

---

## **Malawi Is Not a ‘Poor Country’**

STACIA NORDIN, RD

---

*“The people with the problem are the people with the solution.”*  
Miles Horton, Highlander Center<sup>1</sup>

It is common to introduce Malawi as one of Africa’s poorest nations, but most people in the country did not think they were poor until foreigners arrived and told them they were. Prior to the arrival of outsiders, communities used what they needed from the environment and traded what they had with other groups who had different resources or skills. The poverty label that the ‘developed’ world has placed on ‘developing’ nations undermines the self-sufficiency that could exist if solutions, not problems, were the focus. One of the largest barriers to improving lives that I have seen is the emphasis on what is not available instead of what is. This places so much importance on income and money that we overlook the non-cost resources right around us. In fact, we even destroy them in the name of profit instead of protecting and utilizing them in the name of health and prosperity.

A large part of my work with nutrition and HIV has focused on dispelling the recent myth of poverty in Malawi and reminding people of the wealth of resources here that can supply everything we need. It represents a marked departure from the negative, problem-oriented view typical of development agencies. It involves an exciting way of thinking that encompasses health, food security, environmental protection, and the preservation of traditional culture and knowledge.

### **Good Health Does Not Need to Be Imported**

Many development organizations focus on improving the health of populations by collectively spending millions of dollars on importing medicines, health care systems, food aid, nutrient supplements, and fortification. But inside each of our bodies we have a free, built-in system to defend us from diseases that try to enter and to heal us from the ones that do make it in—the immune system. To work properly the immune system must have the nutrients it needs, in addition to other factors like rest. In order to improve nutrition we have to provide the body with a variety of different foods. But the food that people eat is only as healthy as the soil that it is grown in and, just like humans, the soil becomes unhealthy if it is ‘eating’ only one type food. The soil needs a wide variety of

---

Stacia Nordin, R.D., is the HIV/AIDS Crisis Corps Coordinator for Peace Corps Malawi. She served as a Peace Corps volunteer in both Jamaica (92-94) and Malawi (97-00). She and her husband Kristof have worked to promote better nutrition and health through more effective use of local natural resources in Malawi and around the world. They can be reached for questions and comment at [nordin@eomw.net](mailto:nordin@eomw.net).

organic matter to return to it in order to get all of the nutrients it needs. This variety of organic matter can only be obtained when people allow many different things to live in the environment, not just one or two. As the soil improves and more organic matter is present, this also helps allow water to sink into the ground. Water is filtered as it passes through the different layers of the earth, so that by the time it reaches our drinking water wells it should be free from bacteria and other things that cause illnesses. We refer to these connections as 'The Cycle of Better Living:'

- When we have healthy soil through a variety of plants and animals,
- We have healthier food and clean drinking water;
- Healthier food and water gives us better nutrition;
- Better nutrition helps to strengthen our immune systems;
- When our immune systems are strong this helps protect us from disease and stay healthy.

### **An Abundance of Staple Crops Is Not the Same as Good Nutrition**

Food security is generally measured by the amount of a few staple crops (often only one grain) that is available to meet a population's calorie needs. This is unfortunate, as it says nothing about nutritional security, which depends on access to a variety of different foods from several food groups in order to meet calorie needs. The emphasis on increasing the yields of one staple crop often results in a diet low in nutrients; soil infertility; high chemical and labor input farming; increased risk of crop failures from weather, diseases, and insects; destruction of natural areas for crop expansion; dwindling or contaminated water supplies; increased food aid, supplementation, and fortification; and time-consuming expensive research into problems such as genetic engineering.

In Malawi the emphasis for the last 50 years or so has been on maize, a crop that is not even native to the culture. Before maize, Malawi's environment and diet revolved around a wide variety of local fruits, vegetables, nuts, seeds, millets, sorghums, roots, and various animal foods. Although many of these foods are still available, they are vanishing quickly because of the push to supply maize year-round either by forcing the land to produce it or by bringing in maize aid when the environment is unable to meet our demands. Maize is not the only culprit, however. People are becoming more interested in obtaining the foods of the western world than in giving attention to the abundance of foods right around them. Expatriates who come in to 'help' often never take the time to learn about the valuable food resources that are already here. These local foods that are being crowded out by maize and western imports are often higher in nutrients and available with no work or money—not to mention that they are delicious. There are over

500 foods available in Malawi that are able to meet all the nutritional needs of people living here. The work my husband, our partners and I are doing involves trying to revive the knowledge and use of these plants as part of the local diet. Even food aid and nutrition supplement programs can be provided in the form of local resources instead of focusing on the intake of one or two items. In Malawi it is feasible to provide calories in the form of local pumpkins, gourds, beans, nuts, seeds, insects, fruits, roots, and so forth, as part of an aid package when disaster interferes with the food supply. Micronutrient sources are also available in abundance through local fruits and vegetables. By including a wide variety of foods in our environment we can have better food and nutrition security, in addition to healthy soil, water, plants, and animals.

### **Local Resources for Disease Treatment**

With the current health system in Malawi, there is a lot of emphasis on medical treatments that are imported instead of focusing on the supplies that are already available in-country. Medicinal treatments have been a part of the Malawian culture for centuries. Around the world, including in Malawi, more people are taking heed of this knowledge to identify accurate treatments and promote them as part of treating diseases or symptoms. In some places, traditional and non-traditional systems are coming together to share expertise, such as western clinics offering herbal remedies or supporting traditional healers in disease identification, and traditional healers coming together to form associations for advocacy and research documentation. Development programs can join in to focus on local knowledge and assist in documenting and promoting local medicine resources. They can then support the logistics of making these resources available in a safe manner to wider audiences.

### **The Permaculture Project: A New Take on Old Issues**

As part of our project utilizing the principles of Permaculture (coined from “permanent culture or agriculture”), we have been collecting plants, learning about them, sharing the seeds, teaching about their importance in nutrition and the environment, using them in our own meals, and encouraging their use for anyone living in Malawi—but not as a job, as a way of life. In our first two years here we planted over 100 different local foods in one half-acre plot, in addition to other plants that can be used for fuels, medicines, and building materials. Each year we have been able to add to our collection and knowledge. As of last year we had about 150 different foods in the yard, along with numerous medicines and other supplies. We are in the process of adding up the figures for this year’s yields. Unlike a mono-cropped system with yields only once per year, the yields

from this system are continuous. Our yields are also increasing every year as new trees reach maturity and the soil is improved to support more life.

Many places in Malawi are now establishing similar permanent gardens and taking advantage of the riches we have here. People are utilizing gray water from washing clothes, dishes, or bathing; using water at the end of wells where it often sits in a large puddle; putting organic matter to use instead of burning it; reducing the amount of clearing that is done; observing what nature has to offer and using it wisely; and incorporating local varieties of foods and medicines along with the conventional system that is in place. Everyone is the target audience for this way of thinking. Malawians from all walks of life have grasped the ideas and understood the importance of using what we have available around us to the fullest potential—individuals, government ministers, business people, health centers, nutrition rehabilitation units, people living with HIV/AIDS, schools, expatriates, locals, and wildlife and environmental organizations. The list of beneficiaries is growing.

Our work is founded on the belief that we all have a part to play in improving the world. The lessons we have learned here are not just specific to Malawi; our approach to the environment and nutrition could have far-reaching benefits elsewhere as well. If we each begin to open our eyes to local knowledge and solutions, and teach others to do the same, we can begin to work with the earth instead of against it to make it a much healthier place for everyone to live.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The Highlander Center is a non-profit U.S.-based organization focused on promoting social justice and political participation.