

**WHAT DOES A COMMITMENT TO ENVIRONMENT AND DEVELOPMENT  
IMPLY FOR URBAN CENTRES IN MALAWI?**

By

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**Background Information**

Malawi is a small landlocked country situated in Southern Africa occupying 118,580 sq Km. It has a population of 12 million people. Malawi is very densely populated, with a 1998 average of 105 persons per sq. km. The northern region is the least densely populated area (46 persons/sq. km) and the southern region the most (144 persons/sq. km).

Malawi ranks among the world's least developed countries with per capita income of US\$ 220 and over 65 percent of Malawi's population live below the poverty line. Malawi has the GDP of US\$1.7 billion. Its economy is heavily based on agriculture, which supports around 90% of the population and contributed over 36% of GDP in 2002. The Malawi government faces strong challenges, e.g., to fully develop a market economy, to improve educational facilities, to face up to environmental problems, contain the ever-growing urbanisation, to deal with the rapidly growing problem of HIV/AIDS, and to reduce poverty and inequality .

**Rate of Urbanisation in Malawi**

Urbanisation in Malawi has been growing in recent years. 75 percent of Malawi's urban residents are in the cities of Blantyre, Lilongwe, Mzuzu and municipality of Zomba. Although data shows that the level of urbanization in Malawi is low when compared to other African countries, it is argued that Malawi's rate of urbanisation (due to urban migration) is much higher than any other country in Africa. According to the United Nations Centre of Human Settlement (UNCHS), Malawi is the 'fastest urbanising country in the world, and by 2015, about 44 percent of the country's

population would be living in urban centres’ (*IRN News* 7<sup>th</sup> July 2004). According to Oxford Policy Management (OPM 2004:iii), ‘the percentage of the population living in urban areas [in Malawi] is increasing significantly, reaching 15.5% in 2002. The population of some urban areas (e.g. Lilongwe and Mzuzu) increased by almost 100% from 1987 to 1998.’ A study by UNCHS has shown that ‘urban population growth of 6.3 percent, compared to 0.5 percent in rural areas. According to the study, three million people now live in urban areas compared to 260,000 in 1966, something which represents a 25-percent growth’ (*Matauni News* 2004). Below is a table showing the rate of urbanisation in major urban centres of Malawi.

**Table 1:** Population of principal towns (’000s)

	1977	1987	1998	2003*
Blantyre City	219	333	478	547
Lilongwe City	99	223	436	499
Mzuzu City	16	44	87	100
Zomba Municipality	24	43	64	na

(\* 2003 figures are estimates from *Countrywatch*, 2004)

**Source:** OPM 2004: 2

As noted earlier, migration from rural to urban areas is a major contributing factor of urbanisation in Malawi. People leave rural areas because of a low rate of growth in agricultural production, and poverty. Most rural Malawians on average farm less than one hectare of land, insufficient to meet household needs, and routinely suffer from seasonal hunger (*IRN News* 7<sup>th</sup> July 2004). Therefore they move to towns mostly in search of work and education. The poor regard the towns and cities as opportunities for economic and social development.

Specifically, the rate of urbanization is not sustained by strong economic growth. This has led to a situation whereby there are rising levels of urban poverty, lack of adequate basic infrastructure and urban services. Recently, a meeting held in Lilongwe under the theme "Malawi is World Champion in Urban Population Growth", concluded that ‘urbanisation was the main contributing factor to land and

housing shortages, congestion, squatter settlements, crime, HIV/AIDS infection and unemployment’ (IPS 2004). The rapid population increase that has resulted in increased urbanization also puts a lot of pressure on allocation of natural resources (Chikhwenda 2002).

Unfortunately due to increased poverty in rural areas the above consequences of urbanisation can not be mitigated by barring the rural poor from migrating to urban centres. In this respect it is argued that ‘urbanisation in Malawi cannot be stopped whether by law, policy or development projects targeting the poor. The best thing to do would be to let public investment follow the people’ (Mail and Guardian Online 27 July 2004). To be sustainable however, this public investment has to take into consideration environmental challenges that urbanisation poses.

## Urbanisation challenges in Malawi

### *1- Waste Management and Pollution*

Solid waste disposal in Malawian urban centres since 1996 has not changed much and is mainly through sanitary landfill and open dump method as indicated in the table below:

**Table 2:** Type of solid waste disposal method utilised in urban centres of Malawi

Method of disposal	Urban Centre and percentage of solid disposal method utilised			
	Blantyre	Lilongwe	Zomba	Mzuzu
(a) sanitary landfill	32	90	0	80
(b) incinerated	2	1	0	2
(c) open dump	59	8	100	15
(d) recycled	2	1	0	3
(e) other	5	0	0	0

**Source:** UNCHS. 1996

Solid waste disposal by open dump is the most harmful method which leads to many environmental and health hazards in urban centres. The extent of these impacts is highlighted by the increased rate of urbanisation. For instance Ferguson and Mulwafu (2004:25) noted that in Zomba Municipal sewage system was designed in the 1950s for what was then a city of approximately 35,000, but which now numbers more than 85,000 people. This increased urbanisation has resulted in the treatment plant to virtually collapse, forcing the release of untreated sewage directly into the nearby rivers. The consequence of this is that there have been high levels of faecal contamination in the rivers, and nearby boreholes and wells. Both urban and rural dwellers living downstream who depend on the river for drinking and bathing have suffered from dysentery, cholera, typhoid and scabies for years.

In addition, there has been a vast increase in number of cars in the urban centres so that 'during peak hours, roads from townships leading to the city's main streets become clogged with traffic that range from minibuses, trucks, bicycles and a sea of pedestrians' (IPS 2004). This has resulted in increased pollution of urban centres in Malawi causing environmental problems and the resultant health risks. This is evidenced by pollution related diseases that are common among urban residents, measles, meningitis, flue and tuberculosis, and high stress levels, for instance.

## *2-High Demand for Housing*

Shelter provision is one of the challenges urban managers in Malawi currently face (Chikhwenda 2002). The low-income residential areas of Malawi's urban centres are officially divided into Traditional Housing Areas (THAs) and 'squatter' settlements. THAs had been initially demarcated for the public through Malawi Housing Corporation (MHC). The MHC demarcated the plot and dug a fifteen-foot pit latrine which was expected to be covered by a concrete slab (Chilowa 1996). The MHC was also required to provide access roads, piped water within 1,000 feet of each plot, and to allocate plots on a first-come, first-served basis, while avoiding multiple ownerships (Chilowa 1996). Consequently the official policy is that only one dwelling unit should be erected on a plot. However some surveys by the MHC showed that the THAs of Blantyre, Lilongwe and Mzuzu could have as many as ten dwelling units on a plot. By 1993, 82 per cent of the population in Blantyre city and 78 per cent in

Lilongwe city lived in THAs (Chilowa 1996). MHC handed over THAs to city councils in 1980s.

Most of the urban poor are found in 'squatter' settlements because the supply of THAs had been exhausted in early 1990s and these THAs were heavily congested. The only alternative for the urban poor was the 'squatter' settlements. The major problems with these squatter settlements are:

- 1- Social amenities such as water and sanitation services are inadequate
- 2- Dwelling units are built with no consideration for public infrastructures such as access roads.
- 3- Officially they are categorised as illegal settlements hence are not eligible for important developments.
- 4- There is no guarantee for security of land ownership and the buying or selling of land is based on irrelevant customary principles which often lead to conflict.

It must be noted however, that squatters in Malawi have been known to be agents of irreversible environmental damage. As mentioned above, water and sanitation amenities are poor. This results in people disposing their waste any how leading to environmental hazards. Secondly most squatters have occupied forest and mountain areas which has led to deforestation. In most cases, income activities of squatter dwellers centre on mountain agriculture. This has led to increased soil erosion and destruction of water catchments areas. This has been a major explanation to the drying up of rivers in urban Malawi.

The high demand of housing in urban areas resulting from urbanisation has also led to increased brick baking activities. Usually firewood is used for baking bricks and indigenous trees are the favoured ones. The Ministry of Environmental Affairs (GoM, 2002) mentions that more than 50,000 hectares of trees are lost every year, against 8,000 that are replanted most of which do not survive. It is argued that 'with the rising demand for housing a significant percentage of this loss is due to use of firewood for baking bricks' (Lweya 2004:2). According to Lweya (2004:2), the significance of firewood brick baking to the environment in Malawi can be explained as follows:

1- Those that bake bricks prefer the indigenous trees because they argue that these types of tree bake the bricks thoroughly. However, indigenous forests take many years to be fully restored as compared to exotic forests. Brick baking therefore, poses an environmental threat.

2-In order to have close access to water supply, brick making is done close to river banks. The trees close to the river banks are cut for the same purpose leading to frequent problems of river flooding during the rainy season. Furthermore, some rivers are drying up due to siltation and destruction of the catchment areas. A case in point is the frequent disruption of Hydro-electric power supply due to siltation of Shire River.

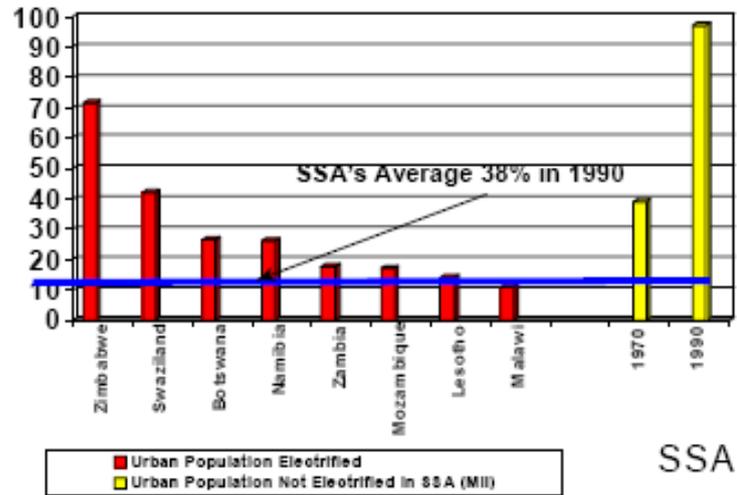
3-Since brick making involves the digging up of soil, this leaves holes and craters which are left uncovered. During the rainy season these holes are filled with stagnant water which is ideal for mosquito breeding. Mosquitoes are a serious health risk because they transmit plasmodia that cause Malaria. It is not by coincidence that Malaria is the leading killer of infants and expectant mothers in Malawi's urban centres.

### *3- Energy Supplies*

As urbanization has accelerated in Malawi, energy use in urban areas has also increased rapidly. According to the last house hold survey census of 1998 (NSO 1998), 97% of the national population used wood fuel and charcoal as their source of energy for domestic cooking and heating. In terms of consumption volume the urban areas take up 85% most of which are in the low income bracket. However with the current escalating levels of urbanisation the figure are likely to be very high.

The urban centres mainly rely on charcoal for energy as electricity is relatively expensive for the majority of urban residents. Only 2% of the population is now using Electricity which represents a decline from 4% and corresponds to the increase in wood fuel dependence (Government of Malawi, 2000). As compared to other Sub-Saharan African countries, Malawi's urban residents are the least users of electric energy, as can be seen in the figure below:

**Figure 1:** Percentage of Households Electrified in Sub Saharan Africa Urban Areas



**Source:** Karekezi, 1999

In addition, although the urban rich primarily rely on electricity, they also make extensive use of fuel wood. This is the case as black-outs are a normal occurrence in Malawi. Blackouts in urban centres are attributed to two main factors: Firstly, due to increasing urban poverty, that comes with urbanisation itself, many resort to living on proceeds from electrical appliances vandalism. In this regard, the Electricity Supply Corporation of Malawi (ESCOM), ‘is also feeling the pinch of urbanization’ because ‘its installations, such as transformers, are targeted by [urban] residents’ (*Mail and Guardian Online* 27 July 2004). Secondly, as mentioned above destruction of forest cover along the liver banks increases siltation which affects the hydro electric generation plant at Nkula Falls.

With the accelerating rate of urbanisation some cities have instituted measures to control deforestation and hereby ensure a constant supply of fuel wood to meet the every growing energy needs. An example in point is the Blantyre City through the Blantyre City Fuelwood Project, (BCFP) a conservation project managed by the communities within the city. One of the tools used at BCFP for forestry resource monitoring is growth measured as Mean Annual (MA) must be equal to or more than the volume of trees harvested. To meet this end, the BCFP has management plans which indicate required harvesting period to enable the communities harvest trees within the forest’s limits. These management plans present a harvesting schedule

based on estimated annual increments, which determine the ‘maximum sustainable yield’ or actual cut or harvest in the year. Jorgensen et al, (2001:12) noted that the harvesting schedule is based on sound calculations on a rotational system of harvest to bring sustainable utilization of the plantation resources. Below is an example of a management plan:

**Figure 2: BCFP Management Plan**

Forest Management Plan for the Year.....To.....  
 Area.....  
 Year .....Block.....

1	2	3	4	5		6	7	8	9		10
Area (HA)	Plot	Area of Plot (HA)	Year Planted coppice	Expected Yield		Operations to be carried out	Time	Who is to do it	Yield		Tools to be used
				Mendles	MK				Mendles	MK	

**Source:** Jorgensen *et. al*, 2001

Communities are not allowed to harvest trees beyond what is stated in the management plan. Communities are required to sign an agreement form with the Department of Forestry that they will comply under Section 31 of the Forest Act of 1997. In the same arena, the Forestry Department is mandated to withdraw any forest plantation from communities that do not comply. An example in this tune is a BCFP community of Sanganiza where a forest allocation was withdrawn due to deliberate non conformity to the management plan (Jorgensen et al, 2001:18).

**Conclusion: The future of environment and development in urban centres**

With the escalating rate of urbanisation in Malawi, commitment to environment and development imply a strong focus on issues of waste management, housing and energy in the country’s urban centres. Taking into consideration that Malawi is one of the poorest countries in the World these urbanisation challenges will need concerted effort and sacrifices on the part of government and citizenry.

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