

By **Gospel Mwalwanda**

Fish farming saves people from crocodile threat

LOOKING back, Margaret Sabe never thought there would ever be a solution to the crocodile attacks her community was experiencing.

"With no solution in sight, we were resigned to being attacked by crocodiles," Sabe said.

But when her community embarked on fish farming as an income generating activity, little did they know that they were also tackling the crocodile problem.

"It is amazing that today we rarely hear of crocodile attacks because of these fish ponds," said Sabe, a member of the Kadansana Fish Farm along the east bank of the Shire River in Nsanje District.

The fish farm in the area of Group Village Headman (GVH) Chipondeni, Traditional Authority Mlolo is a community initiative aimed at improving the well-being of its members' households.

Kadansana Fish Farm is one of several fisheries groups that people in Chikwawa and Nsanje districts have established to reduce their dependence on the Shire River as a source of fish and income.

The Shire River is Lake Malawi's only outlet and flows through the Elephant Marsh in Chikwawa and Nsanje as it heads southwards before joining the Zambezi River in Mozambique.

For years, the Shire River has been a source of livelihood for most of the inhabitants of the two districts.

However, overfishing and bad fishing practices in the river have led to a reduction of catches, prompting locals to turn to fish farming as an alternative source of fish and a way to make money.

But the people needed a push to bring their dream to fruition and got it from one of the country's biggest development projects ever—the Shire Valley Transformation Programme (SVTP).

The SVTP will abstract water from the Shire River at Kapichira in Chikwawa and convey it by gravity using canals to irrigable areas in Chikwawa and Nsanje.

About 43,370 hectares of land will be irrigated. The World Bank, African Development Bank (ADB), Global Environment Facility (GEF) and the Malawi Government are the financiers of the project which is to be implemented in three overlapping phases.

The SVTP comprises a component on conservation with funding from GEF, which is intended to lessen the impact on the environment at all stages of the SVTP's implementation.

GEF has contributed \$5.5 million to cater for wildlife



A CATCH—Fish harvest at Phala fish farm—Pictures by Gospel Mwalwanda.



MAGOMBO—There was need for support

issues and environmental conservation in Lengwe National Park, Majete and Mwabvi Wildlife Reserves, Elephant Marsh and Matandwe Forest Reserve.

The component is vital for the conservation of natural resources that are along the route of the canal which will cover more than 100 Km, according to Daulos Mauambeta, SVTP's Natural Resource Management Coordinator.

"We don't want siltation in the canal. If this will happen, the canal will not be effective," Mauambeta said.

And it is under the conservation component that Kadansana Fish Farm received assistance from SVTP to build five additional ponds to boost production of fish, the main source of animal protein in Malawi.

Four ponds were already constructed under the Shire River Basin Management Programme.

"We used to rely on the Shire River as our source of fish. We didn't know one could do fish farming as a business. We are wiser now," said Peter Muguduzeni, Secretary for Kadansana Fish Farm.

To derive maximum benefits from fish farming, the locals are practising integrated farming: they are growing rice and fish together in the same ponds that so far number nine. This is called rice-fish culture.

One fish harvest earned the farmers nearly half a million kwacha. The locals used part of the money to buy essential goods for their households.

The fisheries sector

contributes more than 70 per cent of the dietary animal protein intake of Malawians and 40 per cent of the total protein supply, according to Malawi's Annual Economic Report 2020.

The report by the Department of Economic Planning and Development says there are about 15,465 fish farmers in the country of whom 61.51 per cent are males, while 38.49 per cent are females.

Malawi has 10,007 fish ponds with a total pond area of 251.59 hectares. Per capita fish consumption is at 8.72kg per year, which is below 13-15kg recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO).

Laban Silli, District Fisheries Officer for Nsanje underscored the importance of having fish ponds in Nsanje and Chikwawa districts to ease pressure exerted on the Shire River due to overfishing.

"Despite the fact that there is the Shire River which is the source of fish for the locals, catches are dwindling due to overfishing resulting from over population," Silli told this writer.

He said it was the reason government was promoting aquaculture using pond-based fish farming in an effort to end hunger, reduce malnutrition and create jobs for the local communities.

The fishing industry is also a major source of employment, currently employing about 60,636 people. Additionally, it indirectly employs more than half a million people, and supports more than 1.6 million.

Another fish farm group that is also benefiting from the

presence of the 14-year SVTP is at Phala Irrigation Scheme in GVH Nantusi, T/A Makhwira in Chikwawa.

The group consists of 110 farmers who are engaged in different agricultural activities at the scheme and decided to integrate with fish farming.

The group started fish farming in October 2019. The farmers' appeals for assistance towards the construction of additional ponds initially received no response, until SVTP came along.

SVTP showed interest and provided training, fingerlings, feed and harvesting nets, among other items through the GEF component.

The fish farm recently had its first harvest.

GVH Nantusi, who also witnessed the harvest, said the harvest was the culmination of months of his subjects' hard work and determination to have fish on their doorstep.

"With these fish ponds, we have been empowered economically. Besides, fish is very good for our bodies. We need more of these ponds," GVH Nantusi said.

Annie Magombo, Chikwawa District Fisheries Officer, said there was great need to support fish farming upland to allow fish in the Shire River to breed. The district currently has 86 active fish ponds.

Magombo said communities in the district see the Shire River as their source of fish protein. But she noted that the fish in the river has been depleted in recent years due to increased human population.

"The support SVTP is

providing in the Elephant Marsh is timely and commendable. These ponds show that it is possible to conserve fishery resources," she said during the harvest day in Nantusi Village.

Chikwawa and Nsanje are two districts that for long have been infamous for incidents of crocodile attacks on people either fishing or bathing in the Shire river.

While some reports of the incidents raise eyebrows as they border on black magic, it is a fact that many people in the two districts, mostly fishermen, are killed by crocodiles each year.

Now people in the two districts say they have observed a reduction in the number of deaths from crocodile attacks. They are attributing the drop to the fish ponds.

Sabe said she lost her 32-year-old nephew in 2004 after he had gone fishing in the crocodile-infested Shire River.

She said there were times when a man would vanish and people thought he had sneaked off to South Africa to seek employment, only to discover that he was a victim of a crocodile attack.

"The same happened to my nephew. We mounted a search for him and after two days only found some parts of his body. It was then that it dawned on us that we had lost him for good," Sabe said.

"The ponds have provided a solution to the crocodile attacks," she said.