



Centre for Environmental  
Policy and Advocacy

## ***Key Note Address: Striking a Balance***

### **Wetland Management and Policy Gaps**

**By**

**William Chadza**

The Convention on Wetlands of International Importance especially as Waterfowl Habitat, also known as the Ramsar Convention, defines wetlands to include flood plains, marshes, swamps, lakes and perennial rivers. In Malawi typical examples, include Kasungu Plain, Vwaza Marsh, Elephant Marsh, Mpatsanjoka Dambo, Shire River, Bua River, Lake Chilwa, and Limphasa swamps.

In this country, wetlands support wildlife, fisheries, livestock and crop production. Wetlands contain numerous goods and services that have an economic value. Wetlands play key environmental roles such as regulation of stream and river flow; reduction of flooding; maintenance of dry season flows; recharge of groundwater supplies and maintenance of springs.

For instance, Lake Chilwa Wetland is endowed with water, fish, birds and grass for thatching. The Wetland supports over 1.4 million people through fishing, irrigation and bird hunting. Studies have shown that in economic terms, the benefits derived annually from Lake Chilwa Wetland amount to US\$19 million.

Across the country desperate farmers are going into wetlands for dry season production to supplement poor rain-fed harvests. In the late 1990s there were “dry season” targeted input programmes focusing on dimba crop production.

The driving force behind the intensification of wetland cultivation is the recurrent droughts and floods and declining soil fertility. This increase in reliance on wetland cultivation in the dry season is sometimes policy driven as our leaders attempt to encourage local communities to increase their food production.

While wetlands are important because of their livelihood contributions, they are fragile areas that easily get degraded. The National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan noted that most of the marshland has been lost due to cultivation and invasive species. It further noted that the loss is very pronounced in the central region, where over 60% of the marshes and dambos have been lost to winter cultivation.

Government and nongovernmental organizations have also introduced treadle pumps and watering cans in some areas. Treadle pumps and watering cans are appropriate where there is a water source close to the surface and close to the field to be irrigated. This has made observance of river bank buffer zones extremely challenging.

It is not clear whether the proponents of these irrigation initiatives have clearly understood the relationship between people and wetland ecosystems and how to balance wetland utilization and conservation so that wetland ecosystems can continue to provide the full range of services to Malawians.

Malawi's wetland management is guided by its commitment to the Ramsar Convention since 1997, designation of Department of National Parks and Wildlife as the National Convention Focal Point and setting up of a National Wetland Committee. However, the National Convention Focal Point and the Committee are largely dormant and tend to focus on large wetlands and wildlife related conservation. Lack of funding and absence of a specific wetland policy are cited as some of the obstacles in implementing the Convention in this country.

It is important to note that wetland management in Malawi sends mixed signals. There are typical best practice cases such as Lake Chilwa Wetland. Lake Chilwa is a Ramsar Site and has a management plan. Lake Chilwa also has externally supported programmes currently going on. However, most of the wetlands across the country do not have

planning frameworks in place. They have largely been ignored and their ecosystems are being degraded with various unsustainable agricultural practices. In extreme cases wetlands are being allocated for settlement. There is an urgent need to match livelihood needs and environmental functioning in wetland management in the country, given that there is increased use of wetlands for livelihood benefits especially for agriculture. At the same time, there are threats to wetlands from intensified use, catchment degradation and climate change; and limited policy guidance on how to sustain wetland use.

Malawi does not have a specific policy instrument on wetlands. Many of the existing sectoral policies and legislation address issues of wetlands but not in specific terms.

A number of sectoral policies have grown piecemeal, yet they are intended to regulate the same wetland ecosystems. There are many government agencies with a stake in wetland management and utilization, such as agriculture, water, irrigation, land resource, environment, wildlife and tourism. Commonly, these institutions have different priorities and objectives that can cause conflict.

Each institution has its own mandate and the emphasis in the implementation of the wetland utilization and management related provisions of their policies varies; specifically in relation to irrigation and land resources conservation sectors.

This has led to conflicting practices on the ground. For instance those advocating for winter cropping and small scale irrigation do not seem to care much about management of catchment areas provided their goal of increasing irrigable land and food security is attained. Cultivation in river banks is now intense leading to sedimentation of rivers and reduction of habitats for aquatic biodiversity.

In terms of the current policy landscape, the National Irrigation Policy and Development Strategy (2002) provides for identification of areas with irrigation potential and the need to conserve them, but no specific strategies are given on how they should be conserved, let alone how they can be sustainably utilized, typically these are wetlands.

The National Water Policy (as revised in 2004) calls for promotion of good catchment management to protect and sustain the ecosystem

biodiversity and wetlands. These intentions would be accomplished through harmonizing policies that are relevant to natural resources management and mutually enforcing natural resources legislation to protect water resources from degradation. The process towards developing an enabling legislation to harmonize natural resources management policies, specifically revision of the Environment Management Act (1996) has stalled.

The National Land Policy (2002), addresses issues of tenure of common land reserved as *dambos*, but lacks emphasis on sustainable utilization regimes of these common access areas under which wetlands fall.

The Environment Management Act (1996) contains measures that cover wetland management. These measures include requirements for environmental impact assessments in relation to any project that would impact on wetland management. However, there are limitations in public participation in EIA processes and ensuring that developers comply to environmental measures. This was noted a few years ago in Mpatsanjoka Dambo when there was a conflict between communities and sugar cane developers over use of the Dambo.

The National Wildlife Policy (2000) considers wetlands as extremely valuable but fragile ecosystems. The focus of the policy is on wetland as habitat for wildlife and ensuring conformity with the provisions of the Ramsar Convention. This seems to be narrow considering that the main use for wetlands in Malawi is mostly for agriculture purposes.

The problems facing management of Malawi's wetlands are many, complex and vary substantially across the country. Actions to address these therefore need to be designed on the basis of area specific analysis of the nature and severity of the problems faced.

Ideally these actions should be designed and pursued as part of a comprehensive programme for wetland management and conservation.

There are five major policy related areas for consideration in terms of urgent attention:

**i) Improved Information and Awareness:**

We need to make wetlands more visible and increase awareness. The quality and quantity of information on wetlands and their values needs to

be increased, and communicated more effectively to policy makers, decision makers, technocrats, nongovernmental organizations and local communities. Other approaches to awareness could be commemoration of the World Wetlands Day.

## **ii) Developing Effective Policies:**

Many national policies currently encourage wetland loss. As a first step towards changing this, a wetland policy audit should be carried out. The policy audit should specify measures to address policy gaps and inconsistencies so as to promote wetland conservation and management. This would lead into development of policy tools to guide wetland utilization and management.

It is essential that a framework policy on wetlands be formulated. A National Wetlands Policy is important as it would help in setting up objectives and equitable ways to balance short term demands with safeguards for wetland functions and values in the long term.

A specific Wetlands Policy would bring more visibility to wetlands and increase awareness around wetland use and conservation. The Policy would assist wetland management to benefit from the national resource envelope. Dialogue must therefore commence on the development of this policy instrument.

Then too, in moving towards policy harmonization, it is essential to consider sustainable utilization and management of wetlands in ongoing reviews of relevant sectoral policy instruments.

## **iii) Planning Wetland Resource Use:**

Many wetlands in Malawi have been lost because their full value to society is not taken into account in the planning process. In the planning process, there is need to identify and map the wetland systems; assess the functions which they perform, the products they yield; and evaluate their social and economic benefits. This information will guide policy and decision making in wetland management and utilization.

## **iv) Strengthening Institutions:**

Wetland resource use planning and policy implementation needs appropriate institutions and capacities. Collaboration amongst sectors such as agriculture, water, irrigation, fisheries, climate change, disaster management and others is required in integrated planning. Currently,

interagency links for agencies which come under different ministries is weak. The National Wetland Committee provides a good starting point for integrated approach to wetland management. However, its composition, functionality and scope of work needs to be reviewed.

The coordination role of the National Ramsar Convention Focal Point also needs to be revisited given that the key function of most wetlands in Malawi is for agriculture purposes.

**v) Increased Funding Opportunities:**

There is need to mobilize financial resources towards wetland management through the national budgetary allocations and exploring international funding opportunities through the Convention and other windows. Ongoing interventions such as Shire River Basin Programme and Lake Chilwa Wetland Catchment Management Programme could provide opportunities for leveraging resources.

It is important to note that in order to implement these five actions, there is an urgent need to commence dialogue on wetland policy development.