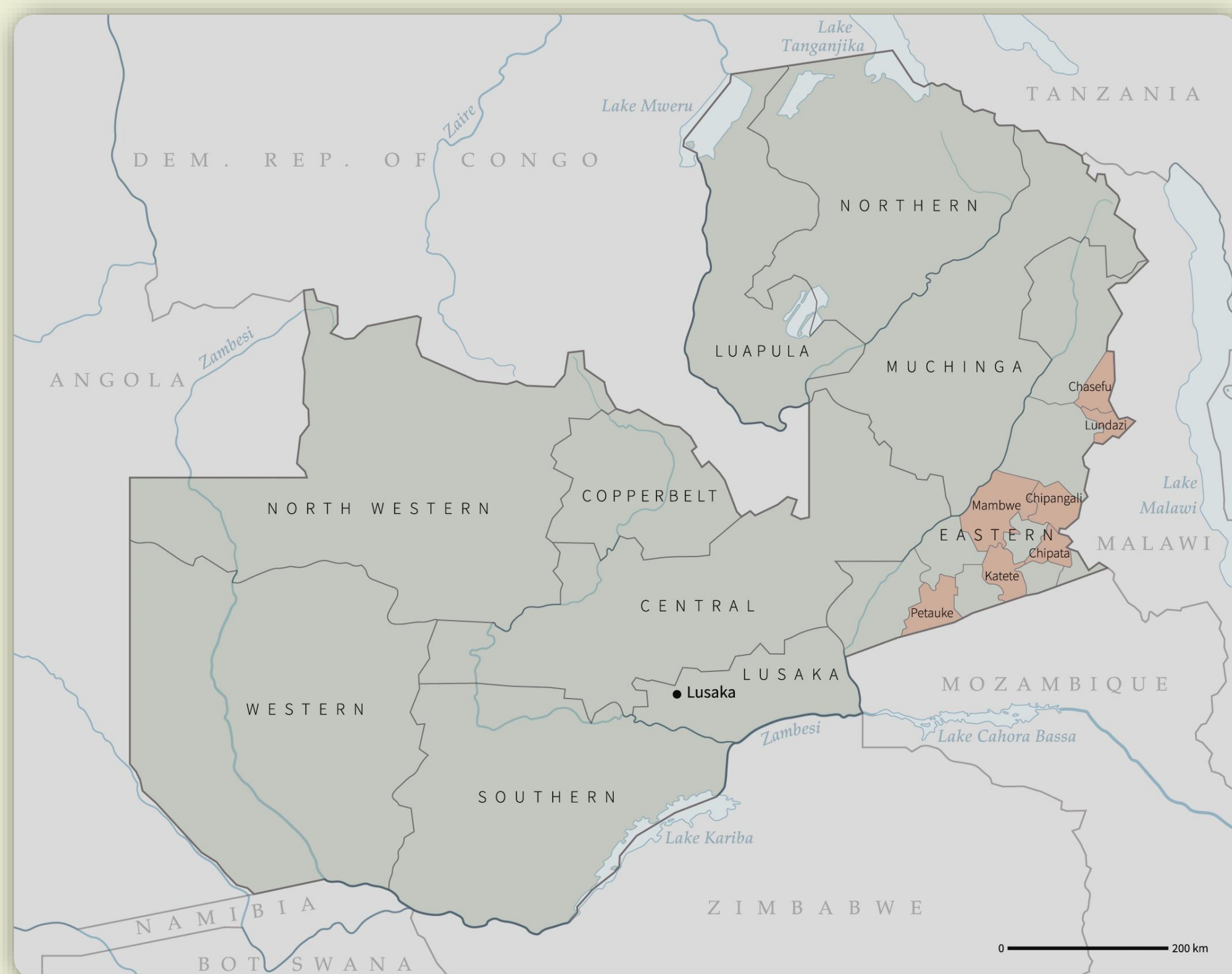


# The Role of Cooperatives in Strengthening the Leadership and Voice of Women: Evidence from Zambia

## Research Questions

- What are the key challenges and enabling conditions for the equal representation of women in agricultural cooperatives, particularly in leadership positions?
- What are the impacts of female leadership from a gender perspective?



## Methods

Qualitative field research conducted in April/May 2025

- Focus group discussions and in-depth interviews with 192 smallholder farmers of 12 cooperatives in Eastern Province of Zambia
- Semi-structured interviews with traditional authorities and community leaders, government and private sector representatives, non-governmental actors

## Key Challenges for Women

- Traditional gender norms and roles
  - Primary responsibility for domestic and care work
  - Public and decision-making positions as domain of men
- Mobility constraints
- Lower levels of education
- Low self-confidence

## Enabling Conditions for Female Representation

- Through targeted training (e.g. on agroecological methods, financial management, entrepreneurship) women become knowledge-bearers
  - Women's voices and agency within their households increases
  - Women gain self-confidence and self-esteem
- Lower-level cooperative roles (e.g. within producer groups) often serve as entry points in women's leadership journeys
- However, single women past reproductive age appear to be more likely to attain leadership positions

## (Gender) Impacts of Female Leadership

- Gender roles in the household are redistributed, with a more equitable division of tasks
- Social recognition of women increases and they assume leadership positions even beyond the cooperative (e.g. in community or church committees)
- Female-led cooperatives are considered to be better organized, more resource-efficient, and more proactive in seeking funding and investment opportunities

## Conclusion

- Capacity building is of pivotal importance for the promotion of women's voice and leadership within cooperatives
- Measures must also involve men and boys on a targeted basis in order to eradicate prejudices against female leadership and mobilise their support

