

Shire Valley Transformation Programme's fascinating history

By Gospel Mwalwanda

The Shire Valley Transformation Programme (SVTP) is an interesting project.

Malawi has implemented many development projects since it gained independence from Britain 58 years ago, but none has a fascinating history as the SVTP.

It is a project that has come about because of the 'unruly' behaviour of Lake Malawi, and it is also reportedly the biggest irrigation project in Southern Africa.

But perhaps the most interesting aspect about the SVTP is that it had been on the drawing board for decades before it got off the ground in 2018.

"The Programme dates back to the 1940s. We can say it has been 80 years on the drawing board," said Dr Stanley Chakhumbila Khaila, SVTP Project Coordinator.

Khaila said: "It is a very important Programme which will transform many lives in the Shire Valley and the country as a whole."

The SVTP is a 14-year irrigation project (2018-2031) being implemented in Chikwawa and Nsanje districts.

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

The SVTP's objective is to increase agricultural productivity and commercialization for some 48,400 targeted households in Chikwawa and Nsanje.

But what prompted the country to come up with an irrigation project of such magnitude?

There was a very big



KHAILA — it has been 80 years



MAMBA — This is a great achievement

concern by the colonial administration, according to Dr Khaila, that Lake Malawi-or Lake Nyasa as it was known then-and the Shire River were "misbehaving".

"Sometimes you would have a lot of water in the Shire River wreaking havoc in the Shire Valley," said Dr Khaila.

He said the flooding of the river negatively affected settlements, destroyed infrastructure and damaged commercial and subsistence crops.

It was then that a proposal was made to find a way of controlling the flow of the Shire River from Lake Malawi, and an engineer named Francis Edgar Kanthack came up with a solution.

In 1941, the engineer par excellence published an article in the Geographical Journal on 'Fluctuations of Lake Nyasa'.

Kanthack concluded that regulating the discharge of water from Lake Malawi into the Shire River would maintain the level of the lake at a stable height.

"Most people believe that this is the starting point of the Shire Valley Transformation Programme," said Dr Khaila.

It was suggested that instead of just controlling the Shire River, they needed a project that would have a barrage,

hydroelectric power and an irrigation scheme in the Shire Valley.

"These were the three parts of what was known as the Shire Valley Project which was the integrated development plan of the colonial government. I am glad all have been implemented, including the Shire Valley Transformation Programme," Dr Khaila said.

He said the Kamuzu Barrage at Liwonde and Nkula hydropower plant were projects that were planned a long time ago in the SVP.

"What we are seeing is something that had been in the pipeline for more than 80 years," Dr Khaila said of the SVTP.

While the Kamuzu Barrage and hydropower project have been done, it was only in April 2020 that the irrigation part of the SVP was implemented.

Dr Khaila said it was only when the country got independence that things began to move.

He said Dr Hastings Kamuzu Banda was aware of the development concepts under the SVP and decided to start implementing them, with the Kamuzu Barrage as a priority.

"The project was a priority because it was not simply about a barrage. It was also about crossing the Shire River," Dr Khaila

said. "At that time crossing the Shire River was by a ferry and it was very dangerous. In fact, lives were lost."

Dr Khaila was referring to the 1965 ferry disaster that happened at Liwonde before the coming of the barrage-cum-bridge. The ferry capsized midstream, killing over 100 people.

Dr Khaila said a barrage was therefore considered a priority to control the flow of the Shire River, and also to act as a bridge for crossing the river.

"Then came the Nkula [hydropower plant]. They were more or less being done simultaneously. And then came the Tedzani and later Kapichira [power stations]," he said.

Dr Khaila described the three projects as building blocks for changing "how we see the Shire River and the lower end of it. But the agriculture transformation did not occur."

Dr Khaila said the agriculture transformation did not happen because the feasibility of having an irrigation project in the Shire Valley has undergone different studies for many years.

"A lot of studies were done but none of them was conclusive," he said.

"It was only recently when in 2008 government with support from our development partners, African Water Facility, that

we were able to do another study done by CODA."

The study concluded that it was possible to implement an irrigation project in the Shire Valley.

"They even estimated that close to 43,000 hectares could be irrigated. But they also recommended that further studies needed to be done," Dr Khaila said.

The African Development Bank provided financing in 2012 to the Government of Malawi to do a pre-feasibility study. When the study was completed, it confirmed what CODA said.

"They said that, indeed, there is very good potential for Chikwawa and Nsanje to be transformed through a gravity-fed irrigation project," Dr Khaila said.

"But they said we needed a detailed feasibility study which the World Bank funded to the tune of \$6 million."

A number of consultants were hired to do the feasibility study with KRCC (Korean Rural Community Corporation) as the lead consultant, assisted by six other consultants.

"At the end of the feasibility study in 2017, it was concluded that the Shire Valley Irrigation Project (SVIP) is socially, financially as well as economically feasible," Dr Khaila said.

"All that was needed was to provide financing so that it can be implemented. Fortunately, the World Bank had already pledged that if it was feasible, they would put in \$160 million."

The long-awaited SVIP, renamed SVTP, is now in progress, to the relief and joy of people of Chikwawa and Nsanje districts who had despaired of ever seeing it brought to fruition.

Dr Khaila said he was glad the long wait

for the project was over as local leaders during preparatory meetings did not hide their frustration at the seemingly endless promises.

"During preparatory meetings, local leaders were sceptical about the project, telling us that we go to conduct meetings and then disappear," he said.

"They said their parents told them that rumours about the project started long ago with nothing happening."

But the SVTP has started in earnest with the construction of the intake at the Kapichira Dam and the first 52kms of the 118Km long main canal from the intake to Bangula in Nsanje. Conduril is constructing the intake and first 6kms of the Main Canal while Sinohydro is constructing 46kms of the Main Canal.

The Malawi Government (\$7.2 million), World Bank (\$160 million), African Development Bank (\$50 million including \$15 million from the OPEC Fund for International Development and US\$6,428,571 from the Nigerian Trust Fund) and the Global Environment Facility (\$5.5 million) are financing the first phase of the project.

The Malawi Government through the Ministry of Agriculture is implementing the SVTP in three sequential but partly overlapping phases.

Engineer Geoffrey Mamba, Principal Secretary-Irrigation in the Ministry of Agriculture said the country had wanted to implement the SVTP for a long time.

"We are proud today to see government implementing the project after many years of conceptualising it. This is a great achievement," Mamba said.

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Mamba said the government was placing emphasis on three things: creation of jobs, wealth and attaining food security. He said the SVTP could achieve all the three.

"What we have to do now is to ensure that the contractor and the officers are dedicated to the project," Mamba said.

Mamba appealed to farmers in the Shire Valley to own the project which he said would transform their lives.

"The farmers should own it in such a manner that they will have to take responsibility. It is a good infrastructure and will take a lot of money which is not free but a loan," Mamba said.

He said: "So if farmers are not keen to participate, all the effort will go down the drain."

Mamba, however, said a lot of community engagement has been done and government was aware that farmers were ready for the project.

"We need to continue engaging the farmers so that they understand the purpose of this project, that it is theirs and not for the government," he said.

Dr Khaila, as Coordinator of the SVTP, says these days he goes to Chikwawa with his head held high.

"Today, I don't hesitate to go to the Shire Valley because chiefs have seen that what we were promising them from 2014 to today was not mere talk but it is for real," Dr Khaila said.

"It is good that the project has started, otherwise, farmers would have lost hope on profitable, commercial farming."



A model of Matope Lake Control Barrage produced by Halcrow and Partners in 1954- Photo courtesy of National Archives, Zomba.

Visionary GBA, transformative - Malawi

By Mandy Pondani

The Greenbelt Authority (GBA) has outlined ambitious plans that will in the next two to three years turn Malawi into a food basket for the region and an export hub for agricultural commodities.

Speaking exclusively in an interview Chief Executive Officer (CEO) for the authority Eric Dudley Chidzungu said they have in place a five year strategic plan of 2022 to 2027 to champion sustainable large scale commercial irrigation agriculture which he said has potential to turn the country's economic fortunes.

He said the plan which takes a phased approach and alligns operations of the authority with the ten-year Implementation Plan (MIP1) of the Malawi 2063 will be launched by November 2022.

"We have a five-year strategic plan which takes a three phased approach. It runs from 2022 to 2027. During the first two years our focus is on completing all outstanding developments and positioning ourselves well in terms of governance

and operational structures. In this case we are looking at advancing mechanisation and agro-processing," Chidzungu said.

Among some of its major investments are the Nthola-Illola rice scheme in Karonga which has about 500 hectares under cultivation but has potential of well above 1000 hectares.

The scheme according to the authority has over 3000 jobs in the offing, courtesy of the manufacturing factory under construction, but over 1000 Malawians are already benefiting.

Another project worth touting is the Lumbadzi Greenbelt Greenhouse Limited (GGBL) which so far has 16 greenhouses where horticulture cooperatives are being nurtured and trained.

"Through the greenhouses initiative we are initiating the export drive for vegetables and fruits including tomatoes to South Africa. We are expanding to Tete in Mozambique and Chipata in Zambia where talks are at an advanced stage," Chidzungu explained.

He said the authority is committed to utilising all the potential irrigable land that government already declared to the state owned irrigation enterprise such as the Salima Sugar Investment and Nchalo project which started over six years ago.

Chidzungu expressed optimism that by the end of the second phase of implementation of the strategic plan the GBA which was a signature initiative for the late President Bingu Wa Mutharika will have started remitting dividends to the government.

He also disclosed that after fruitful talks a couple of local banks have expressed interest to invest in the various ventures of the authority which at the meantime is looking for a cash injection of about K100 billion to K150 billion.

At a time when Malawi is losing over K4 billion due to importation of bananas, the GBA is not just watching.

Through the the Public Sector Investment Program the authority has in the pipeline a banana project in Mulanje sitting on about 6000 hectares of

land.

The Mbalangwe Cannabis project in Mtakataka is also another potential substitute for imports as government eyes fully fledged manufacturing, further to bringing in the much needed forex.

According to Chidzungu aquaculture remains an area of potential that the country has not fully exploited.

It is in such vein that the authority after all upstream activities such as the feasibility studies are done will be going in aquaponics at Kachulu area in Salima and around lake Malombe in Mangochi where rice farming will also be done on about 100 hectares and 500 hectares of land respectively.

The GBA by practice is meant to implement government's highly popularised mega farms in creating jobs, wealth and income for Malawians.

CEO Chidzungu confirmed that discussions are still underway with Capitol Hill adding that government intends to place a number of irrigation schemes which have been lying idle for years under the care of

GBA.

"The issue is under preparation, formulation and discussion stage. There is currently a loose arrangement between us and government but clearly the GBA will be at the center of implementing the mega farms which will then they take off will transform Malawi's economic and agriculture landscape all together. The objective is to see irrigation schemes like Likangala in Zomba, Langa dam between Nkhata Bay and Nkhotakota being commercially productive," he said.

Meanwhile, the authority boasts of 20-25 applications from private firms that are interested in entering into Private Public Partnerships with the authority.

The GBA touts the good will from the Ministry of Finance, Justice and the policy direction that the Ministry of Agriculture provides.

The National Planning Commission and the Mwapata Institute; an independent agricultural policy think tank in Malawi, they say have also been instrumental to the vision.