

CHAIRMAN'S BLOG | VISIT TO MALAWI, JANUARY 2010

PART 1

The trip from London to Lilongwe was a long one and a tad boring. Apart from the odd funny moment I relieved my boredom with watching the movies on the flights. I like Johnny Depp but thought his new movie was dung.

One incident that had me laughing and highlights some of the problems they have in Africa over education. Our plane had to stop at Lusaka, Zambia to let passengers off & on and when the new passengers arrived it was quite obvious lots of them had never flown before. Each of them had to be shown to their seat as they could not count and did not know the alphabet. So sitting on seat 33F maybe easy for us folks but not in Africa. I actually started helping people as the flight attendants could not cope.

After about 20 hours travelling I landed at Lilongwe airport to be greeted by my friend Zak. He is an amazing guy and for £20 he gets my cases, fills in my visa, gets my passport stamped and gets me out of the airport before some are even off the plane. On the way home he always gets me into the VIP lounge and taken to the plane by private car. Always good fun when folk are looking at you and wondering if you are somebody important or not and then they see you taking an economy seat and get disappointed.

Unfortunately I was in the air when Malawi won their first game in the African nations 3 - 0 against Bougie and his mob. This place is now bouncing and full of anticipation. Reminds me of the optimism we used have with Scotland. The Malawians are making all sorts of noises that if they win their next game they will win the tournament - brilliant!!! Hats off to them as most of them have nothing much to shout about but here they are with the world now looking at their football results. The second game is tomorrow and I am really looking forward to watching it on tv with the locals.

Anyway back to Malawi and after getting my car hire sorted (4x4 type thing) I had to put fuel in it. It is £1 a litre of diesel over here and £1.10 for unleaded. For one of the poorest countries in the world this place is extortionate. The problem the government have is that they do not export much so to generate money they tax everything. The only other ones making money are all the Indian & Chinese guys who own all the shops etc in the city.

Last night I was woken at 1am by my room shaking (not had any drink or drugs) and genuinely thought I had imagined it until I was told at breakfast that we had a small earthquake last night. Registered at 4 ish on the richter scale. Maybe I would have been better on the booze!!!

Today has been spent getting all my visits sorted and contacting the proper people. This is key as in Malawi nothing goes to plan and no one is on time. They would not bat an eyelid at being 2 hours late. That is Africa for you.

I make my first visit to the village tomorrow and I am really looking forward to it. It will be great to see the people again and get discussions ongoing about building the primary school. Hopefully I will also get a chance to go to the nursery that we support tomorrow but if not it will be Monday as Friday is a national holiday here and the country comes to a standstill. (not that it runs much quicker than that on any other day) Already the time I have here is being squeezed but hopefully I will get to complete all of my plans.

As I start to visit the villages etc I will update this blog and add some pics. I have with me the Rangers Media old football Rangers kit plus JJB donated some Rangers kids tops - thanks to you both. I also bought 120 kids t-shirts in Primark before I left at £1 each so it will be fun handing them out with the load of flip-flops I have. Hell knows how I managed to get on the plane with all that stuff. 2 cases weighing 26kg each plus hand luggage that my shoulder is still recovering from. Thank god Kenya Airways have not been taken over by Ryanair.

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PART 2

Thursday was to be a big day in Malawi as the expectation of heavy rain and the Malawi football team expected to win in the evening. The buzz was really quite exciting and, as if the plan had been written, the afternoon brought the expected downfall with additional thunder and lightning. The locals were over the moon as the rain had been so scarce here that most folks had to re-plant after going a month without rain - and this is supposed to be the rainy season. This lack of rain already means that crops will be poor this year and they really need an hour of rain every two days to give their re-planted seeds a chance.

During the morning I went to visit Mother Superior's Orphanage. The work the nuns do here is really quite amazing and I love visiting the kids here. There are about 70 children, from newborn to five years old, and they are all amazing, healthy children who have been shown so much love. The sisters feed the children three times per day plus two snack breaks. Every day the kids are washed and allowed to play in the yard. They love visitors and getting their pictures taken. Like all children they like to play games and I spent a couple of hours with them.

The nursery Moni Malawi supports is overseen by Mother Superior's Orphanage and it was great to get an update from her. I am visiting the nursery on Monday but sister Linda tells me that the little malnourished kids I saw on my last visit six months ago are now healthy kids that have learned their alphabet and their numbers and can speak good English for their age. They all now have school uniforms and school bags and as things are going so well the sisters put a Christmas party on for them. I am looking forward to seeing the kids myself and I cannot thank the sisters enough for making this project a success. Who would have thought that Moni Malawi, supported by RangersMedia, would be working hand in hand with the nuns of the Mother Theresa Orphanage. That is what makes us champions!

After a boring afternoon making phone calls and meeting people I prepared myself for the big game and what better place to watch it then with the locals in a bar called Chemelion owned by a Scottish Rangers fan called Stewart. He is a tremendous lad and has been a great help to me giving advice etc. The place was packed with the middle class Malawians all dressed up and ready to party. Every pass forward was greeted with a cheer, and a corner kick was like a goal. Unfortunately the other mob did not follow the script and scored two quick second half goals and the party was over. To be fair to the locals they all applauded their team at the end, dusted themselves down and prepared for Monday's game to clinch qualification.

I also think Malawi deserve praise for wearing loose fitting shirts rather than the skin tight tops the other countries are wearing, although if I was built like a tank with a great six pack I would want the tight shirts! In all seriousness even in football you can see the physical difference between Malawi and some other African nations. Malawi has had years of malnutrition that stunts growth and the Malawian people are a long way behind their neighbours in a physical sense.

Friday brought about my first visit to our village, Kambudzi, where we are building the primary school. Although the journey is just over an hour from the city the last few miles are across what cannot even be described as dirt tracks. Any heavy rain makes the road impassable even in a 4x4. As it was a holiday there was no school that day but word travelled quickly that I was in the village. The chief left a meeting of area chiefs to speak to me as he wanted to confirm that he could go back and boast to fellow chiefs that we were building his village a school. It was great to see the kids and school teachers etc. I brought a load of food and sweets for the kids and asked them to be prepared for me coming back on Wednesday for a meeting with the committee, chief, head teacher, PTA etc.

Kambudzi 'school' at present consists of six trees, each with a blackboard. That is it! No buildings or classrooms - so it is a great place for us to build. Although they have no physical school, they have a great set-up and have stacks of enthusiasm. Better still they are want to do this in partnership with Moni Malawi and not just accept gifts. All through this project they will have commitments to make or they know the project will be stopped or cancelled.

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The village shared with me the classroom numbers, which highlights the problems the school, and indeed Malawi in general, has to overcome. Primary 1 has over 200 kids, primary 2 has 120 kids, primary 3 has 80 kids etc. Part of this is sadly due to death, part of it is due to the kids' parents needing them to work the fields as they get older and stronger and part of it is down to the fact the school has no buildings and the kids walk miles to neighbouring schools. You simply cannot teach kids under trees when it is raining. These numbers were a shock to me and confirmed again in my own mind that Moni Malawi made the correct decision is choosing Kambudzi primary school.

I have told them I have the Rangers Media football strips with me and I will give them out on Wednesday and get some good pics. Their love of football and football strips is amazing and the way they bound about in bare feet is amazing. Almost all of them have no skill, but hey if trophies were won on enthusiasm then they would lift the world cup.

After a few days of admin things I get the feeling again of why I am in Malawi and what we are trying to achieve. It is easy for people to knock what we are trying to do and say that charity should stay at home but I would defy anyone to visit this village and tell me these kids are not worthy of our support. They deal with death on a weekly basis but have the world's largest smiles every time you see them.

PART 3

The weekend here gave us more heavy rain and since I've been here I have hardly seen the sun. Well, it is the rainy season.

On Saturday it was time to visit the orphanage again and this time I timed it right and the kids were all hyper. I love going to this place and the children love a wee cuddle. They all sat nice and quiet until I brought the biscuits and lollipops out the bag and then they went wild. It was hilarious! The sisters quickly gained control again and the kids all waited patiently on their sweets. Their faces were brilliant as they enjoyed the taste so much. I spent all afternoon there and had a real good laugh. The orphanage does not allow visitors to take photos but I have managed to get myself into the good books and was allowed a few snaps. Great kids and a great place.

Sunday took me to the village of Kaponda that is supported by the Betty Cunningham International Trust. It was a chance meeting with Betty that got me addicted to Malawi and I have visited Kaponda village a few times so I was welcomed like a long lost brother. The work that the BCIT has done here is simply amazing and Betty herself is hero worshipped by everyone in the village. It was great to catch up with the folks here and get updates on how things are going. Thankfully in Kaponda all is going well and the kids have a nursery that feeds the children twice a day and the benefit to them is huge.

As it is rainy season my journey to Kaponda was a good laugh as the roads (dirt tracks) were pretty bad at times and my truck slid more than a few times.

As I have now visited Malawi a few times I am always finding ways to do things a little more cheaply. For example when I take food to the village like maize, sugar, rice plus the customary sweets for the kids I now buy from the trading centres that are generally only used by the locals. I have grown to love this experience as not only is it a huge saving I love the game that develops. In Malawi there is a local price and then a price for the Mizungu (white man). Thankfully I know how it all works and let them tell me the prices then tell them that I am Malawian and if they want the sale they can forget about their inflated prices. This brings a big smile to their face and then they agree to give me the correct price. Honestly it is a superb experience! I was buying mangos from a guy and he told me that the small ones were 10 kwacha and the big ones 20 kwacha. Now this is like 8p and 16p and would be a great price back home but even though they were so cheap I knew he was at it. I told him my story and him and all his mates started laughing and said yeah ok they are 5 kwacha and 10 kwacha. I bought everything he had for about a fiver and he was over the moon and in proper Malawi style asked me to come back tomorrow as he would have more stock. Part of the reason for telling you this is to give an example of how safe Malawi actually is. I would regularly be the only Mizungu amongst hundreds of local people who have nothing or virtually nothing yet I have never felt threatened or unsafe.

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A Sunday in Malawi is like what it used to be like in the UK years ago. Nobody does much and everything is closed or perhaps open for only a few hours. Whether it is in the city or the villages people generally attend church then have a day of rest chatting with friends and spending time with the family. No Sunday afternoons on the bevvvy out here (well not for many folks).

Monday is the big day! Malawi have one last chance to qualify in the African Nations Cup and they have to beat Mali, although a draw in the other game would mean they only need a point. The game is a 6pm kick-off local time and the game is the only thing folks want to discuss today.

In the morning I went to visit the nursery which was a brilliant experience as it was six months since my last visit and it was great to see the kids again. With them now being fed daily there is a definite improvement in the condition of the kids. They now all know their alphabet and numbers and are really good at English. It is brilliant to hear them singing and a few of the songs they have actions as well and some of it is hilarious.

Although most of the kids are in good health there are a couple who have had their difficulties. I was taking a photo of all the children individually for the Moni Malawi Sponsor-a-Child campaign when I noticed a kid with a badly swollen tummy. I asked why as I thought this was usually caused by malnutrition and obviously the kids are being fed in the nursery daily. It turns out the poor boy has had malaria that many times that his system is really low and therefore vulnerable. This has caused him further problems with his spleen. What a magic wee boy he is as well and he has a wonderful big smile. I've asked his mother to take him to hospital as her boy clearly has problems. That leads to another issue here in Malawi as you can wait so long to see a doctor and the distance to get to one can be many miles. When you consider that people have no transport, have land to farm, other kids to feed etc. then a visit to the doctor can be a two day exercise.

The second child I was taken aback with was when I looked at the paperwork and noticed one of the children was eight years old. Obviously with this being a nursery I asked which kid and why. Well I was amazed when this wee tot stood up. There is no way she was more than three or four and my automatic response was that someone was at it and pulling an asylum seeker line at UK customs. It was then explained to me that the child had really bad stunted growth. The sister stood her next to her sibling who was 3 years younger than her and you would have sworn it was the other way around. Stunted growth is a huge problem in Malawi with 46% of kids affected by it in some degree. Stunted growth is generally caused by malnutrition.

After catching up with emails it was time to watch the big game. I headed back over to Stuart's bar, Chameleon, and watched it with him and his mates. Unfortunately I was 15 minutes late and missed the kick-off and Malawi were already two goals down! The first one was after 37 seconds and was a nightmare for the keeper. The second half saw Malawi creating lots of chances and after pulling a goal back their number nine missed a van Vossen-type sitter. The atmosphere was brilliant and we all thought they were going to do it as the result in the other game was going Malawi's way, but unfortunately Mali scored a third from a breakaway and the party was over. It looks like Scotland has taught Malawi a lesson in hard luck football stories. So near but yet so far!

PART 4

On Tuesday morning I went out to visit the village of Chipsea which has had some support by the St. Andrews Trust based in Glasgow. The directors of that charity built a small school here which supports a couple of hundred kids.

The village of Chipsea is incredibly poor and I have to admit it is not my favourite village to visit. Some of the men in this village drink the local moonshine and there is definitely more desperation here than some of the other villages I have visited. Some of these problems may stem from the fact that the chief is only 29 and actually looks like he is 21. There are also more Muslim Malawians in this village and historically in Malawi the Muslims did not appreciate the need for education and therefore did not send their kids to school. As Muslim Malawians generally have more than one wife they also tend to have bigger families and hence more kids that do not go to school.

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The lads at St. Andrews Trust gave me some money to take some supplies to the school. I went with a truck load of maize, rice, fresh vegetables, eggs, sweets and footballs for the boys and volleyballs for the girls. Through past experience visiting Chipsea it is important that the supplies are delivered to the school teachers and are stored in the school because if anything is delivered to the chief he keeps it or shares it amongst the villagers. Now it would be great to help everyone but the whole idea of most of the charities over here is to educate and feed the children and unfortunately it is just too much to try and support entire villages/districts.

After unloading all the goodies I chatted to the chief and the teachers and asked how things were going and what problems they had. They told me that the local water well was broken and the nearest alternative was many miles away so the locals are drinking dirty water. The water board had visited and the estimated cost of replacing parts and fixing the well was about £200. They also have a shortage of school jotters and pencils. The lads at St. Andrews Trust are good lads who do tremendous work and after informing them they will now go about fixing the problems they have at Chipsea.

The reason to tell you this part of the story is that it is ok to build schools and water wells etc. but Malawi needs ongoing support. A lot of projects fail after people have done tremendously well to raise funds and build schools etc. but the ongoing maintenance is left to the villagers. Initially that would make a bit of sense but when a community has a £200 bill to pay and over 60% are unemployed, most have no money at all and others make £20 per month. So basically if St. Andrews Trust had walked away from this village then no one would ever fix the water well. Also the school would stop being used as much as they would have no stationary so the kids would walk further to another school who could supply what they need. It really is so important to look at these projects with a long-term plan to support them.

Previously when I have visited Chipsea it has always been very difficult to give the kids sweets as they get so few visitors that there is a greed mentality and they tend not to share as much here as they usually do in Malawi. Normally if kids in Malawi had a packet of sweets then they would share them equally amongst friends. To get over this problem the last time I visited I asked some of the older children to give them out. That did not work either as folks swamped them and then there was chaos. On this occasion I was not in any mood to be swamped as it took me long enough to buy all the food at market after my usual haggling routines. This time I asked the chief to organise it and told him I would like the children in one big line and when he gave each one sweets they had to stand in another area to stop them joining the line again. As the chief is so young and I always thought lacked respect by his people I thought this would end up in the usual chaos that happened on previous visits. To my amazement and within ten minutes he had all the children lined up in perfect order ready to dish out the sweets. Twenty minutes later it was all done and the whole process was brilliant. I told the chief how impressed I was and he more or less told me well what do you expect I'm the chief. The funny thing is that in each visit to Chipsea the chief has always been there and watched me try to assemble some order. Thinking about it now he must have been pissing himself at me! I suppose that is 1-0 to Chief Chipsea.

On Tuesday night I met up with a brilliant guy called Dean who is a fitness coach for Bolton Wanderers. His story is amazing and hopefully one day I will get to share it with you. His desire to help the poor people of his country is amazing and if everyone in Malawi was like him the country would make huge strides forward. Recently he shipped over 10,000 football shirts to Malawi from the UK and that is a fantastic achievement. It was great chatting about football and Malawi with him and we both agreed that football is so big in Malawi that it is definitely a way to bring support to this country as long as it also involves education.

Wednesday morning was an early start as I was due back at our own village Kambudzi. I had left maize for them a few days earlier and the plan today was to meet all the children as they were being taught then the children would stay behind and be fed.

I stopped at the local trading centre and bought more maize, rice and fresh vegetables to add to the trolley load of sweets, biscuits and crisps that I had bought in the cash & carry in the city. I surpassed myself this time and managed to buy the maize for cheaper than I had ever done previously and I felt quite chuffed as I was no longer being seen as someone to try and rip off but rather

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someone they want to do business with due to the volumes that I buy in. The worst part of buying locally is just the time that it takes but when you are saving up to 50% of what you pay in the city then it is well worth the wait as that means more food goes to the school kids.

I was slightly behind schedule (suffering from Malawi time) but as I drove into the village I could see the kids sitting under the trees having their school lessons. That all stopped when they saw me as they knew I was the sign that meant they could have some food and get their wee party started. A couple of days earlier I left a few sacks of maize plus fresh veg and sweets, biscuits etc. This was now to be dished out to the children so they were all high as kites. All this plus I brought another load with me and as they could see into my truck they got even more excited.

Before the party started I made a visit to each standard level (primary year to us) and asked the kids questions etc. The responses was great and they are all very much looking forward to having a school building to learn in rather than sitting under a tree. Once this was complete I had a meeting with the village head chief, his junior chiefs, the committee, the PTA and the school teachers to discuss the building project and plans etc. Hopefully the school will start getting built in April and will be complete three to four months later.

So now the business stuff was over it was time to get the party started. Some of the woman of the village had been using the supplies to make lunch. It was a porridge type thing and to be honest it looked awful. They had a great set-up for feeding the kids as they had built temporary sinks with flowing water and got the kids to wash the plate they had brought to school (they knew they were being fed) and then they got their big portion of porridge then sweets etc. With 420 mouths to feed it was quite the operation but it all went without any major problems. The kids loved it and everyone was singing songs and, well, behaving the way kids do.

After the grub was finished and there was absolutely nothing left it was time for the football game they had arranged for my benefit. Six months back on one of my visits to the school I had a kick about with them and they enjoyed it so much they expected me to play again but foolishly I was only wearing flip flops so could not get too involved. Anyway Kambudzi A were playing Kambudzi B and the two teams lined up with the different Rangers shirts I left them the last time I was here. It was amazing to see as the kits still looked brand new. All this way out in deepest Malawi, Africa and I am watching Rangers A v Rangers B.

To their great joy and pleasure I asked them to wait a few minutes before starting the game. I then produced the RangersMedia shirts and another load of Rangers shirts donated by JJB. So each team now had two kits and in all we had enough Rangers shirts for four teams. Amazing, there are four different full sets of Rangers shirts! It is safe to say that all 420 kids at Kambudzi primary school are Rangers fans. In addition to this Jim Hannah had given me some Rangers ties that I presented to the teachers and the chief and those guys were over the moon, so even the teachers now have a Rangers connection.

Obviously I was taking a lot of photos of all the kids and I also took quite a few of the football teams. I had got a few banners made up to say thank-you to folks who raised so much money to help these kids. During taking these photos I was telling the kids to smile and they all had terrific big grins. Whilst taking these pics I noticed one lad was intimating my laugh. I started to change my style of laugh and every time I did he copied me. Soon the other kids knew what was going on and they also joined in. Now I had two football teams worth of kids taking the piss out of me by copying my laugh. It was funny as hell and goes to show that wherever we go in the world children are simply children and do not change regardless of the circumstances.

I stayed for the full game and it was won quite comfortably by the A team. It was a great day that I enjoyed so much and every day you spend in the village and at the school convinces me more that we are doing the correct thing and have chosen the right school to support.

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As I write this blog now I am thinking back to the cost of the day and the enjoyment it created. For the food and sweets etc it may have cost about £200 to £300. With 420 kids that is less than £1 a kid for them to have a wee treat and enjoy a good meal, have some sweets and enjoy themselves. Amazing!

PART 5

Thursday was a day I was really looking forward to as I had organised a party in the nursery. I had left money with the teacher and the supervisor to get rice, chicken and vegetables etc and I would bring the rest.

Well the kids thought they had all their Christmases in one day and they were as high as they possibly could be with excitement. Each of the 35 children (some had left to start school and will be replaced soon) got each of the following items:-

- Sturdy flip flops that will last longer
- 2 t-shirts from Primark at £1 each but look great (different ones for boys and girls)
- A pair of kids' sunglasses
- A toy and some balloons
- A large bowl of rice with chicken
- A yogurt
- A Malawian version of Capri sun
- A cake
- 3 lollipops, 2 packets of crisps and 3 small packets of biscuits

Well I am sure you can imagine their faces as they just kept getting more and more. Now what happened next really does highlight the poverty in Malawi and something I was totally amazed with but proud to be part of in such a small way. The kids ate their yogurt and then had a bash at their huge bowl of rice and chicken. Most of them could not finish the big portion they had so we had to use the plastic bags that the toys were in to scoop their lunch into so that they could take it home. It was the same with the crisps, biscuits and sweets; they all went into the bag with maybe the exception of one lollipop. This was unusual for me as I am so used to kids back home just trying to eat as many sweets as possible so I asked the teacher why the kids were taking so much home. She said that even though the children are so young they realise their family is hungry and that they will share everything they have been given today with their sisters and brothers. It stopped me in my tracks a bit and I just thought, 'wow, how nice is it for kids to have that attitude'.

I still had lots of biscuits & crisps in the truck as I knew I was going back to Kambudzi primary school but as I looked around there were lots of kids mulling around from the village watching the nursery children getting such a special day. In this situation I think we would all do the same - I emptied the truck and gave what I had to the kids from the village and that way they could have a day that was a bit more special than a normal day.

Meantime the nursery kids were all having a ball playing with their toys, singing songs and generally just doing what kids do. The only difference on this occasion was that they never let go of their bag of goodies.

During this visit the teacher wanted me to meet three children who had just left the nursery. She explained to me that 15 of the kids had just left and should be starting primary one. Unfortunately they had no uniform and the primary school would not allow them to start without the yearly payment of 100 kwacha (which is about 50p) That really is how poor some of these families are when they cannot afford 50p per year to send their kids to school.

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Of course I paid for the fee for the 15 kids to attend primary school. I also paid for the material and the tailoring of their uniforms so that they blend in with the other kids at school. A really horrible yellow & green uniform but hey, what could I do!

The nursery school teacher does a great job with the kids and she earns £20 per month so I left both her and Anceata, the supervisor who does this voluntarily, a wee bonus from us for the tremendous work that they do. All that can be done now to improve the nursery is to give them some more teaching supplies and supply them with some more food to feed the children a bit more substantially. Yeah, they cannot get chicken and rice everyday but it would be nice to give them this a bit more often, make sure they get some eggs for protein occasionally, and some fresh vegetables for their vitamins and minerals.

On average, a family in Malawi will only have meat with their dinner once a month. I was speaking to a family who were explaining to me that the best meal they have is Christmas dinner and this year they had chicken and chips. I really cannot imagine chips being fried in the villages but good on them. Cooking oil is so expensive over here and I have never seen potatoes for sale. When they say chicken they mean a portion the size of a chicken drumstick. There are fatter pigeons in the UK than the scrawny chickens you see in Malawi.

As I spent more time with the kids (I did not want to leave) taking photos, listening to them singing, playing games and watching them hold on to their goody bags as tightly as possible, I had a really good feeling come over me. I took a few minutes to myself and watched from a distance two groups of kids. One was the children of the nursery and one was the kids of the village who don't go to nursery or school. One set of kids had new clothes, new shoes, looked healthy, had food in their tummy and were having a party. The other children had dirty, worn clothes with bare feet, slightly swollen stomachs due to malnutrition and looked on in envy as the other children played with toys and ate sweets. On my first couple of trips to Malawi I would have wanted to help everyone (I still would love to) and I would have concentrated more on the kids who are missing out, but experience teaches you that you cannot help everyone and you cannot change the world. What you can do is influence small pockets of people and give them a better start in life. So this time as I looked at the two groups of kids I could see one group of nursery kids who are going to have a better start in life and with our help might just have a chance to make a little bit more for themselves. This chance that these 40 kids are getting is down to you guys supporting Moni Malawi who in turn support the nursery as one of our projects. As for the other kids I still felt bad but I did all I could by giving them all the food I had left in my truck, so they still got more than they would have on any other normal day.

Thursday night I spent in the company of Stuart Millar who owns the Chameleon bar and after spending 16 years here Stuart is a guy with a huge amount of experience in Malawi. As his bar is used by the middle class Malawians he has substantial amount of contacts. It has been great to meet so many of the Malawians who do the office jobs etc as it is good to hear all the different opinions and their thoughts on improving their own country.

This brings me on to something that has totally intrigued me on this trip - the number of middle class Malawians who are fat. Well over 50% are fat! Now I know I am not the man to be making comments about being fat but with so many poor people around then there is no need. As usual with me I started to ask the question, why? As it turns out the answer is actually really simple - the Malawian people believe being fat is a sign of both wealth and health. I was told they quite commonly tell each other you are looking very fat and healthy today. Well, after cancelling my flight home and deciding to stay for a few months only joking!

With only a few days remaining and with me having already extended my trip I made my last visit to Kambudzi primary school. This was to go over the final details and bringing all the plans together for the school, from the government planning to the permission of the chief right through to discussing everything with the builder. It all went well and everything is now in place and ready for the school to start being built in April. It will take three to four months and if all goes to plan the children can move from under the trees into a proper, well designed school building.

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Before I left I spent some time with the children, but this trip was all about business and getting things ready for what is the real reason I am in Malawi. The children were sad to see me go as they know that is the end of school meals for a while. Hopefully once the school is built we can introduce a feeding program that would only cost £20 per day to feed 420 kids a bowl of porridge. Is it not amazing that you can feed that amount of kids for less than a ticket to the football?

With my flight on Monday morning (this time from Malawi to Zimbabwe to Nairobi to Amsterdam to Glasgow) I used the weekend to say all my farewells and arrange all the last minute things. It was important to organise someone who can be the charity's eyes and ears whilst we are not here, and to make sure everything is going to plan. I met so many nice people it took me some time to do the rounds and say my goodbyes. I have met a great deal of people who will be able to help me and Moni Malawi get the results we need. There are so many wonderful stories in Malawi of people doing so much tremendous work, it really can be a quite humbling experience. Many people, both young and old, give up everything they have back home to come to Malawi and probably to many other African countries to help out people less fortunate than themselves.

I made my last visit to the Mother Superior orphanage and said my goodbyes to the kids. They have got to know me there now and when I drive in they all know the car and make a run for me. For me it feels like the movie 'Daddy Day Care' as all these kids want to see you. Although there are a few babies there most of the kids are from two to five years old and with 75 kids in total it is pure chaos. I have to say I love it. What most of the kids want is a cuddle and a bit of affection. With so many children there it is difficult for the sisters to give the kids all the love that they need as most of their time is spent washing and feeding them. For this reason this is why the kids are looking for a bit of attention.

I had one final meeting with Sister Linda and agreed some plans for the next 6 months and then I had to finally say bye. They all lined up to wave me off shouting bye with these amazing smiles on their faces. Moments like these are undoubtedly the most difficult and it took me about ten minutes to drive 20 yards. The children in the orphanage can only stay here until they are five or six and then they must be returned to their closest guardian back in the villages. Most Malawian families look after other children in addition to their own due to the number of orphans (15% of children in Malawi are orphans). On many other occasions, although there is a parent still alive, he or she has to work all day so you often have a situation where a six year old girl will look after and carry around a one year old child.

On my final evening I popped round to visit the Irish Ambassador and his wife. I got to know them well during my last trip but on this occasion Katherine was back home and did not arrive in Malawi until that morning. It was good to see the staff again and I happily accepted an invite to dinner with them both and their son. We spoke about all things Malawi and about football etc. I brought the staff's kids some Rangers shirts just so that we can influence the household (hee hee). They both do a superb amount of work for Malawi and one of the things Liam told me really hit home about the struggle Malawi really does face. As a government they have a budget of 1.5 billion to do everything - health, education, police, army etc. Ireland, which is obviously also a small country, has a budget of 16 billion just for their health service. And Malawi has to do all this with a population that has doubled in the last 20 years.

After a good blether and a lovely meal I went back to my hotel to pack. I had been in Malawi for two weeks and had not been bitten by a mosso or stopped by the police and bribed. I had the occasional loose bowel movement but nothing really bad so imagine my horror when I was feeling happy with myself that I farted and ended up shitting myself. Yup, yours truly followed through. Right through the shorts as well. Just as well I was in my hotel room and it did not happen 10 minutes earlier when I was at the Irish Ambassador's house.

As I write this blog I am on the second leg of my journey flying to Nairobi, Kenya with a surprising amount of turbulence. I hope you have enjoyed reading my experiences of Malawi and better still enjoyed looking at the photos.

 Say hello Malawi... **Moni Malawi!**

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I would like to thank all of you who have made a donation as the money you have donated really is making a difference to our projects in Malawi. The money is going directly to give children a better chance in life. If anyone would like further information or have any questions then do not hesitate to get in touch with me.

Finally if any of you would like to help further by sponsoring a child at the nursery for £10 per month or taking tickets for the upcoming fund raising dinner for Malawi then please contact me. Maybe your family or your boss or someone else close to you has a few quid and you think they would like to support the work we are doing here – so please pass my details onto them. Maybe you would like to do a sponsored event to support the kids?

This year Moni Malawi have to raise over £50,000 to build the school, take care of the nursery and pay for the feeding station that we support so any assistance that anyone can give would be much appreciated.

My next trip to Malawi is on the 24th June with 30 Glasgow school kids, so that will be an experience! Thanks again for all your support and lets hope legs three & four of my return journey go ok ...

Cheers
Scott McMillan

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