

The Zephaniah Phiri Legacy

When Ken Wilson asked me to pay homage to the innovative work of VaPhiri, I just asked myself the question; “where do I start from?” This is because I have known VaPhiri since 1975, initially as a primary school pupil when my father was transferred to go and teach at Msipani Primary School in Zvishavane District. I and a group of friends used to go to VaPhiri’s homestead to buy vegetables having been sent by our parents. Although it was some distance to get there I would always look forward to such errands because VaPhiri would give us watermelons and sweet-reeds (ipwa nenzimbe as free-biz) harvested from his well-tendered small farm.

As a young adult I again met VaPhiri in a more professional role in 1988. He and I teamed up to set up an organisation out of the innovative agricultural work VaPhiri was spearheading in rural Zvishavane. I worked with him and helped set up the Zvishavane Water Projects, which was basically an organisation that enabled VaPhiri to reach out to as many communal farmers as he could with the support of a team of both field and office staff.

VaPhiri changed the lives of so many small scale communal farmers in Zvishavane, Mberengwa, Shurugwi and Chivi Districts with his practical demonstration of how to harvest rain water even in semi-arid conditions. His work changed the attitudes of so many framers he came in contact with...where previously there were some who were resigned to life of supplementing their meagre farm produce with hand-outs from well-wishers, VaPhiri empowered these farmers with practical knowledge and confidence to be self sufficient in their own natural environment.

Conservation of the natural environment was his message. The message was clear and simplelook after the natural environment you are living in and that environment will look after you and your family. Make use of the natural environment on a sustainable basis and that environment will be preserved for future generations. This is how vaPhiri impacted on the lives of other communal farmers in Zvishavane. VaPhiri not only worked closely with individual families and groups of farmers, he also reached out to rural primary and secondary schools with his message and good works. This saw water tanks being built at schools in Msipani, Mototi (in Mazvihwa) and Ndinaneni (in Wedza), just to mention a few. As Zvishavane Water Project we used to host a number of different farmers group from around Zimbabwe who came on field visits to our projects and most importantly to VaPhiri’s farm.

VaPhiri did indeed touch the lives of my people with his great works and I believe he still is doing so. This seemingly ordinary man has done so much great work in agriculture and conservation of the natural environment that the “more learned professionals” could take a leaf or more. This is the Legacy of VaPhiri.

I truly was privileged to have worked with such an extra-ordinary yet humble man.