

Hardship in Malawi

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Last week I travelled to Malawi to see first-hand the work that Trócaire does. Despite being well aware of the story of the family featured on this year's Lenten appeal, nothing could prepare me for seeing the hardships the people of Malawi face on a daily basis.

As we travelled out from the capital Lilongwe, I was immediately struck by the volume of people walking the roads, all carrying huge burdens of weight. Whether it was women with buckets of water on their heads or men and children with stacks of sticks and wood, everyone was walking somewhere, carrying something in scorching heat. Immediately I got a sense of the resilience of these people.

We travelled for six hours to a village in the Machinga District. Here I met the family that featured on one of our Trócaire boxes: Malita and two of her six children, twins Patrick and Patricia. They, along with the other families in their village, struggle every day in pursuit of clean water to drink and nutritious meals to eat. I'm not sure what I was expecting, but I have to admit to getting a shock when I learned they had no electricity, no plumbing, no flushing toilets or any clean water source in their village.

When we arrived, we were asked to join them in a hike up the base of



a mountain to see a water pump that is shared by four villages. The heat and length (one hour, round trip) of the walk meant that some of the visitors felt unwell when we got to the pump. This is a journey Malita makes several times a day, sometimes waiting up to five hours in a queue with women from neighbouring villages. She will then make the return journey carrying twenty litres of water on her head. The water pump is in such demand but is unreliable in the dry season, so often Malita and her community have to walk even further to a spring that is shared with animals to salvage some water. They know it is not safe to drink, as animals use it too, but often there simply is no other option.

The community rely almost entirely on what they produce on their small piece of land as their source of food.



It is predominantly maize, but the changing weather patterns make a once reliable crop unpredictable. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that people are cutting down trees to make and sell charcoal for fuel to cook. They know it is making the problem worse, but they have no other way of feeding their families. By cutting down the trees the land is much less stable, and villages and homes are more exposed when the weather extremes come.

This week marks one year since Cyclone Freddy, the latest in a pattern of cyclones that have battered southern Malawi in recent years. Cyclone Freddy killed more than 1200 people, some of whom have not been recovered from under mud slides. It damaged or destroyed more than a quarter of a million homes, and, one year on, only a fraction of those homes have

been able to be restored due to lack of funds.

Weather extremes are battering this country, making it so much harder to grow crops. The floods wash seedlings and good topsoil into the rivers, the dry spell then stunts growth of anything that remains. .

I saw the work Trócaire is doing on the ground alongside their local partners, supplying the communities with tree seedlings to reforest around the villages, providing beehives to supplement traditional crop growth as a means of income, training farmers in new diverse crops that can tolerate weather extremes. While I witnessed some of the toughest circumstances I've ever seen in my life, there was another side to this trip. The work of Trócaire filled me with hope in how we can make a difference!