

Getting fruit trees to save lives

The annual tree planting exercise has become more of a routine than an initiative that would reforest the nation. But in Mzimba, as Daniel Nyirenda found out recently, a unique project to make good of this exercise is earnestly underway.

The soil around Mzimba is loose and very vulnerable to erosion. The natural Viphya vegetation, which covers the area, is fast getting depleted due to the coming of tobacco growing, charcoal and timber business and population pressure.

Most of the residents of the area, who are largely Ngoni, are fast losing their grip on the traditional economic activity. They used to rely on cattle. But there is doom lying ahead of them as marauding cattle rustlers have forced most cattle owners to abandon the practice.

Horticulture, unfortunately, is taken as a luxury in the area. The commonly consumed fruits, bananas, are brought by traders from as far as Nkhata Bay. Therefore, one has to pay through the nose to have a bite.

And with increasing cultivation of grazing land, the future seems gloomy for the people.

However, the dwellers of Mzimba Solola can breathe a sigh of relief, with the introduction of "Trees for Life" project.

A Veterinary Surgeon, Dr. Kholiwe Mkandawire and her sister, Gertrude Mkandawire, who is MP for the area, have embarked on the ambitious project to ensure food and economic survival of the people.

Families are urged to plant fruit trees for food and for income, instead of planting ordinary trees.

An American of Indian origin, Balbir Mathur, inspired Kholiwe to venture into the project when she visited the USA in

September last year soon after the general elections.

According to Mkandawire, Mathur, who left India in the 1950s for studies in the USA, gave up his family business to invest in charity work back home in India and other impoverished Asian and Latin American countries, which include Guatemala, Cambodia and the Caribbean.

"Mathur believes that you can inspire people so that they can start helping themselves without waiting for the government. The project uses fruit trees," she states.

Balbir launched the Trees for Life formula in a poor and remote Indian village called Mulbar, in Orissa state, in May 1988. The people in the village, who used to follow a strict caste system of life, embraced the formula. Within a period of three years, farmers in the village, mostly banana growers, managed to break the vicious cycle of poverty.

"When I heard the story about the Mulbar village story from Mr. Balbir, I said why can't I try it back home in Malawi? I thought this would be ideal for Mzimba Solola. Maybe next time we would move to neighbouring constituencies and then move to the rest of the country," Mkandawire says.

Participants in the project are supposed to grow a minimum of 10 fruit trees of their familiar taste and of the finest breed.

According to Mkandawire, a farmer has to part with about K500, the average cost of seedlings for

10 fruit trees.

The Mkandawires embarked on implementing the project in February during this year's tree planting season.

While the rest of Malawians were busy planting ordinary, artificial trees like blue gum, gmelina, and others, the Mkandawires instead mobilized their people to plant fruit trees.

Armed with an initial capital of K150,000, the project took off.

"I invested the money in buying plant seedlings of likeable fruits such as mangoes, oranges, tangerines, and bananas," Mkandawire says.

Without the blessings of Mkondezi Research Centre, a government institution in Nkhata Bay which multiplies fruit trees, her project would probably have hit a snag.

She bought a nursery from there which included 500 mangoes, 500 oranges, 300 tangerines, 300 bananas, all of them improved varieties.

So far they have partnered with wildlife clubs at Chasato and Kazomba Schools, which would act as models for the project in the area.

"We have started with 100 families which understood the formula and showed willingness to implement it," she says.

Mkandawire, the MP, observes the initiative would help empower the people, who would be left helpless if government does not bring them projects.

"My support for the project is unlimited. For those families who are willing to move forward with us, the future looks bright," she says.

Kholiwe and the MP would like to involve expert hands in the name of Desk Officer at Mzimba District Agricultural Development Office for Horticultural Projects, Cosmas Chikapa.

Chikapa agrees with Kholiwe that fruits,



GETTING STARTED—Khowlie (left) plants a Mexican apple tree

particularly mangoes and oranges, generally grow very well in Mzimba Solola.

But he singles out peaches and pawpaw, which he says would grow very well along the edge of Viphya Plateau.

"With some care, bananas, pawpaws and guavas can do very well here," he says.

According to Chikapa, husbandry practices to

employ in order to yield results include manure application, watering, pruning and trimming.

With 28 degrees Celsius annual average temperatures, coupled with moderate rains, Mzimba Solola has the potential of turning into a fruit basket.

However, Chikapa observes that the rains have been erratic for the past two years, with this rain season being the worst.

Balbir, the brains behind Trees for Life, would like to come to Malawi to talk to the MPs so they can take the project to their constituencies, according to Kholiwe.

"A good breed of banana plants would start bearing fruits within two to three years. I imagine a load of bananas from 10 trees per family throughout Malawi," Mkandawire reasons.



FOLLOWING THE EXAMPLE — Villagers planting their fruit trees to curb erosion



NURSERY — These saplings will bring a harvest of many fruits

