

# The Independent-UK: Malawi's Farming Revolution Sets The Pace In Africa

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By: Steve Bloomfield in Chiseka

A green revolution taking place in the fields of Malawi has, in three years, turned a nation that was once reliant on international aid to feed half its population into a food exporter.

In doing so, it has set an example for other developing countries struggling to feed themselves. But it has done it all against the express wishes of Britain, the United States and the World Bank – its largest donors.

Malawi suffered a catastrophic drought in 2005. The World Food Programme estimated that five million people – out of a population of 12 million – needed food aid and many villages reported people dying of starvation.

A new government, led by Bingu wa Mutharika, believed the problem was straightforward. Farmers were using seeds that were highly susceptible to disease and weevils, and too few were using fertiliser. If farmers could afford high-yield maize seeds and fertiliser, the government argued, they would be able to grow enough food. At a cost of £30m, the government launched a subsidisation scheme. With a state coupon, the price of a bag of fertiliser fell from 6,500 kwacha (£23) to 900, while a 2kg bag of hybrid maize seed dropped from 600 kwacha to 30.

Malawi's donors refused to fund the programme, arguing that subsidising farmers would not bring the desired results. They were wrong. Malawi needs about 2.2 million tonnes of maize a year to feed itself and from a low of 1.2 million tonnes in 2005, national maize production rose to 3.2 million tonnes in 2007, according to the Ministry of Agriculture.

The results are plain to see in the village of Chiseka, 50 miles south of the capital Lilongwe, where the village chief Herbert Kamponda remembers the 30 people who perished during the drought. Most died of starvation but a few were killed in desperate battles with their neighbours over the last remaining crops. "People were so hungry they would do anything," he said.

All that has changed. Tito Jestala, one of the village's farmers, proudly shows off his maize store, filled to the top with corn cobs. One acre produced 250kg of maize three years ago – now it is producing up to 750kg.

The scheme has its critics, who argue that agricultural subsidies can be ineffective as they provide the same benefits to rich farmers that could afford the full price, and that bigger improvements could have been achieved if the money was invested in agricultural research. Critics also say that Malawi's agricultural output has been boosted by good rainy seasons rather than the subsidy scheme.

Idrissa Mwale, the subsidy coordinator at Malawi's ministry of agriculture, countered that there had been good rainfall in the past and still bad harvests.

There is also the problem of corruption. The scheme has become politicised, with MPs being given large numbers of coupons to hand out to constituents. Unsurprisingly, that has led to accusations that ruling party supporters have benefited more than opposition supporters, but the government said it has tried to make the scheme as transparent as possible and at least one former MP has been charged with misusing the coupons.

One potential problem is the rising cost of fertiliser, caused by soaring oil prices. However, international donors, after early scepticism, now support the scheme. Britain donated £4m last year. With many developing countries in the grip of a global food crisis, Malawi is now urging its neighbours to follow its example. "We've set the pace," said Mr Mwale. "Sometimes you have to take a bold step and say 'This is in the interests of our people'."