MALAWI

Saving the Land

A unusual community project aims to rehabilitate one of Malawi's most vital regions

The malaise spread inexorably across the land. Flash flooding gouged huge gullies across the rolling hills and entire chunks of red earth were swept away. Rivers began to silt up.

Degradation

Drought scorched the soil into fine grains and winds then swept them away. The entire climate pattern became unpredictable and farmers say it has changed forever.

Harvests began to fail. "Our crop yields were low even when we used expensive fertilizers," recalled one woman farmer, Agnes Robben. Hunger began to stalk the villages. "During particularly difficult times, we didn't have food to give the kids," the mother of three children said. "We often had to rely on government handouts."

The vicious circle had other knock-on effects. Children dropped out of school. Health began to deteriorate.

Farmers in such African countries as Malawi are generally poorly educated and notoriously conservative. Time, and simple agricultural innovations, often pass them by and even when available are often shunned.

Education

Eighty percent of the population of Malawi, a landlocked sliver of sub-tropical land in southern central Africa, is tied to the land. The country is already one of the world's poorest and it faces the prospect of a burgeoning population which will double in just a few short years from its current 15 million.

Unlike many of her neighbors Agnes became a farming activist. And the future of not only her own village, Kumpondu in southern Malawi, but of the entire country could rest on her efforts and those of like minded farmers and experts.

Kumpondu lies in Malawi's Middle Shire region. The nearby Shire River provides 98% of the country's power supply, but it is rapidly silting up with potentially devastating effects not only for agriculture but for fledgling industries, homes, hospitals and schools.

An estimated three million cubic meters of once valuable farmland has already been dumped into the river as silt which threatens nearby hydro electricity stations.

Vital, Degraded Area

What is one of the most vital areas in the entire country has become its most degraded region and a vicious cycle has become difficult to reverse.

The reasons for the crisis are familiar. The population in the once fertile area soared in recent decades. More farmers needed more land to feed their families. Forests were chopped down for firewood, charcoal and building materials. Stripped of its cover and scarred by bad farming practices, the land and the streams and rivers deteriorated rapidly.

However, in what has become a race against time, activists such as Agnes, government experts and the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) are involved in a five-year community project to literally stitch the land back together again and stop the soil hemorrhaging.

Officially known as Covams, or the project for Community Vitalization and Afforestation in Middle Shire, it concentrates on the key areas of soil conservation and recovering barren hillsides with trees.

After an initial government request JICA created a master plan for the region's rehabilitation followed by a pilot study which initially concentrated on tree regeneration, according to chief advisor Akira Sato, one of three permanent Japanese experts living in Malawi.

"But we quickly realized that it was more important for farmers to secure daily food needs before they became interested in planting trees so we expanded our aims to include soil conservation," he said.

The five-year plan initially covered 50 villages but by the end of 2011 it will incorporate 243 local communities and a population of 100,000 rural people.

A Different Approach

In this, the U.N. International Year of Forests, there are many projects around the world using different approaches to both prevent the destruction of forest areas and aid in their rehabilitation.

For only the second time anywhere, the Malawi project is using a concept developed a decade ago by a Japanese expert in the northwest African nation of Senegal.

Effectively, all activity is centered exclusively in local communities. Villagers receive all their instruction and training in their village halls, churches, schools or in the open underneath trees and in their fields.

After widespread training Agnes is one of an estimated 1,000 locals who have been designated as 'farm leaders,' effectively the movers and shakers in their communities.

They in turn have helped to train several thousand other farmers in both soil conservation techniques and tree planting. Materials, equipment, training devices are all from local sources.

"We don't give them anything except training," says Akira Sato. "We don't take them on out-of-town courses or offer financial inducements. Everything is done at the grassroots level."

JICA is currently involved in similar community forestry projects in countries as diverse as Nepal and Panama.

This approach is in line with a concept known as 'human security' which JICA President Sadako Ogata helped develop in the 1990s, emphasizing the importance and centrality of local communities and individuals in development projects.

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In the gently rolling hillsides villagers are busily constructing rock, wood and bamboo barriers across numerous gullies to prevent further soil loss when the rains arrive.

Hillsides of maize, vegetables and other crops are being contoured and 'stepped' to both encourage water preservation and halt water runoffs.

Some villages have begun bee keeping and fishery projects to augment their crop and vegetable harvests.

The establishment of large nurseries is a traditional method of reforestation—an approach Akira Sato describes as 'industrial forestry.' Here farmers are encouraged to directly plant 'easy and fast growing trees' as part of the social or community forestry approach.

Project coordinator Mika Kawamoto acknowledges that reafforestation can be a 'tricky sell' to skeptical farmers. "Everyone likes instant results," he says. "They don't want to wait years to see the benefits. So far we are reasonably happy, but we still have so much work to do."

But some results are already impressive. Agnes Robben grows maize, peas, ground nuts, sorghum, pumpkins and sweet potatoes on a 1 ½ acre plot.

She says "We can now sometimes harvest 15 bags of maize on one plot which previously yielded only three bags. Instead of spending all of our money on food we can now buy other things, including our children's education and the future."

In her area, 183 heads of household out of 247 are participating in various aspects of the project.

The organizers, and virtually all of the so-called 'lead farmers' were so encouraged that recently they gathered in a huge hall in Malawi's second largest city of Blantyre to 'sell' the project to government officials from surrounding regions.

"We have covered a lot of ground in a very short time," said Malawian project Manager Peter Moyo H. Mkwapatira.

Malawi's future will depend to some degree on how many of the country's farmers and decision makers agree.

Regeneration

Success

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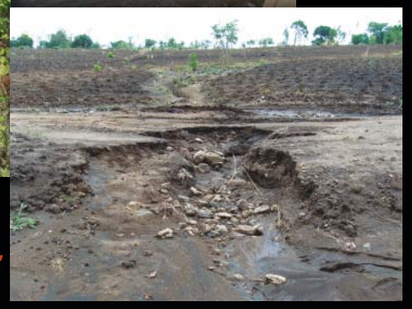
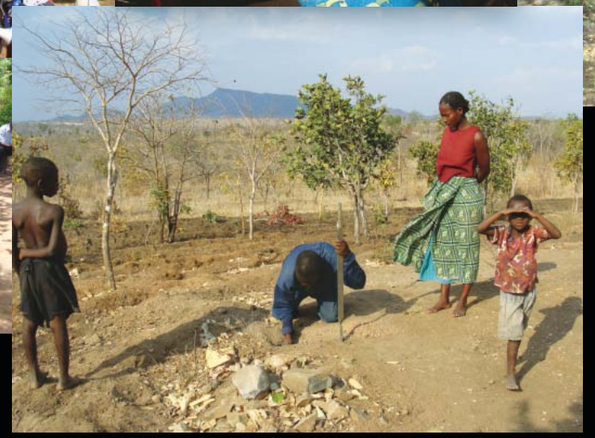
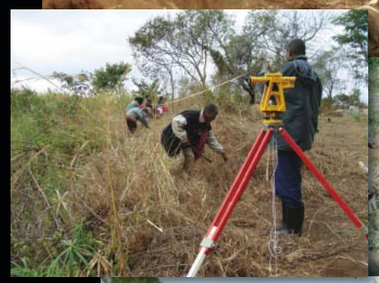


The land under attack



Learning new skills



Fighting soil erosion and deforestation

A brighter future

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The Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) is the world's largest bilateral development organization, operating in some 150 countries to help some of the globe's most vulnerable people.