Samson Kamputa 32, also popularly known as Jam 2 among other traders is a prominent Irish potato businessman trading at Blantyre market. He has been in business for the last nine years. Every now and again and when he is sure that the profits are worthwhile, he diversifies his portfolio to supply garlic to Indian clients. For Samson, the bottom line must make sense.

Married with two children, and the proud owner of a modern four-bedroomed house in Chilomoni, one of the townships in Blantyre, are some of the greatest achievements in his business.

Samson does not shy away from assuming the full risks of cross border trade. Often traveling as far away as Mozambique, a distance of over 200 kilometers from Blantyre, to destinations like Ligowe, Msonkha, Chikomasi, and Maponje to source Irish potatoes when they are out of season in Malawi between October and February.

Recently, Samson won tenders to supply to Crazy Food, Trade Fair and Nchalo in Chikwawa District which is 70km south of Blantyre District under his trade name Jam 2. Every week, he sources 85 bag each weighing 125 kilograms. Other than supplying potatoes to the institutions, his business is sustained by retailers from Chilomoni, Bangwe and Ndirande markets thanks to the good rapport he enjoys with them. He even allows them credit when they are unable to make upfront payments on his deliveries.

However, Samson is not immune to the challenges confronting Malawian potato traders. A nagging problem is poor quality. Having established early in his career that a guarantee of quality was indeed good for business and for retaining his customer base, Samson is discerning about what he is buying.

He remembers a time when a farmer in Mozambique called to say that his field was ready for harvest, and since he has been buying from this particular farmer, he authorized him to
hire casual laborers to harvest the commodity while he secured the transport. But he received the shock of his life when he discovered the potatoes were very small. Far away from home in a foreign country, he resolved there was little he could do about the situation but to pay for the potatoes anyway. Once back in Malawi he decided to manage the competition on the market by selling his potatoes at break-even price.

“I just wanted to get rid of the commodity and at the end of six hours from off-loading the commodity at Blantyre market, the 85 bags exchanged hands either on loan or cash” he explained.

Traders also face additional hurdles when borders with their commodities which attract import/export taxes. “I really wish farmers in Malawi would produce large quantities of potatoes, of higher quality all year round,” he muses. “Between September and December, potatoes in Malawi are so scarce such that the only commodities one can buy are those stored in sheds but these potatoes tend to be shriveled and infested by weevils and other pests.”

However, Samson observes of the Mozambican farmers: “Farmers in Mozambique practice intensive mechanized farming and they know the business, whereas in Malawi, farming is not understood as a business therefore it tends to be characterized by low production, poor quality, highly priced commodities and poor storage.”

Competition at sourcing areas pose further challenges for business persons like Samson. It was noted that

80 % of potatoes come from Ntcheu district where people from all districts in Malawi including refugees and immigrants from other countries like Somalia, Burundi and Tanzania flood the area. Ntcheu is in Malawi’s Central Region, nearly 200km away from Blantyre.