**FOOD FOR LIFE MALAWI**

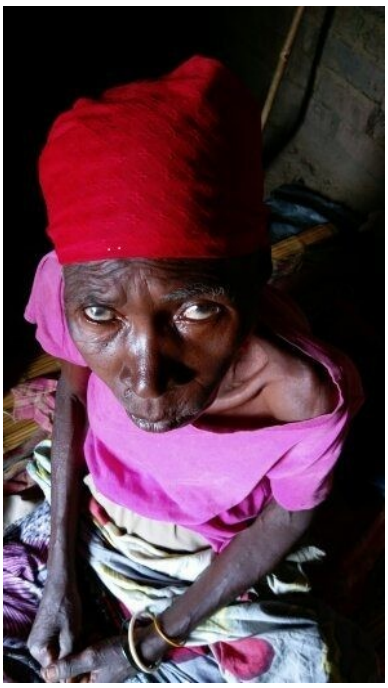
*Stichting The Art of Charity*

*A Malawian woman in her thriving maize field*

# From self-sufficiency to economic independence

*How Farmers First works – and what it sets in motion*

Food for Life Malawi has been working for more than fifteen years towards a simple goal: lifting Malawian families out of dependency for good. We do not hand out food – we enable families to grow it themselves. In this document we explain how our Farmers First programme works, the journey a participating family travels in three years, and the wider effects this has – on the family, on the soil, on children and young people, and on society as a whole.



*Witness Mlotha – who died of hunger before we could reach her. She has become the face of why this work matters.*

## The essence of Farmers First

Farmers First moves Malawian families permanently from dependency to self-sufficiency, and in time to economic independence. Our approach has three elements:

- We teach the participating farmer our method: planting in the ground with enriched compost, rather than on high ridges as is traditional. By enriched compost we mean animal manure mixed with finely chopped green material – a combination that both supplies nutrients and retains a great deal of moisture.
- We provide the necessary seed and fertiliser up front and free of charge, together with on-site guidance.
- The farmer then does the work entirely himself, on his own land. He is not a recipient – he is the producer.

The yield ratio compared with the traditional method is striking. On one acre (seven gardens) a traditional farmer typically harvests 14 bags of 50 kg – 700 kg per acre – and crop failure is not uncommon. With the FFLM method, that same farmer harvests 100 bags of 50 kg per acre, or 5,000 kg, without crop failure. That is a yield improvement of up to roughly sevenfold, on exactly the same piece of land.

*The difference in maize cobs: from the meagre cob on the left (traditional method) to the full, well-filled cob on the right (FFLM method).*

## Why plant in the ground, not on ridges?

The heart of our method is fundamentally different from what is common in Malawi. Traditionally, farmers plant on high ridges, in the belief that this improves drainage and root growth. In practice this has a major drawback: when it rains, nutrients are washed off the ridges and lost. The plant has to make do with what remains, and in drought there is insufficient moisture reserve.

We do precisely the opposite. We make planting holes in the ground of about 20 × 40 centimetres and 20 centimetres deep, and fill them with enriched compost. The effect is remarkable: the hole functions like a potted plant in the ground. The compost holds the moisture and nutrients exactly where the plant needs them – at the roots, not washed away elsewhere. At the same time it captures moisture from the air and dew, so the soil remains moist and productive even in drier periods.

*Carefully prepared planting holes using the FFLM method. Each hole is filled with enriched compost, so that moisture and nutrients stay close to the roots.*

This difference is visible in the Malawian landscape to any visitor. Anyone driving from Central Malawi northwards during planting season – early January – will see more and more farmers who have abandoned their traditional ridges and are planting on flat ground using our method. The visual contrast makes the spread of our approach visible to every traveller.

## Soil improvement and soil life

The FFLM method does not only produce a harvest in the short term – it also makes the soil itself richer and more vital. The enriched compost, manure mixed with green material, continually adds organic matter to the ground. This has three far-reaching consequences:

- Soil structure improves. The addition of organic matter loosens the soil, helps it absorb moisture better and retain nutrients longer.
- Soil life becomes active. Earthworms, fungi and micro-organisms find a rich habitat in our planting holes. In turn, they make nutrients available to the plant and keep the soil healthy.
- The soil becomes more fertile year by year. Where the traditional method gradually depletes the soil, our ground grows richer each season. It is a building system, rather than a depleting one.

*For the farmer, this means he not only brings in a good harvest today, but also leaves behind ever better soil for tomorrow's harvest – and for his children.*

## Scientific research: University of Bunda

Since the end of 2025, the University of Bunda in Malawi has been conducting independent scientific research into the FFLM method. The research is set up across two markedly different climate zones in Malawi, examining 35 different variants of growth and yield in total. In this way our approach is being tested systematically and scientifically under a range of conditions.

The first interim results reported by the researchers show a significant improvement in yield compared with the traditional method. The full and final report is expected in August 2026.

**For us this is an important development. What we have built up in fifteen years of fieldwork is now receiving independent scientific validation. It confirms what our farmers have shown us for years: the FFLM method works, and it works structurally.**

## Our cost per garden

The contribution of Farmers First is measured per garden. Our costs per participating garden are as follows:

| Cost item | Per garden |
|---|---|
| Direct costs (seed, fertiliser, on-site guidance) | **€ 40** |
| Indirect costs (organisation, transport, coordination) | **€ 20** |
| **Total cost per garden** | **€ 60** |
| Yield per garden (maize) | **ca. 500 kg (10 bags)** |
| **Our cost price for maize (all-in)** | **ca. € 0.12 per kg** |

*For comparison: the market price of maize in Malawi currently stands at roughly € 0.50 per kilo. Our cost price is therefore more than four times lower than the market price – because we do not buy, we grow. That is precisely the leverage by which every gift reaches so much further than a direct food purchase ever could.*

## The 10% repayment: a learning, self-sustaining programme

Farmers First is not a one-way street. We provide every participating farmer with seed and fertiliser, free of charge and up front. In return, the farmer signs a contract committing to return 10% of his harvest to us. In this way the farmer gains valuable experience of doing business, and the programme remains partly self-sustaining.

The maize that the farmers return to us, we sell. The proceeds from that sale are used for the implementation and expansion of the programme. This has no effect whatsoever on the number of people who eat from the harvest: the family keeps its ample surplus, and the 10% is delivered out of production that, without our method, would not have existed at all.

**In practice this repayment generates a significant share of our annual budget. In a large-scale programme this income stream can amount to up to one third of the budget required – as set out further on in this document. That makes Farmers First not only effective, but also financially sound and sustainable.**

## What does a gift do?

Because our cost is exactly € 60 per garden, and because one garden makes one family fully self-sufficient in year 1, it translates very simply. Every € 60 sets one family in motion. The table below shows what various contributions set in motion:

| Contribution | Number of gardens | What it sets in motion |
|---|---|---|
| **€ 60** | 1 garden | one family self-sufficient (ca. 5 people) |
| **€ 600** | 10 gardens | 10 families / ca. 50 people |
| **€ 6,000** | 100 gardens | 100 families / ca. 500 people |
| **€ 60,000** | 1,000 gardens | 1,000 families / ca. 5,000 people |

*Including the spin-off explained further on, the total reach per € 60 averages 1.4 families – or about seven people.*

## What does an annual budget of € 600,000 achieve?

To make the scale of our work visible, we show you what a full annual budget of € 600,000 achieves in a year. These figures follow directly from our cost price and method:

| Measure | With € 600,000 |
|---|---|
| Number of fully equipped gardens | **ca. 10,000 gardens** |
| Number of families directly supported | **ca. 10,000 families** |
| Number of people directly reached | **ca. 50,000 people** |
| **Including spin-off (+40%)** | **ca. 14,000 families / 70,000 people** |
| Total maize harvest thereby produced | **ca. 5,000,000 kg (5,000 tonnes)** |

Added to this is the effect of the 10% repayment by the farmers themselves:

On a harvest of 5,000 tonnes of maize, our farmers return 10% to us under their contract – 500,000 kg of maize.

At the prevailing farmgate price of MWK 800 per kilo, and an exchange rate of MWK 2,000 per euro, this represents a sale value of about € 200,000.

**That is one third of our annual budget of € 600,000, raised by the farmers themselves.**

**With those proceeds we can equip about 3,300 additional gardens the following year – growth achieved without external funds, paid for by the farmers who themselves benefit from the programme. This is the heart of a learning, sustainable and self-sustaining development model.**

## Our goal: by the end of 2029

The work of Farmers First does not stand still. Our goal is to be working, by the end of 2029, with 7,000 participating farmers, each cultivating one acre of land – that is, seven gardens per farmer. This is the level at which a farmer becomes fully independent: he provides not only for his own family, but produces enough to feed many other families through sales, sharing and market distribution.

Because one garden under our method provides a family with maize for a whole year, the combined 49,000 gardens of these 7,000 farmers can provide 49,000 families with their annual need. By the end of 2029 we will thereby reach a scale at which the FFLM method is no longer a regional project but a substantial pillar of Malawian food security.

| Measure | End of 2029 |
|---|---|
| Number of participating, producing farmers | **7,000** |
| Land area per farmer | **1 acre (7 gardens)** |
| Total number of gardens in production | **49,000** |
| **Number of families supplied with maize for a full year** | **49,000 families** |
| **People eating from the harvest every day of the year** | **245,000 people** |

| | |
|---|---|
| Including spin-off (+40%) | **ca. 68,600 families / 343,000 people** |
| Total annual maize harvest | **ca. 35,000 tonnes** |

**By the end of 2029 we will thereby provide 245,000 Malawian men, women and children with their plate of nsima every day, all year round. Including spin-off, that figure is expected to reach approximately 343,000 people.**

For the 7,000 producing farmers combined, the surplus also generates an estimated annual income of € 11 million – a substantial economic boost for rural Malawi. That is the scale at which we want to work, and that we are growing towards step by step.

## Food consumption in a Malawian family

To understand what 500 kg of maize per garden means for a family, we describe what our participants have consistently told us for more than ten years about their daily eating pattern. Nsima – maize porridge eaten as a block-shaped piece – is the main meal in Malawi and is eaten once a day. One piece weighs approximately 147 grams of dry maize. The portions are as follows:

| Family member | Per day |
|---|---|
| Father | 3 pieces (ca. 441 g) |
| Mother | 2 pieces (ca. 294 g) |
| Child (per child) | 1 piece (147 g) |

For about two months a year – the lean months before the harvest – everyone receives half of the usual portion. This is one of our most important reasons for working with the FFLM method: with a sufficient harvest and a surplus, this hungry season is bridged.

*Based on these portion sizes and ten years of field experience, the annual consumption of an average family comes to about 10 bags of maize of 50 kg, or 500 kg. This is exactly the yield of one garden under the FFLM method – hence our choice to begin in year 1 with one garden per family.*

## Three years: from self-sufficiency to economic independence

The effect of a contribution does not stop with the first year's harvest. What is financed is in fact the starting point of a three-year journey in which the family grows step by step from self-sufficiency to a tradable surplus. The system works as follows:

| | Area | Harvest | Result for the family |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Year 1** | 1 garden | 10 bags | Fully self-sufficient: the harvest covers exactly the family's own annual need (10 bags). |
| **Year 2** | 2.5 gardens | 25 bags | Self-sufficiency (10 bags) plus a surplus of 15 bags that can be sold. |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Year 3** | 7 gardens (1 acre) | 100 bags | Self-sufficiency (10 bags), customary sharing with relatives and neighbours (10 bags), and a surplus of 80 bags for sale. |

*A Malawian woman in her thriving maize field – lush green, self-sufficient, with the prospect of an ample harvest (December 2020).*

## The income that follows

Following the practical pattern – selling the surplus at the prevailing farmgate price of about MWK 800 per kilo, converted at an exchange rate of MWK 2,000 per euro – produces the following income build-up per family:

| | Surplus for sale | Proceeds in MWK | Proceeds in EUR |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Year 1** | — (self-sufficiency) | — | — |
| **Year 2** | 15 bags / 750 kg | MWK 600,000 | **ca. € 300** |
| **Year 3** | 80 bags / 4,000 kg | MWK 3,200,000 | **ca. € 1,600** |

**To put this figure in context: in rural Malawi families often live on a total annual income well below € 1,000. A saleable surplus of € 1,600 in year 3 means, for the family, the difference between mere survival and being able to pay for school fees, clothing, medical care and small investments – from their own resources, without outside help. That is the true meaning of economic independence.**

## The spin-off: how a gift multiplies

The power of Farmers First is, moreover, that our method spreads of its own accord. When a traditional farmer sees that his neighbour harvests seven times as much from the same piece of land, without crop failure, joining is not optional. People queue up to take part, or try to apply the method themselves.

This is literally visible in the landscape. Anyone driving from Central Malawi northwards during planting season – early January – sees farmers everywhere planting on flat ground instead of on the traditional high ridges. These are the farmers who have learned our method from their neighbours or acquaintances and have begun applying it independently. The visual contrast between flat planting and traditional ridges makes this spread visible to every visitor.

On the basis of this observable adoption we use a cautious estimate of 40% spin-off: for every ten families we directly support, we estimate that some four additional families take up the method independently. This means that every gift in reality achieves a greater reach than the directly funded gardens alone – the effect multiplies, without additional resources being required.

## What this means for children, young people and society

The consequences of Farmers First reach far beyond the harvest itself. When a family no longer has to spend all its time on mere survival, room emerges for development. We see a number of clear patterns in this from the field.

### Children get a better and healthier life

Sufficient and good-quality food means that children grow and develop normally. Crop failure and hunger – which occur regularly in the traditional situation – weigh heaviest on children: under-nutrition causes both physical and mental developmental delay. In the families working with our method this disappears.

In addition, something practical but fundamental applies: children can go to school all year round. In the traditional situation, children often stay at home during the lean months, either to help in the fields or because there is no money for school fees and school supplies. For families with their own harvest and a saleable surplus this is no longer the case. The step from survival to learning is made.

### Girls become more independent and self-reliant

For girls and young women, the FFLM method has its own important significance. When a family is economically independent, daughters no longer have to marry young to ease the economic pressure on the parental home. A girl can complete her schooling, gains room to choose her own future, and ultimately to marry whoever she chooses. This is a continuing development that works through across generations: the daughters of today become the independent mothers and grandmothers of tomorrow.

### Food security prevents violence

Hunger and food insecurity are not only personal suffering – they are also a major driver of social unrest and violence. When people constantly have to fear the next harvest, tension rises – within families, between neighbours, and on a wider scale in society. Food security is therefore not only a matter for the family but also an important condition for peace and stability.

### A future in one’s own country

Finally, food security has a dimension that reaches beyond the borders of Malawi. When people in their own country lack sufficient prospects, the urge arises to seek a future elsewhere. The journey to Europe is then often a dangerous and uncertain undertaking.

But even for those who do make the crossing, the price is high. People are separated from their parents, their land, their community, their mother tongue and the culture in which they grew up. African culture differs fundamentally from European: in family ties, in community life, in the way of dealing with time, with elders, with faith. Anyone who is forced to find themselves in an entirely different world is often more deeply uprooted than they had anticipated – even when material conditions improve.

**For us this is an important reason to continue working in Malawi. When a family can build a good future in its own country – with sufficient food, an income of its own, children in school and prospects for generations – then the need to move elsewhere falls away. People can then remain where they are rooted: with their parents, in their language, in their community. That is in the interest of the Malawian himself, in the interest of his family, and ultimately also in the interest of Europe.**

## Climate resilience and generations

The children of the families we support grow up with our method and apply it naturally on their own land when their time comes. The knowledge thereby becomes a lasting possession of the family and of the village.

Decisive in this is that families working with the FFLM method experience no crop failure in practice. The enriched compost – manure mixed with green material, placed into the ground in planting holes – uses the moisture present in the air and the dew retained in the compost. As a result, the soil remains moist and productive even in drier periods. In this way the consequences of climate change – irregular rainfall and longer droughts – are largely neutralised.

**Every contribution therefore funds not only the food of today but also embeds a climate-resilient form of agriculture that keeps families self-sufficient year after year, and generation after generation.**

## Assumptions and ranges

In full transparency, we set out the assumptions on which this document rests:

- Cost € 60 per garden (€ 40 direct + € 20 indirect); average yield 500 kg of maize (10 bags of 50 kg) per garden.
- A Malawian family on average comprises five people (father, mother, three children). The portion sizes – father 3 pieces, mother 2, child 1 – are based on ten years of consistent field experience; one piece weighs approximately 147 grams of dry maize.
- The three-year build-up (1 – 2.5 – 7 gardens) is our standard growth path for a Farmers First family; practice shows that families share about 10 bags with relatives and neighbours in year 3.
- The 10% repayment is laid down in a contract that every participating farmer signs in advance.
- Income calculation: farmgate price MWK 800 per kg, exchange rate MWK 2,000 per euro (May 2026). Both the maize price and the exchange rate fluctuate; we use current and cautious figures.
- The 40% spin-off is a cautious estimate based on observable adoption in the field, not a measured percentage. We deliberately stay on the low side; in practice, the spin-off is visibly greater year after year.
- The scientific validation of the FFLM method by the University of Bunda is not yet complete at the time of writing; the first interim reports show significant yield improvement, with the complete report expected in August 2026.

This document focuses on maize as the basic food and as a saleable product. A complete meal also requires relish (vegetables, beans and sometimes fish), cooking fuel and labour. The figures in this document show what a contribution achieves at the level of the most basic food security and the emerging independent farm – the foundation on which everything else can be built.

## Would you like to join us?

*Every € 60 sets one family in motion.*

Stichting The Art of Charity – Food for Life Malawi

**IBAN: NL29 RABO 0118 3557 32**

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www.foodforlifemalawi.com • info@foodforlifemalawi.com