

THE SCOTTISH MALAWI RICE PROJECT

RESOURCES FOR SCHOOLS

The story of Malawi kilombero rice

Malawi is a land of farmers. Nearly 85% of people live on the land and most will have around 4 acres (think 3-4 large football pitches) to farm. Many of the poorer farmers grow only enough food (mostly maize and a root crop called cassava) to feed their families for 8 months of the year. They then have to take any work they can find to have food for the rest of the year. There may be work for them on the tea and tobacco estates, or they may earn some cash by selling firewood from the forests.

The sad fact is that the poorer a farmer and his family are, the less of their land they are likely to cultivate. Why is this? Why is life so difficult, if you can only grow enough to feed your family?

In order to cultivate your land you need to buy seeds and, ideally, fertilisers, to make sure that you get a good harvest. If you hardly grow enough to feed your family, you don't have any produce left to sell to get cash. Without cash you can't buy seed and fertiliser. Any cash you have managed to save, you look after very carefully in case of emergencies. Even if you do sell some of your crops, you may not get a fair price. There are many traders who buy from small holder farmers using scales which give false readings. In this way farmers may receive as little as a third of what they should be getting. So, many farmers are caught in a poverty trap.

But not all. Abdul Phiri is a farmer in the north of Malawi in the Karonga region. He has a wife and four children and they live with his mother-in-law in a farmstead with 4½ acres. On 2 acres of his land he grows maize and cassava and this produces nearly enough for him to feed his family. On the rest of the land he grows rice. A little of this he keeps for the family's use; some he uses to buy maize; and the rest he sells to meet the many needs that he and his family have for cash.

What does the family spend their money on?

- **Housing:** they have a strong house (important in this region where earthquakes cause a lot of damage, as they did last Christmas), a house for his mother-in-law and an outside toilet to protect the family from disease, as well as shelters for the animals.
- **Clothing.**
- **Farm-inputs:** seeds and fertilisers.
- **Transport:** Abdul would love to have a car but that's way out of reach. He has however been able to afford a bicycle

- Farm implements: Abdul has a plough which takes a lot of the work out of tilling the fields and makes it easier for him to cultivate more of his land, even to cultivate land that is not being used by other local farmers
- Education: primary school education in Malawi is free but secondary is not. To send one his four sons to secondary school for a year, he will need to sell 90 kg of rice.

How did Abdul manage to get out of the poverty trap many farmers are caught in?

Some years ago, Abdul joined NASFAM (the National Smallholder Farmers' Association of Malawi). The association is organised locally into clubs and marketing associations and then has a national body which oversees all the work. It provides

- training for farmers, enabling them to grow new crops.
- Cheaper farm inputs, because they can buy in bulk
- Marketing to enable farmers to get a fair price for their crops

NASFAM introduced Abdul to rice which he had never grown before and provided him with good quality seed for Malawi's top rice, kilombero rice. They gave him advice and training and this meant he had the courage to grow a new crop which NASFAM could pay him a good price for. He also works very hard with help from the rest of the family. As a result of all this, Abdul in 2008 was able to grow 2.6 tonnes of rice. Abdul is a very successful farmer and by his example, he also encourages other farmers to work their way out of poverty.