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## Features

### Hunger Project declares Mpingo hunger-free zone

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Florence Chitsonga, 63, of Duncan village in area of chief Somba in Blantyre had no choice but to ask for her marriage to be dissolved.

Her husband would sell domestic items and use the money for beer.

Ironically, it was the woman who was running up and down to bring money to the house. So, the husband was defeating her efforts and the house remained poor.

When the court exterminated the marriage, little did she know that it was a blessing in disguise. She started rearing pigs under the auspices of The Hunger Project (THP). The husband is not there anymore to steal the pigs and sell them.

She now has the peace of mind. She is able to take proper stock of her business. She is able to buy whatever she likes with the assurance that there is nobody to steal from her.

Chitsonga, a mother of seven and grandmother of 10 says since she knew The Hunger Project in 2003, she has never thought of another husband.

Transformation of her life dates back to the year THP invaded Mpingo area with its programmes. These included food security and livestock production, micro finance, early and adult literacy education, Health and hygiene initiatives, HIV/Aids and gender and safe drinking water.

"We were told to form groups through which we got loans. I took K5,000 to be repaid in six months. Most of the members did not repay and we were later given choice to get livestock," says Chitsonga who is also village head woman Duncan.

Chitsonga chose to rear pigs while others chose goats. The project gave three pigs to all those that chose so. The project also gave her four bags of cement, pipes and plastic sheets for the construction of a pigsty. She also received vitamin, iron and de-wormer substances for the animals.

She employed some young men to construct a pigsty. She now has two pigsties.

In total her loan came to K49,313 which she has already finished paying back on June 25, 2007. The loan was supposed to be repaid in six months. She started paying back on April 28, 2006.

Fruits of the farming came her way in just under one year's time. After getting the pigs in 2005, they produced 13 piglets in the following year.

"And as I am talking to you now, I have 15 pigs and mind you I have sold 27 piglets since 2005," she says adding that she sold each piglet at K2500.

After repaying the loan, Chitsonga is all smiles because she does not owe anything to The Hunger Project. She has full control and ownership of the pigs.

But what animal husbandry practices does she follow to ensure that the animals keep healthy and that they produce more? She says she sweeps and mops the pigsties every morning and feeds them twice a day thus in the morning and afternoon.

Chitsonga also says she feeds the animals with madeya mixed with salt, grass and cabbage.

"On market days, I walk to Chadzunda market and buy cabbage for the pigs. I do not get tired because this is business," she says.

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Since every business pays if handled well, Chitsonga can ably point at a few things as some of the achievements from the farming. She says she has been paying school fees for his son Don who is at Mpemba Community Day Secondary. She also wants to fix a new roof and cement the floor of her house.

Apart from the fees and house maintenance, Chitsonga says she is able to buy clothes for her children, eat decent food and handle emergencies that require financial attention. She intends to empower all the children by giving each a piglet.

The pigs do not stop at providing her with money. They also produce manure for her. She has opened a vegetable garden that depends on manure from the pigs's dung. Not only does she apply the dung in the vegetable garden, she also sells it.

"I sell a bag of dung at K50.00. I have plenty of dung. I dug a pit into which the dung is stored," explains the jovial looking woman speaking with vigour.

It appears she does not encounter big problems with the farming. Sometimes buyers are not readily available and she travels to Blantyre city to sell her pigs.

She is such an enterprising woman. She does not stop at anything that comes her way. Pig farming aside, she took another loan from The Hunger Project. This was two bags of fertiliser of 50 kg each (Urea and 23-21-0+4s) and 10 kgs of maize seed.

She expects to get a yield of between 45 and 55 bags from the loan. Chitsonga says she decided to get the loan because she is not sure if she will benefit from government's fertiliser subsidy programme. After harvesting next year, she will repay the loan with six bags of maize to THP.

Chitsonga is not the only farmer that rears pigs under Mpingo epicenter of The Hunger Project. There are 10 farmers in 15 villages under the centre that rear pigs. But Chitsonga is the first to have finished repaying the pig loan.

Those that ridiculed Chitsonga and others that embarked on pig farming are now envious. As Mpingo epicentre project assistant Fostino Mvula puts it, there are over 100 people on the waiting list to get pig loans.

Mvula said since THP came to the area, hunger is no more an issue to the villagers. He says the project has completely conquered it. For example, he mentions that about 300 farmers in the epicentre got fertiliser loans in the 2006/07 year and that 1346 bags were collected from farmers and are stored in the food bank at the centre.

Due to lack of space in the food bank, Mvula says other 447 bags are kept in the hall. And yet another 300 bags have been lent to farmers who will have to repay a 60 kg bag instead of a 50 kg one.

"All this is done because our village partners harvested a lot of maize last season and sales have been low hence the big surplus. Hunger is no more here. Nobody lacks maize," says the youthful Mvula.

Hunger Project stores maize it collects from farmers in the form of repayment in food banks built at every epicentre in the districts it operates. The maize is later sold back to the villagers during famine.

As if the pigs and fertiliser loans are not enough, THP has also given out cash loans to 384 women and 108 men in Mpingo epicentre since 2003. The loans are given through groups.

Another group is benefiting from goat farming. Mvula says there are 97 people that received money from the project to buy three nanny goats. Each villager will have to repay K4,050 from K3000 he got for the goats. Repayment is done after a period of 12 months.

In this era when HIV/Aids have rocked the society and can defeat such good projects initiated in Mpingo, The Hunger Project distributes female condoms to the villagers in the area.

For the success of the female condom programme, 30 HIV/Aids animators were trained. Their role is to educate both men and women in the 15 villages on the importance of the female condom. Each village has two animators.

THP introduced adult literacy classes in the area because many villagers did not go to school and cannot manage farming properly.

THP has not left children out. It also opened a nursery school at the centre. The school takes 50 children. They pay K75.00 per month. The money is used at the school.

"We want to prepare the children for primary education," says Mvula.

What else can the 21,000 villagers of Mpingo epicentre need from The Hunger Project? As far as they are concerned, hunger is history.

Hunger Project country director Rowlands Kawotcha says his organisation is a branch of the Hunger Project Global and is operating in 158 villages in Malawi.

These include 31 and 30 villages in Jali and Nsondole epicentres in Zomba respectively, 25 villages in Neno under Ligowe epicentre, 15 villages in Mpingo sub epicentre in Blantyre, 33 villages in Ntcheu under Mwaiwagwa epicentre and 24 villages under Nchalo epicentre in Chikwawa.

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