

Africa

From famine to food surplus

Malawi's maize subsidy programme has bolstered the country's food security

Busani Bafana

In each of the past three growing seasons, the family of Bernadette Banda, in Chidambo village in the central region of Malawi, has doubled the maize harvest from the family plot, thanks to a government input subsidy programme.

Subsidised hybrid maize seed and fertilizers have helped boost harvests and incomes at household level for more than 1.7-million farming families in Southern Africa's most densely populated country.

Resource-poor smallholder farmers like the Bandas have demonstrated that subsidies can overturn a food crisis if applied correctly.

In 2005 Malawi experienced a major famine where more than five million people needed food aid. Three years later, Malawi has dramatically moved from a serious food deficit to becoming a net food exporter, with the 2008 maize harvest of 2.6-million metric tons – the highest on record.

"We used to have food shortages but now that has changed as a result of the subsidy programme," says Banda. "My family has enough to eat and we are able to sell some of the



Queues such as this for maize may soon be a rare sight in Malawi after subsidy programmes produced bumper harvests. Photo: AP

maize to get cash," she adds.

Banda explains that sustained bumper maize harvests have freed her family from hunger and given them a better outlook on life.

In a country where almost 7.2-million – 60% the population – live under the poverty line, each extra bag of grain harvested and extra kwacha earned makes a difference. The Bandas' compound in Chidambo village is a hive of activity. Bricks are being moulded and neatly lined up

to dry in the sun ready for firing. The bricks are for a new house for the Bandas and their five children.

Government officials, the private sector representatives and researchers say the maize productivity turnaround is proof that with the right policies, Malawi can say goodbye to international food aid.

As a result of the subsidy programme, Malawi's grain production tripled from national production average of 1.2-million tons in the

2004 and 2005 agriculture season to 3.4-million tons in the 2006 and 2007 agriculture season.

Malawi President Bingu wa Mutharika – who is also the Minister of Agriculture – went against the grain and risked international donor support by promoting the subsidy programme. Government distributed seed and fertilizer vouchers, allowing smallholder farmers to buy two 50kg bags of fertilizer, which would normally cost the equivalent of US\$14 (about R109), for about a fifth of the market price. Average maize yields per hectare of land have increased from 0.8 tons to two tons.

Donors opposed the programme at the outset, but some saw it differently and changed their opinion when it bore results. "Malawi and Africa need subsidies because within the three years of our programme our farmers have benefited," says Dr Andrew Daudi, principal secretary in the ministry of agriculture.

Players in the private sector have also been won over. There have been concerns that the subsidy programme would fuel budget deficits and distort the market and be costly to administer. The jump in maize production has players in the sector commending the programme for promoting "smart partnerships" with government.

The Seed Traders Association, which represents eight companies, has reported an increase of about 40% in actual sales by participating

seed suppliers since the agricultural input subsidy programme was initiated in 2005.

The programme has not been without its challenges. Farmers and human rights organisations want more deserving people to be included. In addition, the programme should improve the roll-out times for farmers to get the input in quantities and on time for planting.

"Subsidies are good and we should advocate for them, but not indefinitely," says Richard Kachule, a researcher at Bunda College who coordinated a study of the input programme. The study was funded by the Food, Agriculture and Natural Resources Policy Analysis Network (FANRPAN), a regional multi-stakeholder network promoting food security policies in Southern Africa.

Kachule adds that subsidies should have a sustainable exit strategy.

"The whole issue of subsidies is looking at inputs marketing but what of the output markets? Once you develop output markets, producers must be able to sell at higher prices to be able to afford the agricultural inputs without subsidies."

How Malawi achieved its "Green Revolution" and tackled the food crisis will be a focus of a Regional Stakeholders Policy Dialogue convened by FANRPAN in Lilongwe next week. More than 200 international and local delegates are expected to attend. — IPS

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David Tlale, fashion designer

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