

WHEN THE HEAVENS ARE SHUT, GOD OPENS A WINDOW

By Alfred Kalemba



Counting the loss: Stan Hamusunga recently graduated from The University of Zambia and decided to straight away go into farming. He has now lost his investment

The skies looked promising back in October. That is when our rainy season starts in Zambia. We only count three seasons – winter, summer and the rainy season, which starts in October and ends in March.

The rainy season is, without doubt, the most important season as it brings the much-needed water to fill our rivers, lakes and also to water our plants. Hence, this period is also referred to as the farming season, with cultivation and sowing of seeds such as our staple – maize or corn - in October or November and harvest taking place in April and May.

A large population of farmers in my country, especially the small-scale and subsistence farmers, depend on rain for their agriculture.

Many of our citizens had decided to grow maize, encouraged by attractive prices offered by the Government, which usually buys the maize to boost national reserves and for export to neighbouring countries.

Some who didn't have land of their own decided to rent pieces of land to grow maize. Muumbe and I, who have been practicing farming for some years now, didn't want to be left out of the frenzy to grow maize.

With the help of our friend, Brian Maydew and his family, we planted 10 hectares of maize at our Sibanyati Farm in Choma. Our son Lumba and his wife, Thondela, planted five hectares at the same farm.

We made sure we planted our seed in good time, applied fertilizer correctly and weeded the field to ensure maximum yield.

In January, we proudly showed our healthy-looking field of maize to Brian and his mission team on our way to Livingstone, where we visited some tourist attractions, including the world-famous Victoria Falls.

On our way back to Lusaka, Muumbe and I made another stop at Sibanyati and took pictures of our field with its lush stalks of maize that promised a very good harvest.

But then, there was no promise of rain in the sky, and days went by without a drop of the precious life-giving water; and days turned into weeks.

Soon, our good-looking maize began to wilt in the intense heat and dry weather. It soon became apparent that our country was facing a severe drought. We avoided visiting the farm as we were aware that our maize crop was dying for want of water; the sight of the dying maize would break our hearts.

On 3rd March, I drove to Livingstone with fellow facilitators Wana and Edna Kalala for the ILI History Makers conference that was held on 4th to 8th March, 2024.

I was somewhat happy that we were driving past our farm late in the evening and therefore would not make a stop-over. About a week later, as we drove back to Lusaka after the conference, I felt compelled to make a stop at the farm.

As we drove past some fields, including one that belonged to one successful commercial farmer, I saw maize withering under the scorching sun and dry, thirsty earth. The effect of the drought was all too clear.

When I looked at those maize fields, my heart sunk. I felt helpless. Usually around this time of the year, people

eat from their fields different fresh crops like pumpkins and maize. Food is plentiful and it is a happy time, especially for the villagers who solely depend on their fields for food.

Not so this year; hunger now stocks every home as the drought has affected over one million hectares of maize across the country, forcing our President Hakainde Hichilema to declare the drought a national disaster. The United Nations estimates that over six million of our citizens now face starvation, as the drought has affected 84 of our 116 districts, with the southern part, where I come from, being the worst affected.

Most threatened populations are those in rural areas, where citizens solely depend on subsistence farming for food, as well as low-income households in both rural and urban areas as food becomes scarce and prices are pushed upwards.

Our hearts go out to our people in villages like Muuka village in Sinazongwe district where I grew up and Sichibeya in Kalomo district where Muumbe grew up and our pastors in rural areas who are already experiencing hunger.

We think of children who will not be able to go to school for lack of food. This is really a big challenge in our nation. Pleas for help have already started coming as people start getting desperate for food. Recently, I got a text message on my phone from a man in Namwala pleading for help.

"We need help from you, we are in trouble dear father, we have no food," he wrote.

His major plea was for his nine-month-old grandchild Luyando Sibajene, who can't sit or stand, and is blind.

"We have exhausted all the funds we had trying to have the child treated but there is no change. These are the problems we have as a family," the man pleaded.

Compounding the situation, before the drought hit, farmers in Southern Province, lost their cattle to livestock disease.

Mungoni Simulilika, a farmer in Choma lost 35 of his 92 head of cattle. Even my 92-year-old mother, Maliya Zilombo, lost 19 of her animals, leaving her with only six. She is devastated by this massive loss.

Farmers are faced with the present challenge of hunger and future challenge of where to get capital for seed and implements for the next farming season. As we wrestle with these challenges that have no immediate answer I wish to propose the following:

1. As a nation, we must adapt to growing various food crops and also eat other foods like rice, potatoes, cassava, etc., instead of relying solely on nshima (maize meal).

2. Our policy makers must seek donors to help the nation grow the irrigation systems at commercial and household levels. God has blessed us with abundant water that run to the Indian Ocean every year and many other natural resources.

3. Households must learn to harvest water during the rainy season to be used in the dry months.

We are thankful that the government has directed the security wings to grow maize by irrigation. To our friends, brothers and sisters who are in a position to help us feed our people this year of little or no food in most cases, would you ask how God may use you to help us feed our people?

As I conclude, let us be reminded that national food shortage or times of famine have not started in our time. They were there in the Bible times. The Israelites were made to move from their homeland to Egypt, saved by their own Joseph and settled in Gorshen. Habakkuk, the minor prophet during the time of national hunger failure of crops declared, "Though the fig tree does not bud, and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails, and the field produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my savior." Habakkuk 3:17-18.

May God grant us joy even in hard times such as these. I believe that even when the heavens are shut, God still opens a small window to pour out his blessing for His people.



Thank you.

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