

# **African Business** MALAWI: Malawi donates surplus food

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In 2002, Malawi, hit by drought, urgently needed food aid to avoid disaster; this year it was able to sell some of its surplus grain and also donate food aid to neighbouring countries. Lameck Masine explains how this remarkable change came about.

Malawi, one of those countries in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) worst hit by the 2002 drought that left about five million people - out of its 12m population - in dire need of food aid, has this year become an overnight donor of maize to other hunger-stricken countries in the region.

Maize (used as a maize meal porridge staple) provides a significant part of the diet in most countries of the SADC region. Government statistics show that this year Malawi harvested 3.4m tonnes (mt) of maize, the country's staple food crop, against a national consumption of 2.1mt, representing an increase of 22% over last year's yield and leaving a surplus of about 1.3mt.

The harvest represents a 70% increase on the average for the past five years. Malawi's success story in maize production, which contributes about 58% of the national food basket, is attributed to a number of factors, including good weather.

Mac Leans Victor Makwinja - a crop specialist in the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security - told African Business that apart from the good weather, the bumper harvest is also the result of farmers adopting modern farming methods.

"Farmers have realised the importance of adopting modern farming techniques. For example, we are advocating the one-one-planting of maize, which most farmers have discovered is very good method. We [the Ministry of Agriculture] have also gone flat out to campaign for manure-production and soil and water conservation. We are also encouraging our farmers to use improved seed varieties - varieties that tend to yield much, much more than local varieties," he said.

Besides modern farming methods and good weather patterns, Malawi's bumper maize harvest can also be attributed to the government's Fertilizer Subsidy Programme introduced in 2005. Under this programme, poor farmers are provided with coupons to buy the fertilizers at a subsidised price through the country's Village Development Committees.

The government had also intensified irrigation farming, distributing free treadle pumps to farmers' dubs across the country. This was to ensure that maize was grown extensively throughout the country.

In his speech at the SADC heads of state summit in Zambia in August, Malawi's President Bingu wa Mutharika told the local media that Malawi has pledged to donate 5,000t of maize to Swaziland and Lesotho, which are in dire need of food aid after natural and artificial disasters struck the countries leaving many without food.

In Swaziland, food shortages have been mainly attributed to the drought that hit the country last year. In Lesotho, wildfires destroyed crops in the fields.

In July Malawi sold 400,000t of maize to Zimbabwe and in September the government donated 10,425t of maize to the UN's World Food Programme (WFP) under its three-year Protracted Relief and Recovery Operation (PRRO).

Under the PRRO, which finishes at the end of 2007, the WFP is currently providing assistance every month to over 110,000 people infected or affected by HIV/Aids in eight districts across Malawi. Malawi is believed to have an HIV/Aids prevalence of 14% in the adult population. In addition, the WFP is helping around 1,500 malnourished mothers and children in therapeutic feeding centres around the country.

Stripping contingency reserves?

But critics say donating and selling the maize puts the country at risk in the same way as when, in 2002, the government sold all its surplus maize to Kenya and was left without any contingency reserves.

Ronald Mangani, an economist from the University of Malawi, said Malawi was far from able to claim the status of a bilateral donor within SADC. He said it was counterproductive for the country, where poverty remains rampant, to simply make donations. "Government must use the scarcity of maize in other countries to create markets for local farmers. This would keep prices up and motivate farmers to continue producing maize," he cautioned.

Sam Mpusa, a spokesperson for the opposition United Democratic Front, agrees that Malawi is not in a position to donate maize to other countries. "Government should have taken into consideration a number of factors. For example, is the country indeed food sufficient? Not all the districts have enough food - there are some looking to the government for assistance," he said.

Another voice of dissent came from civil rights organisations. Rafik Hajat - executive director of the independent Institute for Policy Interaction, a research driven advocacy in democratic consolidation and social justice - says Malawi is not in a position to donate maize to other countries and the issue about Malawi having surplus maize, as official statistics indicate, was far from certain.

"One thing about statistics [is that] they can be used to show whatever you want them to show. Those are just estimates and we don't have those in our grain reserves. Government should trade carefully otherwise these can lead to 2001 and 2002 type hunger situation when we sold all our maize," he said.

Hajat said government should have considered a number of factors before pledging donations. "Rainfall patterns are erratic and I think our irrigation-fed-agriculture has not developed to an extent where we can with certainty project bumper harvests every year. I would say that it is imperative for the government to ensure that we have adequate stocks, buffer stocks in case we are not blessed with plentiful rains in the future."

Makwinja said there was a possibility that Malawi would have another bumper harvest next year. "Already there are plans to have the 2007/2008 Fertilizer Subsidy Programme again this season. Assuming all the factors are good, for example we have good weather and low

levels of pests and diseases, there is a good chance that we are going to have another bumper harvest this season," he claimed.

President Mutharika said he deemed it human, proper and African to assist those in need. He also ruled out fears that the donation could lead to the 2002 hunger situation, saying his government has put in place mechanisms to ensure Malawians continue to enjoy high yields in the years to come.

"The question is what will we do with all this surplus food? Out of the 1.3mt we are only giving 5,000t each to the two countries. Is it wrong giving the maize to people who require food?" the president asked.