



NOURISH
THE CHILDREN

Journey Through Malawi

Marcus Westberg's Story

In September 2006, NTC Executive Marcus Westberg travelled to Malawi to witness first-hand how life is for the people there, many of whom live on the very brink of survival. Being an active participant in the Nourish the Children™ initiative, he wanted to see for himself the difference VitaMeal™ is making in the lives of poverty-stricken children and their families. Below, Marcus tells in his own words, the story of his travels through Malawi and shares his observations of life there.



*To jump to any of the following topics,
please use these links:*

- *Facts about Malawi*
- *Blessings Hospital*
- *Napoleon Dzombe*
- *"Build a Village" Project*
- *Other Programmes*
- *VitaMeal Production & Distribution*

Facts about Malawi

Arrival in Lilongwe, Malawi was rather pleasant in the end. After five flights and well over 24 hours of travelling, I was expecting mind-numbing heat and lost luggage at the very least. However, I was pleasantly surprised to find my bag having arrived before me, the weather very agreeable and two welcoming committees waiting to greet me – my parents-in-law, visiting Malawi between work placements in Botswana and Zambia; and Dick Stephens, Director of the Malawi Project.



Malawi is a country that, as I am certain many Distributors have discovered, not a great deal of people have heard of – and if they have, they know next to nothing about its people, features, problems or even location. Admittedly, despite a longstanding interest in everything to do with Africa, I had not heard much about Malawi myself until I came across Nourish the Children.

In terms of area, Malawi is a relatively small country by any standards – roughly 950 by 180 kilometres, landlocked by Tanzania, Zambia and Mozambique, although Lake Malawi, the most prominent physical feature of the country, is one of the largest in Africa, stretching approximately 580 kilometres along Malawi's eastern border. However, its population of around 13 million is anything but small and its population density is one of the highest in Africa. Despite being a relatively peaceful country – no tribal warfare, no major international conflicts and fairly low rates of violent crime – it does have its fair share of problems.

HIV/AIDS, of course, is one that we all hear about. The official statistics are bad enough – roughly 15% of adults are thought to be infected. However, after two months on the road, it seems that almost nobody in a qualified position puts the number at lower than 30-40%. The reasons for this rather large difference are many. For one thing, in a country where over 90% of the population lives in rural areas, statistics are always going to be difficult to collect without making large estimates and assumptions.

Furthermore, AIDS is still a taboo subject in many areas. Several doctors I met expressed despair at a particular scenario – there is a terrible stigma attached to being diagnosed as



HIV-positive before your partner, since it suggests extramarital activities on your side. This appears to have fairly drastic effects on the number of people who go to get tested at all. Also, many patients who die from AIDS-related diseases are officially documented as having had a different cause of death.

Roughly half of the population is under the age of fifteen and estimates of the number of orphans in the country range from a fifth to a full half of the children, although it is impossible to acquire accurate figures for this. On average, each woman gives birth to five children, but 30% of children born die before they reach the age of five, and another 30% of those remaining will not survive the following five years. There have even been reports of parents numbering rather than naming children until they reach a few years of age and the parents can be more certain that they will live, but these are unconfirmed and I do not know how much truth there is in this. What is certain is that many children do not survive, and of those that do, very few do so comfortably.

The economy, too, has seen better days. GDP per capita is estimated at roughly 600 USD, making it the second poorest country on the planet after East Timor. Tobacco accounts for almost all of the exports and with the tobacco market dwindling, Malawi is in trouble. Of course, these figures are incredibly misleading. A huge portion of the population makes no money whatsoever and many people, if they can get work at all, get paid in food rather than money. There is also a serious lack of educated professionals. I met two doctors, stationed in Blantyre, who due to this shortage struggled to find suitable nursing staff, often having to hire people without proper training just to make up the numbers.

I could go on of course – deforestation, starvation, lack of clean water, numerous other diseases – but I'm sure you get the idea. Does it sound

miserable? It is. That's not to say that this isn't a country that has a lot going for it, or is not worth visiting. For one thing, I have seldom seen people with so little be so happy. Spoilt children in the west certainly have something to learn here – these children run around in torn clothes, starving, their toys often nothing more than pieces of wood, rock or pine cones; yet the laughter is loud almost everywhere you go. It is also a country of great natural diversity and beauty in those areas where the trees have not been felled for firewood. The soil is often of good quality and if proper irrigation was in place, Lake Malawi would provide more than enough water to grow crops around the year.

And there are people who are making a difference. Many of them will never get much, if any, attention – what they do is perhaps not effective enough, or not on a big enough scale. Or they are doctors, whose work is hopeless at best. But then there are people who can change the destiny of an entire nation – people like Napoleon Dzumbe.

I was not quite sure what to make of Napoleon before I met him. His story was a bit too good to be true, I thought – I suppose it is natural to be a bit suspicious when all you hear about a person is extremely positive, feats of wonder. Yet of course I was not about to deny that he seemed to be a very remarkable man, having already accomplished so much and wanting to accomplish even more for his people and his country. Nevertheless, he was one of the main reasons for my going to Malawi. Yes, I wanted to see the effects Nourish the Children was having in this very needy country, but I also wanted to meet the man who was making it all possible and form my own opinion of him.

But first things first. Before I left Europe, I had listed a few things I would not leave Malawi without having done; namely, spend some

The author, enjoying a chat with some of the children from the Mtendere Orphan Village.



time talking to Napoleon, see the VitaMeal plant, visit the agricultural school/village out in Madisi, and go out on a food distribution run. Africa being Africa, there was not much point in expecting this to happen straight away, so I had given myself plenty of time to accomplish this and to have a look around on my own.

The joy one can evoke simply by attempting to say "hello, how are you?" in Chichewa (the official language, alongside English) is, quite frankly, a bit disturbing, since it surely tells us how few azungus (that's white people) make any effort at all to learn even the simplest greeting. (I got used to having kids point fingers and shout "azunga" after me. It's quite charming really, and they will erupt in a mirth of laughter if you shout "Chewa" or "Malawian" back at them.) Nevertheless, it does make poorly made attempts to communicate in Chichewa that much more fun. In fact, the Malawians are likely to be more enthusiastic than you, often helping you to answer the questions they ask, which although it makes for a rather one-sided conversation, does take the pressure off a bit. And sooner or later, you're bound to learn.

Travelling around the country independently, it's amazing how far a few simple words or phrases will get you, how truly grateful the people are that a white tourist has made the effort to learn a bit of their

language. Of course, there were times when being able to ask for directions or say good morning led people to the inaccurate conclusion that my Chichewa was in fact quite good (which it certainly wasn't – I had a vocabulary of maybe 40 or 50 words by the time I came back to Malawi from Zambia), and since no amount of assuring them that this was not the case seemed to have any effect whatsoever, all that was left to do was nod and smile, which seems to be a universal language in any case.

If you are planning a trip, forget about what the phrase books say about greetings – I don't know who writes these books, but I had it from several sources that most of them seem to be a bit of a joke. The standard greeting is quite simple: muli bwanji / ndili bwino, kaya inu? / ndili bwino, zikomo / zikomo kwambiri, which translates into something like: hello, how are you? / I'm well, how about you? / I'm well, thank you, / thank you very much. The "very much" effectively ends the exchange, but if there is more than one person in the group, everyone should be greeted individually. Other phrases you are likely to hear a lot are chimozimozi (same same) and "mwina mwake" (maybe), which seems to be the national motto. Maybe the bus will leave within the hour, maybe not. Maybe we can go today, maybe tomorrow. But I reckon it's good for the nerves – forces you to relax a bit and take things as they come, when they come.

An interesting experience was to attend a church sermon. It was long, three hours or so, and a mix of lecture, bible school and of course, singing. The singing in itself was amazing, as could be expected I suppose, and nearly as colourful as the clothing. Religion is taken very seriously, and "what church do you belong to?" was always one of the first questions asked when meeting new people. It is quite nice though – everyone is

referred to as "brother" or "sister" and although that would have had a different effect on me back home, here it made me feel accepted into the culture and welcome in the country.

Blessings Hospital

One of the people who made the greatest impression on me during the entire two months I spent in this part of Africa was Dr. Eric Cahill, who works partly at Blessings Hospital, partly (and mostly) at Kamuzu Central in Lilongwe. The American doctor, who will have been in Malawi for six years by the time he leaves, made no secrets of his opinions on life in Malawi; yet I found his honesty reassuring and his views sobering. Working in an environment where a good day – and they were rare, from what I gathered – was a day when he lost no patients, he saw things on a daily basis that most of us would not even have nightmares about. "It's the smell, the dark, the screams, then the silence. For most, it's the stench of urine, faeces, vomit and death. Did you know you can smell death, even before it comes?" And then, of course, people believing that you are the miracle that will save them, even when there is no hope.

"Can you imagine what it's like to tell the parents that their child died from a simple intestinal infection – 'sorry, we didn't have the \$1.00 bag of intravenous fluid, or the medicine that costs 35 cents'. Or to watch someone suffer with a fever, go into convulsions and die, because we didn't have aspirin to give them. The family demands to know why you let them die; you're the white doctor, you must have the answers. As you go from the last patient who died, to the next patient, they hope for that 'miracle' that you weren't able to give to that last one.

Did you ever wonder what it would be like to know that you have a 1 in 3 chance of not reaching your 35th birthday? What it feels like to know that you're going to outlive your 2-year old child and, most likely,

outlive 4 out of your 6 children? And that you are the reason your child won't live to see their 10th birthday? You can't feed your baby because you can't afford food, and you're too sick to breast feed. To see your parents die in agony from AIDS and its complications and know that this is your future. What are they thinking as they lay dying, from something they can't understand or see, from the water that brings life to plants and trees, an insect bite – and what is AIDS? They feel, they cry, they love and they mourn. Life is tolerated for as long as it lasts, death is a celebration. Is it because of the end of suffering, or is it because it means one less mouth to feed, one less person to care for?"

I am sorry if I have painted a rather bleak picture for you so far. But I must tell it as I experienced it – there is no point in painting a pretty picture when behind the canvas, people are dying. However, the bleakness will also give you an idea of the massive impact of what we do, of what has been accomplished so far and of what NTC and the Malawi Project will achieve in the future. For despite all the horror and despair, there is hope; and despite the fact that I didn't want to get too carried away, to keep my feet on the ground, it was hard not to be blown away by what is being done and the implications for the future. I truly believe that the turning point for Malawi, if it has not been reached already, is not far away and much of the reason for this is Napoleon Dzombe.

Napoleon Dzombe

Napoleon was shorter than I expected. Fitting, I suppose, for a man who jokingly calls himself the emperor of France – Bonaparte was not of very imposing stature himself as I recall. Why is it that we tend to imagine great men as tall? Funnily enough, the last time I saw him before I left, Napoleon was reading a biography on his French namesake. Most of you probably know Napoleon Dzombe's story already, but it is a good one, and well worth repeating.

As a young man in the late 1970s, Napoleon set up his first business with the equivalent of 3.00 USD that his father had given him. Over the course of 20 years he became an extremely successful businessman with numerous holdings throughout Malawi and employing scores of people. When famine struck the country in 2002, people in his area came to his home to ask for food. He gave them some and they went home. The next day, more people came and the following day, even more. Thousands came. Distressed at seeing his compatriots suffering starvation he decided he would do whatever he could to help. Since then, he has used his own personal fortune to fund numerous relief operations and development projects, working closely with the US-based Malawi Project and the Nu Skin Force for Good Foundation™.



Napoleon Dzombe

Napoleon took me out to Mtalimanja agricultural village himself, the site of the "Build a Village" project. The village is located at Madisi, which is a trading centre near where he grew up. He's been chief there for about ten years, which makes the construction and on-going running of the project a lot easier. Permission from the local chief is always necessary. In fact, I learned something very interesting in western Zambia. At the time I was there, elections were just about to

be held throughout the country, on all levels. The district nurse in the Luangwa Valley, Paul, explained to me that the main focus of those running for local offices was gaining the approval of the chief of the area. Without that, they would stand no chance of winning whatsoever; and even if they did, they would have a very difficult time trying to implement any decisions. So the chiefs effectively work as a system of checks for the elected officials, ensuring that the politicians keep the interests of the people in mind. Not a bad idea, really.

"Build a Village" Project

Back to Madisi. It is fairly large, as far as trading centres go (a trading centre is a local centre of commerce for village people who do not have access to urban centres), so Napoleon has a fair few responsibilities there as well. This became obvious pretty soon after we arrived, as ten or twelve people, presumably farmers, formed a circle around him and it was close to two hours before he emerged again. In the meantime, I was shown around by two other men; the chief water engineer at the site, Maxwell, and an agricultural extension development officer, Alex Chinkoka.



Napoleon Dzombe (blue shirt to right of picture), meeting with some of the farmers from the "Build a Village" project.

At present, there is an enormous amount of construction and experimentation taking place where the school will operate. Many of the buildings should be completed by now – there was a lot of progress even in the short time before I left. While this construction is taking place, Napoleon has over 350 employees at his various sites, making him, at least unofficially, the largest rural employer in the country.

In terms of experimentation, most of it revolves around trying a multitude of crops and seeds on different types of soil, at different times of the year. The government has provided a fair share of the seeds, as the results will no doubt benefit, in time, the entire nation. The soil and climate in Malawi are good enough to support very diverse crops, from cabbage and potatoes, to carrots and tomatoes, as well as mangoes, maize and wheat. If irrigated properly, that is. This was a very curious fact, I thought, and one that really emphasises the importance of Napoleon's agricultural projects. The country has a total land area of around 94,000 square kilometres. 20% of this is arable land – that's just under 20,000 square kilometres. Yet despite the enormous Lake Malawi and a tropical wet season, only 560 square kilometres are irrigated. At the same time, nine out of every ten persons making up the 4.5 million strong labour force work within the agricultural sector. So needless to say, improved irrigation and farming techniques would have a massive impact on a huge number of people.

The Mtalimanja agricultural village is Napoleon's baby. Largely financed by the Nu Skin Force For Good Foundation™, this is what will change the course of a country. Already using smaller-scale projects for farmers, such as providing clothing as a reward for using drip irrigation, Napoleon's dream to make Malawi truly independent took another huge leap when this idea was conceived of. "One day (in 2001)," he told me, "I carried three dead bodies, right from my house. But during that

time, we had enough water in the rivers. So if they would have used that water for irrigation, I think they would not have died."

Instead of giving in to the poverty and hunger like so many others have done, Napoleon decided to be the one who teaches his people how to use the water for irrigation, or grow more than one crop every year, or farm fish. And although the school is not yet ready for its official launch, it is in fact already running. "I already have 43 farmers on the scene, who are practising irrigation, even before the opening of the school."

Everywhere I went during my two or three hours in the fields, there were crops being grown – some of them, such as maize and mangoes, I had seen growing elsewhere around the country. Others, such as cabbage, tomatoes, carrots, wheat, spinach and sweet potatoes will be grown here on a scale not common in other places. Furthermore, the experimentation and selection process is extensive – which seed is the best? What kind of soil is ideal? What time of the year? How much water maximises growth? – making sure that nothing is overlooked.

Most of you have probably heard that Napoleon and the others at the Malawi Project have been promoting a multi-crop system, but perhaps that requires a short explanation. Traditionally, the plot of land owned or leased by the farmer carries a single crop and all of the land is used at once. The result is a very rapid degradation of the soil, as it becomes exhausted. This also means that, with the decreasing quality, it takes longer for the crops to ripen, meaning that harvest usually does not take place more than once or twice per year. However, if the farmer can divide his land into four equal parts there are a number of advantages.

Planting different crops in three of them whilst leaving the fourth plot empty allows him to rotate his crops after every harvest. This not only allows the soil to rest completely for a quarter of the year, but as some crops actually add certain nutrients to the soil, rotating crops can

enhance the fertility of the land. It also ensures that the farmers do not limit themselves to relying heavily on just a single crop, avoiding a possible disaster should that crop fail.

Napoleon's dream is to have one man from every village come to his school, staying for two years to learn about sustainable agriculture, drip irrigation, animal husbandry, fish farming, making compost, growing fruit and a multitude of other skills related to farming. In the beginning the farmers will come from the central region, but Napoleon hopes that before too long, they will come from the whole nation. These people will then return to their homes and acting as teachers and models, educate the farmers in their villages. Napoleon, on the other hand, has set his goals higher than that. Sustainable farming, he says, is the first step, but for Malawians to truly stand on their own feet, they need to conduct surplus farming – growing enough to sell for a profit, in other words. And he hopes that he will be able to build small processing plants around the country, where the farmers can sell their goods for export. There are even plans for the VitaMeal factory to be involved in this – even as I write this, Napoleon, Sid Henderson and others are trying to come up with a cash product, something completely un-related to VitaMeal, which can be produced when the food plant is not being used to make VitaMeal, then sold for a profit. In that sense, what we do in Malawi is more than just feeding children – already, hundreds of farmers make a living selling their produce to make VitaMeal and the more donations we create, the more farmers we provide with a means to feed their own families.

Other Programmes

The days when I had nothing else planned, I spent a lot of time just wandering about Lilongwe and Lumbadzi, or talking to the children at Mtendere Orphan Village. It is, if nothing else, a good way to observe certain aspects of local village life, even though these children lead a relatively sheltered existence. Not that they don't deserve it – most of them have pretty horrific backgrounds. Of course, what orphan doesn't? But still, as with everything I think there are different levels, and meeting a three-year old who has lost both parents to HIV/AIDS, or a nine-year old who has watched their mother and grandmother die and been sexually assaulted by male relatives – that puts things into perspective.

The orphanage has a capacity of around 570 children, although they are currently housing no more than around 90. They had their first death just before I arrived – a little girl called Chikondi, HIV/AIDS claiming her life. Her background was unknown other than the fact that her parents were dead and she had a sister.

In general though, life at Mtendere seemed pretty good. The children appeared to enjoy a fair bit of freedom while at the same time learning what they need to know about traditional village life and performing very well in school. These children are the "lucky" ones, if that can be said of any orphan, receiving food, housing, clothing and education from people who care about them. There are hundreds of thousands of others who don't enjoy the fulfillment of these basic needs and they are where we need to focus our efforts.

Janet, one of the children who lives at the Mtendere Orphan Village. Both her parents died of AIDS. She has two sisters at the orphanage, one 8 and one 14.



I also travelled to Lake Malawi and spent a week with Samantha Ludick at Cool Runnings Resort in Senga Bay, about two hours from Lilongwe. Sam is... well, cool. She is originally from Zimbabwe, but grew up partly in Malawi before she returned to her home country, only to be forced from her farm. After some years in South Africa, her husband got killed and she returned to Malawi; and since a few years back, she has been the proprietor of Cool Runnings. What really makes the place special is Sam. The only white woman living in the village of Senga Bay – population roughly 10,000 – she works incredibly hard for the community in which she lives.

Her main aim, she says, is to help the people help themselves by finding solutions that don't require money. An example: the population can feast on mangos – rich in vital vitamins – for part of the year, but in the months leading up to the start of the mango season, there is nothing left, as nobody has thought to dry mangoes in order to preserve them. Realising that she is not likely to be able to change their behaviour herself, being a white woman, and that it would be better if it started as a trend amongst the locals anyway, she had some of her staff start drying mangoes on the roofs of their homes. And, lo and behold, by the next year, there were thirty or forty other households doing the same thing; and this year it seems to have really taken off.

Second on Sam's list is health and environmental issues. She runs a small mobile clinic with the approval and cooperation of the chief – but again, people have to help themselves, make an effort, if they are to benefit. Much of her clinic is supplied from Blessings Hospital and Dr. Cahill comes down when he has the time to look at particularly bad cases. For the rest of it, it's just Sam, who has a large "do it yourself" medical dictionary that she uses to diagnose and treat patients. But as I

said, she is adamant that they come to her – that they make a conscious effort to seek assistance if they need it and to follow her instructions and take measures to improve hygiene. I saw her give a busload of overlanders a good verbal hiding after they had thrown candy to children outside her gates from the window of their truck. "Free handouts create beggars!" she exclaimed, suggesting that there should be large signs at the airport informing tourists of exactly that. And it's true – I heard Napoleon, Suzi Stephens and countless others say exactly the same thing. "I want to teach people to fish, not give them fish," as Napoleon put it. We might not see the harm in it, but we are doing people no favours by giving handouts, teaching them that by asking they can get for free, when the reality of their world, their future, is so much harsher than that. Cruel? It might seem so, but then our sympathy or pity won't save their lives – learning to take care of themselves will.

This might seem like a bit of a conflict of interest with how VitaMeal is given out, but it's not, really. The VitaMeal gets distributed via schools, programmes, local chiefs, parents. In other words, figures of authority to these children – and at a fixed time, fixed amount. It isn't given to a child coming up to the factory and asking for a bag, as much as factory staff would love to help. Furthermore, it's sustainable, rather than feeding today and leaving tomorrow.

In regard to environmental issues, Sam has threatened to take several big hotels to court unless they cease using public land for dumping waste – something that the local people would not have been able to do on their own. Not just because most of them are illiterate, she said, but because they do not actually realise that it is their right to do so. "Money rules here," she explained. "If you've got money, those poorer than you will assume that you're in the right no matter what, and wouldn't dream of complaining or making a fuss – it simply isn't an option for them to do

so." So Sam does it for them and although it stirs things up sometimes, it has also won her a lot of respect.

I spoke to her very recently and she told me of her newest project. She owns another property that she will now turn into an internet café and computer school, using the former to finance the latter. She got the idea when she was doing a session at the clinic with some local volunteers. They were in secondary school, but when she asked them what they saw for themselves in the future they told her "nothing, there is no future for us in Malawi." Why? Having almost completed secondary school, they are relatively well-educated, but there is a problem. For almost any job within government, administration, offices and so on, they are missing one vital thing – computer skills. In all of Senga Bay, the only computers that exist reside in a few of the guesthouses and hotels, but even here there are no internet cafés or public access.

So together with some friends and former guests, Sam is putting together a computer school, where those who have completed their secondary school education can come and learn basic hardware and software skills, enabling them to apply for jobs that would otherwise have been out of reach for them. She will not keep any money from the café – half of it will go to pay for electricity and for somebody to look after it; the other half will be put into the school. She is considering using students to look after it, as it would both be a means for them to pay for their course and at the same time provide her with reliable and willing staff.

Sam told me when I was there that this is her life now, and that if she can help just one person to a better life, then she will be happy. I think she underestimates what she is doing and the effect she is having. But this is one woman who deserves all the support we can possibly give her,

and quite honestly, I feel that I could trust her with my life. So anything anyone can do to help, whether it's computers, money, clothes, books or just paying her a visit and telling your friends about her – I don't doubt for a second that it would be used wisely.

VitaMeal™ Production & Distribution

Back to Lumbadzi. One morning, after another 5 a.m. start, I had a tour of the VitaMeal plant. The early mornings were entirely my own choice by the way! At that hour, nobody else had made it out and it allowed me the pleasure of watching the stunning African sunrise – there really is nothing like it anywhere else on earth – and the Mtendere orphan village wake up. All whilst enjoying a cup of tea of course, grown in the southern part of the country. This was probably one of the most peaceful and most memorable experiences I had – sitting there every morning, watching the cooking fires get lit, water being brought, breakfast cooked, firewood collected for the rest of the day, teeth cleaned, public areas and doorsteps swept. It's funny – I normally prefer sunsets, but here, I found the sunrises much more beautiful. The sunsets rarely lasted more than a few minutes, at best, but the play of light before the sun made it past the horizon in the mornings set the sky on fire; it was truly magical.

The food plant was very impressive. Obet, the plant manager, took me around. The equipment was of extremely high quality, yet easy enough to work. Farmers from a fairly large area surrounding Mtendere, including the agricultural village over in Madisi, sell enormous quantities of maize and soy beans to the factory, where it gets roasted, cleaned and ground down to a fine powder before being mixed with the vitamin blend (imported from South Africa), then measured into bags of two kilos each. The factory is clean and modern and I was surprised at the enormous quantity of VitaMeal bags in stock! This shouldn't have come

as a surprise, I suppose – even if they produce more or less the same number of bags every day, the delivery dates and times will vary much more.

Rows and rows of VitaMeal, ready to be loaded onto the delivery truck. Production capacity is currently only at 50%, so more donations will mean the factory can produce more to feed more children.



The factory is not even close to having reached its maximum potential as far as production goes – I was told by the factory manager that they can produce around 6,000 bags every day, which since they often work Saturdays means a total production of around 150,000 bags every month. At present, the monthly order from NTC hovers between 50,000 and 80,000, so we can safely double our efforts without having to worry about them not keeping up!

Furthermore, when I spoke to Napoleon, he really emphasised the importance of creating ADPs. Infrastructure, communication and organisation – none of it comes close to what we would expect in Europe or in the States. If, in addition to that, they have to deal with hugely fluctuating numbers from one month to the next, it certainly doesn't make things any easier. I understood from Sid Henderson that this is being addressed right now – by estimating the number of donations and balancing them out over a six-month period, then making up for surpluses or shortages during the next six-month period. But focusing

on ADPs rather than individual donations would definitely take some of the pressure off.

As far as the organisation goes though, it is also being worked on – the fiancé of a medical student doing a placement at Blessings Hospital happened to be an accountant, so he is giving them a hand creating computer-based inventories and statistics over how much food is being produced and where it ends up. Not that there hasn't been anybody keeping track until now, far from it, but getting it into the computer systems will make it easier to control and easier to determine what can be done to improve the process in the future.

Once my tour was over, it was time to go out distributing. Using one of the two trucks remaining from his former business empire, hundreds if not thousands of bags were loaded up and off we went. We drove for about an hour into a much more rural area, leaving the paved road after about ten minutes and entering a part of the region where mud huts with thatched roofs were the only buildings to be seen. This could have been anywhere of course; the vast majority of Malawians live in such dwellings.

Wherever we passed, the kids would come running and screaming, but whether for the recognition of the truck as a bringer of food or simply because it was a truck I don't know. Stating your involvement with VitaMeal or the food plant, however, tended to bring about an amazing amount of good-will, both in Lilongwe and surrounding areas. I cannot stress enough what an enormous difference NTC is making and how aware of it these people are. It made me a bit uncomfortable at first – my personal involvement is only so big, and I did not feel like I should take credit for all of this. But I soon realised that I would not be doing these people any favours by telling them of the relatively small scale of my involvement so far – rather, they were happy to have someone

responsible to thank. Telling people how much I enjoyed Malawi and how much I hoped that we could and would do more, brought them more joy because it was coming from somebody "involved", rather than from a mere tourist, even if that would not quite accurately describe my role either. And although I have always found it a bit hard to swallow, seeing people thank you on film – it feels a bit staged, rehearsed – there should be no doubt that our work is appreciated beyond words. An enormous number of children are alive today only because of the combined efforts of NTC contributors and Napoleon, and that is simply huge.

The method of distribution varies a bit depending on who is to receive the food, but in general, the children in need are given a 12-month ticket and registered (in case they lose their cards), through the help of the local chief, who is in charge of making sure that everyone in his area who should get help receives it. There were a few hundred people at each of the sites we went to – some with tickets from numerous family members, balancing six or eight bags of VitaMeal on their heads by the time they turned back home. The excitement was great, but people remained calm; this was obviously not a new experience and patience speeds up the process. The calm amongst the children only remained until they realised that they could see themselves in the back of my camera – after that, I had an entourage of at least thirty of them, posing as soon as I turned their way, making natural photos a tad difficult. Even some of the adults were having a hard time hiding their curiosity, even though most of them were too shy, or perhaps too old, to make a big deal out of it. One older woman shoved a screaming boy of perhaps one or two in front of my lens, obviously much keener than the child to get him in a photo. But other than the photo-frenzy, I was very impressed by how smoothly the whole operation was executed, how calm everyone remained, particularly the children waiting in line, who showed tremendous patience.

It was a great mix of impressions of course. Boys playing football using numerous rags tied together – do you feel sorry for them because they cannot afford a ball, or happy for them because they are enjoying themselves? The VitaMeal distributed – do you feel sorry, because these people are starving and need it in the first place, or happy, because we are able to help?

It's impossible not to get emotional watching scenes like the ones I saw. Yet I found it difficult to express, even to myself, what it was I was feeling. With so much at once, it was almost impossible to get my mind working properly and at the time I actually found myself grateful that I had my photography to keep me distracted – I would have time to sort my feelings out later. Hopelessness, despair, anguish at what these people have to go through. And all the millions who don't even have the benefit of VitaMeal, who have nothing. How do you react to that? There's nothing you can do – not then, not there, and in many cases, not for these particular people – they might not survive another year, so by the time you have found a way to help it will be too late, although perhaps you can still help a brother, sister, another child. It's too big to take in.

I saw the same suffering in Zambia. Zimbabwe is even worse. Will it ever end? Can it? Briefly, "what's the point?" flashed through my mind. There's too much greed, too much selfishness in the world, too many people that benefit from poverty. And can we ever understand it? Can we ever even come close to imagining what it's like to fight for survival? To know that your luck will never change? To know that you will never do more than barely make it, that you will go hungry again, that your children might not live – and if they do, they have a life no better than yours to look forward to? I don't think so. I know I can't. We may think we can and say we can, but I think it's like imagining losing your

parents as a child, or the love of your life – impossible to imagine for anybody who hasn't experienced it. Yet they don't give up, do they? And so neither should we.

More and more, it dawned upon me what a difference we were making. We might not be able to save the entire nation today, but it isn't an impossible dream. I think it was good, in a sense, seeing so many places where we are not yet able to help – it put things into perspective. It's easy to become detached – we think so much in numbers, don't we? Feeding 60,000 children is great, but it's hard to relate to, to feel. But seeing so much misery, and then being able to single out just one face, and think that this child is alive today because of us – that's something I can't describe. And I'm truly grateful that I was able to experience this.



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