

Mr Phiri, The Water Harvester of Zvishavane

I was rummaging through some old files in the Oxfam Archives in Bicester, Oxfordshire, this week and came across ZIM 151, the file for the Zvishavane Water Project. In it, I found a note addressed to me, dated 13 July 1987, from Peter Nyoni, Oxfam GB's Country Representative for Zimbabwe. In it Peter wrote:

It's much easier to write about this after your recent visit which gave you a chance to meet some of the people involved, to see the extreme dryness of the area, and its population and stock pressure. *I expect the memory of both Mr Phiri and Sr Chiedza will remain writ large on your mind for a long time to come.*

Peter was absolutely right. It has, 23 years later.

At that time, I had worked in Southern Africa (colonial Zimbabwe, Malawi and Zambia) as a academic for 20 years, and had just joined Oxfam as its Desk Officer for Zimbabwe and Zambia. I was to work for Oxfam for another 20 years.

Zephaniah Phiri Maseko, *The Water Harvester* (to cite the title of a book about him) is without doubt one of the most charismatic and deeply impressive individuals I encountered during those 40 years.

On 22 June 1988, it was an absolute delight to host Mr Phiri in Oxfam House in Oxford. We spent a wonderful day, the highlight of which was undoubtedly his lunchtime talk, illustrated with brilliant slides, which truly captivated the audience. At the end of the day we took him to the Pitt-Rivers Museum to meet the academic, Paul Richards, who, I wrote at the time, 'is very concerned to make people in the UK listen to people like Mr. Phiri.'

This visit helped to spread Mr Phiri's fame throughout Oxfam, and I fear we inflicted far too many visitors on him in Zvishavane. Many of their impressions are recorded in file ZIM 151. But you could hardly blame us, for both he and his work were quite extraordinary. Within Zimbabwe too, he received a regular flow of local visitors coming to learn how he, a self-taught farmer, had caused 'the desert to bloom.'

In a 1992 Oxfam book, *Zimbabwe: A Land Divided*, which I wrote with Izzy Birch, we included an interview with Mr Phiri talking about his life and work which ended with these words:

Our main projects are now dams, tanks for rainwater collection from roofs, fishponds, and gardens. We are going to schools to set up the roof collection systems. This will help to spread the message: the children will see how it works, and go home and tell their parents. And then they might want to set up a tank too. We also want to encourage people to plant indigenous trees, because they do so much to save soil and water.

That captured the very essence of what the Zvishavane Water Project was all about.

In late November 2006, just three months before I retired from Oxfam, I seized the chance to visit Mr. Phiri again. Afterwards, I wrote this little piece which was published in *The Zimbabwean* on 14 December 2006.

A VISIT TO THE WATER HARVESTER

BULAWAYO – When I was in Bulawayo recently for an Oxfam International meeting, I took the opportunity to visit a Zimbabwean hero I had not seen for over 15 years. He is Zephaniah Phiri Maseko, the water harvester. ‘Mr Phiri’, as everyone calls him, is now a veteran of 79. He travelled to Washington last month to receive a Leadership in Conservation Award from the National Geographic Society. In the accompanying press release, the NGS spoke of his outstanding lifetime work and leadership and described him accurately as an ‘inspirational conservation advocate who serves as a role model and mentor to his community.’

I first met Mr Phiri in 1987, when I joined Oxfam GB, and travelled regularly in Zimbabwe. He was an inspirational and charismatic figure then. He had been tortured and jailed by the Rhodesian authorities for his political beliefs, denied employment and so had turned to the land to support his family. With a little help from Oxfam, he had just set up the Zvishavane Water Project to help spread his self-taught conservation messages. Mr Phiri has only Standard Six education, but this has not deterred him from ‘learning by doing’ water conservation on his communal area farm 20km outside Zvishavane just off the Shurugwe road. One of the many remarkable things about his enterprise is that he always envisaged it as helping his community, not just himself.

So it was with immense personal joy that I met him again at his home. Age is beginning to take its toll, as he freely admitted, but he had lost none of his enthusiasm. He took us on a vigorous tour of his ‘Garden of Eden’, a perennial wetland which is now 40 years old. His home lies beneath a large rock formation. He has harnessed the water that flows from it and captured it in ‘Phiri pits’ so the water can seep through the soil below and nourish his crops and fruit trees. Below these are further pits which prevent the rain water flowing away from his fields. The water retained here is used for fish ponds. He has significantly raised the water table under his land and that of his neighbours. He farms organically, which has helped sustain the fertility of the soil.

For me the most rewarding thing was being accompanied by three young Zimbabwean colleagues working for Oxfam in Zvishavane. They had not known of Mr Phiri before my visit and it was moving to observe the obvious and genuine respect in which they held him and his achievements. At a time when we hear so much about global warming and climate change, Zephaniah Phiri Maseko stands as a true visionary.

He is one of the most remarkable people I have ever met in my life.

Robin Palmer
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