

Visually impaired students grow better maize

In Ndola, Zambia's second largest city, a special school for the visually impaired recently added agricultural production to its programme. The students learn to produce various food crops as well as pigs. Last year, they won the prize for the best maize, outcompeting all the "normal" schools in the area.

Humphrey Nkonde

The costs of running the Ndola Lions School for the Visually Impaired have increased as a result of attracting more pupils, and higher food and transport expenses. Its premises now accommodate 120 students, boys and girls aged 7 to 16. By 2006, the long-running government grant could no longer sustain the school's operational costs. The school administration then decided that the pupils should be involved in agriculture to make the institution self-sufficient in food, and to help raise some income.

Contribution to agriculture

In the early stages of crop establishment, the visually impaired cannot be involved in farming maize. This is because they

cannot tell which is the food crop and which is grass by sense of touch alone. Once the maize grows, however, blind students can feel the difference, and are therefore capable of weeding. After the maize is harvested, it is ground to produce Zambia's staple food, *nshima*, to feed the students. Sometimes the students eat meat, from the pigs that the pupils also look after with the help of support staff. The school now has a piggery for about 20 pigs. Left-over food supplements feed from millers, keeping the cost of running the piggery low.

The students also grow bananas and vegetables, which supplement their food needs and provide income for the school. It is interesting to see how organised the students are. When the bell to go to the garden rings, the partially blind pupils help keep their completely blind colleagues in a line. Upon reaching the garden, one child connects the hosepipe to the tap while others fill plastic containers and buckets to water the vegetables, tomatoes and bananas. Two years ago the school only had five banana plants, but the number has now shot up to almost 130 plants. With a borehole in place, there is abundant water for the bananas, which need a lot of water. The students' commitment can be seen from the fact that the plants are always watered. If there are problems, they are rectified by support staff.

It is commonly believed in Zambian society that the differently-abled, including the blind, cannot be involved in agriculture. Surprisingly, the school demonstrated the best agricultural practices in the 2006/2007 farming season among over 50 basic schools in Ndola. How did the pupils with partial or no sight at all produce the largest cobs of maize from the same seeds that were distributed to other schools? Clearly, people with disabilities can very well contribute to food security through small-scale agriculture. In fact, it is only lack of capital that prevents the students becoming involved in other forms of agriculture such as chicken rearing or fish farming – there is a fish pond lying idle.

Beyond basic school

After about nine years at Ndola Lions School for the Visually Impaired, pupils attain the junior secondary school level of Grade 9. Those who make it to senior secondary school go to other parts of the country, where there are extensions for special education meeting the needs of the visually impaired. There is also the Kang'onga School for the Blind in Ndola, where some former pupils go for advanced subjects such as basketry and handicrafts, though this school also suffers from lack of funding. The main job that suits the visually impaired is working in exchange rooms as telephone operators, but with the advent of mobile phones, these jobs have become scarce. Because of the agricultural knowledge they gain at the basic school, many graduates continue to garden even when they are drawn into other professions, such as personnel management or special education. Some graduates have established smallholdings in Kang'onga, where they practise farming to make a living.

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This article is based on discussions with Daniel Mwamba, Deputy Headmaster of the Ndola Lions School for the Visually Impaired, and with the boarding master, Stephen Mumba.



Photo: Humphrey Nkonde

Being visually impaired is not an impediment to cultivating tasty and beautiful bananas!