

**BUREAU FOR DEMOCRACY, CONFLICT, AND HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE (DCHA)
OFFICE OF U.S. FOREIGN DISASTER ASSISTANCE (OFDA)**

**SUCCESS STORY
IRRIGATION TRANSFORMS A FAMILY'S LIFE IN MALAWI**

Every year during the dry season, Esther Manyesa would sit at home without much to do and unable to plant because, like most rural Malawians, she needed rain to grow food for her family. Her family's food availability for the entire year depended on one harvest grown during the October to April rainy season on a small plot, which made them unable to grow enough food to last the entire year. Successive years of drought and other production shocks in Malawi have reduced crop productivity and undermined livelihoods, leaving smallholder farmers like Esther and her family increasingly food insecure and vulnerable and making recovery more difficult. Divorced and without help from her ex-husband, Esther has the responsibility to provide for her six children and mother. To feed her family after their own food production ran out, Esther would do *ganyu* (casual labor), working in the fields of other farmers to earn 2 kg of maize meal per day. However, doing *ganyu* left her with little time to do her household chores and tend to her fields. In years of severe drought, Esther and her family were dependent on food aid distributions when their food stocks ran out.



Esther Manyesa and three of her children stand near her irrigated field, which was possible through the USAID/OFDA-funded RIPE program (Photo by Alexandra Riboul, USAID).

In 2006, Esther's life changed with the arrival of the USAID/OFDA-funded Rehabilitation through Irrigation and Production Extension (RIPE) program to her village of Zalengera I in Ntechu District, central Malawi. Implemented by a non-governmental organization consortium that includes Africare, CARE, Catholic Relief Services, Emmanuel International, Save the Children/US, and World Vision, the RIPE initiative promotes small-scale irrigation in six drought-prone and food insecure districts of Malawi in order to increase and support more consistent agricultural production for families, while strengthening their resilience to withstand droughts. The RIPE program is closely integrated with the Improving Livelihoods through Increased Food Security (I-LIFE) initiative, a development assistance program funded through USAID's Office of Food for Peace (USAID/FFP) since 2004. The I-LIFE initiative works with farmers to transition from subsistence to commercial agricultural production and to improve their nutritional and health practices. Through the program, farmers receive training in improved agricultural practices, such as conservation farming, crop diversification, and the establishment of soil and water conservation structures.

Through the RIPE initiative, USAID partner Africare introduced Esther and members of eight villages along the Mpmemba stream to irrigation. Although some community members were initially skeptical about the feasibility of using the stream to irrigate their fields, others, including Esther, expressed a keen interest in irrigation. With materials, training, and technical assistance provided by the RIPE and I-LIFE programs, members of the eight villages worked together to build the Mpmemba irrigation system. The villagers provided sand and rocks, built a reservoir to store water overnight, and dug out a feeder channel and irrigation canals that diverted water to the fields. Today, 150 farmers from eight villages and their families benefit from the Mpmemba irrigation system.

Esther can now irrigate crops during the dry season, allowing her to harvest up to three times a year. In 2007 and 2008, Esther grew a variety of crops under irrigation, including tomatoes, onions, cabbage, mustard leaves, and maize. After feeding her family, Esther sold the surplus vegetables and maize in the market, making in three months approximately 20,000 Kwacha, the equivalent of \$140, a significant improvement from the average annual household income of \$400 in Malawi. With the additional income, Esther purchased a bicycle, guinea fowls, goats, and chickens—none of which she had prior to the RIPE program and which allow her to earn additional income through the sale of eggs and meat. Esther is also proud to have a leadership role in the project as secretary of the Mpmemba Irrigation System Water Users Committee (WUC). Through the WUC, community members participate in all aspects of operating the irrigation system, including planning, construction, and maintenance.



A feeder channel built through the RIPE program diverts water from the Mpmemba stream and irrigates farmers' fields (Photo by Alexandra Riboul, USAID).

Esther describes the changes in her family's life, "Now, *ganyu* is history! Before, I was in dire poverty and stayed at home during the dry season. Now, we have food all-year round and do not depend on food aid. I can pay my children's school fees and will be able to send them to secondary school, and perhaps even university." When asked about the future, Esther is convinced that she will be at a better stage of her life in three years. She plans to start a small business to buy and sell beans and, in a few years, will go to Tanzania to buy new and used clothes for sale in her community. The future is indeed bright for Esther and her family.

Since the start of the program in March 2006, RIPE has had a significant impact on the lives of many smallholder farmers in the districts of Dedza, Lilongwe, Mangochi, Mchinji, Ntcheu, and Thyolo in central and southern Malawi. During the program's first phase, which lasted until September 2007, the program benefited 3,819 vulnerable subsistence farmers and their families, with an additional 12,713 benefiting indirectly. The program established 55 irrigation sites and resulted in a total of 270.6 hectares of irrigated land. The program's impact will expand through a second phase, which began in October 2007 and will benefit directly 1,000 farming households and their families through the establishment or expansion of 37 irrigation sites. A measure of the program's success has been the interest expressed by other communities in establishing small-scale irrigation systems. Through the promotion of irrigation and improved agricultural practices, the RIPE program has improved food

security for vulnerable smallholder farmers, while benefiting communities in the longer-term through increased productive capacity and strengthened resilience to future droughts and other climatic shocks.