

'Thieving is a hindrance to development'

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The Shire Valley Transformation Programme (SVTP) has deployed theft of the project's construction materials, saying the malpractice is a hindrance to development.

The project's coordinator Stanley Khaila said theft of construction materials not only delays the completion of a project, but also increases its cost.

Khaila called on people of Chikwawa to own the SVTP and be vigilant against theft of construction materials.

He made the remarks in Chikwawa last Tuesday when he, on behalf of the SVTP, handed over equipment to Chikwawa Police Station for use by community policing forums (CPFs).

Chikwawa Police Station officer-in-Charge assistant commissioner of police Carolyne Jere received the donation before she and Khaila proceeded to Fombe Village to present it to CPFs.

The equipment is for CPFs that are in villages along the path of the main canal of the SVTP, Malawi's flagship irrigation project and reportedly the largest in southern Africa.

Total cost of the donation could not be ascertained, but it comprised 650 reflector vests, 120 torches and 600 whistles.

The donation was made against a backdrop of widespread incidents of loss of construction materials after the project started in April 2020, with locals initially turning a blind eye to the thefts.

It was not until Chikwawa Police, in collaboration with



SVTP main canal under construction in Chikwawa

the SVTP, conducted awareness campaigns that it dawned on communities that the project was intended to benefit them.

It was then that CPFs that were dormant and strengthened to deal with the thefts of construction materials and other security threats in their communities.

In his remarks at Chikwawa Police Station after he handed over the CPF equipment, Khaila condemned theft of construction materials and called for collaborative effort to eradicate it.

"The issue of theft scared us at first because when contractors lose

cement, diesel or any other construction material, it doesn't affect them because they recover the loss by merely increasing the cost of the project," Khaila said.

He added: "If we stop thieving, the construction of secondary canals, warehouses and other structures [at later stages of the project] will not face problems," he said.

Khaila said the SVTP was a big agricultural project that would benefit many farmers in the district to transition from stallholder to commercial and mechanised farming.

Khaila said a country with too much thieving could not attract investors, adding: "A district should not

be famed because of incidents of theft but should be known about development."

He said the SVTP, which was conceptualised in the early 1940s, was an ambitious government programme designed to benefit not only people of Chikwawa and Nsanje, but the entire country.

"[SVTP] farms will be large with a lot of machinery and there will therefore be need for security," he said.

Khaila commended Chikwawa Police for "accepting the programme", noting that had SVTP collaborated with police earlier, stealing of construction materials would not have happened.

"We are prepared to work with you and give you support," he assured Jere.

Khaila said it was pleasing that communities' perception of the project had since changed as they were now seeing it as their own and assisting in catching people stealing construction materials.

He said the fact that the CPFs had apprehended some people suspected to have been involved in the malpractice clearly demonstrated a change in how locals now viewed SVTP.

Between December 2023 and January 2024, there were 11 cases of theft of construction



Jere: You have always been there for us

materials. Six ended in conviction, while five are still under investigation,

according to Chikwawa Police. "If all of us had the



Khaila (R) confers with Jere during the function

spirit of considering development projects as our own and safeguarded them, our country would develop a lot," Khaila said.

Jere, speaking when she received the equipment and later at Fombe, Traditional Authority Kasisi where she in turn handed it over to CPFs, thanked SVTP for assisting the police in times of need.

She said the equipment would enable members of CPFs to be identified without question, especially at night as was happening before the arrival of the equipment.

"You have always been there for us when we need you. The police cannot carry out their job

of maintaining security in the district singlehanded. We are very grateful to SVTP," she said.

Jere said that was the reason they collaborate with locals "who know members of each household and tip us whenever they see suspicious things."

"We need the public's support to discharge our duties to everyone's satisfaction," she said. Jere said the construction of the SVTP's main canal was progressing well although in the early days, communities detached themselves from the project as they saw it as a government thing.

"But because of the awareness meetings we

conducted, communities now know how important the project is to them," Jere said, adding that for this reason they would not want anything to disrupt it.

And speaking to reporters after receiving the donation on behalf of CPFs, village head Kanthema 11 said people in Chikwawa now welcomed SVTP wholeheartedly.

"It is us who will lose if we just sit and watch construction materials either being vandalised or stolen. I call on all community leaders to join hands with police to bring the thefts to a halt," he said.

Chikhambi CPF chairperson Ibrahim

the responsibility of each one of us to get rid of the malpractice."

The SVTP is a 14-year programme (2018-2031) that the Department of Irrigation (DoI) in the Ministry of Agriculture is implementing with support from Malawi's development partners.

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

The objective of the multi-billion kwacha project is to increase agricultural productivity and commercialisation for the targeted 48 400 households.

Targeted farmers will combine their parcels of land to form large commercial farms between 600 hectares and 1 600 hectares each.

Farming will be done on a commercial basis using motorised machinery such as centre pivots, a method of irrigation, and tractors.

The farms will operate as cooperatives and agribusiness companies will be employed to manage them.

Fifteen cooperatives have so far been set up and legally registered in the first-phase of the project. It is anticipated that there will be 30 cooperatives altogether.

The consolidated pieces of land will be converted as shares. Land owners will receive dividends according to their land shares.

The Malawi Government, World Bank, African Development Bank and the OPEC Fund for International Development are currently financing SVTP.

Construction works are in progress for the 118-kilometre main canal from Kapichira to Bangula. ■

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