

Common Ground



| *Stories of Resilience and
Community Spirit Across Africa*



MAY 2026



A WORD FROM OUR REGIONAL DIRECTOR

Across East and Southern Africa, we work in some of the most complex and difficult environments in the world. Communities are navigating the compounding effects of climate change, conflict, displacement, and deeply entrenched inequalities, often all at once. In the middle of all of that, it can be easy to focus on the scale of what remains to be done. This publication asks us to do something different: to stop and look at what is already happening, in villages, on farms, and in savings groups, where women are refusing to accept the limits placed on them and building something better.

The stories in this edition of Common Ground come from Tanzania, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, Malawi, Zimbabwe, Zambia, and Mozambique. They differ in detail but are consistent in what they reveal. When women are given real access to skills, resources, and collective support, not token inclusion, but genuine investment, they do not just improve their own lives. They become the engine of change for the people around them. Angelika in Tanzania. Tiringo in Ethiopia. Roslyne in Kenya. Stella in Zimbabwe. Mariamo in Mozambique. Each of them shows us what becomes possible when the barriers are real, the support is practical, and the trust placed in women is unconditional.

CARE and our partners across the region are working to create and sustain those conditions: through farmer field schools, savings groups, climate-smart agriculture, and shelter programmes. But I want to be clear about something: the programmes are the scaffolding. The women in these pages are the builders. Their determination, their knowledge, and their instinct to reach back and bring others along, that is what makes change last. That is what we mean by locally led development.

There is still a great deal of work ahead. The crises are real, and the needs are urgent. But this collection is proof that transformation is not a distant aspiration in the communities we work with. It is already underway. Our task is to make sure it reaches every woman who still needs it. And increasingly, that means evolving how we work; deepening our partnerships, connecting women directly with private-sector opportunities, and building the kind of sustainability that means communities continue to thrive long after any single programme ends.

Walter Mwasaa,

Regional Director, CARE International East and Southern Africa

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Tanzania

STORY 01 OF 08

One Woman, Three Businesses, Eight Children, and a Community Transformed

By Edward Charles and Jesca Eliphas

In Mgama Village, Iringa region, Tanzania, widowhood and poverty left Angelika Kitime with eight children to feed and almost nothing to feed them with. She once had so little she reached for bicycle grease as skin oil. Today, she runs three businesses, owns her own home, and serves as a Community Health Worker, sharing the skills and confidence she gained through CARE's programme with every woman in her community who needs them. She did not just build a better life. She is pulling others up alongside her.

Angelika Kitime remembers the details that most people would rather forget. The meals were too small and didn't meet her nutritional needs. The old, crumbling house her late husband left behind, its walls letting in rainwater, its corners harbouring snakes. The moment she realised she had nothing to put on her skin and reached for bicycle grease instead. As a 55 year-old widow, a mother of eight, she was doing what she had always done: finding a way to survive.

Since her husband's passing in 2009, Angelika had carried her family alone. In Mgama Village, in Tanzania's Iringa region, that was no small thing. Agriculture is the backbone of Tanzania, employing nearly 67%, about two-thirds of the population, and sustaining millions of smallholder households. But for women, the system is stacked against them from the start. Limited access to land, financial services, and markets, combined with social norms that restrict women's decision-making and control over income, means that hard work alone is rarely enough.

For many women farmers like Angelika, hard work alone is not enough to break cycles of poverty or fully benefit from the agricultural economy. Angelika worked hard. And still, it was not enough. "I was living in my husband's inherited house, which was old and unsafe, allowing pests like snakes and vulnerable to water intrusion during the rainy season," she recalls. She was working on her small farm but harvesting little. With climate change, it had become harder each season as the rains grew unpredictable, and the soil dried out faster.

In Tanzania, climate change is already affecting smallholder farmers through irregular rainfall, longer dry spells, and rising temperatures, all of which reduce crop yields and make farming more uncertain.

Studies show that farmers in areas with highly variable rainfall can experience up to 15% lower maize yields, while higher temperatures further reduce productivity. Across the country, droughts and shifting weather patterns are becoming more frequent, disrupting planting seasons and causing the reduction of fish stocks while increasing the risk of crop failure and, for families who depend entirely on their land for food and income.

Multiplying knowledge and income

In 2023, everything began to shift. Angelika joined CARE Tanzania's Scaling-Up Farmer Field and Business School initiative, a programme designed to equip smallholder farmers with the practical skills, knowledge, and collective support needed to transform their livelihoods from the ground up. Through the programme, she gained hands-on training in entrepreneurship, savings, climate-smart agriculture, and value addition.

These were not abstract lessons delivered in a classroom. They were practical, applicable, and immediately relevant to the land she was already farming and the products she was already growing. She began applying climate-smart techniques to her fields, improving efficiency and boosting yields even on her small piece of land. She realised that to earn more, she needed to create value from what she was already producing. She learned how to process soybeans into products she could sell: tea, flour and oil, which quickly became popular in her village and made her well known. She also started rearing goats, which provided milk she could sell, adding another source of income to support her family.

With all the income she earned, she reinvested in her future, saving through not one but three Village Savings and Loan Association groups. The transformation was quiet at first, small changes taking root day by day. Then, over time, it grew into something impossible to ignore.



Angelika Kitime displays her "Tubadili" branded soy flour and oil in Mgama Village, Tanzania. Through CARE's Farmer Field and Business School programme, she learned to process soybeans into marketable products, growing her monthly income from just over \$1 to \$80. Photo: Edward Charles/CARE

From poverty to business and an enterprise

Today, Angelika's monthly income has risen from TZS 3,000, just over \$1, to TZS 210,000, US\$80. She has grown her poultry stock from 5 chickens to 40, providing both nutrition and a steady source of income. She now owns eight goats that supply her household with milk. She has established a mobile money transaction point that generates between TZS 14,000 and TZS 19,000, about US\$7, every single day. She has built a new home. A safe one, without snakes in the corners or rainwater coming through the walls.

“ Now I can feed my family, pay school fees for my children, and attend to all my family needs

She pays TZS 600,000, around US\$230, a year in school fees for her children. She runs multiple income streams simultaneously. She saves consistently and plans deliberately. The woman who once had to reach for bicycle grease is now a businesswoman managing her finances across three savings groups and several enterprises.



Angelika feeds her herd of goats in Mgama Village, Tanzania. Goat rearing is one of several enterprises she built after joining CARE's Farmer Field and Business School programme, helping her grow her monthly income from just over \$1 to \$80. Photo: Edward Charles/CARE



Angelika tends to her soybean crop in Mgama Village. After joining CARE's Farmer Field and Business School programme in 2023, she transformed her small farm into a thriving enterprise, and now helps other women in her community do the same. Photo: Edward Charles/CARE

When knowledge spreads, so does change

But for Angelika, building a better life for her own family was never going to be the whole story. Today, she serves as a Community Health Worker, sharing knowledge on nutrition and wellbeing with other women in her community. The skills and confidence she gained through CARE's programme have become a resource that extends far beyond her own farm and household. She is part of a wider shift, one woman at a time, in what is possible for women in Mgama Village. "When women are equipped with skills, resources, and collective support," Angelika's story shows, "they do more than improve their own lives, they uplift entire communities." For Angelika, that truth is no longer an aspiration. It is simply what her life looks like now. Angelika Kitime is a participant in CARE Tanzania's Scaling-Up Farmer Field and Business School initiative, supported through an anonymous donor.



Ethiopia

STORY 02 OF 08

From Drought to Harvest: A Climate-Smart Revolution

By Amare Molla

In the Sidama region of Ethiopia, women have long been expected to stay home while men manage the land and the money. Tiringo Burka refused to accept that future, and with support from CARE's Women's Empowerment through Gender-Transformative Opportunities (WEGO) project, she is changing not just her own life, but the world her daughters will inherit.

Tiringo Burka is a mother of ten. For most of her life, the expectations placed on her were clear: keep the home, raise the children, and leave the farming, and the income to her husband. In Wondo Genet Woreda, deep in the Sidama region of Ethiopia, that was simply how things were. It was not that the land lacked potential. Quite the opposite. The area is fertile, well-suited to high-value crops, and full of agricultural opportunity. But for women like Tiringo, that opportunity belonged to someone else. She had no meaningful access to land, no connection to markets, and little say in the decisions that shaped her family's future.

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I had never thought life could be any different

- Tiringo recalls

Across Ethiopia and many parts of the world, women have historically been deprived of secure land rights due to discriminatory laws, customs, and social norms. Despite reforms that legally recognize gender equality, land tenure practices still often marginalize women, limiting their ability to own, inherit, or control land independently. Cultural traditions frequently prioritize men in land allocation and inheritance, meaning women often only access land through male relatives and risk losing it through divorce or widowhood. The conflict between the central government of Ethiopia and the Tigray People's Liberation Front continues to have a huge impact on women and girls in northern Ethiopia, despite a truce agreement in November 2022.

An eye-opener and a turning point: Unlocking women's economic empowerment

In 2023, Tiringo joined CARE's WEGO project. Funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and implemented with Ethiopia's Ministry of Agriculture, the five-year initiative works with women across Sidama and Amhara regions to break down the structural barriers that keep women locked out of economic life.

Through WEGO, over 5,000 women, including Tiringo, have gained access to Farmer Field and Business School training, practical, community-based sessions that build agricultural skills, sharpen business thinking, and open up conversations about equality that many participants have never had before. For women who were told that farming was not their domain, sitting in those sessions is itself an act of quiet defiance.

But knowledge alone is not enough. WEGO also organises women into Producer and Market Groups (PMGs), giving them something that individual farmers rarely have: collective power. Selling together, women can negotiate better prices, access broader markets, and build the kind of confidence that comes from knowing you do not have to face the system alone. Alongside this, the project connects women like Tiringo to improved agricultural inputs, irrigation technologies, and stronger market linkages, the practical tools that turn good training into real income.

Taken together, these interventions have expanded women's access to resources, increased their economic opportunities, and perhaps most significantly strengthened their voice in the decisions that shape their own lives, inside the home and beyond it. More than 10,000 smallholder farmers have been reached across both regions, with women comprising more than half of all participants. And CARE has worked deliberately to ensure these gains do not disappear when the project ends embedding proven approaches into local agricultural systems and strengthening the institutions that will carry this work forward. The goal was never just a better harvest. It was a different future for women like Tiringo, and for the daughters watching them lead.

“*The training did something I had not expected. It did not just teach me new techniques. It shifted how I view myself.*

- Tiringo, mother of ten

Shifting norms, one harvest at a time

WEGO began to loosen the grip of unspoken but firmly held rules that had long governed women's lives. As more women joined FFBS sessions and PMGs, something shifted in the social fabric of the community. Women who had once deferred every financial decision to their husbands were now tracking prices, planning harvests, and making deals.

But Tiringo will tell you that the most significant change is not the harvest, or the income, or even the children now studying at university. It is the shift in how women are seen in her community and how they see themselves. Women who once stayed silent in community meetings are beginning to speak. Husbands are asking their wives' opinions. Daughters are watching their mothers negotiate, decide, and lead and imagining themselves doing the same.

"We are gradually breaking restrictions on women's mobility, work, and public engagement," Tiringo says. "We are becoming equal counterparts to men." She is clear about what made the difference and what is still needed. "There should be more women-focused initiatives like this," she says, "to empower more women farmers."

Today, Tiringo co-manages a diversified 1.5-hectare farm with her husband. Together, they grow chilli, tomato, avocado, banana, and mango, and raise livestock. Improved irrigation has dramatically increased what their land can produce. Better market links have turned that productivity into real, sustained income, and that income has quietly transformed what is possible for her family.

“ We are now able to afford a better life. We have even sent three of our children to university.
- Tiringo, mother of ten



Tiringo Burka holds a basket of avocados from her farm at her home in Wondo Genet Woreda, Ethiopia — where university graduation photos of her children hang proudly on the wall behind her. With support from CARE's WEGO project, the income from her farm has sent three of her ten children to university. © 2025 Paddy Dowling/CARE

For a mother of ten in a community where women were rarely part of financial decisions, that sentence carries enormous weight. The farm is no longer just a source of subsistence it is a business, and Tiringo is one of the people running it.

CARE's WEGO project has now reached more than 10,000 smallholder farmers across Sidama and Amhara regions, with women comprising more than half of all participants. The initiative has worked deliberately to build systems that will outlast the project itself embedding approaches like the FFBS and PMGs into local agricultural structures, and strengthening women's ongoing access to technical support, inputs, and markets.

The results point to what becomes possible when women are not simply included in agricultural programmes, but genuinely placed at the centre of them. For Tiringo, every morning on her farm is a reminder of how far she has come, and a quiet act of proof that the old rules no longer have to hold.



Kenya

STORY 03 OF 08

The Saving Groups That Changed Everything

By CARE Kenya Staff

Roslyne Saris, 20, had a plan to finish school, maybe college, then earn her own money. It was not an unusual dream, just the quiet, reasonable ambition of a teenage girl growing up in Emurua Dikir, a remote village on the edges of Kajiado County. Then the rain stopped. Her father's cattle, the family's savings, their insurance, their hope, all shrank and then vanished in the dust of another merciless drought.

With no cattle, there was no money for college fees. In a community where drought rewrites the rules of survival, marriage became the most available door. Roslyne walked through it at 18, even by 17, she was already a mother.

“ If I were to reverse the clock, I wouldn't get married at 18, but due to severe drought, my father lost all the cattle, meaning no money to educate me. - Roslyne



Members of the Nanapae Youth Group gather for a savings session in Emurua Dikir, Kajiado County, Kenya. Through CARE Kenya's SHE SOARS project, young women like Roslyne meet regularly to pool savings, issue loans, and share knowledge on health, rights, and financial independence. Photo: Mary Ndulili/CARE

Her story is not an exception. Across Kenya's semi-arid regions, climate change and prolonged drought don't just reduce harvests; they collapse futures. Families are forced to choose between feeding their children and educating their daughters, and frequently choose the former. Girls are married early, not out of malice but out of desperation. The bride price offers immediate relief; a daughter's education feels like a luxury no one can afford. When Roslyne joined the Nanapae Youth Group, a 34-member Youth Savings and Loans Association (YSLA) consisting mainly of adolescent girls under the CARE Kenya SHE SOARS project, she arrived with almost nothing. She had no savings and no real knowledge of her own body, her rights, or the health services she was entitled to access.

What she found in that circle of mostly adolescent girls was something older than any development project. It was about neighbours deciding to trust each other with money, and with secrets. Every week, members pooled small amounts and every cycle, loans were issued. And alongside the sums of money circulating something else was being taught: body autonomy, contraception, the difference between what a community normalises and what a person deserves. "The belief before was that the role of a man was to bring money home and a woman to look after the children and cattle. This has changed after the training began," said Sarah, Group Rover, Nanapae Youth Group.



Roslyne feeding her chickens. With a KES 3,000 loan from her Youth Savings and Loans Association, she bought 20 chickens. Photo: Mary Ndulili/CARE

Before the project arrived, most girls in the group didn't know they had rights at all and gender-based violence (GBV) from partners was common and widely accepted as normal. The YSLA didn't just redistribute money but also redistributed knowledge. In 2024, Roslyne borrowed KES 3,000 from her group. She bought chickens, sold eggs and repaid the loan and reinvested.

Today she owns around 20 chickens and is already thinking about expansion. It is a small business but the independence it represents is anything but small. "Through savings I can pay school fees for my son, make money from the poultry business, buy myself sanitary towels and provide for my kids. I also gained confidence to seek health information and make decisions about my well-being," said Roslyne Saris.

She no longer must ask her husband for money for necessities. She attends health facilities and asks questions and makes decisions about her own body. When her second child was born two months ago, she knew what she hadn't known about her first and that knowledge is its own inheritance. Roslyne's story unfolds on a scale. Across Kajiado, Nairobi, Kisumu, and Siaya Counties, the SHE SOARS project delivered through CARE Kenya and partners Hope Worldwide Kenya, CSA, and CREAM has been quietly rewriting the same story in hundreds of different voices.

Across those same counties, women in the programme have used their savings to build homes, enrol in skills training, and for the first time call income their own. "Saving my own money is fulfilling rather than depending on other people," one member said. The YSLA is modelled around the VSLA (Village Savings and Loan Associations) model, a community savings circle built on mutual trust. It is Africa's own logic made formal, in the same spirit as the chama, the susu, the stokvel, the tontine. Thousands of years of neighbours deciding what one person cannot carry alone, many can carry together. Agenda 2063's vision of "The Africa We Want" is not abstract. It is this: a woman in Kajiado who owns her income, knows her rights, and is raising a son she has decided to educate.



Somalia

STORY 04 OF 08

Finding Safety, Building Future

By CARE Staff

Inside a displacement camp in Doble, Warsan Bare Sugule turned a small grant and an unbreakable will into a future she never thought possible.

Warsan Bare Sugule knew exactly who she was. She was a farmer's daughter in Bula Gudud, in Somalia's Lower Juba region. She knew the fields by the soil felt under her feet, the seasons by the smell of the air before the rains. She was young, and the land was hers, and that felt like enough. Then armed actors arrived and seized the farmland. In a morning, the ground that her family had worked for years was no longer theirs. There was no negotiation, no compensation, no recourse.

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We lost everything when our land was taken. I was still young and had no voice to defend what belonged to us. That is how we ended up here, starting from nothing.



Warsan at Doble IDP Camp, Somalia. After losing everything to armed conflict, she rebuilt her confidence and her future through CARE's psychosocial support, medical care, and cash assistance. Photo: CARE

She arrived at Doble IDP Camp carrying two children, the memory of everything she had lost, and a body already battling her from the inside. As a diabetic and hypertensive patient, Warsan needed continuous medication; consistent, reliable, never skipped. The kind of care that is difficult to maintain anywhere, let alone in a displacement camp where resources are stretched thin and tomorrow is never guaranteed.

Day after day, she watched the same horizon from inside the camp: the same rows of shelters, the same dusty paths, the same weight of uncertainty pressing down on everything. She had two children depending on her, a chronic illness demanding attention she could barely afford, and no income that could bridge the two. Then came a traumatic incident of sexual violence. An assault that threatened to extinguish what little ground she had managed to hold. In a world that had already taken so much from her, this felt like the final word. It was not.

CARE's team reached Warsan not with a form or a queue number, but with time and attention. She received psychosocial support from counsellors trained to sit with the weight of what survivors carry. She received medical care, the kind that asks how she is feeling, not just what she is presenting. Case managers worked with her step by step, at her pace, keeping everything confidential and centred on her choices. "I felt broken and alone. But the support I received helped me find strength again. They treated me with respect and listened to me without judgment."

As her footing returned, CARE also provided Multi-Purpose Cash Assistance. It was a modest amount. But Warsan did not spend it the way someone defeated would spend it. She thought hard. She looked at what the camp needed. And she opened a canteen.



She started with tea. Sugar. A few basic snacks and household items that people would come back for day after day. She woke early, showed up every morning, tracked what sold and what didn't, restocked carefully. The business grew, not because of luck, but because of the same discipline that had kept her alive through everything else. "With the cash support, I decided to start something small. My canteen is now helping me survive. I can buy my medicine and support myself without depending on others."

Warsan tends her canteen at Doble IDP Camp, Somalia. With cash assistance from CARE, she built a small business that now funds her medication and supports her family. Photo: CARE

That last sentence carries the whole story. To buy her own medicine. To meet her family's needs. Warsan's canteen is now a fixture of daily life in Doble IDP Camp. People come for the tea, the snacks, the familiar routine of it. But they also see something else: a businesswoman who opened every morning before the camp stirred, who learned her numbers, who refused to let the worst moments be the last word on her life. Her confidence has returned. The voice she said she did not have when her land was taken has found its strength again. "I never thought I could stand on my own again. Now I feel proud of what I have built. I have hope for my future."

Warsan's story is not about a programme. It is about what happens when protection, health care, and economic support reach the same person at the same time — when a woman is treated not as a case to close but as a life to support all the way back to standing. From a stolen field in Lower Juba to a canteen that opens every morning in Doble, she has built something no one can take from her: a future she chose herself.

**The name in this story has been changed to protect the identity of the individual. Warsan is a project participant of CARE's integrated humanitarian programme in Doble IDP Camp, Somalia.*



Malawi

STORY 05 OF 08

Seeds of Change: Women Farmers Leading the Way

By Chimwemwe Chiweza

In Phalombe District, southern Malawi, the rains can no longer be trusted. For smallholder farmers like Maureen Office, that uncertainty once meant hunger. With support from CARE's resilience programme, she has not only transformed her own farm, but she is also leading the change in her community.

Maureen's office knows what a failed harvest feels like. She has watched maize wither in soil that was too depleted to sustain it. She has planted season after season, done everything the way it had always been done, and still come up short. As a mother of three in Nachipo Village, Phalombe District, the stakes of every planting season could not be higher.



Maureen Office outside her home in Nachipo Village, Phalombe District. Photo: Chimwemwe Chiweza/CARE

The land around her was not always this unpredictable. But droughts, floods, and erratic rainfall have become a familiar reality across southern Malawi's Nsanje, Chikwawa, and Phalombe districts, where the vast majority of families depend entirely on rain-fed agriculture to eat and to earn.

As the climate has shifted, traditional farming practices that sustained generations have begun to fail. Soil fertility has declined. Harvests have shrunk. Families like Maureen's have found themselves increasingly reliant on emergency assistance just to get through the season.

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Each poor harvest made the future feel more uncertain. I didn't know how to change things. - Maureen

An eye-opener and a turning point

In response to these growing pressures, CARE Malawi as part of the Malawi Humanitarian NGO Consortium led by Self-Help Africa and funded by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, implemented a programme across Nsanje, Chikwawa, and Phalombe districts alongside six partner organisations. The goal was to reduce the devastating impact of climate-induced disasters by enabling communities to prepare for shocks before they hit, adapt their livelihoods, and respond early when disaster threatened.

The programme reached more than 320,000 individuals through a package of integrated support, including multipurpose cash transfers, drought-tolerant and nutrition-sensitive crops, Community Disaster Funds, rehabilitation of irrigation schemes, and early warning and anticipatory action systems. At its heart was a simple but powerful conviction: that communities should not have to wait for disaster to strike before help arrives.

For Maureen, the entry point was a set of targeted climate-smart agriculture training sessions that would change the way she understood her own land. She learned practical, low-cost techniques, proper crop spacing, organic manure preparation, improved soil management, and the use of locally available natural pesticides. These were not complicated interventions. But applied consistently, they made an extraordinary difference.

"We learned how to space our crops properly so that maize can grow well on the land," Maureen explains. "Now each plant has enough room to grow." She is equally clear about the shift away from chemical pesticides. "Using local pesticides is important because chemical pesticides can be harmful and are expensive."

Turning knowledge into action

The results on Maureen's farm were immediate and visible. Yields improved. Soil that had seemed exhausted began to recover. Her maize grew healthier. Her vegetables flourished. And with plans to sell tomatoes for the first time, Maureen was beginning to see her farm not just as a source of food, but as a source of income, a buffer against the next inevitable shock.

But what changed was not just the farm. It was Maureen herself, her confidence, her knowledge, and her sense of what she was capable of. Those around her noticed too. Because of her commitment and her natural ability to explain what she had learned in ways that made sense to others, Maureen was supported to become a lead farmer, a bridge between the programme's training and the wider community around her. She did not hesitate.

She established a demonstration plot on her own farm, a living classroom where neighbours could come and see climate-smart practices not just described, but growing in front of them. She conducts practical training sessions, walking farmers through each technique step by step, making sure nothing is left to guesswork.

"We show simple ways to measure spacing so farmers can apply it easily in their own fields," she says.

From one farm to an entire community

The changes spread. Farmers who had planted multiple seeds in one station for as long as they could remember began to try proper spacing. Neighbours who had relied on expensive chemical pesticides began preparing their own. Knowledge gained through training began to take root in the community itself, no longer dependent on the programme to sustain it.

So far, Maureen has reached 144 farmers, most of them women. At least 39 have already changed the way they plant and manage their crops, improvements that are showing up in better yields and in reduced vulnerability to the unpredictable rainfall that once left entire communities at the mercy of the season. "People are now trying these methods, and we can already see the difference," Maureen says. The difference shows up in full granaries and in healthier children. It shows up in families who are no longer waiting for emergency assistance but building the capacity to withstand what the next season brings. And it shows up in a community where one woman's determination to learn, and to share what she learned, is quietly reshaping what resilience looks like from the ground up.

For Maureen, the shift from struggling farmer to community lead farmer is not a title she takes lightly. It is a reflection of everything she has learned, everything she has overcome, and everything she now believes is possible, for herself, for her neighbours, and for the generations of farmers who will work this land long after the rains have become predictable again.



Maureen and her maize farm in Phalombe District, Malawi. CARE's resilience programme introduced improved seed varieties and climate-smart techniques that are helping smallholder farmers recover soil fertility and rebuild food security. Photo: Chimwemwe Chiweza/CARE



Zimbabwe

STORY 06 OF 08

Stella's Voice: How One Woman Transformed Her Community

By Wilbert Marimira, and Rumbidzai Moyo

In Bikita District, Zimbabwe, drought has made survival a season-by-season struggle. At 68, widowed and raising five grandchildren alone, Stella Kunedzimwe was running out of options. But given the right tools, she did not just feed her family, she showed her whole community what was possible.

In the drought-prone districts of southern Zimbabwe, hunger is not an abstract threat. It is a calculation made at every meal, every planting season, every time the rains arrive late or not at all. For the women who anchor these communities, who plant, harvest, cook, and hold families together through every failed season, that calculation is a daily reality.

In Ward 10 of Bikita District, Stella works her two-hectare irrigation plot with the kind of quiet, unrelenting determination that keeps her household alive. Every hour she puts into that land is an act of love for the grandchildren depending on her. And for too long, it was not enough.



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The rains made it hard for us to harvest much and we did not have the right knowledge.

- Stella explains

Stella, a smallholder farmer on her plot in Bikita District, Zimbabwe. She is a project participant of CARE's CBA-SCALE Southern Africa+ project. Photo: Rumbidzai Moyo/CARE

Zimbabwe's droughts are among the most devastating climate events in southern Africa, and women bear the heaviest burden when they strike. The 2023/24 El Niño-induced drought affected more than 80% of the country, resulting in significantly below-normal harvests and prompting the government to declare a state of national disaster in April 2024.

The 2024/2025 planting season was no better. Six million people faced food insecurity. For women smallholder farmers like Stella, who grow the food, fetch the water, and hold households together when everything else falls apart, the consequences are acute and compounding. Children eat fewer meals, while mothers choose not to eat at all, so that the family has enough. Evidence also shows that drought-related resource scarcity heightens the likelihood of child marriage and exposure to gender-based violence, while limited access to water affects girls' school attendance and self-esteem. These crises do not unfold in isolation. It is women like Stella who are left with the least to fall back on and the most to lose.

Without access to improved seeds, financial services, or the agronomic knowledge to help her land produce more, Stella was farming at the edges of what was possible. School fees went unpaid. Her grandchildren, at times, went to bed hungry. Her voice in community gatherings, once present, had grown quieter under the weight of it all. "It has been very hard to put food on the table and pay school fees for my grandchildren," she says. The words are simple. The burden behind them is not.

The moment that changed everything

Across southern Africa, women like Stella, generation after generation, are feeding families and holding communities. Year after year, through failed rains and empty harvests, she continued to feed her household and sustain livelihoods, even as the burden grew heavier. At times, she was forced to sell her livestock to get by and cover the gap left by failed harvests. In 2024, a conversation with her local Agritex Extension Worker changed her life for good. She was selected to grow biofortified orange maize and butternuts on a 0.2-hectare plot under the Scaling-Up Community Action for Livelihoods and Ecosystems in Southern Africa and Beyond project (CBA-SCALE Southern Africa+) Crisis Modifier.



Stella, a farmer tends butternut seedlings on a demonstration plot in Bikita District, Zimbabwe. Through CARE's CBA-SCALE Southern Africa+ project, smallholder farmers are learning drought-resilient techniques that are transforming harvests across the region. Photo: Rumbidzai Moyo/CARE

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While I was sitting at home thinking about how to feed my grandchildren, our Agritex Extension Worker told me about the CBA-SCALE Southern Africa+ project. That moment changed everything. - **Stella recalls**

She received training in climate-smart farming and irrigation, gaining skills in water-efficient techniques like drip irrigation and water harvesting, planting drought-resistant crops, conserving soil through methods like mulching, understanding planting seasons, diversifying crops, and managing farm resources more effectively in Zimbabwe's drought-prone areas.

Funded by the International Climate Initiative and implemented by a consortium led by CARE Deutschland alongside CARE Zimbabwe, CARE Mozambique, CARE Zambia, FANRPAN, IISD, and IUCN, the CBA-SCALE Southern Africa works with communities, local authorities, and policymakers to scale up nature-based, gender-responsive approaches that help people adapt to a changing climate before crisis becomes catastrophe.

The project is supporting 18,000 farmers in Bikita and Chiredzi.

For Stella, this project brought a renewed sense of hope. With the knowledge she gained, Stella did what women in communities like hers have always done: she made the most of every opportunity. She carefully followed the training step by step, putting into practice what she had learned in her own field through the 2024/2025 planting season, despite the drought. She planted maize seed using climate practices, and she also planted drought-tolerant biofortified yellow maize on a 0.2-hectare farm. She also planted butternuts.

Studies across sub-Saharan Africa show that drought-tolerant maize and improved farming practices can significantly increase yields under stress conditions, helping farmers produce more food even during dry seasons. Research also shows that adopting climate-smart agriculture practices such as improved seed varieties, soil and water conservation, and better crop management can substantially improve farm productivity and resilience for smallholder farmers in Zimbabwe.

For Stella, raising five grandchildren in a drought-prone area, this meant more than a good harvest, it meant having enough to eat, better nutrition, and a real chance to move beyond just surviving. Her work and determination paid off. Her fields, lush and green again, something she had not seen in a long time. She harvested green mealies from the first plot, which she sold and earned US\$130 while the rest she kept for food.

From her 0.2-hectare plot, she harvested 1.5 tonnes of orange maize, enough to feed her family through the season, while her butternut harvest brought in US\$180, enough to cover her granddaughter's college fees.



In the maize field, Stella holds cobs of biofortified orange maize in her field in Bikita District, Zimbabwe. Rich in Vitamin A, the variety was introduced through CARE's CBA-SCALE Southern Africa+ project to improve both nutrition and income for smallholder farmers. Photo: Rumbidzai Moyo/CARE

Numbers that might seem modest elsewhere carry enormous weight in a household that had so long gone without. For Stella, they represented something more than income. They represented proof, that with the right support, she could do what she had always set out to do: provide for her family.

"For the first time in years, I can provide for my grandchildren," she says. "I now have the tools to recover and prepare for what comes next." She is already planning to expand to a full hectare. Her ambitions are clear and deliberately chosen. "My goal is to expand production, secure a stable income, and ensure that my grandchildren never go to bed hungry again." When knowledge spreads, so does change. But Stella's harvest did not stay on her plot. It never does, with women like her.

With renewed income came renewed confidence, and with that, a restored presence in the life of her community. She is more visible now, more engaged, more willing to speak in the gatherings where decisions are made. Neighbours watch her and ask questions. Younger women in Ward 10 see a grandmother in her late sixties producing results from a small plot of land and begin to reconsider what is possible on their own.

This is how change moves in communities where women are at the centre. Not in grand announcements, but in harvests shared and knowledge passed on. In a granddaughter who goes to college because her grandmother grew butternuts. In a community that looks at an older widow and sees not a burden, but a leader.

"This project has given me the tools, the knowledge, and most importantly, the hope to build a better future," Stella says. "Thank you, IKI, we are fighting poverty with climate-smart agriculture."



Zambia

STORY 07 OF 08

Reviving Seeds, Restoring Futures: How Kizito and Siankope's Women Farmers Beat the Drought

By Margret Ngonga

In Siankope ward of Zimba district, in the Southern part of Zambia, recurring dry spells had left many households facing hunger and uncertainty. Among them was Kizito Munkombwe, a 41-year-old farmer and mother of six children.

Farming was her main source of livelihood, yet it produced very little due to unreliable rainfall. Most families relied on local maize varieties that produced small yields and struggled in dry conditions. Food shortages were common, and many households could not produce enough to feed their families throughout the year.

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We used to harvest very little, and sometimes it was not enough to last the season

- Kizito recalls

Limited exposure to improved farming methods meant farmers had few options. Knowledge on crop diversification, soil improvement, and climate resilience was minimal, leaving the community vulnerable to climate shocks.

Through CARE Zambia's Community-Based Adaptation: Scaling Up Community Action for Livelihoods and Ecosystems in Southern Africa and Beyond (CBA SCALE+) Project, and working with partners such as the Zambia Agriculture Research Institute (ZARI), farmers like Kizito were introduced to improved and traditional drought-tolerant seed varieties, along with training in climate-resilient agriculture.

Kizito attended training sessions where she learned how to grow crops such as sunflowers, finger millet, cowpeas, and improved maize varieties, sparking her interest in growing traditional seed varieties. These included seeds with larger grains that could be replanted multiple times, like gankata maize varieties.

Farmers were also trained in organic soil fertility practices, including the use of manure, helping them improve productivity using locally available resources.

"The new seeds are different; they give more grain, and we can plant them again multiple times without buying new ones," Kizito explains. The initiative encouraged farmers to experiment, learn, and share knowledge within their communities, creating a strong foundation for sustainable change.

The results have been transformative. With improved seeds and better farming practices, Kizito's production increased significantly. From a small plot and a 250-gram packet of seeds, she harvested 12 kilograms of sunflowers, 4 kilograms of cowpeas, and 8 kilograms of finger millet, a major improvement over previous seasons.



Kizito holds bowls of her maize outside her home. Through CARE's resilience programme, she gained climate-smart farming skills that transformed her harvests, and her confidence. Photo: Margret Ngonga/CARE

Crops like sunflowers have introduced unexpected opportunities. Farmers in the Siankope community are now aware that sunflowers can be processed into cooking oil, opening the door to additional income streams. "I didn't even know we could make cooking oil ourselves. Now I see new ways to earn income," Kizito says.

Finger millet has also improved household nutrition, offering a more resilient food source during dry periods. Unlike maize, it withstands drought better, ensuring families have something to rely on even in difficult seasons.

"Even when the rains are not good, these crops will still give us something," she adds. Kizito is now determined to sustain and expand the progress. She plans to continue planting the improved seeds and encourages others to do the same. With only a few farmers currently using these varieties, she sees an opportunity to grow their impact by sharing and multiplying seeds.



Warsan tends her canteen at Doble IDP Camp, Somalia. With cash assistance from CARE, she built a small business that now funds her medication and supports her family. Photo: CARE

"We want to make more seed available, so we can continue, share with others, and improve together," Kizito explains.

What started as a response to hunger has grown into a pathway for resilience, learning, and opportunity. Through knowledge, improved seeds, and community collaboration, Kizito and others in the Siankope community are no longer just farming — they are building a more secure future.

Kizito Munkombwe is a beneficiary of CARE Zambia's CBA SCALE+ project. The project is implemented inimba District in partnership with the Zambia Agriculture Research Institute (ZARI), local partners Nutri-Aid Trust, Alliance for Nutrition and Reconstruction. It is funded by the International Climate Initiative (IKI) of the German Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature, Conservation, Nuclear Safety and Consumer Protection (BMUV).



Mozambique

STORY 08 OF 08

When the Rain Came, She Was No Longer Afraid

By Terica Vilanculo

The night they came, Mariamo Awuca could smell the smoke before she could see it. By the time the flames had reached her neighbourhood in Meluco District, there was no time to gather anything, no food, no clothes, no papers, no memories. At 77, with vision so limited she cannot see beyond a few metres, Mariamo ran into the dark with her daughter, leaving behind a lifetime in a home she would never see again. "When they entered my community, they started burning all the houses. They killed people... those of us who managed to escape ran away with nothing, no food, no clothes, no place to sleep."

That was the night the armed group known locally as al-Shabaab reached her door, part of a conflict that has torn through Cabo Delgado since 2017, displacing more than 1.3 million people and leaving no corner of the province untouched. For Mariamo, violence was not a distant news story. It was the sound of her neighbours screaming. It was ash where her roof used to be.



She and her daughter fled to the 1 de Maio community. For the first days, they slept in the open; the cold night air on their skin, the ground wet beneath them, the sounds of strangers all around. With no income, no materials and no support, her daughter eventually managed to piece together a small shelter from whatever she could find: thin poles, plastic sheeting, salvaged scraps. It was not much. But it kept the worst of the rain out. For a few months, it was enough.

Mariamo Awuca, 77, sits inside her home in the 1 de Maio community, Meluco District, Mozambique. She fled armed violence in Cabo Delgado with nothing but the clothes on her back. Photo: Terica Vilanculo/CARE

And then it collapsed. "The house collapsed after three months. It was not strong... and we were left without protection again." They rebuilt with their bare hands, and the cycle began again, fragile walls, anxious nights, the constant fear that the next storm would undo everything. But it was not only the roof that threatened Mariamo's dignity. With no latrine, she had nowhere private to go. "I used to relieve myself in the banana trees next to the house. Anyone could see me... I felt like I had no privacy."

This is what displacement looks like beyond the headlines: not just lost homes, but lost dignity. Not just physical danger, but the daily humiliation of having no space that is yours, no door you can close, no wall that will hold.

In December 2025, through CARE Mozambique's Prepare, Respond and Protect project, funded by the European Union, Mariamo received a Type-C transitional shelter: a structure built from locally sourced wooden poles, bamboo, metal roofing sheets and wire, assembled with the help of community committees and built to last. For the first time since she fled, she slept under a roof she could trust.

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Now I have a strong house. When it rains, I am not afraid. When I sleep, I feel protected.

- Mariamo recalls



Mariamo stands outside her transitional shelter in the 1 de Maio community, Meluco District, Mozambique. Through CARE's Prepare, Respond and Protect project, funded by the EU, she received a durable shelter after years of living under walls she feared would collapse. Photo: Terica Vilanculo/CARE

The project also installed a latrine adapted to Mariamo's needs designed specifically for someone her age, with her visual limitations in mind. And through community hygiene sessions, she learned had never heard before, the conditions to practice: how to wash her hands after using the toilet, how to break the cycle of open defecation that puts entire households at risk.

“I learned that I must wash my hands every time I go to the toilet, using water and soap or ash. I no longer relieve myself in the open.” The change in her voice, when she speaks about the latrine, is striking. It is not gratitude for infrastructure. It is the sound of a woman who has been given back her right to privacy, to move through her own life without exposure or shame. “Now I have my own latrine. I feel respected.”

Today, Mariamo lives in a home that holds. The roof does not shake in the rain. The walls stand through the wind. She does not lie awake bracing for the sound of collapse. The project's impact reaches beyond the physical. CARE's integrated response, shelter, sanitation, and hygiene education, has helped restore something that cannot be measured in materials but is felt every morning when Mariamo wakes up inside four walls that belong to her. “I am very grateful to CARE for this support. After everything we went through, having a safe house and a latrine has changed my life. Now I feel protected and have more dignity.”

Mariamo survived armed attacks, displacement, collapsed shelters, and years of uncertainty. And when she speaks about the future, she does not ask for much.

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At my age, what I want most is for the conflict to end. I want life to return to how it was before; when we could walk without fear, sleep without fear, and live without fear.

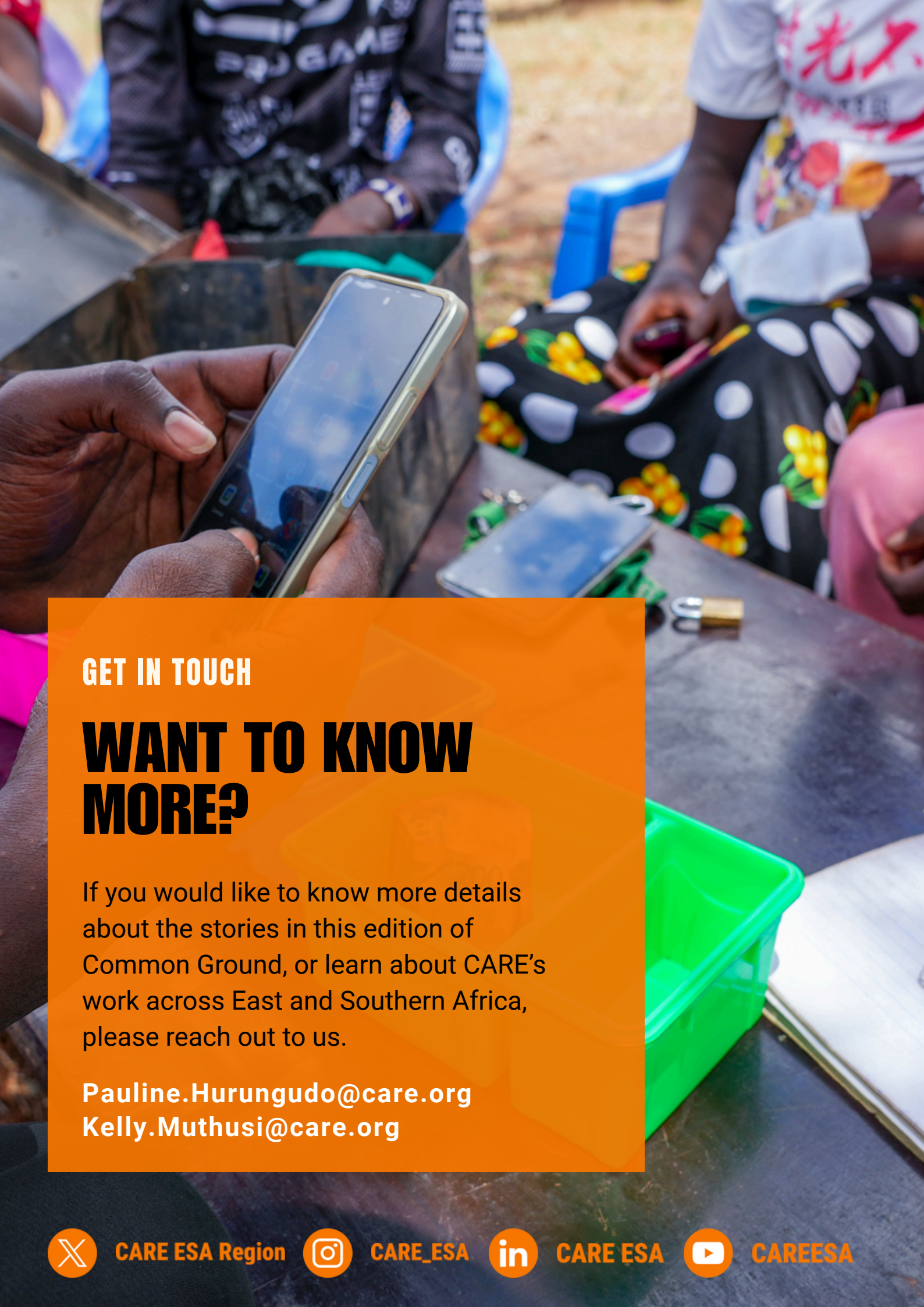
- Mariamo, 78



Mariamo, 77, stands beside the latrine installed for her by CARE Mozambique's Prepare, Respond and Protect project in Meluco District, Cabo Delgado. After fleeing armed violence with nothing, she told CARE that having a private latrine gave her back her dignity. Photo: Terica Vilanculo/CARE

Mariamo's story is a reminder that the humanitarian response, at its best, is not only about survival. It is about restoring the small, essential dignities that make survival worth something: a roof, a door, a private moment, a night of unbroken sleep.

Mariamo Awuca is a project participant of CARE Mozambique's Prepare, Respond and Protect to Address the Protection Needs and Concerns of Girls, Boys, Women and Men Affected by Crises in Northern Mozambique project, funded by the European Union. The project is implemented in consortium with Save the Children, Norwegian People's Aid, ShelterBox, and Fundação Wiwanana across five districts of Cabo Delgado Province.

A close-up photograph of a person's hands holding a smartphone. The phone's screen shows a home screen with various app icons. In the background, there is a table with a blue folder, a green plastic container, and other people, some wearing colorful clothing. The scene appears to be outdoors or in a semi-outdoor setting.

GET IN TOUCH

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

If you would like to know more details about the stories in this edition of Common Ground, or learn about CARE's work across East and Southern Africa, please reach out to us.

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