

Malawi shines in small-scale farming

BY KAREN MSISKA

MALAWI's success story in agriculture for the past three years is being used as a compelling case for increased investment in small-scale farming in the southern Africa.

This, though, comes amidst conflicting reports on the food situation in the country, with some quarters saying the country will replicate bumper harvest realised in the past two years while others fear the country is on the verge of experiencing

acute food shortage.

Citing how Malawi averted the threat of food shortage through the fertilizer subsidy programme, Earth Institute of the University of Columbia's director of tropical agriculture, Pedro Sanchez, said southern Africa can "turn an economy around and improve food security by investing in small-scale farmers."

"It costs K9,800 to grow a tonne of maize as opposed to importing it at K98,000," Sanchez was quoted by the

international media as saying.

"In 2006, there was a surplus of 25 percent [in Malawi]; in 2007 the figure shot up to 45 percent. Malawi is a country that has gone from (being) a food aid recipient to an exporter of maize; the beneficiaries are Zimbabwe, Lesotho and Swaziland," he said.

President Bingu wa Mutharika realised his campaign dream ahead of the 2004 general elections by instituting the fertilizer subsidy programme in 2005, leading to

the first of the bumper harvests in 2006. The country repeated the feat in 2007.

But the country is facing a precarious situation this year following chaos in the distribution of material under the programme, in which farmers receive basal and upper dressing fertilizer. However, some critics have blamed the situation on the exportation of the surplus maize.

However, Sanchez believes southern African countries can emulate

Malawi's example and turn around their own erratic food situation, while maintaining the commercial farmers on large properties.

"In Zimbabwe, for instance, agriculture can be turned in no time if the commercial farmers who had left are invited to come back" said Sanchez.

He identified political will, donor assistance and proper application of technology as key in achieving small-scale agriculture.