

Nkhani Zaulere

the Malawi Chatterbox March 2010

Mrs Mazoe Gondwe is food provider for her family. "I plant two crops, one watered by rain and one that needs irrigating. That's back-breaking and it takes four hours a day." I also need somewhere to store the grain that will keep the weevils out."

Women like Mazoe Gondwe produce 80% of the food needed in Africa, but they can own as little as 2% of the land and in some countries receive only 5% of farming information and training. Malawi is well above this average due to the Christian Council policy of working through women.

Slowly the message is getting through that women do most of the farming but have few of the land rights. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation will no longer fund a project that ignores gender issues. UN Food & Agriculture in Malawi works with village chiefs to let women know they are legally entitled to own land. Women are given wind-up radios so that they can listen to farming programmes in their own language and learn how to write wills.

Maize & acacia canopy

Ochieng Ogodo, a Nairobi based environment and science journalist, says Africans could triple their yields by planting alongside their crops a fast-growing, hardy species *Faidherbia albida* that becomes dormant and sheds its nitrogen-rich leaves during the early rainy season. This is the time when maize and other crops need nitrogen. It re-grows them again at the start of the dry season and so does not compete with crops for light.

In Malawi maize yields under the acacia canopy are 280% - nearly three times – those outside it. The tree has other names including *apple-ring acacia* and *ana-tree*.

Besides providing organic fertilizer and fodder for livestock, this acacia also acts as a windbreak, provides wood for fuel and building, and cuts erosion by loosening the soil to absorb rainwater. during the rains. Despite 60 years of research and over 700 scientific publications, the tree is almost unknown outside Malawi, Tanzania and Ethiopia.

“Smallholder farming could transform the lives of the poor” – say two Africans from the Institute for Democracy in Africa. But it is not happening except in a handful of countries - Malawi, Ethiopia, and two in West Africa. In percentage

terms, Africa spends only half as much as Asia on agricultural research. "This leaves us an abiding legacy of poverty and hunger."

Food security A number of areas are short of food this year, especially in the Lower and Middle Shire areas and along the lakeshore. President Mutharika, who is also minister of agriculture, is confident enough maize is stored in the new silos, though there will be financial problems. Unlike previous years, Malawi will not be feeding Zimbabwe.

GRAIN – www.grain.org is a small international non-profit organization, based in Canada, working to support small farmers and social movements in their struggles for community-controlled and biodiversity-based food systems. Most of its work is carried out in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

In January Grain published *Unravelling the “miracle” of Malawi’s green revolution*, a study of the current position of agriculture in Malawi, this can be found at www.grain.org/seedling/?id=665. An excerpt:

“All the fertilizers and seeds in the world cannot make much difference for the great mass of farmers in Malawi, who do not even have enough land to grow the food their families need. The average small farmer in Malawi cultivates less than half a hectare, while in the fertile southern part of the country the average per capita landholding is only 0.33 ha. Access to land has become dramatically worse in Malawi over the past few decades, and the problem is not population growth, of which Malawi has a relatively low rate, while it has a relatively high rate of rural exodus. By far the most important factor behind inadequate access to land is inequitable distribution of land. Half of Malawi’s arable land is controlled by some 30,000 estates of 10–500 hectares ”

Conferences

In June and November last year Malawi hosted two international conferences on permaculture – permanent agriculture – attended by more than 200 people from over 80 countries. These were aimed at helping small farmers increase the variety of crops grown by using sustainable methods.

Synthetic fertilizers have an important role in production of food but there is an increasing

awareness of the need to use organic matter to maintain and improve the fertility of the soil. Three agriculturalists at the University of Illinois in the USA have published a paper expressing concern over the long-term harm to soil by prolonged use of synthetic fertilizer. This can be found at <http://jeq.scijournals.org/cgi/content/full/38/6/2295#TBL4>

Bunchy top disease already causes 40% loss of crop to the many families in Malawi who rely on bananas for feeding their children. The disease is common in Mozambique, Zambia and further north. Instead of the big, green drooping leaves of a healthy banana, the plants have narrow, yellowing spikes and fruit are scarce. Bunchy-top is spread by the black banana aphid.

Queensland has been fighting bunchy-top since the 1930s. Their strategy:

- don't move plants;
- eradicate infected bananas;
- spray the aphids;
- propagate & replant with virus-free and nutrition-rich varieties.

Queensland University of Technology has set up a 3-year project with Africa Harvest and Bioversity International to tackle this huge problem.

Trachoma & blindness

Trachoma is the main cause of blindness in Malawi but for 20 years there has been no proper survey. A team from the Malawi College of Medicine has now examined 6,792 people, half in Chikwawa and half in Mchinji, selected randomly. Roughly half were adults and half children.

In this 6% of the population of Malawi, 2,196 people have **trichiasis**. This means they need surgery to stop them going blind. Why are they not getting it? "This is mostly due to the lack of trichiasis surgical equipment in the hospitals." In other words, there are not enough of the special knives.

The report calls for the **SAFE** strategy to be launched, the WHO policy. SAFE stands for:
Surgery for those at immediate risk of blindness.
Antibiotics for individuals and to reduce community infection.
Facial cleanliness to reduce transmission.
Environment: clean water & good sanitation.

Children can be stopped going blind in ways which cost very little and the experts are already in place. They just lack the tools to do the job. To see for yourself, google "Trachoma in Central & Southern Malawi."

Malaria 1 in 10 children in Malawi die before they are five. One of the main causes is malaria.

In Malawi the Government spends £18 million every year fighting malaria. At present, 21% of patients admitted to hospital are suffering from malaria. One of the reasons for the high mortality rate amongst children is that only 23% are able to sleep under impregnated nets. Many of the children who survive malaria suffer from brain damage or learning disabilities.

In recent years malaria has become increasingly resistant to previous treatments. Lifelong impregnated nets are by far the most effective preventive measure.

Pregnant women are at increased risk from malaria as their immunity is reduced. Also, their increased body heat attracts mosquitoes. Their risk of illness is increased four times.

The only effective protection is a treated net. MACS has the chance of bulk buying 5000 nets for £12,500 - £2.50 a net. How many lives will you save this Lent? Donations can be sent to: MACS Treasurer, 83 High Street, Rayleigh, Essex, SS6 7EJ or via www.malawimacs.org

"Animals, Anthu & Ancestors" by Brian Morris, who lectured on this at the Royal Geographical Society, in October 2009. He said:

When I accompanied groups of Malawian schoolchildren to the wildlife sanctuaries of Lengwe and Liwonde twenty years ago I was struck by the expressions of wonder, fascination and sometimes awe that young children often displayed when they came to confront some of the larger mammals. For most of them it was a completely new experience, as they had never before seen waterbuck, kudu, nyala or elephant in the wild.

Recently I had a discussion with one of my friends in the Domasi Valley. Like many young men he was attempting to secure a living by collecting firewood. I asked him if he encountered any wild animals on the mountain these days. Not much, he replied, mainly baboon and vervet monkey, and the occasional grey duiker, blue monkey and hyrax. But the other day, he said, I came face to face with a bushbuck (*mbawala*). It was a really beautiful sight – using the verb *kukongola* (to be beautiful). It struck me at the time that it is by developing and emphasizing this aesthetic sentiment that the future of the wildlife in Malawi really depends.

All the pioneer conservationists emphasized that wild animals were part of our human heritage, that they should be protected because they had intrinsic value, not because they had an economic "use" for humans....

Even the simple observation of wildlife can be an aesthetic and spiritual experience that satisfies deep human needs – as expressed in the Nyau rituals or by the young children who express sheer joy on encountering wild animals for the first time in Malawi's wildlife sanctuaries.

Copies of this gem - "*Animals, Anths and Ancestors*" are available from Harry Foot: Stowford Farm, Harford, Ivybridge PL21 OJM for £5.00 plus £1p&p.

Dr. Susannah Wood writes from St.Luke's: "There's been a real lack of rain but Malosa has fared better than much of the South and my walk to church was through a tunnel of maize. I am struck again by the birdsong and a flash as a red bishop-bird crosses my path, by the importance of greetings and the singing in church. The hospital has just been getting on fine without me! Mr. Kwekesa, the chief clinical officer, has enjoyed being a doctor in my extended absence.

The lab renovations are almost complete and a container of drugs and an ultrasound machine have just arrived from the Netherlands – you can actually see things on it! and another from Huddersfield with boxes, wheelchairs and sewing-machines. And my cat has had kittens!"

A report of the work in the 2 hospitals and 8 health centres in the diocese of Upper Shire for 2007-08 is available by email from: joanna@cwoodd.wanadoo.co.uk

Forced marriages

Belita Simpokwe was 12 and an ambitious pupil in Std. 6 at a school at Chitipa in Northern Malawi when she was ordered to leave school and get married to a 77-year-old man. She refused but that changed nothing. "Soon after my stepfather sent me to the market each day to collect money from a certain gentleman. I used some to buy food and the rest I gave to my stepfather."

To her surprise, three weeks later the man came to her house with a garden hoe, a symbol of dowry among some northern people. "I was shocked when my stepfather asked me to receive it from the man. I objected, knowing this would be a sign of accepting marriage. My mother tried to reason with him, saying I was too young to marry. But my stepfather charged

at my mother, saying that we had already 'eaten' the man's money."

After two weeks of marriage the Chitipa Women's Forum came to her rescue and convinced the parents of the need to send her back to school. The Women's Forum is a group, funded by Action Aid, which tries to end harmful practices which violate the right of girls to education.

"We don't really provide help to those who go back to school but we have set up a fund which enables us to pay the school fees for children whose parents refuse to assist. We have so far been able to send back to school 40 girls between 7 and 16, married through *kupimbira* in this district."

Senior Chief Mwaulamba says he is trying to end the practice in his area although some families are continuing secretly. "We accept that it is bad and we have our traditional ways of punishing our people. We may tell him to pay a chicken. If he objects we have the power to evict him from the village." The project is being copied in three other districts, one in each Region – Rumphu, Salima and Chiradzulu – while government, civil society and churches all have programmes to wipe out cultural practices that violate the rights of women.

Joyce Banda, the first-ever woman vice-president, was sworn in at a ceremony in Kamuzu Stadium at Blantyre in June. She is the wife of former Chief Justice Richard Banda.

Vaccines against diarrhea

Dehydration causes the death of more than 500,000 children each year, mostly in Africa, and rotavirus causes 40% of the cases. Trials of a new vaccine suggest that half of the deaths could be prevented in Malawi and 77% of those in South Africa. The difference has still to be explained.

Karonga earthquakes After three months of tremors, earthquakes destroyed or damaged some 4000 homes in the far north of Malawi in the week before Christmas. The largest measured 6.2 (Richter scale) The impact has been most severe in Karonga. 7000 have had to leave homes destroyed or damaged. Four have died and over 300 have been injured at the time of writing. Government and aid agencies are trying to do what they can for the tens of thousands affected.

Describing the first earthquake a grandmother said, "The house was shaking as if it was being carried on a big lorry. I had such a fright. I rushed out of the house and forgot my grandchild inside!"

Malindi A violent storm in December killed six people and injured others.

At **St. Michael's Girls Secondary**

Secondary School all 145 Junior Certificate students passed. For the School Certificate, there was a 96% pass rate for the 125 of the 129 who wrote the exam. Chikondi Dinemu achieved distinction in all subjects. St. Michael's was 4th in the whole country. 56 are going to sit for university entrance – last year 8 obtained places. They want to say to all who support them, "You are making a difference to our lives!"

Malosa Secondary School

Of the 128 students who sat School Certificate, 127 giving a pass rate of 99.2%. These excellent results made the school 2nd in the whole country and 1st in the South Eastern Education Division. 75 students will be sitting for university entrance. Last year 19 obtained places. There are 550 students and 27 teachers and vacancies for 5 teachers. Fees are £67 per term, which have to cover food, payment of non-teaching staff and maintenance of buildings.

IN BRIEF

Fr Bernard Njakare, interned with Canon George Ndomondo and ordained with Ken Bell, is writing a life of +Frank Thorne as well as his own autobiography. Canon Ndomondo is researching the life of Canon Petro Kilekwa.

"**History of the UMCA**", vols 1 to 3. Deeply grateful for the sets sent. Others are still needed by Malawian church historians. Another wanted book is - Canon Tom Hicks: *The Happiest Life*. No existing copy is known by the Bodleian or USPG libraries.

Bobby Kitchin - with Alison in Malawi in the '50s-70s, now battling with Parkinson's in NZ - has just published his memoirs. £15 post-free in UK from Belinda: The Old Chapel, Lyburn Rd, Hampworth SP5 2DR.

Botswana & Malawi are ranked by the Global Peace Index as the two most peaceful countries in Africa. One is diamond-rich, the other almost the poorest and most over-populated. How come?

Weeds in the Shire River Five hydro plants have been battling with weeds for 25 years. In 2005 the generators were out of action for 350 hours. Now marine engineers have solved the problem and vast amounts of compost are being supplied to farmers on the banks of the river.

President Bingu wa Mutharika has been elected president of the 53-nation African Union, replacing the Libyan leader General Kadhafi

Lightning killed six members of a 40-strong Baptist church choir as they were preparing for a Sunday service near Balaka.

Free health care will reach 10 million people in six nations including Malawi from a deal brokered by Gordon Brown. It will be focussed on mothers and young children.

R.I.P.

Frank Chithila, a dedicated senior clinical officer, who worked at Likoma hospital for many years, died last June. Frank worked in government hospitals until 1964, when he started a three year State Registered Nurse training course in the Bridge of Earn Hospital in Scotland. He distinguished himself there and won a prize for tuberculosis nursing. On his return to Malawi he worked in Lilongwe District Hospital but then responded to an invitation from the Bishop to look after St Peter's Hospital on Likoma Island. There he cared for patients who came from Mozambique and Tanzania, as well for the people on Chizumulu and Likoma islands. He also worked at St Anne's Hospital in Nkhotakota. Frank was a committed lay person and was elected to represent Malawi on Provincial Synod, which he did for a number of years. He was also a senior member of the Umbrella Committee for refugees from Mozambique in 1988. Our sympathy to his wife Monica and their nine children.

John Sheriff was a District Officer in Nyasaland from 1948; Mwanza he recalled with special pleasure. He was proficient in Chichewa and after the 1959 disturbances was made a special magistrate. He sometimes helped translate at the immigration desk at Heathrow and on a 1994 visit amazed people by quoting old proverbs. His bouts of depression he called his 'black dog.' He was in touch again with his divorced wife Heather before she died. John's last years were lonely ones at Mortlake where he died on 8 May 2009.
Gordon Landreth

Malawi Reunion & AGM of MACS

25 September 2010

10.30-3.30

St Saviour's Church Hall, Pimlico, SW1V 3QW

All welcome

Drinks provided – please bring your own lunch

Editor: Donald Arden: 6 Frobisher Close, Pinner HA5 1NN
tel: 020 8866 6009 e-mail: ardendj@yahoo.co.uk