Renious Chademana (59) from Kandororo Village in Mangunje stands at the St Boniface dam wall reminiscing about the good old days. His mind drifts to 1968 when the dam was constructed. He used to come to the dam construction site as a little boy. He remembers how the whole community was excited when the dam was commissioned.

Finally, the community had enough water to sustain agricultural activities and for domestic use. Fifty-five years later, a lot has changed, Renious still lives in the same community with children and grand children of his own. He has grown, his family has also grown, and everything has improved. The same can not be said for the dam.

“This dam was and still is our source of livelihood– but the dam is now leaking due to some cracks on the wall. Because of the leakage, the dam quickly dries up, especially during the summer season. Last year it dried up and we had to dig (mupfuku) - shallow wells in the dam.

Most community members are into farming, and some have cattle, goats and sheep, so when the dam dries up our source of livelihood is threatened. The surrounding schools also depend on this dam. Seeing that the dam is also affecting learning for children at the school and threatening our livelihood, in 2021 we approached the church as a community seeking assistance in resuscitating the dam,” said Renious.

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Over the past 50 years, human activities have transformed ecosystems more rapidly and significantly to meet the growing demands for food, fresh water, timber, fiber, and fuel. The utilization of ecosystems has increased risks and exacerbated poverty for some groups of people, especially the vulnerable.

These problems, unless addressed, will substantially diminish the benefits that future generations obtain from ecosystems. St Boniface Dam is one of the many cases here in Zimbabwe.

To address some of these challenges Catholic Relief Services (CRS) in partnership with Caritas Diocese of Chinhoyi and the Government of Zimbabwe (GoZ) recently held a project inception meeting for the Zimbabwe Ecosystems Service Project in Hurungwe District with government stakeholders, local authority and community members.

“I was so happy when CRS and Caritas approached the community in 2022 to discuss the resuscitation plans. My fear was the dam was going to dry up one day so receiving the news felt like a dream,” said Renious cheerfully.

I am the chairperson at St Boniface High School and as a community, we are prepared to work with CRS and Caritas to fix the dam wall. We will also provide labor and other resources available in the community when necessary. I am very confident that this dam will return to its former glory,” said Renious cheerfully.

The Zimbabwe Ecosystems Project feeds into CRS’ goal area three, All People Achieve Dignified and Resilient Livelihoods in Flourishing Landscapes. Under this goal, CRS strives to end poverty by helping farmers and communities access the tools and resources to earn living incomes, cultivate flourishing landscapes, and build resilient communities.

I was so happy when CRS and Caritas approached the community in 2022 to discuss the resuscitation plans. My fear was the dam was going to dry up one day so receiving the news felt like a dream.

Through the Zimbabwe Ecosystems Project, CRS will also increase the integration of natural resource management and conflict mitigation initiatives and prioritize and expand climate adaptation support.

The project will also seek to expand inclusive financial services, including Savings and Internal Lending Communities (SILC), and pilot innovative financing approaches designed to engage the private sector in facilitating scale and driving sustainable outcomes.

CRS will also double down on efforts to empower youth and women to create more innovative solutions to poverty.

The three-year project targets 800 households in wards 11, 12 and 13.

Under the project, CRS and Caritas Chinhoyi will collaborate with the GoZ and local authority to; rehabilitate St Boniface Community Dam in Magunje, drill and equip two community boreholes, conduct training sessions on smart agricultural practices. Additionally, the partners will rehabilitate three boreholes and install solar equipment, conduct Gender Based Violence (GBV) Sensitization Meetings, conduct SILC Training, Community Visioning and Development of Participatory Action Plans for land restoration.
By Tariro Mhute

In 2020, Jennifer Ncube’s (40) life turned for the worst. Her husband lost his job in neighboring South Africa. He could not return home when the COVID-19 pandemic started due to travel restrictions. Faced with this predicament she had to find ways to single-handedly fend for her three children.

“A lot has changed in my life since I joined this project, my business has grown for the better because of the money I received. Life became very hard, I had to fend for our three children alone through my detergent-making business which I started in 2017 when I was trained by an organization called Orphan’s Friends. However, it was not easy as before, because of travel restrictions, I was failing to get ingredients for making dishwashing liquid and foam baths. My children and I survived from hand to mouth. I used all the capital from my business. I could not even bother my husband because he also couldn’t afford his rentals.” said Jennifer.

Zimbabwe declared the COVID-19 pandemic a national disaster in March 2020. To date, the country has recorded 262K confirmed cases and 5,652 deaths. The Government of Zimbabwe (GoZ) responded to the pandemic with regulatory measures as well as strict containment actions to stop the spread of the virus. Restrictions initially included movement restrictions, curfew, and limitations on gatherings.

Only those considered to be essential services were allowed to move about and remain open. By closing of informal businesses, marketplaces, and vending sites affected many people like Jennifer.

A ray of hope

“A few months later news came to us that a vaccine has been found and people could now get vaccinated and go back to work. My husband eventually got a job, and he was sending money back home, but it wasn’t enough, schools had reopened, and I paid fees. Even though I could revive the business, I had spent the capital buying food, so I put my business on hold.

“However, in 2022 we were called for a village meeting and told a new USAID project is going to give us capital to revive our businesses since COVID-19 had ended. I received $154 as a cash transfer and a voucher worth $50 meant to buy poultry. I used the money.

“A lot has changed in my life since I joined this project, my business has grown for the better because of the money I received. I even recruited my eldest son to join this business – it’s now a family business. My husband sends money back home, but I don’t have to wait for him all the time. Now I can afford to pay fees and put food on the table. I have been empowered and I know my future is so bright,” said Jennifer with a huge smile.

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Staying strong
Like many others, Tolani Nkomo (45) from Dinyane, Tsholotsho, felt the devastating effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Tolani and her husband are both unemployed and do menial jobs like working in other people’s fields. Due to the COVID-19 lockdown, they were left with no other means of survival.

“As a parent, your joy comes from providing for your children, that is what we live for. But during COVID-19, I felt like I had let my children down, I couldn’t even work because people stayed in their homes. Imagine waking up every day not knowing how you are going to feed your family.

We struggled as a family and ate what was there as means of survival. When the restrictions were lifted there was a ray of hope as employment opportunities started to open up, but life was still difficult” said Tolani as she narrated how she wished she had assets to keep the family afloat.

New Beginnings
“In 2022 heaven smiled back at us, I joined the Bambelela Project and received $154 and a $50 voucher to buy chickens. From the money, I bought these four goats. We only had chickens in this household and imagine a person like me is now a goat breeder. Soon after, my husband and I got a menial job and when we got paid, we added another goat to our herd. So now we have five goats.

Also, one of the goats is in kid and I am expecting that by June this year, we will have six goats. I am very grateful for the head start; I now have tangible assets something I never dreamt of. I dream of owning even more than 20 goats. This is only a start. I want to venture into buying and selling goats so that I can send my children to school.” continued Tolani.

Keep holding on
COVID-19 affected everyone in Zimbabwe. However, because 60% of people in Matobo and Tsholotsho are poor, families in these districts were affected the most. Additionally, Matobo and Tsholotsho lie in drought-prone regions posing risks, shocks, and threats to livelihoods.

The consequences of COVID-19 have been particularly severe on rural women, adolescents, and girls. In addition to their social and reproduction roles, they are also caregivers for children, the elderly, and the sick, and are also largely responsible for ensuring household food security. Additionally, the period the initial nationwide lockdowns saw a 38% increase in cases of violence against women and girls compared to previous months: 71% of these cases were reported as partner violence.

To address these socio-economic challenges, the USAID Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA) provided funding to Catholic Relief Services (CRS). Since 2022, CRS has used this funding to implement the Bambelela Project in partnership with Caritas Bulawayo and Tree of Life. In addition to livelihood restoration, the project is addressing protection issues for both children and adults. Bambelela is a Ndebele word that means “keep holding on”.

The project’s goal is to have vulnerable communities in Matobo and Tsholotsho better prepared to manage protection risks and effects of COVID-19 on livelihoods. The Bambelela project is implemented in six wards in Matobo and four wards in Tsholotsho targeting 5 000 households.
Bambelela Project: Gross Margin Statistics

During the month of March (27-31 March 2023), gross margin data was collected from projects participants who received the Bambelela cash transfer. The purpose of the exercise was to establish the percentage of beneficiaries who report net income from their livelihoods.

Summary Visual

A total of 1771 project participants were reached during the data collection exercise (240 males and 1531 females).

Livelihoods revived using BHA funds

Eighty percent of the participants reported having invested a portion of the cash transfer towards reviving a livelihood activity

Reported Net Income

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of participants who invested in reviving a livelihood</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Males who invested</td>
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<tr>
<td>Females who invested</td>
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<td>Total</td>
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