



Circular Letter N°1 - November 2025

By Roxane Cattaneo -

An assignment from Comundo



Dear readers,

Hello—or *muli bwanji*, as we say here. Welcome to this first circular letter, written from Zambia. Over the coming months, I will share with you glimpses of Zambia and of my work with Comundo.

As I write these lines, I am on my way to the Rufunsa district, where my organization is running a project (I promise, I'll tell you more about it later). Looking out the window, I remember the first time I saw these landscapes in July. They already seemed strangely familiar. Today, it has been five months. Five months already. Five months only. Time takes on a different dimension here; it becomes relative. But that's not what matters. What matters is the encounter. The exchange. The human connection. The community. And that is what I want to share with you in the lines that follow.

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Comundo sends co-workers to Kenya, Namibia, Zambia, Nicaragua, Colombia, Bolivia and Peru.

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Zambia: a land of contrast

Zambia is often described as a peaceful, stable country, rich in natural resources — a place imagined as vast golden savannas, villages with thatched roofs, and of course the majestic Victoria Falls, or Mosi-oa-Tunya (“the smoke that thunders”) by its proper name.

Behind this postcard image lies a more complex economic reality. Zambia is classified among the least developed countries despite its immense natural wealth, and it ranks among the most unequal in terms of income levels. Prices are rising, the kwacha fluctuates, and natural disasters — droughts and consecutive floods — further strain millions of households. The energy crisis, causing frequent power outages, also represents a major challenge.

But Zambia cannot be reduced to these extremes. It is a land of contrasts, even paradoxes.



Elephant's herd in Kafue National Park

Spend a little time in Lusaka, the capital, and you will see it: a vibrant mosaic where large modern malls coexist with bustling markets, where an emerging middle class shares space with a population living day to day.



Woman selling oranges on the streets of Lusaka

Travel just a few dozen kilometers outside the city, and you are plunged into nature. Vast, pristine arid lands are interrupted here and there by villages living in harmony with their environment, often without network coverage, electricity, and sometimes even water.

A few kilometers further, you find yourself in a national park, protected and preserved, with turquoise rivers attracting antelopes, elephants, lions, and other majestic animals. Be careful though—not for swimming; the waters are full of crocodiles.



A crocodile in Kafue National Park



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If Zambia struck me with its contrasts, it touched me even more with the warmth and hospitality of its people. Here, community comes before individualism, and it shows in every daily interaction. Greetings are not mere formalities: people genuinely ask how you are, and they expect an answer. If you are in difficulty, there will always be someone ready to help—a neighbor, a colleague, or even a stranger.

In cafés, sitting alone never lasts long: conversations, sometimes brief, sometimes deep, almost naturally begin. At work, integration comes as much from professional collaboration as from invitations to family events—including weddings—demonstrating hospitality that goes far beyond social convention.

This central place given to the collective gives Zambian life a rare human dimension, where one quickly feels welcomed, supported, and fully included in the social fabric, even as a newcomer. Zambia is a complex, beautiful, sometimes bewildering country, impossible to fit into a neat box. Perhaps that is what makes it so endearing.



With my colleagues at a Chilanga Mulilo

Zambia's rhythm: Life in music



Zambian artist Yo Maps performing in Lusaka

Music is omnipresent here, and it is probably one of my favorite aspects. It streams from buses, small shops, and mobile phones. It sets the pace for the day, for travel, for events. Between afrobeats, traditional rhythms, and gospel influences, music is more than art; it is a social language, a shared space in which everyone can find themselves.

The local scene is particularly vibrant, revealing a flourishing creativity. Festivals, intimate concerts, themed evenings—opportunities to discover new artists are almost daily.

Since my arrival, not a single weekend has gone by without a musical event coloring my days—a faithful reflection of the cultural energy animating contemporary Zambia.



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This musical effervescence has profoundly marked my personal experience. It has become an anchor, almost a thread that accompanies my own discoveries of the country. Songs heard by chance in a taxi or at a market have become familiar markers, fragments of daily life reminding me where I am and what I am experiencing. Music has allowed me to forge connections, understand cultural codes, and sometimes even spark conversations that would not have happened otherwise. It has offered me a way to enter Zambia through feeling rather than analysis—a vibrant, deeply alive auditory gateway.



The Nakabeya Mountain Festival in Lusaka



El Mukuka performing at the Island Party in Slavonga

Aging well: autonomy and knowledge transfer



Mr. Johns Chakuflyali in the onions field in Rufunsa

One thing we can all be sure of is that we will age. And “aging well” should be a right, not a privilege.

Africa is a young continent, and Zambia is no exception, with a median age of 17.9 years and only 5.5% of the population over 60. Issues related to older adults are therefore often deprioritized.

Yet in 2025, 80% of households headed by older people live in poverty, and more than one in three older adults report having experienced age-related discrimination. This affects their wellbeing, health, autonomy, and also the younger people under their care. In Zambia, many orphans and vulnerable children rely on their grandparents. Older adults also hold traditional knowledge, part of the country’s history



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Empowering and protecting the rights of older adults is therefore not only about ensuring their wellbeing; it also supports younger generations and ensures the transmission of knowledge across ages.

Improving social protection, access to healthcare, and recognition for older adults is a way of preparing for our own futures.



Mary Nkhuwa giving a speech in Rufunsa

Support To Older People-Zambia

Support To Older People-Zambia is a local NGO dedicated to older people, with a particular focus on empowerment and financial security. Its mission is simple but ambitious: to enable older adults to be valued, autonomous, and healthy. Across its programs, the organization actively promotes inclusion and intergenerational dialogue, believing that knowledge transfer and solidarity are central to community wellbeing.

My role with the organization is to support the teams in strengthening their communications, managing and showcasing their data, and documenting their actions.

For *STOP-Zambia*, older adults have the right to live dignified, productive lives. Its projects focus on skills development—sewing, carpentry, automotive mechanics—as well as income-generating activities like a red onion field and poultry farming. The common thread of these projects: bringing together older and younger generations to work side by side, improve household financial security, enable skills transfer, and break down stereotypes.

And the impact is real. For example, during a visit to a mechanics workshop in the rural Mukonchi district, a 60-year-old apprentice proudly shared his latest learnings alongside his 30-year-old trainer.

His smiling eyes conveyed joy and pride as he demonstrated his work—a smile we would like to see on every grandparent's face.



Tembo Davis, 60 years old mechanics trainee in Mukonchi district



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Social protection: towards inclusion

I mentioned earlier the economic challenges Zambia faces. Certain populations are particularly exposed: women, children, and older adults are among the most vulnerable.

Inequalities affect them disproportionately, and despite efforts to strengthen the social protection system, significant gaps remain.



Dancing and singing in a community meeting in Rufunsa

Consortium for the Rights and welfare of Older People

CROP (Consortium for the Rights and welfare of Older People), is a network of five organizations all working with older people. Its goal is to protect and promote their rights and to contribute to the development of more protective legislative frameworks.

To do this, CROP works closely with a variety of actors: civil society organizations, international agencies, and government institutions. Together, they aim to ensure that older adults are fully recognized, respected, represented, and protected.

The government is revising its social protection policy, taking a life-cycle approach—from childhood to old age. CROP is directly involved to ensure older people's needs are fully considered. This includes active participation in consultation workshops and formulating recommendations based on field observations and community exchanges.

I support the teams in structuring their advocacy strategies and actions for older adults' rights. This is long-term work aimed at strengthening their influence with decision-makers and ensuring public policies truly reflect the daily realities of older people.

Rufunsa: a story of resilience



Monitoring visit in the onions field in Rufunsa

To close this first newsletter, I want to share a story from the field, focusing on one particular project—the one I am visiting today as I write.

Code-named OPIES-II (Older People Income and Economic Strengthening), it carries behind it a very human story. In the heart of Rufunsa, a community gathered around a family that donated land to establish a cooperative for cultivating and selling red onions and other vegetables.



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This land, nestled in Zambia's natural landscape and which I discovered for the first time in my second week here, embodies collective effort: women and men of all generations working together to create a new source of income and strengthen household resilience.

Led by *STOP-Zambia* with support from *Comundo*, the project has equipped the cooperative with a borehole, a water tank, and a solar-powered irrigation pump, and has trained members in sustainable farming techniques.



Water tank and solar panel on the project site in Rufunsa (L), Village headman in the onions field (R)

Talking with cooperative members, I realized the impact goes far beyond income from onion sales. The project has fostered intergenerational dynamics, helped older adults feel useful and valued in their communities, and strengthened family ties.

Amid thousands of green shoots, I understood that impact isn't always about big numbers in polished reports; sometimes, it's a field of onions. Often quiet, this impact nonetheless profoundly transforms daily life for the communities involved.



In the onions' field in Rufunsa

As I finish this newsletter, the road ahead stretches between dry hills and villages where children wave with smiles at my passing. It is in this setting, between observation and immersion, that I continue my work with *STOP-Zambia* and *CROP*.

I hope these first lines have allowed you to glimpse a fragment of this reality—far more vast, nuanced, and alive than I could have imagined before leaving. I will return in the next newsletter with more stories from the field, more encounters, and perhaps a deeper understanding of what it truly means to “cooperate” day to day.

Thank you for accompanying me on this journey, both professional and profoundly human.





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Together for a fairer world

Comundo is the leading Swiss organization for development cooperation through the exchange of people. We currently have nearly one hundred active co-workers working in seven countries in the Global South. Every day, they collaborate closely with colleagues from local partner organizations to find innovative and sustainable solutions to combat injustice and inequality. We use three main tools to create lasting change: the exchange of co-workers, the funding of projects, and the promotion of networking.

At Comundo, we believe that each of us has a responsibility to act against injustice and inequality. Choosing to engage with us is a concrete way to contribute. Together, we can foster long-term change toward a fairer world. We are convinced that change is possible through an exchange between North and South based on mutual respect and trust.

Our mission is to promote networking, exchange, and cooperation among people and organizations from different continents, cultures, and religions. Our vision is guided by the belief that a world in which all people live together in equality, dignity, and peace is possible. In this way, we contribute to achieving the goals of the 2030 Agenda.

Comundo

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