

By Gospel Mwalwanda

**T**HE presentation with the aid of slides about one of Malawi's biggest agricultural projects gripped everyone's attention in the room, including Vice-President Saulos Chilima.

Chilima was visibly so absorbed in the presentation that although the room was stuffy due to that afternoon's soaring temperature, he gave no hint he was bothered.

And at the end of the 45-minute briefing and after inspecting some construction works, the Vice-President expressed happiness about the progress the multibillion kwacha project had made.

"This is perhaps the best in class. As they said, it will be the biggest in sub-Saharan Africa," Chilima said.

The Vice-President was referring to the Shire Valley Transformation Programme (SVTP) which he went on to describe as a timely project carrying the aspirations of Malawians.

If there is a development project that is giving Malawi hope, it is SVTP being implemented in the Shire Valley districts of Chikwawa and Nsanje.

As rains have become erratic and less predictable in recent years leading to low agricultural productivity, Malawi has realised the folly of relying on rain-fed agriculture.

An estimated 85 percent of the country's population of 19 million-plus live in rural areas, with the majority engaged in rain-fed agriculture and raising livestock.

As rainfall has become erratic, the country has decided to utilise the huge water resource it is blessed with to ensure sustainable incomes and food security at individual, household and community levels.

SVTP in essence will use water from the Shire River to enable targeted households in the two districts to grow crops on a large scale on a commercial basis using irrigation.

The project will irrigate 43,370 hectares by abstracting water from the Shire River at Kapichira Dam in Chikwawa and convey it by gravity to the irrigable area in Chikwawa and Nsanje through canals.

The project will be implemented in three overlapping phases.

Phase one is currently underway and includes the construction of the intake at Kapichira Dam and the first six kilometres of the main canal.

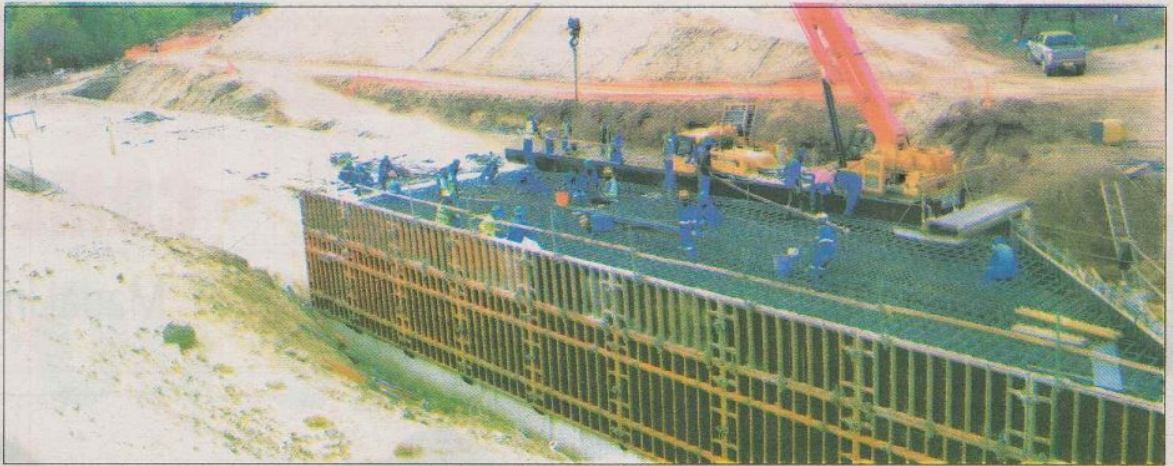
The main canal will cover a distance of slightly more than 100 kilometres from the intake to Bangula in Nsanje.

The World Bank (\$160 million), African Development Bank (\$50 million), Malawi Government (\$7.2 million) and Global Environment Facility (\$5.5 million) are funding the first phase.

When the project will be completed around 2031, about \$574 million will have been spent, making it one of the biggest development projects the country has undertaken since independence in 1964.

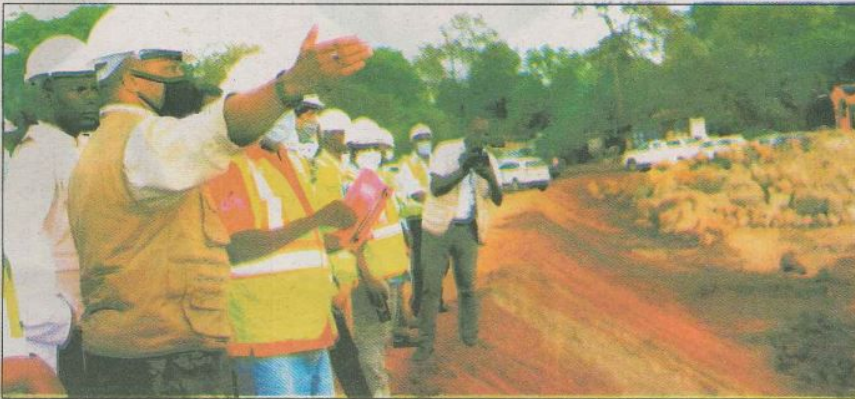
"This is considered to be the largest irrigation project in the SADC [Southern African Development Community] region," Stanley Khaila, SVTP Acting Coordinator, said when he briefed Chilima.

Khaila said the gross total area that would be irrigated would be 49,806 hectares, adding "this is a real investment the government is making to improve the lives of

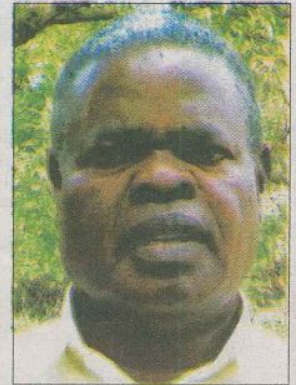


**IMPOSING**—The first six-kilometre stretch of the main canal under construction—Pictures by Gospel Mwalwanda

# Project carrying Malawi's hopes



**IMPRESSED**—Chilima (with stretched arm) emphasises a point as he inspects construction of SVTP's water intake at Kapichira Dam



**KHAILA**—This is the biggest irrigation project in sub-Saharan Africa

smallholder farmers".

SVTP will benefit smallholder farmers and other farmers within the project area.

Smallholder farmers who are the owners of the land will be the primary beneficiaries of irrigation water.

The project area has an estimated population of 223,550 in 48,000 households, according to the 2016 population census.

All people in the project area will receive the information needed to decide whether they want to take advantage of the opportunity to modernise their farms and enter into commercial farming.

Farmers who will be part of the irrigation scheme will have to organise themselves and be legally registered based on models of consolidated farms that are in the project area.

Farmers will also decide what crops to grow on their land but cash crops will have to be grown on a larger portion of the land.

The rationale behind apportioning more land for cash crops is to enable farmers to realise enough income so that they can pay for the management, operation and maintenance fees and other expenses.

Khaila in his briefing said there would be need to consolidate land to form large-scale farms of not less than 500 hectares if SVTP was

going to achieve its objectives.

On average, a Malawian smallholder farmer owns about 0.8 hectares.

"Now to irrigate a hectare and make it commercial is very difficult. For this project to be successful, there will be need to consolidate land to form large-scale farms," Khaila said.

"In our design, we are thinking of farms of not less 500 hectares that will produce large volumes of crops to give farmers bargaining power and better markets."

Khaila said there would be need for the formation of some kind of entity, preferably a cooperative that will allow farmers to pool their resources together and access financial markets.

"[This way] successful farmers will become more commercial, resulting in the reduction of poverty and make them be big players in the national economy," he said.

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

But Khaila told Chilima, who is also Minister of Economic Planning and Development and Public Sector Reforms, that forming an organisation without proper management would not be enough.

He said the large farms would require to be managed commercially.

"That's the only way you can

have commercial production which responds to international standards and production which is efficient and competitive on the world market," Khaila said.

Agriculture experts investigated a number of crops that could be grown under irrigation and selected the most viable ones with highest gross margins that are easy to grow, harvest, store and market.

Bananas, citrus, mangoes or pawpaw are examples of tropical fruits that could be grown.

There is also potential in the area to grow high-value vegetables such as baby corn.

Khaila said while the project belonged to Ministry of agriculture, its success was dependent on other stakeholders.

He singled out transport, electricity and water sectors as some of the key players.

Khaila said demand for water and electricity would be very high with the industries that would be expected to be set up once the scheme was operational.

"And if we are going to have produce that are competitive on the world market, we have to produce and transport them with efficient means of transport," he said.

Chilima in his response expressed happiness with what he had seen and urged SVTP to maintain the team spirit to ensure the success of the project which "Malawians have

been crying for" for a long time.

He told SVTP management that \$574 million dollars was not "small change" and that the country therefore expected them to deliver something that would reflect the huge investment.

Chilima concurred with Khaila on the need for other ministries to play their part.

He said energy, water and transport sectors must also work for the project to succeed.

"There have to be linkages between this ministry and other ministries to ensure that not only the project succeeds but the aspirations of Malawians are also met," he said, pledging to render support.

Chilima, who is known for his frankness and does not hesitate to criticise when he sees shoddy work, later spoke to reporters after inspecting construction of the intake and canal's first six kilometres.

He said SVTP was "a very big plus" not only for the Shire Valley but the country as a whole and that it was in line with its economic development efforts to create jobs, business and to be food-secure.

"You are not going to sink \$574 million and not reap anything. Then we have to go for a mental examination. Let us make it happen," Chilima said.