

Malawi gives farmers a chance

Millions of farmers are being helped to cultivate land to feed their families and even turn a profit

Raphael Mweninguwe

Mail&Guardian January 9 to 15 2009

In a two-bedroomed iron house in the southern district of Phalombe, Malawi, Simati Matupa is watching the television he has just bought. Seated beside the 37-year-old farmer is his wife. The Matupa family had dreamed of owning a television set for a long time, but it was difficult because of a lack of money. But this year, after a bumper harvest, they decided the time had come.

Phalombe is about 90km south of Blantyre, Malawi's commercial capital. Here the Matupas own four acres of land, but for a long time the family did not have enough food to last the whole year because of high costs of farm inputs such as seed and fertiliser.

The Agricultural Input Subsidy Programme was introduced in 2004 by Malawi President Bingu wa Mutharika, immediately after he took office. Last year the family was among the list of targeted poor households to benefit from the programme.

"I received a 50kg bag of subsidised fertiliser and 10kg of seed. I planted the seed and after applying fertiliser using the technological skills from agricultural extension workers, I was surprised at the yield I harvested," says Matupa.

He did not cultivate all four acres of land "because I was not sure whether I would make it". He harvested enough to feed his family and had extra maize, which he sold to buy a television set, two bicycles and a three-CD player. He was also able to open a grocery store. Smiling broadly, Matupa says he hopes the subsidy programme continues for the betterment of many poor farmers. He says a number of farmers in the district have enough food because of the programme. "If I

were asked whether the programme should continue or not I would prefer the former."

Matupa is one of the millions of Malawians benefiting from the subsidy programme. Patrick Matemba from the same district of Phalombe told the Mail & Guardian, soon after receiving a 50kg bag of subsidised fertiliser, that he echoes Matupa's sentiments. "This programme has had a significant impact on the lives of poor Malawians. Most of us are food secure because of this programme," he says.

Mutharika introduced the programme after noting in 2002 that Malawi was in a crisis as a result of drought in some parts of the country and the high costs of farm inputs. During the last growing season a 50kg bag of fertilizer was selling at \$25. A subsidised bag is \$6. An estimated 60% of the population lives on less than \$1 a day, a situation the president has on a number of occasions said could be changed for the better.

Since Mutharika took office Malawi's economy has grown to 6% annually. Finance Minister Goodall Gondwe has attributed this growth to the government's "good economic policies".

For the first time in years farmers are in a position to buy cars or build new iron-sheet houses, an indication that the subsidy programme is benefiting the poor. The sick, especially those infected with HIV, have enough food to eat and so can prolong their lives. About 14% of the country's 13.6-million population are HIV-positive.

From the start Mutharika, who is also the country's minister of agriculture and food

security, said he would not allow "Malawi to continue begging from donors when the country is able to produce enough food to feed itself". The president has told the nation that donors, especially the United States and Britain, did not want to fund the subsidy programme because "they are saying the programme would be costly to the country". But he has vowed to continue with the programme "as long as he remains the president".

The cost of fertiliser has gone up from MK4 000 last year to MK11 000 this year. Despite the increase, the president reduced the cost of the subsidised fertiliser by a further 20% this year to allow more farmers access.

In addition, Mutharika has made irrigation one of his priorities in achieving food security. Two years ago his administration budgeted for 400 treadle pumps per MP, to be distributed in the MPs' respective constituencies.

It is because of the president's leadership that, in the 2006/07 marketing season, Malawi was able to harvest an extra 500 000 tons of maize. Some of the maize was sold to Zimbabwe. Malawi also exported maize to other countries in the Southern Africa Development Community, including to Lesotho following drought in that country.

Mutharika's efforts have been recognised by a number of international organisations and countries. Recently he received from the Food, Agriculture and Natural Resources Policy Analysis Network (FANRPAN) the first Food Policy Leadership Award for transforming the country from food deficit to food surplus.

The annual Food Policy Leadership Award was established in 2008. It has no cash prizes but includes, among other things, a

trophy, a signed certificate and some prizes donated by FANRPAN partners.

FANRPAN board member Sindiso Ngwenya says the success of Mutharika's subsidy programme has enabled the country to feed itself as well as its neighbours.

Deputy Minister of Agriculture and Food Security Frank Mwenefumbo told a Kenyan delegation, during a September visit to learn more about the subsidy programme, that "without the subsidy programme Malawians would have starved to death". He said there were no "immediate plans to stop" the programme and that discontinuing it would not be in the best interest of the nation.

Although the programme has received overwhelming support from the people, it has shortcomings. Some targeted individuals fail to get the coupon vouchers because of the "unscrupulous people who produce fake coupon vouchers", according to Mwenefumbo. Others receive more than they are entitled to and Mutharika has warned that his government would deal with "anyone who wants to derail my programme".

He has blamed the opposition for the problems rocking the distribution process. But the opposition has denied any link either to fake coupon vouchers or failure by the target groups to access subsidised seed and fertiliser.

A number of people have been arrested and these include chiefs and opposition party members. But despite some shortcomings within the programme Malawians are now far better off in terms of food security than they were in 2002 when more than six million people had no food. And for that they have Mutharika, to thank