

Report on Roy Dyche's trip to Bees Abroad's Zambian project: Empowering women through beekeeping, Monze, Zambia

I have recently returned from southern Zambia, where I was helping to launch the first twelve-month phase of our new three-phase project in Monze District, one of the country's least developed districts in which the levels of poverty are very high.



The SRDA team

Our aim is, in the course of the three years, to introduce modern beekeeping to six women's groups as a source of much needed income. The members of the groups will all be subsistence farmers, many of them solely responsible for the wellbeing of their households, which have an average of eight members. Almost all the women will have had no prior beekeeping experience.

Our local partner is the Sustainable Rural Development Agency (SRDA), a small NGO, with which I have worked in the past. This project is very similar to one we undertook together and completed in 2015.

The intention is that during each phase two women's groups will each be helped to set up an apiary equipped with eight hives* and be given all they need to manage their hives: a smoker, protective gear, gum boots and food-grade, airtight

containers. At the outset they will receive basic training, which will include small business skills, after which SRDA's field officers will visit the groups very regularly to see how they are faring and to conduct further practical training at appropriate times: for example, when the women's hives have honey ready to harvest they will be shown how to do this.

The purpose of my visit was to participate in the initial training and decide with our partner the phase's targets, milestones and success indicators.

During my stay I spent two days with the phase's new groups, both with 15 or 16 members. The SRDA director, Phillip Nsakilwa, had interviewed a number of groups eager to join the project. He wished to verify that their apiaries would be close to abundant forage and to check that they had already existed as a group rather than being formed specifically for the beekeeping project. It would then be more likely that they had a strong group identity and had shown they could work successfully together on joint enterprises.



One of the new groups



One of the two apiaries

The apiaries had been almost completed before I arrived and both were impressive. They were spacious and safely fenced to keep animals and children away from the hives, which had been well made and were securely hung from stout posts. The rainy season finished later than usual this year, so work on the apiaries had been delayed; it was understandable, therefore, that neither group had had time to clear vegetation from beneath the hives — an important measure which reduces the danger of ants gaining access to the hives — and the posts supporting the hives had still to be treated with sump oil to deter termites. I gather that within a week of my returning to the UK, both groups had completed these tasks.

* The hives are not simply gifted to the groups; they are required to pay a part of their cost from their honey sales. Giving the groups a financial stake in the project will, it is hoped, increase their determination to make it succeed.

At the time of my visit most of the hives were well shaded from the sun by tree foliage. When the trees lose their leaves, the women understood that insulating straw must be secured to their hives' metal roofs, so that excessive heat within the hives does not cause the bees to abscond.

After inspecting the apiaries, Phillip, an SRDA field officer and I conducted the basic training in apiary and hive management, adopting the 'participatory' approach that aims to keep trainees actively involved in the proceedings: questions were encouraged and these certainly kept us on our toes, the smoker-lighting competition was hotly contested and great fun, and once they had been shown how to do it, the women were required to apply starter wax to top bars and bait several hives inside and out.



The smoker-lighting champions!



The women waxing top bars

It was very clear that the women had found the training engaging and entertaining; and it had also become clear in the course of the training that there were a number of members in both groups who will eventually have the self-confidence to open and harvest their hives without any help from SRDA.

Before I left for the airport, Phillip and I spent some hours together discussing a few minor issues that had become apparent prior to and during my stay and agreeing a detailed memorandum of understanding, which included targets, milestones and success indicators.

It had been a most enjoyable visit and I took my leave satisfied that the groundwork for the first phase had been well laid.

Roy Dyche
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