

Irrigation system brings food security to remote village in southern Malawi

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A rooster scratches the ground listlessly in front of a small cluster of modest mud and thatch huts, just off the path to the fields. In the lush green valley below, villagers of rural Tsegulani also work the soil. Bent double, the women use metal bottle tops as a measure for fertiliser, dropping some into each hole. The men work ahead preparing the maize beds and digging the seed holes using long thin sticks. Everesi Zimete, with milky half blind eyes and an age-wrinkled face works in the sun-baked field amongst the women. She is too modest and old school to reveal her age. She is working beside a quiet, thin, 28-year-old, Mwangisi Divala, who works to feed her two sons and grandmother. She is divorced, and like 37 percent of women in the area, heads her household. They are among a group of 24 women who, in 1998, joined the Namithembe Irrigation Scheme in a remote area of southern Malawi - a rough and slow 45-minute 4x4 drive 29km south of Mwanza Boma - almost right up to the neighbouring Mozambican border. Malawi has an agricultural based economy and ninety percent of the villagers in Tsegulani are subsistence farmers, living off the produce from their land. They are at the mercy of Malawi's unstable and harsh climatic conditions which are such that at least fifty percent of Malawians suffer from repeated annual food insecurity as the produce of the one harvest runs out before the next crop is ready for harvest. A family's food often runs out around November, and the food shortage would peak with the start of the new year, with maize and other staples reaching record high prices up until March and the next harvest. The Namithembe Irrigation Scheme is one of many small-scale irrigation schemes that the Malawi government is establishing, in partnership with NGOs, under the US\$4,1million African Development Bank funded Small Scale Irrigation Project with the aim of improving food security and incomes of some subsistence farmers in the country. Using black irrigation pipes that snake across the land they gravity feed water from the Namithembe River to their water basin irrigation system that feeds 2,7 hectares under maize, sweet potatoes and beans and it has helped reduce the food gap in the region, and provided a small income from the sale of produce. "I can buy soap to wash my clothes, and salt for my food," said Zimete. "And above all there is food security." Divala agreed and added that if she works hard she will be able to earn K7 000 in a year from the communal scheme. The Namithembe Irrigation Scheme was created with help from Action Aid International Malawi, assistance from government and a contribution of K200 from each of the 35 communal farmers. It has created greater crop diversification in the region and reduced the chronic food shortage from five to eight months down to two to three months, explained McLean Chimpeni, Action Aid International Malawi's Programme Co-Ordinator for Mwanza. Margaret David, another farmer on the communal scheme, also speaks of "benefiting through food and money" as well as the ability to send her child to school. However she pointed out that the scheme needed improved road infrastructure and a vehicle for access to markets, more pipes and fertiliser and six more water basins to enable them to cultivate the full 10 hectares available to them. "Action Aid has encouraged the formation of Farmer's Associations to give the farmers a bigger voice to lobby for services," said Boaz Mandula, Action Aid International Malawi's Programme Co-Ordinator for Mwanza. Chimpeni added that it was up to government to supply access to markets and funding: "Action Aid is not there to provide services. There is a government to provide that." Action Aid is supplying seed and fertiliser to the project, and confirmed that the project was performing well. Leonard Mbewe, Agricultural Extension Officer for the project from the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security, was in the area to conduct a baseline data survey in the rural areas to establish their needs. He said that government hoped to "help empower people by creating income generating activities." Although the contribution may appear small, it provides hope for people living in abject poverty and facing annual chronic food shortages. With only 2,7 hectares cultivated out of an earmarked area of 10 hectares the Namithembe Irrigation Scheme has a waiting list of more than 170 people hoping to join and benefit from the food security it provides but they need a further five water basins and more irrigation pipes to cultivate the rest of the land. Mbewe said that worked stopped on the scheme due to lack of funds, but that money from the African Development Bank will allow the 10-hectare project to be fully developed by September this year. With this investment, perhaps the dreams of Emily John, another subsistence farmer on the Namithembe scheme, will be realised. 30 years ago Emily's hopes of becoming a teacher were dashed when her father died and she had to leave school in order to earn money for her family. Now Emily fervently hopes that at least one of her six children will be able to realise her dream and become a teacher in her stead. Â

Â MALAWI FACT BOX:

Malawi has an agriculturally based economy producing maize, tobacco, tea, sugar, groundnuts and coffee; Agriculture makes up 36,5% of GDP; Life expectancy has just dropped by one year to 37. HIV/AIDS prevalence is 14,4%. Chronic food insecurity is experienced by 50% of the population; 42% of the population live on less than \$1 a day; 76% on less than \$2 a day. Within the rural community 24,3% are considered ultra poor and 55,9% poor.

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