

Mbewa Village Self-Help Project

Report to donors - August 2011



How small loans and donations are being used by the Mbewa Self-Help Project Committee in Mbewa Village, Malawi

The Mbewa Self-Help Project

The Mbewa Self-Help Project was born in 2009 in the village of Mbewa at the foot of Mulanje Massif in Malawi, Central Africa.

A Project Committee already existed in Mbewa to handle money provided by supporters in the UK, initially in response to a drought that affected the country in 2005. In a bid to introduce income-generating projects, the Committee recruited an Agricultural Advisor in 2006. The Advisor, Jones Nyalugwe, a graduate from Agricultural College, was provided with a house and some funds from UK supporters to set up a chicken rearing project.

Jones and the Committee not only introduced chicken rearing, but breeding and rearing of Chambo fish in artificial ponds and an amazing maize irrigation scheme.

The irrigation scheme began in 2008 when Jones convinced 7 farmers to take part. Everyone in the village, as in most of Malawi, grows their own food, maize being the staple crop. The irrigation scheme enables farmers to grow an extra crop of maize in the dry season as a cash crop. An irrigation system was constructed and farmers who need to borrow fertiliser are loaned this, to be repaid when the maize is sold as a cash crop. The scheme was such a success it has grown to involve over 200 farmers and now provides two crops during the dry season.

In July 2009, the Committee ran a coffee and cake stall at the Porters' Race. This is an annual event, initiated by Mike Brady in 1996 when he was working in Malawi through Voluntary Service Overseas. This was a parting gift to porters in Mbewa village who had joined trips organised by Mike when he was a teacher at nearby Mulanje Secondary School (1992 - 1994) and the Maintenance Engineer for Thyolo District Hospital and surrounding clinics (1994 - 1996).

The race was picked up by other members of the Malawi Mountain Club and is now organised by the Mulanje Conservation Trust. Through his connection with the village - and porter Francis Atiya in particular - Mike had kept in contact in the village after leaving, particularly following the drought in 2005. He suggested that the Project Committee run a coffee and cake stall

at the Porters' Race and loaned some money for ingredients. The Committee turned a three thousand Malawi Kwacha (MK) investment into MK 11,000 income, repaid the loan and agreed that this was the way to work in future to make projects sustainable.



To make this a reality, the Project Committee registered formally as a Community Based Organisation under the name of Madalitso CBO (Madalitso means 'Blessings' in Chichewa) and a bank account was opened.

There were several ideas for possible projects, including developing the coffee and cake stall into a café and gallery to be a destination to draw visitors - and their cash - throughout the year. However, the Committee, made up equally of men and women, decided that a maize mill would be both more useful and immediately profitable.

Mike agreed to try to raise the money for the equipment and materials for the building if the Committee provided land, bricks, sand and labour. The land and bricks had already been donated by villagers by the time Mike left for the UK in August 2009.



This report explains what happened next.

Note: The Committee was left with a camera and takes pictures as a service for villagers and for the project. Income from the photos covers the costs of developing prints and fees for the internet café for the reports.

The Maize Mill Project...

Maize is the staple food of Malawi, used to make nsima dough, eaten with 'relish' (vegetables), and meat or fish when available.

Maize is grown on land surrounding each villager's house or in nearby fields. The cobs are dried and the kernels detached. These then have to be ground into flour.

The Project Committee prioritised a maize mill as both a profitable income-generating project and a service to the village. Mbewa has a population of about 3,000, but about a further 12,000 people come to Mbewa to grind maize as it has an electricity supply because of the Likhabela Forestry Reserve. The existing maize mills are unable to meet demand, more so when equipment breaks down, which means a further 10 mile journey to Mulanje to use the mills there.

The Project Committee was quick to find land to site the maize mill. The diary of events from then on follows:

11 August 2009: A villager has decided to donate his stock of bricks to the project - so building can commence as soon as funds are available.



1 October 2009: The *Warrington Guardian* in the UK (Mike's local paper) reports on the project and appeal for funds.

22 October 2009: Loan fund at £800 - enough for the building. The first instalment has been transferred to the village committee. Villagers will now construct the building under the supervision of one of their number who is an experienced builder.



27 October 2009: News just in: "We are glad to inform you that the foundations have started today. We bought 8 bags of cement on Saturday. The Committee members used their bicycles to transport the bags [10 miles]. The Committee is working very hard and there is cooperation among members in doing the work."

12 November 2009: Pictures, receipts and report received on work so far. Below pictures of preparing the foundations and transporting bricks and completing the floor slab - all generations are involved.



3 December 2009: the November report from the Project Committee shows the progress with the walls and roof, giving the almost finished building. Exchange rate changes and price increases put the loan for the complete building phase of the project to £ 1,000.



Many challenges... but we got there in the end

11 February 2010: Funds transferred for purchasing wiring and electrical fittings to prepare the building for the milling equipment. Funds also transferred for a dam project as the region is suffering a drought (see later).

12 March: Grant of £ 2,000 awarded by W.F. Southall Charitable Trust towards the project. Fundraising for the rest of the money continues.

16 June: The electricity company, ESCOM, has installed the required transformer near the building.

6 August: Still seeking extra funds for buying the maize mill equipment. The Project Committee has just been sent a small loan to buy 50 kg maize to break into 1 kg bags affordable for those in the village who need it.

30 November: Sufficient funds raised to be able to purchase the maize mill equipment so that the mill can be put into operation.

14 December: Three villagers sent to Agricultural College for a two-week course on operating and maintaining the milling equipment.

10 January 2011: Members of the Project Committee collected the equipment from Blantyre and installed this in the newly-painted building.

24 February 2011: ESCOM did not have three-phase cable available for completing the connection from the transformer to the milling equipment. Apparently ESCOM's budget for buying materials has been exhausted. With no alternative, additional funds have been sent for the Project Committee to purchase the cable to be fitted by ESCOM.

26 March: ESCOM have made the connection - all except for the electricity meter. There are no longer spare meters in the country we are told.

4 May: A meter is fitted after an appeal to the ESCOM Regional Engineer for help resulted in a meter being found.

15 May: The Project Committee's engineer connects the mill and tests it.

16 May 2011: MAIZE MILL BEGINS OPERATING



5 June - 15 June: Power cuts hit Southern Malawi. First partial month's income allocated to costs, extra equipment needed for the mill, paying for a business licence and the social welfare fund (helping with school fees for orphans and other costs for vulnerable families).

15 July: Three people are being employed to run the mill plus a night watchman. After salaries, electricity bills, maintenance costs and the social welfare fund, the first instalment towards repaying the capital fund is made.

15 August: Monthly report suggest bringing forward the purchase of a sheller to go alongside the mill, to improve the service to villagers and increase income....



The irrigation project

Jones, the Agricultural Advisor, brought an innovative idea to Mbewa Village.

During the dry season, water is channelled from streams fed by Mulanje Massif to specially prepared maize fields.



Villagers with land in a suitable location allow other villagers to prepare this for irrigation. Each farmer involved has four rows of beds, which they prepare with manure and fertiliser and plant their maize.

Water is fed to the beds weekly. When the maize is knee high after about four weeks, a further dose of fertiliser is added. Jones experimented with different regimes at college and this is what the hybrid maize grown requires.

When ready, the maize is harvested as green maize for selling on the markets as corn-on-the-cob, giving the farmers a cash income.

Those who have been loaned fertiliser repay this from their income. By buying the fertiliser in bulk and breaking this into smaller volumes (as shown right), the Project Committee is able to provide this to the farmers more cheaply than they could otherwise obtain.

The farmers then prepare the land for the landowners' main crop. This is part of the benefit to the landowner. The other is that the residual fertiliser in the land means they do not need to add the first dose.

The scheme has grown from 7 pioneers to several hundred farmers as more land has been made available.

Jones (in the blue jacket below) has used the scheme to gain extra support for the village, such as a donation of equipment (wheel barrows, hoes and sprayers) from the District Social Welfare Office, which was handed over in a public ceremony.



Maize and other crops to live on throughout the year are planted with the first rains in October or November. The second, main rains are then due in January. In 2010 these failed to materialise and very little maize was harvested.

Money was sent to the Project Committee to purchase maize to bring to the village for the most needy. Seeing opportunity in crisis, it was decided to take advantage of the river running dry to raise the rock dam that feeds the irrigation project and finish it with concrete. The plan was approved by the authorities and a water-extraction licence purchased.



Our aims: security, sustainability and empowerment



Following the drought in 2010, it was decided to ring-fence some of the income from the maize mill to build up a food security fund as a reserve for times of hardship.



When the rains failed in the south of Malawi, much of the maize died in the fields before producing cobs, shown left. Funds were sent to the Project Committee to buy maize flour to distribute to the most vulnerable people in the village, principally the elderly and orphans. Top right in the blue shirt, is Ivory Kaliati, the Project Committee Secretary and manager of the maize mill project, who sends regular reports, including copies of receipts and photographs.



The drought provided an opportunity to build a better dam and water intake for the irrigation project (see previous page), supervised by Jones, the Agricultural Advisor. Funds were provided for cement and pipework, and to hire an experienced foreman. Villagers collected rocks and river sand and built the dam. They dug an associated reservoir.



Jones has also developed a tree nursery and mobilised villagers



to plant trees to protect water resources and prevent erosion of the irrigated areas. It took a small amount of money for watering cans and polythene tubes to make this possible - the nursery fencing, nurturing and planting were in the hands of the villagers.



The Project Committee is full of ideas and has been encouraged to innovate, to plan, but not be afraid of failures: it is part of learning what works. Fish farming chambo has proved a success (Mike Brady with Jones in 2009 pictured below) and is self-sustaining as the fish breed. Chicken farming has proved to be harder to make a profit from as disease has been a problem and has been halted for now.



With income from the maize mill, the Project Committee will have a steady source of income for social welfare and for investing in further projects, while paying back the capital invested - much of which will then be invested in future projects.



Friends of the Mbewa Self-Help Project are still welcome to contribute funds as donations or loans for two larger projects: firstly, purchasing a sheller to complement the maize mill, and then building the Mbewa Coffee and Crafts Shop and Visitors' Centre. Take part in this development story by going to:

www.maravilha.co.uk/mbewa



Sometimes all that you need to turn your dreams into reality is a little backing from people who believe that you can