



Comic Relief Friday 7.00pm BBC1

The Doctor never faced a challenge like this one – but **Peter Capaldi** discovers hope amid the slums of Malawi



WHEN RICHARD CURTIS asked me to go to Malawi to see the work that Comic Relief funds there, I don't mind admitting I thought long and hard before saying yes.

The pitfalls, it seemed to me, were many and various, with my ignorance lurking within all of them.

The language, the culture, the history of the place and its people made me fear slipping into dreaded patronisation.

As well as assuring me that I'd find my own way through these hazards, Richard also said, in that gentle way of his, that as the current Doctor Who it was essentially my duty to show people what their extraordinary generosity can achieve.

So I was on my way to south-west Africa, a journey that brought exotic names into view on airport departure boards, names like Addis Ababa, Khartoum, Harare and Lusaka – but I was headed for an altogether more familiar-sounding destination, Blantyre. The South Lanarkshire town and birthplace of Victorian missionary David Livingstone also gave its name to Malawi's second city, home to more than a million people, including me for this week.

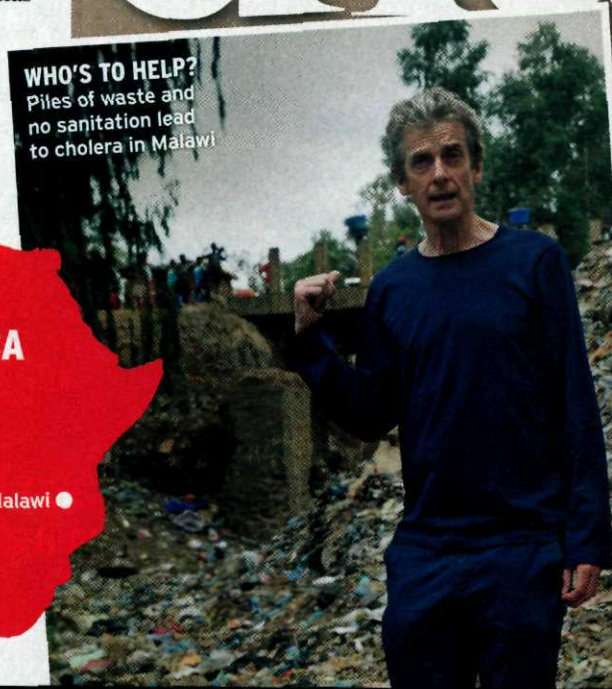
### *Braving the heat*

For all the place's Scottish connections, my classically blue Glaswegian skin required some serious sun cream before I could brave the unforgiving heat on the first morning. Once we were on the road, we headed for Ndirande, the country's largest slum – or informal settlement, as they are referred to now.

No matter what you call it, there's no disputing that this is an incredibly poor neighbourhood and one that suffers dreadfully from cholera outbreaks because of the chronic lack of sanitation, and a river that does a very good impression of an open sewer. The condition, which leads to an agonising death as severe prolonged diar-



**WHO'S TO HELP?**  
Piles of waste and no sanitation lead to cholera in Malawi



**'Emma's house sits on the bank of a filthy river running through the slum'**

PETER CAPALDI

# My Africa diary

rhoea takes hold, is a particular menace.

Without toilets, cholera spreads and spreads at a fearful rate. But much like the dire problems inherent in the slums and tenements across British cities less than a century ago, they can be addressed and rectified, no matter how hopeless the situation looks on first inspection.

The Comic Relief-funded C-Code project was set up in Ndirande last year and is helping to regenerate the area, starting with the toilets. Without a sewer system in the area, the project is instead installing composted toilets, which leave no waste and require no piping. As these new facilities are rolled





**SURVIVING ON THE EDGE**  
Peter meets Emma, 43, and  
three of her six grandchildren  
in disease-ridden Ndirande

out across the area, this simple and sustainable solution could begin to fight the preventable scourge of cholera – which would leave the second preventable killer in the area to be tackled: malaria.

As you stand and watch the mosquitoes hatching on the top of the filthy puddles and streams, the fact that in a night or two they will be biting, infecting and eventually killing so many children, all for the want of a bed net, is almost beyond comprehension. For the world's poorest communities that is the harsh reality. It's reckoned that globally the disease takes the life of a child every single minute – something Emma knew about all too well.

Last year this 43-year-old mother of three

## 'Malaria takes the life of a child every single minute'

lost two of her daughters, the first to HIV/Aids and the second to malaria. The family's house sits on the bank of the filthy river running through the slum. The back portion of the structure slid away down the bank, leaving Emma, and the six grandchildren she's left to care for, huddled in the front of the house. With their handful of possessions and school books high on a shelf

to keep them safe from the filthy water that floods the place in the rainy season, this is a truly awful situation.

That's not the worst of it, though. The same floods that destroyed their home also acted as the breeding ground for the mosquitoes that infected her daughter. Without bed nets, her grandchildren are now equally at risk.

### *Four babies to a bed*

That afternoon at Blantyre's main hospital, I saw first-hand just what this malaria threat does to an already straining health-care system. In the paediatric ward two, three and four babies are forced to share beds as they're treated to help ▷







#### FIGHT FOR LIFE

Peter and nurse Jean in the Blantyre hospital where babies battle against malaria  
Inset: befriending three orphans in Belesoni

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◁ fight off the parasitic infection they almost certainly contracted while they slept.

A look though the ward's record of fatalities is startling; entry after entry listing malaria as the cause of death, child after child taken because they slept unprotected. Comic Relief has helped to distribute millions of nets across parts of sub-Saharan Africa and the effect has been positive. But there's more to do, especially here in Malawi.

### The village of hope

The next day I was taken to meet the people running another Comic Relief-supported project, this time working with those affected by HIV/Aids. Like Malaria, much progress has been made in tackling this epidemic and the distribution of anti-retroviral drugs has improved the day-to-day reality of living with the condition for many in Africa's poorest communities – but the stigma still remains.

The rural village of Belesoni, an hour from Blantyre, is home to an astonishing support group, called Napham [National Association for People Living with HIV and Aids in Malawi]. The project is helped by Comic Relief cash and works hard to tackle the isolation many feel when they are diagnosed.

The charismatic Stanley, who runs the 145-strong forum, tells me that just two days before I arrived, an HIV-positive man, who

struggled to come to terms with his status and what it'd mean for his family, committed suicide by poisoning himself with undiluted alcohol.

It isn't just those living with HIV/Aids who suffer because of the stigma, though; it's also those left behind. That's why the support group has started a pre-school nursery for little ones, which brings together children who are either infected themselves or have lost parents. These

### 'All they want to do is play, laugh and draw'



tiny, bright kids are taught together and shown from a tender age that this medical condition is not of their doing. They learn it is just something that's happened to them in their short lives and is not to be feared. They're taught those with it should not be shunned.

This is as tangible and practical an impact as you can imagine, a building, a nursery, a project, performing a function that's extinguishing stigma before it takes hold.

As well as the centre, they also come to the aid of orphaned children who struggle to cope after losing their parents to HIV/Aids. Nine-year-old Manwel, 12-year-old Lozi and Furases, 13 and now head of the family, are a tragic case in point. After losing their father many years ago, they lived happily with their mother before she finally succumbed to an Aids-related disease last year, leaving these three children alone in the world.

As I spoke with them, Lozi produced a clutch of loose paper and proudly took me through her school work. I asked who puts who to bed at night, who makes the breakfast – "We have no beds, we have no food to eat before school," they answered.

**A**SADDER, MORE DESPERATE situation is hard to imagine, yet all they wanted to do was play, laugh, draw in the dust – act like the carefree children they are, or at least used to be. Adulthood has been foisted upon these children in the harshest, cruellest way imaginable.

But they have the Napham group. A lifeline in a very literal sense that will help them navigate their many issues. They'll provide help with food, giving them seeds and livestock and even vocational training, should Furases be forced to drop out of school to lead the young family, as seems likely.

Theirs won't be an easy life, their teenage years will be a battle for survival, but with the support of this project – support funded in part because you choose to buy a Red Nose, bake a cake, donate via the *Radio Times* envelope on this page, or call the phoneline to donate – they are being given at least the chance of a future.

Like everything I'd seen, this was a challenging and complex situation that Comic Relief had chosen to help tackle – no quick wins or fancy gimmicks here.

But Richard Curtis had been right. People's generosity really does translate into truly extraordinary change – and I'm very glad indeed I was there to witness it.