

Drought and hunger: the real face of climate change

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THE chief thanked the visitors to his village for helping to keep the river away from the homes of his people. Wearing darkened sunglasses, he stood tall in his prominent orange-lined t-shirt with its on-message lettering: 'Fight Hunger'. "The river was always running wild during the rainy season," Tumalisye Phoya says, pointing through tree cover to a wide river bed, its earth cracked dry, which is being used by local women as a short cut on their journey.

In three months the rains will arrive in Nkatsano village and the river will flow again. "What happened previously is that the area around the village would always flood and displace the local people," explains Patrick Chibota, a Malawian working with the aid agency Goal.

The 75 houses in the remote Nkatsano village in the south of Malawi are home to over six hundred men, women and children. The small houses are built from mud and roofed with thatch or, for those who are more fortunate, some galvanised metal. The people have few possessions as they battle with poverty, hunger and the devastating impact of Aids.

Some 14% of the national population is infected with the virus. Official figures show that 90% of Malawians work in agriculture while 80% of those in rural areas are described as subsistence farmers. One in five do not have enough food to eat.

The people in Nkatsano had become used to the annual battle with flooding. The situation has only been getting worse in recent years. But they have been contributing to their own problems by cutting down the trees in their area.

In a country where electricity is a luxury, over 90% of people rely on firewood for cooking.

Trees are also cut down to sell for charcoal. The loss of forest cover and soil erosion only added to the precarious food situation as fertile soil was washed away.

Satellite images have shown the huge impact of deforestation on the country, which is one of the ten poorest in the world. According to the World Bank, in 2000 about one fifth of Malawi's surface area was under forest. In recent years, forest cover has been declining by an estimated 2.4% per annum. And the problem is not just one for Malawians . . . deforestation accounts for 30% of all global greenhouse gases.

The loss of tree cover in countries like Malawi contributes to increasingly erratic and unpredictable global weather patterns. The increased incidences of flooding and drought, however, only make the already considerable challenges in Malawi far greater.

The Irish aid agency Goal has been working with local communities in the south of Malawi to start tackling these problems. Since 2005, the villagers in Nkatsano have planted about 60,000 trees along a 1.5km stretch on both sides of the river bank.

The impact has been dramatic. Soil erosion has stopped, and last year the river maintained its size and direction.

"The trees hold the soil in place and has prevented the river changing course," the chief says.

Along with replanting, several aid organisations are encouraging villagers to fell fewer trees. Reducing the demand for firewood is another Goal project at Mbangu village, where 32 local women have been producing fuel-efficient stoves.

"We work on Saturday and Sunday when our other work is done," Treasa Joe says. She is a widow with three children. The other married women say the men in the village have shown resistance to their enterprise.

"Their husbands complain about the lack of profit for all the work and want us to stop, but we have told them no."

"The next time I come back and you have made money, I want all your husbands to apologise," Cath Whybrow, Goal's Country Director in Malawi, tells the local women. Her remarks are met with broad smiles and applause from the women.

Agencies like Concern and Goal started to work in Malawi in 2002, when a state of emergency was declared after two successive poor harvests. While a good harvest in 2006 has allowed Malawi to even export some produce this year, the overwhelming majority of the country's population live from season to season with no crop growth outside the traditional growing season.

Up to 60% of rural households face chronic food insecurity for between two and five months every year. There is a huge dependency on rain-led farming.

The irony is that Malawi is actually water-rich due to plenty of rainfall in the months between November to February, while Lake Malawi and other smaller lakes are considerable water resources. Still, less than 2% of the country's arable land is under irrigation.

Helping Malawians exploit the potential of irrigation is driving a Concern-backed project in Mibwabwa, an isolated village about an hour north of the capital. By encouraging the use of a low-tech treadle pump, Concern has

helped the villagers to dig a 3km-long water canal.

On previously idle land, the local people now grow year-round crops including tomatoes, sugar cane and other vegetables, including Irish potatoes.

"We now have food during all the year," says villager Moses Kathikwiri. He has a family of nine. Overall, the Concern project brings greater food security to more than 1500 people.

The villagers are also monitoring progress on their tree nursery, where 24,000 seedlings are being grown. "Our aim is to avoid soil erosion. The drought here was due to environmental damage so now we're trying to bring back new trees," says Osbin Falimoe, Concern's area manager. Earlier this year, Action Aid published a report on the impact of climate change in Malawi. "We found a direct link between weather and food production in Malawi," says report co-author Rene Gommès, who works with the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation.

The researchers also found that changing rainfall patterns and higher temperatures in Malawi has meant a shorter growing season and that the staple crop maize, usually grown in November, is now being grown in December.

"Malawians are experiencing climate change in the most direct way, through floods, droughts and hunger," says Carol Kayira, the Food Security Officer with Action Aid Malawi.

"If people are cutting down trees then they should know the consequences. We are telling them about that," says Osbin Falimoe from Concern.

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