

Beans into Bales: Charles Muzabarani's Velvet Bean Breakthrough

📍 Ward 3, Dande Valley – Mount Darwin District



No smallholder should suffer the indignity of poverty

"This crop is easy to grow. I'll dedicate land to it every year—because healthy animals mean a healthy community."



Tashinga members bale the harvested velvet bean



Charles feeds his cattle velvet bean bales, ready for the dry season

For decades, Charles Muzabarani weathered the rise and fall of farming fortunes in Dande Valley. Born in 1973, Charles began farming cotton in 1993, and for a time, it brought real prosperity. With the earnings, he bought cattle—his long-term investment. But by 2010, cotton prices had plummeted, and in the same year, he lost three cattle to landmines before the HALO Trust finally cleared his fields. Still, he persevered.

By 2024, Charles owned 14 cows. Yet, when drought struck that year, he lost another four to hunger. Like many in his community, he relied on dry sorghum stalks to feed his cattle during the lean season—a strategy that delivered bulk, but not nutrition. That's when he discovered the true power of a forgotten legume: velvet bean.

Known locally as chiriri, Charles had long known velvet bean as a food crop, though its bitter beans required long boiling. Years earlier, he'd received seeds from a government programme—but, unaware of their remarkable value as livestock feed, he had shelved them.

Then came the Tashinga Group, an Internal Savings and Lending Scheme formed in 2022. With support from Agricultural Partnerships Trust (APT) and government extension officers, the group established an agroecology demonstration site in 2024. The demonstration site champions agroecological solutions that integrate soil fertility, livestock nutrition, and drought resilience. One of the featured crops? Velvet bean—this time, not for the pot, but for the pen.

Through training at the site, Charles learned how to plant, harvest, bale, and store chiriri as fodder. Unlike traditional crop residues, velvet bean hay boasts over 33% crude protein, offering drought-tolerant, nitrogen-fixing, high-value feed for cattle in dry zones like Dande. For Charles, it was a game-changer for his herd.

This season, he expects to harvest 400 kg of velvet bean biomass, which he'll mix with sorghum stover to produce nearly a tonne of fortified feed—enough to help his herd weather the next dry spell. Velvet bean has become more than a backup crop—it's part of Charles's strategy to secure his livestock, improve soil fertility, and build resilience.

Now, Charles is a vocal advocate. He shares his experience with neighbours, encouraging them to embrace chiriri not just as tradition, but as transformation. Stories like Charles's are inspiring other farmers across Mount Darwin to rethink fodder, resilience, and agroecology—one bale at a time.