

# Country profile: Malawi



**HDI ranking:** ranked 163 out of 173 countries

*The UNDP Human Development Index (HDI) measures a country's achievements in terms of life expectancy, educational attainment and adjusted real income.*

## Country background

After 30 years of repressive one-party rule under President Kamuzu Banda, popular pressure made Malawi a multi-party democracy in 1994. The transition was smooth, but the 1999 elections, which returned Bakili Muluzi as president, remain contested by the opposition and genuine democratic processes have not yet fully taken root. Moreover, the three main political parties each draw support from different regions. This does little to enhance democratic progress.

Malawi has relative political stability but remains vulnerable. Ministerial corruption continues, despite criticism forcing Muluzi to oust a number of key ministers in 2000. The government is again under pressure to clean up its act with the suspension of vital loans from the IMF amid concerns over high government spending. In December 2002, the government borrowed US\$50 million from the World Bank to cushion the worsening food crisis, while cost-cutting measures are introduced. In early 2003, Muluzi faced growing opposition from religious, civil and political groups to his attempts to amend the constitution which would allow him stand for a third term in office.

Economic prosperity in the 1970s failed to spur broad-based economic development. Agriculture remains the backbone of Malawi's economy, contributing 90% of rural employment, while tobacco, the main cash crop, accounts for more than two-thirds of exports. However, Malawi's agricultural land is under severe pressure from rapid population growth, which, according to the UN, has more than doubled since independence in 1964.

Malawi is prone to natural disasters: floods in early 2001 hit southern areas badly, displacing more than 300,000 people and causing a food shortage by the autumn. After widespread drought in 2002, January 2003 again brought torrential rains, destroying homes and crops and spreading water-borne disease such as cholera. A state of national disaster has been declared as the balance is tipped on Malawi's precarious food security situation. A country in need of thousands of tonnes of food aid every year is now facing its worst ever famine, affecting over three million people and exacerbated by alleged government mismanagement of grain reserves and the HIV and AIDS epidemic. International donors have been slow to respond while the government accused them of forcing Malawi to sell its food reserves last year. The government however was late to admit to a food emergency, supporting allegations that Malawi is governed by a small elite which has tied up the economy and done little to help the very poor.

As foreign investors evade landlocked Malawi's limited natural resource base, poor physical and financial infrastructure, slow-moving bureaucracy and rising crime, the country remains dependent on economic assistance from international financial institutions and external donors. Malawi was approved for relief under the World Bank's Heavily Indebted Poor Country programme in 2000.

Approximately 90% of rural Malawians are smallholders. They have few productive assets, scarce opportunities to generate income outside agriculture, are poorly educated, undernourished and in poor health. Accustomed to state subsidies and fixed prices for their products, they have been hit hard by structural adjustment. In September 2002, the country's largest textile factory was shut down, putting more than 2,000 people out of work after plans for privatisation failed. While the government is committed to universal primary education and access to basic health

care, it still struggles to bring essential services to rural areas and two-thirds of the population remain in poverty.

More than one in seven of the 12 million people living in Malawi are HIV-positive – one of the world's highest infection rates. The human toll is terrible: deaths placing unbearable stress on families and communities, an excessive number of orphans and undernourished children, loss of the productive members of society and a drain on meagre family and state resources. By 2010, an estimated two million people will be infected and an equal number will have died from AIDS-related illnesses, including up to half of Malawi's teachers, nurses, army and police. After years of silence, the authorities are finally acknowledging the crisis by promoting health awareness and discussing measures to prevent the spread of the disease.

## The VSO programme

*Number of volunteer in-country : 54*

VSO Malawi places volunteers in an integrated rural development programme, where volunteers with different skills can benefit the most disadvantaged groups: people living with HIV and AIDS, rural poor people (particularly women), young people and disabled people. Placements are set to take on a district-centred and predominantly rural focus to heighten our impact.

VSO Malawi is part of VSO's Regional AIDS Initiative of Southern Africa, ([www.vso.org.uk/raisa](http://www.vso.org.uk/raisa)), where volunteers in all skill areas work with local organisations and institutions to fight AIDS. RAISA volunteers focus on strengthening local HIV and AIDS organisations in management, financial and administrative skills. They also support home-based outreach programmes to assist the disadvantaged groups most affected by the disease. In addition, all volunteers in Malawi, regardless of skill area, are asked to undertake HIV and AIDS awareness activities in their community, in an attempt to mainstream HIV and AIDS prevention and enable those infected to have a meaningful life and a dignified role in society. For example, VSO teacher trainers have introduced HIV and AIDS into the training curriculum for primary school teachers, and VSO secondary school teachers are proactively supporting anti-AIDS clubs. Health volunteers disseminate HIV and AIDS information, support voluntary counselling and testing initiatives, and improve the HIV and AIDS component of clinical staff training.

Health volunteers also work in placements benefiting rural poor people, especially women, children and disabled people. VSO health tutors provide training to improve clinical skills in pharmacy, nursing, midwifery and primary health care, while a VSO paediatrician is heading the paediatric department of a new referral hospital for the north of Malawi. In addition, technical volunteers work as hospital maintenance supervisors and radiographers to help district and regional health offices maintain vital medical equipment and hospital buildings. In a shift towards more district hospital placements, we are providing volunteers to reduce the shortfall of trained medical staff by upgrading the skill level of their local colleagues. A VSO dentist at a district mission hospital is teaching clinical staff at local health centres how to undertake simple extractions and providing dental technicians with the skills to diagnose and treat conditions indicative of HIV and AIDS.

VSO therapists provide rehabilitative care for disabled people and help to improve service delivery and staff training. We are exploring involvement in special needs schools for 2003, as well as improving management and business skills in disabled people's organisations.

Ninety-four per cent of Malawi's poor households are in rural areas; 60% of VSO's placements in Malawi are rural. We aim to improve rural livelihoods by promoting sustainable use of the natural environment and through improved access to income-generating opportunities and decision-making. Emphasis is on supporting grassroots non-government organisations through capacity-building, improved service delivery and reaching female-headed households. Recent volunteers

include environmental educators, dairy production advisers, agricultural marketing advisers and veterinary officers. VSO foresters have contributed to community-based reforestation programmes and assisted in correcting misconceptions around environmental practices in the lakeshore area. Volunteers with the Wildlife and Environmental Society of Malawi have supported the development of school wildlife clubs, community awareness campaigns and environmental rallies. Income-generating activities, such as rearing fowl, have contributed to a reduction in poaching from protected areas.

VSO aims to increase opportunities for young people to have a role and identity in society and increase their ability to achieve sustainable livelihoods. Our volunteers support education, and vocational and social awareness training. VSO teachers teach English, maths and science in the under-resourced rural Community Day Secondary Schools, which provide secondary education to children from poor rural families. They have also organised after-school clubs and set up libraries and laboratories. Volunteers based at the teacher training colleges are introducing new teaching methodologies to primary and secondary education, while volunteers in advisory roles share budgetary, communication and organisational skills. Future volunteer placements will be clustered, with a stronger focus on skills-sharing and capacity-building with teaching colleagues. Volunteers will also conduct advocacy activities to address low teacher morale. VSO is developing its work with young people by placing volunteers with youth organisations and contributing to training and other services to out-of-school youth.

Most Malawian children are disadvantaged by belonging to poor rural households, but some are even worse off: they are orphans, affected by HIV and AIDS or disabled. During 2002, we prioritised placements that address the needs of children and the communities in which they live. Examples include HIV and AIDS placements with organisations which assist vulnerable children, such as the Department of Social Welfare and Unicef. We are also investigating partnerships to support the provision of education for disadvantaged children. Our work in health and disability continues to focus on the needs of children through the placement of paediatricians and doctors and specific attention to the needs of disabled children through partnerships in community-based rehabilitation.

Gender equity and environmental education are cross-cutting themes that all volunteers seek to address.

## Volunteer perspectives

"My job has had its difficulties, and nothing is achieved too quickly. A lot of my day is spent talking to colleagues about the problems that Malawi is currently facing, [including one of] the highest AIDS rates in the world. I have lost friends, neighbours and colleagues in the eight months I have been here. But despite all these problems, Malawians are the most wonderful people I have ever met: they have a real warmth and joy about them and I have been made to feel so welcome and so much part of a community. Malawi, the Warm Heart of Africa – a title it so rightly deserves."

"You simply have to do what you can with what you have. The wind blows dust through the room. We have no glass in the windows and no doors. Sparrows skitter in and out through the doorway – they have a nest above the blackboard. Last Tuesday evening, I was teaching biology in the hall and a barn owl flew in, sat on a beam above my head and noisily ate a mouse! A lesson in ecology and a practical all rolled into one!"

## Partner perspectives

"Placement of VSO teachers in CDSSs [community day secondary schools] has a great impact on fellow teachers, learners and the community in which they are placed. VSO teachers have acted as role models due to their dedication to duty and other teachers have emulated their

everlasting effort in assisting learners... It might be difficult to measure the change, but one can easily note that most teachers have greatly acquired certain skills and knowledge in various subjects thanks to the VSOs... Most pupils have grown interest in learning and the rate of drop-outs from school has, of late, decreased. ...These arguments clearly score one major point: placement of VSOs in CDSSs has improved the quality of education." [Headmaster of Phwadzi CDSS, 2002.](#)

"The knowledge and skills you share with poorer people in other countries and the hardship that you endure while doing this will go a long way towards building a better world for all of us. VSO certainly means a great deal to us." [Bakili Muluzi, President of Malawi, 1997.](#)