

Maggie Klein
Ponchatoula High School
Ponchatoula, LA
Malawi, Factor 16

Innovation to Reach and Sustain Equality: Malawi

There are twenty-two countries in the world that are considered to be developing. To be considered a 'developing country' there must be a low level of material development. Developing countries generally live in an atmosphere of poverty, few exports, hunger, and often life-threatening diseases. Individuals in developing nations are often unaware of where their next meal will come from and they are often faced with the reality that they may not receive one at all. Malawi is one of these countries. In this country, a child dies of hunger-related causes every three seconds (12). This statistic alone shows that this country is in need.

Malawi is a landlocked country in Africa with a population of 16,323,044 people. Since there is over sixteen million people living on an area of only 118,484 square kilometers, one can infer that this country is overpopulated. The terrain is composed mainly of rolling hills, some mountains, and narrow plateaus. Water occupies twenty percent of the country and eighty percent of the freshwater withdrawal is for agricultural purposes. The population is very diverse with more than nine different ethnic groups throughout the nation. Arable land and a large supply of water make agriculture practices seem in abundance; however, this is not the case. More than half of the nation currently lives in poverty and one in every 10 adults are infected with HIV/AIDS. The children of Malawi are born into a fight for survival and for every one thousand births; seventy-nine lose that fight before their first birthday (7). With that being said, I feel that it is my duty as a citizen of the world to take a hard look at what's happening outside of my home country and what I can do to help in a positive way (7). I believe we should consider the phrase, "acting beyond existing." I've had the privilege of riding in a car on paved roads my entire life, while only forty percent of Malawi has paved roads. The aforementioned statistics are the depressing reality the people of Malawi are currently facing. The reality shows an abundance of problems in dire need of solutions. My solution to one very important problem is simple. It is equality and innovation.

"From the eradication of foot binding to foot-pedaled water pumps, from the Pill, to property rights, innovation can transform women's lives"(2). Often times, innovation and gender equality are not used or even thought of in the same context. What I have previously failed to notice is that innovation has aided in the acceptance of women across generations. To be innovative is to secure a pathway for future generations. With concern to gender equality, innovation on every level is going to provide a pathway to empowerment. From giving women suffrage over ninety years ago in the U.S., to trying to secure property rights for women in third world countries today, innovation is a strong source for the growth of our world (2).

When referring to a country that has experienced hard times, provided aid to refugees, and has gained their independence, one would think that innovation would not be in short supply. Before gaining independence in 1964, Malawi was under British rule (5). At the turn of the century, the pressure for independence grew in the colony known then as, Nyasaland Protectorate. The people were ready to make many attempts to gain independence and began speaking out first through associations, and then through the Nyasaland African Congress (NAC). If the pressure for independence was not high enough, Nyasaland was joined together with Southern Rhodesia in 1953 to form the Republic of Nyasaland and Rhodesia. In 1961, the NAC, which later became the Malawi Congress Party (MCP), gained rule of Nyasaland. On July 6, 1964, Malawi became independent, and adopted their first constitution. In addition to the battle for independence, history also shows, Malawi is a nation that demonstrates selflessness. Malawi was one of the first countries to "grant asylum." The effect of this generosity caused Malawi to

become home to over one million refugees after famine and war struck the neighboring country, Mozambique (6).

Presently, Malawi is operating under a multiparty democracy. With a government system much like the one in the United States, one might expect conditions to be running smoothly; however, this is not the case. With the government successfully forming its “National Assembly,” a congressional house with 193 seats, the Senate would be expected to form as well. The government failing to develop their second congressional house, as their constitution calls for, shows that organized government is not a priority. In addition, failed attempts at elections in May 2005, and again in May 2010, demonstrates the system’s lack of enforcement and organization. Their education system also shows to be lacking in virtually every area. As of 2009, only eighty-seven percent of children were said to be receiving a primary education. While that number does not seem so alarming, the twenty-three percent receiving a secondary education raises questions. When a nation falls short in educating its’ youth, the nation then falls short in assuring the talent of its’ future generations. As a result of a poor government system, and an education system that needs to be strengthened, the health care system is likely to follow a similar route. With 90% of Malawi’s healthcare being provided by donations, their healthcare system is fragile. A prime example of this fragility was demonstrated in 2011 when Malawi’s main donor, the Department of International Development (DFID), made the decision not to renew their six-year spending commitment (1).

With limited government, healthcare, and education system; the average life of the Malawi people is also limited from housing to transportation. With just over 80% of the population living in rural areas, that the Malawian economy is made up of primarily agriculture related activities. The average family consists of four to five people with only 1 in every 10 families having electricity (7). Without reliable electricity, advances in modern technology are almost nonexistent. The average rural family participates in subsistence farming (8). As a result of only growing enough food to support themselves, most families fail to achieve enough income to even provide the basic necessities. Their main source of energy is carbohydrate- rich foods such as maize, rice, cassava, and potatoes (9). Women are often the main processors of the maize from harvesting it, bringing it to mills, to transferring it to sacks and cleaning it. For 80 percent of Malawians, “chimanga ndi moyo”, or “maize is life.” Their major source of protein is a popular type of fish called ‘chambo’. This is a bream-like fish that is known in America as tilapia (9). The average farm size ranges from .58 hectares to 1.76 hectares depending on the village (7). Although healthcare access in Malawi has drastically improved over the past eight years, they still have a significant journey ahead. With the implementation of a Sector Wide Approach program in Malawi, the less fortunate now receive free healthcare from the point of delivery. Since the Sector Wide Approach program was set up in 2004, the Essential Health Package they created has come to provide two thirds of the population in Malawi with healthcare. Also, with every 1 in 10 adults being infected with HIV/AIDS, it is vital that healthcare be provided in that area. With the Sector Wide Approach program, two-thirds of Malawians are now able to receive antiretroviral treatment for HIV and AIDS; which is an enormous leap from 3,000 in 2003 to 184,000 in 2009 (3).

As technology advances, society and social normality change with the times; or so one might believe. In Malawi, tradition is a large portion of how their country is run and operated. Tradition is very important to maintaining culture and to the individualism of a country; however, as times progress, certain traditions can become obsolete and in turn become socially incorrect. An example would be the women’s rights movement in America. Before the ratification of the 19th amendment in 1920, women in America could not exercise the right to vote. This is a prime example of how tradition then becomes obsolete. Malawi, however, is very different. Normally, in a government system, laws and rights established in the constitution are considered to be the “law of the land”. However, in Malawi’s constitution, women are granted basic rights, and instead of them being enforced, they are disregarded. This common practice is slowly becoming more unacceptable in Malawi as education progresses at an idle rate. It seems that, there

will soon be a breaking point and the suffrage of women will be enforced. It is my opinion that a point of action can be established with just a few adjustments on a village level (5).

Before addressing the adjustments, one must first be aware of the problems at hand. With the lack of rights women actually have in Malawi, agricultural productivity is virtually at a standstill. According to the African Studies Quarterly, 20 percent of households in Malawi are headed by women (8). This statistic would fail to bother the average person if women were receiving a quality education. Since this is not the case, I feel that it is more than unacceptable to have uneducated women determining the future of Malawi. In addition to the percentage of women that head households in Malawi, 85 percent of them are also primarily involved in subsistence agriculture (6). Since women head one in four households and are key players in agriculture without a great deal of education, it becomes apparent why food and income are limited. Without the implementation of gender equality, women cannot earn the wages and receive the opportunities they deserve. If a woman has to be the head of her household and the primary caregiver for her family, she should be able to own her own land. If a woman can virtually be the backbone of an entire country, she should have access to credit and loans. Presently, the result of women not having rights is a major factor in the lack of food the country currently faces. Although the situation's severity has lightened over the past decade, I feel that the progression of equality in Malawi can be greatly accelerated (7). The only proof that shows the lightening of the situation is the literacy rate over the past decade. With a slight increase in the number of women completing primary school, progress is creeping along.

With the improvement of gender equality in Malawi, I feel like women will become more involved in the improvement of their own farms and food production efforts in much more effective ways. One might ask, "How would giving women rights change the productivity of agriculture in a country?" The answer is so simple yet so impactful. By allowing women basic rights, such as access to opportunities and ways to further themselves, they will be receiving an advantage they have never had before. With these opportunities, women will then feel empowered and will gain a sense of pride and stability they truly deserve.

The next question to consider is how does one give women the right to operate and make profit? Well, first one must give women financial support. Since most women in Malawi are impoverished, microfinance loans would be an option to increase the amount of women who have the ability to start a business of their own. A microfinance loan is given to either a group of people, or a person interested in operating his/her own business. It is a small loan that is meant to aid in beginning the process to become sustainable. In Malawi, AfID (Accounting for International Need), has been established to aid in making microfinance loans available to citizens. The organization had given over 23,000 loans as of 2008 and predicted to have over 16,000 clients by the end of the year. The loans they give have groups of recipients from 15 to 18 people. With the loans, the groups of people are able to establish a system of work that they can use to make a profit and eventually pay back their loan once their business has become sustainable. The system AfID has established is making remarkable progress, however; the company needs to expand and get to a point where their capacity can help a greater population of people (10). To expand micro financing in Malawi, more loan stations would need to become available. Also, more people would need to be employed to manage these stations.

With the expansion of microfinance loans in Malawi, guidelines need to be established so that a group of women can have a loan and not have to worry about their system getting demolished. Farm tenure systems could aid in establishing those guidelines. In Malawi, the government controls most of the land. Private property is not widespread and Malawians are consequently living on land they do not own. If land tenure systems were established, assigning rights to certain groups to have pieces of land, I feel like the idea of owning your own property would spread quickly. A land tenure system could easily be set up on a local level with rights written out so that everyone could operate and work efficiently. Setting up these systems would require an amount of cooperation and trust from the people and the government.

Since most of the land in Malawi is customary land, land that is possessed by traditional jurisdiction, there needs to be government established tenure that allows for the land to be sold (4). Under customary law, a family is allowed to divide the land between members, but the members are not allowed to sell the land they have been given. To me, customary law is a tradition that is long past outdated. It would be in Malawi's best interest to move into systems that make a more economic use of the land. In addition to customary land, Malawi has three other options for their use of land. Public land, Freehold land, and Leasehold land are the categories that have been set. Public land is for parks, and other places that are run by the government. Freehold land is complete ownership of the land with rights to do with it as you please without consent of the government. Leasehold land is land that an individual has the right to use for an extended period of time under contract (11). I believe that if Malawi progressed into having less and less customary land, and started to use a larger amount of their land as public, freehold, and leasehold land; their people would begin to have a greater ability to build personal success. For this to become reality, enforcement and establishment are needed. A group is needed to establish these laws and a force is needed to enforce them until they become common practice. In order to establish what's needed, the government will have to intensify and become more reliable for their people without corruption.

The women of Malawi need to be the instrumental force behind the expansion of their rights. In order for any change to occur in a society, a group has to stand up for what they believe in. Although I am against violent protest, I believe that the peaceful action of women will demonstrate a force for equality. The women of Malawi can start their movement by speaking out and by attempting to do what they have never done. Women of this country should learn their rights and begin practicing them to the full extent of the law. They can work with organizations already in place in addition to updated land tenures and micro financing. With the aforementioned ideas being mentioned, before women can fight for their rights they must have the proper education to do so. The current problem originates from a lack of education in women. With an improvement in literacy women will be ready to take on the fight for their rights. In addition, they will be more equipped to convince their current governmental powers that the enforcement of their equality is a priority. It would not be as effective for the women of Malawi to use foreign power as leverage to achieving their rights. The use of foreign power could heighten the chance of violent behavior. If the women of Malawi utilized any foreign power to accomplish equality the power would have to seem weak and/or unimportant.

By establishing and enforcing these basic ideas, the current problems of land security for women and the ability of women to work efficiently are going to progress at a steady rate. If executed appropriately, the effect of revised land systems and microfinance loans will lead to a higher functioning system and a greater enforcement for women's growth. In addition to observing the problems at hand, one must then think about the future. With these systems, progression will happen, and to help the agriculture sector with becoming successful and sustainable we must support the women in their agricultural programs. I propose that an agricultural internship program will ensure that support and help bring in materials and knowledge that will cause the progression to continue.

My proposal continues with setting up a nonprofit organization composed of a board of directors, twenty-eight agriculture agents (one for each region of the country), and a supply manager for each agent. The board of directors would come from qualified representatives from within each region with their primary job being to assess needs and track progress within each region. They would execute this by conducting surveys and performance evaluations every six months. The surveys and evaluations will observe the current system and point out what aspects are successful, and what aspects need revision. The twenty-eight agriculture agents would be on a team with their supply managers to reach and have an impact directly with the local farmers (including the women who have come together to create or improve their own farming efforts). Both agriculture agents and their supply managers would travel to their assigned district once every month for a five day period of work. Primary focus would be to impact large amounts of people and the way they live and farm. To accomplish this, the teams would hold workshops in

villages at a central location. The workshops would teach agriculture practices, proper nutrition, and marketing tips for families by creating a test plot and market at the central location in each district. This test plot would be the site for agricultural training for the farmers. Agents would also visit individual farms and work with the farmers on an as needed basis. The supply managers will also assess the needs and provide seeds, fertilizers and supplemental items as needed by the farmers.

With a system like the one discussed above, the women of Malawi would become more empowered to build a future for themselves and their families through agriculture. They would have the opportunity to provide for their children, keep themselves healthy, and eventually make a positive change in their country. Having workshops that educate women on the importance of healthy lifestyles will empower them with knowledge. The result of a person gaining knowledge is further curiosity. As the women of Malawi become more aware of their own self-worth, they will then be more empowered to take that new found self-esteem further. In addition, having agricultural agents addressing crop yields and farming practices, the production of food will rise in Malawi. With agents helping the farmers produce more food while teaching nutrition, the people will become healthier and stronger. The result will be a country that is truly developing, and a country that will eventually become developed with a population of women that are empowered to make their country great.

To begin operation of my non-profit, I would seek out a foundation grant to get infrastructure and start-up supplies. After reaching that point, I would seek out donations from celebrities and corporations to ensure the work of my organization for five years. With that being said, I realize and take into consideration that an organization must become sustainable. Once facilities are built and a clear work force is established, I would partner with the University of Malawi. Out of the four universities in the country, the University of Malawi is the largest and has the most diverse selection of majors. With the help of the university, my program will become sustainable through the Malawi people within a ten-year period. I would start by recruiting interns to complete “semesters of service” with the teams of agricultural agents and managers. There would be one intern per team that would eventually gain enough experience to take over. The result will eventually be a sustainable program that is free of foreign involvement.

My sustainable non-profit proposal would allow the “African Protocol for the Rights of Women” to become more common practice. According to the program, “Equality Now”, the protocol will enforce women’s reproductive rights and it will outlaw female genital mutilation (13). The organization, “Equality Now” is making efforts around the entire African continent for women’s rights. I believe that this organization possesses a great groundwork to establishing equality. If their protocol is ratified, the non-profit I suggested will provide an action to a policy. The protocol will give women a force to stand on in their fight for equality. In addition to “Equality Now”, there are also other organizations that are presently working for gender equality in Malawi. The Centre for Community Organisation came up with an innovative way to train women for more efficient electricity use.

In partnership with the Malawian Government, the CCODE initiated a project that trains women to equip their homes with solar lighting systems. “CCODE selected seven semi-literate women from Chimonjo and Chitala villages in Salima district; Kaphuka village in Dedza district; and Makunganya village in Zomba district, and sent them to Barefoot College in India, where they were trained as ‘solar engineers’ for six months,” reports Clement Nyirenda. These women returned home with the ability to install and maintain solar lighting systems, which significantly improved the quality of life in their villages. The women have become leaders in their communities and are using their skills to empower their families and friends (14).

With the two previous organizations mentioned, my non-profit proposal is sure to fit into what is presently being done in Malawi to secure rights for women. My belief is that the organization I proposed will bring further and more sustainable effort to an important aspect of life in the Third World.

To me, Malawi is a country that shows potential through their fight for survival. Malawi is a country that deserves a chance to change. Women in Malawi deserve the opportunity to make a better life for themselves without discrimination. With the implementation of microfinance loans, proper tenure systems, and a system designed to help one family at a time, women would receive the right to change, and the right to live freely without worry. With tenure systems and microfinance loans becoming available to women, the current population will begin to see a shift in their social normality. A shift that is positive and impactful on a long-term level. With an internship system designed to encourage Malawian college students to help on so many levels, the country as a whole will begin to feel pride, gain personal financial stability and will physically become healthier. In my opinion, if a person is provided with the ability to positively change their situation, they will then become empowered to seek more positive change in every aspect of life. The people and the women of Malawi need empowerment to change the course of history for themselves. It is time that we stop and take a look at the problems the world is facing. It is time that we take a stand and show the people of Malawi that we care and that they are not alone. It is time we provide a “hand up, not a hand out” (9). Only then will we truly see the world become a better place.

Works Cited

- 1 "Effects of DFID Aid Withdrawal." *Kaiser Global Health*. Kaiser Family Foundation, 6 June 2011. Web. 3 July 2012.
- 2 Malhotra, Anju, Jennifer Schulte, Payal Patel, and Patti Petesch. *Innovation for Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality*. N.p.: International Center for Research, 2009. Print.
- 3 "Malawi - Making Strides in Essential Healthcare." *ReliefWeb*. Department for International Development, 15 Mar. 2010. Web. 26 July 2012.
- 4 Ngozo, Claire. "MALAWI: Patrilineal Inheritance Prevents Women's Access to Land." *IPS News*. IPS-Inter Press Service, 9 Mar. 2010. Web. 26 July 2012.
- 5 "Background Note: Malawi." *U.S. Department of State*. U.S. Department of State, 4 May 2012. Web. 26 July 2012.
- 6 "Migration - Mozambique." *Encyclopedia of the Nations*. Advameg, Inc., 2012. Web. 10 July 2012.
- 7 "Malawi: Country Brief." *World Bank*. World Bank Group, Apr. 2012. Web. 8 July 2012.
- 8 Gilbert, Robert A., Webster D. Sakala and Todd D. Benson. "Gender Analysis of a Nationwide Cropping System Trial Survey in Malawi." *African Studies Quarterly* 6, no.1.
- 9 "Secondary School Education." *RIPPLE Africa*. RIPPLE Africa, n.d. Web. 3 July 2012.
- 10 "MicroLoan Foundation Malawi." *Accounting for International Development*. A F I D, n.d. Web. 26 July 2012.
- 11 "Local Government - Malawi." *Encyclopedia of Nations*. Advameg, Inc., 2012. Web. 3 June 2012.
- 12 "Frequently Asked Questions." *Kids Against Hunger*. Kids Against Hunger of Cedar Rapids, 2011. Web. 20 July 2012.
- 13 Agengo, Caroline. "Countries Make Headway as African Union Marks Second Anniversary of African Protocol on the Rights of Women." *Equality Now*. N.p., 21 Nov. 2007. Web. 8 Sept. 2012.
- 14 Langeveldt, Veleska. "Gender Equality in Malawi: The Way Forward." *Consultancy Africa Intelligence*. Consultancy Africa Intelligence, 16 Mar. 2011. Web. 8 Sept. 2012.

