BEE PRODUCT DIVERSIFICATION
AND VALUE ADDITION

Mbawemi Women's Co-operative Society in Malawi are dedicated to setting an example to others by proving themselves to be successful women entrepreneurs.

Bees for Development has helped them on their way by training them in value addition, product diversification and the marketing of bee products.

The training was part of the Government of Malawi's women empowerment programme, and funded by the Special Advisory Services Division of the Commonwealth Secretariat. In a previous phase of the project, the Mbawemi Women's Co-operative Society were supplied with hives and trained in beekeeping. The long-term aim is for them to produce their own bee products for processing, and also to train other women.

This training programme was delivered in Mzuzu by Bees for Development's Janet Lowore in November and December 2007, and consisted of a strategic overview of marketing opportunities for Malawi bee products, plus a two-week practical course for 28 women entrepreneurs.

The market overview revealed that the demand for attractively presented table honey is now higher in Malawi than ever before, with supermarkets and tourist shops often unable to source supplies to match demand. The demand for quality beeswax candles is also significant, with craft shops and tourist outlets always on the lookout for new suppliers. The market conditions seem good for the Co-operative.

The training course started with theory, with lectures on honey and bee products, diversification and the idea of value addition covered in detail. However, all participants were eager to move on to the hands-on practical sessions of rendering and filtering beeswax, making candles, skin balms and propolis tincture.

The greatest successes were the dipped candles. This was a method completely new both to the group members and to our local facilitator, who have previously only known about candles made in moulds. The wax that was bought from local beekeepers, in both processed and unprocessed form, was of the highest quality and lovely to work with. The course generated so much interest within Mzuzu that even before the end of the course, the group were receiving orders for candles!

Other products made during the Course included skin balm, polish and propolis tincture. The participants spent time working out the cost of each product they made, and discussed possible sale prices given different target markets. This session generated much discussion as participants learned how some products sometimes enable higher profit margins than others, and that testing prices in the market place is all part of the business development process.

At the close of the Course, the group resolved to focus on making high quality candles. In addition to wax and wicks, candles require few other materials. This is important because many ingredients required for other processes are not easily available in Mzuzu. Furthermore, unlike honey, candles do not need to be put in containers. In Malawi, only poor quality PVC honey jars are available and as these often leak, this limits opportunities for producing a high quality honey product for retail sale. The demand for beeswax candles is high in Malawi, as they are much sought after as 'made-in-Malawi' gifts for visitors.

Course participants preparing to strain crushed honey comb

Course participants with dipped candles

Mbawemi women using plastic pipes as moulds for beeswax candles