

BY GOSPEL MWALWANDA

Villagers smile all the way to the bank

WHEN Samson Billa, 67, was told he had to relocate his home to another place to give way to an irrigation scheme, the news, not surprisingly, upset him.

Subsistence farmer Billa had deep misgivings about the project that would see his family having to resettle within his Supuni Village, Traditional Authority Katunga in Chikwawa once it got off the ground.

The thought of financial implications of building a new house filled him with apprehension because he was not certain he would be compensated adequately to start life anew.

But as the retired civil servant worried over his impending relocation, little did he know millions of kwacha lay in his way—thanks to a compensation fund under the same scheme he was despising.

“We initially spoke ill of the project, thinking it would only bring us misery. But it has proven us wrong as it has created opportunities for us to improve our livelihoods,” Billa said.

Billa is among 1,259 people from the areas of Traditional Authorities Maseya, Kasisi, Katunga, Ndakwera and Lundu in Chikwawa District who have been laughing all the way to the bank to collect money.

The joyous villagers are beneficiaries of a K1.3 billion compensation fund, which is part of a Resettlement Action Plan under the Shire Valley Transformation Programme (SVTP)-1.

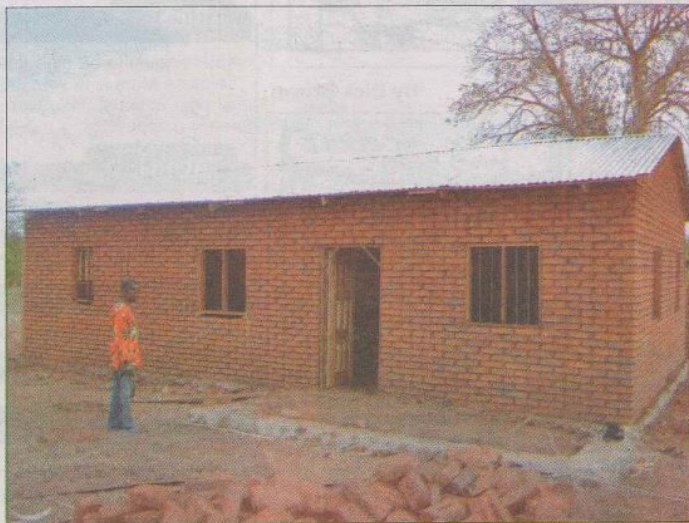
The SVTP is a 14-year programme being implemented in Chikwawa and Nsanje, and it is intended to move people of the two districts from subsistence to commercial farming.

The multibillion kwacha programme is being implemented with financial support from the Malawi Government and some of its development partners.

Institutions supporting the SVTP are the World Bank (\$160 million), African Development Fund (\$50 million), and the Global Environmental Facility (\$5.6 million). The Malawi Government has contributed \$7.2 million towards the Programme.

The Programme is being implemented in three phases. When completed in 2031, it will arguably be the biggest irrigation scheme in Southern Africa covering 43,370 hectares, with K175 billion invested in the first phase alone.

The SVTP is expected to contribute to national socio-economic development through increased and sustained crop production, productivity, agro-processing and value chain development.



BILLA—Admires his new home—Picture by Gospel Mwalwanda



BILLA—I hope the scheme will transform poor lives—Picture by Gospel Mwalwanda

The Programme will basically abstract water from the Shire River at Kapichira Dam and convey it by gravity to irrigable areas in Chikwawa and Nsanje districts, thus ensuring a consistent supply of water.

The construction of the scheme's canal meant that owners of houses and property that were in its path had to give way and resettle elsewhere.

Whenever a development project of the magnitude of the SVTP is being implemented, there is a fund set aside to compensate people who are to be displaced to enable them to build homes elsewhere.

Construction work of the canal to Lengwe National

Park that covers 52 Km in the first phase commenced in March 2020. It started only after people affected by the project had been appropriately compensated.

“The compensation is part of the Resettlement Action Plan to ensure that all project affected persons are not made destitute for losing their land,” said Arthur Kambombe, SVTP Social Safeguard Specialist.

Kambombe said the compensations were given to the people to enable them to replace their lost property to their original level, or “even to better levels”.

“The project identified 1,259 people to be compensated [under the first phase of the project] to the

tune of K1.3 billion. All have now been compensated,” he told this writer.

And the people have been compensated in accordance with the laws and policies of Malawi, the World Bank, and the African Development Fund.

Compensation figures were arrived at after valuing five broad types of losses: land, agriculture produce such as crops, plantation crops, trees (exotic and indigenous), flowers and physical assets such as buildings and other structures.

The SVTP also took into consideration access people had to forestry products, grazing areas and watering points, among other factors.

Many beneficiaries of the compensation have put their money to good use by building new houses and buying property such as livestock and motor cycles that are in vogue nowadays for generating income.

One such beneficiary is Billa who has relocated to another place in his village where he bought land on which he has built a new house for himself, and another two in his compound for his two married sons.

The father of 10, who also bought five cattle and a motorcycle after he got his money, said some people used to tell them to forget about being compensated.

“Honestly all of us who were affected by the project doubted the government would keep its word and compensate us. But it has fulfilled the promise and we are so happy,” Billa said.



PRISCA—Shows Kumbambe the motorcycle she and her husband bought with compensation money—Picture by Gospel Mwalwanda

Another beneficiary who has used prudently his compensation is TA Ndakwera. He decided to invest a large portion of it into poultry farming.

“I was satisfied with the sum I received and invested most of it in poultry business because I wanted to have a steady income generating activity and also I wanted to motivate my people to use the money wisely as this can change their lives for the better,” the youthful chief said in an interview at his headquarters.

Before the money was disbursed, the SVTP conducted financial trainings for the beneficiaries as a way of stopping them from spending the compensation extravagantly once they received it.

“The idea was to assist them to make plans before they received the money to ensure that the compensation was used for the intended purpose of replacing their lost property,” Kambombe said.

Despite the trainings, stories abound of some individuals who went berserk upon receiving their compensation, spending huge sums of money on beer and women with reckless abandon.

On hearing that the irrigation project had made some villagers in Chikwawa millionaires overnight, some sex workers in Blantyre headed for Chikwawa and reportedly camped in the areas of the five TAs.

The sex workers used their tricks to the maximum,

pouncing on the excited villagers, most of whom were simple farmers who in their lives had never handled large sums of money, let alone millions.

It is not surprising that such beneficiaries had nothing to show for the compensation they received and are now gnashing their teeth in anger for being easy prey to the sex workers who have since vanished.

While some beneficiaries are agonizing over their loss of compensation money due to their wayward behavior it is a different story for 19-year-old Prisca and her husband Paulo Junisi, 23.

The young couple from the village of Tome Paramount Chief Lunc heeded the advice they received during the financial training and today are proud owners of some property.

“We have built a new house and electrified with solar power. We have also bought a brand new motorcycle, an oxcart and three cattle,” Prisca said she posed for photos with SVTP official.

By the end of the SVTP total of about 43,370 hectares of land are expected to be under irrigation in the districts, benefiting more than 223,000 smallholder commercial farmers directly.

“I hope the program will transform our lives. It weren't for the scheme I would not have achieved this,” Billa said, pointing in the direction of the new houses he built from the compensation.