

Africa

Watering Malawi's farms

A UN irrigation scheme promises to increase food security, writes **Pilirani Semu-Banda**

Wyson Chandanga, who farms a small-holding in the northern district of Mzimba, Malawi, does not care whether the country receives enough rain this year. Neither is he concerned about whether the rains come on time or not.

Chandanga's attitude is questionable, especially because Malawi is an agricultural economy which depends greatly on rain-fed farming. The country derives up to 70% of its foreign exchange revenue from agricultural produce and 85% of the country's population depends on the sector for its livelihood.

However, Chandanga says adverse weather, including erratic rains in recent years, has ended his dependence on rainfall.

Malawi underwent three major episodes of drought: in 1991, in 2000 and, most recently, in 2005. The country has also experienced serious flooding in some regions and last year was no exception — half its 28 districts were hit and most crops were swept away.

Looking dirty and tired but content after finishing a day's work cultivating his plot of land, Chandanga declares that he will be a more successful farmer now that he no longer depends on the rains. "I have now ventured into irrigation farming and I grow maize twice a year — even in the dry season. I could produce the staple food only once a year when I practised rain-fed agriculture, but the yield was not enough for my family," says the farmer.

Chandanga is one of Malawi's 29 000 farmers receiving assistance from the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) to intensify farm production through the development of small-scale irrigation systems and water-harvesting schemes in the northern region.

The FAO is helping farmers to

improve food security, diversify sources of household income, prevent waterborne diseases in water points and pit latrines, improve dietary intake and conserve natural resources, says the organisation's communications officer Muwuso Chawinga.

"Up to 90% of Malawi's agriculture is rain-fed, but we need to diversify into more irrigation-farming practices if we are to attain food security for the country," says Chawinga.

Seven out of 10 households in Malawi usually run out of food before the end of the harvesting season, mainly because of drought and floods, according to Chawinga. "It is therefore important that the country maximises methods to grow crops, even in the dry season and avoids the effects of drought or flooding, which destroy crops," he says.

The irrigation programme, which began in January, is already showing signs of success and is encouraging crop diversification in a country highly reliant on maize, the lone staple food. Chandanga, for example, is now cultivating potatoes, beans and rice to supplement his maize crop.

Masuzgo Jere, a woman who farms a small piece of irrigated land, says she has already harvested enough maize this year to feed her family of five. She expects her land to yield more crops from two further irrigation seasons before April next year, when the country harvests maize from the rain-fed agricultural system. "I not only manage to feed my family, I also sell the surplus I grow. My family is now being regarded as well off by members of my community," says Jere.

The farmers involved in the irrigation project are provided with treadle pumps and water pipes to pump water through canals from dams, rivers and streams close to them.

They are also taught skills in water management, development of agro-



Green fingers: farmers use a basic treadle pump (above) to drain the water from a nearby canal to water their crops in the Sanje district, Malawi; and (right) a farmer tends to his crop of Chinese cabbages at Simpha village, north of Lilongwe. Photographs: AP



business, promotion of afforestation and natural resource conservation.

"Our children are not left behind in this since we are also developing garden-based learning centres in primary schools. This forms part of their agriculture lessons and will ensure sustainability of the project since the kids will acquire knowledge of irrigation farming," says Jere.

The irrigation programme was kick-started after a rural poverty assessment exercise by the FAO in May 2007. The assessment highlighted low crop yield and low income levels among rural households — attributed to a lack of irrigation opportunities, erratic rainfall and drought.

According to the government Malawi is irrigating only 72 000ha of 400 000ha of irrigable land. However, President Bingu wa Mutharika, who doubles as Minister of Agriculture, said at a press conference in August that government is creating a "green belt" along Lake Malawi, with irrigation schemes along the

banks of the lake.

Lake Malawi, a fresh water lake, is the ninth-largest lake in the world. It flows through the three regions of the country and the government is expected to help smallholder farmers to establish irrigation schemes.

The ministry of irrigation and water development has been allocated a budget increase of 50% — to \$55 million — in the 2008/09 budget. "The funds will be used in the ministry's development programme that is considered to be crucial for food security. This year the ministry is expected to construct about 16 earth dams in addition to 20 already constructed," said Minister of Finance Goodall Gondwe when he presented the budget statement.

The ministry of agriculture has since indicated that the country is expected to produce up to 300 000 tons of maize from the irrigation schemes by November. The first rains usually come between November and December. — IPS



If you could change one thing forever, what would it be?

"It would be to give every child in the world free education, right up to university. I think that the line of poverty is parallel to the line of illiteracy."

Stoan Seate, Bongo Maffin rapper

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