



USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

POUNDS OF PREVENTION

- A Disaster Risk Reduction Story -

“Pounds of Prevention” is a series of short articles that illustrate how disaster risk reduction works and why it is important. Take a behind-the-scenes look at aid work in action, long before the disaster occurs. How is that possible? Read on!

FOCUS: MALAWI

Droughts—extended periods of time with below-average rainfall—frequently descend on much of southern Africa. For the people of Malawi, unreliable rains and prolonged dry spells bring a great deal of hardship because the country’s economy is tightly linked to agricultural production.

Drought conditions often mean that farmers cannot harvest enough crops on their small plots to last through the year, and likewise may not have surplus to sell at market. With more people buying food and fewer crops available, prices go up. When coupled with economic influences like globally high fuel costs, this situation can push prices even higher and fewer people still can afford what they need at market. Ultimately, the number of people who depend on emergency food aid distributions until the next harvest may go up significantly.

An unusually long period marked by erratic rainfall in 2011 and 2012 has provoked just this scenario, particularly in the drought-prone, southern parts of Malawi. While these dry conditions were not preventable, their effects are being partly reduced by farmers who are managing their lands in new ways. Recognizing the need for action many years ago, USAID has been working with especially poor and vulnerable households to address and mitigate the effects of drought in Malawi since 2004.

In recent years, USAID and partners have focused on strengthening the linkages among livelihoods, agriculture, and nutrition. Through a multi-pronged approach, USAID’s programs provide people with increased capital through collective commodity sales, access to credit through village-run savings and loan organizations, and training to conserve water and soil. Other programs help farmers grow different, drought-tolerant crop varieties and construct small-scale irrigation systems.

One activity uses gravity-fed irrigation methods to catch and direct water to crops, while another harnesses untapped water resources like streams to water fields. Both projects extend the length of the growing season, increase crop yields and the number of harvests possible, and permit more varieties of crops to thrive. Another project works with farmers to transition to growing crops that need less water and can be sold commercially. These include tomatoes, onions, cabbages, chilies, mustard leaves, and the drought-resistant staple sorghum. Once established, farmers sell their surplus and use the earnings to buy other food items, make improvements to their farms, and begin raising small animals. Furthermore, villagers participate in all aspects of operating the irrigation systems, including planning, construction, and maintenance. These investments not only improve agricultural production and nutritional practices, they give people a renewed sense of purpose and hopefulness for the future.

USAID and partners have already helped several tens of thousands of people, but the results do not stop there. Neighboring communities are often inspired to adopt these practices when they see such positive changes. In time, USAID believes that the more consistent agricultural production can be for Malawians, the more resilient the country will be to future droughts and other climatic shocks.



A channel diverts water from a stream to irrigate farmers’ fields. Photo by Alexandra Riboul, USAID.



A farmer demonstrates how she diverts water from a main irrigation channel to a row of crops. Photo by Helen Ho, USAID.