams and farm contours were getting too old and devastated with no imminent restoration in sight, owing to decades of national economic lie-down.

In 2014 the FFM came and tried to support villagers around Matibi Mission who wanted to repair the over-silted Muchingwizi dam, whose water carrying capacity had tumbled to slightly above 10%. The pictures below compare the muddy dam in 2014 before FFM intervened for an excavation project and in 2018 when a new submersible pump was installed in the now blue-deep dam.





The 2014 excavation project was a half success. The negative side of it was that the contracted company abused the funds and left the project unfinished, having scooped only half of the 80'000m<sup>3</sup> of sand that was supposed to be removed from the small dam. In a strong show of community commitment, the villagers organised animal-drawn carts to try and finish off the other half of the work but they only managed less than 6'000m<sup>3</sup>. See below a picture of villagers using donkey-pulled scotch carts.





However, the scooped 46'000m<sup>3</sup> silt and the 8 sand barriers which were constructed in 5 rivulets upstream caused the dam's water carrying capacity to significantly improve; and the dam has operated efficiently since that time. In what was described by many as divine intervention, the country experienced a heavy cyclonic rainstorm that year and the dam has never dried out to today. This opening project sowed the seeds of steady development collaboration between the community and the FFM, leading to a surge in livelihood innovations, some of which are now already bearing fruit as elaborated below.

### **The work**

The particular subsequent activities that contributed to the ongoing socioeconomic bloom include renovation of bush-type boreholes, solar boreholes, dam pumps and the fencing of gardens. The FFM principle from the start was a clear-headed departure from failed conventional agriculture because it demanded too much in resources and yet the yield was always diminutive. The input costs always exceeded the harvest and this did not fit with FFM's value-for-money approach. With the assistance of FFM, the Matibi community have



so far been making safe inroads into organic gardening, with the community raising the ideas and the FFM intervening with lacking resources. In general, the agreed rule has been for the community to shoulder 40% of the costs for each project for which they require FFM funding. Due to the biting economic climate, most of the said 40% has been provided through manual labour. The following pictures show gardeners clearing the land on which to construct gardens and the FFM supplying the needed materials.





The rehabilitation of the dam mentioned above increasingly attracted villagers to organise themselves for garden cropping, beginning in 2014 with only 23 households of 2 villages in 2 gardens and surging to today's 89 households of 7 villages in 4 gardens. Many villagers are

now doing both conventional agriculture and gardening while 2 of the organised groups (Tamuka and Njeremoto) have already complete *gardenised* (They now concentrate 100% with gardening). The organic model of gardening is such that only climatically adapted crops and vegetables are grown and the fertilisers and pest repellents are non-synthetic but natural. This practice has received encouraging commendation from health staff who find the gardens to be good sources of safe natural foodstuffs.

It has been very difficult to convince the villagers to abandon the conventional practice of using chemicals and growing exotic species but the current stage in the advancement of the organic agenda is just pleasing and self-propelling already. Based on the success made by Tamuka and Njeremoto gardens, the model is being demanded across the broader community. According to the national Poverty, Income, Consumption and Expenditure Survey of (2011), the use of gardens instead of conventional fields is gaining unprecedented publicity in dry ecological regions, Matibi included which is in the worst Region 5. In Matibi, the nearby hospital has also played a role in encouraging villagers to go organic in their diet thereby gaining motivation to do organic gardening.

Going forward, the FFM committed itself to propagating the model organic gardens by creating 8 more of these in the community. The model garden which we are about to set up is one which is complete with a solar-pumped drip irrigation setup, and in future it will include a solar drying mechanism to protect excess produce from going stale. The standard area of one garden is 50x40m which averagely houses 40 members representing 40 households. Given this population, the villagers have also asked for FFM to kindly intervene in the construction of toilets in the garden premises. Most of the technical consultation and manual labour is already done and arranged and what they are requesting are a few materials which they still find difficult to purchase by themselves. See picture below which shows that the toilet pits are already dug.





The builders are also going to come from the community and not to be hired.

### **The results**

The FFM managed to induce productiveness and a sense of custodianship in Matibi community projects. The bulk of past projects by other agencies (including government) used to suffer the tragedy of the commons – little consideration for sustainability. It is the FFM that kick-started the earnest idea that the donors must not give everything; before this, there was only uncommitted talk of this principle without practising it to any extent. A fresh spirit to adopt the 60:40 commitment ratio came in 2016 when the FFM send delegates from Switzerland to do an evaluation in Matibi. Today, the locals have since registered a local version of FFM led by community representatives as trustees. This is a way to own up the responsibilities of the projects and to adopt professional measures in managing the funds because they are greatly treasured. Local authorities commended the villagers and the funding partners for creating this inventive scheme, the only such donor-client relationship in the province whereby an agency commits to a sustainable tenure of support to a clearly defined local community.

Productiveness is greatly showing in the gardens because they are now evergreen even during dry seasons where they used to suffer abandonment. Gardens used to thrive only up to July or August because after that time the water from the previous rainy season would have dried out completely from most sources. Today only 4 conventional gardens remain in that dilemma while the rest have either dam water or underground water to use throughout the year. Therefore through the funded dam and boreholes, the FFM directly increased gardener presence in the gardens as well as making it easy to produce. The following pictures depict the past watering scenario which was just pathetic. Water was being sourced some 600m away from the garden, and the vegetables were never well-watered as a result.







Compare with the evergreen gardens of now which exist within water vicinity.

Pictures of Tamuka and Njeremoto gardens

Also cropping up from the above activities is a barrage of excited comments about self-sufficiency and income generation, although new problems come with it, chiefly the need to identify markets for the heaving produce. The local school of home craft is pleased to learn



that they now have a ready source of some of their foodstuffs. The local church has also acknowledged that several families that used to frequent the mission to beg for sustenance have since found new relief from the gardens since the projects are primarily targeting the extreme poor and the sick. An increasing number are also reporting less and less arrears in their kids' school fees thanks to their now expanded livelihood base; and the same applies to medical bills. This is on top of the general easing of psychological pressure related to daily bread.

## **Conclusion**

An outstanding lesson from the above story is that of community commitment – that it is hard but doable to make the community own their projects. Let the community commit the resources that it has and this produces diligence and hard work whose general outcome is meaningful progress. The wider implication of this story is that meaningful empowerment is not given free of charge because the leading resource should be the community itself. More interestingly, the FFM would not have made this early impact had it spread its resources over a wide geography. We target a sizeable community and this is why we are able to address the three basic facets of community development: livelihood, education and health. Now the donors and the community are heroes together in this development which is spectacular not only in the district but also in the nation. Even those with chronic illnesses and the elderly can participate, meaning that the FFM has come up with a non-discriminatory model of empowerment which incorporates the oft forgotten.