Six Kernels of Corn a Day

Wilfred, just two and a half years old, tightly clutched six kernels of corn in his tiny fist. Lethargic because of hunger, Wilfred leaned against his mother who held his 16-month-old brother, Manuel, in her arms. Mary Nachongo is thin and her rib cage juts out of her torn clothing. It’s been two days since she ate a small bowl of porridge, and the six corn kernels are Wilfred’s only meal of the day.

“I skip one or two days of food,” she explains. “That way, I will have something to give Wilfred, even if it’s only a handful of corn.” Wilfred carefully puts one precious piece of corn in his mouth and crunches, slowly. He wants to make it last. Something scares him and he starts to cry.

Without hesitation, Manuel reaches over and strokes his brother’s face until the tears stop and the crunching continues.

Satisfied that his older brother feels secure, Manuel tries desperately to suckle his mother. But she is producing little milk because she is seriously undernourished. His head lolls and he grips on tighter. Though he’s the age when most children attempt to walk, Manuel’s tiny limbs aren’t able to support his body.

Though severely malnourished, he is alert and can be saved. Just the fact that he responds to his brother’s fears shows that this child is aware of his surroundings. He is not yet at the point where starvation has left him numb and without hope.

ADRA is helping this young mother and her children with supplementary food aid, seeds, and medical help. Much more needs to be done, not just for Mary, but also for

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“Six Kernels of Corn a Day”

“If a free society cannot help the many who are poor, it cannot save the few who are rich.”

John F Kennedy
ADRA Canada’s Response

According to the Statistics Division of the United Nations, over four million people in Malawi are undernourished and some twenty-two percent of children under the age of five are moderately to severely underweight. Food security in Malawi is a major concern and in most cases the responsibility to provide food falls to the mother. Often children are withdrawn from school to support their mothers’ efforts in the search for food. ADRA Canada is working to bring positive change to the lives of the individuals affected by these challenges.

ADRA Canada in conjunction with the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), began the Malawi Agriculture Program in March 2004. The program targeted women-headed households. Many of the women lost their husbands to HIV/AIDS and have not been allowed to

Humming to Ease the Hunger

“Many people think he’s a very quiet boy,” Teresa Mateyu says with joy on her face, describing her three-year-old son, Chikondi. Clinging to his mother’s long skirt, he quietly hums a traditional African lullaby. Perhaps he wants to show his mother how secure he feels when she sings it to him at night.

“When Chikondi was born,” Teresa explains, “one of his aunts had just given birth to a baby who died a few days later. She asked me to name my son Chikondi, which means ‘love.’ We believe God gave our family love by giving me this son. Of my three children, he’s the most loving and inquisitive.”

It was noon when Teresa told her story to the ADRA workers, yet she and her children had eaten nothing that day. Their meager food supply had finished two days ago and she planned to spend the afternoon searching for pumpkin leaves and wild roots for their daily meal. Many roots are inedible and kill the people who eat them.

Chikondi hadn’t uttered one word of complaint. He’s so used to being without food that he doesn’t feel hunger anymore. If he eats, he eats. If he doesn’t, he simply cuddles up to his mother and hums quietly. When he’s really hungry, Chikondi hums.

His skin is covered with mosquito bites and bumps caused by a serious lack of Vitamin C. Fruit is a luxury they can’t afford, and children grow up in famine-stricken Malawi without the necessary nutrients they need for development. Teresa dreams that Chikondi and her other children will survive the “hunger” period, as they call it, go to school, and get good jobs that pay a steady income.

“I don’t want my children to have to struggle like me. Without an education, they will not be able to find work,” she says. When asked about her husband, Teresa is overcome with grief. Such an outward expression of pain is unusual for an African mother.

Struggling to beat famine, drought, and disease, villagers living in remote areas are no strangers to early and preventable death. It becomes a part of life. Having little access to adequate food supplies and medical help, they become resigned to their fate—often an early, preventable death. But the death of Teresa’s husband was dramatic and painful. And she has a hard time recounting the images of his final days.

“For a long time, he bled heavily from his nose,” Teresa said, with tears in her eyes. “He became very anemic and died at home. I’ve struggled alone in the field for two years now,” she explained, using the crop-planting season to remember how long it had been since he died. But she carries on for the sake of her children.
Orphans Raise Themselves

Kabongo village is spread out on one of Malawi’s hillsides in the Mpemba area. More than 2,000 villagers share the same problem: hunger. Far from the beaten track, on a steep incline, you’ll find a small house made from mud and straw. The roof made of bamboo and plastic bags, the black kind you use for garbage.

Because the family who lives there has very little income, there aren’t enough bags on the roof to keep out the rain, and it’s rainy season. The walls inside the boy’s bedroom are covered in mold. Eston Kazembe, the head of the family, is a 17-year-old boy who has raised his four brothers alone for the past seven years since his mother died. His father died when he was eight, and he has no idea what disease killed them. It is possible that they had AIDS.

“The day my mother died was the saddest of my life,” Eston says. “She was in a hospital for two months and I hadn’t seen her since the day they took her away. One day, someone told us she was dead. I wasn’t scared, only sad. My only thought was that life had to go on, and I set about the task of raising my four brothers.”

Faced by such a tremendous responsibility at just 10 years of age, Eston stopped going to school and looked for work weeding fields in surrounding villages. For one week’s work of eight hours a day, he can earn $6, and he gets work once every three months. They use this to buy seasonings for the porridge they eat, and in drought season they use it to buy maize. But Malawi’s drought has driven up the price of maize in the local market, and the boys can’t afford it.

When his mom died, Eston was 10, Kalonga was seven, Christophe was five, Bamsey was four, and Wyson was just three. Life is very hard for these boys. The nearest river is a brisk 15-minute walk down a steep hill, and when there is no rain, the river is dry.

You’d be surprised how well behaved they are, considering they’ve been alone for seven years. Eston is a tough, but loving, “parent.” He cooks their daily meal of porridge on some bricks outside the house, and he does the laundry. The younger boys are responsible for sweeping inside and out.

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take part in village affairs because they are regarded as the poorest of the poor.

The objective of this program was to train women in improved farming methods and food storage. Skills taught in the program included:

- Planting: proper spacing between plants in order to have healthy plants
- Manure Application: trained on advantages of using compost manure rather than expensive fertilizer
- Weeding: taught about the importance of weeding fields in good time and proper disposal of the weeds
- Soil and Water Conservation: taught how to conserve water and soil by planting veti va grass

In addition, farmers received training in rearing small livestock like poultry, rabbits, and goats.

This two-year program ended in June 2006 and a new program funded completely by ADRA Canada took its place. This new three-year project is called the Kalumba Food Security Program and will pick up where the old program left off. The program aims to increase food supply, reduce malnutrition and empower women by providing them with the necessary skills, tools and education to improve their lives.

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and helping to fetch water.

With ADRA’s help, this family is surviving. ADRA has given them seeds to plant, supplementary food aid to keep them from starvation while their meager crops grow, and hygiene supplies to prevent disease. We also help the smaller children go to school. “We would be in big trouble without ADRA,” Eston says.

When asked for his happiest memory in life, Eston shook his head and his eyes filled with tears as he spoke, “That’s easy. It was New Year’s Day this year. I took my brothers to church for worship and prayer, and the service made me very happy. Being close to God helps me to forget our pain and suffering.”

To reinforce hope, the boys have planted a tiny garden with one single flower surrounded by small stones. “It brings some beauty to an otherwise ugly life, and it reminds us of God’s love and the hope we have in ADRA,” Eston says.

Global Impact

Global Impact is a publication of the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) Canada. ADRA Canada welcomes comments, suggestions, and contributions for its news publications.

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