

# Nkhani Zaulere

the Malawi Chatterbox March 2011

## Health in Malawi

**Staff** The Health Minister, Professor. David Mphande, says Malawi has come a long way in six years in staffing the health service. In 2004 there were 43 doctors; now there are 265 in the public services, two per 100,000 population. Despite the increased numbers, it is still difficult to find doctors, nurses and midwives, especially in rural areas, where staffing levels can be less than 50% of establishment. Often this is because they are married to someone who is not willing to work in a rural area.

**HIV, TB and malaria** Health for many people has improved in recent years but **The Global Fund for fighting HIV, TB and malaria** has recently rejected Malawi's request for \$600 million over the next six years. This is a bitter blow. Only 79 submissions out of about 150 proposals have been awarded this year.

Martha Kwataine, the Executive Director of Malawi Health Equity Network says the proposal from Malawi focussed on tackling transmission of HIV from mother to child by providing lifelong HIV/AIDS treatment to all HIV+ pregnant women. Malawi had hoped to scale up the treatment from 287,000 to 537,000. No reasons were given for the refusal. Malawi had also planned to scale up voluntary male

circumcision which has stagnated at 12%. Nearly one million men could have been circumcised over the period. 90% of HIV programmes are donor-funded and there will now be a halt in the fight against HIV. If people stop taking ARVs for two or three months they develop resistance and die. Currently there are enough resources to last until 2012. "Shortage of medical staff and the reluctance of men to go for testing are major hurdles but we are optimistic that the battle will be won. Nothing will stop us!"

**HIV in children** Over 26,000 children are infected each year through mother-to-child transmission. Pregnant women need to be tested and to be counselled on how to avoid mother-to-child transmission. This has worked well in Malawi and 16 other African countries. Patricia Mbetu, director of the Call to Action project, says 20,000 HIV-positive mothers have given birth to healthy children through the project.

Susan Chakwiya, an HIV+ mother who has given birth to an HIV negative baby, says: "When babies are born, health-care workers see that we breast-feed them exclusively for 6 months until we can introduce them to other foods."

## HIV / AIDS 2011

The figures given here have been taken from UNICEF's *State of the World's Children 2011* report but relate to 2009. Prevalence rates vary from region to region, largely due to the different strains of HIV. The average adult prevalence rate for the 22 countries in the Eastern and Southern Africa region, which includes Malawi, is 7.2%. For the 24 countries in West and Central Africa the rate is 2.7%. The HIV strain in Asia is less virulent and the average adult prevalence rate is 0.2%.

Country	Adult HIV prevalence %	Mother to child transmission	Young people HIV prevalence		Orphans*	
			Male %	Female %	Due to AIDS	Due to other causes
Malawi	11	470,000	3.1	6.8	650,000	1,000,000
Mozambique	11.5	760,000	3.1	8.6	670,000	2,100,000
Namibia	13.1	95,000	2.3	5.8	70,000	120,000
Zambia	13.5	490,000	4.2	8.9	690,000	1,300,000
S.Africa	17.8	3,300,000	4.5	13.6	1,900,000	3,400,000
Lesotho	23.6	160,000	5.4	14.2	130,000	200,000
Botswana	24.8	170,000	5.2	11.8	93,000	130,000
Swaziland	25.9	100,000	6.5	15.6	69,000	100,000

\* estimated children 0-17 who have lost one or both parents.

**Malaria & DDT** Swaziland, Zululand and Botswana, as *Nkhani* has previously reported, wiped out malaria in the 1940s simply by spraying bedroom walls once a quarter with

DDT. This was done by two men with a knapsack-sprayer and cost almost nothing. The health danger was nil, unless you had a habit

of licking the walls of your bedroom. The Secretary for Agriculture in Malawi has however said recently: "DDT makes men get tired and reduces their sperm production!" Robert Chirwa MP disagrees and asks: "Should our children be dying of malaria because men want to produce more sperm?"

Insecticide treated nets are effective in preventing malaria but comparatively expensive when the minimum wage is £12 a week. In 2009 25% of under 5 children were sleeping under a net.

More than 7000 Malawians died of malaria in 2009, mainly women and children. 4½ million cases were recorded and the cost to government was over £4.3 million.

**Family planning** Malawi's population is now 15.3 million, with an annual growth rate of 3.2%. Only 18 other countries have higher growth rates. Rapid population growth increases the need for health care, employment, and education, all in short supply.

**Pneumonia, meningitis & sepsis** are major causes of disease and death in Africa. A consortium from Liverpool University and ten others have received \$1.5m from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to study the 90 different strains of the bacterium. They will be based in Malawi, Nigeria, Gambia and South Africa. They will find out if the vaccine being used now gives adequate protection and will train new African researchers.

## **Women have a tough time in Malawi.**

It was even tougher in 1932 when Vera Chirwa was born. Her autobiography, *Vera Chirwa – Fearless Fighter* – was published by Zed Books in 2007 and should be read by anyone who wants to know how Malawi, in one generation, has passed from a colonial backwater to an independent state with a woman vice-president.

Vera's book tells of her upbringing, how she was the only girl in a class of 72 boys in primary school and the only girl in a class of 24 boys in secondary school. She wanted to become a doctor but this was not possible in Nyasaland so she trained as a teacher. Her parents were politically active and she followed in their footsteps.

Vera married Orton Chirwa in 1951, he was one of the first graduates from Fort Hare University in South Africa. Orton later became Minister of Justice in Malawi and Vera qualified as a lawyer. Together they later challenged President Kamuzu Banda's autocratic rule and were abducted from

Zambia in December 1981 and imprisoned in Malawi. Vera writes in her book, how they were both sentenced to death in May 1983 and how Orton had said to her, "Vera, let's forgive their weaknesses, their lies, Dr. Banda – everybody. They were afraid to lose their jobs. Jesus says we must forgive, so let's forgive them all."

Although they were both held in Zomba prison for 12 years till Orton's death in 1993, they were only once allowed to see each other.

Vera writes: "I slept on the bare cement floor on a blanket. The relish was often a disgusting sauce of small rotten fish. I think they purposely made the food rot before they gave it to us. The woman's officer was a kind woman and allowed us to do a bit of cooking for ourselves but the men had to eat the prison food and they were dying of dysentery.

I was picked up one morning and taken to a room, bare except for a high table covered with white linen. There was a doctor in the room and I was certain that this was the end for me. "Climb up!" the doctor snarled. But it was merely a medical check-up. I asked the warder the next morning what the examination was all about. "Just to see if you are fit."

"Fit for what?" I asked.

"Just fit", he said uneasily and I knew exactly what he meant - fit for execution.

One morning in June 1984 I was reprieved, though I was never told, but the chains were taken off. Shortly afterwards they were put back on and I was confined to the cell. "Why?" I asked. I sat down to eat but the door was thrown open and a male officer jumped on me.

"Chain her! Chain her!" he screamed at two young officers.

"You all go to hell!" I shouted at them and kneeled down in my chains to pray. "God, what is this? You freed me from the chains but now they are back on. Please, please God, I know you love me. Please help me!"

I prayed for about an hour, and then the door opened and four officers came into the cell. I just stared at them. "I'm sorry there's been a mistake. I can't say much, but I'm sorry."

When I finally fell asleep, God comforted me. I dreamed that I was flying up into the sky. There were angels all around me and one of them said: "Look, a human being is crying." I knew I was not alone and it filled me with joy. When my feet touched the ground again I was so happy: "Thank you, my Lord, because you love me. Thank you!"

There were quite a few children in the prison, some were even born there. Slowly but surely we started a Bible school and I taught them to

sing hymns. They were in rags, many half-naked with their buttocks showing. They had a special place in my heart, these ragged, imprisoned children and I did my best for them. And they helped me. When I made my garden and began to remove the concrete and bricks from my yard, they all assisted me.

The years went by. Slowly I even began to counsel the staff and the prisoners and to interpret their dreams. However, I still had absolutely no contact with the outside world other than one single letter from our second-born, Virginia.

An American woman, detained briefly in the cell next to me, to my great surprise told me that Orton and I were famous prisoners of conscience for Amnesty International. It was comforting to learn that people all over the world were pushing for our release.

Gwanda Chakuamba was imprisoned next to Orton. Together they smuggled out a letter about the many deaths due to the rotten food. The letter reached the International Red Cross which sent a delegation to Malawi to inspect the prisons in 1990.

“Are you being tortured?” they asked me.

“No, not any more”

“You must tell us. Don’t be afraid”, they insisted, but I was not afraid. I held back because I pitied the women guards whose jobs were hanging by a thread. Many of them could not read or write and a job like this was everything to them and to their children.

It was 25 September 1992. We had spent more than ten years since our abduction on Christmas Eve in 1981. I was escorted to a room in the prison and found myself facing a group of white men and women. Who were they?

“We are lawyers from Britain.” When we knew each other they brought Orton in. We had not seen each other for more than eight years. It was a deeply passionate moment. We did not talk, we just hugged each for a long, long time. “I thought you were dead,” Orton finally said and looked me straight in the eyes. We thanked God that we had been allowed to meet.

Then we remembered that we were not alone and sat down with the lawyers. It was very, very sad to hear Orton’s story. They had starved him and he was constantly suffering from asthma in the small, damp cell.

We said good-bye to the lawyers and they left the room. “Let’s sing”, Orton said and we sang three hymns together before the warden interrupted us. “You can’t leave without shaking hands in our

tradition.” Orton explained to the warders and came back up and prayed for me. He went down the stairs and I never saw him alive again.”

“A month later a group of police officers and women prisoners entered the yard. Mr. Mwale, the leader, cleared his throat. “I’m sorry, Mrs. Chirwa. Mr. Chirwa has left us.” My head was spinning – left us? released? gone to another prison?

“He was found dead in his cell.”

“Dr. Banda must be happy. He has killed him.”

“It is mysterious. We are going to investigate. You women are not going to sleep in your own cells tonight. You stay here. I don’t want anything to happen to her like what happened to her husband.” He was a good man. The true story of Orton’s death was that he was given a lethal injection.”

Through the efforts of Amnesty International Vera Chirwa was released in 1993 after 12 years in prison. She became the first director of Malawi CARER with no salary, no car, an empty office and a secretary called Ivy. Together they declared war on the many injustices under which women were living in Malawi, especially in rural areas, using impromptu plays to make their point. The play might show a husband dying of a sudden illness, the crying and wailing as his coffin was carried round, and then his relatives grabbing the property.

A cornerstone of their work was the ‘paralegals’ – lay people with a very basic legal training, to take the place of lawyers whose absence in rural areas and their cost left people in the villages helpless. Their work, free and competent, worked fantastically well and was welcomed by the chiefs.

“When Dr Banda was on his deathbed in the Adventist Hospital in Blantyre, I thought ‘Here lies a great man’. But he was cruel, very cruel. His hunger for power created a reign of terror. But the lion was helpless now and I felt pity for him. I prayed for him and said goodbye.

A long time ago, Orton and I had fought side by side with this man, but more recently we had fought against him. Our fight had been a fight for justice and prosperity for our people. We fought for the right to express ourselves, to write and print our opinion, to worship the God of our choosing.

We fought to empower women to participate in all aspects of Malawian society. We fought for the rights of children, the rights of prisoners and those affected by the HIV/AIDS scourge. We fought for an accountable and transparent government that is accessible and responsive to an electorate. Orton and I fought together. He died fighting. And I fight on.”

*(Vera Chirwa – Fearless Fighter is available from Amazon)*

## In brief

**Soybean varieties** have been produced by Malawi and Nigeria working together which outperform existing varieties in yield, and in resistance to rust, lodging, blight, leafspot and erratic rainfall. They also smother weeds and reduce the cost of weeding. They have been tested in both countries on farms and research stations.

Farmers also like them for their golden colour at maturity. In Malawi one new variety with the attractive name of TGx1740-2F yielded 2464Kg per hectare, out-performing the best existing varieties by between 15% and 38%.

Soybean is fast gaining appeal in Africa as a cheap source of protein and for its ability to fix high amounts of nitrogen from the atmosphere.

**Globe Metals & Mining** is the new name for Globe Uranium, an Australian company already mining uranium in Northern Malawi, which has found 16 million tonnes of niobium, a silvery-grey metal used in steel alloys. Other metals such as niobium, tantalum and zircon have also been found.

At present the company uses mainly foreigners because there are few Malawian geologists, surveyors and drillers though scholarships are being provided to train them. 60 Malawians are employed at its Kanyika and Livingstonia sites. In addition to training, it also asks government to improve transport by road, rail and water.

Victor Mbewe, Governor of the Reserve Bank of Malawi, says the investment in uranium alone will contribute over 30% of Malawi's export earnings, which now come mainly from tobacco, tea and sugar.

**External support.** 2010 was a record year for EU development grants to Malawi and 2011 could be even better. The EU has just made a 70 million euro grant for transport. However, the US decided in February not to sign a \$351million agreement to update Malawi's outdated power supply. An Embassy spokesman did not elaborate but said it expected partners to be committed to good governance, economic freedom and investments in their citizens.

The German government also announced it has withheld part of its balance of payment support due to concerns over a new law restricting media freedom.

**Electricity.** 7% of people in Malawi have access to electricity – and that only when it is working. In 2010 there were 63 days when power failed. The only alternatives are diesel generators or

firewood or charcoal, which devastate the forests and cause a major obstacle to economic growth. Largely due to shortage of foreign exchange, diesel is often unavailable for generators. Most people rely on paraffin for lighting but a large increase in cost is causing considerable hardship.

**70 bags of charcoal** have been confiscated on Zomba mountain and people charged. Government aims at restoring the Liwonde, Malosa and Zomba Mountain forest reserves.

## UMCA - the Universities' Mission to Central Africa - 150 years

In 1861 the first missionaries arrived in Malawi in response to David Livingstone's challenge to universities to spread the Gospel and to stop the slave trade.

Celebrations are being held throughout the year marking the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the arrival of Bishop Charles Mackenzie and his companions at Magomero. On 7 August President Bingu Mutharika will visit Likwenu, where two of the early missionaries are buried.

The year of thanksgiving culminates on 8 October when President Mutharika and the Archbishop of Canterbury will be leading celebrations at Magomero. The Archbishop will dedicate a memorial commemorating the arrival of the first missionaries.

Richard Barton, Chair of MACS and Eileen Eggington, Project Officer for MACS, will be attending the celebrations (at their own expense). MACS has assisted with several projects at Magomero.

**A new Archbishop for the Province of Central Africa** was elected in February – Bishop Albert Chama of the Diocese of Northern Zambia. The Anglican Province of Central Africa consists of 14 dioceses in Botswana(1), Malawi(4), Zambia(4) and Zimbabwe(5).

**Malosa Secondary School** has a new Headmaster – Mr Micah Zingani. Before coming to Malosa he was at Mwanza and Chikwawa secondary schools.

**Janette O'Neill** takes over as Chief Executive of USPG on 1<sup>st</sup> May when Bishop Michael Doe retires. She has worked in Lesotho and is currently head of Episcopal Relief and Development in New York. She is married and has two sons.

**MACS Annual Meeting 2011**  
**Saturday 17 September**  
**All welcome**

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