



**Success Stories
from the WALA and
IMPACT programs
in southern Malawi**

Cultivating change

APRIL 2014



Credits

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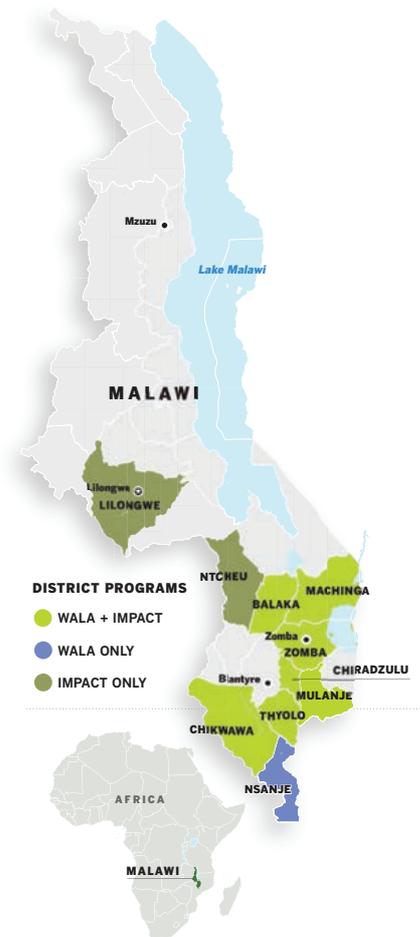
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PROGRAMS AT A GLANCE

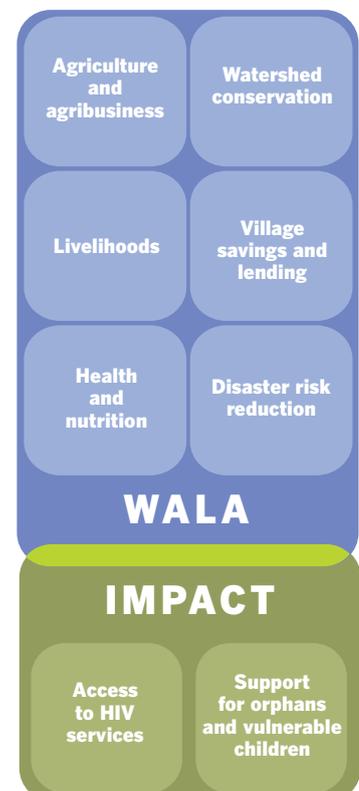
WALA

- July 2009 to June 2014
- US\$81 million from USAID and US\$886,000 from private cost-sharing donors
- 229,792 poor rural households participated in WALA activities, benefiting over 1 million people
- Activities focused on improving food security, incomes, health and nutrition
- Led by Catholic Relief Services (CRS) Malawi
- Implemented in eight districts in southern Malawi by seven implementing partners
- Supported by government agencies and community leaders
- Technical support provided by ACDI/VOCA and research institutions



IMPACT

- July 2010 to June 2014
- US\$28 million from USAID, alliance members and private cost-sharing donors
- Improved the wellbeing of almost 60,000 orphans and vulnerable children
- Enhanced access to treatment and care for 40,000 people living with HIV
- Led by CRS Malawi
- Implemented in nine districts by 12 implementing partners
- Other partners include government agencies, community leaders, private sector partners and the US Peace Corps



- particular young mothers, about health and nutrition
- increasing access to HIV services
 - strengthening social welfare systems that support orphans and other vulnerable children

Even more importantly, WALA and IMPACT gave people the tools they need to continue these activities well into the future. “The most valuable part of WALA has been the knowledge and skills imparted to me. Even if the program leaves, I can still use this knowledge,” says program participant Judith Dzinga. Many others agree, as shared in these stories of life-changing experiences.

The multiplier effect



When you're living on a dollar a day or less, one intervention or even two simply aren't enough to make a lasting impact. To escape chronic poverty, you need to be able to change your life in many ways that build on each other over time.

Take, for instance, Judith Dzinga, a 35-year-old single mother from Malikopo village.

"Before WALA, I was leading a very difficult life. I lost my mother when I was in 6th grade," Judith shares. "Then my brother, who was taking care of me, passed away when I was in secondary school."

Judith began to care for her brother's four children in addition

"It was a difficult time," Judith adds. "We were relying on the simplest of foods—very soft porridge—and were only eating one meal a day." She later had a second child of her own and also learned that she had HIV, adding to her long list of worries.

In August 2010, Judith attended a community meeting where she learned about the various WALA activities funded by USAID coming to her village. The one that interested her most was village savings and lending (VSL) groups, also called Savings and Internal Lending Communities (SILC). Instead of having to take out loans at high interest rates, community members could form a group to pool their savings in order to extend lower interest loans to each other. These loans allowed members to start small businesses to earn a quick profit.

"I was interested in VSL because everyone needs money," Judith explains with a smile.

The community selected Judith to receive WALA training to help villagers form VSLs in her area. For two years, she advised groups on VSL procedures in exchange for a small stipend. Then in August 2012, she was selected to be certified as an independent private service provider (PSP) for VSL activities. The goal was for Judith to now

"Now I have eight bags of maize, a mattress, a bowl and cooking utensils. In the past, around this time I wouldn't even have one basin of maize."

Judith Dzinga | VSL PSP network president for Chikwawa district and HIV support group leader

to her own child. "I couldn't stay in school but had to become a casual laborer, weeding and doing farm work in other people's fields," she says. "I was not a happy person as I lacked a lot of things, like food, soap, clothing and agricultural supplies."



JUDITH DZINGA visits with one of the VSL groups that she provides mentoring to as a private service provider.

start earning an income outside of the WALA program whenever she shared her VSL expertise.

“My life started to change, and my worries began to decrease,” Judith shares, who was elected by her peers as president for the VSL PSP network in Chikwawa district. “As soon as I started earning money, I built a bigger house. I also bought land where I now grow rice and maize [corn]. Now I have eight bags of maize, a mattress, a bowl and cooking utensils. In the past, around this time I wouldn’t even have one basin of maize.”

But earning a good income—65,000 kwacha, or \$150 a month, by supporting 65 VSL groups—wasn’t the only reason

Judith’s life changed. She also joined an IMPACT HIV support group, which she now leads. In the support group, she learned to not be ashamed of her HIV status. She also learned that she should treat the orphans she cared for just as she would her own children—and the program helped pay secondary school fees for the two oldest orphans.

“I was denying them food as punishment when they acted out,” she admits. “Through IMPACT I learned the rights of children and how to treat them well.”

“I feel it is important that all of these services are integrated. If they are separate, they would have little impact,” Judith adds.

“For example, the money I get from VSL, I invest in my field, and I use that harvest for food and to sell. And in the support group, we learn about nutrition, so I then grow some vegetables or buy additional nutritious foods. I’ve also opened savings accounts for my children at the local bank to make sure they have the money needed for school.”

Judith is no longer struggling but is a respected community leader. “I am a different person from before I joined the WALA program. I’m leading a happy life because I have enough food for me and my children,” she says. “And now casual laborers are working in my garden, and I pay them.”

“WALA is strongly focused on capacity building so **we are able to teach from within. WALA teaches community members to help others. Even if WALA leaves, the work can continue.”**

Davis Rice | Soleyani Village Head



Looking to the old to bring in the new

Traditional leaders play a key role in guiding and governing Malawian communities. A Traditional Authority in each region oversees a dozen or so Group Village Heads, who in turn oversee their Village Heads. Through this structure, communities address many of their problems and resolve any conflicts.

Knowing that strong community involvement was essential for long-term success, USAID-funded WALA and IMPACT first approached the traditional leaders to garner their support. Staff members then introduced program activities at village meetings, working with the leaders, government officials and community members to determine who would participate in each intervention, with a focus placed on assisting families most in need.

To encourage community members to adopt new behaviors and practices, traditional leaders served as role models. They and their spouses joined VSL groups, planted home gardens, participated in agribusiness, constructed toilets for their homes and were openly tested for HIV at community health days. They also advocated strongly for better treatment of orphans and reduced discrimination against people living with HIV.

“I met with my chiefs and told them that if someone is HIV positive to not isolate that person. If someone is affected by this disease, do not tease them. If someone is found doing that, we’ll punish them,” says Elliot Golden, the Traditional Authority for the Chamba region, who oversees



GROUP VILLAGE HEAD Frendson Peterson actively serves as a community role model for program activities.

22,500 people. As a result of by-laws developed by traditional leaders, someone who treats a person living with HIV poorly might be told to dig a latrine at a health center or sweep at the local court for a week.

“People used to think that people who were HIV positive should not associate with others. They wouldn’t eat together because they thought they were going to contract the virus,” adds Medson Wotchi, Group Village Head for the Machinjiri area. “But with the coming of WALA and IMPACT, this is no longer an issue. They gave people advice in numerous, frequent meetings, which changed people’s thinking. People are now able to join support groups and be open about their status.”

“We are not as poor”

Frendson Peterson is the Group Village Head for the Meja community of 1,750 people living in six villages. He shares the positive changes resulting from WALA and IMPACT activities in his area.

“WALA has assisted us so much. People have improved their hygiene, we no longer see malnourished children, and there is a change in discrimination and stigma for people living with HIV.

In my village, the health clinic is very far away. We had a problem with malnourished children, but because of WALA’s intervention on proper feeding of children, we no longer have that problem. When we see that a child is getting malnourished, we now give them local foods prepared in a more nutritious way, as trained by WALA.

Diarrhea has also reduced because of WALA initiatives, like improved latrines and hand-washing stations. [Almost] every household in the Meja area now has a latrine.

Under my leadership, I thought it wise to be a role model. I am a member of a VSL group. Previously we only had one group in Meja village. Now we have four and 18 in the wider Meja area. I also have a home garden where I grow cabbage, greens, mustard and okra. Community members come to get seedlings. I also now grow vegetables and sell them. During the growing season, I earned about \$3 a day.

Previously we lacked knowledge, but now in our area we are financially strong thanks to the interventions of WALA. We are not as poor. I thank you so much.”

GOVERNMENT PARTNERS

“We will still sustain the program activities when WALA stops.”

Helix Chamdambo | Mtowe health surveillance assistant



Lasting change

Just as community members need to feel ownership of program activities for sustainability, government involvement is also needed to ensure ongoing technical support.

“If you wait to involve the government until you’re phasing out, it doesn’t work so well,” explains Lucius Suwedi, an agriculture facilitator for WALA partner Africare. “They won’t understand the concept of the whole thing. It is better to involve the government from the start so the government will feel part and parcel of the implementation.”

WALA and IMPACT staff took this philosophy to heart, coordinating program planning and activities with key government ministries. Staff members also teamed up with government agriculture extension development officers and government health surveillance assistants each day in the field.

“Going to the community daily has increased my work

motivation. It encourages me to solve the problems that the community is facing,” says Helix Chamdambo, a health surveillance assistant for the Mtowe catchment area.

Before working with USAID-funded WALA, Chamdambo visited communities once or twice a month. When he began coordinating his work plans with WALA, he started visiting communities every day.

The time paid off. Malnutrition is down, children are weighing as expected at growth and monitoring sessions, and every household in the Mtowe area has a toilet. Agriculture officers in areas served by WALA are also seeing farmers getting higher yields on the same small pieces of land thanks to watershed conservation, conservation agriculture and irrigation schemes.

“We will still sustain the program activities when WALA stops,” Chamdambo says. “It will never end. The interventions are there.”

Saving lives with mobile phones

When a woman living with HIV becomes pregnant, she can greatly reduce the risk of transmission to her newborn child. Ensuring that expectant mothers follow the necessary prevention of mother-to-child transmission (PMTCT) steps can be challenging, however, especially in remote areas with few health centers.

To improve PMTCT adherence, the USAID-funded IMPACT program introduced a mobile phone application for use by government health surveillance assistants. HSAs work with mother-infant pairs—a pregnant mother and, upon birth, her infant. The mobile app walks the HSAs through a series of screens that make it easy to explain the preventive actions HIV-positive mothers need to take during pregnancy and after birth. Follow-up home visits collect client data and track PMTCT progress.

“This program has really reduced morbidity and mortality rates among women who are positive and their children,” says Rodgers Mittochi, senior HSA for the Machinjiri catchment area. “All these activities will continue even as WALA and IMPACT phase out.”





Since 2011, farmers trained in agribusiness by WALA have sold more than \$1 million in cash crops.

Farming as a business

Since 2010, WALA worked with its technical partner ACDI/VOCA to organize 25,292 farmers—60 percent female—into 253 marketing clusters for collective selling of cash crops. The WALA program also held marketing fairs to bring smallholder farmers and potential buyers together.

These efforts have resulted in the sales of more than \$1 million of pigeon peas, chilies, cassava, sesame and more. Buyers include smaller regional buyers, international buyers like the World Food Program, and large national buyers such as Ex Agris, Nali and Universal Farming and Milling Limited.

FOOD SECURITY

“We’re no longer talking about hunger in this home.”

John Chambo | conservation agriculture farmer

More food for families

Imagine living off your land. You have just one acre—or maybe two—to grow all of the food you and your family need to survive. If it rains at all the right times, you have good harvests. But if it doesn’t rain or rains too much, you struggle to feed your family, having no other source of income to buy food.

This is how the majority of rural Malawian families live. From harvest to harvest, with hunger pains increasing until their maize is finally ready to pick and eat.

The WALA program, funded by USAID, aimed to end this crushing cycle of poverty and hunger. By promoting soil and water conservation measures, teaching farmers new agriculture techniques and encouraging them to approach farming as a business, WALA empowered rural farming communities to grow more food and earn more money.





AGRIBUSINESS

Double the profits—twice!

Farmers in the Mitumbila-Ng’oma area never considered farming for money. Farming was simply a way to grow enough food to feed their families.

All this changed when the USAID-funded WALA program arrived in 2011 talking about farming as a business. WALA staff sat down with farmers and explained that they could sell certain crops like pigeon peas for a decent profit as long as both the quantity and quality were high.

Ninety-seven farmers were convinced. They organized themselves into five agribusiness clubs that now make up the Namajilinji agribusiness cluster. At WALA trainings, they learned how to use better agricultural

techniques like ridge realignment, manure usage and conservation agriculture to increase their yields.

Meanwhile, the cluster’s marketing committee began negotiating contracts with buyers to assure the farmers a good price and guaranteed market.

“We are able to negotiate a higher price because we bulk the commodity and due to the good quality and quantity of our pigeon peas,” explains club member E Vance Hamilton.

But none of the farmers could have predicted the success to come.

When they organized their cluster, pigeon peas were selling for about 50 Malawian kwacha—or 12 cents—per kilogram. When they



sold their pigeon peas collectively for the first time in 2012, they received almost 25 cents per kilogram. And in 2013, they doubled this amount again to close to 50 cents per kilogram.

“Our households have improved,” says club member Celina Samson. “I’m able to get food for my table, and we’re able to cover household basic needs. I can buy clothes, pay school fees for the children, and even buy some imported goods.”

“Our major issue here is food security, and we’ve managed to achieve it,” adds Mercy Lupiya, a club member, lead farmer and agribusiness community agent. “I want to thank USAID and WALA because the support they’ve given us will be with us forever, and our children will enjoy the fruits of this work.”

Leading the way

Mercy Lupiya is a driving force in the Mitumbila-Ng’oma area, serving as both a lead farmer and a volunteer agribusiness community agent to help other farmers increase their yields and crop sales.

“As a lead farmer, I teach new farming techniques that I learned from WALA to 25 farmers in my group. We’ve adopted conservation agriculture, and it’s very profitable. We demonstrated manure application, pit construction, mulching and how many seeds to plant in each pit. Since we started, most farmers have adopted the techniques, and all of the farmers are saying that their fields are doing well.

The farmer with the demonstration plot previously could only grow enough food to feed her family for just a few months of the year. After practicing conservation agriculture, she’s able to supply her household throughout the year.

I also provide advice and agribusiness training to farmers on how they can approach farming as a business. The field size we use is the same, but using the new techniques, we produce more and make a profit.

When I was selected as a lead farmer, my husband said I shouldn’t participate, saying ‘farming has been around forever so what was the point?’ I started to do some conservation agriculture in our fields after receiving training. That year, the rains weren’t good, but we still had a harvest. So now he supports and encourages me.

My household has really changed because I’m able to meet the needs of my children. Before joining WALA, I was struggling with life because finding money was a problem, as was getting farming supplies. After WALA, I’ve seen a great improvement. I’m able to get all of the farming supplies I need before the rains start. And I’m able to pay my children’s school fees and have enough food for my family year round.”



“Our major issue here is food security, and we’ve managed to achieve it.”

Mercy Lupiya | club member, lead farmer and agribusiness community agent



AGRIBUSINESS

An exceptional entrepreneur

At 68, lead farmer Simiche Steven continues to out-farm and inspire all those around her

Simiche Steven is singing as she shows off a training certificate recently presented to her by the government. She can't contain her joy. For the last four years, she's been involved in just about every WALA and government program offered in her area, and her success has been an inspiration to all around her.

"I've been recognized at the district level," 68-year-old Simiche says with an irrepressible grin. "I'm very happy, and some now even view me as well to do."

Simiche is doing very well. In December 2009, the USAID-funded WALA program trained her as a lead farmer to pilot and then demonstrate conservation agriculture techniques to other

farmers. She later joined a WALA agribusiness group and began to grow crops to sell at a profit.

In her very first year, Simiche earned a whopping \$240 growing chilies. She bought a goat, a treadle pump, a hose and some fertilizer with her earnings. She also hired day laborers to plant more maize and chili on additional family land. The next year, even with the poor rains of 2012, she earned \$210, which she increased to \$245 in 2013.

"My life has changed. I was thin, but I've put on weight. I have maize for home consumption and don't have to buy any extra or get any government assistance," Simiche says, adding that she now grows maize three times a year

using her treadle pump, as well as cabbage, onions and tomatoes in her home garden. “I have goats and chickens. I’ve expanded my maize plot to four acres and my chili plot to 1.5 acres, and I’ve bought fertilizer. Now I’m just waiting to see the profits from these investments.”

But Simiche is never just waiting around. She’s always busy with the next innovation.

Her latest endeavor is to sell sweet potato and cassava cuttings to other farmers from a seed nursery that she started with help from WALA and the government.

She is also a member of a VSL group and serves as treasurer for the village’s orphans and vulnerable children committee, which is supported by the IMPACT program. This work is important to her, as she and her husband look after three of their grandchildren and care for the daughter and son of her sister, who died in 2002. Simiche is making sure to pass her wisdom down to these children.

“I told [my niece Judith] that I’d give her some fertilizer if she cleared a patch of land. She now grows maize and cassava too,” Simiche says. Her niece also serves as a mentor at the IMPACT-supported drop-in center, which provides Saturday tutoring to village children, while Simiche serves as a committee member.

“The woman is a role model,” says Symon Maseko, deputy program manager and agribusiness coordinator for WALA partner Emmanuel International. “She leads in a community where men typically lead, bringing in new opportunities whenever they arise. She’s always the pilot. She will take up the challenge of any new WALA activity, and others are convinced when they see the benefits.”

“People follow what I do because I work well with people,” Simiche acknowledges. “Most of the people have started to realize that you can farm as a business.” Even more will learn to do the same as Simiche continues to share her knowledge and tap her entrepreneurial spirit.

“My life has changed. I’m very happy, and some now even view me as well to do.”

Simiche Steven | lead farmer and entrepreneur in Chilonga village



An easy way to increase yields

Just by digging pits for planting, using manure for fertilizer and laying down corn stalks for mulch, farmers are doubling and even tripling their yields of maize. These conservation agriculture techniques let crops grow better by conserving water and soil.

“I dig small pits for planting. Then when it rains, the pit fills with water that the plant can use,” explains 54-year-old Alfred Masaninga, a farmer supporting his wife and eight children in Palato village. “I’ve also been preparing and applying manure. Because of the manure application, my grain storage house is almost full. Before it was just half full because I was harvesting very little.”

Alfred especially appreciates how easy conservation agriculture practices are to apply because he occasionally has less stamina due to his HIV-positive status.

“Before, food shortages started in June or July and would last about five months. I was relying on day labor to earn some money but it was not enough,” Alfred says. “Now I’m getting enough food because of the high crop production. I plan to even sell some of my surplus maize and use that money to send my daughter to a training school.”

Profiting from conservation

By conserving 221 hectares of land, residents of the Makande watershed rejuvenated their water table and reduced soil erosion, resulting in significantly higher crop yields.

For crops to grow, they need plenty of water and soil filled with nutrients. In many poor areas though, struggling residents cut down trees to make charcoal to sell and cut grasses as well to sell for thatched roofs. Without any anchors, soil rushes down mountainsides with each rain, damaging fields and making it even more difficult to grow crops the next planting season.

“Before WALA, the major problem we faced

“The Makande river now has water flowing year-round. This will lead to an irrigation project.”

John Meleson | chairperson of the Makande watershed committee



was soil and water erosion. It was affecting our lives because we were getting very low yields,” explains Yasin Daudi, a farmer in Mbuyao village. “The major problem was low soil fertility.”

Although residents can readily identify problems, it’s difficult to entice them to put in the work and sacrifices needed to undertake demanding soil and conservation measures.

Community members need a vision of the long-term gains to agree to protect an area, particularly when they’ll no longer be able to earn small but precious amounts of money from its resources. But first, program staff needed to be convinced of the potential gains.

“CRS knew that soil and water conservation measures would make a huge impact on food security. We brought in two expert consultants from India to train WALA partner staff and help identify pilot sites,” says Juma Masumba, WALA technical quality coordinator for irrigation. “We also showed our partners videos of similar projects in India. When they saw the rejuvenation of plants and water in formerly degraded areas, they became conservation advocates.”

The next step was to convince community members that the sacrifices were worth the expected future benefits. In the hard-to-reach Chavala area, villagers weren’t used to receiving any assistance at all. But the persuasive arguments made by WALA staff made them decide to give it a go.

More than 500 vulnerable community members helped to build conservation structures to reduce soil and water erosion in return for food donated by the American people through USAID’s Office of Food for Peace. “They collected stones to create walls so during rains



THE WORK DONE by the Makande watershed committee benefits more than 5,000 area residents, including farmer Yasin Daudi and his wife, below.



the run off will be reduced. Where there were no stones, they dug trenches to absorb the water,” explains Paulo Raphael, Village Head of Chelaisi village. “We also established tree seedling nurseries and then planted the trees in the watershed area. With these structures, runoff has been reduced.”

“It took close to 18 months,” notes John Meleson, chairperson of the Makande watershed committee in Chavala. “Every beneficiary worked for 20 days for food and then contributed four additional days for free.”

These extensive efforts—conserving 221

hectares of land with more than 800 trenches and 3,800 check dams—paid off.

“The Makande river would flood and wash away the crops,” explains Vaison Sakaiko, Chavala Group Village Head. “Now because of these conservation structures, people can grow vegetables and not have them be washed away.”

“In the past, we were running short of food from August until March, the time of the next harvest,” farmer Yasin adds. “Now, we have higher yields. I am able to produce enough for food for the entire year. We also sell the surplus to earn some money. My children are growing faster, and I’m able to send all four of my children to school.”

The 5,000 residents living in the watershed area are also benefitting from the conservation efforts. The Makande river, which used to dry up between August and November, now has water year-round. A borehole that used to run dry also began producing water throughout the year.

“With water in the river year-round, we’re able to grow vegetables using river water, and we can now use the river for washing,” chairperson Meleson notes.

“We are sure that when WALA phases out people will continue to implement the interventions, and as leaders we’ll make sure that we encourage them to do so,” Group Village Head Sakaiko adds.

IRRIGATION

Improving on Mother Nature

If you can only grow food when it rains, you're in trouble. WALA-supported irrigation schemes offer relief by enabling farmers to water crops year-round. This also lets farmers earn an income by growing surplus food they can sell.

"It has helped me very much," says Margaret Mbewe, a member of the Tipindule irrigation scheme in Mbewa village. "When I harvest my crops, I can sell them to cover our basic needs. I'm able to buy clothes, school supplies and food for my family."

Initially, farmers didn't believe that water could be brought to fields planted so far from the river. A small group of visionaries partnered with WALA to build a dam, main canal and distribution boxes. They then started diverting water to their fields. Neighboring farmers were stunned when they saw the irrigation farmers harvesting vegetables in the dry season—and they quickly got on board.

The innovative Tipindule scheme lets farmers use land owned by others during the dry season. Due to the irrigation, scheme farmers can grow maize, vegetables and beans on assigned plots from July to September. They then prepare the fields as payment to the land owners, who plant their own maize for a rain-fed harvest.

Before the irrigation scheme was in place, members say they were growing only three months worth of food a year. During the other nine months, they needed to do day labor or harvest wood or grass to sell, which degraded the environment. Now more than half of the scheme committee members say they can cover their food needs year round.

"We depend on the river and if there are



"During the dry season, we were able to harvest maize and vegetables, and this surprised neighboring farmers."

Akimu Maula | WALA farmer
extension volunteer

no trees, we might lose water. So we do agroforestry and plant vetiver grass to conserve our soil," explains WALA farmer extension volunteer Akimu Maula. "That adds nutrients to the soil so we can grow what we want. These vegetables and other crops are also nutritious, which helps us to build our bodies."

The irrigation farmers are also involved in other WALA activities funded by USAID.

"We're integrated with eight VSL groups, 14 producer groups, agribusiness with marketing committees, and health and nutrition care groups," says committee chairperson E Vance Governor. "We started in 2010 with 43 farmers. Now there are 196 farmers." And thanks to their success, the scheme keeps growing.



TRAINED PARAVET Robson Miranzi treats villagers' livestock in exchange for a small service fee.

Paravet to the rescue

To help villagers care better for their livestock, WALA trained residents to provide basic veterinary services as animal health workers, known locally as paravets. These hardworking service providers help to ease the heavy loads of government extension workers who often can't cover all of the veterinary needs in a given region.

"I show villagers how to use the drugs, and if they don't understand, I do the treatment," says paravet Robson Miranzi from Lundu village. Robson buys livestock medications in town and then charges livestock owners small fees to treat

their animals. Services include deworming, deticking and vaccinations.

"We work hand in hand with the government staff—we were trained by WALA together," Robson adds. "Customers call me, and I also go around on a schedule. If I see a sick animal, I treat it. And when there's a large number of animals, like 20, I call the government staff to help."

Robson's fees are affordable—for example, a few cents for each chicken he inoculates against common fatal diseases. He is also a VSL private service provider who offers guidance to village savings and lending groups

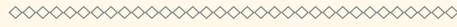
and is a volunteer agriculture community agent, sharing advice for free with fellow farmers. Robson's paravet and VSL PSP work enables him to earn up to \$60 a month—a significant sum in a region where many families survive on less than \$1 a day.

"Before, I had no goats. Now I have four goats, three sheep, and the two cattle I owned before. I can sell these animals if I'm ever strapped for cash to buy livestock drugs," Robson adds. "I opened a bank account and have seen an improvement in my family's health. It's really changing things in my household."

HEALTH

“We are promoting good health for the entire community, for each and every individual.”

Gertrude Patrick | care group volunteer in Mbonya village



Creating healthy communities

Good health is critical to overcoming poverty. Without it, people can't work in their fields to grow food for their families or undertake other income-generating activities. Villagers must also spend precious resources on transportation to health clinics and at times needed medicine.

To improve community health, the USAID-funded WALA and IMPACT programs introduced multiple initiatives:

- Better sanitation through construction of toilets, hand-washing stations and dish drying racks
- Bi-annual Community Complementary Feeding and Learning Sessions (CCFLS) that teach villagers how to prepare highly nutritious meals using locally available ingredients
- Home gardens to diversify diets and increase the amount of vegetables grown and consumed
- Care groups that bring mothers with children under 5 together to learn best practices for nutrition, sanitation and health, including proper infant feeding
- HIV testing, counseling and follow-up activities, with a focus on couples testing and regular retesting
- Use of expert clients—HIV-positive men and women stationed at health clinics—who counsel people newly diagnosed with HIV and follow up with others to better ensure adherence to treatment

Together, these activities have made a significant impact.

Bringing good health to a village near you

In rural Malawi, villages may be far from the nearest health center. To give residents access to key health services, WALA and IMPACT sponsored community health days.

“These community health days are really beneficial because we are targeting people in really hard-to-reach areas,” explains Rodgers Mittochi, senior health surveillance assistant for the Machinjiri catchment area. “We take services to their doorstep.”

At a community health day, residents can take part in variety of health services, including malnutrition screening for children under 5, growth monitoring, tuberculosis screening, blood pressure checks, malaria testing, and HIV testing and counseling. Over four years, more than 12,000 people received HIV testing at community health days, including more than 725 couples.

Cooking demonstrations also show villagers how to cook more nutritious meals using readily available local foods, while skits by staff and volunteers share important health and sanitation messages. Program staff also set up booths to promote WALA initiatives, such as VSL groups and conservation agriculture. “I feel like all these activities will continue even as the WALA and IMPACT programs phase out,” Mittochi adds.

Healthy babies, happy mothers

A group of mothers sits under a tree with their young children on their laps. The children's chubby cheeks and baby fat are clear evidence of their good health—and a recent change for the better thanks to the USAID-funded WALA and IMPACT programs.

“Malnutrition is down, because care group volunteers are there to teach the mothers. They work day and night teaching the community how to feed their children and prevent malaria,” says Helix Chamdambo, a government health surveillance assistant for the Mtowe catchment area.

Elizabeth Dan joined a care group because her one-year-old son wasn't growing even though she was getting supplemental food from the local health clinic.

“I had been getting soya and making porridge for five months, but there was no change,” shares the 25-year-old mother of three from Mponya village (see photo, p. 9). “Program volunteers visited me and showed me how to prepare nutritious local foods to feed my child. Within the very first week, I started to notice change. My child wasn't walking, and by the second week he was. The baby is now healthy and continues to gain weight.”

Mothers with children under 5 and people living with HIV are invited to attend bi-annual Community Complementary Feeding and Learning Sessions



“Previously we were depending on clinics for supplementary feeding when a child was malnourished, but now we can depend on local foods.”

Judith Nyson | care group volunteer

(CCFLS). Over the course of 12 days, they are taught to make highly nutritious meals using locally available ingredients, which they feed to their children on the spot. By the end of the sessions, many children have already gained weight, just like Elizabeth's son.

“I was taught to feed my baby all six food groups—beans, vegetables, fruits, carbohydrates, oil and meat. And I learned new recipes, like porridge mixed with

fish powder or peanuts, and to feed my baby four times a day,” Elizabeth adds. She also joined a VSL group, using loans to buy and sell fish to earn some money to buy more diverse foods to feed her baby. Elizabeth also started a home garden to grow vegetables and is now growing orange-fleshed sweet potatoes to sell cuttings.

WALA and IMPACT also train care group volunteers to share nutrition, health and sanitation messages with community members. Each volunteer is assigned 10 households, going door to door with educational flipcharts to promote healthy behaviors such as exclusive breastfeeding of infants up to six months and the use of bed nets to prevent malaria.

“During our home visits, we discuss issues with them and address any concerns,” adds care group volunteer Joyce Kachere in Mbonya village. Two key pieces of advice are for mothers to come home from their fields every two hours to breast feed and to bring husbands to the clinic for growth monitoring so they are also invested in improving the health of their children.

“Our role has assisted the entire village. Now on home visits, we see that every house has a toilet,” Joyce adds. “We do this work together with the government staff, the village head, and us. We'll continue because WALA has given us skills that we can continue to use.”

Expert advice from expert clients

A large concern in rural areas is ensuring that people living with HIV adhere to their antiretroviral regimens. If they don't, they risk building a resistance to the drugs, which can be fatal. To reduce default rates, USAID-funded IMPACT recruited HIV-positive role models to serve as "expert clients." These

"IMPACT through WALA is covering us like a heavy blanket so we should no longer feel the cold."

Sara Machemba | WALA-IMPACT participant and expert client

dedicated volunteers work in health clinics and conduct home visits to educate and counsel HIV clients. Sara Machemba, a 34-year old expert client covering 28 villages in the Machinjiri area, provides an overview of this very important role.

"In February 2012, I became an expert client. An expert client assists people to go for HIV testing. When they test positive, you have to reveal your status and give your testimony

to that person. And if there are some people not adhering to treatment, we follow up to see what is wrong. We don't want to lose these people because of defaulting. They should die of other causes, but not from HIV.

In this area, there are two expert clients. Every day, one of us is at the clinic and one is doing home visits. I go visit the people—at their homes, at schools, churches. We tell them to come to get tested. We see more than 300 people in a month, with me alone seeing 150 to 170 people each month. To date, I have helped 3,239 people.

If an HIV-positive woman happens to be pregnant, we give the mother advice on how she can take care of herself and [prevent transmission]. We follow up with them until the child is 2.

We also put more focus on families affected by HIV because sometimes it's only the woman who gets tested. We sit down with the family to discuss the importance of the whole family getting tested so the whole family can get help if positive, including the children.

I started on ARVs in 2008.

I was often falling sick prior to the medication. I couldn't participate in many activities. People were making bricks to sell, but I was very weak and often ill. After taking the medication, my health changed. Since 2009, I've never been admitted to the hospital. I only come to the hospital because it's where I work now.

Now people who test positive are not worried because we hold a lot of meetings. We share messages through drama. We hold discussions on how people can prolong their lives.

My life has really changed thanks to WALA and IMPACT activities. I've moved from somewhere very low to somewhere very high. For example, with VSL I can invest just a little and take a larger loan to use for my household needs. This lets me deal with my challenges at home using money I thought I could never find. I have a child in 8th grade in [the capital of] Lilongwe, and I'm able to pay for her school through agribusiness. I grow chilies, pigeon peas and peanuts. I also sell doughnuts sometimes when I get a loan.

My VSL group knows



COUNSELING from Sara Machemba, at right, saved the life of Elizabeth Kashoti, at left.

my status. When we are doing our VSL activities, we also use the meetings to share messages about HIV. There are 25 members, and they all have been tested and know their status.

I am also in a [mothers'] care group. When I joined the care group, I saved a lot of lives because I assisted people with how they should take care of themselves because I came out in the open. In the care group, we talk about the issues people living with HIV face and how

they are to eat. We're doing home gardens, which gives us access to nutritious vegetables.

Before, we literally had nothing. But now you can see houses with iron sheets for roofs, livestock, sewing machines, carpentry. That's why we say that IMPACT through WALA is covering us like a heavy blanket so we should no longer feel the cold. I can see that with the activities IMPACT brought, I've benefitted my community in many ways."

A new lease on life

Elizabeth Kashoti is a client of Sara Machemba's in Chibwana village.

"I was getting sick now and again. At first when I got sick, I didn't visit the health facility. Sara came to my home and gave me some counseling, and then I came for testing.

I did not accept the results at first. I thought they were lying to me. Sara used to visit me and tell me I should accept my status and start taking ARVs. She told me 'Do you see how I look? Even I have the same status.' So I accepted my status.

I noticed that I used to get sick now and again but after starting ARVs, my life went back to normal. Now I'm healthy and able to participate in development activities, including VSL, agriculture and being in an HIV support group.

Sara told me that I needed to be happy and socialize with other people. I should not isolate myself and should live positively. Now I'm free. I'm open [about my status] with everyone. We also found that my eldest child was positive. She's now on ARVs and is healthy and strong. Sara saved our lives."



"Expert clients are really helping us follow up on clients who have missed their clinic appointments, counseling defaulters to adhere to their drugs."

Rodgers Mittochi | senior health surveillance assistant for the Machinjiri catchment area



COMMITTEES that focus on orphans and vulnerable children help community members make sure that children at risk receive needed care and support.

CHILD PROTECTION

Standing guard

In poor communities, children often suffer the most, particularly if they have lost one or both parents. Orphans living with other family members may be mistreated or provided less food than the other children in a family. If they are supporting themselves, many must work as day laborers to survive, forcing them to drop out of school. The USAID-funded IMPACT program worked with community leaders and government officials to protect thousands of orphans and vulnerable children (OVC) from abuse and exploitation.

Program staff taught people about children's rights and helped communities to establish

or revitalize OVC committees. Family care volunteers also visited homes twice a year to assess child welfare, counsel caregivers and make any needed referrals to support services.

In addition, IMPACT found that many children were not progressing in school and that their parents and caregivers were not available or confident enough to help with homework. IMPACT established Educational Drop-in Centers where volunteer mentors now provide valuable tutoring while building each child's self-confidence as a learner. Through these efforts, the plight of children in need has improved.

A brighter future

Mercy Banda was a happy 14-year-old student in Kachikuni village in Balaka district. She enjoyed spending time with her classmates and had a dream of one day becoming a teacher.

Partway through the year, her parents took her out of school because they could no longer afford the school fees. Mercy was then forced to marry so her parents could collect her dowry. An IMPACT promoter in the area heard about Mercy's situation and shared it with a government child protection worker. Together, they approached the village chief in hopes of resolving a bad situation.

The chief summoned Mercy's parents to the traditional court. Mercy's mother explained that the family was so poor that they needed the dowry to survive. She also shared that her husband was abusive and she felt that Mercy might be safer and taken better care of through marriage.

The village chief decided that Mercy would leave the forced marriage and return home. He also spoke to Mercy's father about his responsibilities as a father and husband, warning him that any further abuse would be reported to the police and social welfare office. To cover the cost of Mercy's studies, her mother joined a VSL group and planted a home garden, from which she now sells any excess vegetables for cash.

Today, Mercy is back in school, and her dream to become a teacher is moving closer to reality.

"School is great because it will help me achieve a bright future," Mercy says. "I hope to always stay in school." Due to integrated services, WALA and IMPACT made an invaluable impact on her life.

PROGRAM PARTNERS

WALA

- ACDI-VOCA
- Africare
- Catholic Relief Services
- Diocese of Chikwawa
- Emmanuel International
- Project Concern International (PCI)
- Save the Children
- Total Land Care
- World Vision

IMPACT

- Africare
- Catholic Relief Services
- Dedza Catholic Health Commission
- Diocese of Chikwawa
- D-tree International
- Emmanuel International
- Lilongwe Catholic Health Commission
- National Association for People Living with HIV and AIDS in Malawi (NAPHAM)
- Opportunity Bank of Malawi
- Project Concern International (PCI)
- Save the Children
- World Vision
- Zomba Catholic Health Commission



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