

# GUMBI NEWSLETTER 2020

Dear All,

**NDILIBWINO! BULIWANJI** (\*How are you, fine thanks" in the local Chichewa language)

Greetings from Gumbi, the small village in Malawi showing how just a little help with education can transform lives in some of the most disadvantaged places on earth

To all of our friends and supporters very many thanks! To anyone new to the **Gumbi Education Fund**, welcome!

First, the good news. When we told children at the local secondary school in Nambuma that we would buy a computer and pay the fees of anyone who passed their exams and were offered a place at university, we thought that one or two might one day qualify.

That was 2018. Since then, seven boys and girls have won places and are now studying everything from forestry and mathematics to engineering, accountancy and electronics. For a small rural school in one of the poorest countries in the world where only about 1% of children ever get to uni, this is stunning.

And now the bad news! There are no grants or loans available and the pound has collapsed in value since Brexit. We are victims of our success and are now having to find more money, not just for fees and computers, but just to keep helping the many children who want the chance of a decent education.

## TO RECAP

\***18 years ago** two in three children in the whole drought- and famine- prone central region of Malawi where Gumbi is found were illiterate and just one in 10 stayed at secondary school for more than a year or two. Most girls had little chance of any education at all and nearly all the boys had no option but to go on to scratch a living growing tobacco and maize.

\***Schools were falling down**, classes were huge, teachers had to work in terrible conditions and the result was an inward-looking society, children who lacked motivation and where families had no hope of change or betterment.

\***17 years ago**, following a piece in the Guardian, the Gumbi fund was set up. Several new primary and secondary school classrooms were built, and the fund paid the fees of around 50 children from Gumbi and other nearby villages. The adventure began.

\***Over the last 15 years** we have rebuilt two more primary schools and a dozen teachers' houses. We have built libraries in Mphaka, Mguwata and Gumbi villages and one in the Nambuma secondary school; the fund has provided solar lights for the schools and several hundred children; and it has stepped in with feeding programmes for primary schools during two food crises. It now pays for the full secondary education of more than 120 children a year and supports schools with pens and paper.



\*Results are now being seen. Joseph Jimmy, Yohane Lungu and Kennedy Jimmy are now qualified teachers. Yohane (below, left) received a prize last year from the minister of education for being the best primary school teacher in the capital, Lilongwe. He writes: “It was the most unforgettable thing in my life to be recognised like this”.

\*Of the 120 children who the fund put through secondary school in 2019, nearly half were girls, compared to perhaps 10-20% when we started.

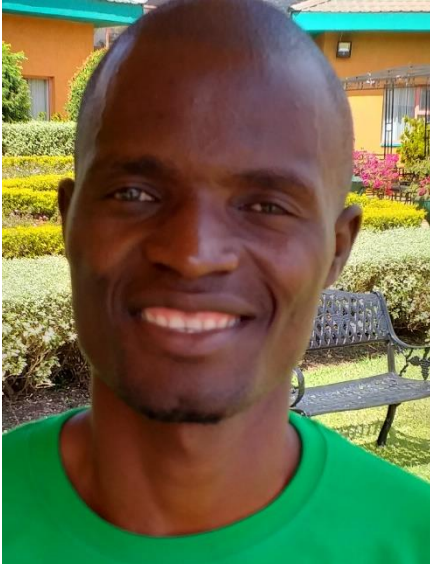
\*James Gomani graduated last year from the Catholic University in Blantyre (above, right) with the equivalent of a first. He now leads a team in one of Malawi’s biggest accountancy firms. He says: “It’s amazing how the future is becoming brighter and brighter”.

\*Justice Chukka, Benson Louis, Christopher Synduza Crispine Sundaza, Esau Kayesa, Felix Chisemphere, Stadiel Wachison and Trifonia Josephy [above] have started university. They are all very proud of what they have achieved so far.

\*The four small libraries are stocked with books by Bookaid International and are being well used, especially by infants and mothers. The university students are asked to help teach village children in the holidays as a way of repaying their fees.

\*The secondary school of St Martins, in Nambuma (below) has a new headmaster and is bursting at the seams with nearly 300 pupils, compared to just 190 only 10 years ago. Success has attracted more pupils, the children mostly now speak good English and they all say they want to go on to university or to learn a trade.

\*Here is Acreo Kamera, the headmaster, [below, centre]talking to us last November: “In the past pupils had no incentive to pass their exams. They said ‘no-one will, so why should we try?’ Now they have role models. Girls would drop out of school early, but the Gumbi fund brings them back. In the past they would get married and have children very young.”



## WE ARE STILL LEARNING

After 18 years we have reached a crossroads. We have learned that education takes time. When the Gumbi fund started in 2002, we told the villagers that we would not leave them after a year or two, but would stay with them through thick and thin. The fund and its administrator, the healthworker

Patrick Kamzitu, are now widely trusted. We now see that it takes a generation to convince naturally cautious people that education is worthwhile and years to see the results. We realise that it needs whole villages to support children to learn and decent schools for them and teachers to work in.

Now we have a problem. We know that what we do works, but we are not large and are ill-equipped to expand greatly. So what should our priorities be? Whose education should we prioritise given limited funds? It's great to get children to university, but when their families are penniless and they cannot possibly get a loan or a grant, it is just not fair to leave them, especially at the time of their greatest achievement. We'd love your opinions and ideas.

This is how it stands. Most university courses in Malawi last four years and cost about £600 a year; computers are compulsory and cost over £350, and staying in the cheapest hostel costs students about £1 a day for board and lodging. So, keeping a student at uni costs about £4,000 over the normal four years length of the courses. This could pay the secondary fees of more than 20 children a year.

If we pay for seven students, it means we will have to cut back on paying the school fees of many youngsters who are less academic but who desperately need help just to go to secondary school or learn a trade. So far we have not asked the fund to pay for computers or any board and lodging. This is being done out of personal donations.

Patrick Kamzitu suggests we rethink how our limited funds are distributed. "Parents do not need persuading now about the value of education as they did to start with. They can see it for themselves. Families can see the benefits of education and the suspicion about it that existed in the early days has gone. They are prepared to dig deep and pay a little. The message that education is valuable has definitely got through."

So, we plan to ask parents from next year to find 30% of the secondary school fees and we will stop sending children to private boarding school. This should save us enough to send the few to university. But what happens when more children pass their university exams? All ideas welcome.

In the meantime, we are looking urgently to see if there are any funds or institutions or individuals happy to subsidise the university students. If anyone has an idea, please let us know.

## **NEW CLIMATE, NEW WORMS**

When we first went to Gumbi at the height of a dreadful, country-wide famine in 2002, the village women insisted that education was the single thing that would prevent such disasters happening over and over again. They told us that only education could bring people out of poverty and help families access money and food during the annual "hungry season" and the occasional deep drought.

They were correct. These days all farmers need to be able to speak English, and read, write and count when they sell and buy seeds, crops and fertiliser. Education is no cure-all, but it is certain that without schooling people have no chance to avoid a lifetime of gruelling field or house-work and no choice in life.

Now, though, the villagers face another, growing menace: climate change. We asked Patrick to talk to farmers, teachers and others across the 12 villages he serves. This is his report: "In the past, the rains came regularly in early October but these days it is in December and they are heavier. We do not know what to expect. We are experiencing more heat in the summer months and it is also hotter

in the winter. Strange winds damage peoples' crops and homes and we are seeing new pests. Special worms which we have never seen before are destroying our crops and we do not know how to control them. The result is another hunger crisis and a lot of malnutrition in the villages. I believe 10% of the children are now malnourished. Harvests are badly affected. We need to adapt to climate change and would like to plant trees and learn new techniques to farm other crops but we need advice.

“You will still see deep poverty If you go to Gumbi and other Malawian villages, but there has been a change in the people, says Patrick: “Education is vital for these villages. We can see now how it transforms people and societies and there is a definite change in the way people think and also their way of living. There is now big gap between educated and illiterate people. None of these villages have had books before, or graduates, or teachers. It is a big change for them . The libraries are helping people go to school and raising their ambitions. We hope that the pupils we are teaching now will be able to help other pupils as well.”

### CAN YOU HELP, PLEASE?

Depreciation of the pound, inflation and exam success means we need to raise about £15,000 a year now for school and university fees, teaching materials and lamps. If you can spare anything it will make a difference to someone.

£5 pays for a child's pens and schoolbooks for a year

£20 pays for a family-sized solar lamp

£50 pays for a secondary education for a year

£100 pays 3 local teachers to give extra classes in school holidays

£1,000 pays for a university education for for one year

£5,000 pays for a village library to be built and dedicated in someone's memory

Please send cheques to Gumbi Education Fund, and send to:

The Forge,  
Pontyblew,  
Chirk. Wales  
LL14 5BH.

Standing orders are greatly appreciated.

The bank details are:

Gumbi Education Fund  
Co-operative Bank  
Skelmersdale WN8 6WT  
Sort code:08- 92-99  
Account no 65125373

TO RECAP:

This is where the money goes:

\* We are a very small education fund, and every penny raised goes straight to Malawi for education. Two individuals have left us legacies which have helped us to build the libraries and provide the lamps.

\*Village committees oversee all spending. Money is sent directly to their accounts. Patrick Kamzitu uses his local knowledge to identify and help orphans and families in particular need. We are now prioritising girls.

\*The fund pays no-one in Britain, and no expenses. There are three trustees. Once a year someone from UK visits the villages if possible, but they must pay their own way.

DO NOT HESITATE TO WRITE OR CALL 01691 778399 IF YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS

PLEASE HELP. IT WILL BE GREATLY APPRECIATED

**ZIKOMO KWAMBIRI = THANKYOU VERY MUCH**

JOHN VIDAL  
JENNY BATES  
PAULINE SMOUT  
(trustees)