How Malawi Fed Its Own People

By JEFFREY D. SACHS

President Bingu wa Mutharika of Malawi died on April 5 of a heart attack at the age of 78. His countrymen, suffering a massive economic and political crisis, seem to have declared good riddance. Some of his rogue allies apparently tried to hold on to power after his death, but democracy prevailed with the installation of the vice president, Joyce Banda, to the presidency. President Banda inherits an acute crisis much of which was Mutharika’s making.

Yet we should also remember a positive legacy of the late president, because that legacy holds a key for Africa’s future development and escape from poverty.

Until his final two years, Mutharika had actually engineered an agriculture-led boom in Malawi, one that pointed a way for Africa to overcome its chronic hunger, food insecurity, and periodic extreme famines. To accomplish this, Mutharika had to stand bravely against the arrogance of an ill-informed foreign aid community back in 2005.

Malawi is an impoverished, landlocked, tropical country in southern Africa, one of the poorest in the world. Its population has soared beyond the carrying capacity of the land. Many farms are one to two hectares, or even smaller, for a family of five or more. Powerful and often foreign owners hold the larger tobacco estates. AIDS began to ravage Malawi in 2001-3 to help the country become one of the first recipients of the new Global Fund to Fight AIDS, TB and Malaria that I helped to design and that was finally opened for business in 2002.

Sanchez explained to me, the drought was not only a rainfall drought, but also a nitrogen drought.

Malawi’s impoverished farmers were too poor to buy fertilizer, and their intensive farming over many years had depleted the soils of nitrogen, with a consequence that the farm yields were among the lowest in the world. Mutharika then did a brilliant thing. He said that the government of Malawi would subsidize the smallholders to buy a small amount of fertilizer and seed so that they could replenish the soil nutrients, take advantage of improved seed varieties, and at least achieve a livable crop from their tiny farms. Over time, they could save part of their increased earnings to become creditworthy on their own, thereby “graduating” from the subsidy program.

This was to be a “smart subsidy.” Rather than simply lowering fertilizer prices for all, which would disproportionately benefit the rich, the government gave a voucher ticket for a small fixed amount of fertilizer and seed per household, thereby disproportionately benefiting the poor.

The donors were aghast, scandalized. Didn’t Malawi know that farm subsidies were bad, indeed “prohibited” by the donor community? The head of Britain’s Malawi assistance program actually told me that Malawi’s peasants (presumably by the millions, though this was only implicit) should leave Malawi for other countries rather than be supported by “unsustainable” subsidies. I told him that his idea was tantamount to a death sentence for a vast population.

A dozen years ago, at the start of the new millennium, Malawi’s extreme suffering was pretty much ignored by the world. AIDS, malaria, TB, hunger, extreme poverty and one of the world’s lowest life expectancies (46 years in the period 1995-2000, according to the U.N. Population Division) wrecked the land. The donor nations did little to help.

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I began to visit Malawi in those years through my work as special adviser to Kofi Annan, U.N. secretary general at the time. I was shocked by the overflowing pediatric wards of hungry, malnourished and dying babies, and the adjoining adult wards filled with AIDS patients without medicines in the central hospital, waiting to die an agonizing death. I could hardly imagine this hellish scene as actually belonging to the 21st century.

I worked with the government of Malawi in 2001-3 to help the country become one of the first recipients of the new Global Fund to Fight AIDS, TB and Malaria that I helped to design and that was finally opened for business in 2002.

Yet the donors fought bitterly, and alas successfully, to keep Malawi’s early programs very small, in some ghastly exercise of budgetary prudence. Countless Malawians continued to die unnecessarily as a result of this penny-pinching.

In 2004, Mutharika was elected president. He entered office with a drought already under way. Yet as my colleague and World Food Prize winner Dr. Pedro
In the end, Mutharika prevailed over donor resistance. Malawi used its own paltry budget revenues to introduce a tiny subsidy program for the world’s poorest people, and lo and behold, production doubled within one harvest season. Malawi began to produce enough grain for itself year after year, and even became a food donor when famine struck the region. Life expectancy began to rise, and is estimated to be around 55 years for the period 2010-15.

Once the program began to show success, the donors started to fund it, thank goodness, since Malawi could not carry the program on its own (at least not without squeezing other life-and-death needs such as health delivery). Even more importantly, many other African countries began to follow Malawi’s lead, and thereby to achieve breakthroughs in farm yields and food production for the first time in their modern history. Malawi had pointed the way to a new Green Revolution for Africa.

Around 2009 there were rumors, fortunately false, that Britain would withdraw its support from the donor program. I called one of the U.K. government’s lead development advisers. The adviser, a very congenial person, told me in all innocence, “No, of course we won’t stop funding it. The subsidy program was our idea.” I had to laugh. Such is the way with success.

In 2009, Mutharika won a resounding, indeed landslide re-election, based on his success in feeding the people through improved agriculture. Yet things went downhill soon afterward. Mutharika began to try to put family members into power to create a dynasty. The family’s corruption, according to many reports, soared. Mutharika made big mistakes in economic management, for example in completely mismanaging the exchange rate. When riots ensued on July 20, 2011, police killed at least 19 demonstrators.

In this context, Mutharika and the donors began to fight again. When the foreign donor countries withdrew their aid, Malawi went into a tailspin. It is all too easy to destroy an impoverished country that depends on donors for a variety of life-saving interventions.

Mutharika goes to his grave widely despised by his own countrymen, and unknown to most of the world. Yet however many missteps he may have made in the last years, his positive legacy remains historic. He was the first African president in recent years to face down the donors by insisting that Africa can and must feed itself, especially by helping smallholder farmers to gain access to the vital inputs they need to raise their productivity, diversify their production, and escape from poverty.

Fortunately, much of Africa and the donor world has come around to this vision. As of 2020, Africa could double, or even more, its current grain yields. By recognizing the potential of Africa’s smallholder farmers, Mutharika helped put Africa on a path out of poverty and hunger.

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