

Meet Lizzie Shumba:

Advancing nutrition,
climate adaptation, and
gender justice in Malawi



We interviewed Lizzie Shumba who works directly with communities in northern Malawi to facilitate and support agroecological transitions. Lizzie narrated how agroecology came to be a focus of her work and highlighted its potential as a people-centered and equitable movement. Her story tells of how she moved from a focus on malnutrition to tackling themes of nutrition, gender, and farmer-led research and offers inspiration for anyone seeking to support agroecology in their own context.

While Lizzie’s background is in nutrition and agriculture extension her interventions to address malnutrition have been truly agroecological in that her approach is holistic and focuses on root causes. After studying nutrition at the Natural Resource College of Malawi, Lizzie was working in the hospital with Soils, Foods, and Healthy Communities (SFHC). Lizzie shared:

“There were high rates of child malnutrition. [So, then SFHC] conducted a baseline study to find out: what were the major causes of child malnutrition? We found out that most of the farmers’ fields had degraded soil. Because of the degraded soil, they couldn’t harvest enough food. Most households were having food insecurity. At that time, the households only knew one approach of farming whereby they were doing monocropping, only maize. So, in terms of nutrition, it was very difficult for the children because they only had cereals, no supplemental proteins.”

So, working with SFHC, Lizzie and her research team brought legume seeds including soyabeans, cowpea, pigeon pea, and groundnut to farmers and facilitated trainings on intercropping the legumes to improve the soil by fixing nitrogen. They also facilitated cooking days and workshops on how to process the beans for consumption. In this way, the legumes provided protein as an essential nutrient for malnourished children, and they also improved the degraded soils.

Although these **agroecological interventions** did have a positive impact on addressing malnutrition and soil health, Lizzie and her team soon discovered that gender inequality was preventing some of the positive impacts of this intervention. In one story that Lizzie told, a family had children who were malnourished, and the woman had been looking forward to their groundnut harvest to feed her children. But when harvest came, the husband took the groundnuts, sold them, and used the money frivolously.

In the communities where Lizzie worked, **gender inequality** meant that women were largely excluded from access and control of household resources and decision making. Women were not supposed to speak during

community meetings and did not get to decide how to use their household funds. While in many cases women did most, or all, of the agricultural labor as well as household chores and childcare, they were excluded from taking part in decisions around what types of crops to grow or how to utilize the harvest. Women were also excluded from the resources that they need to accomplish these tasks. For example, many women work in other people's land to have some money to buy seeds, but this means that by the time they get the money to plant the seeds it is late in the season and the harvest is less successful.

To address gender inequality in the communities, Lizzie and her team worked to design a training for both men and women members of families on gender, gender roles, and decision-making power. At the beginning of the training, Lizzie facilitated exercises for both the husband and wife to speak on how they share their household roles and to discuss gender roles. They quickly found out that women were doing much more work than the men were. From this, the participants of the training spread their knowledge. Like the practice in agroecology of Farmer-to-Farmer networks, these gender workshops used a peer-to-peer system. In the villages, they would perform dramas or skits on gender dynamics for the whole community, and then discuss how they might begin to share the labor more in their homes and villages. They also gathered for “recipe days” where Lizzie and her team would facilitate trainings on processing food and cooking meals – with men also taking part!

These *gender interventions* had a remarkable success. Though it took some time to adjust, Lizzie shared that a second survey five years after the training revealed that women had become more involved in decision making around crops and harvest and saw husbands taking up household chores such as cooking. Crucially, women also began to participate in meetings and even join committees for community-level decision making.



FIGURE 1. LIZZIE SHUMBA (ON LEFT) WITH RESEARCH PARTNERS ESTHER LUPAFYA AND RACHEL BEZNER KERR. PHOTO CREDIT: CARMEN BEZNER KERR.

Lizzie explained that many men were in fact aware that their wives were tired and doing most of the work, but they did not help for fear that other men would laugh at them or think less of them for doing “women’s work”. The workshops acted as a social lever to start a change. In the interviews, several men shared "Before, I was shy because my friends would ask why I would cook for my wife but now I can say that I took the training and I help my wife with the work." Through the gender workshops, Lizzie and her team helped to facilitate a shift to more gender equity despite challenging the social norms.

Other agroecological interventions also challenged *cultural norms*. Farmers in the community had requested support in finding seeds and agroecological options to be more resilient to the variable rainfall and degraded soils in the region. Collaborating with *farmer networks*, Lizzie and her team had found that the Bambara nut (a legume) is highly drought-tolerant and nutrient dense, so it would be an effective option, as well as having the benefit of improving nutrition and soil. However, Lizzie’s research found that in the Northern region of Malawi (unlike the central and southern regions), that Bambara nuts were not being grown, despite these wonderful properties. As Lizzie shared, empowering change requires listening to members of the community, and through this practice, Lizzie learned that people in Northern Malawi had a cultural understanding that they could not grow Bambara nuts unless they had lost a child.

Lizzie and her research team helped some farmers to travel into the central region as a part of a Farmer-to-Farmer exchange where they met people who were growing Bambara nuts but had never lost a child. From this exchange, the farmers from the North realized that it was just a cultural belief, and they could indeed grow the Bambara nut. It was through these personal observations and connections that farmers became willing to grow it. In a further display of the power of Farmer-to-Farmer exchange, those Northern farmers who went back home and began to grow Bambara nut were able to further act as an example of Bambara nut growth in their own communities. People were able to see for themselves from peers that there was no relation between Bambara nut and losing a child. Through this farmer exchange and power of personal observation, communities in the North were able to integrate this important crop.



FIGURE 2. LIZZIE SHUMBA (MIDDLE) ADDRESSING A GROUP OF FARMERS IN NORTHERN MALAWI. PHOTO CREDIT: LIZZIE SHUMBA.

Farmer exchange through *farmer-to-farmer networks* is an essential part of agroecology and has been an essential strategy for adapting to a rapidly changing climate. In her own words, Lizzie says that “farmer-to-farmer is the best teaching approach to bring novelty.” Novelty has been needed. Farmers were experiencing challenges due to rainfall variability leading to long droughts and dry spells and then heavy flooding. Farmers approached Lizzie and her team asking if they could conduct research on climate adaptation to address these challenges. Funded by the Collaborative Crop Research Program (CCRP), Lizzie and her team started a Farmer Research Network (FRN) across 400 villages with two representatives (one man and one woman) in each who are selected by the farmers themselves. Extension support is inaccessible in these regions, but FRN members are trained in nutrition and agroecological practices and can then offer support to their communities. One key project the FRN has undertaken has been researching climate adaptation.



FIGURE 3. VANESSA EXPLAINING TO A GROUP OF PROMOTERS IN MALAWI. PHOTO SOURCE: RACHEL BEZNER KERR. FIGURE 4. MARGARET SHONGA GIVES THE THUMBS UP WITH HER FAMILY. PHOTO CREDIT: RACHEL BEZNER KERR.

To experiment on how to create *climate resilient farms*, Lizzie and her team went into each village and experimented together with community members in a demonstration plot of the communal field. Together, they tried a variety of crops and methods and observed the impacts. There, Lizzie engaged farmers actively, she said, by asking farmers, “What do you see? Why do you think this is happening? What do you think of this crop or this innovation? [If] this is not working, what can be done?” From there, members of the FRN across the regions integrated these learnings by planting diverse crops and implementing various agroecological practices including compost, intercropping, and cover cropping. The impact of these interventions became apparent in the communities when, during a dry spell, the farmers who had adopted these agroecological practices still had green crops growing whereas their neighbors’ crops were brown and dried.

Because farmers could so easily see the difference for themselves and had the support of the FRN members in their community, many more farmers were able to adopt these agroecological practices. In this way, Lizzie and the research team were able to elevate and promote farmer expertise to create horizontal learning, using their position as researchers to facilitate a participatory process.

Lizzie’s experience as a researcher has centered around humility and respect—essential elements to the deeply embedded approach to *participatory research, learning and action* that characterizes her work. She shared what is vitally important in working with communities:

“When you are working with the communities, it has to be you, yourself. You have to be like them—be in their shoes. You have to be of the same level. Make sure you are understanding, and you respect their culture. You should also be able to listen to what they are saying. Because if you listen to what they are saying, because of their local knowledge that they have, it helps you to improve your work. So you need to have those skills if you want to work with the communities.”

These lessons that Lizzie shares are a testament to her strength as a *participatory researcher*—she has now been cultivating relationships with communities that extend over 20 years that are marked by trust and affection. However, she shared that the relationship did not begin with such confidence.

As a young woman from outside the community, when Lizzie began working with farmers in northern Malawi, they did not believe that she would be able to help them. During her first visit in the community, farmers said, *“Do you think this small girl is going to teach us? She doesn’t even know our language!”* By the next visit, Lizzie was beginning to speak their language and gaining confidence, and soon, she gained the trust and confidence of the community as well by becoming fluent in their language and connecting with them directly. Now, she is respected and appreciated. She attributes this to being willing to learn, being herself, and putting herself at the same level as people in the community.

It is this exemplary approach to *participatory-based agroecology* that has contributed to such effective interventions in Lizzie’s work: from legume integration to gender workshops to climate adaptation experiments. The relationships that Lizzie has built as a part of her work demonstrates the power of a relational approach to research and action for agroecology and how long term personal and collective commitments in place contribute to a wider movement for agroecology.

Colophon

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Created with the support of the Collaborative Crop Research Program of the McKnight Foundation

Suggested citation: Blume, S., & Bucini, G. (2022). *Meet Lizzie Shumba: Advancing nutrition, climate adaptation, and gender justice in Malawi*. Perspectives on Agroecology Transitions – No. 4. Agroecology and Livelihoods Collaborative (ALC), University of Vermont.

About the Agroecology and Livelihoods Collaborative: The [Agroecology and Livelihoods Collaborative](#) (ALC) is a community of practice at the [University of Vermont](#), which utilizes an approach grounded in [agroecology](#), [participatory action research](#) (PAR) and [transdisciplinarity](#). The ALC approaches agroecology by integrating ecological science with other academic disciplines (e.g. agronomy, sociology, history, etc.) and knowledge systems (e.g. local, indigenous, etc.) to guide research and actions towards the sustainable transformation of our current agrifood system.

About the CCRP Program: The Collaborative Crop Research Program (CCRP) is a program of [the McKnight Foundation](#) that has funded agricultural research since the 1980s. Working in three regional [communities of practice \(CoPs\)](#) in Africa and South America, CCRP projects generate technical and social innovations to improve nutrition, livelihoods, productivity, environmental sustainability, rural vibrancy, and equity for farming communities. CCRP engages in local, regional, national and global processes to support agroecology transitions.