

BY GOSPEL MWALWANDA

Unlocking Shire Valley's economic opportunities

Senior Chief Ngabu nodded in approval as he watched heavy construction equipment at work.

If the chief had a tinge of doubt about the much-touted Shire Valley Transformation Programme (SVTP) becoming real, it vanished at the sight of construction vehicles working with practiced speed.

"This is pleasing," Senior Chief Ngabu of Chikwawa commented, beaming with satisfaction when he saw for himself that Malawi's biggest irrigation project was not hearsay.

The SVTP is one of the biggest development projects Malawi has implemented since independence in its fight against poverty that affects the majority of the country's 17 million plus population.

The Programme is expected to contribute to the country's socio-economic development through increased and sustained crop production, agro-processing and value chain improvement.

The SVTP is a 14-year Programme being implemented in Chikwawa and Nsanje districts, and it is intended to move people of the two districts from subsistence to commercial farming.

The multibillion-kwacha project is being implemented with funding from the Malawi Government, the World Bank, the African Development Bank (ADB) and the Global Environment Facility (GEF).

It is not surprising the nation's eyes are on the project, given the impact it will have on Malawi's economy which remains agro-based, accounting for more than 80 per cent of its export earnings.

A central feature about the SVTP is the gravity-fed canal that will abstract water from the intake at Kapichira Dam in Chikwawa to Bangula in Nsanje, covering slightly more than 120 Km, passing through some protected areas.

And to ensure that the project is implemented without hitches so that it is completed on or ahead of schedule, there is a horde of engineers overseeing the work almost on a daily basis.

"It's a massive Programme, considered the largest irrigation scheme in Southern Africa," engineer Geoffrey Mamba, Director of Irrigation Services in the Department of Irrigation, said in an interview.

Mamba said big projects such as the SVTP require close supervision so that by the end of the day, there would be quality work that would improve the livelihoods of farmers in the Shire Valley.

"We have put in place several layers of inspectors. We all frequently go to supervise so that at the end, farmers can help in the country's economic development through irrigation farming," he said.

Mamba expressed satisfaction



with progress made so far, praising both the project consultant and contractor for continuing with the work in the midst of the Covid pandemic.

"It's impressive that the consultant and contractor have been very resilient. They have managed to do what could not have been done under the present circumstances of Covid," he said.

Conduril Engenharia SA, the contractor constructing the intake and the first six kilometers of the main canal under Phase One, said Covid slowed down progress as it delayed the arrival of some equipment and personnel from abroad.

"But things have now normalized and we have all the conditions to enable us to do a good job," Aires Enosse, Conduril Engenharia SA Site Manager, said. "And we have all the equipment we need."

The SVTP is being implemented in three phases. When completed in 2031, it will be one of the biggest irrigation schemes in Southern Africa. About \$235 million (K175 billion) is to be invested in Phase One alone.

Under the Programme, 43,370 hectares of land in the two districts will be irrigated and benefit more than 223,000 people, according to the 2016 population census.

The SVTP therefore holds the key to ending food shortage that people in the two Shire Valley districts frequently experience, resulting from either flooding or drought.

Senior Chief Ngabu said the project would be a game-changer for the district as people had for a long time been complaining about floods and droughts, resulting in persistent food shortage.

"We will be relieved once the scheme is operational. The canal will enable us to utilize idle land and grow crops twice a year for

farmers with land within the irrigation block will be free to participate.

The majority of the people in Chikwawa and Nsanje secure an income and food for their families from cultivating crops and raising livestock. But both cultivation and livestock production depend on rain.

Both droughts and floods therefore have a significant impact on whether farmers can feed their families, pay for daily expenses, have a good house and secure the future of their children.

Sandram Maweru, Principal Secretary for Irrigation under the Ministry of Agriculture, said the SVTP would help to address problems smallholder farmers in the Shire Valley had been facing for years.

"It is a peculiar environment because they suffer from floods without necessarily getting adequate rains," Maweru said.

He said rains that fall in the highlands wreak havoc in the Shire Valley, flooding the valley and in the process hindering smallholder farmers from producing adequately through rain-fed farming.

"When the project is completed, our expectation is that farmers in the Shire Valley will produce at least twice a year, enabling them to have adequate food and access to disposable income," Maweru said.

The government wants Malawians to change their mindset and embrace commercial farming if the country is to be food-secure, import less and export more agricultural-related products.

But for commercial farming to be there, farmers will have to consolidate their land together to create large farms which will be managed professionally.

Farmers who will consolidate their land will have a share of the commercial farm corresponding to the area of their land. All

kilometres of the main canal from Kapichira to the edge of Lengwe National Park, covering 52 Km under phase one.

Phase two will cover the area from south of Lengwe National Park along the main road to Bangula. The canal will cover a total distance of about 120 Km.

The gravity-fed system was chosen for the scheme because it is cheaper than pumping water using electricity, according to Martin Chizalema, the project's irrigation engineer.

"The other way would be to pump water and to do this, you would need electricity to pump it to the people," Chizalema told reporters.

"But with this system because Kapichira is on higher ground than the areas to be irrigated, water will just be flowing naturally by gravity without using any power. So, the cost will be much lower."

The canal will have several structures along the way such as siphons built where a canal is crossing the road to Kapichira Hydro Power Station. In this way usage of the road will be uninterrupted because the road will be passing over the siphon (canal).

Another striking thing about the project is that issues of environment were considered. For instance, the design of the canal addresses the threat the tiger fish in the lower part of the Shire River would pose.

"For this purpose, we will construct a fish barrier structure to prevent the tiger fish from accessing the Shire River through the canal," Chizalema said. The Tiger Fish preys on other fish, using its razor-sharp teeth.

When a development project of the magnitude of the SVTP is being implemented, it is inevitable that some people get relocated to other areas where they start life anew after being compensated.

Some 1,305 people in the areas of four Traditional Authorities in Chikwawa have so far been compensated under the project's Resettlement Action Plan to the tune of K1.3 billion.

Dr. Stanley Chakhumbila Khaila, the Acting Coordinator for the SVTP, said compensation in the first phase went on well and that most beneficiaries used prudently the money they received.

"Some bought bicycle taxis, livestock and built decent houses, even though the real project's benefits have not yet started to manifest," Khaila said.

It will be sometime before the SVTP bears fruit, yet Senior Chief Ngabu is more than confident the project will live up to people's expectations once the canal is operational.

"The project gives us a lot of hope," the chief said when the project's stakeholders in Chikwawa visited the construction site to appreciate works. "It will unlock the valley's numerous economic opportunities."