2025 INTERIM REPORT ON SGG-ZOMBATREEZ PROJECT

INTRODUCTION

It is normal practice for SGG to produce a report for donors after every field monitoring visit to projects. 2025 is unusual because for the first time since 2006 SGG has not been able to make our normal annual visit. The last visit to Malawi was undertaken in November 2024 with a field report available from January 2025, and the next visit is scheduled for January 2026 with a new progress report available next March. Nevertheless, there have been significant developments during this year so these are recorded for donors in this interim report.

For any Trustees unfamiliar with this 'Community Development Through Environmental Improvement' project near Zomba, we recommend that you browse through the accompanying attached report which gives details of actions during the last field visit. This report concerns only actions during 2025.

DEEP BED FARMING

Much time last November was spent training small-scale farmers on the soil management techniques promoted by Tiyeni. See www.tiyeni.org for details, or the accompanying report.

A priority action was to train 20 members of Nankhunda Transformation in deep bed farming methods, making use of Tiyeni's practical manual. Here *[see above left]* trainees are double-digging a demonstration plot in preparation for making planting beds. After 2 days work on this plot farmers then went to their own farms to replicate what was done here. By the end of a week more than 100 double-dug planting beds were ready on 20 farms.

This work was watched by a Mbedza official, working on a social welfare project in nearby Namadidi. They requested that some of the parents at Mbedza's Special Needs School were trained in similar methods. Here *[see above right]* some of those parents are preparing the ground in the new school, using the methods advocated by Tiyeni. This training was hard physical work, but the value of this method can only be seen when comparing harvest yields before and after the establishment of deep bed farming methods. For that we needed to wait until the maize harvest was completed in April-May. As a yardstick Tiyeni claim that their methods can double the harvest yields of maize in some locations.

Ground being prepared for well manured planting beds which are separated by water retention ditches. Here the Nankhunda Transformation team are working on an individual farmers plot *[see above left],* with an Mbedza member undertaking similar work on their own land *[see above right]*

The success of this method depends largely on the size of the harvest. SGG was very pleased to receive the following information in June. The table below compares estimated yields for a given maize plot before the November 2024 training course and the maize harvest on the same plot as recorded in May 2025

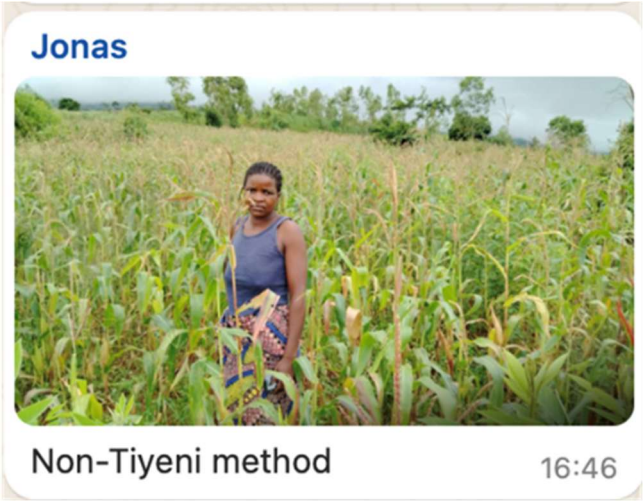
Comparing Tiyeni method and Traditional method

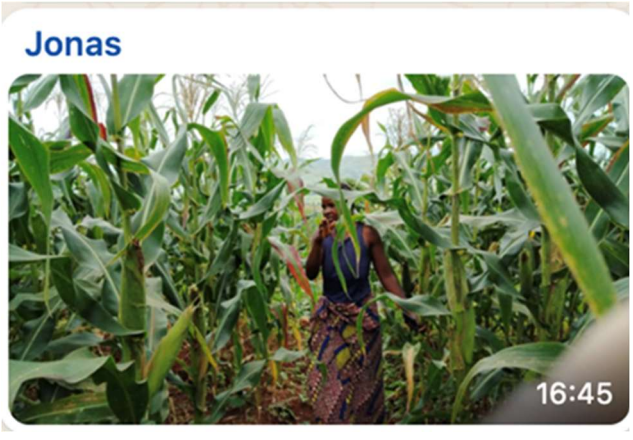
Name of Farmer	Size of land	Quantity harvested on (Tiyeni method)	Quantity harvested (Traditional)	Difference
Perpetual Nkumba		165 kg	100 kg	65 kg
Mercy Chim'dima	6 by 6m	25 kg	15 kg	10 kg
Stellar Maluwa	6 by 6m	25 kg	15 kg	10 kg
Evenness Nzerera	6 by 6m	35 kg	30 kg	5 kg
Cicilia Hasani	6 by 6m	25 kg	20 kg	5 kg
Steveria James	6 by 6m	23 kg	20 kg	3kg
Elena Asims	6 by 6m	25 kg	18 kg	7 kg
Adam Kwamchera	6 by 6m	25 kg	19 kg	6 kg
Georgina Mwanamayi	6 by 6m	25 kg	20 kg	5 kg

Dalitso Malikebu	6 by 6m	20 kg	16 kg	4 kg
Chimwemwe Chalera	6 by 6m	40 kg	28 kg	12 kg
Geoffrey William	6 by 6m	27 kg	24 kg	3 kg
Crisy Malefula	6 by 6m	35 kg	33 kg	2 kg
Anna Banda	6 by 6m	50 kg	40 kg	10 kg
Violet Kananji	6 by 6m	65 kg	20 kg	45 kg
Florence James	6 by 6m	80 kg	50 kg	30 kg

What these figures show is that for these 16 farmers total maize yields before Tiyeni training were 468kg whereas after deep-bed training total yields on the same plots rose to 690kgs, an increase of 222kgs. This is a very small sample of trainees but this increase of nearly 50% in harvest yields implies that this improved soil management technique can be of major importance in reducing food shortages in rural Malawi. Furthermore, the beds where maize was planted were used to grow other crops by interplanting, often of leguminous vegetables. Thus, the aggregate increase on these 100-plus plots was much greater than the above table implies where only maize yields are measured. Yet another significant advantage of this method is that the rainwater retention ditches greatly reduce rapid surface runoff and therefore also reduce soil erosion.

These two photos were taken by Jonas Beyard, the community leader of Nankhunda Transformation. They show two neighbouring plots farmed by Perpetual Nkumba. One plot was prepared & planted using the traditional method, while the other part was farmed using the Tiyeni method. The differences are obvious in these two photos. The post Tiyeni training maize is much taller, more green & healthy looking. However, the real value of this training is best seen in the table above showing Perpetual to have increased her maize harvest by more than 50%.





We do not have such precise ‘before & after training’ data for those members of Mbedza who received training. However, SGG has received some useful illustrations of success and praise for the work done for Mbedza.

Here *[see above left]* some of the mothers who hope to send their children to the planned Mbedza Special School are sitting on the maize harvested from the school grounds. For those used to seeing harvests from large European farms this might seem a small yield, but the training was done on a very small plot [about 25 sq. m.] and the mothers were happy with this additional harvest. Most mature maize seen around Namadidi reaches shoulder height, but the above right photo of a plot using Tiyeni methods shows the maize to be much taller & healthier than normal.

KITCHEN GARDENS

Previous reports have highlighted the importance of demonstration kitchen gardens as the basis for promotion of horticulture and improved nutritional levels around Nankhunda village. Both ZombaTREEZ & Mbedza are considering the establishment of another kitchen garden, but detailed plans & budgets are not yet in place. One crucial problem here is that SGG does not have sufficient time during a month long visit to do both Tiyeni-type improved soil management training & the development of a new demonstration kitchen garden for both the Mbedza & Nankhunda Transformation community groups. A decision concerning kitchen gardens will probably not be made until 2026.

AGROFORESTRY

It is SGG’s hope to make agroforestry a major part of the 5-year programme being implemented by the membership of Nankhunda Transformation. At present this part of the programme seems to lag behind other aspects of the project. Certainly when SGG recently requested information concerning what seedlings were available in community tree nurseries for the coming rainy season, the response given in the table below was disappointing. In late November only 6 of 15 community groups seem to have a significant reserve of seedlings with a total of only 2,199 seedlings available. However, this table ignores all the trees planted from such nurseries earlier in 2025 and that figure is likely to be several thousand. We shall not know details of 2025 agroforestry planting before March 2026.

Name of Groups	Total Number of seedlings	Number of Agroforestry Seedlings	Number of Indigenous Seedlings	Number of fruits Seedlings	Number of Timber seedlings
Mountain club	872	34	372	21	445
Chigwandembo	660	137	175	348	0
Hyena Rock	259	259	0	0	0
St Birgitta	252	30	181	41	0
Sikamu VHs	72	72	0	0	0
Berries	69	33	24	12	0
Mountain Shielders	15	15	0	0	0

There are a few points of interest in the above table. Three years ago SGG heard the suggestion that local farmers were mainly interested in pines which could be sold as timber. These figures suggest that local farmers are now giving more consideration to other species. About 20% are fruit species which can improve local nutrition but also provide a commercial crop for sale in the urban market of nearby Zomba. Indigenous species is an interesting category. Some of these may be planted in the Conservation Areas of each group, or they could be for sale, or they could be for their own members who have rough, rocky land unsuitable for cultivation.

One very encouraging development this year came with news in March of an initiative taken by Chancy & Aaron, two of the leading members of Nankhunda Transformation.

In between the homes of Chancy & Aaron there is a steep-sided valley with shallow soil & exposed rock. There are some small, cultivated plots, but most of the terrain is unsuitable for farming and lies as waste land – as seen above left. In February the two neighbours recruited a team of 15 workers who cleared the grass and planted 480 purchased seedlings, which included some fruits. The size of this valley & the scale of this conservation work is best judged from the size of the workers in the top left photo where they are hardly visible.

Within this valley there are several patches of already established trees, especially in the valley bottom. These can form the basis of a riverine forest and thereby regulate water flow & supply for those living at a lower altitude where the population density is much higher. There are few mature trees on the upper slopes of this valley, but many have already reached head height and can be integrated into a new 'mini-forest' or 'copse'. My guess is that there are up to 1,000 trees similar to those in the two photos above and which can be included in any tree count.

For SGG there are two very significant aspects to this development. One of the crucial obstacles to the conservation areas being managed by 15 'conservation groups' within the ZombaTREEZ-Nankhunda Transformation partnership is that those areas are located within the Zomba Forest Reserve, and therefore ultimately managed by a government ministry rather than the community itself. This is a huge disincentive for the further improvement of those areas. However, this small project implemented by Aaron, Chancy & neighbours is outside the official forest reserve, so under the control of the farming households living next to this valley. It will be interesting to see if it develops more rapidly than Zomba Forest Reserve in terms of productivity, biodiversity, carbon capture, and value to the local inhabitants.

The other aspect of significance here is the initiative taken by Aaron and Chancy. It is SGG's view that development in rural Africa will proceed at a suitable pace only when Africans themselves turn away from overreliance on wealthier countries & institutions, but instead take up the initiative and work for the benefit of themselves. The long-term role of NGOs such as SGG should be to facilitate and support projects proposed by African beneficiaries. Thus, SGG was overjoyed to hear news of this initiative. We hope other clusters of neighbours follow this pattern of conservation in 2026 and transform patches of waste, rocky ground into productive 'mini-forests'.

There is one more aspect of this conservation scheme to consider. Many supporters of SGG will be aware of our claim that we can "plant a tree for 20p". The full cost of Chancy & Aaron's conservation efforts was about £300 with one outcome being the planting of about 500 trees. That is far more than SGG normally pays for tree-planting. However, by far the biggest cost here was labour: 15 workers were each paid MKw 3,000/- per day for 7 days. Some NGOs work on the basis of labour being entirely voluntary, and in many circumstances SGG would agree that such arrangements were appropriate. However, SGG opposes the expectation that very poor families should work for free. The accompanying report from December 2024 indicated that absolute poverty was endemic in parts of rural Malawi, so SGG's policy in this situation was to pay what was little more than £1/day for help in completing this conservation work. That payment was fully justified.

FOREST RESTORATION

In the December 2024 report it was clear that forest restoration by a mechanism of fire suppression & bi-annual maintenance [weed-cutting] was a major part of environmental improvement in the Nankhunda-Nsanama locality. There is an annual counting of trees & subsequent payments made to the 15 conservation groups on the basis of how many trees they have protected. This annual tree counting has been done in November this year, and SGG now has most of the results in the table below.

During this first week of December 2025, SGG received news that 96,844 'trees & bushes' had been counted in the conservation areas so far. The following incomplete table gives the names of some of the conservation groups & some of the tree counts for their area.

Hammers	
Nankhunda	
Berries	
Back to Jesus	6,802
Mountain Club	7,247
Mountain Shielders	10,050
Chigwandembo	9,605
Hyena Rocks	19,993
Maguba Salvation	13,011
St Birgitta	7,663
Umodzi Youth	6,050
Nsanama	7,902
ZFL	5,871
Committee	2,650
Bright Dreamers	

At the start of this December the tree count was given as 96,844, but within a few days that figure has risen to 112,000 when the tree counts for Happy Hammers & Berries have been added. Clearly these figures have to be treated with care. In January 2024 the estimate of trees within these conservation areas was 60,728. As seen from photographic evidence in previous reports natural regeneration can be rapid in this humid tropical climate. A near-doubling of trees within two years though does seem to be excessively rapid. Two factors may account for such rapid change in the figures. One is simply that farmers counting trees knowing that they will be paid on the basis of how many trees are counted is an obvious recipe for overestimates. A second factor is that some of these conservation groups have significantly increased the areas where they are protecting trees, so these figures are bound to rise. Readers should also recognise the difficulties of accurate counting in dense tropical forest.

SGG agreed to help fund this forest restoration work on our first visit to ZombaTREEZ in January 2023. On the basis of observations made since then of changes within these conservation areas SGG expects an increase of at least 50,000 trees over the 5 year period of the SGG-ZombaTREEZ partnership. That might appear to be a low estimate when compared to the figures above, but SGG will be using more demanding criteria than that currently adopted by ZombaTREEZ. The most important points to remember though are that this type of conservation work is providing some seasonal employment for Nankhunda Transformation membership, which now stands at more than 500 local farmers. Furthermore a significant carbon sink is being established for the benefit of all.

Readers should appreciate that tree count figures are only reasonable estimates. Many of the conservation areas are on steep slopes with trees at/above head height and plenty of undergrowth hiding young saplings *[see above left].* When weeds are being cut and a conservation area actively maintained, as seen in this photo *[see above right]* where Happy Hammers Sports Club are cleaning their area, there are still many opportunities for miscounting of young trees.

SUMMARY

This report summarises the news received by SGG from Zomba over the last nine months. That news indicates that progress is being made in Nankhunda and Nsanama villages. Thus, on behalf of the hundreds of small-scale farmers who are involved in these various actions, Sustainable Global Gardens wishes to thank all those who have provided funding which has made these actions possible. Thank you for your generosity.

My final point is that SGG will undertake a field monitoring visit to this project in January-February 2026, so you can anticipate a further progress report in March.

Paul Keeley

SGG Director