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CONTRIBUTOR

Govt touts Shire Valley Transformation Programme

Government has said the Shire Valley Transformation Programme (SVTP) could be the key to solving the country's economic problems and deserves support from all Malawians.

The sentiments were made by Ministry of Trade and Industry cooperative auditor Henry Chimpesa, who said government was investing huge sums of money in the programme.

"This is a multi-million kwacha project. I urge all Malawians to give government support now that this dream is a reality," he said.

Chimpesa was speaking in the area of Group Village Head Zimola, Traditional Authority Maseya in Chikwawa at a ceremony convened to unveil board members for Zimola Irrigation Block.

The SVTP is intended to increase agricultural productivity and promote commercialisation for the targeted households in the Shire Valley districts of Chikwawa and Nsanje.

The programme, which the Department of Irrigation in the Ministry of Agriculture is implementing, is also designed to improve sustainable management and utilisation of natural resources.

The SVTP will irrigate 43 370 hectares of land by abstracting water from the Shire River at Kapichira Dam in Chikwawa and conveying it by gravity to the irrigable area in the two districts through canals.

The SVTP is expected to benefit some 223 000 farmers from the two districts, who will consolidate their parcels of land to form large farms that they will run as cooperatives.

This is a departure from the way other irrigation schemes in Malawi operate, where farmers cultivate individually, tilling land mostly using the traditional hoe.

In contrast, SVTP farms will be mechanised.

And the cooperatives will only grow crops for which markets will have been identified. Factories will be built in the Shire Valley to add value to whatever a cooperative will produce to maximise profits.

Farmers who will participate in the project will have a share of the commercial farm corresponding to the area of their land.

The 14-year SVTP is currently undertaking a number of activities, but the major one is the construction of the 118-kilometre main canal from Kapichira Dam to Ngabu in Nsanje.

Another activity involves forming and training cooperatives, and the Ministry of Trade and Industry is one of the stakeholders tasked with the job. So far, five



The SVTP's 118-km irrigation canal under construction

cooperatives have been established.

Chimpesa called on the nation to ready itself for the SVTP, saying the project was not only for the people of the Shire Valley, but for the entire country.

He said more than 40 mega farms would be established along the main canal, and that if the farms "will be working effectively", hunger in Malawi would be history.

"It is the key to ending hunger," Chimpesa told reporters in Chikwawa after the unveiling function.

"Not only that, we will also be able to produce goods that currently we are importing, in the process saving foreign exchange."

Cereals and animal or vegetable fats and oils dominate Malawi's food imports, accounting for almost 50 percent of the country's total food imports.

Chimpesa said he was certain that the SVTP would be a game-changer if implemented successfully in terms of generating foreign exchange that the country needed so much.

"There will be factories here when this project starts functioning. And some factories in Lilongwe or Blantyre will obtain their raw materials from here, again, saving foreign exchange," he said.

The World Bank, African Development Bank (ADB), Opec Fund for International Development (OFID), the Global



Masebo: We intend to form 40 cooperatives

Environmental Facility (GEF) and the Malawi Government are funding the first phase of the SVTP, Malawi's flagship irrigation project and reportedly the largest in southern Africa.

SVTP Agriculture Commercialisation Specialist Adrian Masebo said farmers were more than eager to consolidate their land and farm commercially.

Masebo said, previously, land of the farmers was not under irrigation and they could at times not harvest at all, exacerbated by drought.

societies.

"The four pre-cooperative societies are not yet registered, but have governance structures," he said.

He added: "We intend to form 40 cooperatives in total."

The SVTP had been on the drawing board for decades, having been conceived as Shire Valley Project (SVP) in the early 1940s by the colonial administration.

The SVP was to allow stabilisation of Lake Malawi, expansion of water transport, generation of hydroelectricity on the Shire River, establishment of a vast irrigation programme in the Lower Shire, and prevention of floods.

Parts of the SVP have been implemented and include the Kamuzu Barrage at Liwonde, and Nkula, Tedzani and Kapichira hydro-electricity power stations.

More than 80 years after it was conceived and following a number of surveys and studies, the irrigation project, now renamed SVTP, got off the ground in earnest in 2020.

Chimpesa said: "We are going to reach the needed levels of import substitution and save the little dollars earned from sales of other commodities such as tobacco."

"So, let us all rally behind the government, people of Chikwawa and Nsanje," he urged, adding "the irrigation project could be a stepping stone to better things." ■

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