



Circular Letter N°1 - November 2025

By Roxane Cattaneo -

An assignment from Comundo

In the shade of the Miombo trees: a story of learnings, participation and power of action



Dear readers,

Welcome to this second newsletter from Zambia.

As I write these lines, it has already been a year since I unpacked my bags in Lusaka, and it feels both incredibly distant and surprisingly close. I would have liked to say that after a year everything now feels familiar. But it is far from that simple. Each day brings its share of new experiences and challenges. And perhaps that is also the beauty of this journey: learning to adapt, time and again.

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

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One year. Even as I write it, it does not quite feel real. I now find myself halfway between the beginning of this experience in Zambia and whatever chapter comes next.

So, while it is still too early to take stock, I would like to share some reflections that have taken shape over the past few months.

To do so, I am going to tell you a story: the story of a day in the field with the team at STOP-Zambia, the organisation I work with here in Zambia.



Mr. Johns Chakuflyali in the onion field in Chipindani

It is a hot June morning in Rufunsa District. Far too hot, in fact. The cool season should already be settling in, yet this morning the temperature is hovering around 28°C.

While people in Europe might welcome a winter that is slow to arrive, here everyone is already thinking about what it could mean: a likely drought next year.

In a fragile economy that relies heavily on small-scale agriculture, that is very bad news. The consequences will be significant.

It is a reality that farmers must now learn to live with.

Over recent years, the frequency of droughts in Zambia has increased from once every five to seven years to once every two to three years. A very real consequence of climate change, whatever the sceptics may say.

As with all natural disasters, vulnerable populations are the hardest hit when drought occurs. Among them are the older people and children supported by *STOP-Zambia*.

For this reason, climate resilience has become one of the organisation's core areas of work with rural communities. Much of its recent efforts have focused on this issue.



Chimwemwe and Johns Chakuflyali with James Nguwo Kafupi Banda and Donald Syamuleya from STOP-Zambia transplanting tomatoes



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In my previous newsletter, I told you about the **OPIES-II project** and its community-led agricultural cooperative in Rufunsa. Since then, the project has grown considerably.

Following the first onion harvest, the cooperative has successfully cultivated and harvested maize and tomatoes. These successive harvests are gradually creating a steady source of income for the older people in the community.

And on this hot June morning, we find ourselves standing among rows of beans ready to be harvested, providing a training session on climate-smart agriculture.

From producing organic fertilisers and pesticides to water harvesting and storage techniques, and selecting drought-resistant seeds, the organisation is strengthening the community's capacity to manage future droughts and adapt to the changing climate in the years ahead. All of this is aimed at ensuring the long-term sustainability of both the project and its impact.



Training with members of the Ministry of Agriculture in Mukonchi



Donald Syamuleya, STOP-Zambia head of programmes

Protecting vulnerable populations in times of emergency

One of the activities that has occupied much of my time with the STOP-Zambia team over the past few months has been the preparation of an emergency response plan.

As I mentioned earlier, the likelihood of drought in the coming months is significant, but it is far from the only hazard Zambia faces.

The organisation is preparing to respond to floods, cyclones, human and animal disease outbreaks, and droughts in order to support and protect older people and the children in their care.

This plan, which is essential for the organisation, outlines the activities, expected results, required resources and response strategies for any humanitarian intervention undertaken.

The plan ensures that the organisation is prepared to respond effectively in times of crisis, while also including preventative measures to strengthen preparedness and enhance the capacity of at-risk communities to anticipate and respond to emergencies. Once again, resilience and long-term impact sit at the heart of the discussions shaping these strategies.



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Empowerment and participation

Sustainability, in fact, is one of the key challenges of cooperation through the exchange of people, and of my assignment here with *STOP-Zambia* and *CROP*.

Sustainability in the face of climate challenges, sustainability of transferred skills, sustainability of project impact... and this last dimension is impossible without building resilience, strengthening capacities and empowering local actors.



11-years old boy watering okras on the IGA site in Chipindani

This brings me to a transformation currently underway in the development and humanitarian sectors, one that must accelerate in the years ahead: **participation and locally led development**.

This approach involves moving away from a traditional "North-to-South" model towards greater autonomy for local organisations.



Mrs Stelia Phiri, carpentry trainer in Mukonchi

It rests on three fundamental principles:

- First, **the redistribution of decision-making power** and resource allocation to the people directly involved in projects;
- Second, **direct and transparent funding** that allows local actors greater flexibility;
- And third, **local ownership of projects** to build resilience and confidence over the long term.

Locally led development, as it is commonly known, is currently at the centre of many discussions across the sector, including within Comundo.

While there is broad agreement on the overall benefits of such an approach, it also brings its own challenges. Perhaps the most significant is that it requires a profound shift in mindset at every level, from the NGOs implementing projects to the major donors and institutions that fund them.



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Yet there is no better way to understand the impact of this approach than to experience it in the field.

And so I return to my story, that day in Chipindani, Rufunsa District.

Lunchtime is approaching and we have an appointment. Beneath the shade of a large tree bordering the field, the older members of the village begin to gather. The women, dressed in their traditional chitenge wraps, settle on a mat laid out on the ground. The men, despite the heat, have brought out their finest jackets. They sit on an assortment of mismatched chairs arranged here and there. The village Headman presides over the gathering. Everyone has come together to discuss, openly and transparently, the project's progress and challenges.

James Banda, STOP-Zambia's Director, presents the latest updates. Then, one by one, people begin to speak.

As I do my best to follow the conversation with my limited knowledge of Nyanja, they help us untangle challenges with an understanding of the context, daily realities and underlying issues that only they can provide. They share their analysis and advice, their wisdom and experience, their solutions and expectations.



Mary Nkhuwa,



Cooperative's members in Chipindani

Thirty minutes under the shade of a large tree.

That is all it took to reposition our approach after several months of obstacles. Thirty minutes that delivered more value than pages of carefully prepared reports.

The more time I spend in the field, the more convinced I become that the most relevant projects and the most sustainable impacts cannot be imported. They must be driven by the people and organisations who understand the context, the realities of everyday life, the traditions, and above all, the genuine needs.

That is how projects become both more relevant and more sustainable.

There is also another outcome that is often overlooked: enabling local communities to become more autonomous and actively participate in decisions that affect them, thereby increasing both their confidence and their capacity to act. In many ways, that is the very definition of empowerment.

In this context, and by way of conclusion, the role of international development organisations such as Comundo is therefore not to lead change, but to support those who are already building it.



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Our day in the field is already drawing to a close after this meeting. At half past one, it is time to begin the journey back to Lusaka. But first, there is no question of leaving without stopping at the market to enjoy *nshima*, Zambia's traditional dish.

Nshima is a thick maize meal porridge prepared by cooking maize flour in water, somewhat similar to polenta. It is eaten with local vegetables such as pumpkin leaves and sweet potato leaves, okra or impwa (my personal favourite), beans, and either meat or fish. On this occasion, my colleagues opt for chicken, while I, as a vegetarian, am spoiled for choice among the many vegetable dishes available.

As I roll the nshima in my hand, still trying to master the technique (one year has not been enough), the Headman, who has joined us for lunch, insists on the importance of the discussion we have just had and its value for the project.

Listening to him, I find myself drawing a parallel with my own profession.



Nshima, beans, okra, sweet potato leaves and pumpkin leaves

Communication as a tool for empowerment



Working in the field inevitably leads you to question your role, your usefulness and your impact. As a communications professional, it has undoubtedly changed the way I see my profession.

If communities should be at the centre of the decisions that affect them, then they should also be at the centre of the stories we tell about them.

Participation does not stop at identifying needs or implementing projects; it also concerns the way we represent the people we work with.

Every story we tell from the field holds power. It can change perceptions, challenge stereotypes, influence political decision-making and inspire support. But it can also, intentionally or not, reinforce harmful stereotypes or undermine people's dignity if we are not careful.



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That is why I firmly believe that communication must go hand in hand with accountability. Accountability towards the communities we work with, not only towards our audiences or donors.

This means questioning ourselves whenever we write a press release, speak about a project or share a photograph:

Are we representing people with dignity and respect?
Are we highlighting positive impact or appealing to pity?
Are we helping amplify local voices rather than speaking on their behalf?



Mr Johns Chakuflyali and his grand-children, Chimwemwe (R) and (L)

Communicating in the development sector means creating understanding within a complex environment, not oversimplifying reality at the risk of reinforcing clichés. It means making communities and minorities visible, not vulnerable. It means amplifying their voices and narratives, not speaking for them.

These are questions I ask myself every day, both professionally and personally, including while writing this newsletter. I hope that comes across as you read it. They form part of the many lessons I continue to learn from my experience here.

I am beginning to realise that my time in Zambia is teaching me less about providing answers and more about asking better questions:

How do we build truly sustainable projects? How do we support without directing? How do we communicate without speaking for others? How do we help strengthen communities' ability to act rather than replacing it?

I do not yet have all the answers. But what the field teaches me every day is that the most lasting change rarely comes from ready-made solutions. It is built through listening, trust and teamwork.

As I begin my second year here, that is the image I carry with me: a large tree offering its shade to a community gathered to imagine its future.

And with it, a renewed conviction that the most meaningful and enduring change always grows from participation, trust, and people's ability to shape their own story.

Thank you for continuing to follow mine.





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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 about 70 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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