

Building better futures in Malawi

Florence Munthali and her husband have been able to increase their farm income with training from Christian Aid.



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The problem

Malawi is one of the world's least developed countries, with 70% of people living on less than \$1.90 a day. Approximately 84% of people rely on rain-fed agriculture and other natural resources for their livelihoods, and their way of living is being placed under increasing stress by the climate crisis. Rural communities face a highly uncertain future, and unless changes are made to traditional agricultural approaches to respond effectively to this unfolding crisis, the Malawi Government's goal of ending poverty by 2030 will not be met.

In recent years, extreme weather events, such as hurricanes, floods and droughts, have been increasing. Rainfalls in Malawi are erratic, leaving people struggling to know what to plant and when, as they can no longer rely on their traditional growing seasons. The result is significant reductions in crop yields, household incomes and food security.

Poverty and climate change are tightly linked. In Malawi, lower incomes for families dependent on farming means parents cannot afford school fees and have to remove children from school. If children are able to stay in school, they are tired and find it harder to learn. Young people's hopes of a brighter future and training for a career are often stymied, trapping them in a cycle of poverty and providing little hope of escape.

Our programme aims to overcome these barriers, and give people the opportunity to build resilience to shocks and develop long-term security.



Justina Zimba collecting wood from the forest for her cookstove.



Tapiwa Munthali's father had to take out loans to keep her in school, increasing the family's debts.

The Social Support for Resilience programme

The Social Support for Resilience (SOSURE) programme is designed to strengthen the resilience of the most vulnerable households in Malawi. It is giving 270,000 people the skills to meet their basic food and nutrition needs, to develop small businesses and to improve their farming. The programme works in coordination with other organisations and government departments, including Christian Aid, Concern Worldwide, United Purpose, Save the Children, Irish Aid and the Malawi Government's Ministry of Gender, Social Welfare and Community Development.

SOSURE is an ambitious project, which aims to reduce poverty and enhance resilience among the most vulnerable households in Malawi.

Project name: Social Support for Resilience (SOSURE)

Local implementing project partner:

Synod of Livingstonia Development Department (SoLDEV)

Project area: Mzimba, Malawi

Timeframe: 2021-2024

Funding partner: EU

To help the most vulnerable groups recover from crisis and support them to phase out of humanitarian assistance and build long-term food and nutrition security, SOSURE will:

- give 65,000 households (270,000 people) in seven districts cash transfer payments
- ensure 95% of households receiving these payments can have at least two meals per day.
- support long-term investments in household production, helping to protect, restore and develop livelihoods, and empowering families to graduate out of poverty.

Christian Aid is delivering one part of this programme with its partner Synod of Livingstonia Development Department (SoLDEV). SoLDEV is a faith-based non-governmental organisation that has been working in northern and central Malawi for 30 years, delivering food security, water, sanitation and hygiene, climate change and humanitarian responses.

Christian Aid's work in Mzimba

Through SOSURE, we are helping 14,907 people from the most vulnerable households in Mzimba district to build their resilience to shocks and increase their security. To do this, we are teaching people the skills they need to make a better future for themselves and their families.

We have three overarching goals with this project:

- increased incomes and resilient livelihoods
- enhanced food security and natural resource management
- strengthened systems to protect the most vulnerable.

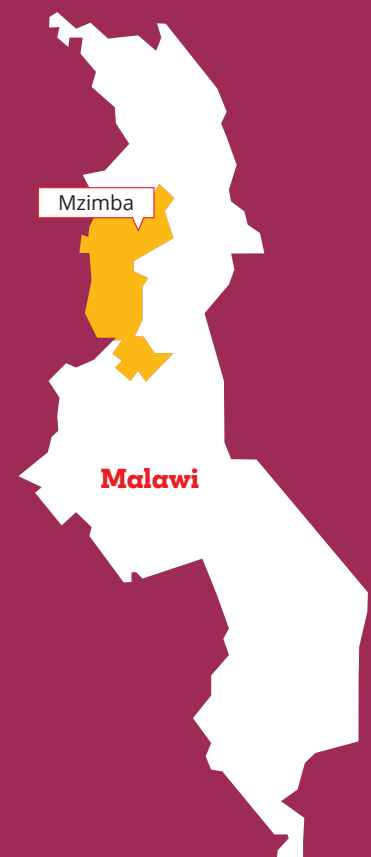
Increased incomes and resilient livelihoods

We aim to increase people's incomes, make their livelihoods more resilient to shocks, and ensure they have fair and equitable access to markets to sell their produce and goods. We will achieve this by investing in village savings and loan associations (VSLAs), farming cooperatives and livelihoods diversification.

VSLAs help vulnerable families build a more secure economic future by allowing them to build up their financial assets. We are building the capacity of VSLAs and conducting entrepreneurship and financial literacy training through these groups, so that people can invest their money in activities that will increase their household incomes in the long term.

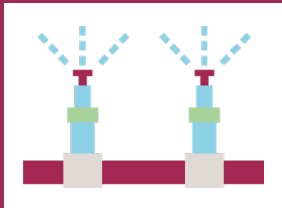
Farming cooperatives are a way for small-scale farmers to get better prices for their produce. These groups are trained in marketing, sales, negotiation and business management. Farmers will also be linked to market information, so they know where to get the best prices for their crops.

Livelihoods diversification will help the most vulnerable community members to set up poultry businesses and train them on livestock management practices to increase their financial resilience.



Enhanced food security and natural resource management

We want to enhance food security and nutrition. Alongside this, we are working on reforestation, biodiversity and soil conservation to improve the future of Malawi's forests and farms. We will achieve these aims by investing in climate-smart farming, gardens, and resource management and energy solutions.



Climate-smart farming techniques are used instead of traditional agricultural methods. People are taught new agricultural skills, including soil and water conservation, how to make manure to replace expensive fertiliser, crop diversification, small scale irrigation schemes and crops to grow to ensure year-round production.

Backyard gardening is a way for people to improve their nutrition. We are training people on how to set up home gardens, and teaching them about consuming a diverse diet.



Natural resource management and energy solutions preserve and restore precious forests. People are planting trees, and new energy-efficient cookstoves that use less wood are being introduced, freeing up women's time collecting wood.



Strengthened systems to protect the most vulnerable

We will underpin the work above by strengthening systems and structures to make sure the most vulnerable people are not left behind. We will achieve this by investing in ways to reduce gender inequality, disaster preparedness and advocacy.

Gender dialogue sessions are used to raise awareness and consider ways to address inequality. Gender inequality derails efforts for poverty reduction through harmful social and cultural norms that perpetuate inequalities. We are working with women and men, community leaders and religious leaders to understand and reflect on these challenges and to design community-led action plans to address them.



Disaster preparedness enables communities to respond quickly and effectively when disaster strikes. We are linking individuals and groups so that they can receive early warning notifications for floods, pests, windstorms and dry spells via their mobile phones. The warnings from agencies, such as the Meteorological Department, the District Agricultural Office and the Water Department, will enable communities to respond quickly and effectively to minimise crop damage.

Advocacy work involves supporting district level meetings to advocate and influence the policies and practices affecting the implementation and coordination of resilience building and social protection programmes.





Justina Zimba using her fuel-efficient cookstove.

Building a climate-smart business

Like most people in Malawi, Justina Zimba has no option but to use firewood as fuel for cooking. Unfortunately, as deforestation increased, wood was getting harder and harder to find.

'In the past, I used to walk long distances looking for firewood,' Justina says. 'I was struggling. I spent more and more time looking for firewood.'

With support and training from SoLDEV, Justina and her community have been making cookstoves that are more fuel efficient. Each of their households now has one. Justina's stove only uses a fraction of the wood she was using before, conserves heat, and cooks meals faster.

Justina says: 'Now, when I fetch firewood, it lasts for eight days, instead of two. In the past, we were destroying more trees but now we use less firewood. And when we go to fetch it, we collect the wood that has fallen on its own, instead of cutting trees.'

Together, Justina and her group have made more than 100 cookstoves – and turned their initiative into a business. They share some of the profits and save the rest, offering a way to increase household incomes while supporting the fight against the climate crisis.

Growing income through agricultural cooperatives

Leah Kamwaka is a grandmother who has observed the huge changes the climate crisis has brought to Mzimba district. This year has been very different from the past, she explains.

'The harvest is not what we anticipated. The yield has not been good. This year I grew soya beans, but only managed to harvest three bags. This is because of the change of weather patterns. Now hunger will hit.'

However, Leah has hope and support to draw on, as a member of her local farming cooperative. By standing together, they're standing strong. Supported by SoLDEV, Leah has learnt new farming techniques through the cooperative and earned money that will help ensure her family has a safety net for the future.

'They taught us a better way of planting maize, how to make manure fertiliser, and conserve the soil. We now know that we were farming haphazardly. We learnt that farming is business and can transform our households,' Leah says.

'In the past they used to farm without fertiliser, but that is not the same today. We have to apply fertiliser,' Leah explains. However, fertiliser is expensive, so learning how to make their own will help them to farm better and obtain bigger harvests in the future.

Even small harvests can be beneficial when people sell together through the cooperative. 'With our little harvest, we needed to come together,' Leah explains. 'I took my soya to the cooperative because there you get a fair price. With the money I received, I bought a goat and kept it. We also save money through our savings group.'

Leah is taking other protective actions too. 'We have learned to protect the environment. We planted some trees. The trees I planted at home protect me from heavy winds and also provide shade. They provide good ventilation so that we can breathe clean air.'

'That's the goodness of the cooperative. It has opened our eyes. There were so many things that we didn't know. It's taught us a lot of things. It's encouraged us to be strong for our families. I have learnt many good things that have helped me in my life.'



Leah Kamwaka has learnt new farming techniques to increase her income and is now able to save money for the future.

Partner interview: Waluza Munthali, SoLDEV

These interventions are making a difference for the most vulnerable people in Mzimba. Waluza Munthali is the Projects Coordinator at SoLDEV and he explains the difference this work is making.

Who is this project supporting?

We are targeting the most vulnerable within the communities and over 80% are women. These are the people under the government Social Cash Transfer programme. Among them are some families led by children.

Could you outline the farming work?

We are using the lead farmer approach. The project trains lead farmers who reach out to the many beneficiaries that we are targeting.

We provide extension messages in terms of how best they can improve production, so that they can be food secure, because that's the starting point. We also provide means and ways to help them to have access to money outside farming, so that's where we are promoting savings and loans.

What effect is this work having so far?

I have been motivated more because I have seen households we started working with a year ago. Now you see them say: 'Look where I am today, I am better off. This is because of these interventions.'

That motivates me to do more to reach more people to improve their life. For me, my favourite part is when I go out to the field and interact with the most vulnerable to hear their stories – to understand their situation and what they are going through, and establish where they can start to improve. I have also grown up in a similar situation. I like that point because it's the beginning of the change itself.

My main message to Christian Aid supporters is that we are working to improve livelihoods of the most vulnerable communities. With your continued support, we can help more people.



Maggie Phiri was trained to be a lead farmer by our partner. She travels around the district to share more effective farming techniques and has now received a bicycle to help her reach more people.



Fyness Tembo with her village savings and loans group.

Learning to save for the future

Fyness is a mother of five children and a small farmer. She received training in vegetable growing and making fertiliser, and as she started to sell her surplus crops, she was encouraged by SOLDEV staff to join her VSLA. These are essentially village banks where people can deposit their money and lend to each other, giving people a chance to borrow money for business development and their children's education, and providing them with an important safety net.

Fyness explains that the VSLA taught her important lessons about the money that she was earning. 'We learnt about ways of making money and the benefits of saving money,' she says.

'If I was just using the money without saving, then I would be without money,' she adds. 'But through the village bank, I have been transformed through the money that I save. I had plans to roof my house with iron sheets. With the money I saved, I have been able to start buying iron sheets. I have sent my children to school.'