

SOUNDING THE ALARM

Malawi's Forests on the Brink

Investigative Dossier Part 1



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Go to www.aejmalawi.org/dossier or www.icon.mw/dossier to download this publication.

COVER PHOTO

© Lawrence Dziko - Charcoal transportation

FOREWORD

The evidence is clear: deforestation and forest degradation are among the most pressing developmental challenges facing Malawi today. Rampant unregulated deforestation negatively impacts crop production and livelihood security, nutrition and public health, and national economic development, undermining hard-fought development gains and leaving Malawi less resilient to climate change.

The adverse impacts are already being felt by households across the country. In rural areas – women and children in particular – must walk further to collect firewood and water, limiting their ability to attend school or to participate in productive activities. In cities, both households and businesses are forced to accommodate load-shedding as hydropower capacity decreases. Electricity costs are spiralling, hitting both businesses and urban consumers who in turn look towards illegal charcoal, further compounding the problem. Increased costs to businesses are ultimately passed on to the consumers, driving the cost of living even higher. Given the current trajectory only a strong sustained commitment to protect remaining forests, and to regulate and enforce along the value chain have the potential to stem the pace of forest cover loss.

Unaccounted billions of kwacha are lost as a result of deforestation—stemming from poor management and the illicit trade enabled by corruption. Forest crime is increasingly organised, accompanied by the hallmarks of collusion, intimidation, and violence.

The collaboration between the Association of Environmental Journalists and the USAID and UKaid co-funded Modern Cooking for Healthy Forests, through the Forestry Accountability Journalism Initiative in Malawi (FAJM), is designed to promote fact-based reporting and investigative reporting in the forestry sector. This first edition of the dossier is intended to begin drawing attention to Malawi’s deepening deforestation crisis. It features investigative reports, each conducted by a top environmental journalist on a topic of their choice, and developed and published through their respective media outlets.

This dossier, among other hot issues, uncovers the ugly face of the deforestation crisis, including articles that investigate the illicit charcoal trade, and others the unaccounted loss of the nation’s once expansive plantations. Most of the reports highlight the role of corruption in enabling and incentivizing corruption. As you read through the articles, you will experience shocking discoveries describing the absence of management, staggering lapses in law enforcement, and prosecution woes. A repeat of such unfortunate events will be inevitable if selective application of the law continues.

Fact-based reporting and quality investigative journalism are critical tools for influencing public and political discourse. We believe the media holds the power to inform and inspire; to champion the individuals and organisations who are working to turn the tide; and, to hold those culpable to account. Thanks go not only to the participating journalists and the contributing expert commentators, but also to the associated media houses who have put their weight behind the initiative.

Sadly, there are many more stories that deserve attention, and we along with our partners are committed to supporting sustained reportage on forestry issues across multiple media platforms. Journalists are sounding the alarm, and we all have a duty to respond.

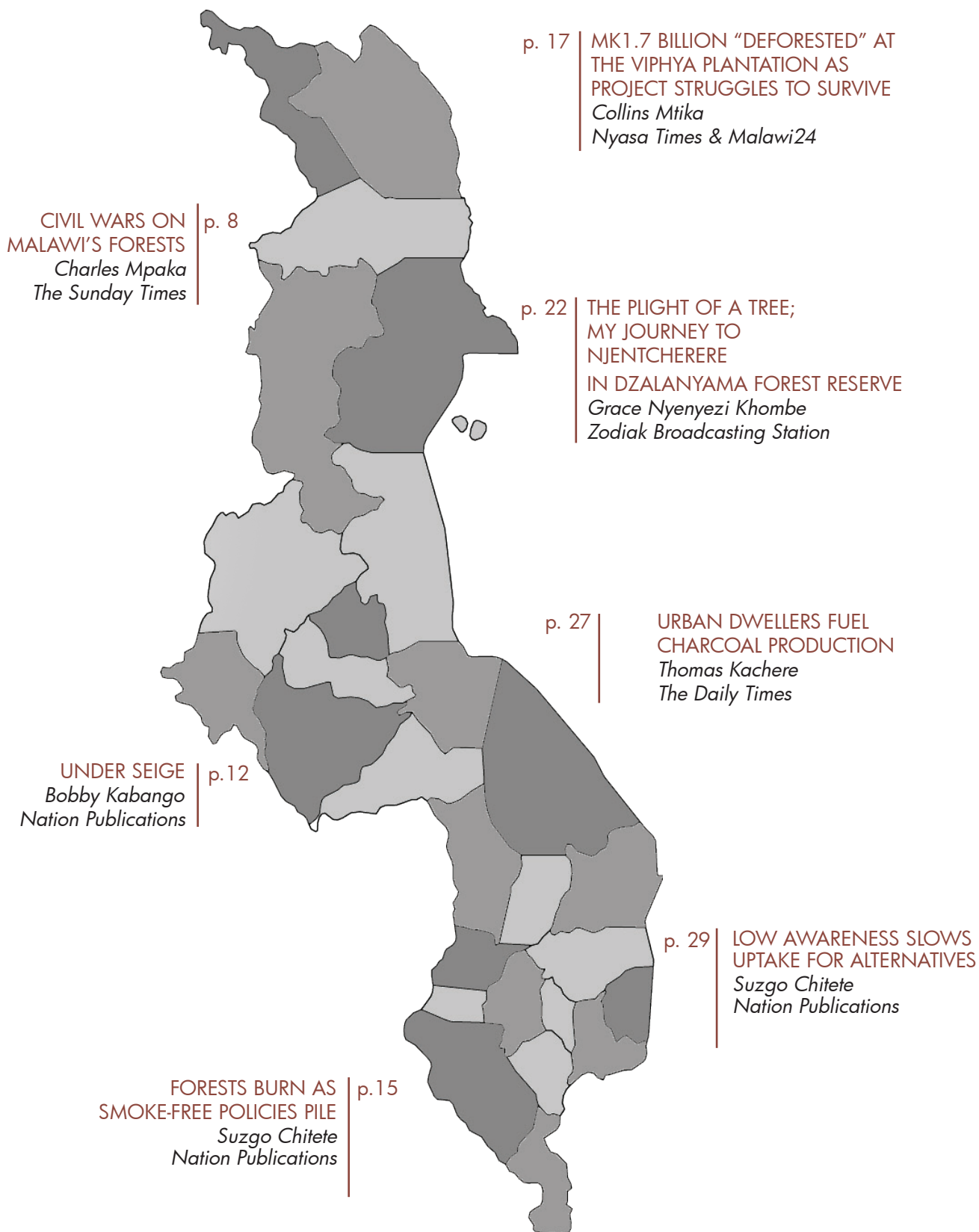


Ramzy Kanaan
MCHF Chief of Party



Mathews Malata
AEJ President

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CEO, CEPA

FOREST VALUES

Trees and forests are vital for...



Energy: 80.5% of Malawi's total primary energy supply comes from firewood, charcoal and agri-waste



Wood products: including timber, poles and planks



Non-wood forest products, including: honey, mushrooms, thatch grass, fruits and medicinal plants



Environmental services: including water and nutrient cycling and carbon sequestration




Productive downstream benefits: including irrigation and hydropower



Resilience against climate change & natural disasters

Malawi's forests contribute directly to GDP and underpin agriculture, tourism and other key economic sectors.

FACTS: THE FORESTRY-ENERGY NEXUS

76% 

of urban households
households, as of 2018 rely
on charcoal as their primary
source of cooking and heating
fuel, up from 44% in 2011



90%

of urban households use
charcoal to meet some
of their cooking/heating
energy needs, despite
access to other fuel sources

8



The number of years it has
taken for charcoal
consumption to double
between 2011 and 2018



1

On average,
1 tree makes
45.9kg
of charcoal.

This demand is met primarily
by the illegal and
unregulated charcoal market.

'CIVIL WARS' ON MALAWI'S FORESTS

by Charles Mpaka

First published: 9th May 2021; Sunday Times and The Loud Whisper (Times TV)

Systemic corruption has turned Malawi's forests into war zones, with some forest scouts taking bribes from illegal sawyers to allow them access to the trees. And when the deals turn sour, gunfights and deaths often follow. At Zomba Mountain Forest Reserve, an important tourist destination in Malawi, more than 100 trees are illegally harvested each month – and just 40 staff do the work of 1,000. The reason? At a time when the demand for timber and charcoal is rising, the government has stripped the Department of Forestry of its funding and manpower, instead of giving it the ammunition it needs to fight the growing threat to Malawi's forests.

Editor's Comments

This was an excellent article that highlighted the Zomba Plateau deforestation crisis. The article addressed issues of institutional corruption, but also documented how the Government's lack of resource allocation to the forestry sector—human and financial combined—have created the current situation in which deforestation, aided and facilitated by corruption has become rampant. With the support of Parliament, Government recently approved financing that will allow the Department of Forestry to fill more than 400 vacant field-based positions. Looking ahead it will be important to track if the funds were actually made available, and if so, whether the staff were hired, trained and mobilized. And ultimately, whether the presence of additional staff (hopefully, with the financial resources needed to do forestry work—including regulation and enforcement) will have the desired impact of curbing illegal activities, halting deforestation, and catalyzing restoration of degraded forests.

How govt, corruption waged war on Malawi's forests

On 23 December 2020, a Department of Forestry guard shot dead an illegal sawyer on the Zomba Mountain Forest Reserve. The shooting which occurred on the outer slope of the reserve on the Nankhunda side was not an act of forest protection.

It was a result of a disagreement over the amount of a bribe.

This tragic occurrence highlights how corruption, largely spawned and aided by the government through systemic emasculation of the Department of Forestry, has turned Malawi's forests into war zones.



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Mathews Mkwapatira, a forester of over 30 years and currently Assistant Plantation Manager for Zomba Mountain Forest Reserve said Malawi's forests have been falling to what he called "civil wars".

"There are civil wars within the system, a fight over exploitation of forests. Then there are wars between outsiders and insiders.

"For example, we have a big problem of illegal timber harvesters in this forest. They can number as much as 50 at once and they come armed. They can kill you," he said.

According to Zomba Social and Economic Profile (2017 – 2020), at least more than 100 timber trees are illegally harvested every month in the plantation, with the harvesters, it says, taking advantage of the limited number of forest patrol staff.

That the staffing levels are too low is true, we have found out. But our investigation has also established that some of those few forest patrol staff are part of the syndicate.

Here is how one scheme has been played over the years: a group of scouts is on patrol. They find charcoal producers in the reserve. Sometimes, they arrest them; but many are also the times when they strike a deal.

"So we agree to give them a bag of charcoal in exchange for us to do our work in the forest without interruption. Agreed, no scout comes to our area until a period of say two or three weeks. When we finish our work, we give them their share of charcoal and we leave the forest. That's when they can patrol the areas again," said one of

the charcoal producers, Powder Mulama, from Nankhunda area.

The same trick has been employed by small-scale illegal sawyers.

“We give them between K50,000 and K70,000 and they allow us to saw or [have] access to live trees,” said a sawyer, Piasi Mkwepu.



© Malasa Ngalawa

He was one of the five illegal sawyers engaged in a fight with the scouts last December. On this occasion, they had already paid K50,000 bribe.

“We expected them to do as agreed. So we were surprised they returned before we had finished our work. They found us around 2pm while we were having lunch. They said they wanted us to increase the money. We refused,” said Mkwepu.

In the heat of verbal exchanges, a physical combat erupted. The sawyers descended on one of the three scouts. To rescue the overpowered colleague, another scout pulled the trigger on one of the sawyers, Justin Nasiyaya. He died on the spot.

A scout who was redeployed from the reserve on reasons he suspects are related to his being involved in such malpractices said: “This is one major factor in the destruction of the forest. Everyone is doing it. Our bosses are doing it. We also do it.”

The scouts we interviewed alleged that managers have “deals of their own class”. For example, they alleged, they illegally allocate themselves timber plots during harvesting seasons.

Or they allocate some licensed harvesters a bigger than necessary plot in exchange for money.

While admitting that corruption is a problem, Mkwapatira dismissed the allegation that forest department officials allocate harvesting plots. “Government gave that task to Frim (Forest Research Institute of Malawi). They make the demarcations,

determine the volumes to be harvested, calculate the revenue and give the information to government,” he said.

On the guards’ involvement in corruption, he said: “Not too long ago, we got two scouts arrested. In the past, some were redeployed on those allegations.”

Govt’s war on forests

Our findings also show that government, Treasury to be specific, has helped to create conditions for the thriving of corruption that is tearing down Malawi’s forests.

At a time demand for forest products has been rising sharply partly due to failure of government’s poverty eradication policies, booming population, lack of alternative energy sources and human rights consciousness, government has emasculated the Department of Forestry by starving it of funding and manpower – instead of giving its battlefield lead soldier the ammunition needed to counter the growing siege.

Details in Annual Economic Reports of the past 22 years reveal that since 1998, not in a single year has the Department received the essential Other Recurrent Transaction (ORT) funding that is even half of its budgeted requirement.

For instance, in six financial years between 2003 and 2009, the DoF received an average of K54.7 million per annum in ORT. This was way below its average requirement of K250 million for its 8 cost centres.

In the 2013/14 financial year, out of K131 million approved budget for ORT for all its 8 cost centres, the South cost centre received K16. 5 million to manage daily operations at 40 forest reserves and 15 plantations covering a total of nearly 22,000 hectares.

In the past 5 financial years (2016 - 2021), Treasury has consistently cut ORT approved budgets for DoF. In the 2020/21 financial year for example, it reduced the budget from K302 million to K208 million against a minimum ORT requirement of K700 million for 8 cost centres.

“That’s our situation,” said Ted Kamoto, Assistant Director of Forestry, adding, “90 percent of what we get covers the wage bill. The rest goes to ORT for us to manage about 88 forest reserves. The funding is not only too low but also not all of it comes, let alone regularly.”

Asked about these funding concerns, Treasury spokesperson Williams Banda said in a WhatsApp text: “The funding to every institution will never be enough as we have huge development needs while our resources are limited.”

Environmental activist Dorothy Tembo-Nhlema said the government has never treated natural resources as an anchor of Malawi’s development.

She said a recent natural resources budget analysis shows that the sector gets just around one percent of the national budget.

“This is against the political narrative you hear that they want to arrest deforestation. Our priorities are upside down,” she said.

She further argued that while natural resources sector is starved of financial support, sectors that depend on natural resources to thrive such as agriculture gobble up the largest chunk of the budget.

“Agriculture, for example, needs water. It needs good soil. It needs forests. If we invested more in natural resources, we would invest less in agriculture because we would have dealt with the root causes that make agriculture fail,” she said.

Tembo-Nhlema also questioned the low staffing levels in the forestry sector.

According to Kamoto, the Department has not recruited new staff for 13 years now following a 2008 government moratorium.

“Education has been recruiting teachers. Health has been recruiting nurses. The police and the military have been recruiting. And government said ‘no’ to forestry? That’s disastrous,” she said.

Funding, staffing blows

Low funding and staff shortage have been weapons in the mass destruction of Zomba forest reserve. Staff numbers have been declining at the reserve since mid-1990s. From a work force that could rise to 1,000 people in peak times, there are now just about a total 40 workers.

Spanning 5,084 hectares, an area that size would require a minimum of 15 forest guards, according to officials. These are the frontline workers. They are supposed to traverse the entire reserve, on foot, combing every acre against invaders and encroachers. But there are only four are scouts, the men whose task it is to police the reserve.

Being few, they do not have shifts..

In their work, they need boots, raincoats and uniforms. But they buy these themselves because their managers say the office has no money to buy the items for them.

In 2016, a group of them went for further training. They hoped this would lead to their upgrading which would bring with it improved salaries. Nothing has changed since.

Out on patrols, when they catch forest invaders, rarely do calls to the office for a vehicle get a positive feedback, let alone fast enough.

“We wait for hours for the vehicle. We end up chatting with the suspects. We later get a call from the office that there is no fuel so we can let the suspects go,” said one of the scouts.

Mkwapatira confirmed these challenges.

“Forest management is labour intensive. You are talking about nurseries, making firebreaks, pruning, fighting fire.... You cannot expect 40 people to do exactly the same work that was being done by 1,000 people.

“And most of those 40 people are old. When you tell them they are not working hard enough, they tell you they are weak and are on treatment for various ailments. What do you do?” he said.

Counting the cost

Part of our two-month investigation included a six-hour trek on the plateau.

We found it well-stripped of trees, except around Mulunguzi Dam and Sunbird KuChawe Hotel where the plantation and tropical rain forest cover is still impressive.

We found maize fields in the reserve around Chingwe’s Hole.

The remaining pockets of indigenous forest, which makes only 20 hectares of the entire reserve, are under siege from charcoal makers.

Most of the streams feeding the Mulunguzi River in the upper section after the dam have lost their forest cover.

This degradation is threatening potable water supply to Zomba City and surrounding areas through Mulunguzi Dam, the biggest business asset for the Southern Region Water Board (SRWB).

Ritta Mwakwangwala, spokesperson for the Board, said the dam is under threat due to loss of forest cover in the catchment area.

She said the dam is now registering increasing siltation and infiltration of saw dust into the system which is pushing up the Board’s water treatment budget.

“In this service, we are supposed to reach a certain standard of quality for water potability. These days, to get that quality, we are investing more money in water treatment than we used to. This money would have expanded our system so that we supply water to a growing population,” she said.

She attributed the problem in part to conflict of interest between the department and the Board.

“We want every tree to remain standing for water restoration. The department wants trees harvested. Then you have invasion by charcoal makers and illegal sawyers. This conflict is posing problems,” she said.

Communities who have relied on streams bearing down from the mountain in various ways also reported a decline in water flow.



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“Most of these streams used to supply water throughout the year. Now most of them become dry in August and

September. This is affecting our production of vegetables and fruits such as strawberries,” said Grace Luka.

Furthermore, Zomba Plateau is one of the important tourist destinations in Malawi with attractions such as Chingwe’s Hole, Williams’ Falls and Emperor’s View, among others.

But visitors to these sites now complain of high temperatures on the plateau due to lack of shade in the hiking trails following the stripping of trees.

“So, we are recording increased cancellation of some trips and we lose money,” said Jonas Beyard, chairperson of the Zomba Tour Guides Association.

He added that they are seeing frequent mud slides which block some roads and trails, disappearance of species of birds, plants and animals leading to some animal lovers and bird watchers not to visit the mountain.

“In brief, the natural beauty of the mountain is diminishing, making it less attractive to tourists.”

‘We can fix this’

Despite suffering overwhelming devastation, Zomba Mountain Forest Reserve can be fixed, experts and communities told *The Sunday Times*.

Professor Sosten Chiotha, an environmentalist who has been in close contact with the reserve since 1973, said all it needs is to fix the governance system.

“In those days, there was a functional, alternating timber harvesting and replanting system which was being religiously followed. The Department had structure and stamina. Fires were treated as an emergency and putting them out was not the responsibility of the department alone. Everyone was a stakeholder, with the DoF providing leadership.

“Sort out the governance system and remove the silo mentality where government departments are not talking

to each other on development plans. The situation can be fixed,” he said.

In Nankhunda area, the Zomba Forest Lodge has mobilised communities and slowly winning over the people to appreciate the impact of the loss of the forest on their livelihoods.

Tom Inch, manager of the lodge, said communities do not necessarily want to destroy the forest.

“But the capacity of land to sustain the needs of growing population has collapsed. Alternative sources of living are not available. In their minds, they invade the forest not to destroy it but to live. If this is fixed, it is possible to bring the community into conservation work and restore the reserve,” said Inch.

Minister of Forestry and Natural Resources, Nancy Tembo, admitted the challenges affecting the forestry sector.

“Your findings on corruption, funding and recruitment are correct. We are taking action.

“We have best practices around the country on forest management and we can reverse the situation in reserves such as Zomba,” Tembo said.

Government has also staked 1,800 hectares of the plantation for concession management for 60 years. Identification of the concessionaires is in progress.

But communities have warned that if there are no survival alternatives for them, the concessions will not stop them from invading the forest.

Tayimu Undani from Kasonga area who survives on illegal sawing in the reserve said in the 90s, the reserve was employing thousands of people from the surrounding communities.

He paid his entire secondary school fees using the money he was earning from piece work in the forest every holiday.

According to Undani, small scale businesses thrived in the communities because of the circulation of money earned from work in the forest.

“But [Bakili] Muluzi government retrenched people. It also stopped employing people. All those businesses collapsed, no alternatives. If those concessions bring back that past, we won’t be fighting. Sixty years is too long for us to be pushed out. This forest is ours,” said Undani.

UNDER SIEGE: FOREST RESERVES TURN INTO WAR ZONES

by Bobby Kabango

First published: 31st May 2021; The Nation and Nation Online

A brave undercover reporter risked his life posing as a charcoal middleman to gain access to Thuma and Dedza-Salima Forest Reserves, which have become battlegrounds between communities illegally harvesting trees for charcoal and the law enforcement trying to protect the reserves. Both the police and the Malawi Defence Force (MDF) have failed to end the siege – two forest encroachers have died, and a police vehicle was set alight. The Wildlife Action Group (WAG) manages the reserves and has been working with community leaders to provide incentives to stop deforestation, but more needs to be done. And it's not just the trees that are suffering – Thuma and Dedza-Salima escarpments are also home to 36 species of mammals, including elephants and buffalos – and they need urgent protection.

Editor's Comments

This article highlighted how the illegal charcoal value chain operates from the source of production. It also documented how the right partner can support Government and communities to restore degraded forests, and protect wildlife, while delivering tangible benefits to surrounding communities. Looking forward, it would be interesting for journalists to investigate and document instances of how Traditional Leaders and politicians have championed or undermined Government's conservation efforts.

A torched police patrol vehicle. A chief's house was set on fire. Bullets fly. Two die. This is the war zone that Dedza-Salima forest reserve has turned into.

On one hand, communities are ready to die for them to freely, albeit illegally, exploit economic gains from the protected sanctuary via charcoal production and marketing.

On the other hand, Malawi Police Service (MPS) and Malawi Defense Force (MDF) have vowed— sometimes using excessive force—to save the forests and enforce law and order in the area.

Within eight months—between September 2020 and May 2021—some community members illegally encroached on the forest reserve, shaving off trees on roughly five square kilometres (km) of land in Dedza-Salima Forest Reserve for charcoal production, according to Wildlife Action Group (WAG), a non-profit environmental watchdog.

Dedza-Salima Forest Reserve, gazetted in 1972, is 326 square km in size while Thuma Forest Reserve—gazette in 1926—lies on 197 square km. Some villagers surrounding the reserve have made it their mission to resist every move by authorities to stop them from making an illegal and unsustainable living out of the wooded areas.

One of the encroachers loads a bag of charcoal.

Twice last year, the villagers chased away local patrol police officers who tried to halt charcoal production in the reserve. During one of the confrontations, the encroachers set ablaze a police patrol vehicle, according to the area's village head Mzikamanda.

He said they also burnt a house belonging to their group village head, Kapanda, accusing him of working with government agencies to stop the deforestation.

But National Police spokesperson James Kadadzera said in an interview last month that police will not give up until the encroachers are brought to book. "We will make sure there is order in the area because no one is above the law," he said. "At the moment, we are meeting community leaders such as chiefs to make sure that our forests are protected."

Mzikamanda said efforts by the Ministry of Forestry and Natural Resources and Dedza District Forest Office have failed to stop villagers from cutting down trees and producing charcoal from the protected area. "We will do what it takes to make sure we remain in the area until the government provides us with food for our families and loans to start small businesses," he said in an interview in his area last month.

The forest encroachers have put in place security measures to protect themselves against State agents they deem intruders. Even rangers guarding the forest reserve area



© WAG

are chased away with pangas and sticks whenever they patrol the area.

But posing as a charcoal intermediary, this reporter—with the help of a local fixer— managed to get into Dedza-Salima Escarpment Forest Reserve in the second week of April.

Equipped with 20 empty sacks, we first convinced Mzikamanda, the local chief, that we wanted to order hundreds of charcoal bags for sale in Lilongwe.

Mzikamanda, which is under Traditional Authority Tambala, is benefitting from the charcoal business in the reserve, which is about 60 km to the east of Linthipe 1 Bridge.

The chief has a group of men—his subjects—who are part of the encroachers. “They too produce charcoal and sell wood products,” he said.

But the chief warned us against meeting them, before quizzing us to first tell him the real mission of our visit. He invited one of his henchmen—who, he claimed, uses black magic called ndota to determine our real reason for visiting the area. “I need to do this because some come here pretending to buy charcoal when they are police officers trying to arrest us,” Mzikamanda said.

After handing over some cash to the chief’s magic man for a positive diagnosis of our intentions, we were cleared to carry on with our supposed charcoal deals. The barefoot chief then said: “[But] if I find out that you just want to play games or that you are a CID officer, then you are gone. You will not be able to return home.”

When we moved closer to the reserve area, he sent a young boy to call two men. But only one man, whom the chief identified as Cheukani, came to greet us. Cheukani was jittery and suspicious.

It took Mzikamanda’s effort to reassure him that we were only charcoal traders.

Within an hour, he agreed that every fortnight he will be able to produce 290 bags of illegal charcoal weighing 50kgs to satisfy our order. Each bag would cost us K3 500 (a 50kg bag plus its head).

We agreed that all bags would be kept at Mzikamanda’s house and the village head pledged to provide maximum security at a fee each time we visit the area to collect the bags.

To put an end to the forest reserve siege, Malawi Defence Force (MDF) soldiers were deployed to the forest reserves last year, according to Minister of Forestry and Natural Resources Nancy Tembo.

In an interview last month, the minister said the action resulted in the killing of two forest encroachers, while six others were seriously injured.

Tembo said she visited the area last year to discuss best ways to end the forest invasion, but her intervention did not end the encroachment.

“I went there, but they threatened to kill me,” she said. “That time there was tension following the death of two community members. I told them to stop cutting down trees.”

Following the minister’s visit, a task force was formed to monitor what they had agreed. The task force was designed to make sure that no community member is cutting down trees and the area and that they should provide security to the Dedza-Salima Forest Reserve.

The task force which comprised community members has not met, it died and there is no future.

Dedza District forestry officer Violet Msukwa, who at the time of the interview was not aware that the community is back in the Dedza-Salima Forest Reserve, said the meeting agreed to set boundary tracing, form a task force to deal with encroachment cases and provide food to the communities.

The two reserves are managed by WAG, which signed a memorandum of understanding with the Department of Forestry in 1997 to manage Thuma Forest Reserve.

In 2007, they also took over management of Dedza—Salima Escarpment Forest Reserve to better support protection and management of wildlife in the two reserves.

WAG has been working with traditional leaders around the two sanctuaries to stop community members from cutting down trees by providing incentives for three years. Among

the incentive packages, over 1 600 people are directly benefiting from income generating activities.

Thuma and D-SEFR are two of the best managed Forest Reserves in Malawi, which is evidenced by both the wildlife populations and the botanical health and diversity of species as it is a home to mammals (36 in the case of the two reserves), including elephants and buffalos.

From the engagement, WAG worked very closely with traditional authorities and communities who assisted to protect the forests. Through this cooperation and collaboration WAG has supported many community income generating activities which help mitigate community dependence on the forest product such as bee keeping production, irrigation agriculture, poultry projects—and has also supported community-based infrastructure, including drilling of bore holes, building schools, and one health center.

WAG has had an excellent relationships in the areas of TA Chitekwere, Chewere, Kalonga, Kambwiri, Ndindi, Kambalambe and Kachikomoto and some areas in TA Tambala in Dedza.

It is in some parts of Tambala where certain areas are unwilling to work with and wish to continue conducting illegal activities which is causing serious negative impacts on the protected area.

They are involved in charcoal burning, hunting in large groups of up to 40 people with over 60 dogs to kill wildlife for commercial trade.

They are also setting wire snares to kill wildlife for commercial trade. These snares also injure listed species such as elephants who carry horrific wounds due the wire on their legs or trunk and some die from their wounds. They have been involved in hunting and killing elephants for the ivory trade.

Others do light fires inside the forest, illegal trespassing when walking across the forest to the Salima side to visit family, illegal fishing inside the protected areas for commercial trade—some found with over 287 fish. Encroachment—opening gardens inside protected areas and hunting with firearms to kill buffalo.

Despite all this, WAG has made a number of efforts to end the illegal activities within the reserve land.

In the year 2020 alone, WAG recorded 67 patrols into areas where Kapanda and surrounding villages are active inside the protected area. However, the same year, 83 illegal activities

were reported. From the year 2019 and 2020, 28 arrests were made.

WAG has also made some efforts to control, educate and develop those areas by regular communication with TA



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and GVH, meeting in July 2020 to ask how they can start income generating activities in the area to reduce reliance on forest. Sponsored a borehole for Kapanda school but it was diverted to another area without consultation. In 2018/19 they held meetings to sensitize communities about the new Wildlife Act and distributed community guides to the amended Wildlife Act.

According to the Global Forest Watch (2020), between 2001 and 2019, the rate of deforestation in Thuma Forest Reserves was estimated at 3.8 hectares per year. The country's growing population is increasing demand for forest resources.

More than 96 percent of Malawian households rely on firewood and charcoal as their primary cooking fuels, and over 75 percent of urban households rely on charcoal.

The report says that in 2018, demand for charcoal alone was worth an estimated \$191 million (more than K150 billion), almost half of the total revenue that tobacco, the country's main foreign currency earner, brought in that year.

With that demand, charcoal production and marketing provided employment opportunities for around 150 000 people, according to the report.

FORESTS BURN AS SMOKE-FREE POLICIES PILE

by Suzgo Chitete

First published: 16th May 2021; Nation on Sunday and Nation Online

Malawi's trees are disappearing at a rapid rate, as the government's failure to promote alternative sources of cooking energy puts extreme pressure on the country's already depleted forests. Over 80 per cent of Malawians survive on charcoal and firewood (and this soars to 96 per cent in rural areas), due to the high cost and unreliable supply of electricity, limited investment in alternative sources of energy and a lack of education and awareness. This is despite the National Charcoal Strategy promoting alternative energy sources, including sustainable charcoal, electricity, liquid petroleum gas (LPG) and briquettes. It's vital that the government consistently regulates illegal, unsustainable charcoal, which will decrease availability and increase costs, leading to an increase in the use of alternatives. But it must be done soon – Malawi's forests are running out of time.

Editor's Comments

This article very correctly highlighted how the lack of a shared vision and coordination across Ministries and Agencies has resulted in Government working against itself. The article noted that at the same time Government was actively promoting both LPG and electricity as cleaner cooking options for urban households, in line with the recently revised National Energy Policy (2018), MERA increased tariffs for both fuels making it even more difficult for these alternative and cleaner cooking energies to compete. Looking forward, a whole of Government approach to addressing the forestry-energy nexus, and specifically the problem of charcoal-led deforestation will be essential—and past experience has demonstrated the need for the Ministry of Energy and the Ministry of Forestry and Natural Resources to actively engage Treasury/Ministry of Finance from the onset, demonstrating the costs and benefits of cleaner cooking and ensuring that Government does what it can to help make cleaner cooking alternatives to charcoal affordable and accessible to urban households.



Mkandawire shows of a five kilogramme pack of briquettes at the shop

Government's failure to promote alternative source of cooking energy is putting pressure on the already depleted forests as the demand for illegal charcoal and firewood remains high – a development which threatens the country's well-being.

The country's forest cover is estimated at about 30 percent—meaning the rest has been wiped out due to deforestation. Statistics show that over 80 percent of Malawians both in urban and rural areas survive on charcoal and firewood.

The National Charcoal Strategy (2017-2027), if nothing is done to reverse the trend, projects that by 2030 there will not be enough biomass in the country to meet demand for firewood and charcoal. This projection signals trouble but unfortunately the pace at which government is implementing policy is worryingly slow.

Apart from the national charcoal strategy, both the energy policy and the national forestry policy aim to promote alternative source of cooking energy such as sustainable charcoal, electricity, liquid petroleum gas (LPG) and briquettes just to mention some.

Quick facts, however, from Malawi Cooking and Heating Energy show that the use of charcoal in urban areas is 76 percent, firewood is 12 percent and electricity covers just about 11 percent. Comparatively in rural areas firewood has a higher percentage standing at 82, charcoal accounts for 14 percent and electricity use stands at just about one percent.

While rural areas, surely for lack of alternatives, has a combined usage of charcoal and firewood standing at about 96 percent—the urban equally has a huge share (88 percent) even when it is exposed to more alternatives.



© Lake Shepherd

Modern Cooking for Health Forests (MCHF), a Usaid and UKAid co-funded project, last year, conducted a Consumer Market Research which showed that of all the four cities Blantyre had the highest percentage of charcoal use standing at about 95 percent, seconded by Mzuzu (91), Zomba (79) and Lilongwe (78).

Interestingly, Lilongwe, according to MCHF survey, has the highest use of LPG standing at eight percent, Zomba (2 percent), Blantyre (1 percent) and Mzuzu (0.3 percent).

In a written response chief of party for MCHF Ramzy Kanaan said they observed that charcoal was more expensive in Lilongwe which has led to the increase in use of electricity and LPG.

“We know it is extremely hard, and in some cases impossible for alternatives to compete in the consumer marketplace with the artificially low price of charcoal that is produced illegally and unsustainably, and transported and sold quite openly despite it being illegal.

But if the government is able to more consistently and regularly regulate illegal and unsustainably produced charcoal, then the availability will decrease, the cost will increase, and use of alternatives to illegal charcoal will increase,” argued Kanaan.

Our analysis also show that the high cost and unreliable supply of electricity, limited investment in alternative sources of energy and lack of awareness is what is driving the high use of unsustainable charcoal and firewood.

Government, last month, increased the price of electricity and gas which counters the spirit of its own policies and strategies that aim at increasing uptake of sustainable alternatives.

The World Bank’s sustainable energy for all (SE4ALL) database ranks Malawi as one country with the lowest number of people having access to electricity which is about 18 percent. Malawi is way below its neighbours with Zambia having about 39 percent, Tanzania (36) and Mozambique 31.

Add to this low electricity coverage, unreliable supply characterised by blackouts leave many without a choice but to stick to illegal charcoal and firewood as a backup.

Government has since removed value-added tax on LPG to increase uptake. But last month, in what appears to be a contradiction in policy, government raised the price of LPG, the best possible alternative cooking energy, by over 5 percent—a development which erodes the gains of removing VAT.

The Malawi Energy Regulatory Authority (Mera) has given itself a target to increase access to LPG from the current one percent to three percent by 2023, but experts and suppliers find this to be a toll order in the face of the increase in price for commodity.

Mera’s public relations manager Fitina Khonje conceded that increase in gas prices is beyond their control as it is determined by other factors such as the performance of the kwacha against foreign currencies.

Khonje said: “Therefore, there may be movements of prices either upwards or downwards to ensure realistic and fair prices that enable licencees to continue to import, distribute and retail so consumers can continue to access LPG”

But Kanaan argues that government should be able to cushion consumers from upward movement of prices to increase uptake in line with its policies.

But the department of energy, which intends to reduce use of charcoal to less than 50 percent by 2030, is against provision of subsidies according to its spokesperson Saidi Banda. Banda said they are looking at developing strategies “to make energy services and products cheaper”.

One of the strategies, according to Banda, is by providing upfront loans under a revolving fund to enable households access appliances that use alternative sources of energy.



© Juliet Saunders

Malawi can no longer drag its feet in promoting alternative sources of energy in the face of alarming statistics of deforestation which jeopardizes agricultural productivity and, consequently, food security. Hydro electrical power generation is also in danger just as water supply, hence working with speed is of essence.

MK1.7 BILLION “DEFORESTED” AT THE VIPHYA PLANTATION AS PROJECT STRUGGLES TO SURVIVE

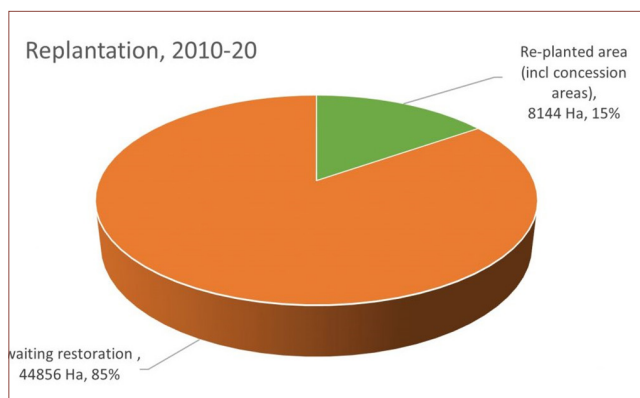
by Collins Mtika

First published: 10th April, 2021; Centre for Investigative Journalism, Nyasa Times

The once lush forests of the Viphya Plantation in the Mzimba District of northern Malawi today lie bare and desolate, with 85 per cent of plantations here still awaiting reforestation, despite the MK1.7 billion that the government has sunk into the project over the past nine years. While the government is blaming poor record keeping, there are numerous other factors at play, including a lack of a clear plantation management policy and logging by private companies, compromised trade unions and illegal lumberjacks. Despite the government’s assurances that tremendous progress is being made, just 815 hectares is being replanted yearly. At this rate, it will take 55 years to restore the once beautiful Viphya to its former glory.

Editor’s Comments

This article highlights the massive clearing of the once grand Viphya Plantation, and the poor use of resources intended to “re-establish” the largely cleared plantation area. While the journalist’s research did focus on the mis-use of funds, and touched-on some issues related to alleged political interference and corruption in the award of some timber concessions, the article did not fully address the more MK580M in outstanding debts owed to Government by timber operators. The list of debtors was led by the Timber Millers Union (now the Reformed Timber Millers Union), and included prominent business people and high ranking politicians with various party affiliations. Understanding how rights to cut trees and saw timber—profiting from a public good—without payment (and why, in some cases debtors were allowed to harvest additional areas after exhausting their allocated harvest area) is essential to preventing future misuse of Malawi’s plantations. Other important, related topics that could also be researched include the significant under-valuation of plantation resources in monetary terms when compared to nearby countries in East and Southern Africa.



Ten years since the restoration drive kick-started and billions poured into the scheme, 85 percent of the plantations remains bare.

The lack of a “a whole government” approach to the management of the once glorious and paranoic Viphya Plantation in Mzimba District in northern Malawi, has seen MK1.7 billion meant for a ‘turbo-charged’ restoration drive suffering the same fate as the trees it was meant to rekindle – ‘deforested’.

A drive to Mzuzu on the 116 km stretch from Mzimba via Chikangawa in 1998 and before would always be

an indelible experience—kilometre after kilometre of undiluted verdant charm.

A panorama of gently undulating hills of forest lushly decorated the roadside beyond the reach of the human eye in Malawi’s northern highlands, just off the grandeur of Lake Malawi.

That was the Viphya Plantation in boastful—almost arrogant—glory, a man-made green belt whose history stretches back to the rule of the late Hastings Kamuzu Banda.

But all that is no more; what remains are stumps that jut out as sad amputees on an ecological battlefield, thanks to mismanagement, political manipulation, greed and upended priorities.

Literally, the brazen rape of an innocent project that would have sustained thousands of jobs in direct and downstream industries and kept this part of Malawi awesomely beautiful.

It would have boosted Malawi’s eco-tourism facilities like lodges, spas and resort villages—complete with modern roads, schools, health facilities and shopping malls.

Of course, the plantation would be harvested one day, but not in the way it has been literally been razed down. Some MK1.7 billion that the government has sunk into the project in the last nine years seems to have suffered the same fate as the trees largely comprised of exotic pines.

Now, the authorities are dumping the buck merely on poor record keeping at the plantation. “The Department of Forestry has noted poor record keeping in the Viphya Plantation is working on improving this,” the Director of Forestry Clement Chilima said.

The tragedy, investigations have revealed, is explained by a whole array of other, avoidable, factors. Since 1998, private companies and illegal lumberjacks have been hacking away at the Viphya Plantation.

The brazen involvement of politicians, especially those aligned to the ruling party from that time up to 2019, is to blame, to a large extent.



Where replanting has been done, Trees are not adequately cared for.

Former senior Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) ministers, Peter Mwanza and Goodall Gondwe were among the ‘vultures’ they circled on the Viphya project.

They reportedly went as far as facilitating a government-backed loan for the now defunct Sterling Timber International, a politically-connected company to secure MK1.4-billion from the now defunct Malawi Savings Bank (MSB) in 2011 to set up a timber processing plant.

The factory, relying on the timber on the plantation, was never built and it remains unclear what the two politicians would actually benefit from the loan facilitation.

Sterling Timber secured the loan, which was guaranteed by another state institution, the Export Development Fund, from MSB despite having no experience in the timber business.

The Parliamentary Committee on Natural Resources and Climate Change has not delivered on the promise that it would “soon” name and shame politicians interfering

with activities of the Department of Forestry in managing natural resources at Viphya Plantations.

The otherwise media-savvy Werani Chilenga, who is the committee chairperson, has ignored our questions on the matter, despite repeated reminders, but he acknowledges political manipulation in the Viphya project.

“There are a lot of politicians who are interfering with management of our natural resources. And when we come to this plantation, we hear (that) this politician (is) doing this, another politician doing that...and these politicians are from all political parties. So we will produce the report, name and shame them and bring them to book,” Chilenga said some time back.

Compromised trade unions have also been circling on the plantation, using political links to gain from the project.

The Reformed Timber Millers Union (RTMU) invoked the political card in trying to persuade former President Peter Mutharika to increase its concession in the area from the current 4,000 hectares to 10,000.

A November 2017 letter to the ex-president that the Centre for Investigative Journalism Malawi (CIJM) is privy to indicates that the union approached Mutharika and promised him political support in exchange for a bigger stake in the plantation.

The letter reveals that RMTU claimed to have been supporting the DPP and BEAM—former First Lady Gertrude Mutharika’s charity.

It further pledged to keep surrendering royalties to the DPP and BEAM if he influenced the Department of Forestry to allocate them a bigger concession.

“We recently supported the BEAM project at Chisenga in Chitipa district. We contributed computers, cement, shovels and other equipment for the project. The money was contributed by members of the Union and we will continue...,” reads the letter in part.

Wanton logging has taken place from 1998 and promises to reforest have not brought any tangible results to the 53,000 hectare plot.

In 2012, the Malawi government claimed that replanting was taking place in the Viphya’s pine-based plantation, following a public outcry of aggressing logging. It claimed replanting 1600 hectares.

Paradoxically, official figures from the department of forestry show that an average of 815 hectares has been replanted yearly from 2012 to date.

A Forest Development Fund was created in 2012, managed by Malawi’s Forestry Department with a goal of collecting

categories of payments, retaining 80% of revenue collected.

Revenue is collected from sales of trees, fuel wood, as well as rentals and permits issued to plantation operators – the loggers.

Despite the evident lack of progress on the ground, the Malawi government insists it is doing something to salvage the situation claiming the establishment of the Forest Development Fund will help in restoring the plantation to its glory days.

But nine years since the operationalisation of the Fund, things seem to be worse than there were in 2012.

A mere 8,144.80ha that includes concession areas out of the 53,000 hectares has been reclaimed and it is estimated that, out of this hectareage, some 80 percent of the planted trees have survived, particularly in the areas that are under concession by private operators.

This means approximately 815 hectares is being replanted yearly and at this rate it will take 55 years to restore the plantation to its yesteryears.

“Malawi requires a restoration movement and a “whole of government approach”—one that is led by farmers, communities, entrepreneurs, investors, NGOs and extension workers, and government officials responsible for agriculture, forestry, finance, planning, and rural development among others,” said Patrick Matanda, Secretary for Natural Resources, Energy and Mining in the 2017 National Forest Landscape Restoration Strategy.

The Strategy outlines priority opportunities and interventions that can translate the potential of restoration into multiple benefits such as improved food security, better biodiversity, more reliable water supply,

job creation, income generation carbon sequestration and enhanced resilience to climate change.

Plantation History

The establishment of the Viphya Plantation started in 1949/50 with the planting of exotic soft wood in a number of areas such as Luwawa, Chikangawa, Champhoyo and Lusangazi with the initial aim of making the northern part of Malawi self-sufficient in construction timber.

The Malawi government planted most of the 53,000 hectares with pines, mainly P.patula, P.kesiya and P.Elliottii.

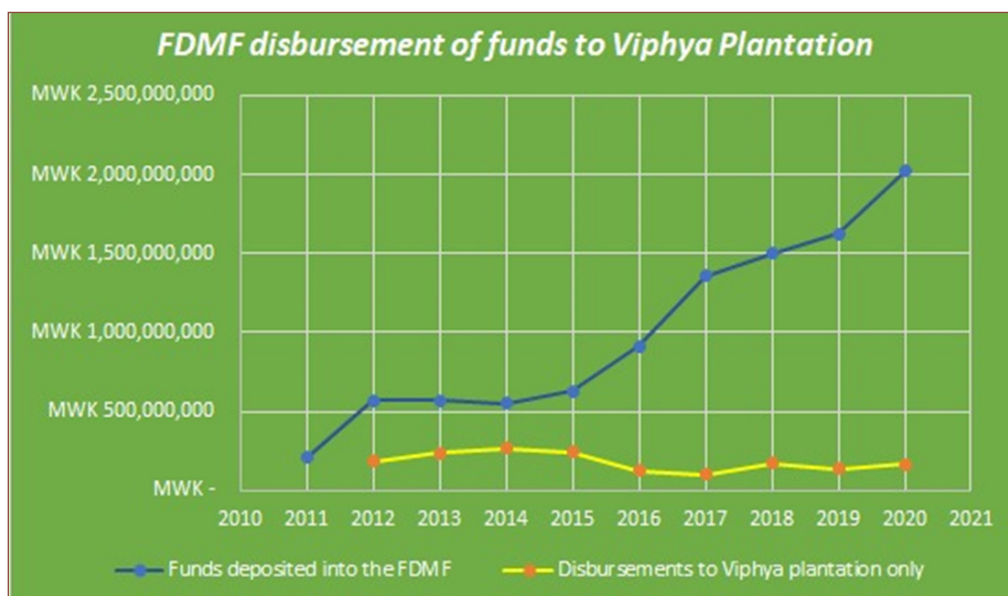
However, at independence in 1964 Malawi’s first head of State, Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda decided that the country should invest in a pulp and paper industry to earn much needed foreign currency.

This gave rise to the 53,000 hectare pine project in the South Viphya Forest Reserve that was managed by the State-owned Viphya Plywood and Allied Industries corporation as an export-oriented venture that was probably the biggest man-made forest in Africa then.

The project was set up on the montane grasslands in the highlands. Nevertheless, government stopped the project in 1979 after a feasibility study indicated that the project would not be viable only to resume it in 1980 by planting more trees after commissioning another study that contradicted the initial one.

Unfortunately, the global recession and a reduction in export demand that year scared away investors, so the project was again discontinued, only to be resuscitated years later.

The strength of state control under Dr. Banda and foreign expertise kept the project intact and in good operational prowess, noted Dan Msowoya, a political analyst.



The Viphya Plantation got almost MK1.7 billion for reforestation but it seems the funds suffered ‘deforestation’

“For a long time the forest project was managed by an expatriate. The project was self-sustaining and held out so much promise to the economic future of Malawi. The bad turn of events occasioned by the end of contract of the expatriate management brought along with it the diametrically opposite profile of the project.

“It slowly degenerated into a liability, culminating in privatizing part of its operation. The succeeding governments of the multiparty democratic era exacerbated the already deteriorating management of the forest project,” Msowoya said.

Restoration, Income and Expenditure

Despite the huge problems that the project is suffering, the Malawi government is telling a tale of unbelievable success.

According to Vice President Doctor Saulos Chilima, the Viphya Plantation is generating MK4 billion revenue a year to the government and increasing timber exports.

“So far, about 70 per cent of the 53,000 hectares of Viphya plantation is under private management, creating about 2,300 jobs,” the Vice President said after an interface meeting with Minister of Forestry and Natural Resources Nancy Tembo on the progress of reforms in the ministry in August last year.

There is little indication that reforestation is taking place but on paper there is tremendous progress as superfluously written documentation stashed at Malawi’s seat of government, the Capital Hill, claim.

Associate Professor Jarret Mhango of the Faculty of Environmental Sciences at Mzuzu University noted that the management of the Viphya Plantation is not taken as a priority but just like any activity in the line ministry.



Some parts of the Viphya Plantation: Drone Footage

“Replanting has been haphazard and without the requisite care. Forest fires have become the order of the day because the fire prevention and control mechanisms and policies have since been abandoned and discarded” he said



© Nico Taljaard - Nyala Park Illovo Sugar Estate

At the 53,000 hectare Viphya Plantation, the Malawi government manages a paltry 9196 hectares.

The rest of the Plantation has been sliced as follows: 20,000 hectares for RAIPLY, Reformed Timber Millers Union (RTMU) 4000 hectares, AKL 6000 hectares, Kawandama 6000 hectares, Total Land Care 2500 hectares, Pyxus Agriculture 1998 hectares, Consolidated Processing Limited 1583 hectares, Greenwing Agriculture Resources 687 hectares, Kayola Constructions 584 hectares, Mbelwa Heritage Trust 500 hectares and Forest Services & Suppliers 448 hectares.

Now let’s do simple mathematics: Malawi government has disturbed MK1,639, 396,019.75 into Viphya Plantation to manage 9196 hectares from 2012 to 2021. Roughly it means government allocated MK 201,281 per hectare.

“These funds were largely used for replanting, tending operations e.g. weeding, conducting law enforcement, fire-fighting, payment to contractors and conducting maintenance work (vehicles, office buildings and water supply). The above figures are far below 80 percent of the Viphya’s contribution to the Fund per year,” the Director of Forestry, Clement Chilima said.

Most concessionaires are planting improved, certified seed. All costs associated with planting 1 hectare come to \$1,000-\$1,200. This includes: the cost of the imported seed; the nursing costs; the land preparation; the out planting; and fire prevention for 3 years, according to industry experts.

Msowoya feels that an everlasting solution to the plantation would be to place it under local government, with the two district administrations’ capacity being

boosted through training and better resource allocation. "Harvesting shall be regulated by these local government authorities in collaboration with a line Ministry, and a percentage of the proceeds shall be retained and maintained by the local government authorities to further maintain the forest," he said.

Associate Professor Mhango insists, though, the government must prioritise the project and come up with a sustainable strategy.

"There must be an approved long term and short management plan for Viphya. The line ministry should create a department of plantations to manage plantations. We could devote a 3-4 year or national tree-planting programme to focus just on replanting Viphya," Mhango suggested.

She blamed inadequate funding for the poor fortunes of Viphya and other plantations "But these (plantations) are unique and need a budget line of their own to manage them effectively," Mhango said.

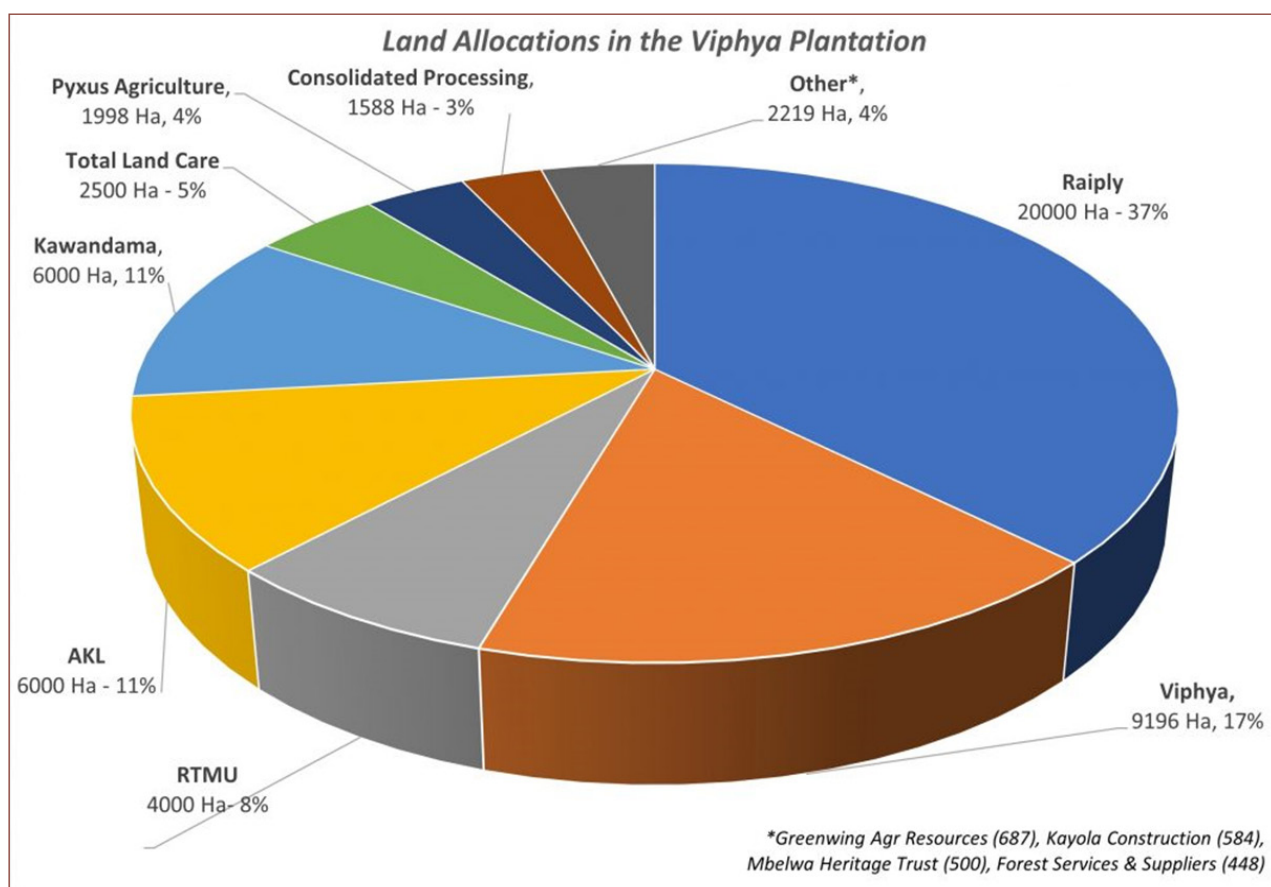


Empty Hillsides: A stark reminder upended priorities and mismanagement

The mismanagement of the Viphya Plantation has dire long term consequences if unchecked.

Unprotected soil can also be carried away by wind leaving the infertile lower soil layer exposed to the sun.

The exposed soil becomes an unproductive hardpan and develops desert-like features. The landscape may go through different stages and transform in appearance as the process of desertification takes place.



Multiple concessionaires oversee the management of the infamous Viphya Plantation

THE PLIGHT OF A TREE; MY JOURNEY TO NJENTCHERERE IN DZALANYAMA FOREST RESERVE

by Grace Nyenyezi Khombe

First published: 26th - 28th March 2021; ZBS News Special Report

Journalist Grace Nyenyezi Khombe visits Njentcherere dambo in Dzalanyama Forest Reserve, where she meets families who are turning to 'tree hunting' – cutting down indigenous trees to produce charcoal – as a means of survival. A 50-year-old tree produces just two to three bags of charcoal, with each bag selling for as little as one thousand kwacha. But, as one tree hunter says: "we continue coming here because this is our source of living, the government cannot stop us if there is no alternative for our survival." With corrupt forest guards taking bribes rather than protecting the trees, and a lack of viable, affordable alternatives to charcoal, what hope is there for Dzalanyama and the rest of the country's forests? Malawi is at the edge of desertification.

Editor's Comments

This article highlights the desperate situation in Dzalanyama Forest Reserve, Lilongwe City's primary water catchment. The journalist begins by stating that to a large extent deforestation "...is being orchestrated by some trusted forest guards". While this article, and others in this dossier describe corruption within the ranks and file of both Dept. of Forestry and Malawi Police Service staff, the journalist also describes very clearly how charcoal producers know they are doing something illegal—but they chose to do it because it is more lucrative than legal livelihood options they were pursuing. The article also begins to describe the organized nature of the charcoal business in Dzalanyama. In future it would be worthwhile to investigate the organized nature of charcoal production, and those financing (and benefiting most) from this production and trade from Dzalanyama.

In this special assignment Grace Nyenyezi Khombe takes us to Njentcherere dambo deep inside Dzalanyama Forest Reserve to tell the plight of a tree and establish the degree of deforestation which is to a larger extent is being orchestrated by some entrusted forest guards.

Njentcherere is one of the few places where there are mature indigenous trees in Dzalanyama Forest Reserve and has become one of the busiest places in the forest.

At Njentcherere, Grace has found mature trees as old as 50-year-old produce only between two to three bags of charcoal. Each bag is sold as low as one thousand Kwacha which is just enough to buy one meal for a family of six in a village setup.

Here, as we hear in this report, people who are involved in these illegal activities of cutting down trees are ruthless to anybody who dares to confront them and though they are aware of the environmental and social consequences they are not ready to quit.

The happenings at Njentcherere in Dzalanyama are a replica of what is happening in almost all forest reserves in the country which are a threat to Sustainable Development goal 15 in sustainably managing forests, combat desertification, halt and reverse land degradation as well as halt biodiversity loss.

My journey to Njentcherere I met these angry tree hunters, ***"Police officers or forest security guards cannot come here, we don't fear them, infact they are the most corrupt people, we are ready to defend ourselves, we use whatever is available like trees, panga knives and axes to defend ourselves, we have nothing to lose, those people who are telling us to stop this business receive government allowances and they want us to stop without providing any alternative, this we can't allow"***

This is Njentcherere dambo. It is located deep inside the once gigantic Dzalanyama forest reserve in Dedza district near Mozambique. This one of the busiest places inside this forest. It is a place of attraction. Here, we are told the number of people doing these activities outnumbers those in the village. Here, both men and women are into this business of 'tree hunting', yes the business of cutting down trees for fuelwood and charcoal production. They claim this is the sole means of their survival.

Global Forest Watch report of 2020 reveals that Dzalanyama forest reserve has experienced extensive deforestation and degradation largely due to human activities. According to the report, between 2001 and 2019, the rate of deforestation was estimated at 544.9 hectares per year. The forest has a total area of 98.930 hectors. This resulted in accumulated forest loss of 11.1 percent during the same period.



© Augustine Magolowondo

Indigenous trees here are prone to charcoal production because they have high calorific value, high biomass, and low moisture content.

These men and women today look tired, hungry, angry and fearless; they are alert and ready to deal with anybody daring to come closer and stop them from doing this illicit business. There is tight local network within this area to alert each other when need arises especially when Malawi Defense Force soldiers are deployed to protect the forest.

“we are many here and when one sees something strange, the message goes as quickly as possible to everyone, even to our friends who are close to Mozambique they are able to get the message, it is a vast network, we are able to run away. There are hundreds and hundreds of charcoal burning sites across the forest, but when it happens that they have found us here unexpectedly we fight”, they attest

Meet Brenda Nkhwani a mother of four children and she is in her late 40s. She has just finished cutting down one giant indigenous tree all by herself. She tells me that the processing of a tree into charcoal takes her two weeks from the day she cuts a tree down. She expects to produce at least two to three bags of charcoal which she is likely to sell at 1 thousand kwacha each. Hence, she expects to get 2 to 3 thousand Kwacha after a period of two weeks.

When I asked her why she joined this dreary work, she giggles and tells me point blank; poverty is a driving factor ***“ we were lacking all basic needs and our home was in a miserable state, we were a laughing stalk in our village, we were unable to fend for our children hence we agreed to do something, we had no choice but to come here and start doing this tough job for our survival, we stay in Magomera and it takes two hours on foot to come here on a daily basis”,*** explains Mercy.

Brenda and her husband joined the band wagon of tree hunting here at Njetcherere dambo since January 2021. But within a space of four weeks the couple managed to cut down twenty mature trees thereby producing over twenty bags of charcoal which translates to about 80 thousand Kwacha.

Although she admits this is donkey work, she tells me they are not ready to quit because they are now getting what they needed. Interestingly, Brenda attests to the fact that trees have been depleted and fears for the worse in few years to come. She tells me; ***“We are aware that charcoal production business is not our permanent solution for survival, trees have gone and we don’t know what will happen next... but there is nothing we can do about it, what concerns us is our daily food, we just need something on the table today, let tomorrow worry for itself, but we can’t just quit, we can’t!”***

Timothy Mwenda and his wife Tapiwa are here too. They ventured into this activity in 2016. Every month, this couple cuts down between four to five mature trees for Charcoal production and they produce at least 6 bags charcoal every month. Each bag of tree is sold between 1 thousand to 3 thousand kwacha.

“As a father I was failing to provide for my family. I tried several businesses but to no avail, but this is not a good business, we use physical strength to cut down trees, burn charcoal and the whole process is tedious, but we have been hearing on radio that government is providing loans to those who want to venture into business, but we are sidelined this is why we cannot stop cutting down trees here, we can’t quit!”, argues Mwenda

His wife Tapiwa too is not ready to quit. ***“This is donkey work and we are having a lot of health problems to cut down trees and prepare charcoal burners, but we can’t stop, we continue coming here because this is our source of living, government cannot stop us if there is no alternative for our survival, we are ready to risk our lives to come here, we do all this for our children to have something to eat and survive”***.

At Njetcherere dambo I found Kalikokha Mwandama and Chikaiko Mphande who are in their 40s. They have just finished cutting down one of the biggest trees here at Njetcherere. It has taken the two men close to two hours to cut down this tree using man made axes. On a daily basis, they cut down at least two trees of this kind. Today they have not eaten anything since morning and this is why it has taken them close to two hours to cut down this tree. Kalikokha and Chikaiko have been in this business for more than four years but confess to me that they have nothing to show for their labour but only bitter experiences they have suffered in the hands of Malawi Defense Force soldiers who are sometimes hired to provide security in quest to end charcoal production. ***“We fear MDF soldiers, when they get us they can kill us, we are beaten mercilessly, they leave us at the point of death, sometimes we are carried back home by fellow villager’s unconscious, but we can’t stop, when we have recovered from the injuries we still come back to continue our business because we have nothing to fend for ourselves”***.

Interestingly, they told me they are able to beat the system and continue cutting down trees because they receive go ahead from forest guards who demand money as low as

one thousand kwacha for them to have access to trees. They are given specific plots where they can cut down trees. Money exchange hands here and it is a normal trend.

They attest to this; ***“ a security guard cannot dare come and stop us from cutting down trees, even police officers we don't fear them, they are corrupt people, forest guards they are not here to protect the forest, when they find us they only ask us to give them money like one thousand kwacha to share us plots where to cut down trees. They can do nothing to us, imagine we are able to cut down trees and a whole seven tone lorry of firewood we can only pay them 7 thousand kwacha and allow us to go. They tell us that they too they want to benefit from the forest”.***

USAID/UK project on Modern Cooking for a healthy forest MCHF reveals that communities around Dzalanyama forest are motivated to stay in this illegal business by existence of high demand for charcoal, the primary source of domestic energy in both urban and suburban areas of Lilongwe city.

In addition, The 2018 Malawi Cooking and Heating Energy report reveals that Charcoal consumption in urban settlement was at 76.4 percent and 14.3 percent in rural areas. In Blantyre, illegal charcoal use was at 81 percent, Lilongwe at 74 percent, Mzuzu and Zomba at 69 and 67 percent respectively.

The report further argues that due to the high demand for charcoal, some people around Dzalanyama forest reserve have abandoned farming and other businesses and resorted to illegal harvesting of trees for fuelwood and charcoal for their livelihoods.



© Oscar Mbewe

Clement Banda who comes from Chadza village in Lilongwe rural quit his fresh maize business and ventured into charcoal selling in 2017. On February 20, 2021 I met him at Njentcherere in the midst of his business. He had just packed his three bags of charcoal which he expects to get at 4500 kwacha from each bag. He sells charcoal at Ngwenya market in Area 24 in the outskirts of Lilongwe city. ***“This is not a good business; we face a lot of challenges on the way most of the times we sleep on the road. From here to Lilongwe I walk close to 7 hours pushing these bags of charcoal on foot, honestly I am ready to stop if I can have enough capital to boost my previous business. The most difficult time is when we have been caught by forest officers on the way who beat us and confiscate our charcoal and bicycles, but we can't stop because we have nothing to do, charcoal is on demand in town”, Banda explains.***

Now in his 50s Yelomani Lemoni has been coming here to buy bags of charcoal and sell them in Mchesi township in Lilongwe since 1999. He pushes bags of charcoal from here to Lilongwe Mchesi which takes him close to ten hours. He blames forest officers of being on the forefront in promoting this business because they resell charcoal which they have confiscated from them and sees no reason to quit. He calls this part of the game. ***“ Here in the forest we don't have problems, but when we meet forest officers on the way especially at the road block, they can beat us like nobody's business. I remember one day when they caught us near Likuni road block they beat us so badly and my friend attempted to run away but to no avail so he was severe injured and they confiscated our charcoal and bicycles. But here we are today. What pains me most, when they confiscate bags of charcoal they resell them for their own survival. This pains us and we can't stop because they are making money using our sweat, they have to stop this”***

MMY efforts to meet forest guards proved futile on several occasions. They did not want to meet us even when we visited their homes.

When we confronted Dedza District Forestry Officer Violet Msukwa on March 8th 2021 on massive plundering of trees at Njentcherere area, she at first expressed ignorance on the matter. And on allegations by some tree hunters that some forest guards demand money in exchange for trees, Mrs. Msukwa could not believe the news. However, a week later, on March 13 2020, Dedza forest officers invaded Njetcherere area where they managed to arrest some people whom they believe will help to provide names of forest guards who are allegedly aiding the wanton cutting down of trees in the area.

“After your phone call, we decided to do something and we assigned a team to go to the area where we found hundreds of people cutting down trees and burn charcoal. We managed to arrest some of the people and they will appear in court soon. We want these people to disclose

names of forest guards who are aiding them cut down trees for charcoal production”, explains Msukwa.

Njentcherere Damdo is situated within TA Chilikumwendo in Dedza. Area Development Committee ADC chairperson Mr. Fanuwere Mwanza said efforts to stop men and women from cutting down trees are yielding no results. He admits that this is a serious challenge that requires multispectral approach to end the vice. He fears for the worst saying charcoal production continues to affect the environment. He too told us forest guards are promoting the trend.

“This is a serious challenge, but what we see is that this is being orchestrated by forest guards, they are in the forefront demanding money from these people to give them a go ahead to continue cutting down trees. This has destroyed the forest. But I believe if these people are given loans to start other businesses they can stop destroying trees. Unfortunately, efforts to help them access public loans are not yielding anything and people are frustrated”.

Away from Njentcherere in Dzalanyama, Chagunda area near Thuma Forest in Salima district is another business place for charcoal production. Almost everyone here has one story to tell, poverty is a driving factor pushing them into tree hunting for charcoal production. I met these three men who have been in this business for more than ten years and they do not have any reasons at all to quit. ***“I can’t stop this business because of poverty though it is not good to us, but this is where we get all the basic needs for our children, talk of school uniforms and exercise books, there is nothing we can do apart from this business”.*** ***The second man narrates his story “i tried several times to get MEDEF loans but to no avail, I gave up and this is why I came here to venture into this business. But if I’m empowered financially I can surely quit and start doing something else, I can venture into irrigation farming since we have a scheme here”.*** ***The third man tells me “What demotivates me is the fact that these forestry officers when they confiscate bags of charcoal they resell them, this is not fair. And those hired to protect trees here in Thuma forest demand money from us so that we can have access to trees here. We can’t quit”.***

Thuma forest in Salima is also heading for desertification due to huge volumes of trees that are being destroyed for charcoal production. Here Salima district forestry Officer Adam Jarson said 2 hundred hectares of trees under forest management land have been depleted. *“According to our survey conducted in 2016, half of the forest resources are depleted annually, this translates into 200 hectares of land which is 500 thousand trees. Charcoal production is the main drive and we are struggling to contain this”, says Jarson*

When we confronted Director of Forestry in the ministry of Natural Resources Dr. Clement Chilima with our findings, he acknowledges serious depletion of trees in the country’s forest reserve. As one of the controlling measures he tells

us the department has suspended the resell of confiscated charcoal in all districts but also said investigations has been launched to bring to book corrupt officers. ***“we are aware of massive plundering of our natural resources particularly trees for charcoal production, but you know we are dealing with dangerous people and you can’t just go there and stop them, they can kill you, this is why most of the times we deploy the Malawi Defense Force to help us. But still we have instituted an inquiry into the matter and bring to book all forestry officers who are aiding charcoal production”, says Chilima.***

The National Charcoal Strategy of 2017 to 2027 states that more than 97 percent of households in Malawi rely on illegally and unsustainably sourced biomass (charcoal and firewood) for domestic cooking and heating energy. This has resulted in high levels of deforestation and forest degradation throughout the country, with downstream negative impacts on water availability, hydropower-generating capacity, and more broadly, vulnerability of Malawians to climate change.

Sustainable Development goal 15 stresses the need for countries to sustainably manage forests, to combat desertification, halt and reverse land degradation as well as halt biodiversity loss.

But Malawi Parliamentary Conservation Caucus chairperson Welani Chilenga who is also Parliamentary committee on Environment chairperson is in no doubt that Malawi is losing the battle against deforestation. He fears if 70 years from now Malawi would ably deal with deforestation which is fueled by charcoal production. He tells me government is not ready to deal with the issue at hand. ***“I have been in parliament and in various environmental committees in Parliament since 2014, I have seen several policies passed and Acts amended but implementation is a big challenge, there is no political will to end this vice, we have many more years to end this business, we are not ready to provide alternatives to charcoal as source of energy, electricity tariffs are high even me I can’t afford to use electricity as a source of energy at my home”, laments Chilenga.***

The National Charcoal Strategy indicates that drivers of charcoal production include rural and urban poverty, a readily-available urban market for charcoal tied to a lack of reliable, affordable alternatives, and weak law enforcement.

The 2021 Modern Cooking for a healthy forest MCHF site based inventory Analysis which targeted Dzalanyama, Kaning’ina, Thuma, Bunganya, Perekezi , Mua –Livulezi and Dedza-Salima Escarpment forest reserves suggests that rural communities bear the disproportionate burden of deforestation, reduced wood supply and environmental degradation.

A forest expert Mike Chirwa suggests adoption of sustainable alternative energy sources and efficient cooking



© Angela Jimu - Charcoal vendor selling charcoal at a market in Mtandire township, Lilongwe

technologies to reduce unsustainable wood fuel and charcoal demand is a lasting solution. He states that

Malawi is losing huge volumes of biomass each year and he called upon those responsible to take action.

But is there anything that government is doing to help ending the vice by empowering those cutting down trees for charcoal production? Most of these people in Dzalanyama and Thuma forest attest to the fact they are willing to quit if given money to start other businesses.

National Economic Empowerment Fund NEEF a public loan facility tells us it puts in place measures to ensure all resource-constrained Malawians access the loans.

Through a questionnaire on March 14, 2021, NEEF public relations officer Whyghton Kapasule indicated that they have reviewed the loan facility requirements to take on board those that may be left out by the formal banking sector due to collateral demands.

“We have softened our collateral requirement and included physical collateral such as land, property, so they should take advantage of this and hatch viable businesses”, Kapasule says.

A National Forest Landscape Restoration Strategy stipulates that Malawi requires a restoration movement and a “whole of government approach”—one that is led by farmers, communities, entrepreneurs, investors, NGOs and extension workers, and government officials responsible for agriculture, forestry, finance, planning, and rural development among others.

But the fact remains that charcoal production is the main driver of deforestation but findings have shown that to date, corrective efforts have focused narrowly on prohibition of charcoal production, which has promoted illegality in production, transportation and marketing.

Urgent action is needed now to turn around tables and effectively control the rate deforestation and sustainably use forest resources for economic benefits of the nation and preservation of wild species. Otherwise Malawi is at the edge of desertification.

URBAN DWELLERS FUEL CHARCOAL PRODUCTION

by Thomas Kachere

First published: 9th April 2021; The Daily Times & Times TV News

High demand for charcoal in Lilongwe and other urban areas is accelerating deforestation in MuaLivulezi Forest Reserve in Dedza District. As one local comments: “I would rather have the trees in the reserve depleted than search for other means of making money.” To combat the problem, the government must promote and scale up the production of alternative sources of energy, such as LPG, sustainable charcoal, pellets and briquettes, in order to reduce this demand and protect the reserve. Until then, the trees will keep on falling.

Editor's Comments

The article did a good job of highlighting the plight of charcoal-led deforestation of the Mua-Livulezi Forest Reserve, and began to address some of the ways in which politicians looking to secure votes have encouraged deforestation. Looking forward, it would be interesting for journalists to investigate and document instances of how Traditional Leaders and politicians have championed or undermined Government's conservation efforts.

High demand for charcoal in urban locations is hastening deforestation in MuaLivulezi Forest Reserve in Dedza District. THOMAS KACHERE has found that those involved in the illegal activities have little or nothing to frighten them.

Huge quantities of charcoal daily leave Mua-Livulezi Reserve as locals frantically pursue ways of surviving in hard economic times.

Their customers are businesspeople who ferry the loads to Lilongwe and surrounding areas, leaving huge stretches of the 12,644-hectare forest, gazetted in 1924, without cover.

Huge billows of smoke above trees in the reserve speak volumes about the rapid race to devastation. Charcoal producer, Ephraim Robert, from Golomoti Village, near the reserve, admits the Forestry Department is not that harsh on those carelessly felling trees.



© Prince Foley

“They know that is what we depend on to make a living. Once they locate us, they confiscate our equipment which we reclaim later at a fee,” Robert says.

He would rather have the trees in the reserve depleted than search for other means of making money.

Apparently, the charcoal trade is big business with ever-ready customers willing to offer considerably better prices. Officials at the forest reserve admit charcoal production is the woodland's biggest problem, but insist they are trying to put it under control.

Michael Joseph Njala— whose role is to ensure the forest reserve is well protected—says they have been carrying out intensive patrols despite that the charcoal problem persists.

He says the engagement of Malawi Defence Force soldiers in protecting the reserve has lessened the problem and that it would further drop significantly if demand eased in Lilongwe.

“Apparently, a bag of charcoal that fetches around K2, 000 here is sold at K7,000 in Lilongwe. The market sustains the production. Charcoal production will stop if there is no market for the commodity,” Njala states.

Locals in villages surrounding the forest reserve have taken it upon themselves to protect the wooded area but their efforts are frustrated by those from faraway locations who still sneak into the forest to produce charcoal.

Dorothy Chauma is among those sparing their time to patrol the reserve. “It pains us to see that, after our patrol



© Simeon Katunga

sessions end, people from other villages go in to cut the trees. It really deflates us,” Chauma says.

In the rare event that the patrollers capture the charcoal producers, they confiscate their materials and warn them against returning to the reserve. “But they seem to be very clever and well connected.

The moment we call off our patrol, they tip each other and invade the forest. It is sad,” Chauma says. Senior Chief Kachindamoto of Dedza, in whose jurisdiction the reserve lies, is equally concerned with the rate at which the trees are disappearing. The crisis prompted her to establish a committee to look into the issue and counter massive deforestation.

“When I went into the forest to see for myself, I was shocked to see how charcoal producers were destroying trees. I then called for an emergency meeting and reminded traditional leaders in my area about by-laws which prohibit careless cutting down of trees,” Kachindamoto said.

The local rulers who resisted the by-laws were sanctioned in various ways including suspension.

But the destruction continues. And Deputy Director of Forestry Teddie Kamoto is “concerned” that despite that, six years ago, his department started engaging communities

around the reserve on how they can conserve it by shifting to other income generating activities, the initiative seems to have flopped.

“We will be engaging the communities through another programme so that they have alternatives for charcoal production. They need other economic activities to reduce pressure on the forest,” he said.

Kamoto further indicated that the amended Forestry Act, which now permits forestry officers to carry firearms in the line of duty, will help the Forestry Department in enforcing the law.

A professor of democracy at the University of Birmingham, Nic Cheeseman, believes the historical deforestation problem is sometimes propitiated by leaders who seek votes and are, therefore, reluctant to be “harsh” on the voters even when they commit crimes.

Cheeseman further feels the roots of the deforestation problem are deeper than often presented—the unmet basic needs of people.

He says Malawi needs to create cheaper alternatives so that people do not have to fall back on charcoal, which is a major source of energy in urban locations.

On his part, fuel technologies specialist Admore Chiumia wants alternatives to illegal charcoal such as pellets, sustainable charcoal, briquettes and liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) promoted and scaled up for more households to access them.

“The promotion of improved charcoal stoves is also a feasible option in terms of efficient consumption of biomass in urban households,” Chiumia says.

He adds that most households fail to adopt the use of LPG due to issues of cost, perceptions that gas cylinders can explode and unavailability of the fuel in urban neighborhoods.

On top of popularising the alternatives, Chiumia says, there is need to strengthen regulation and enforcement to deal with all actors involved in the supply chain.

In the meantime, charcoal producers who invade Mua-Livulezi Forest Reserve have little to scare them out of their illegal trade largely sustained in towns and cities.

LOW AWARENESS SLOWS UPTAKE FOR ALTERNATIVES

by Suzgo Chitete

First published: 16th May, 2021; Nation on Sunday and Nation Online

Despite Malawi now being home to a variety of smart cooking energies, such as liquified petroleum gas (LPG), sustainable charcoal and briquettes, a lack of awareness and access is slowing the uptake of these alternatives. LPG is not widely available in rural areas, where 84 per cent of the population live, and the cost of appliances, along with unfounded safety concerns over the use of gas, are also standing in the way of progress. If the government is serious in its bid to increase the use of these alternative fuels, incentives and strategies to increase awareness and access must be at the forefront of their agenda.

Editor's Comments

This short article highlights the progress and challenges faced by a range of alternative cooking energies. The article presents the opinions of private sector operators that Government needs to do more to support growth in cleaner cooking, including: actively marketing cleaner cooking solutions; removal of taxes (e.g., customs, duties and VAT) on cleaner cooking energies, technologies and associated appliances; and, and the need to work to more effectively control price fluctuation. Looking forward, it will be important for the media to track and report on the sale/market penetration of these cooking energy alternatives, to continue highlighting the challenges broader adoption, and to continue encouraging Government to develop the incentives and regulatory framework to encourage large-scale private sector investment in the cleaner cooking sector.



Mbvundula shows some LPG products

TMbvundula shows some LPG products here is a flourishing business in the energy sector, especially for those trading in sustainable cooking energies, but lack of awareness and government incentives is affecting the business that has the potential to reduce the high consumption of illegal charcoal and firewood.

Malawi is now home to a variety of smart cooking energies such as liquidified petroleum gas (LPG), sustainable charcoal and briquettes, just to mention some. For example, government targets to increase access to LPG by three percent by 2023.

For those operating retail filling of gas, the licence fee has been reduced from K500 000, to only K50 000; and

wholesale licence has dropped from K1.5 million, to only K200 000.

Even with the newly increased price of gas, Mera's estimations still show that it is relatively cheaper using gas than other forms of energy—a claim that collaborates with our findings based on interviews with suppliers and users of the product.

“For a family of four, a kilogramme of LPG (K2 065) can last five days. Consumers cannot get the same value from charcoal worth K2 065. Consumers will still see savings in their energy bill when they use LPG,” says Mera public relations manager Fitina Khonje.

We followed and interviewed three Lilongwe-based households that use LPG and they all confessed it was cost-effective compared to both electricity and charcoal, but complained of access as a major drawback.

Tired of unreliable electricity supply, a Lilongwe-based resident, who declined to be named, switched to gas three years ago and he counts more benefits than trouble.

“I noticed that that when using electricity for cooking, grilling and heating using the same microwave, K30 000 units would not last us a month, yet gas of the same amount (K30 000) lasts close to 50 days. Actually, even when you factor in transport or consider how cumbersome it is to walk with a gas canister, it is still cheaper,” explains the resident.

Speaking to suppliers—they are also talking of how cost-effective the alternatives are, but indicate that the

customer base remains low; not only on account of money, but lack of information and access to the products.

Founder and chief executive office for 265 Energy, Fundo Mbvundula, says main challenges are that even those that are economically able shun gas based on misinformation, urging government to create more awareness. He says the other reason people avoid gas for charcoal is an issue of availability.

“You talk of a six-kilogramme cylinder, which when filled weighs about 15 kilogrammes, and someone has to travel a distance. So, if they have no car, surely this is a drawback. So, we have introduced a door-to-door service, which many find convenient,” says Mbvundula.

He adds that there are also perceived safety concerns on use of gas such that they make it a point to train all their clients on use of gas cookers.

Gas selling outlets are more prevalent in cities—which already excludes many from accessing this important alternative source of energy.

The price of appliances is another drawback for others from using the smart technology. A snap check of gas cookers, depending on plates, fetch between about K20 000 to over K200 000, and what makes them expensive is the value added tax which industry players are lobbying for removal.

Lecturer in energy sciences and head of energy department at the Malawi University of Science (Must) Dr. John Taulo is not optimistic that government will increase access to LPG to three percent in two years’ time adding that there is need to have the product locally produced to make it both affordable and accessible to many including rural areas.

“LPG is not adequately available in rural areas, where majority (84%) of the population live. In addition, LPG is very expensive. As a country, we need to start producing LPG locally to make it cheaper” argued Taulo who cautions government to tread carefully when determining price for such products arguing that the recent hike in price of LPG is counterproductive and promotes inequality and energy injustice.



© Thokozani Chimasula

Sustainable charcoal makes inroads...

Kawandama Hills had become the first one, in 2015, to be licensed as a sustainable charcoal producer in Malawi and currently has a number of outlets in urban areas which include supermarkets where they sell their charcoal.

“This charcoal is far much better than the illegal charcoal because our production is carefully done; we grade the charcoal and we use quality wood so that it is not harmful to human health like the illegal charcoal produced anyhow” claimed the sales lady, Caroline Mkandawire, in a typical business style meant to lure a new customer. She sells Kawandama Hills sustainable charcoal at one of the outlets in Lilongwe.

Mkandawire claimed that her family of five uses about 15 kilogrammes for two weeks for daily cooking at only about K4 000.

“You can ask the owner of this restaurant on how good our charcoal is” she added “they use our charcoal and they have never complained” she stressed as if her own testimony did not carry weight.

Next to her container is an eatery which attracts a sizeable group of customers. Surely, at this eatery, the sight of charcoal was too visible to be ignored.

“The charcoal does not take time to catch fire and even if it got wet it will quickly dry. It has no smoke—making it a smart cooking energy,” said Karen Nyasulu, the owner of the restaurant.

We interviewed some customers we found buying the sustainable charcoal at some outlets for Kawandama Hills and out of five, four cited cost and efficiency as what motivates them to use the sustainable charcoal. One talked about environmental reasons.

“You buy a 15-kilogramme bag at K4 000 and what you get is quality charcoal which burns without smell and irritating smoke. In fact the illegal charcoal would weigh heavier because of dust and wood yet does not burn efficiently. I stopped using it” said one lady customer.

Apart from the charcoal, there is also an increase in production of briquettes, but still the uptake remain low. According to Richard Mlotha, a Lilongwe based briquette manufacturer there is a lot of expertise in making quality briquettes but the demand is lower compared to capacity of production.

Mlotha said their production can significantly go up if there is more demand. While he tries to market his own product, he feels it would help to have government do it—to make the “message more credible”.

The lack of awareness questions government’s seriousness to live up to its own policy dictates to promote sustainable sources of energy.

EXPERT OPINIONS

HON. WERANI CHILENGA

Chair of Natural Resources Committee, Co-Chair of Malawi Parliamentary Conservation Caucus

Fighting Corruption Must Be a Priority

Hon Werani Chilenga, MP, Chitipa South, Chair of the Natural Resources Parliamentary Committee, Chair of the Parliamentary Tax Justice Network, and Co-Chair of the Malawi Parliamentary Conservation Caucus



Let's put the statistics aside for a moment, because we have all witnessed the devastation with our own eyes. Vast swathes of our forests lost up and down the country. Rivers silted up, topsoil washed away, and ancient habitats lost.

Of particular concern is the illicit charcoal trade, which is driving Malawi's rates of deforestation to catastrophic levels. Supply chains are becoming increasingly controlled by trafficking syndicates and facilitated by a network of corrupt and greedy individuals employed across multiple government agencies.

This dossier, with contributions from some of the nation's best investigative journalists, lays bare the extent and nature of what amounts to organised crime. Grace Khombe tells of the desperation of communities outside Dzalanyama, subjected to intimidation by the brazen, violent gangs who in turn pay a pittance for the harvested charcoal. Charles Mpaka documents the 'bloody civil war' between charcoal producers and the forestry departments. Bobby Kabango recounts a single night in the life of a syndicate who coordinated a train of 7-tonne trucks and minibuses laden with charcoal, bribing their way through police blocks.

'Dirty money' is facilitating criminal activity across the whole chain. Corruption is a serious crime, and those individuals who don't resist the temptation ultimately rob from us all. Addressing corruption can feel overwhelming - it is not isolated to the forest sector, or indeed Malawi. It goes beyond systems to cultural norms and society values. However, transformational change IS possible and it is heartening that His Excellency, President Chakwera, has recently ordered a systemic review, including any legislative changes necessary to protect public resources. Our forests are indeed one of our most important natural assets.

I have honed in on corruption because it is a cause that the Malawi Parliamentary Conservation Caucus (MPCC) have placed at the top of its agenda this year. I urge you to read our recently published Corruption Review, supported by the Anti-Corruption Bureau and Departments of Forestry, and National Parks and Wildlife. MPCC is fully committed to supporting those government agencies in following through on the recommendations.

However, the deforestation crisis will not be solved simply by tackling corruption. It is a complex challenge that needs to address the management of forest reserves, regulation of forest products, and access to sustainable fuel alternatives.

I therefore applaud the quality, fact-based journalism that is desperately needed to keep the spotlight on all of these issues, to help and urge everyone to take time to support our media, to read and learn, and in turn think about what role they can play in steering us towards a better future. Malawi's natural resources must be protected for all Malawians to enjoy and benefit from, before it's too late. The time is now.

DR. CLEMENT CHILIMA

Director of Forestry

Establishing the Government's Role in Malawi's Forest Conservation

The state of forests and forest resources in Malawi and the role of Government in protecting and managing them have changed dramatically over the decades, closely associated with the local political evolution.

During the colonial days, forests and trees were protected by the Government for the national good, driven largely by a 'custodial mentality'. Later, Government established industrial plantations and gazetted areas as protected forest reserves. Local communities were empowered to manage Village Forest Areas (VFA), while Government retained control over extraction of trees through Licensing.

During the transition period to democracy after 1995, Malawi experienced the most rampant destruction of forests and an escalation of deforestation, when through restructuring of the public service, there was massive layoff of general workers in the Department of Forestry, inadequate capacity by the Department to manage and protect forests and large scale corruption.

Currently, the Government is encouraging and facilitating the involvement of the private sector and communities to manage forests through medium to long-term agreements.

Within the context of the Forestry Act, the Department of Forestry is mandated to 'ensure the sustainable development, conservation and utilisation of forestry resources for socio-economic growth and development of Malawi'.

The Department's various responsibilities include: licensing for sustainable use of forest land and utilisation of forest produce on customary land, public land, forest reserves and protected areas; regulating charcoal production, importation, exportation, transportation and utilisation; entering into agreements with local government authorities, NGOs or private partners for implementation of forest conservation management plans; and ensuring collection, organisation, maintenance and access of forest information data and records.

Other responsibilities include providing forestry research and training services and enforcing forest law. The Department carries out its mandate using key strategic instruments, such as the National Forestry Policy, the National Forestry Program (NFP), Charcoal Strategy, Forest Landscape Restoration Strategy and the REDD+ Strategy.

There are various challenges and threats facing Malawi's forests, including: frequent bushfires and conversion of forest land to agriculture, settlements and infrastructure development; illegal and unsustainable harvesting of trees to supply firewood and charcoal; corruption involving forestry officers and other law enforcers; inadequate focus on forestry as a priority by Government; limited interest by the private sector to invest in forestry; and weak institutional structure, technical and financial capacity of the Department of Forestry to coordinate forest management and enforce the Forest Law.

For the Department of Forestry to deliver its mandate and support Government to fulfil its role, these challenges need to be addressed swiftly and effectively.



RAMZY KANAAN

Chief of Party, Modern Cooking for Healthy Forests Project

Forests are essential to Malawi's survival

The science is clear: forests are essential to life on earth. While forests cover only around 30% of the planet's land area, they are home to 75% of all plant and animal life. Forests play a critical role in mitigating climate change and are essential components in the water cycle. Globally, and here in Malawi, forests provide food, fibre and fuel that supports human growth and development. However, the world's forests are being lost at an alarming rate - and the same is true in Malawi. Approximately 12% of Malawi's natural forests were lost between 1985 and 2017, but just as significantly, over the past two decades even more of Malawi's forests have been thinned and degraded.



The primary driver of deforestation and forest degradation in Malawi is well documented - the growing demand for charcoal (and secondarily, for commercial firewood). Between 2011 and 2018, the percentage of urban households using charcoal as their primary source of cooking/heating energy increased from 44% to more than 76%. Nearly all the charcoal available to buy in Lilongwe and other urban areas is produced illegally and unsustainably from natural forests. How did we get to the point where trees can be cut and charcoal produced in Forest Reserves? Where illegal charcoal is transported openly, passing through multiple roadblocks manned by personnel from both the MPS and the DoF, to be sold openly in markets? The answer is clear - it is enabled through systemic institutional corruption, facilitated by powerful individuals.

Could the production and trade in illegal charcoal be stopped? Absolutely – if the Government were to fully commit to addressing the problem.

First, the Government must prioritise investment in protecting remaining forests and key forest reserves. At present, most DoF staff are located in urban areas far from the forests they are assigned to plan, manage and conserve. Similarly, budget allocations for regulation and enforcement are minimal, especially when compared with the investment in tree planting and other activities with far less potential to contribute to forestry sector goals.

Second, focus on restoring degraded natural forests. Letting trees grow back naturally with limited assistance is often cheaper, more efficient and more effective than planting trees. Third, strategically invest in supplemental tree planting: tree planting can and should be part of Malawi's solution to deforestation and forest degradation, but the current programme has been ill-placed, resulting in an enormous waste of already limited financial resources.

Finally, to succeed in addressing the problem of charcoal-led deforestation, the Government must ensure the rule of law applies to everyone, everywhere, always. The extent of political involvement in Malawi's deforestation - in Viphya and other plantations and in the charcoal business - is well known and continues today. If hard-fought enforcement gains can simply be 'overturned' through political influence, then we will have lost before we've even started.

MATHEWS MALATA

President, Association of Environmental Journalists in Malawi

It's time for Malawi's Environmental Journalism to thrive.

The quality, the depth and strength of the stories in this dossier shows the seriousness, passion and dedication my fellow journalists have for environmental journalism in Malawi.

Investigative journalism can be tiring and life-threatening. It requires a lot of patience and perseverance. In the testimonies, I saw acts of bravery and integrity from the journalists. And it was so clear to me that my esteemed members of the Fourth Estate willingly chose to put their lives on the line in defence of Mother Nature.

Every time I read their stories, it gives me hope that if we do this repeatedly enough, our forests will be healthy again.

Malawi's journalism is navigating one of the most difficult decades in history - with COVID-19, media capture and inadequate resources choking the operations of most newsrooms. The media landscape is evolving fast, and gaining, maintaining or expanding media spaces for environmental issues hasn't been easy.

It is extremely difficult for media outlets to support a journalist working on an environmental assignment, let alone an investigative piece, which is usually very expensive and time consuming compared to hard news or regular features.

However, with the coming of the Association of Environmental Journalists (AEJ) and the worsening climate crisis, environmental issues are increasingly receiving the attention they deserve, to the extent that some made it to the front pages.

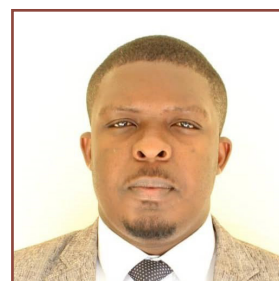
During a panel discussion on charcoal-led deforestation at AEJ's Green Media Awards in December, panelists, including Director of Forestry Dr. Clement Chilima, Assistant Director in the Department of Energy, Saidi Banda, and Dorothy Nhlema, representing civil society, all denied that the country was going through a deforestation crisis.

However, minutes later, Minister of Forestry and Natural Resources, Hon. Nancy Tembo-MP, stood up to deliver her speech: "It is a special day we celebrate and recognise excellence in communicating, reporting, and disseminating achievements, issues, and challenges in the environment, natural resources, and climate change. In fact, we are in a crisis situation."

In her speech, she also admitted learning things she never knew about through the media and encouraged the media to keep 'getting messages across' and continue influencing positive behaviours and policy decisions.

AEJ's FAJIM project, supported by the Modern Cooking for Healthy Forests in Malawi (MCHF) and co-funded by USAID and the UK government, is a timely intervention that will continue to expose high levels of systematic corruption in the forestry sector.

FAJIM must be a long-term project, and we need more of these investigative pieces in the media spaces. It's time for environmental journalism to thrive in Malawi.



DR. ZACHARIA MAGOMBO

Chair, Africa Energy Forum

Complex Problems Require Complex Solutions

The current deforestation crisis is a result of complex factors, ranging from population growth with the subsequent increase in demand for resources and services, to the collapse and failure of governance systems, exacerbated by corruption, politics, and failure to set our priorities and change our mindset. The situation is further compounded by emerging issues, particularly climate change.

Complex problems require complex solutions that address both the short and long term. Efforts to reduce charcoal supply from the point of production, without concurrently addressing high charcoal demand in urban areas, lack of alternative energy sources, and governance system failure, will not stop deforestation.

Some of the things we are doing are appropriate – promoting use of LPG and solar as alternative sources of energy, restoration of degraded areas, promotion of forest regeneration, and use of efficient technologies such as the efficient cooking stoves. The problem is that we are not doing these things to a scale that corresponds to the degree of the problem.

Why can't we facilitate nationwide use of LPG? Why can't we have a nationwide awareness campaign on the use of LPG? The piecemeal approach to activities that address the problem of deforestation will not change the current trajectory of the deforestation problem. Malawi needs prioritisation of best practices and to undertake those practices to a scale that will make an impact.

To solve this complex problem, everyone must be involved: the government (be it the legislative, executive, and judicial arms), the general public, private entities and entrepreneurs, politicians, local leadership, community level structures, individuals, philanthropists, scientists, researchers, media, the business community, the religious community, and youth.

Among these, government and politicians have a leading role in creating an enabling environment for others to play a role in a professional and complementary manner. For example, the government has to come up with policies/legislation that helps to translate research findings by scientists into tools for spurring economic development.

Consider, for instance, the statistics where more than 96% of households rely on charcoal and firewood as their primary cooking fuels, and about 20% of the entire population have access to electricity. This is information that should make government officials and politicians urgently consider appropriate medium and long term approaches in solving the energy crisis. To the contrary, we seem to be naive to realities on the ground and continue to act at a scale that amounts to nothing except satisfying our personal egos.

It is not too late to reduce, stop and reverse deforestation, as nature has a huge capacity to recover given the opportunity to do so. I also believe that it is not too late if we implement best practices to scale. On the other hand, doing nothing about the current deforestation crisis is not an option.



DOROTHY TEMBO - NHLEMA

Director of Programmes, Lilongwe Wildlife Trust

Malawi's Natural Resources Compromised by Short-Sighted Development

When I was young, most mountains in areas that I have lived were covered with mature trees and they looked beautiful. Soche, Bangwe, Mpingwe, Ndirande and Michiru in Blantyre were amongst the mountains with lots of beautiful trees.

As the population growth rate grew from 2.6% in 1970 to 3.6% in 1990, coupled with new buildings and roads, it is inevitable that there will be land use changes including expanding into fragile and forested areas. But we could have been proactive in striking a balance between population growth, development and natural resources.

Blantyre landscapes are among the many fragile catchment areas that have been encroached due to population pressure, and the hills have become residents and farms. These hills were major biodiversity hotspots, whose value of ecosystem services they provided has been reduced to nothing. With destroyed catchments, disasters in the lower Shire including Blantyre itself, and related costs, has increased.

The felling of 50 year old Mahogany trees to pave way for the six-lane road expansion is yet another example of short-sighted planning on the part of the Lilongwe City Council, Roads Authority and the Government. It will result in disturbances in ecologically sensitive areas around



Ndirande Mountain 2021

Photo credits – Dorothy Tembo-Nhlema

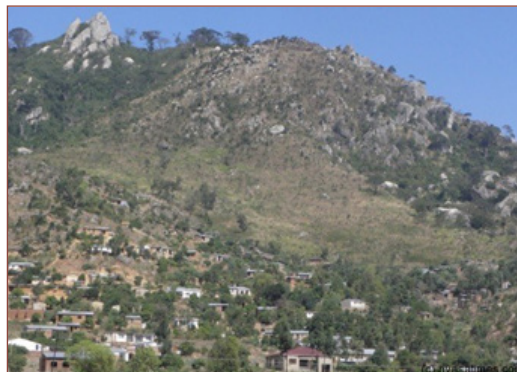
Lingadzi and Lilongwe rivers, and nature sanctuaries, which are likely to have a compounding impact on wildlife, biodiversity and environment in general.

These trees were within the proposed Lilongwe Ecological Corridor and the current initiative to transform Lilongwe into a green, clean, prosperous, and resilient city, by ensuring the protection of its urban natural assets, and advancing complementary nature-based solutions will be hugely affected.

These are not unique examples of short-sighted development planning. We have several development programmes that have led to clearing of trees and forest areas: the M1 road expansion, the expansion of M3, construction of Mombela University and Nkhatabay hospital and planning residential areas of Nthenje residence.

In most cases, Forestry Department and Environmental Affairs are not involved, yet safeguarding mandates reside in their offices. In addition, consultations and public awareness are not extensively conducted to gather ideas that may reduce the impacts. All future development should consider relevant department and organisations.

Development is good and is a sign that a country is growing, however all other factors including environmental planning should be considered. We can learn from offset/mitigation/replacement programmes, like the Sadzi hill project by Leadership for Environment and Development (LEAD). Only if we have plans that translate into actions and long-term planning on both our development and environmental sustainability, will this nation be an exemplary country on green development.



*Soche Hill
Photo credits: Nyasa Times*



*Google map of Sadzi Hill in May 2013
Photo credit: LEAD*



Google map of Sadzi Hill in April 2019



Felled Trees along Kenyatta drive in Lilongwe

HERBERT MWALUKOMO

CEO, CEPA (Centre for Environmental Policy and Advocacy)

Securing Malawi's Forests Need Less Talk, More Action

Forests provide a variety of important goods - timber, food, energy - and services - soil and water conservation, pollution reduction and climate regulation. Despite their importance, forest resources in Malawi continue to degrade rapidly, largely due to unsustainable and illegal charcoal production. There are three main challenges facing the forestry sector: convenience of forest resources as a source of income; limited availability of alternative energy; and weak law enforcement.

While some illegal charcoal producers claim they are involved in the business because it is their only source of survival, it is the convenience of forest resources as a source of income that is a major drawback in the fight against deforestation in Malawi. Forest resources are readily available throughout the year as a source of income both on customary land and in protected areas. This is unlike many other forms of income generation, which require risk taking, investment costs and time.

There is also limited availability of alternative energy sources among urban and peri-urban populations, and, as highlighted by Suzgo Chitete in 'Forests burn as smoke-free policies pile' and 'Low awareness slowing uptake for alternatives,' adoption of those that are available is very low. The lack of policy implementation by the Ministry of Energy means that alternative energy solutions are not available at scale, and the Forestry Department has been left to promote their use.

The final key challenge for Malawi's forest resources is the weak law enforcement regime, characterised by corruption and limited capacity. Sources suggest that social, political and administrative conditions in the country provide an environment conducive to corrupt practices. Government officials have been known to be complicit in the trafficking of illegal charcoal, while there are similar stories of forestry officials aiding in forest crimes. There is also a high number of vacancies in the Department of Forestry for front line personnel, such as forest guards, while existing personnel are poorly equipped.

Addressing these problems will require strong political leadership and exemplary behaviour among leaders, with the goal being to instil positive environmental values in society. The government must increase awareness of, and access to, alternative energy sources among the urban and peri-urban communities and incentivise private sector investment in alternative energy. Vacancies at the Forestry Department must be filled and more resources provided to allow them to effectively undertake their jobs. There must also be implementation of improved systems for reporting, investigating and fighting corruption, to allow it to be dealt with decisively.





DEPARTMENT OF FORESTRY

GUIDELINES FOR SUCCESSFUL TREE PLANTING AND FOREST RESTORATION IN MALAWI

1. **PROTECT EXISTING FORESTS FIRST:** Keeping forests in their original state is always preferable; undamaged old forests soak up carbon better and are more resilient to fire, storm and droughts.
2. **USE NATURAL FOREST REGROWTH WHEREVER POSSIBLE:** Letting trees grow back naturally with limited assistance (and protection) is often cheaper, more efficient and more effective than planting trees.
3. **SELECT THE RIGHT AREA FOR REFORESTATION:** Plant trees in areas that were historically forested but have become degraded, rather than planting trees in other natural habitats (such as grasslands, wetlands, etc.). And strategically plant elsewhere for specific purposes (e.g., soil fertility on farm, fruit on farm/homestead, wind breaks, stream bank protection, etc.).
4. **SELECT THE RIGHT TREE SPECIES FOR THE RIGHT LOCATION:** Where tree planting is needed, picking the right trees is crucial. Scientists advise a mixture of tree species naturally found in the local area, including some rare species and trees of economic importance, but avoiding trees that might become invasive.
5. **MAKE SURE THE TREES ARE RESILIENT TO A CHANGING CLIMATE:** Use tree seeds/seedlings that are suitable for the local climate and how that may be expected to change in the future.
6. **MAKE TREE-PLANTING DEMAND-DRIVEN:** Local stakeholders must drive and own tree planting efforts. It is often local people who have most to gain from looking after the trees planted in the future (and similarly, it is local people who are at greatest risk from unwanted tree planting).
7. **PLAN AHEAD:** Plan well in advance to ensure you can source seeds, sow seeds, establish nurseries, prepare transplanting pits and outplant trees early in the rainy season (see DoF Forestry Calendar for recommendations). But first, work with local people to define the planting/reforestation goals, confirm the timeline, management requirements, and roles and responsibilities. Lastly, plan to plant only what you can manage (to reduce waste).
8. **PLAN AND COMMIT FOR THE LONG-TERM:** Tree planting is not a one-off-event, it is a long-term commitment that may require 5, 10 or 20 years to “pay-off”. Ensuring that planted trees are well managed, survive, and are able to deliver the desired products/services requires a long-term commitment.
9. **LEARN BY DOING:** Combine scientific knowledge with local knowledge. Ideally, small-scale trials should take place before planting large numbers of trees. Monitor, learn, adapt, then scale-up where and when feasible.
10. **MAKE TREE PLANTING PAY (AND MAKE IT PAY OVER-TIME):** The long-term success of tree planting depends to a large extent on the ability of the tree planting effort to provide multiple benefits to key stakeholders (and especially local stakeholders), over time. This can include livelihood (non-monetary) benefits and monetary benefits. Generally, speaking stakeholders must value these benefits over changing the landuse (e.g., from forest to agriculture).

Adapted from Briggs, H. (January 26, 2021). “Scientists address myths over large-scale tree planting,” BBC. Available: <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-55795816>



SNAPSHOT OF MALAWI'S FORESTRY SECTOR



94,080 km²
TOTAL LAND AREA

MALAWI'S PROTECTED AREAS:

88 Forest Reserves

5 National Parks

4 Wildlife Reserves

3 Nature Sanctuaries

TOTAL FOREST COVER (2021, est.): 24.4% \approx 22,954km² = 2,295,400 ha

NATURAL FOREST (2021 est.): 22,281km² \approx 2,228,100 ha

PLANTATIONS (2021, est.): 673km² \approx 67,300 ha

FOREST BIOMASS STOCKS Malawi's forests have a mean biomass stock of 104.9 ± 10.2 tons of dry matter per hectare (tDM/hectare), but with considerable variation from one location to another

Biomass stock of **Dzalanyama Forest Reserve** (2020):
 76 ± 9 tDM/hectare

Biomass stock of **Kaning'ina Forest Reserve** (2020):
 315 ± 34 tDM/hectare

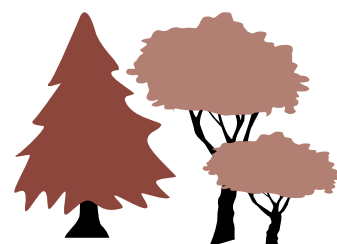
FOREST DIVERSITY

While the National Forest Inventory 2020/2021 identified 176 tree species, the sample was dominated by a much smaller subset of species

4 species accounted for one-third of the total tree biomass

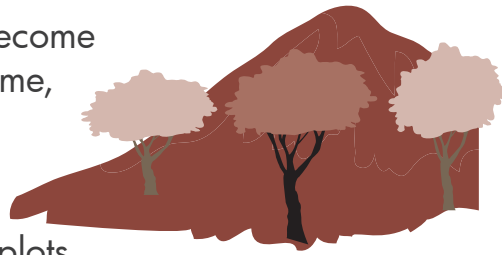
Uapaca kirkiana
Brachystegia bussei
Brachystegia manga
Brachystegia spiciformis

9 species accounted for one-half the total tree biomass



WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

While trends will become clearer with more time, more data, and through re-inventorying permanent sample plots. Over time, it seems apparent that forests are becoming less dense and less diverse over time.



This would also suggest that these forests cannot produce the same diversity and volume of products (e.g., fruits, medicines, etc.) or the quality services (e.g., water infiltration, erosion control, etc.) that they did in the past.

DEFORESTATION



An average annual deforestation rate of 0.63 ± 0.10 per year for period 2006 – 2016 (GoM) approx. 14,500 ha/year

DEGRADATION **2.5x**

Malawi loses almost 2.5 times more biomass from degradation (thinning) than from deforestation

AFFORESTATION

The mitigation gains from planting have been limited, and nowhere near large enough to compensate for deforestation and forest degradation, reflecting the limited success of tree planting efforts.



The Problem: Increasing Demand for Charcoal ?

76%



In 2018, 76% of urban households relied on charcoal as their primary source of cooking and heating fuel (Population and Housing Census, 2019), which increased from 44.6% of urban households in 2011 (IHS3, 2012).

