

Advertisement

## Agricultural subsidies are not the only answer

**Source:** (IRIN) **Reporter:** X IRIN  
**Location:** EKWENDENI, Malawi **Published:** April 19, 2011 06:26 am EDT  
**Topics:** Health, Healthcare Policy, Economy, Business And Finance, Agriculture



It is almost harvest time in Mzimba district, northern Malawi, but Salieta Nyasulu's maize crop looks dry and stunted and it will be hard to feed herself and her three children this year. "[The maize] won't last until next harvest," she told IRIN. "I'll have to do piece-work and grow some vegetables by the river."

Nyasulu was among the 1.6 million smallholder farmers who received government coupons to buy maize seed and fertilizer for the 2010/11 farming season at a tenth of what they would normally cost.

"The soil is good only if you use fertilizer," she said, but the two 50kg bags of subsidized fertilizer allotted per household were not nearly enough to get a healthy crop of maize from her one hectare of land, especially after a dry start to the year. "I had to use less than recommended."

The government's farm input subsidy program was first implemented in 2005 after several years of drought and chronic food shortages left nearly a quarter of the population in need of food aid.

Most small-scale farmers, who account for about 80 percent of the country's agricultural production, grow maize, Malawi's main staple crop. President Bingu wa Mutharika hoped to avoid the need for future food handouts by distributing coupons for maize seed and fertilizer to the poorest 50 percent of farmers.

The government has since credited the program with several years of bumper maize harvests that have given the country a surplus and contributed to strong economic growth. There is little doubt that the subsidies have greatly improved food security and helped reduce the number of Malawians living below the poverty line from 60 percent in 2004 to less than 45 percent in 2009.

However, a number of smallholder farmers IRIN spoke to in Mzimba district said they either did not qualify for the program, or did not receive enough subsidized fertilizer to make a significant difference to their yields. Several said they received only one 50kg bag this year and had to share it with a neighbor.

As the program goes into its sixth year, there are also growing concerns about long-term sustainability and the extent to which it has diverted attention and resources from other initiatives that could help farmers like Nyasulu.

"It has really taken people out of hunger," said Elizabeth Sibale, a consultant at the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in Malawi, "but it's not a lasting solution."

A costly "band aid"?

The cost of fertilizer and transporting it to farmers all over the country has risen steeply in recent years and by 2008/09 the program was draining 16 percent of the national budget and nearly 7 percent of GDP.

The government has scaled down the program in the last two years, but it still cost 23 billion kwacha (US\$152.3 million) in 2010/11, according to the UK's Department for International Development (DFID), which is providing 5 percent of funding. In total, about 10 percent of the program is donor funded.

"Other programs are not getting as much attention and funding," Sibale told IRIN.

- [Recent Posts](#)
- [Most Popular Comments](#)

### Recent Comments

- [Aning batungbaki](#) Mrs. Defensor-Santiago should worry about the poverty and over population problem of the Philippines rather than the Miss Universe results. In addition, perhaps the contestants should also have an...  
[Filipino senator threatens to file protest over Miss Universe results | AHN · 19 minutes ago](#)
- [Larasalviat](#) Uhhh... you should look at map... Angola is in Afrika not in Latin America....wake up  
[Filipino senator threatens to file protest over Miss Universe results | AHN · 1 hour ago](#)
- [Ms. happy pixel](#) Saw the video..... those pixels hung down to his knees.  
[Ashton Kutcher gets naked for Ellen | AHN · 1 hour ago](#)

### Popular Threads

- [Survey finds increased rate of drug use in U.S. | AHN](#)  
19 comments · 3 days ago
- [CBS Trips Up... Tweets Unconfirmed Report of Steve Jobs Demise | AHN](#)  
13 comments · 2 days ago
- [Smucker to raise prices on Jif Peanut Butter | AHN](#)  
1 comment · 12 hours ago
- [Tony Romo sets Cowboys up for victory before giving game away | AHN](#)  
1 comment · 13 hours ago

Advertisement

"We're forgetting all the other problems that affect farmers and putting a band aid on them."

One of the main problems faced by farmers in Malawi is an increasingly unpredictable climate. Lake Malawi, several other lakes and hundreds of rivers cover a fifth of the country, but only 3 percent of land is irrigated. Most smallholder farmers depend on a good rainy season for their one harvest of the year.

"If the rains are good, I get a good crop," said another farmer in Mzimba district. "If the rains are not good, then it's a disaster."

Sibale said the government had made some efforts to expand irrigation in the last five years by distributing treadle pumps to farmers. However, the Green Belt Initiative, an ambitious plan to irrigate one million hectares along the Shire River in the south of the country has yet to be implemented.

There are other problems too. When Malawi was less densely populated, farmers could leave a field fallow for a year so the soil could recover. But with increasing pressure on land and easier access to fertilizers, "People have completely forgotten how to keep soil healthy," said Sibale. "Now it's so degraded, they have to use more fertilizer every year."

She added that many officials in the Ministry of Agriculture and Food security shared her concerns about soil health.

Looking for alternatives

Victor Mhoni of the Civil Society Agriculture Network (CISANET), a local NGO, said long-term fertilizer use actually contributed to soil degradation by making it dry and acidic unless combined with measures that can restore fertility such as planting nitrogen-fixing trees or growing legume crops.

Programs promoting agroforestry and growing legumes have already shown impressive results, and farmers eventually need much smaller quantities of fertilizer to produce good yields.

In the last five years, the World Agroforestry Centre, in partnership with government and NGOs, has reached nearly 200,000 farmers with tree seeds and training on how to grow nitrogen-fixing trees, as well as fruit trees and fast-growing trees for firewood.

Mesha Khongolo planted gliricidia, a type of nitrogen-fixing tree, using seed he was given by the Ministry of Agriculture's local Extension Development office. He estimated that incorporating the leaves and branches into his soil had increased his yields by more than 50 percent.

Nyasulu tried planting some tree seeds but they failed to germinate and she is now growing pigeon pea, a tall, leafy legume with a similar effect but quicker results. By 2012 she should see an improvement in her soil and get a healthier crop of maize.

Politically sensitive

DFID's five year commitment to the input subsidy program ends in June 2011. "We are currently considering options for new support to agriculture in Malawi," wrote Malawi-based Communications Officer Andrew Massa, in an emailed response to questions.

"We believe that Malawi needs a range of programs that promote economic growth and poverty alleviation," he added.

Attempts to reach the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security for comment on this story failed. Malawi's input subsidy program has become politically sensitive, and reports of pockets of food insecurity, especially in the south, have been met by angry denials by Mutharika .

"There's been a lot of rhetoric about food security being solved in Malawi with the input subsidy program and I just don't think that's true," said Rachel Bezner-Kerr, a Canadian researcher who has worked on a project to promote legume inter-cropping in Mzimba district .

"It's a short-term solution, but in the long term you're really not any further ahead after spending millions of dollars if you haven't found alternative solutions to improving soil fertility."

ks/he







- Provided by [Integrated Regional Information Networks](#).

Aol.  
THE LATEST  
NEWS, SPORTS,  
ENTERTAINMENT  
& MUCH MORE  
STAY UP TO DATE ▶

Advertisement

Watch more of  
Ativa's story  
Ad  
boostup.org

---

 Republish  Email  Facebook  Digg  Twitter  Share

---

Copyright © 2011 IRIN - All rights reserved. Content including text, photos, videos, audio, graphics and logos may not be used for commercial purposes, reproduced, published, broadcast, rewritten for broadcast or publication or redistributed directly or indirectly in any medium without permission and license from IRIN.

Like

Comments for this page are closed.

### Showing 0 comments

Sort by

### Reactions



**ciaraPaine** 4 months ago

 From Twitter

Agricultural subsidies are not the only answer: In the last five years, the World Agroforestry Centre, in partne... <http://bit.ly/i6dYQH>

Trackback URL

© 2011 AHN All Rights Reserved | Hosted on the NewsBahn™