

And the winners are... The Phiri Award Innovators of 2014

Last week, the first ever five winners of the [Phiri Award](#) were announced. All five illustrate the persistence and determination so typical of innovators. As Phiri Award Trustee, John Wilson, explains:

“The Phiri Award Trust believes that it’s crucial that we learn from farmer innovators and other innovators in the food chain as we strive to find sustainable and healthy ways of producing and processing food. During this first year’s process to find and select innovative farmers there was some muddle between who is a good farmer and who is an innovative farmer. An innovative farmer is someone who has tried out and developed new ways of doing things. (S)he has not simply adopted practices from others”.

All those nominated this year are men who came from only three of the country’s provinces. The Trust is committed to changing this next year. Nominations from around the country, and particularly of women and younger farmers or those involved in the food chain are welcomed. Get in touch by email: phiriaward@gmail.com.

Anyway, I thought Zimbabwean readers would like to hear about the winners. The short profiles below have been provided by John Wilson, based on research by Mutizwa Mukute.

Faiseni Pedzi:

61 year Faiseni Pedzi has been a smallholder farmer most of his life. For a brief period in his 20s he worked at a sugar estate in the Lowveld. This stint gave him ideas, which he has used to develop a sophisticated water-harvesting set-up on his 3-hectare farm.

VaPedzi farms in Chivi district in natural region 5. Water is obviously critical in such a dry part of Zimbabwe. Early in his farming years he dug four one-metre deep contours on his gently sloping land as the basis of his water-harvesting system. These turned out to be not enough to catch all the water and so he has added trenches at either end of the contour ditches.

Over the years VaPedzi has developed an intricate system to use

and spread water through his farm. There are also times he has to release excess water into the nearby river. He needs this versatile system because of the variability in rainy seasons. His system is based on 'valves' that he has especially designed to manage his water, depending on whether they are tight, loose or removed.

VaPedzi intercroops his annual rainy season crops and is able to supplement them with water during dry spells in the rainy season, which are common in region 5. He then under sows his summer crops with winter crops that also benefit from the harvested water. He grows reeds and Vetiver grass on the banks of the ditches and other fodder grasses for fattening cattle for sale. Fishponds are an important part of the system, originally introduced because 'my wife loves eating fish'. His farm is a fine example of agricultural biodiversity and integrated farming based on a sophisticated water harvesting system.

Paguel Takura

Paguel Takura is a farmer who likes to experiment and try things out. He lives in Chikukwa on the border with Mozambique, a higher rainfall part of Zimbabwe. He started his small farm of less than a hectare in 2008 and had a disastrous first year because moles ate the bulk of his sweet potatoes and banana suckers.

Undaunted and using his traditional knowledge for trapping field mice, he began the process of designing an effective mole trap. He tried different containers in which to trap the moles – first bark, then bamboo, then 750ml cooking oil bottles – before hitting on a 250ml Vaseline bottle which doesn't allow the mole to turn around. He has also tried various baits and now favours an indigenous plant that he had observed moles liking. He puts the bottle and bait into a mole tunnel with a sprung stick and in 2011 alone he captured 39 moles.

He now works with others in his community to share and spread his mole trap and has plans to sell the traps.

Wilson Sithole

In 1977 Wilson Sithole's father gave him 2 hectares of land. At that stage he was working in town. During this time he built a house and experimented with water-harvesting ditches, having noticed lots of run-off from his land in the high rainfall area of Rusitu in

eastern Zimbabwe. Unfortunately, most of his 2 hectares was unfarmable because it was covered with rocks. This, however, didn't daunt VaSithole.

He knew that with heat and water you can crack and break rocks up. He brought in 7 truckloads of firewood from a nearby timber estate and gradually broke up all the rocks on his farm and turned them into contour bunds, combined with ditches. After 20 years he had 20 bunds and ditches. In between the bunds he has planted bananas, pineapples and citrus trees. For bananas, his harvest averages out at 480kg per month.

Now he is working with other farmers in his area as part of the TSIME programme to find innovative ways to improve farming.

William Gezana

In 2000 Cyclone Eline wreaked havoc on William Gezana's 3-hectare farm in Bumba, Chimanimani. Five of his neighbours died and the cyclone swept away vegetation, houses and animal kraals. The cyclone also caused serious erosion, which undermined the recharging of the stream that William and his neighbors had used for irrigation.

VaGezana, as seems to be the case with many innovator farmers, did not let the enormity of what he had to do to rehabilitate his land dispirit him. Above all, Cyclone Eline taught him the critical importance of water harvesting and so he began laying small rock ridges across his land to catch run off water. He also noticed that during Cyclone Eline, it was the bare areas that suffered most. This led him to plant a range of different species in order to ensure ground cover. The Mukute (Waterberry) has played a significant part in his plans, as has the use of compost.

In a decade VaGezana turned his devastated watershed farm into a productive haven with a diversity of crops. In the process he has recharged the water table and the stream runs again. He taps water from the stream via individually designed and dug irrigation canals. Over 40 farmers have learnt from the integrated farming creativity of William Gezana, using his approach to watershed management in particular.

Bouwas Mawara

Apart from working in town from 1970 to 76, 68-year old Bouwas Mawara has been a small-scale farmer all his life. However, it was only in 1980 that he began innovating, inspired by the liberation struggle, which had given people the ‘courage to try things out and confront and challenge the way things are done’.

Living in Mazvihwa, a very dry part of Zimbabwe in Zvishavane District, he knew the importance of water. His first challenge to the normal way of doing things was to dig dead-level contours 1 to 3 metres deep and 2 metres wide; as opposed to the 1 in 200 diversion drains that are normally called contour ditches. These deep ditches have enabled him to harvest huge amounts of water. Furthermore, within the contours he has made small dams in which he farms fish. Occasionally in Mazvihwa there is excess water and he has designed a complex interconnected system using clay pipes that allows him to remove excess water into pits.

As a result of all this water harvesting, VaMawara is able to grow winter crops every dry season, despite living in such a dry part of the country. He even had excess water in the droughts of 1992 and 2008.

On his own initiative, Bouwas Mawara set up *Hupenyu Ivhu* (Soil is Life) Farmer Innovators’ group in 1989. Through this group he has shared his innovative water-harvesting system and farming practices with many farmers in Mazvihwa.

For more information on farmer innovation from around the world, check out the Prolinnova site at <http://www.prolinnova.net/>. Beyond these five, lots more inspiration there! While formal science and technology is undoubtedly essential for successful agriculture, local innovation from the grassroots is vital too, and is especially powerful when combined with more conventional approaches (as is the case in all domains – see <http://steps-centre.org/project/grassroots/>). I hope that the Phiri Award will encourage scientists in government, the universities and the CGIAR to go and visit the winners, and discover new innovations. If you look, they are everywhere: innovation is what farming is about.

The post was written by Ian Scoones and appeared on [Zimbabweland](#)