

BY GOSPEL MWALWANDA

The Shire Valley Development Programme (SVTP) may have incurred extra costs due to natural calamities, but its potential benefits outweigh the additional costs, says the African Development Bank (AfDB).

Wael Soliman, Water Engineer in the AfDB, said the SVTP was "very unlucky" with two tropical cyclones that had a negative impact on the project when the storms hit Malawi.

"We had some damages and are now rectifying this," Soliman told reporters in Chikwawa when he was in the country on a World Bank-AfDB joint mission the two financial institutions are supporting.

Cyclone Ana hit southern and central Malawi in January 2022. The subsequent flooding brought destruction and damage to buildings and other structures. And the SVTP was not spared.

The storm not only destroyed the foundation of the SVTP intake that was under construction at Kapichira, but it also damaged Kapichira Hydro Power Station, resulting in loss of 129.6 megawatts.

The intake has been redesigned and construction work will start soon. The hydro power station is also back on its feet after receiving financial support from the World Bank.

"It will cost us a little more, but all the cost is dwarfed by the potential benefits of the project," Soliman said in reference to the damaged intake and part of the first siphon following cyclone Ana.

The SVTP is a 14-year programme (2018-2031) that the Department of Irrigation in the Ministry of Agriculture is implementing with support from the World Bank and AfDB, among other funders.

The SVTP will irrigate 43,370 hectares of land by abstracting water from the Shire River at Kapichira and conveying it by gravity to the irrigable area in Chikwawa and Nsanje districts through canals.

The objective of the country's flagship irrigation project, arguably the biggest in southern Africa, is to increase agricultural productivity and commercialization for the targeted 48,400 households.

The SVTP is expected to benefit some 223,000 farmers from the two districts who will consolidate their parcels of land to form large farms that they will run as cooperatives, their preferred entity.

This is a departure from the way other irrigation schemes in Malawi operate where farmers cultivate individually, tilling land mostly using the hoe. In contrast, farms under SVTP will be mechanized.

And the cooperatives will only grow crops for which markets will have been identified. Factories will be built in the Shire Valley to add value to whatever a cooperative will produce to maximise profits.

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

The joint World Bank-AfDB mission also visited Phata Sugarcane Outgrowers Cooperative, on which the SVTP's cooperatives are modelled. It was briefed on the cooperative's background

Irrigation project's benefits override challenge of extra costs



HIGH-POWERED DELEGATION—AfDB officials



LEFELINE—The 1.18-Km Chikwawa-Bangula irrigation canal under construction



ON SITE APPRECIATION—Soliman (with arms folded) listens as SVTP Coordinator Stanley Khaila briefs the mission

and performance.

Soliman said the AfDB was a long term partner of the Malawi Government "when it comes to irrigation development" and that the SVTP "is a baby of the African Development Bank."

"We started studies in the 80s. Now we are partnering with the Government of Malawi, the World Bank, the OPEC Fund and other funders to bring this transformational project into reality," he said.

Soliman, who is originally from Egypt but based in Pretoria, South Africa, said the project gave him immense joy, expressing satisfaction with what he had seen during his visit.

"What I have seen in the field, the achievements so far, the dedication of the team from the Ministry of Agriculture and the PMT [Project Management Team] is up to world standard," he said.

"[Construction] works in the field are very good and progressing well, especially the main canal, one and two.

Quality of work is very good."

The SVTP is being implemented in three overlapping phases. It started with the construction of the intake at Kapichira and first six kilometres of the 118-km canal which will go up to Bangula in Nsanje.

Soliman said the AfDB was now looking at the second phase, and that they would be going to their board later this year to approve the second loan to finance the second phase.

The World Bank (\$160 million), the African Development Bank (\$50 million), the Malawi Government (\$7.2 million) and the Global Environment Facility (\$5.5 million) and the OPEC Fund for International Development are the funders for the SVTP's first phase.

It is worth pointing out that the SVTP had been on the drawing board for more than 80 years, and was known as the Shire Valley Project (SVP) when it was conceptualised in 1941.

The colonial government conceived

the SVP to control the flow of water from Lake Malawi and flooding in the Lower Shire. This led to the construction of the barrage at Liwonde.

The SVP also envisaged utilising the controlled flow of the Shire River to produce hydroelectricity and establishing an irrigation scheme in the Shire Valley.

Nkula, Tedzani and Kapichira hydro power stations are all products of the SVP, and so too the barrage-cum-bridge at Liwonde.

However, the irrigation project in the Shire Valley had to undergo several feasibility studies until April 2020 when construction started and was renamed the SVTP.

Soliman said the SVTP cuts across several sectors, and not just agricultural development. He said it cuts across social services, transportation and industrial sectors, among others.

He said the government had to come up with a structure that would lead the

developments.

"Very soon, we will start production. There will be an influx of people moving to work in that area and the impact on the demography of that region will be huge," Soliman said.

"Government has to anticipate that and plan for it. If you don't do this, it will become a crisis. If you plan for it, it becomes an opportunity."

Soliman said the SVTP offered farmers in the Shire Valley an opportunity to be commercial and improve the lives of their families as well as the economy of Malawi.

"Be patient, very soon you will have your land ready for farming. Please work hard, cooperate, and make sure you follow the cooperative's structure," he said.

"Let's make this project a success." In a separate interview during the visit by the World Bank-AfDB joint mission, SVTP Project Coordinator, Stanley Khaila, said the irrigation project

was very important to the country.

Khaila said it was pleasing to see the assistance and encouragement coming from government, the World Bank and AfDB in the face of some challenges they were facing.

He called on all stakeholders to work together to bring the project to fruition. He said people of the Shire Valley had waited since the 1940s for the project to materialise.

"All of us should cooperate and encourage each other so that farmers and the nation will rejoice once the canal is operational with water flowing," Khaila said.

He said the project would not only assist Chikwawa and Nsanje districts, but the entire country because many goods Malawi imports would be produced in the Shire Valley.

"It is a big project. Many people will be employed and the country's economy will improve. That is why we want it to be completed quickly," Khaila said.



BRIEFING SESSION—The World Bank-AfDB joint mission also visited Phata Sugarcane Outgrowers Cooperative in Chikwawa—Pictures by Gospel Mwalwanda