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Caring for Malawi's orphans to build a more sustainable future: An interview with Dr. Harvey Sindima, founder of The Blantyre North Relief Project

By Henoah Derbew

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Malawians sit in front of their home with a leaking grass roof. BNRP built them a new home. (Photo courtesy Blantyre North Relief Project)

09 December 2009 [MEDIAGLOBAL]: Cases of HIV/AIDS have been rising sharply in Malawi since the 1980s, making it the country's leading cause of death in adults. Now, out of a population of 14.2 million, up to one million people have HIV and over 560,000 children have been orphaned due to the virus.

Two Malawians quietly lead the work of the Blantyre North Relief Project (BNRP), which uplifts and provides for vulnerable Malawians, helping to make them productive actors for the development of the country.

Settling in America several years ago to pursue their education, Colgate University's Dr. Harvey Sindima and his wife, Gertrude Sindima—who works as a registered nurse in central New York—who always remembered their homeland. Wanting to develop Malawi, they started BNRP in 1985 with several orphans and elderly persons.

Twenty years later, there were over 700 people being helped by their organization. Entirely staffed by family members and volunteers, the Sindimas run the organization through donations, but fund the bulk of the operations out of pocket.

Sindima discussed BNRP with **MediaGlobal** in an interview to explain the project's vision, activities, progress, and roadblocks on the ground:

MEDIAGLOBAL: This Sunday's *New York Times* article, "Aid Gives Alternative to African Orphanages," discussed research that shows cash transfers and keeping orphans with extended families rather than at institutions is preferable. It has been made clear by BNRP's literature that it "does not seek to institutionalize orphans." Could you elaborate on the role of BNRP in this respect? How have research and conclusions like those presented in the article shaped BNRP and where does the project stand in this debate?

SINDIMA: Children need to grow with the cultural values of their people, to experience how the social structure and organization of their people function. Institutions do not simulate living within the network of relations or the fabric of communitarian life of African society. Without the knowledge of cultural and social values, people are without roots, history, above all without identity. BNRP is guided by Malawian philosophy of umunthu, or personhood—a complete socio-cultural and spiritual person.

MG: What makes BNRP different? What are the advantages of being Malawians yourselves?

S: We are the only [non-governmental organization] that builds homes for orphans so that they can grow and we can support them in their own villages. Our collaboration with local village chiefs and the people we serve also helps us to identify the greatest need. We have a lot of support in each and every village because people know that no one in BNRP makes a living doing charity work.

MG: What is the importance of self-sufficiency in BNRP, for personal as well as national development, and how does this manifest itself through your operations, especially with regard to the upcoming Sindima Memorial Institute of Arts & Technology?

S: There is nothing that makes people experience their full humanity, umunthu, than self-sufficiency. It is only through self-sufficiency that individuals and nations experience their true selves, empowerment, self-respect and dignity. BNRP seeks to empower orphans to become proud productive citizens of Malawi and southern Africa. The Sindima Memorial Institute will train 3,000 orphans (half females) in medicine,

engineering and communications technology. BNRP will also prepare orphans in areas of need in national development, including the arts and culture.

MG: How have you dealt with funding issues and possibly having to deny services to people you would want to help because of costs?

S: Funding is a major problem. BNRP is funded primarily by my wife and me. We have not had to deny orphans any services, but we try to do with as little as we can. Donations make only three percent of all operational costs. Support for AIDS orphans is not important to many people given the disasters around the world, but Africa has lost a high percentage of people within the productive age-group of 18 to 45. Therefore, without supporting orphans with food, clothing and education, Sub-Saharan Africa will lack skilled labor, human power and knowledge needed for development.

MG: How has BNRP adapted itself to deal with the new issues, as you see them, affecting Malawi and/or Sub-Saharan Africa?

S: Renewable energy is an emerging issue. BNRP will soon begin training young women 15 to 20 (not in school) in making solar panels to give them skills for this new emerging issue and economy in Africa and the world. Healthcare is the second area, though not new. We have started building a 60-bed hospital to provide healthcare in a remote area that will also focus on maternal health. Sick people make an unproductive nation.

For more information about BNRP, please visit <http://www.bnrp.org/>.

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