



Malawi

Institutionalizing Traditional Community-based Natural Resource Management

Malawi, a landlocked country in southern, central Africa, depends on its natural resources, especially the agriculture sector, to meet the demands of a population of about 11 million people. The country has developed a remarkable fishing industry, keeping in mind that about 20 percent of the area is covered by water, including the famous Lake Malawi (called Lake Nyasa by the riparian states, Mozambique and Tanzania). Lake Malawi/Nyasa is the eighth largest freshwater lake in the world, and has the highest known biodiversity of fish species, an estimated 1,000 plus, of any lake in the world. Other important water bodies in Malawi are Lakes Chilwa, Malombe, and Chiuta, and the Shire River system.

Fish is an essential part of the nutritional requirements of the population, supplying most of the animal protein consumed, especially for low-income households. More than 90 percent of the catch is landed by the artisanal fisheries sector; and it is estimated that about 250,000 to 300,000 people from the primary and secondary sectors depend on the success and failure of the industry.

National landings comprised about 78,000 tonnes in the 1980s but declined to 68,000 in 1998, mainly be-

cause of the negative catch from Lake Malawi, which provides about 60 percent of the national catch.

Background to fisheries management in Malawi

Fisheries management in Malawi has evolved from a traditional system to a centralized regime, followed by the recently introduced co-management fisheries systems.

During colonial rule, and through later regimes, a centralized managed system was in place. As in many other countries, these centralized regimes experienced a number of difficulties including: (i) a reluctance or inability to explain to fisherfolk the role of, the need for, and the time-frame of closed

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seasons or the function of fishing licenses to control and limit access into the fishery; (ii) inadequate surveillance, monitoring, and control of fishing activities because of budget constraints; (iii) rules and regulations formulated during a time when biological factors and population density were substantially different. In addition, these centralized regimes often obliterated traditional leadership values in favor of state authority.

From pilot co-management measures to national implementation

The decline of fish catches led to the implementation of a new fisheries management strategy by the Department of Fisheries (DOF), carried out with assistance from the Federal Republic of Germany, through the German Technical Cooperation (GTZ). The strategy included a decentralized, participatory management approach to replace the centralized management style, which had failed to enforce regulations, in particular the increased use of destructive fishing gear

like shore and open water seine nets, often operated with mosquito netting.

The decentralization of decision-making to the fisherfolk in Malawi coincided with the shift in Malawi's politics in 1994 from an autocratic one-party state to a multiparty democracy. In the same year, the pilot measures of a community-based fisheries management program were implemented through a project known today as the National Aquatic Resource Management Programme (NARMAP).

In order to strengthen the capacity of the Department of Fisheries, the project provided assistance through a reorientation of the fisheries extension service, focusing on participatory extension methods. There was also a need to build local capacity and institutions at the community level. This work involved the formation of fisheries self-help organizations—so called Beach Village Committees (BVCs)—that act as intermediaries between the Department of Fisheries, the fishing communities, and the local traditional chiefs, known as traditional authorities (TAs). The rules and regulations of fishery are discussed with these groups, and can become by-laws in the fisheries regulations.

One of the program's main achievements was obtaining the legal backing for this community participation through an amendment of the Fisheries Act. The new Fisheries Conservation and Management Act (1997) passed by Parliament legitimizes local community participation in fisheries management (Box 1).

The “Renaissance” of traditional fisheries management

A great encouragement to the ongoing Community-based Natural Resources Management (CBNRM) programs was the “rediscovery” of a traditional fisheries management scheme that regulates the fishery at Mbenji Island. The island—which is about nine square kilometers in size and located about 10 km off the mainland (close to Salima, Central Lake Malawi)—is in the area of the Sub-Traditional Authority Msosa, Nema Village, Salima District.

The fishery is based on *Utaka*, a plankton-feeding group of species of the Genus “*Copadichromis*”—members of the Chichlid Family. Unlike other areas of Lake Malawi, the fishery at Mbenji has thrived for many years without any signifi-

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cant sign of decline. The reason for this is the strict management regime of Chief Msosa (a former teacher) and his advisory committee, which consists of elders and fishermen.

The fishery has been managed in this way since the early 1950s, when an elder instituted regulations on fishing activities. Traditional belief holds that contravention would offend the spirits that control the availability of fish around the island.

A major aspect of the island's fisheries management system is an annual closed season, which begins in December and runs to March/April of the following year to allow stocks to recover. During the closed season (which also runs parallel to the season of high agricultural activity), nobody is allowed to stay on the island or fish in the surrounding waters.

The closing and the opening are accompanied by ceremonies and follow a strict agenda. During both occasions the fisheries committee (chaired by the chief) meets to discuss what went well and what went wrong during the previous fishing season, and if any contravention of the regulations had occurred. Most offenders are warned or prosecuted (which is often a fine payable in kind). Serious offenders are banned for the next season.

Events during the ceremonies also involve traditional dances and a public address by the chief reemphasizing the observance of the regulations and the standing disciplinary restrictions. Fisheries regulations include a limitation to fishing gear, mesh size regulations (e.g., no mosquito netting), and banning of the use of light to attract fish.

To avoid conflict among the numerous fishermen on the island, the regulations also include a ban on alcohol, gambling, and marijuana (*Chamba*). In addition, the presence of women is not permitted. Fish trade (which is usually done by women) takes place at the beach opposite of Mbenji Island, the location from where the supply crafts leave after being inspected by members of the fishing committee.

Impact of the Mbenji Island scheme

With permission of the chief, the Mbenji scheme was used for sensitization and propagation of the initiative in the various sectors linked to CBNRM initiatives. Chief Msosa is an eloquent and powerful speaker who, in his speeches, also talks about the fight against corruption and the HIV/AIDS epidemic. He and fishermen from Mbenji Island are also

Box 1: Malawi- The Fisheries Conservation and Management Act (1997)

Malawi's Fisheries Conservation and Management Act (1997) legitimizes local community participation in the management of local fisheries. It provides the legal framework to implement co-management strategies by:

- Providing for the formation of management committees by persons engaged in fishing to participate in the conservation and management of fisheries resources;
- Facilitating the implementation of a fisheries management agreement between local communities and the Director of Fisheries (DoF), based on a management plan negotiated between the DoF and the community;
- Committing the DoF to assist in the implementation of the management plan;
- Giving these management committees the power to scrutinize applications of fishing vessels and fishing licenses; keep records of fishing vessels; enforce fisheries regulations; enforce conditions specified in licenses and seize fishing vessels and fishing gears;
- Allowing for communities to make area-specific by-laws pertaining to gear, area, and temporal restrictions and allowing for revenue sharing between government and communities.

regular contributors to the bi-weekly fisheries radio program "*Usodzi Wadero*" of the Malawi Broadcasting Cooperation—a project-sponsored program with a large audience and impact at the community level. Also with the help of NARMAP, closing and opening ceremonies were used to bring together traditional leaders from all over Malawi to study the scheme and discuss it with the chief.

The most successful outcome was the banning of all seine net activities at Lake Chiuta, which was announced in 1999 by Paramount Chief Kawinga at the request of the local community and the local Chief Nkokwe. The seine net fishery (mainly an open-water seine net called *Nkachcha*) was practiced by nonresident, migrant fishermen who had "invaded" Lake Chiuta since 1996. The use of seine nets had caused a severe decline in the catches of the traditional fishery—which was done with gill nets and traps—and to conflicts between resident and nonresident fishermen. The ban led to the peaceful eviction of about 300 seine net units and to the recovery of the traditional lake fishery within two years. The case of Lake Chiuta was included in the extension messages of the Department of Fisheries.

As a result of these exchanges visits and radio messages, traditional leaders from different parts of Malawi began taking similar initiatives. For example, in the Lower Shire, Lake Chilwa, and Chia Lagoon (Lake Malawi), Chief Msosa and two other traditional leaders are permanent members of the Fisheries Advisory Board, which meets biannually to advise the Minister of Natural Resources on matters concerning the fishery.

In Malawi, awareness of the need to conserve fish stocks is increasing, and extension messages regarding the conservation of these stocks are popular. Through the example of the Mbenji Island scheme and its champion, Chief Msosa, the country is witnessing a growing commitment to the sustainable use of natural resources for the benefit of local communities.

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