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MALAWI

FIRST PERSON Training Film Helps Girl Finish School

A determined 16 year old starts farming cotton to pay for school



Photo: USAID/Victoria Nyirenda

Wema shows off her cotton in Kachenga, southern Malawi.

“If it weren’t for the income from cotton I wouldn’t be in school,” says Wema Sikisi, a high school student and cotton farmer who is getting more income out of her cotton farm thanks to USAID-sponsored training films.

Wema Sikisi is 16 years old, a 10th grade student, and a cotton farmer. She is the eldest of a family of six living with her mother in the town of Kachenga, in southern Malawi’s Balaka District. All of Wema’s siblings are in primary school, except the second eldest sister, who is already married. Wema began farming in 2005 because her mother could no longer cover her annual school fees of \$45.

In her first year growing cotton, she produced enough to pay fees for two-thirds of the school year. Her mother paid the rest. In 2006, she plans to earn enough to cover the full \$45. She is confident she will succeed because she is getting trained in best practices from two films on cotton farming. The films are being shown thanks to USAID, in collaboration with Malawi’s two major cotton ginning firms.

In November 2005, after viewing the film on cotton value-chain best practices, Wema went straight to the field to apply what she had learned on a new plot. Now, her two plots are a study in contrasts between traditional and modern cultivation. Wema’s two fields caught the eye of a ginning company agent, who selected her fields as demonstration plots to encourage other farmers to try the new techniques. Over 30 farmers have visited her plots to see for themselves the differences between the new and old methods.

Wema can recount the entire storyline from the two films: “In High Cotton” and “Agricultural Chemical Safety.” She identifies with the film’s characters, and promises, “I will pick four times a week this year like Saidi [in the film] as this will give me a greater yield.” She now recognizes the importance of sorting and grading her cotton, since this helps to get a good price. “I also learned that it is extremely important to wear protective clothing while spraying,” she adds. Wema expects this year’s quantity and quality to improve. She expects not only to pay for this year’s fees, but also for next year’s. She will be the first in her family to graduate from secondary school, but she is already planning to increase her plot size for next year. She now knows that she can make a good living from farming.