

UNICEF HUMANITARIAN ACTION REPORT 2009

MALAWI

REACHING FOR THE SKIES: THE DREAMS OF A YOUNG MALAWIAN

Fifteen-year-old Ennifer Dzimuzani has big ambitions of becoming a medical doctor, the realization of a budding dream that she is nurturing deep in the dusty plains of Shire Valley, in southern Malawi.

If she achieves her ambitions, she will have surmounted incredible odds. No member of her family has gone beyond secondary school and her parents are peasant farmers earning an income barely enough to sustain her and her two siblings. Fortunately for Ennifer, school costs are minimal as the government abolished primary school fees in 1994. She however will need to raise money for her secondary education.

She comes from Chikwawa, a district that every year teeters from one humanitarian crisis to another. Located in the lower area of the flood- and drought-prone Shire Valley, it is one of the poorest districts in the country, with some of the highest rates of child wasting, an acute form of malnutrition characterized by thinness, and lowest school enrolment, attendance and completion rates.

Ennifer attends Mfera Primary School on the outskirts of the district. Heavy rains in January 2007 led to massive flooding in several parts of the district as the Mwanza, Madziabango and Mikalango rivers burst their banks. More than 20,000 households were affected and crops, livestock and property destroyed. Ennifer's school was not spared either. Built in 1925, long before the Malawian nation was born, its weather-battered classrooms barely withstood the flooding but the toilets, made of sticks and grass thatch, were simply washed away. Pupils had to relieve themselves in nearby bushes, posing great safety risks for girls.

Mfera is a mix of the old and the new. Next to the decrepit classrooms lie two gleaming blocks recently constructed by the UK Department for International Development (DfID) and UNICEF through the Schools for Africa Initiative.

"We used to get rained on in the old classrooms," says Ennifer. "We would sit on the wet floor, shivering from the cold. It was difficult to learn under such circumstances and some pupils stopped coming to school." The new classrooms are spacious, well ventilated, and stocked with desks. The floors are constructed with cement, the walls of sturdy brick and the roof made of iron sheeting, making them better able to withstand flooding the next time. These new blocks are a far cry from the mud-walled, thatched-roof structures that still accommodate some of the pupils. "Absenteeism has gone down," says headteacher Moses Mangwaya. "Even children who had left school, especially girls, have come back."

The flooding of 2006–2007 was followed by poor rains in the 2007–2008 planting season. Projections are that the nutrition situation in the district is likely to worsen during the peak hunger season between October 2008 and March 2009. The Malawi Vulnerability Assessment Committee predicts that 26,000 people in Chikwawa will be in need of food assistance, a situation likely to be compounded by the seasonal outbreaks of cholera, which tend to be highest in the district and in the neighbouring Nsanje District.

UNICEF provided water to Mfera and to other schools in the district and is constructing latrines. In the aftermath of the floods, 20 boreholes were drilled in Chikwawa, 30 others rehabilitated, and piped water systems in schools and villages upgraded. Chlorine sachets were distributed to schools and hygiene education campaigns stepped up in order to forestall cholera outbreaks. These interventions ensured that pupils like Ennifer were able to continue with their education uninterrupted. She looks forward to the primary school leaving examinations at the end of the year. If she does well, she will be selected to Form One at Chikwawa Secondary School, 10 kilometres from her village.

"I want to be a doctor because I admire Sister Thoko, a doctor at Mfera Hospital. I want to achieve what she has achieved."