



# **Wage-Labour and Livelihood Strategies in Malawi's Plantation Economy**

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# The role of plantation agriculture as a model for development in Malawi

- Plantation agriculture was the backbone of Malawi's colonial economy, and Malawian agriculture to this day, is the legacy of this history.
- Malawi has continued to pursue an agricultural-led development strategy in the five decades since independence, with 'big agriculture' playing a critical role throughout each stage of Malawi's history.
- In the age of liberalisation, outward-looking trade policies have favoured direct foreign investment in agriculture, and this means continued support for the plantation sector into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

# The plantation as a mode of production

- How do we define a plantation?
- What makes plantation labour different than smallholder production?
  - “If they’re not working here [on the plantation], they’re just working in their fields. They may as well be working for a wage as wasting their time for nothing!” -Plantation Supervisor
  - “I’m always happy when [my wife and I] are working together in the garden. We can tell one another different stories. We can say, ‘no my wife, you must do that,’ and she can say, ‘no my husband, you must do that’, joking. Just chatting together. Now these days, I’m spending time by myself at work on hard tasks. Always afraid the boss will come, shouting, shouting, shouting. It’s no good. It’s better to buzz off here so we can spend good time together in our own gardens.” –Sugar worker
- Plantations: benefits and drawbacks?

# Livelihood Strategies in Detail: The Case of Three Sugar Workers

- Case Study 1: Thomas Nkhwazi
  - Full-time plantation worker; has access to substantial plot of his own land
  - Earns 500mk per day (15,000mk per month)
  - Monthly household needs are 30,000mk
  - Earns 245,000mk per year from his smallholder plot; grows enough food to eat
- Case Study 2: Ester Mbewe
  - Full-time plantation worker; has access to small plot of land; sells mandozi
  - Earns 500mk per day (13,500mk per month after taking Sundays off)
  - Monthly household needs are around 20,000mk
  - Earns nothing from her smallholder plot; grows enough food to eat
- Case Study 3: Dickson Manda
  - Full-time plantation worker; had to sell his land when the plantation expanded
  - Earns 500mk per day (13,500mk per month after taking Sundays off)
  - Food costs *alone* are 25,000mk... 11,500 more than his income allows
  - Has no other land, food, or income except to work additional *ganyu labour*

“At first, it was so painful. When I see the place I used to farm, it still pains me. I am always sad. But I am trying to forget. The money which the company paid for my land, it was not enough. It was just like somebody who was saying, ‘Oh I’m sorry, you can just have this thing’ but it was not enough to buy big land like I had before. It’s better to have the land than to work like this: every day tired, every day shouting. With land you have food, and maybe some money. Now you must wait for the end of the month to buy food. These days I feel too much hunger. I am only just waiting for my salary.”

-Dickson Manda

# Understanding the case studies

Three main points we learn from this:

- 1) Individual accumulation occurs outside the plantation economy.
- 2.) Plantation wage-labour may be a safety net for Malawi's poor, but the plantation system *produces* those poor, as well.
- 3.) The economics of the plantation system is predicated on an invisible, but critical contribution, not accounted for in economic calculations: food production. And this is the labour of Malawian women.

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