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# Ending Famine, Simply by Ignoring the Experts



Evelyn Hockstein for The New York Times

The secret of Malawi's success: heavy subsidies for fertilizer, farmers say. The World Bank had pressed for their elimination. [More Photos >](#)

By CELIA W. DUGGER  
Published: December 2, 2007

## Correction Appended

LILONGWE, Malawi — Malawi hovered for years at the brink of famine. After a disastrous corn harvest in 2005, almost five million of its 13 million people needed emergency [food aid](#).

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[Ending Famine in Malawi](#)

But this year, a nation that has perennially extended a begging bowl to the world is instead feeding its hungry neighbors. It is selling more corn to the [World Food Program](#) of the [United Nations](#) than any other country in southern Africa and is exporting hundreds of thousands of tons of corn to Zimbabwe.

In Malawi itself, the prevalence of acute child hunger has fallen sharply. In October, the [United Nations Children's Fund](#) sent three tons of powdered milk, stockpiled here to treat severely malnourished children, to Uganda instead. "We will not be able to use it!" Juan Ortiz-Iruri, Unicef's deputy representative in Malawi, said jubilantly.

Farmers explain Malawi's extraordinary turnaround — one with broad implications for hunger-fighting methods across Africa — with one word: fertilizer.

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Over the past 20 years, the [World Bank](#) and some rich nations Malawi depends on for aid have periodically pressed this small, landlocked country to adhere to free market policies and cut back or eliminate fertilizer subsidies, even as the United States and Europe extensively subsidized their own farmers. But after the 2005 harvest, the worst in a decade, Bingu wa Mutharika, Malawi's newly elected president, decided to follow what the West practiced, not what it preached.

Stung by the humiliation of pleading for charity, he led the way to reinstating and deepening fertilizer subsidies despite a skeptical reception from the United States and Britain. Malawi's soil, like that across sub-Saharan Africa, is gravely depleted, and many, if not most, of its farmers are too poor to afford fertilizer at market prices.

"As long as I'm president, I don't want to be going to other capitals begging for food," Mr. Mutharika declared. Patrick Kabambe, the senior civil servant in the Agriculture Ministry, said the president told his advisers, "Our people are poor because they lack the resources to use the soil and the water we have."

The country's successful use of subsidies is contributing to a broader reappraisal of the crucial role of agriculture in alleviating poverty in Africa and the pivotal importance of public investments in the basics of a farm economy: fertilizer, improved seed, farmer education, credit and agricultural research.

Malawi, an overwhelmingly rural nation about the size of Pennsylvania, is an extreme example of what happens when those things are missing. As its population has grown and inherited landholdings have shrunk, impoverished farmers have planted every inch of ground. Desperate to feed their families, they could not afford to let their land lie fallow or to fertilize it. Over time, their depleted plots yielded less food and the farmers fell deeper into poverty.

Malawi's leaders have long favored fertilizer subsidies, but they reluctantly acceded to donor prescriptions, often shaped by foreign-aid fashions in Washington, that featured a faith in private markets and an antipathy to government intervention.

In the 1980s and again in the 1990s, the World Bank pushed Malawi to eliminate fertilizer subsidies entirely. Its theory both times was that Malawi's farmers should shift to growing cash crops for export and use the foreign exchange earnings to import food, according to Jane Harrigan, an economist at the University of London.

In a withering evaluation of the World Bank's record on African agriculture, the bank's own internal watchdog concluded in October not only that the removal of subsidies had led to exorbitant fertilizer prices in African countries, but that the bank itself had often failed to recognize that improving Africa's declining soil quality was essential to lifting food production.

"The donors took away the role of the government and the disasters mounted," said [Jeffrey Sachs](#), a [Columbia University](#) economist who lobbied Britain and the World Bank on behalf of Malawi's fertilizer program and who has championed the idea that wealthy countries should invest in fertilizer and seed for Africa's farmers.

Here in Malawi, deep fertilizer subsidies and lesser ones for seed, abetted by good rains, helped farmers produce record-breaking corn harvests in 2006 and 2007, according to government crop estimates. Corn production leapt to 2.7 million metric tons in 2006 and 3.4 million in 2007 from 1.2 million in 2005, the government reported.

"The rest of the world is fed because of the use of good seed and inorganic fertilizer, full stop," said Stephen Carr, who has lived in Malawi since 1989, when he retired as the World Bank's principal agriculturalist in sub-Saharan Africa. "This technology has not been used in most of Africa. The only way you can help farmers gain access to it is



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### Correction: December 7, 2007

*A chart on Sunday about improvements in Malawi's agricultural production, using erroneous information from a study by researchers at Imperial College London and Michigan State University, misstated the size of recent corn harvests. (Because of an editing error, the article also included the wrong figures.) The increase in production was in millions of metric tons, not billions. (Estimates show that corn production rose to 2.7 million metric tons in 2006 and 3.4 million in 2007 from 1.2 million in 2005.)*

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