STUDENT UNLOCKS POTENTIAL WITH MUSHROOM SHORT COURSE

Even with a job as an extension worker, Nelson Lulanga could not financially support his large family. As the only employed child in a family of eight children, his salary was never enough to care for his grandmother and support his younger siblings with school tuition, food and basic needs.

A native of Chipoka, a rural village in the Salima district of southern Malawi, Nelson had earned a diploma in nutrition in 2015 from the Natural Resources College (NRC). During school, he recalled recently, he gave a presentation on mushroom production and “found it fascinating.” But at the time, his curriculum did not cover mushroom production. Then, in February 2020, he heard that the Lilongwe University of Agriculture and Natural Resources (LUANAR)-Bunda campus was offering a course.

“I did not hesitate, and I applied for the short course,” Nelson said.

Nelson joined a total number of 29 students who attended the training from across Malawi, including

Chitipa, Likoma, Salima and Chikwawa districts. The students included 15 women and 14 men, and Nelson was among the 26 students (13 women and 13 men) who received scholarships to attend the

Nelson monitoring the spawning of the seeds in the incubation house

course, which was supported by USAID through the Strengthening Higher Education Access in Malawi Activity (SHEAMA) [1], which is managed by Winrock International under a cooperative agreement with Arizona State University and USAID.

SHEAMA is working with University and Industry partners to identify market-driven, open and distance learning (ODL)[2] programs for high-growth sectors in Malawi in order to increase the country's skilled and employable (including self-employed) workforce.

The course inspired Nelson to venture into entrepreneurship. Though he did not initially have startup funding, he saved the money he received from SHEAMA as upkeep allowance to raise a capital of 75,000 Malawian Kwacha (MWK), or a little over $100. Using cheap and affordable resources from the village, he built a six-by-four-meter mushroom house with a production room and an incubation room. Then he enlisted local community members in the village to help him make substrates to grow the mushrooms, improvised to make sprayers using plastic bottles at little cost, and bought seven bottles of 350 ml seeds at MWK 7,000 (about $10).

Nelson is expecting to harvest at least 600 kg of mushrooms at the end of the season. Under current market prices, Nelson is expecting to make a profit of no less than MWK 1,000,000 (more than $1,300) from his small mushroom house. His dream is to produce mushrooms at a large scale and master the cultivation of oyster mushrooms.

"As a young man, I can sustain myself and support my family with this business," he said. "I employed other community members to support me with building mushroom houses, making substrates and packing at a small cost. If done at a larger scale, this will also promote the livelihood of members in this community. I will not stop there; I will also train other community members who have shown interest in mushroom production."

Nelson has developed flyers to advertise his produce, which have been distributed and shared through WhatsApp and social media. "From the feedback I have been receiving, demand for mushrooms is high in the surrounding rural and urban areas," he said. "The harvests will not be enough."

[1] SHEAMA is managed by Winrock International under a cooperative agreement with Arizona State University and USAID. The project runs from January 01, 2019 through December 31, 2022.

[2] ODL = Open and Distance Learning courses