



The young woman is tapping milk from the cooling tank at the Chitsanzo milk bulking group centre

Passing on the gift

by Fidelis Zvomuya

In Malawi, the world's fourth poorest country, a dairy cow has become a golden animal that has relieved many smallholder dairy farmers of poverty. Milk, in that country, is literally white gold.

Malawi has a total cattle herd of 800 000, of which only 20 000 are dairy cattle. This means that the country cannot produce enough milk and has to import almost 50% of its dairy products.

Land O'Lakes is very active in Malawi. Its country director, Gretchen Villegas, says that Land O'Lakes has helped a lot to bring success to the dairy industry in Malawi. In 1999 they implemented the Malawi Dairy Development Programme (MDDP) which is also funded by USAID. The programme helps to increase rural income by supporting the smallholder dairy farming sector.

According to Gretchen, they found that services such as artificial insemination (AI), dairy extension and animal health care were lacking within the smallholder sector. They therefore created the milk bulking groups (MBGs) where farmers share a common milk collection and cooling centre.

Land O'Lakes and the Malawi smallholder farmers have also set up a heifer loan scheme. The loan scheme is based on Heifer International's "passing on the gift" model.

A family who receives an animal from the scheme, must pass the first female offspring (the first heifer) to another family in need. The other family will do the same when their heifer is born. In this way all families eventually have a cow to milk and the scheme can keep on growing.

Land O'Lakes has taken the scheme a step further by making sure that farmers have markets for their milk. "A farmer can make a heifer loan in different ways and there is also an AI-fund so that farmers can have access to better genetics and AI services," says Gretchen.

Each person who takes part in the heifer loan scheme, signs a contract which states that the gift of the first-born heifer should be passed on. It also has a will in which is written the name of the person who will get the cow, should the owner die. Then the cow cannot land in the wrong hands and the project can go ahead.

Land O'Lakes has already given 426 high grade heifers to nine communities. These heifers have since grown and given birth to 238 female calves. Also, by 2006 more than 7 500 farmers were members of the bulk milking groups. Milk production has gone up in Malawi as a result of the scheme.

Brown Chiphazi Mwale, the chairman of Malawi's Central Region Milk Producers' Association, says the project has taught them to focus much on the fertility of their cows.

They also see their dairy cows as milk producers, and they can also have a calf every year at the lowest cost.

At the same time they have access to funding, they are receiving proper training and are learning to be good managers. Most of their members now have money to build houses, send their children to school, open bank accounts and have three meals a day. **UM**



Agness Chapusuka in front of the house that she built from money that she made from the sale of milk



Tefele Filitasi, a member of the Chitsanzo Milk Bulking Group, milking his cow