

Case Studies on Women in Organic Agriculture in Africa

Fortunate Hofisi Nyakanda, ZOPPA, Zimbabwe



Nyakanda at her ZOPPA office

Fortunate Hofisi Nyakanda was born on the 9th of June 1969 in Guruve, a rural district north of Zimbabwe, to peasant farmers. She majored in rural development and received her MSc at the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences. She also holds diplomas in agriculture and organic agriculture. She is married and has three children.

Nyakanda, 40, now the chief executive of the Zimbabwe Organic Producers and Promoters Association (ZOPPA), developed a strong passion for organic agriculture (OA) while working on an organic growing program in the Zambezi Valley with the Lower Guruve Development Association (LGDA) in 1993.

Before joining ZOPPA, the national movement that brings together organic producers, promoters and processors, she first worked with 40 women in the Mushumbi, Chitsungo and Mahuwe wards in the Lower Guruve district. She gained vast experience in this programme and helped the women to establish organic cotton trial plots and to learn and share information on production techniques using new information blended with the local knowledge they had.

“Knowledge is like a baobab tree: no one can embrace it alone. I learnt a lot from my interactions with the women. Sharing information with women at the grassroots helped me to grow professionally. I became wiser, more experienced and better informed. The women, too, left more experienced, more learned and better informed. This was critical for my professional development,” Nyakanda said.

The organic cotton program, she said, was a huge success and a first in Zimbabwe. Over time people began to see that it was possible to grow cotton organically without the use of chemicals that are harmful to their health. Organic agriculture rallied people together; women supported each other and this opened new ground for them to extend their community spirit to other HIV and Aids programs. Women in this area, she said, carried the heavy burden of the harmful effects of cotton chemicals such as Karate and Rogor which saw many of them suffering from stomach ache, nausea, dizziness and general body weakness.

“I shared with them the benefits of organic farming: no exposure to chemicals and no acute



Nyakanda with farmers from Nkayi and Gwanda attending an organic training course at Fambidzanai Permaculture Centre in Harare

and chronic illness related to exposure to dangerous chemicals used in conventional agriculture. In the Zambezi Valley it was hot and taboo for women to wear protective clothing. Because of this, they got exposed more and carried the heavy burden of the harmful effects of cotton chemicals.

“The organic cotton program changed their attitudes and many had to shift their practices to this safe and environmentally friendly approach. We went further, from growing organic cotton to processing the products into T-shirts and other materials. It was quite fulfilling to go through such a process,” Nyakanda said.

“I experienced the resourcefulness, determination and optimism of the rural women in the Zambezi Valley. I believed that a better world is possible with organic agriculture.”

Nyakanda later joined AFFOREST in 2003, where she continued working with the farmers in the Zambezi Valley, offering them training, technical support and producing training manuals on OA.

Organic Agriculture –the way to go



Nyakanda holds cleome gynandra, a popular indigenous vegetable in Zimbabwe

In a country saddled with rural poverty, she said, organic farming has a great potential to draw households out of dire poverty, food insecurity and malnutrition in Zimbabwe.

“If we develop our local organic industry, it means that organic production can open up other opportunities, such as rural financial institutions and civil society, consumer demand and a stable market. The local organic industry can help the local economy to grow, while at the same time helping to regenerate the land, reduce the decline of biodiversity and improve farm productivity,” Fortunate said.

Nyakanda was elected chairperson of ZOPPA in 2007, becoming the first woman in the history of the country to head the organic movement.

“This was a huge opportunity for me to make a difference in the future direction of the organic movement in Zimbabwe. I wanted to call attention to the organization and go a step further to increase membership and collaborate with other international partners, such as the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM) and others,” she said.

ZOPPA under her leadership has managed to open an office, to join IFOAM, to be registered as a trust and to bring together 100 organic producers, promoters and processors for the development of organic agriculture in Zimbabwe.

ZOPPA, she said, is promoting organic agriculture as an alternative farming system that removes dependency on chemical and seed companies, improves people’s health, and balances the ecosystem while giving a livelihood to the poor who cannot access seed and chemicals.

She said her organization is now actively involved in lobbying and advocating for a policy framework that supports the production, harvesting and marketing of organically produced food according to set standards. Apart from this, ZOPPA provides information on organic farming, coordinates the organic industry and mobilizes resources for research in organic farming and bio-inputs.

“We want ZOPPA to make a meaningful contribution towards a nation that is committed to using natural means of agriculture to ensure a healthy future for the land and its people,” Fortunate said.

Since ZOPPA got funding from Hivos in 2007, she said progress has been made in terms of raising awareness, opening up export markets, increasing membership and training, improving livelihood opportunities for women, promoting the processing of organic fertilizers, gaining media coverage, certifying organic farms, and collaborating with international partners.

She launched a passionate defence of OA. “We need to debunk the myths that organic agriculture is for the poor, its yields are poor and that it will starve the nation. We need to dispel misconceptions that OA is backward agriculture, that it impoverishes and starves a nation, that it is inappropriate for the South,” she said.

“We have to stop seeing OA as an alternative but as mainstream agriculture with huge benefits for mankind. It’s miles and miles away from conventional agriculture in terms of benefits.” OA, she said, when promoted extensively, has a great potential to increase productivity and increased yields, decrease susceptibility to drought, pests and flooding, decrease dependence on the use of fossil fuel, raise groundwater levels, increase soil fertility and make the soil more resilient to erosion. She said it was also important for the rehabilitation of damaged land, increasing incomes, improving livelihood opportunities for women as well as increasing biological diversity and the promotion of production of ecosystem services.



Nyakanda dips a 'thermometer' stick into a compost heap

“Africa must restore OA to its rightful position, especially now when the continent is facing food and nutritional insecurity, experiencing a rapid loss of agrobiodiversity and a general rise in non-communicable diseases such as diabetes, cancer and others, which are coming as a result of eating refined Western foods and GMOs,” Nyakanda said.

“Africa must be at the forefront of the organic movement to save its people from low value monotonous foods produced by using unsustainable production methods. Organic farming is an important adaptation and coping strategy for rural farmers in the wake of emerging threats such as climate change risks and GMOs.”

Since the formation of ZOPPA, she said, players in the Zimbabwe organic industry are now exporting essential oils such as the Mexican marigold, lavender, tea tree oil, eucalyptus oils and lemon grass oil to France, Germany, Britain and other European markets, helping them to generate foreign currency. Apart from exporting, the players are also selling brassicas, mushrooms, onions, indigenous vegetables and organically produced crops on the local markets.

“I cannot give an estimate of the contribution of OA to the economy, but I’m optimistic that in the near future it will generate 20-30% of national revenue from exports. The potential is great and we have to raise awareness and lobby the government to enact laws that promote organic agriculture as well as strengthening the capacity of those involved,” Nyakanda said.

Despite having made a variety of achievements, she said, the organic industry still faces numerous challenges such as lack of resources, marginalization and the absence of laws and policies that support its activities.

Nyakanda says she has gained a lot from working in the organic agriculture sector.

“Organic agriculture played a major role in my professional development. I have learnt a lot and I still am learning; it’s enriching and fulfilling. I can’t imagine a career outside organic agriculture,” she said. “It has opened the world for me. I have met other organic enthusiasts from other parts of

the world and shared experiences, and this has given me confidence and hope that organic farming is the way to go.”

She said organic farming has provided mankind with an enriched way of life in many ways, including through economic benefits. “I believe that our agricultural system must be economically viable, environmentally sound, socially just, and meet the needs of today without compromising the needs of future generations. We reject the philosophy that we must poison our environment or use radical genetic engineering of plants and animals to produce enough food for us all to eat.

“Genetic engineering is not about feeding the world, it's about feeding the companies that are the promoters!” she said.

She has big dreams for Zimbabwe’s organic industry. “Zimbabwe has to go organic. We have the land and resources. We need to raise awareness and lobby the government to take the industry seriously. A huge market awaits the country’s organic producers. The market is hungry for organic products and we have to seize this opportunity.”

“I see organic agriculture – long seen as a sign of underdevelopment and backwardness – becoming a critical lever for adapting to climate change and a pillar for good health and a sustainable environment.”

Sifelani Tsiko

Journalist in Zimbabwe



Nyakanda in an organic forest garden

For more information about ZOPPA see the website: <http://www.zoppa.org.zw/index.php>