

## Mzimba Community of Malawi Transforms Schools

Matthews Beza of Mzimba District, Malawi was at risk of dropping out of school at age fourteen. A strong and determined child, he was orphaned and living with his grandfather, Lywell Beza, who needed him to herd cattle most of the day. Teachers report that students like Matthews are late for class or are too tired to concentrate because they are helping their family with chores.

Malawi is among the poorest African countries where the average income is \$160 a year. Among the 85% of Malawian families living in rural areas, children are often expected to help with harvests or care for younger siblings. But in Matthews' case, not only did he have a daily job, his grandfather discouraged his attending school. "There is nothing you are benefiting from school. Do something more responsible."

Like other orphans, Matthews was particularly vulnerable to lack of adult support for school. According to a 2002 United Nations report, at least 470,000 children in Malawi have already been orphaned because of HIV/AIDS deaths. A USAID-supported campaign came to the Mzimba District to mobilize parents and community leaders to improve their schools, and worked intensively with the school committee to generate solutions.



Photo: USAID/Malawi

Matthews reporting at a mock "school press conference."

USAID helps poor communities to recognize their resources and commit them to educating children. In 2001, USAID launched a project in Mzimba to call on local residents to identify the challenges of effective education in their area. Through USAID's work in the Mzimba district, the number of active school committees increased from a baseline of 24 to 98.

Teachers decided to enlist students to assist in this effort. The children planned and led a "School Press Conference" for the community about the importance of education and how parents can help. Matthews was one of the reporters.

Through the mock "press conferences", students practice communication skills and teach their peers about issues like HIV/AIDS. Sixteen students – eight boys and eight girls – participated in the school "press conference". The conference was attended by 900 pupils, 200 parents, and eight teachers.

***"Unlike other projects, it (the USAID project) has instilled in us a sense of ownership and responsibility for our school. We now realize that investing in education of our children is more valuable than gold."***

### ***- Village leader Amoni Mvula***

When Mr. Beza heard his grandson argue about the value of education, using excellent English, he was convinced. He took over the cattle herding to allow Matthews to attend school regularly and have time to study. Matthews now plans to become a veterinarian, reflecting both his ambitions and his grandfather's training.