

Solving many problems with few chickens

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The chicken is an important part of the household. A chicken dish is the highest honour a guest gets on a Malawian dinner table.

And the Sustainable Agriculture Programme (Sapp) being run by the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Water Development has elevated the chicken to another level.

Through Village Challenge Fund (VCF)—an open financing mechanism for channelling funds for particular development objectives—some communities in Malawi have come together to raise chickens on a pass-on basis and use the proceeds from chicken rearing for the benefit of their families and the environment.

A concept paper of the fund says the project aims at transforming farmers from subsistence production to small-scale commercial enterprise through improved production skills.

A walk in the homestead of Angella Banda, lead farmer of Nakoli Group in Ilandira Village in Traditional Authority (T/A) Mpama in Mbulumbuzi Extension Planning Area (EPA) in



Banda packs eggs in readiness for the market

Chiradzulu District bears testimony of the benefit derived from the fund.

Banda and other members of the group in 2015 received a grant that enabled them to receive 10 chickens each—one cock

and nine hens—out of which they passed-on 20 chicks to two other farmers. “We received K3 571 000 from VCF. We used the money to buy iron sheets for roofing 23 kraals. We also used the money to buy

Improved diet

The lead farmer who has already completed the pass-on requirement for 20 chicks says the programme has revolutionised the diet at her house.

“I now have a menu for my family. We eat chicken twice a month and eggs regularly. My children no

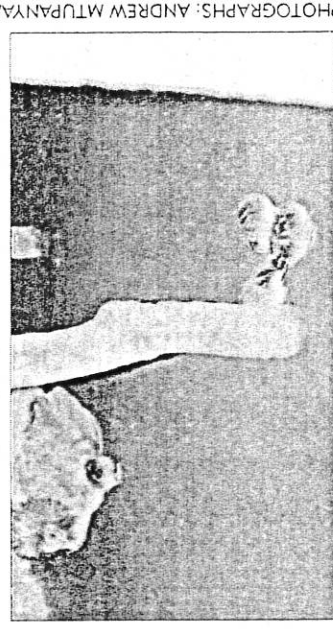
longer look forward to *sadaka* [post-funeral feast] in order to eat meat,” she says. This is an important milestone in a country where 23 percent of child deaths are related to under-nutrition while four percent of under-five children suffer from acute malnutrition, according to Unicef Nutrition Factsheet 2018.

Improved soil fertility

The goodness of the chicken has spread even to



Some of Banda's guinea fowls



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A hen and her chicks in Banda's kraal

the gardens. The farmers testify that chicken manure has enriched their gardens.

They tell of how soils that lost fertility over the years have been revived in the few seasons where chicken manure has been applied.

A 2015 study by the World Agroforestry Centre, International Centre for Research in Agroforestry (Icrf), Chitedze Agricultural Research Station and Lilongwe University and Natural Resources (Bunda College), Crop and Soils Department conducted in Thyolo, Dedza and Mzimba tell a tale of declining fertility.

“This study shows that the current condition of most soils in the districts is of very low soil fertility status,” reads the research paper in part.

Animal husbandry diversification

Banda further says apart from increasing the number of chickens to 71, she has diversified to Guinea fowls and goats.

“When I noticed that the chicken numbers were growing, I bought two Guinea fowl eggs and placed them in the care of a hen. Now I have 10 Guinea fowls,” she says.

The farmers say the programme has not disrupted their way of life because agricultural extension workers trained

them how to maximise traditional chicken rearing methods using modern practices.

“We use free range system of rearing chickens but we emphasise on vaccinating them periodically,” observes Banda.

Commercialisation

Mbulumbuzi EPA agricultural extension development coordinator Margaret Nkuziona says the farmers started reaping the benefits from the chickens in the first year.

“All the farmers complete their pass-on requirement. They are now building chicken stocks in readiness for official opening of the shop,” she says.

In Mbulumbuzi EPA the fund is supporting 225 farmers spread in groups of six.

Challenges

Nkuziona, however, says the benefit could have been greater if all farmers adhered to technical advice provided by agricultural extension workers.

“One major challenge is that some farmers do not follow the chicken vaccination schedule, this affects the growth of the chickens,” she observes.

Through the chicken the farmers have managed to swim out of poverty by practising what they learnt from farm business schools.

The future

In line with VCF's vision of value addition, the Mbulumbuzi farmers say apart from selling live chickens and eggs, they will be selling dressed chickens.

“Our desire is that we should buy solar power equipment and a refrigerator for storage of dressed chickens,” says Banda.

In Mbulumbuzi, thanks to the chicken, VCF's main purpose of promoting widespread adoption of good agricultural practices for the attainment of improved agricultural practices, incomes and nutrition by smallholder farmers, has been achieved.

The chicken has saved a community from economic, health and climate change-induced problems. ■

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