

'I'm blind, but not dead'

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It is Wednesday mid-morning and Shadrick James, 78, is taking four journalists to his garden, shirtless and a hoe slung over his shoulder.

They go to the 4.8-hectare garden, about 300 metres from his home.

The journalists speak in hushed voices and shake their heads in disbelief as he walks briskly ahead of them, a cane in his right hand, aiding him to scan the path.

If the sight of the cane has surprised the visitors, they are dumbfounded when they see him hoeing in his garden.

James, a citizen of Group Village Headman (GVH) Nyampemba, Traditional Authority (T/A) Ndakwera in Chikwawa District, was demonstrating that he leads a normal life despite being blind.

"I am blind, but not dead," the father of seven had told the four journalists the previous day.

When many Malawians who are visually impaired survive on alms, the last thing James wants is to be pitied even if he himself has lived with the disability since he was in his teens.

He likens himself to any able-bodied person. Unsurprisingly, his determination to live independent of other people has made him to be self-reliant, to such an extent people seeking piecework go to him.

And not wanting to be left behind, James is an active participant in communal work as well as government and non-government programmes that are designed to improve people's lives.

The media team spotted him at a Shire Valley Transformation Programme (SVTP) activity for members of an irrigation block which also covers Nyampemba Village.

An avid farmer himself, James has pinned his hopes on the SVTP, reportedly the biggest irrigation project in the Southern Africa Development Community (Sadc) region.

And he is upbeat about the programme's chances of transforming lives of not only his family members, but the entire Shire Valley which is prone to drought and floods.

SVTP is an ambitious government programme intended to increase agricultural productivity and also promote commercialisation among the targeted households in Chikwawa and Nsanje districts.



James and wife Aline leave for a cooperative training

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 programme 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 up to Bangula in Nsanje.

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 either as cooperatives or companies.

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

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.

The 14-year SVTP is currently undertaking a number of activities, including sensitising targeted beneficiaries to the concept of cooperatives before they are formed.

One aspect of the SVTP worth noting is that it is inclusive, giving those who are disadvantaged such as James equal opportunities

to participate in the irrigation project.

James' active participation in the cooperative education class the Ministry of Trade and Industry facilitated on behalf of SVTP for Alumenda and Mvula Irrigation Block stunned everyone.

Throughout the training, he gave answers and posed questions that revealed an inquisitive mind.

"Blindness is not death. You may have a leg problem, an arm problem or be blind like me. It does not mean the end of the world," he told journalists in an interview.

James said he did not want to be a burden to anyone because of his disability and wanted to prove that a physically challenged person could be as productive as any able-bodied one.

He said: "People with a disability should know they have a skill they can use to improve their lives. It is sad that many blind people like to beg. This should be a thing of the past."

"It is not good to rely on others because they can help you today but not all the time. Sooner or later, they are bound to grow tired and stop giving assistance."

James urged people who are visually impaired or have any other disability to take a leaf out of his book. He said they too could be productive.

He disclosed that when he

started cultivating in 1974, he already had lost his sight after he suffered a measles attack in his boyhood. But he never despaired, leading a normal life and going to school.

James, who claimed he went as far as the "old standard eight" class and speaks passable English, said he attended an institution for the blind in the 1960s where he acquired farming skills.

The farming skills have enabled his household to stand out in his village. When most families plead for relief food from government during lean seasons, his home has food that lasts the whole year.

James grows sesame, sorghum, and finger millet. He also rears cattle and goats.

"I am better off than some people who can see but without shame depend on begging for their survival. I have a wife I take care of her. I feed and clothe her well," he said.

During the media team's visit to James' home, they found an elderly woman working in the garden. The journalists learnt that many locals do piece work in the garden, exchanging with money or food.

"People with no disability come to me when they have problems. Some come to do piecework while others come to borrow money," said James, who also chairs a local Village Savings and Loans group.

"People who are able-bodied but cannot support themselves and depend on others should be called physically challenged."

James' original home is in T/A Nyachikaza in Nsanje. He relocated to Nyampemba Village in 1974 with the help of the Malawi Council for the Handicapped (Macooha) so he could start farming.

He said he was indebted to Macooha for making "me a very good farmer" after sending him to Mulanje where he received training in agriculture.

Lasidi Ngwira, who was one of the facilitators during the trainings, spoke highly of James and his enthusiasm for knowledge on cooperatives.

"He is a very active participant and asks questions. During recap time, he remembers everything we discussed the previous day. It shows he understands," Ngwira said of James during the trainings.

He expressed happiness to note that the SVTP was also involving people with visual impairment, saying "we can't sideline such people. They have a role to play."

James' wife, Aline, who was previously married to another man, was also full of praise for her second husband despite being visually impaired. She said she could not have married a better man.

"My husband clothes and feeds me very well. He is a hard worker and through farming, we have acquired cattle and goats. I am happier now than I was in my first marriage," Aline told reporters.

On the SVTP, James hailed the Malawi government for implementing it. He said he had faith in the SVTP achieving its main goal of uplifting people of the Shire Valley.

"We have for long suffered from drought and floods which result in poor crop yields," James said. This programme will be the solution to these problems."

He said being a farmer himself, he was banking his hopes on the programme and appealed to people in Chikwawa and Nsanje, including those with disabilities to get involved for their own good.

"These days, government is encouraging every person to take part in development work, whether they have a physical disability or not," James said.

He added: "Let us not be bystanders simply because one has a disability." ■

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