



Centre for Applied Social Sciences

**Proceedings of the
Regional Conference on Gender Issues in
Community-Based Natural Resource Management**

C B N R M

(Cresta Lodge, Harare : 24 – 27 August 1998)

Compiled by

Nontokozo Nabane

September 1998

University of Zimbabwe

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Preserving Trees:

The Case of Mozambican Refugees in Malawi

Violet M. Bonga

1. Background and Introduction

Malawi is a landlocked country that is bordered by Mozambique in the south and east, Zambia in the west and Tanzania in the north. The total land area is 119,140 square kilometres, 20% is covered by water and approximately five million hectares is covered by indigenous forests and woodland. Of this 20% consists of national parks and game reserves and 20% forest reserves and protected hill tops and 60% of natural woodland on customary land, 80,000 hectares is under exotic plantation management.

Between 1986 and 1994 Malawi hosted over a million Mozambican refugees who fled their country following the protracted armed struggle between FRELIMO soldiers and REMAMO bandits. The large influx had negative effects on the socio-economic spheres of the society as well as the natural resources: such as water, land, trees and forests. This paper will assess how gender sensitive the measures taken by different organizations were and the impact that this had on the afforestation project.

Since the southern and central regions of Malawi are almost surrounded by Mozambique it was relatively easy for them to cross the open borders in order to seek refuge. The refugees impacted areas were Chikwawa, Nsanje, Thyolo, Mulanje, Mwanza, Mangochi, Machinga in the southern part of the country whereas in the central region it was Lilongwe, Mchinji, Dedza and Ntcheu, and Nkhatabay was the only district in the northern part of the country hosting refugees.

2. Causes of Deforestation Before the Coming of the Refugees

Before the coming of the refugees many parts of the country used to experience the effects of deforestation, which were caused by:

- Selling of firewood and making charcoal
- Opening of new gardens especially tobacco estates
- Burning bricks, curing clay pots
- Using slash and burn method as a means of cultivation
- Increased human population in relation to available land
- Lack of incentives to plant and tend trees
- Inadequate forest patrol personnel and extension workers

- Diminished power for traditional leaders over customary forests
- Bush fires
- Digging up and debarking plants for medicinal use
- Non compliance with forestry protection norms
- Uncontrolled grazing of livestock
- Sewing timber and engaging in carpentry ventures

3. After the Arrival of the Mozambicans

Malawi experienced the impact of mass movement similar to that of Somalia, Sudan and Pakistan because refugees arrived within a short space of time. A lot of trees were cut down for the construction of huts in and around the camps, fuelwood, construction of roads and bridges, large tracks of land were cleared for agricultural use, livestock grazing and the like. Livestock grazing to a large extent inhibited natural regeneration of woodland, which in a way hampered reforestation programme (UNHCR: 1992).

The consumption of forest products by displaced persons exacerbated the already existing problem of fuel wood and building materials. It was noted that the consumption of forest products in Malawi exceeded the present regeneration capacity of the forest in many parts of the country particularly in areas where the displaced persons were located. The over exploitation of woodlands and forest reserves by displaced persons resulted in further deterioration of the production of the forests as well as other related land degradation problems.

The displaced persons were, to a large extent, consumers of building materials, including building poles and thatch. It was estimated that their building pole consumption amounted to 928 in the period prior to 1988/9 and 1989/90. Because of the influx, Mozambicans settled on land belonging to Malawians and the Malawians in turn were forced to encroach in forest reserves. This was particularly evident in Nsanje and Chikwawa. Due to lack of employment and meaningful human occupation, the refugees resorted to illegal trafficking of forest produce. Ntcheu district was hardest hit by this factor.

The depletion of forest affected the community and especially the women who are responsible for collecting fuelwood for cooking and heating purposes for the family since they had to walk long distances in search of firewood and this made cooking more time consuming. This in turn meant that they could not cook their regular meals on time and this impacted on the health of the community and especially the young children who were often malnourished. Many people also complained that the pregnant women tended to have more miscarriages than before because of poor health resulting from poor diets consumed. Women were forced to use alternative sources of fuel crop residues such as cassava stalks and the need to search for fuel sources also left less time for other tasks.

Conservation Measures

Firstly this was difficult in refugee circumstances but certain attempts were made. People were encouraged to plant and tend their own trees but the refugees always felt that they would one day be repatriated to their home land. This means that they would not want to leave trees they planted behind. This was confirmed from the fact that some of the infrastructure that was set up was being demolished by some of the refugees because the communities did not want to leave "iron sheets" on schools that were in Malawi and yet had been constructed for the refugees. Secondly the idea of forest management was never really practised initially because of lack of environmental education. Traditionally it is believed that nature is Gods' gift to his creatures and so no one can really control it hence the uncontrolled wanton cutting down of trees.

5. Forest Guards

Forestry guards who were deployed were all men and their task was to control the number of illegal entrants to the forest. Those permitted to collect fuelwood had to pay a small fee but many of the female refugees could not afford this. Women were forced to encroach on prohibited forest areas and when caught actually succumbed to sexual advances by the men just to ensure that they have wood in the home. Unfortunately there was no government or no NGO that really addressed the issue of abuse of women.

6. Stove Supply Projects For Refugees

The Energy Studies Unit of the Ministry of Forestry and Natural Resources approved that the ceramic 'mbaula' (stove) economized fuelwood consumed by over 40% compared to the three stones. The project was funded by other donors, as well. They included the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Malawi, Lutheran World Service, the EEC, UNDP, and UNHCR.

The key institution in the stove supply project was the Forestry department. Its functions included training refugees and local artisans to produce the stoves, and to test the quality of the final products (including the ceramic lining which was produced almost exclusively by the refugee women). They also trained in providing user education and generally co-ordinating with UNHCR the activities of all NGOs and other bodies interested in the Programme (Paper on Assistance of Mozambican Refugees in Malawi: 1992).

The stove project was not only under the auspices of the Forestry Department but other agencies joined in the venture. These other organizations very often simply distributed the stoves without prior user education. Once distributed there was no monitoring to check how the stoves were being utilized. Like the other handouts they used to obtain from the camps, the refugees felt they were free to sell the stoves because they needed to raise money in order to purchase items they wanted. For them the stove was not a priority. Changing peoples' attitude requires a lot of time and the people were not given sufficient time to disassociate themselves from the traditional three stone stove.

The three-stone stove has many advantages in that it can take any size of pot as opposed to the stove that is not very suitable for clay pots and "nsima" (maize meal

dish) cooking especially for the larger families. The refugees did not have the appropriate pots to use on these new stoves. The three stone stove can use unsplit wood and in camp situation this was appropriate because many of the women did not possess axes the women had heavy workload since they continued to perform their traditional household chores with little or no assistance from their male counterparts. Most of them failed to adapt to the new environment by assisting the women to perform feminine chores. The women would not have the time to split firewood and chop it in small pieces in order to use it on the stove, hence they resorted to selling them.

The objective was to fund the supply of the stoves to the refugees to reduce the rate of deforestation and also lighten the burden by women who traditionally gather firewood for household use. There was also a training component attached to it. Local artisans and refugees were required to produce the metal parts of the stoves, and the ceramic lining which was produced almost exclusively made by the refugee women for a fee.

This stove was not readily adopted by the refugee community and was often seen on the roadside earmarked for sale to Malawians often living in urban areas in order to earn an income yet they never owned the project. When innovations are introduced it is important to ensure that right from the project identification stage and solution seeking stage the beneficiaries should be involved in giving their views about the quality and utility and whether they are in line with the culture of the people. Rural Mozambican women and Malawians cook their food while seated. This stove involves someone sitting on a higher stool of some kind and being decently dressed at the same time. The women could neither afford this nor the metal pots. That is why clay pots were in great demand but the process of curing them to make them usable and more durable contributed to deforestation. These were used in the camps since they did not obtain enough suitable cooking pots from the donors.

Furthermore Ntcheu and Dedza are very cold districts especially during the wet seasons. Each person was to be given ten kilos of wood per month in order to discourage them from further damage to the forests. The idea of preserving firewood was not in agreement with their idea of keeping warm. The three stone stove provides a lot of warmth to members sitting around the fire which is not the case with the ceramic stove. The refugees often lacked essential things like blankets, sleeping mats, clothes, and cloth wrappers for the women. So the open fire on the three-stone stove really helped them to keep warm. Health may be affected through reduced heating in winter, and through reluctance to use fuel heat water for personal hygiene to boil safe water in order to make it safe for drinking, undercooking of food that needed longer cooking periods, sometimes women use biomass or saw dust. This is a double-edged sword, although it can be gathered at no financial cost, prolonged exposure to the smoke from these fuels can lead to respiratory disorders, cancer and so forth (Rodda: 1991).

Many projects succeed if there is community involvement, ownership, and communal decision making. This project was for the local and refugee community but they were ignorant of the finances involved since they were never informed. Perhaps if they were aware, they might have appreciated and behaved differently. The major problem with relief situations is that there is a tendency to regard the beneficiaries as "children" hence the top down approach. In the case of the Mozambicans this attitude should have changed over time because of their long stay in the country of asylum.

The refugee community was quite well organized when it came to other projects such as poultry, sewing and cookery, vegetable growing, doughnut frying, tin smithing and the people controlled these activities to some extent. Unfortunately there was no deliberate attempt to have such small groups embarking on forestry activities. Problems arose in that where tree planting was encouraged the refugees never accepted the idea of planting trees in the 'strange' area. Many of them thought of planting the trees across the border so that once repatriated they would be in a position to enjoy the fruits of their labour in their homeland. As for the local people, it was difficult to plant trees because the refugees occupied the land where they were supposed to plant trees.

It should also be mentioned here that a lot of time was wasted in teaching the refugees skills that they already possessed instead of capitalizing on their deficiencies. They did not have enough incentives to encourage the refugees to grow trees. In other places like comprehensive energy conservation training programme was developed but this does not seem to have been there for Malawi (Kimani: 1995).

Just telling people to plant trees by giving them the trees to plant may not be enough to ensure that trees will be planted. Civic education on the effects of deforestation was needed and this could have been achieved through campaigns to the depletion of trees, they did not feel committed enough to help alleviate the problem. Monitoring was another problem. The idea of living a place better than you found it was not part of the thinking of the refugees but attempt should have been made to inculcate this in their mind.

7. Lessons For The Future In Relief Situations As Well As Development Projects

1. For a project to succeed the beneficiaries should be involved actively at every stage of the project cycle to ensure their support and sustainability of the project. Although women were involved in the production of ceramic lining they were not involved in determining the size and height of the stove. They were excluded from the decision making process and yet they were the ones for whom the stove was made. The designers and experimenters were men of course.
2. Revealing the budget to the beneficiaries may make them realize how crucial a project is otherwise large amounts of money cannot be invested.
3. Project donors ought to listen more to the needs and desires of the beneficiaries.
4. A Gender analysis should be carried out before launching any project to ensure that the benefits will reach the target groups. Once they are sure that something will certainly assist them, they will support it.

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