

HUNGER AGAIN? – A CONVERSATION ABOUT MALAWI

Another food shortage?

Afraid so. The Ministry says 250.000 tons. It could be more if sweet potatoes are affected too.

Cock-up or climate?

Both. The rains cut-off early, especially in the densely populated south. The early planters had a reasonable crop, but there was confusion about fertilizer distribution and pricing and the private sector halted imports at the crucial time. Most farmers received seed and fertilizer too late.

Why are these crises so frequent?

The population has increased tenfold over the last century. Imagine someone standing a few centimetres from the edge of a cliff. It wouldn't take a very strong wind to blow him over the edge.

What are the plans of government?

They say 60,000 tons are now available and they are looking for 90,000 tons of humanitarian assistance. The last 30,000 will be imported commercially.

Will families be able to afford it?

It's still a problem. If government subsidises maize by 50%, the potential for making a profit could lead to shady deals. There are tough decisions still to be taken.

What about humanitarian aid?

There are many challenges. There is opposition in the villages if some get free food, while others pay. But if it's divided up between everybody, the needs of the really destitute are not met.

Why isn't the Lake used for irrigation?

Thousands of acres are irrigate by buckets, cups, watering cans and treadle-pumps. These are efficient and produce masses of vegetables, but not much staple food. Bigger gravity-fed schemes have proved expensive and inefficient. They produce less than 0.5% of the nation's grain. There has been a wealth of studies of irrigation by pumping water uphill, but fuel is expensive and there is no reserve of electricity. The cost per hectare of a recent donor-funded scheme would have provided 100kg of fertilizer and 25kg of good seed to a rain-fed farmer every year for a thousand years – and would have produced vastly more food.

How about large commercial farms?

Two problems.

1. Because of the high cost of imports and spares, big growers would want a guaranteed price of around K35 per kg. No commercial millers would be willing to promise this. In Zimbabwe there were large subsidises which

Malawi would find hard to offer. Maize farmers in the US and Europe are heavily subsidised

2. Mechanized farms need much foreign exchange for machinery and fuel, Malawi is short of foreign exchange.

What does government have in mind?

Providing fertilizer and better seed. It is common to see adjacent plots where one gives three or four times the yield of its neighbour. The difference is seed and fertilizer. How can China feed its people adequately and Malawi cannot? The simple answer is that China applies around 690kg of fertilizer on a hectare; Malawian small holders average 42 kg. If Malawi used 170kg – just a quarter of China’s figure – there would be a complete transformation of the food situation.

So why don’t they use much more?

They can’t afford to but it.

What does government plan to do?

They hope to make 70,000 tons of fertilizer available with a subsidy of £6.40 per bag. The subsidy will cover only half a small-scale farmer’s needs; the rest will have to be bought at the full price

And those who cannot afford fertilizer?

That’s the biggest challenge. There are low-cost ways of improving fertility – compost, nitrogen-fixing trees, preventing run-off. These have to be promoted more vigorously, but they involve a lot more labour and are not popular. And even with these methods, maize will need the extra nutrients that fertilizer supplies.

How can people earn money for fertilizer?

Unfortunately politicians are focusing all their attention on the subsidy issue with little thought for the 50% of rural people who will not be helped by the subsidy.