

Josiah De Valois
North Polk High School
Alleman, IA
Malawi, Factor 16: Education

Malawi: Widespread Education to Bring Agricultural Improvements

Malawi is a small country surrounded by land and Lake Malawi and has an abundance of natural resources including uranium, coal and limestone. Despite their resources, Malawi faces a large variety of problems including high percentages of their population infected with many diseases, such as HIV and AIDS, an extremely low literacy rate due to lack of proper education, and deforestation resulting in devastating erosion. All of these issues contribute to making hunger an even larger problem in Malawi (“Major Malawi Problems”). Problems such as these can be solved, and conditions improved in Malawi through the utilization and investment in a better education system. Through a better and more accessible school system, Malawians can begin research on disease, agriculture, and many other things in order to help with their food security. Education ends after primary school for all but 26% of males and 16% of females. Further, only 15% of boys and 7% of girls finish high school (*Why Malawi*). Due to this, making education more widely available and having schools closer together would greatly assist in the amount of graduates, increasing research and technology to help in farming.

Formerly called Nyasaland, Malawi was controlled by the British until they won their independence in 1964 (*The Hunger Project*). After this, they were controlled by a dictator for around thirty years. This ended in the mid 1990s, and since then, a more democratic government has taken the place of the dictatorship (“Malawi Country Profile”). The Malawian economy has been gradually getting better since the end of this; however, more than half of their population still lives under the poverty line. Much of this is due to the fact that Malawi is prone to floods and drought (*The Hunger Project*). At over 86% of the population of around 16 million people surviving by subsistence farming, one can imagine how devastating this can be for the Malawian crops and farmers (*Food Insecurity Case Study*).

If education became of greater importance and availability, the people educated in Malawi could do agricultural research in order to further advance the availability of food in their area. This would make it so that less people would be needed to work the fields and more children could be educated. As technology is advanced, crops could be harvested and maintained much easier than they currently are. This would allow even more people to go to school, hopefully making everybody get educated in the near future. This cycle would build on itself, and more jobs would become available for Malawians. As job opportunities increase, the economy would get better and Malawi won't have to rely on subsistence farming nearly as much. They would be able to sell their goods and use that money to pay for food, education and supplies that are much needed.

Some major barriers to agricultural families is that they need to feed their families, which tend to be large. The average number of children that a woman has is 5.7; a large family may be difficult to support (*Malawi Datasheet*). This results in children working and doing manual labor in order to help support their families. Due to the lack of education, the majority of farmers cannot develop ways to protect their crops from drought or floods. Also because of this, they can't increase their crop productivity. If a drought or flood were to come along, which frequently happens, many of their crops would be destroyed, and much of the population left starving.

Around 90% of Malawians live off of less than the equivalent of two U.S. dollars a day (“Rural Poverty”). Due to a lack of transportation, it is difficult for Malawians to sell their grown goods and gain access to food grown by others. As a result of this, people must use subsistence farming to feed their families. Normally, a Malawian family would not have much access to a market, so when they harvest

their corn, it is often brought to get ground up. Once turned into flour, it is pretty much turned into a paste which provides sustenance for the future (“Food and Daily Life”). According to the FAO, “The Malawian diet is mainly composed of cereals, primarily maize, starchy roots, (cassava and potatoes) and starchy fruit (plantain)” (*National Country Profiles*). This results in a diet lacking many important nutrients.

Access to healthcare in Malawi is very limited, and the few places with hospitals still have problems with getting enough supplies to run their medical facilities. In the past years the government has worked towards basic care for Malawians, including immunizations (*Poverty and Healthcare*). In Malawi, there are a few public hospitals in larger cities, in addition to many which are run by mission organizations (*Poverty and Healthcare*).

A typical rural family in Malawi farms a very small amount of land, averaging 0.8 hectares (a little bit less than 2 acres) per farm. Corn is one major staple there, covering about 80% of the farm land. Although more than enough corn is grown to support the country, they still lack food frequently because of periods of bad weather. Tobacco, the major crop that is exported out of the country, is a primary source of revenue. It makes up around 50% of the money earned from exported goods (*rural poverty portal*). While the majority of the country relies on rain alone and do not use any specific practices to help their crops grow, there are some who also use “conservation agriculture,” which is a way of farming that helps them to maintain their crops in a dry environment (*Conservation Agriculture*). While there is no specific technique, conservation agriculture is a set of certain ways of farming that allow a field to have a higher quality of soil for a longer amount of time. One Malawian stated that while other farms were struggling with drought, “In fields using conservation agriculture, there is no problem” (*Conservation Agriculture*).

While the majority of the population lives in poverty, people living in urban areas are generally better off than people living in rural areas. While the minimum wages (as of 2010) for a rural area was 75 cents a day, in urban areas it was 92 cents per day (*Employment Diagnostic*). While community gardens are difficult to come by, they are existent. The FAO constructed seven locations in which Malawians can access information and resources to help them plant gardens containing more nutrient-rich food. This project was successful, training people to work their garden and giving them a “kit” in order to assist them in starting to grow (*support to NRUs*). The typical job for urban Malawians may include teaching (although there is a severe shortage), carpentry, printing and many other various activities (“Education and Jobs”).

Without an education, it is difficult for technological advancements to occur, resulting in difficulties to produce enough food consistently. Education may result in getting better jobs, and not being forced into subsistence farming, assisting in the ability to grow an economy and help more people be able to purchase food. This would also result in the ability to consume a healthier diet, improving overall health of the nation’s people.

The current problem with the education system in Malawi is that it is widely unavailable. As previously mentioned, many uneducated people are made up more of females than males, and more people drop out of school as they grow older. One problem for education is that many children must work in fields to help their family survive, making it harder for them to have consistent attendance. Whether a family lives in the city or rural area, if they are poor, it is highly difficult for children to be able to attend school. Another factor that may disadvantage people is the inequality of women’s rights. It is much more difficult for females to complete their education than males.

A good thing, however, is that conditions for education are gradually improving. One way that this may be measured is in the amount of money that the government is investing into education. Currently, Malawi has increased their budget for education by now putting around 25% of their national budget into their education system (“Education & Jobs”). Because of this, it is likely that in the near future, more people will be able to get a better education.

Improving educational conditions would help in food production because there would be more educated people who would be able to research agricultural technology. Improving technology would help crops yield more food, and make it more feasible to withstand drought and floods easier. Another benefit of this is that it could also help the environment because there'd be more knowledge and understanding that may be more widely known to farmers on how to prevent soil erosion and other harmful things. This would also improve the economy because more cash crops would be able to be grown and exported. Poverty may also be reduced because people could be able to earn more money for their crops rather than just growing enough to feed their families. Women would benefit from this because they'd have a better education, which can provide more opportunities. Many subsistence farmers would also be helped by this because they would be able to earn more money and grow more food with better agricultural techniques.

Another issue that may affect education is population growth. With a rapidly growing population, it may be more difficult to afford to pay to send a large family to school. This is because they would have to pay for the supplies for their kids. Another problem could be the distance from schools and families. It may be difficult for children to walk to a school that is a long ways away, and may discourage parents from allowing them to attend.

To solve the problem of access to a quality education, or even an education at all, a few steps should be taken. One of these is that a law should be passed that states that there must be at least one school in every so many miles, so that it is easier to access schools. Another law should be passed which increases the amount of roads and the condition of them in the country. This would make it easier for people to get to places that are frequently visited. If people had markets closer to them, or roads that could help get them there, it would be much easier to access food. With better roads and public transportation, kids would be able to attend school more regularly as well as go to markets to sell food. With a nearby market, a more nutritious diet would be possible. This is because people would be able to trade their food for various other crops grown instead of just surviving on what they grew. Something that may help with this is if the government passed policies that would promote opening stores and places for people to be able to sell their grown goods. A project that could be completed to help Malawi in their education system is an implementation of a few classes taught on how to preserve soil quality, and be able to grow crops with less manpower. This would allow people to be able to consider sending their kids to school, because they would not need them to work the land as frequently.

A good suggestion that may be made to the U.N. is that they should continue on with their centers where they handed out kits to people, so they were able to grow a variety of different crops and get more nutrients. To the World Bank, a suggestion may be made to improve upon their program and encourage people to start businesses in Malawi, and allowing people to take out small businesses. Especially beneficial would be food markets being formed in more areas. To international research agencies, a helpful thing to Malawians would be for research to be conducted in drought and flood protection for maize. This would benefit them because then they would not have to worry nearly as much about not having food after harsh conditions. Non-governmental associations should help Malawi by holding classes in which they could teach them on rotation of crops so that they did not wear down their land. Something that would be great for civic organizations to do, rather than just sending meals to Malawi, is holding brief instructional lessons on what can be done to improve crop yield and what other crops can be grown on their land with vital nutrients.

Families from Malawi should be involved in helping these recommendations actually happen by having them be informed on these organizations and possibly having some Malawians employed by them, so as to they may assist people and spread the word about classes. If they were instructed, they may be encouraged to start a class of their own and instruct people about necessary agricultural technologies, and get paid to do so.

There are many benefits that may be seen through the implementation of a better education system. Many of these have been listed, however, there are also many which have not. If better education systems were implemented in Malawi, there would be better chances of crops living through drought and floods. Instead of a major problem and severe hunger lasting for extended periods of time, Malawians would be able to overcome their hunger through better, more widespread education, and more research being conducted as a result of this. Due to a lack of transportation systems, it may be difficult for some families to access markets that are not very close to them. If better transportation systems were implemented, more families would have access to markets. Along with this, people would be able to go to schools easier because they would have routes to follow. If education were implemented, classes would be able to occur which could inform people of how to grow their crops in a way that is better for their fields. Once their fields got better soil, they would have healthier crops. Classes to instruct more people would then be able to be taught by Malawians, and the information would quickly spread around. If there were organizations willing to assist, many other things could be done to help people with their education, and ultimately, food security. With a better education, people would be able to grow a variety of different crops and sell them for a greater amount. Many of their grown goods could be exported, resulting in more money for the farmers. This would be beneficial because then the percentage of subsistence farmers may go down and Malawians could do more than just get by with enough food to survive. If they did this the Malawian economy would also improve. Also benefitting from education would be urban areas. Instead of simple jobs where no education is required, people could get jobs that pay well and they may be able to get better health care. With better health care, people would be more aware of sanitary conditions, and would be able to prevent many further illnesses. HIV and AIDS rates would also likely slowly decrease as a result of wider education and health care accessibility. With a better economy resulting from education, the government would be able to afford to buy all of the necessary supplies and the country would be much healthier.

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