

## *The Woman in Charge: Lilongwe/Malawi – Sub-Saharan Africa (1987 – 1990)*

*This is a slightly shortened and modified version of chapter 4 of my memoirs with additional fotos from my personal collection. Kerstin Leitner*



*Map provided by Malawi embassy in Berlin, 2006*

The way from New York to Africa and many other countries east of the US most conveniently leads via Europe. When I was stationed at UNDP HQ I booked my flights out of New York as often as possible via Frankfurt. These had the additional advantage that I could stopover and visit my mother who lived in a small village about 70 km north of the airport.

Of course, my stopover on my way to Lilongwe was not very relaxing. I was anxious about what lay ahead. I was assuming a job that I had not aspired to. Would it be too big for me? What would happen if I failed? Besides, I did not know this part of Africa; I did not know the country, except for what I had read about it. Malawi's reputation was mixed, because of its Life President's quirky attitudes and unconventional political stands. On the other hand, it was one of the few countries which stayed out of major crises, and the international news. Before I left New York, a friend said Malawi must be a successful place, as one does not read about it in the papers. When Malawi later became internationally known, it was quite exceptionally for a positive reason.

### *Straightening things out*

I inherited an office which was dispirited and a program which was not moving. As one of the biggest programs in Africa for UNDP, Headquarters wanted me to increase the commitment of available funds and to raise the program implementation rate. While I was willing to respond to this demand, I also wanted to develop a program which was useful to Malawi and address core development challenges of the country. Malawi had been dealt a weak deck of cards. It was landlocked and because of the civil war in Mozambique was cut off



Tee plantation near Mulanje

from its nearest sea ports for the exports of its agricultural products, and the importation of essential equipment. It produced high quality agricultural products, like tea and tobacco, but the quantities were too small to give Malawian producers a say in the international markets.

It was a densely populated country in which only after independence efforts had been made to give all children a chance at primary school education. While there were many well-educated Malawians in the mid-1980s, illiteracy was still widespread, especially among women. Besides, many Malawians with a university degree lived and worked abroad. For instance, there were more Malawian medical doctors practicing outside Malawi than in Malawi.

When I arrived, I had the ambition to have the UNDP program make a difference in Malawi, and to strategically strengthen the assets of the country and to compensate for the weaknesses. Many donors did not give assistance to Malawi because of the political regime. I decided that I would not be able to do much about the political situation, except to support that part of the national policy which was addressing the immediate needs of the poorer segments of the population. I also wanted to work with that part of the national government and with non-governmental organizations which were free of corruption and committed to the common good<sup>1</sup>. Most specifically, I wanted to apply what I had learned in China about supporting reforms, and position the UNDP program in such a way that it would serve as a dynamic agent for Malawian socio-economic development.<sup>2</sup>

When I arrived in Malawi in mid-1987 the country was experiencing the beginning of a very special emergency situation: the constant inflow of Mozambican refugees into Malawi.

To an unaccustomed eye the refugee camps looked like oversized Malawian villages. This was intentional. The Malawi government only wanted to give their Mozambican relatives food and shelter for as long as it was necessary. They gave them land to settle, but no fields to cultivate. In the Dedza area some of the refugees therefore would return to their land during the day on the other side of the border and grow their crops there.

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<sup>1</sup> The term *common good* carried for some the connotation of a socialist concept, which was considered politically incorrect in pro-Western Malawi. Little did these critics know that in any democracy this is a core value. Fortunately, President Banda knew this.

<sup>2</sup> Years later a Malawian friend told me: "It is amazing how influential you were on many policy issues in Malawi mainly through projects as instruments for such influence. Compare this to the failures through direct approaches at upstream policy advice!!! Again, it is not the size of projects or programs that matters but the strategic location and the role of the leader, in this case the RC/UNDP Representative. "



Refugee settlement near Dedza

### *Dealing with the inflow of refugees*

One of my very first initiatives after my arrival in Lilongwe in July 1987 was to field a multi-agency UN mission with members from UNDP, UNHCR, WFP and UNICEF to assess the extent of the flood of refugees coming to Malawi from neighboring Mozambique and to give us estimates and advice on the volume and best forms of international support to Malawi to shoulder this humanitarian crisis. So far the Malawian government had provided land, shelter and food on their own, but it was apparent that soon the number of refugees would be too big for Malawi to cope with it and the burden of the ever increasing number of refugees was felt by the surrounding Malawi communities.

Among other things, I had asked the mission to estimate the likely inflow of additional refugees. They developed three scenarios, one of which anticipated that the number of refugees would grow to 1 million over time. During the debriefing I told the mission leader, I did not want to hear of this scenario. In a country of 8 million, to consider food, clothing and provide shelter to 1 million refugees was a scary prospect. Yet, when I left Malawi at the end of 1990, the total number of Mozambican refugees did indeed reach the 1 million mark, and the refugee settlements were beginning to distort the local economy and strain the physical environment. Water and sanitation and the provision of fuel wood for household use were among the biggest challenges, as was the education of children who either spoke a local language, for which there were no teaching materials, or needed to be taught in Portuguese, the official language of Mozambique. We in the UN wanted to do everything which would prepare these children to return

to where they and their parents had come from, and supported through UNICEF and UNHCR the teaching in Portuguese.

It was a constant struggle to convince humanitarian aid agencies outside of Malawi to respect the Malawian government's policy and position that these refugees were in the country only temporarily. One of the consequences of this policy was that the Malawian authorities allowed the Mozambican chiefs to govern the camps. They let them organize the internal distribution of goods and other relief items, and they gave the approval that in the refugee camps children were taught in Portuguese. On the other hand the Malawi government did not allow the refugees to enter the Malawian labor market. This policy later laid the ground for the immediate return of the refugees to their home village, after an armistice had been reached between the warring parties in Mozambique. They resumed their life without waiting for international agencies to arrange for their return. When in 1992 I came back to Malawi for a short visit, it was eerie to see the huge former refugee settlements abandoned with empty huts still standing, except for their tin roofs, which the refugees had taken with them across the border to their home villages.



Refugee gathering for food distribution

*Blending humanitarian and development aid – not always easy*

UNDP was not always successful in its attempts to assist the Malawi government in handling the refugee situation. Every other year, Malawi had a donor Consultative Group Meeting (CGM) at the World Bank offices in Paris. The meeting was normally chaired by a Vice-President of the World Bank. Its purpose was to review the socio-economic situation of the country, to raise donor funds for the next two years and to agree on national policy priorities and donor support for such policies. Malawi had embraced the structural adjustment programs of the World Bank and the IMF early on.<sup>3</sup>

Providing a safe haven to large numbers of refugees from neighboring countries was not foreseen. Yet, when a CGM was scheduled for the summer of 1989, it was quite apparent that the influx of Mozambican refugees had a major impact on the local economy which needed to be factored into the economic projections for the coming years. In the UN system, we were particularly interested in seeing larger investments going into rural water and sanitation schemes and into reforestation or a better organization of fuel food supplies from the forest plantation in the Northern part of Malawi. But the World Bank as the host of the meeting was not interested in including these topics into the discussions. When the participating Minister of Finance said that he would chair such a session, the Bank staff relented, but made sure that all donors said that such programs should be included in ongoing programs without any additional funding being available for these demands. Practically, our initiative had been killed, except for the fuel wood component.

In the Northern part of the country, there were huge forest plantations which had been planted during the colonial years and in the early years after independence. But they were poorly managed and a lot of deadwood remained in the forests increasing the fire hazard. When local businessmen heard of the UN's demands to provide the refugees with fuel from alternative sources than the forests around the refugee camps, they organized the collection of the deadwood and their transport to the refugee camps in the South. Through this initiative the pressure on the dwindling forest resources in the Southern part of the

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<sup>3</sup> UNDP had introduced these donor consultations in the late 1970s in the form of roundtable group meetings. These were held in the country, led by the national government, and meant to enhance donor coordination with national priorities but also to avoid duplication of donor efforts. When the World Bank took hold of these processes, they became more successful in terms of raising funding, but the leadership for such meetings migrated from the national governments to the World Bank, and pledges for donor funds were more closely linked to the structural adjustment programs propagated by the World Bank and the IMF. UNDP and other UN organizations continued to participate in these meetings, normally relegated to merely dealing with the aspects of technical assistance programs. The original purpose of providing an open dialogue forum with an honest broker role for the UN system organizations was lost to these meetings, although throughout the 1980s and over part of the 1990s, the CGMs continued to be the main vehicle for raising donor funding for specific countries.

country was relieved and the maintenance of the forest plantations in the North improved. Besides, local Malawian entrepreneurs drew some financial benefits from the country's hospitality to people from neighboring Mozambique in need of help.

But the water and sanitation needs remained unattended. Looking back, it almost appears like a miracle that we were not faced with a major epidemic outbreak of water-borne diseases. The Malawian health services supported by UNICEF, WHO and NGOs were closely monitoring the situation and succeeded in catching outbreaks of cholera or other diseases early. They provided treatment when the number of infected people was still small enough to avoid a further spread.

All in all, it probably was one of the most successful refugee operations ever mounted on the African continent, and at the same time the least publicized and documented.



A refugee woman receiving fuel wood

### *Encountering President Banda*

Before I could get involved actively in the coordination and programming of such development and relief efforts of the UN system, I had to present my credentials to the Head of State, H.E. the Life President Dr. H. Kamuzu Banda. I had planned my arrival so that I would be in Malawi in mid-July shortly after the National Day celebrations, well knowing that an arrival immediately before the National Day might produce a somewhat awkward situation. On the one hand, the President and his staff were busy with the preparations for the celebrations, and it would be difficult to get an appointment. On the other hand, I would only be able to attend the official functions after I had presented my appointment letters. Being in the country and not being able to attend the ceremonies would be a shaky beginning to my assignment.

The plan worked well. I received an appointment within a few days after my arrival, although I had to go to Zomba where the President was still in residence after the National Day. I thus drove down for the first time from Lilongwe to Zomba, a trip that I must have done close to 100 times during my assignment, and of which I never became tired, as it is one of the most scenic roads in Southern Africa, which at the time also was in immaculate condition, thus making it an easy and pleasurable ride.

In 1987, each UNDP Resident Representative also held the position of UNFPA and WFP Representative and UN Resident Coordinator concurrently. For each appointment, we had to present a separate letter from the respective head of agency. When I had handed in two of the four letters, I got so embarrassed, that I handed in the next two saying: "Sir, they pretty much say the same as the other two." The President smiled and proceeded to welcome me as a German, remembering the visit of one of the former Presidents of Germany and speaking about the excellent relationship which existed between Malawi and Germany. I opened my response by saying that I hoped that the relationship with the UN were equally fruitful. Well, I did not get any further then this opening statement, because Dr. Banda lapsed into a diatribe about the arrogance and willfulness of the UN over its sanctions against South Africa. My audience was over pretty soon.<sup>4</sup> At the end of our meeting, he did, however, extend a warm welcome to me and invited me to come and see him any time I wanted to do so.

After this first encounter, I was not sure that I wanted to seek such appointments too frequently, especially after I had heard that if one

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<sup>4</sup> Dr. Banda was making reference to the UN sanctions against the apartheid regime in South Africa. Malawi was at the time the only Sub Saharan African country, which had diplomatic relations with South Africa, and was defying UN sanctions. Dr. Banda had even been on an official state visit in 1971, forcing the South African government to extend the full protocol of a visiting head of state to him during his visit. Dr. Banda felt this was a better way to force the apartheid regime to change its policy towards its black majority population than the UN sanctions.



mentioned to him problems during such visits, he would have heads roll in his government. I certainly did not want to acquire the reputation of causing heads to roll, nor did I want to just tell him what would please him and his entourage.

I therefore chose to have a weekly meeting with the Secretary of the President and Cabinet and left it to him to bring to the President's attention what he felt was appropriate. This approach worked well. In one instance it even led to a change in presidential policy regarding the country's communications infrastructure which nobody at the time ever thought possible.

### *Stimulating policy change*

Shortly after independence Dr. Banda had ruled that Malawi did not need television. He considered it bad for people and in particular for children, as it would distract them from doing their homework. Consequently, even in the late 1980s, Malawi did not have a national television system and was not poised to get one. However, under my predecessor, the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), the UN organization in charge of communications infrastructure, had obtained UNDP funding for the elaboration of a national communications master plan. This plan was completed a few months after my arrival and ITU wanted me to present it to the President. Yet, when I enquired who in the government had seen the draft and had signed off on the plan, which among others made provision for the establishment of a national television network, I could not identify anyone in the national government who had seen and cleared the plan. I therefore wrote to the government through the Ministry of Finance, and suggested a national seminar to review and assess the proposed plan and to make recommendations for the attention of the minister who was in charge of communications, a portfolio, which was held by the President.

The government accepted my proposal and proceeded to organize the seminar, which with minor changes recommended the adoption of the plan. It was the general practice that after such a seminar the recommendations would go to the cabinet for their further consideration and decision. The permanent secretary in charge of communications was extremely nervous about presenting the results of the seminar knowing full well that the recommendations asked for a major policy change.

According to what I was told afterwards, everybody was holding their breath, when the President, who was chairing the cabinet session, took the floor and proceeded to say that what was a correct decision in the late 1960s was not necessarily the right decision in the late 1980s. He believed that this was a solid plan and that he as the minister in charge was recommending its approval. The cabinet thus approved the plan, and the President signed off on it shortly thereafter.

Immediately after we had heard of the approval, we sent several young Malawian journalists abroad to train for television programming. By the time I left the country, I was fairly close to obtaining donor funding for establishing the first national television studio in the country and to equip all primary schools with one TV set. These were meant to receive TV broadcasts for students during the day and for the general population during the evening. Our idea was that landlocked Malawi as one of the most densely populated countries of Africa, yet with a low per capita income and a generally low educational level, was in need of an educationally oriented TV program. In the long run, the country needed to capitalize on its human resource base and use it for its national development. While the country had invested wisely since independence in raising the educational level, it was not enough. Many of these educated young people preferred to migrate to other countries such as South Africa, Zimbabwe and Botswana, where they could earn higher salaries and enjoy greater personal freedom.

While their remittances improved rural household incomes, their absence nevertheless was a great impediment to Malawi's development. The country continued to have a deficit of well-trained manpower and had still a fairly high illiteracy rate, in particular among rural women. A few years later the situation got even worse. Many Malawians who had lived and worked abroad returned because they were infected with HIV, and as soon as host countries found out about the infections they did not renew the visas and resident permits for these migrants. For the Malawian communities, the costs of the migration began to exceed the benefits. They lost the remittances and they had to care for the sick and dying.



Handing an international award to the President

### *The HIV/AIDS epidemic*

In the late 1980s, the HIV/AIDS epidemic began to show its devastating impact. Yet, the country was in total denial of the threat, although the first HIV case was diagnosed in 1985. While WHO sent one mission after the other to sensitize the government to the looming public health crisis, nobody dared to speak about it openly. Even when South Africa began to test Malawian workers in Malawi who wanted to return to work in the mines after a home visit, and refused visas to those who had tested positive for the virus, the government remained inactive. Rumors said that the Malawian army and police force had a prevalence rate of up to 65 percent. Still the government did nothing. We in the UN system organizations and other donors began to adjust our programs in order to tackle the HIV/AIDS threat, but it was a difficult uphill struggle. Then, an opportunity arose which finally made it possible for me to raise the issue at the highest level.



Rural women often caught the HIV unsuspectingly from their returning husbands who had worked abroad

Every year the permanent secretaries came together in a retreat. In April 1989, they invited the representative of the World Bank and me in my capacity as UN resident coordinator to their meeting. As I was driving to the venue, I was not sure what I was going to say, but as I saw the agenda of the meeting and again did not find any reference to HIV/AIDS, I on the spur of the moment challenged this assembly of the senior most civil servants in the country. I said that while I fully understood why they were discussing the issues on their agenda, I could not for the life of me understand why they were not addressing the AIDS epidemic. Many of their social and economic policies would be affected by this epidemic for years to come, even if the spread of the

virus could be stopped in the near future. This was highly unlikely given the silence in the country about it, and the wrong and misleading information which was circulating as a result of such official silence.<sup>5</sup>

During the following coffee break, the Secretary for Health, who was also the personal physician of the President, approached me and in a somewhat irritated tone asked me why I had brought up AIDS. I responded: “Dr. Ntaba, you know the numbers better than I do, as you are working with WHO on those for years now. How can you not inform your fellow permanent secretaries of the situation?”

As a result of my intervention, the agenda was changed. The Health Secretary gave a full briefing to his colleagues, many of whom were indeed not aware of the situation. By then, they all had buried many a friend, relative or neighbor who had succumbed to the disease. But somehow they were reluctant to put one and one together. As the report of the meeting now had to cover the subject and went up to the President for his information and consideration, he was finally made aware of the upcoming crisis. Later on I was told that he had written on the margins of the report, that he wanted all to be done to stop the epidemic. Well, such political instructions came too late. Malawi continued to suffer terribly and lost many of its best and brightest to HIV/AIDS.<sup>6</sup> But at least we had succeeded in having HIV/AIDS on the public development agenda, and could begin to make provisions in our programs for the fight against the epidemic.

By the beginning of 1990, it was apparent that the AIDS epidemic was changing the demographic situation dramatically. Although the government was no longer denying the threat, they disagreed on how to face it. At the time, the virus was mostly transmitted through heterosexual contact. The official sexual morality of the country did not allow promiscuity. The real situation was far from it. Officials, who travelled a lot or worked away from their families, such as politicians, military and police officers were having frequent sexual contact with unknown partners. The Malawians who worked as miners in South Africa were only allowed back to South Africa if they had tested negative to the virus. Half of them did not and thus remained infected in Malawi spreading the virus even to the remotest rural areas.

It was painful to watch how development gains began to be eroded, while no remedy was in sight. We in the UN system did as much as we could. We based our interventions on knowledge which was very sketchy at the time. We commissioned theatre plays which would tour the country, we sponsored radio talk shows to reach as many people

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<sup>5</sup> At the time, people still believed that the virus was spread through mosquitoes and that an infusion made from the bark of a particular local tree could cure people from the effects of the virus.

<sup>6</sup> At the time that I write this account (2006/7), Malawi has over a million AIDS orphans, and its population growth has gone down from around 3 percent p.a. in the 1980s to under 1 percent in 2000. The population growth rate is now higher again. Newborn babies of HIV positive mothers can be treated relatively easily and effectively.

with messages on how they could protect themselves, and we again organized workshops for traditional healers, this time to convince them that there was no cure against this virus and that they should not say otherwise. We also re-oriented the family planning projects funded by UNFPA. For the first time, demographers factored into their projections the impact of AIDS and predicted that by 2000, the population growth rate from currently around 3 percent would fall to below 1 percent (a prediction which came unfortunately true). The family planning messages therefore shifted from child spacing and birth control to messages about safe sex. These were not easy shifts to make given the prevalent official “Victorian” morality. But at the time, these were the only means at our disposal.

I was devastated to hear, read and see several Malawian counterparts die within a short span of time. Several young professionals we had sent on a fellowship for training abroad came back to succumb to the disease. We were struggling whether we should test fellowship candidates before we gave our approval for their departure. Funds were scarce, and if the candidate would become sick, the investment would be lost. Yet, making it a requirement was a severe infringement on their personal life. In the end, we opted for voluntary testing, but only few underwent the test, and so the country lost in more than one way, when the trainees were HIV/AIDS positive without either admitting it or refusing to know it. To this day, Malawi (like most African countries) has not won the fight against AIDS.

### *Foreign policy complications*

Carrying out my assignment in Malawi had other complications because of the unusual foreign policy of the government. Not only did the country have diplomatic relations with South Africa, it also still maintained ties with Taiwan rather than with the People’s Republic of China. After Beijing assumed its seat in the UN in 1972 and replaced Taiwan, most other countries in the world had changed their recognition, not so Malawi.<sup>7</sup>

It is general practice that a newly arriving resident representative would pay a courtesy visit to other heads of diplomatic missions. Malawi at the time had 9 resident ambassadors. Therefore, it would not be difficult to pay a courtesy visit to each of them. However, two of the nine posed a real problem to me, namely the ambassador of South Africa (a country still under UN sanctions because of its apartheid policy) and the ambassador of Taiwan (a country now longer recognized as a UN member state). During the course of some of my visits, I had learned that the South African ambassador was about to leave. I therefore postponed my call on him waiting for his successor to arrive and leaving the decision to him whether he wanted to call on me or not.

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<sup>7</sup> Only in 2008 did Malawi establish diplomatic relations with Beijing and downgraded its recognition of Taiwan.

The incoming ambassador decided to call on me. During his visit he asked me whether as the UN we would work with South African companies if the Malawian government requested so. I replied if he could indicate to us a South African company owned and operated by black South African businessmen or -women, I would be quite willing to consider such a request favorably. Many months later, the ambassador told me that he was so impressed by my response that he did not ask any of the other questions he had in store for me. As he belonged to the liberal camp of the white South Africans we actually became friends. In a small diplomatic community of only nine resident ambassadors with frequent meetings during official government functions, it was certainly a welcome development.<sup>8</sup>

Trickier was the question of how to greet the ambassador of Taiwan. The UN only recognized the People's Republic of China as its member state and as the representative of the Chinese people; I therefore could not call on him as the ambassador of his government. But he also was the dean of the diplomatic corps. I thus decided to call on him last, making it very clear that I was greeting him as the dean and not as the ambassador of his government. He understood and we developed a good professional relationship, as Taiwan had several very successful development projects in Malawi.

### *A difficult settling in period*

The first few weeks in Malawi were nerve-wrecking for me. I was on totally new territory and constantly fearing to make mistakes. It was a time, where outwardly all was well and going smoothly, but inwardly I felt like walking in a maze without knowing which was the way out. I thus kept moving cautiously, always on my guard, never quite feeling at ease and at home. Malawians are by and large very humble and shy, hardworking and minding their own. It was therefore not easy to make contact with them. The foreign community was very small, and did not offer many opportunities to socialize except for the official functions. Lilongwe was a village filled with gossip and rumors which were sometimes correct, sometimes not. In order to avoid any misrepresentations, which might complicate my life and work, I stayed mostly to myself, going on long walks when I was in Zomba or on weekend outings when I had some time off in Lilongwe. These trips were at the same time opportunities to get a glimpse of the real life of Malawians.

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<sup>8</sup> In the spring of 1990 I travelled by car with my colleague who served in Botswana from Swaziland to Johannesburg. When we stopped for the night in Middlebury/Transvaal, not only had the hotel accommodation for our black African driver, in the dining room a black family was having dinner without anyone paying any particular attention. Quite obviously, the apartheid system was slowly disintegrating and a few months later, the South African government stunned the world by releasing Nelson Mandela from prison.



Traditional dancers on the road to a tamtam

My very first official function outside of Lilongwe was the inauguration of a bridge in central Malawi, which was connecting two villages across a small river. During the rainy season this river could become an insurmountable obstacle, causing the villagers to make a long detour of several hours. The design of the bridge was based on a similar bridge in Honduras, and the villagers were not only relieved to have improved access to and from their village, but they were also proud of this bridge having a replica in a far away country. They had participated in constructing through voluntary labor. UNDP through its Capital Development Fund had provided the material (iron beams and stones) and through a technical assistance project, the necessary engineering supervision.

The tribal tradition in central Malawi was still matriarchal, and accordingly the chief of the village was an elderly woman. She was so surprised and pleased that the UN was represented by a woman that she came across the village square and greeted me with exuberance, speaking rapidly in her own language of which I did not understand a word and touching my arms and embracing me warmly. If until then I had had any doubts about accepting this assignment, the encounter with this local female politician and her joy at welcoming another official woman to this celebration, made me glad that I was there. On several other occasions during my field assignments, I encountered similar

reactions from local people, giving credence to the notion that the UN's advocacy and commitment to enhance the participation of women in decision-making through elected office or in other senior positions could best be achieved by the UN also having women in senior positions.



Three ladies from the UNDP Lilongwe office, myself and 2 Assistant Resident Representatives, Caitlin Wiesen and Cheryl Hairston, in 1988

### *Influencing macro-economic policies*

Malawi is one of the poorest countries according to the international ranking criteria of the World Bank. But it gains on the Human Development Index on average nine positions each year.<sup>9</sup> It is a country which invested heavily in its social infrastructure from its own and foreign resources. It is land-locked, and during the years that I was there most direct link to the sea, the port of Beira on the Mozambican coast, was blocked by the civil war in Mozambique. The closure of this route caused Malawi much higher transport costs for its export crops, which had either to be flown out or taken via Tanzania to sea harbors.

Although the tea is of superb quality, it did not fetch a good price for the producers, because of the relatively high transportation costs, but also because of its small quantities. The big tea companies were mostly using it to upgrade the quality of the tea from other countries which was sold in tea bags. I regularly urged the representatives of the Malawi tea growers to establish for their excellent product a niche market and to undertake the marketing in the European markets directly. But neither the Smallholder Tea Growers Association, nor the representatives of the estate growers reacted to my advocacy positively. Clearly, the international structure for selling and marketing tea was

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<sup>9</sup> The HDI is a composite index. It measures three basic dimensions of human development: a long and healthy life, knowledge, and a decent standard of living. For a detailed definition see Human Development Report 2004, Technical Note # 1.



too well-established for a relatively small producer community to break free from it.



A tea plantation worker posing for a picture

But through such contacts with the producers of export commodities, I also learned a thing or two about the detrimental influence which the macro-economic advice of the IMF had on the economic performance of Malawi. During the first few months of my assignment, I was told that each year the business community dreaded the arrival of the annual IMF mission which reviewed the economic indicators. During the second year of my assignment, I could witness that what I was told was correct. As soon as the mission was planned and speculations started to circulate about its dates, imported goods began to disappear in the shops. Traders were keeping them in their storerooms under lock and key. The reason was that the IMF missions came and invariably recommended a devaluation of the Malawi currency, the Kwacha. This made export goods cheaper, but imports more expensive. Therefore, traders wanted to hoard imported items and sell them after they knew the rate of devaluation with a similar price increase so that they could replenish their stocks without any loss to themselves. As Malawi was importing a great variety of items of daily necessity within weeks, such price increases would make themselves felt for locally produced items, too. Given the dependence of the Malawi economy on imports, a

devaluation of the local currency resulted sooner rather than later in price increases and a rise in living costs.

The government had the practice to debrief the IMF mission with the diplomatic community present. During the first meeting I attended, I raised the issue of devaluation and local price increases, only to be dismissed by the head of the IMF mission that this was of marginal importance to the macro-economic performance of the country. The next year, I employed a different tactic. Even before I had heard about the upcoming IMF mission, I knew they were arriving, because toilet paper and similar items were no longer available in the shops in Lilongwe from one day to the other. I called the Ministry of Finance and got confirmation and the exact dates for the mission. UNDP was supporting the national planning system and we had a young American economist assigned to this project. I called him into my office and asked him, what he thought about the IMF advice and whether he had any idea what one could do about its detrimental impact on the local economy. He was evasive and not very eager to get involved. Besides, he did not want to act solely on my request, but wanted to have permission from his employing UN organization to take on this extra task.

It so happened that shortly after my inconclusive meeting with the expert, which UNDP was funding, his technical supervising officer from New York was visiting. So I told him that I wanted the expert to do something which would counteract the IMF advice. Failing this, I would have to think twice about extending the project, the real reason why he had come. Then for a few days I heard nothing, until I met with the permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Finance, who thanked me for having made available our young economist as part of the government team which would be negotiating with the IMF. In response I just wished him good luck.

Then came the habitual debriefing, and the mission leader opened the meeting with a bombshell. He told us that they had decided not to recommend a devaluation of the local currency, because of the negative impact on consumer prices. I was mightily pleased, but did not have a clue of what had happened. So I went back to the permanent secretary the next day and asked him how the IMF had reached their unusual decision. He chuckled and told me the following: our young economist had been asked by the government to prepare the updates of the economic indicators which the IMF mission had requested. Instead of showing export producer prices, he showed domestic consumer prices. He thus showed how much Malawi had to pay more for imports rather than to focus on the gains through lower export prices. This action by our economist showing the negative domestic effects of devaluating the Malawian currency took the mission by surprise and convinced them not to make their usual recommendation.

Everybody in the country heaved a sigh of relief. Goods reappeared in the shops at their old price level, more were imported, and the national

customs authority collected more import duties than in previous years, which in turn led to higher public revenues and a slight reduction in the budget deficit. When the Minister of Finance presented his budget to Parliament, he received a lot of praise and he was basking in this approval by his fellow politicians. He also was a grateful person. A few weeks later I had to go and ask him for the payment of Malawi's voluntary contribution to UNDP. Not only did he initiate the prompt payment, which was unusual, he also informed me that Malawi was going to increase its contribution to UNDP, which was even more unusual, and I had not even asked for such an increase. Now, even UNDP Headquarters learned about Malawi's improved public revenue situation, and asked me how I had managed to convince the government to increase their contribution. I am not sure they believed my explanation.

### ***Influencing social policies***

In a certain way, I was doing macro-economic advocacy not as part of our program, but as a sideline. Our programs had a much more social orientation, e.g. poverty alleviation, improvements in primary school education, and modernization of rural housing. But even on those aspects we crossed swords with the IMF and the World Bank more than once.

Upon the advice of the World Bank, the government imposed school fees for primary school education. The effects were that children from poor families could either not attend school or only intermittently, i.e. when parents had the money to pay the fees. In all families, parents gave preference to the education of their boys, leaving many girls without any formal education. Those who were able to attend were nevertheless the first to leave when parents either could no longer pay or had other demands on their daughters in their home and business or wanted to marry them off at age 13 or 14.

In many meetings I urged the government to revise their policy and to abolish school fees. I quoted World Bank studies from Asian countries which stated that the payback to society as a whole was highest for a universal six year primary education. These studies had found that universal basic literacy was the surest ticket to sustainable economic growth, innovation in agricultural production and the establishment of local industries and services. The government officials listened carefully and politely but did not want to oppose the World Bank. At the time they were negotiating a sizeable loan for improving the conditions of the primary school system, and they did not want to complicate or endanger these negotiations. In those days, African officials did not yet realize that the money they borrowed from the World Bank was to serve the best interest of the country as they had defined them. They let themselves be held hostage to the prevailing views at the World Bank. What a huge difference to China, where officials would never accept a foreign view unless they were convinced that it was useful to them.

The World Bank staff was divided, the technical staff, i.e. the educational specialists, agreed with me, but said that their economists would not clear such a policy shift. In those days, the orthodoxy of *the structural adjustment* concept reigned supreme in the World Bank. The consequences on the ground were disastrous: low enrolment, especially of girls, and high dropout rates.

### ***More girls to be educated***

Eventually, I took an initiative in support of my advocacy, which nobody had thought of before. Under our primary education project I opened a budget line for individual scholarships. For three years, each year UNDP funded a full scholarship, covering the annual cost of school fees, school uniform, books and meals for two girls at about 10 percent of all primary schools in Malawi. The total estimated cost per annum was roughly \$ 28,000. We agreed with the Ministry of Education on the selection criteria both of the schools as well as the potential beneficiaries and then I handed the permanent Secretary for Education, Isaac Lamba, a check in a public ceremony which was widely reported in the local radio and newspapers. The latter was important so that as wide as possible an audience would know about this scheme, and hopefully other sponsors would follow suit and a certain public control over the use of these funds would be secured.

The obstacles to get this initiative on the road even within UNDP were manifold. Some questioned whether this was a proper use of UNDP funds. This was hard to understand as we sent every year hundreds of Malawians with individual scholarships for studies abroad. Others did



These were professions open for women with a modern education

not know how we would budget and account for these funds. Again, we had very clear budgeting and accounting procedures in place for the use of such training funds. A third group was ambivalent about the implied criticism of the World Bank/government educational policy. Well, here the delegated authority of a resident representative came handy. I could approve the scheme locally. Because of its innovative feature I informed Headquarters, but I did not need their approval. The result was resounding silence from the regional bureau in New York on this initiative. For good measure I also sent a message to the Administrator Bill Draper directly, and word came back via his chief of staff, great initiative, go ahead.

After one year, I recruited an evaluator and sent her to all regions for an assessment of the impact of this scheme in at least five schools in each region apart from inspecting the records which the Ministry of Education kept. The feedback was wonderful. Initially, the staff in the ministry had not been too enthusiastic about this scheme, as it meant a lot of extra work to them for little money. But over time they caught on, as this little money was putting them in contact with school heads in a new way: they had something to give, small as it was, and they could discuss professionally with these principals about the pros and cons of existing educational policies. Some school heads were questioning the rationale for selecting only girls, after all there were many boys, too, who would qualify under most of the established criteria. I was told that this criticism sparked a lively debate among the primary school educators about the need and necessity to recruit and retain the girls of primary school age in school. I was thrilled when I heard this. No amount of speeches, lectures, letters and memos from us could have possibly produced a better result.

Overall, we had only two dropouts from among the 400 girls who benefitted from this scholarship scheme. Most parents got the message, namely that it was important to educate the girls as well and that education paid. Many years later, school fees were finally abolished, and the enrolment of girls improved greatly. Malawian friends told me that the above initiative somehow became a turning point in the government's thinking and that ever since we had launched this initiative they were disagreeing with the World Bank on the question of school fees. Regrettably by then, the AIDS epidemic was challenging the educational system in new and unprecedented ways. Many Malawian teachers died of AIDS during the 1990s, and the total number of local teachers surviving was so small that Malawi had to revert back to recruiting international and national volunteers, who had to undergo crash teacher training programs in order to keep its primary school system running.

### ***Beginning to feel comfortable***

When I travelled through various parts of Malawi with friends and family members, we greatly enjoyed the existing tourist infrastructure, which often dated back to the colonial times. They were old fashioned,

but impeccably maintained. The hotels were small facilities for visiting families; by now most of these family tourists came from South Africa and other countries in the sub-region. Safaris were exclusively photo-Safaris, and hotels along the lakeshore warned about leaving bungalows at night lest one wanted to encounter a hippo or other wild animals. Villagers told me more than once very angrily about the elephants and hippos which trampled through their fields and destroyed their crops. They were less than pleased with the establishment of national parks and the protection of wildlife. Later on FAO changed their concept and advocated for the involvement of the peasants from surrounding areas in the management of the national parks so that they would partially be benefitting from the parks and not only be shut out or suffer damages.



Hippos near Liwondo at sunset

One of the most beautiful trips I made was to the north of Malawi. With my personal car I drove with a friend visiting from New York to Nyika plateau.

In many ways the grasslands of the plateau which rises to an altitude of 2,500 meters resemble the Scottish highlands. In several places the national tourist organization managed groups of cozy huts, which had been built by British settlers, way back when they came here to hunt. To this day local employees helped in the evening with the lighting of a fire in the fireplace and were cooking a meal with the ingredients one had to bring. It was old-fashioned, but also very pleasant and during a starry night outright romantic.



A view over Nyika Plateau

The next morning after our arrival, I drove with my friend towards the escarpment on the upper rim of the Rift Valley. I had heard in Lilongwe that from the top one could look down into the valley where large herds of elephants were moving about. We were alone and decided to leave the car, as we could see nearly nothing. The grass, which at that time of the year was reaching above our heads, was blocking our view. We started to walk with the help of a map towards a cliff which we assumed would give us an unencumbered view down. When we had walked single file for a while along a small path, I noticed animal droppings and became aware that the wind was blowing from us towards a small forested area. It was known that leopards and lions were in this part of the plateau, and we became very quiet. We both had some Africa experience, and became scared. What if a lion would get our scent? Would the animal attack? We decided to turn back and leave the elephants where they were.

On that same trip we also visited the mission station of Livingstonia high above Lake Malawi, which was built by the Free Church of Scotland to which Dr. Livingstone had belonged.<sup>10</sup> For decades, the station provided schooling and medical services to the African population in this part of the country. Many Malawians from the north had received their first schooling here, and had moved on to university studies in the UK and other overseas countries. During the fight for independence, the colonial administration had ordered all expatriates to leave the rural areas. But the doctors, nurses and teachers of Livingstonia defied the order. When British airplanes were circling

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<sup>10</sup> Dr. David Livingstone had mounted his exploratory travels on the African continent from areas which are in today's Malawi. Even his famous meeting with the American explorer Stanley had occurred near Lake Malawi.

above the station, the missionaries wrote a quote from the Bible with pebbles into the sand signaling that they were staying and continuing with their work. The Africans fighting for independence and the post colonial government thanked these forthright missionaries by giving them protection and support so that they could carry on with their work.

Driving down the escarpment from the station to the lakeshore on a steep, winding road which the missionaries had built with zeal and determination still needed perseverance and courage. The car slid down on the sandy ground rather than drove. But we made it, and continued along the lake back towards Lilongwe. The people we met on our way were friendly, hospitable and helpful. The villages were spic and span, and the fields immaculately planted and maintained. Dr. Banda's personal commitment to modernize the country through hard work, and the response of Malawi's peasants was visible everywhere. In the international rankings, Malawi continued to be one of the poorest countries, but GDP per capita calculated at constant prices of 1964, the time of gaining independence, showed the growth and increase in wealth the country had achieved. Solid social policies and continuing traditions of the extended family had distributed such wealth fairly evenly. Even in the remotest villages people were well clad, and had a few modern amenities to share with other members of the family such as a bicycle or a radio. In between harvest and planting time, villagers



Dancers on the road in Central Malawi



relaxed and celebrated in the evenings in one or the other village. At night one could hear their tam tams and see their bonfires from far away.

While the north was far from Lilongwe, other stunningly beautiful places were more easily within reach, such as Zomba plateau, a reforested area at an altitude of 2,000 meters and further down the Rift Valley, the foothills of Mount Mulanje, only an hour's drive away from Blantyre. Whenever I could, I visited one or the other place when I went down to Blantyre, where I often had to attend to official duties. In Zomba, on the way to Blantyre, I would make a stopover and drive up the mountain to the Kuchawe Inn, have a meal and then sent the driver and car ahead, while I hiked down to town, before continuing on to Lilongwe.

During these visits I would buy potatoes (an Irish variety) and strawberries, which the forest workers were growing in their spare time and the wives and daughters were selling near the rest house. They were the tastiest potatoes and strawberries in the world. If I did not go to Zomba, I would visit the tea estates around Mount Mulanje, a massive mountain range rising to 3,000 meters. As one approached the mountain leaving the hustle and bustle of Blantyre behind, one would drive for many kilometers through well groomed tea plantations which hugged the undulating hills like a green carpet. It was a wonderful sight to behold! Occasionally, I would stay overnight with foreign experts working in Zomba or with English tea planters whose families had lived in Malawi for generations. During these visits I made my peace with my life in Malawi and I was grateful that at least by outward appearance Malawi was the exception to the rule in post colonial Africa. The country was stable, the economy grew and people had enough to eat. Europeans and other expatriates who were willing to integrate, who paid their taxes and respected the political authorities could farm or pursue other businesses without too many difficulties.

Going to the lake, the other exceptional natural beauty of Malawi was less attractive. Although the expanse of this third largest lake on the African continent, 580 km long and in many places 10 – 20 km wide, is an enormous body of water with lovely hilly shores, yet it only offered recreational access in a few places. The water near the shore was too stagnant and hence infested with bacteria which cause bilharzias, or there were other risks such hippos, which in the water were very fast, and had even along an authorized beach near Salima killed a tourist. Still, Club Makokola near Mangochi was a hotel with a well laid out beach, clean water and roomy huts with protection against the all pervasive mosquitoes. Driving down the escarpment from the Dedza area towards the lake was a particularly beautiful ride. Many residents and visitors did not take this road, as it was in poor condition. But I loved it, because it offered magnificent views over the lake and the other shore in Mozambique. This road also took us past a Catholic

mission station, where local wood carvers were producing statues and reliefs depicting African scenes and rural life. Some of the relief panels reminded me of the medieval picture panels in German cathedrals which the priests had used to explain biblical stories to their illiterate community members.



Lake Malawi at sunset

### *Fragile peacefulness*

Nevertheless, there always was a sense that the foundations of such peaceful development were masking many problems and social tensions. Hunger and starvation occurred every year in one or the other part of the country, when the rains had failed. People in the rural areas would only survive on a very slim diet.

In 1987/8, many buildings owned or rented by local Asian businessmen in Blantyre and other Malawian towns were identified for demolition by the respective City Councils. The selected buildings were marked with a red sign for all to see. The action sent shivers down my spine, as it reminded me of the singling out and destruction of Jewish shops during Nazi Germany. It took me a lot of my will power and efforts to investigate the causes for this action and to go beyond the gossip and rumors which were spreading like a bushfire. What motivated this drastic action was that Malawi being committed to the market economy was also counting on the richer segments of the population to invest into the development of the country. The Asian minority in Malawi was making handsome profits from their trading businesses, but was investing very little of these gains in the country. City Councils wanted to force these businessmen to invest in the construction of new

buildings and to renew the urban infrastructure. The move proved somewhat successful in the years to come, but it created a whole set of new problems. Many of these businessmen did not renew existing buildings, but invested in Lilongwe, often obtaining permission to build on land which previously had been used as public recreational space.

Most disturbing, however, was the fact that we heard that persons, mostly native Malawians, had been arrested and remained in prison without charges brought against them. Often their families only learned about the whereabouts of these prisoners after weeks or months.

The local press was highly selective in what they would report on, and they would always report in positive tones about Malawian events. The President and his actions often made the headlines. I was used to such a “glorifying reporting style” from China, but in a big country like China the press was by no means as important as the news media were in a small country like Malawi, where it was difficult to receive verifiable news by any other means than the local newspaper and the national radio. TV did not exist at the time, and the Internet had not yet arrived.

### ***Improved rural housing***

From among the 75 projects we had ongoing, one project interested me especially. This project dealt with improving rural housing conditions. It was funded by a sub-organization of UNDP, the UN Capital Development Fund (UNCDF). This Fund provided grant assistance for the development of mostly rural infrastructure, which would have an immediate and direct beneficial impact on economic development in the area and they provided loans for small businessmen, who otherwise would not have access to banking services. The Fund aimed to complement UNDP technical assistance which was directed towards the development of small entrepreneurs and businesses in Least Developed Countries (LDCs).

When I arrived in Malawi I inherited this CDF project which had established a dozen centers throughout Malawi. In these centers, rural housing materials were produced from local raw materials, which, however, were more durable than the traditional mud bricks. The centers also extended small loans to prospective home owners willing to employ these new building materials and housing designs, as the houses were initially more expensive than those using traditional building methods. In the long run, the new houses were cheaper, as they needed less maintenance and they were more durable. Thus, households could normally repay these loans over the agreed time.

Furthermore, the centers also trained local businessmen in the production, use and marketing of these materials and gave them start up loans for setting up their businesses. Altogether, the project provided a comprehensive package. It also was a worthwhile effort as it addressed the housing needs in densely populated areas, where the traditional building materials increasingly were in short supply. Besides, the design of the houses were environmentally sound, healthy

for the inhabitants and yet affordable to the vast majority of rural households. But when I made a first round in several centers, I found to my surprise that they were languishing. Materials piled up, loan repayments were only slowly coming in, and the number of houses built by local entrepreneurs was small and the construction took an inordinate long time to be completed.

One reason for the slow takeoff was a cultural tradition which the original team of expatriate experts had not thought of, and their Malawian counterparts did not know how to overcome. It was the tradition in rural Malawi that houses, in which somebody had died, had to be abandoned and left to fall into ruins. Within a short span of time, the walls and thatched roofs were decaying and after a few months only a heap of red earth remained, which could then be used for the construction of a new hut. The new houses were designed to be longer lasting, and they were roomier to accommodate whole families. After the death of one family member the other inhabitants were expected to stay. Many Malawians were afraid of violating the tradition. Therefore, in particular older rural people, who often had the money for such a new house, did not warm to the new design.

We discussed with the ministry in charge what could be done. We assumed that in urban areas the same problem must exist, and we enquired from the national authorities, what had been the solution. Yes, the national civil servants said, but in urban areas most people did not hold the same belief, therefore the problem did not exist in the same way. Hence, the urban experience was not particularly helpful. Eventually, we organized workshops for local leaders, including traditional healers and medicine men to have them discuss the issues. They concluded that a ceremony could “clean” the houses of evil spirits and possible remnants of infectious diseases, and then they could be occupied by other tenants. Malawi being a small country, the news of this conclusion spread quickly, and applications at our centers jumped in numbers.

### *Weaknesses in project design*

The other problem, in principle more easily to solve, turned out to be much more difficult to address. The original design did not foresee the inclusion of a latrine, in spite of the fact that UNCDF was supporting through another project the wider acceptance of pit latrines in villages. It became close to impossible to align the two projects, as they were managed by two different ministries with separate teams, loan schemes, work plans and budgets. Eventually, we had the rural housing scheme project buy services and the latrines from the other project, and offered two housing types and two types of housing loans, one with and one without the construction of a latrine.

The loan funds were meant to revolve so that the initial UN endowment would be sufficient for the financing of the construction of houses over a period of time way beyond the duration of the project. But all records

showed that the funds would be exhausted before the end of the project. Everybody whom I asked believed that this was caused by the fact, that repayments were not coming back as they were planned. However, the records showed, that loan takers were repaying their debt, although not as quickly as the project team had assumed. When we looked into this aspect, it became very apparent that people repaid according to their cash flow. This fact was determined by the seasonal income derived from agricultural production. I requested the financial experts of the companion UNDP technical assistance project to build the projections of the revolving fund according to the more realistic repayment schedule of the loan takers. From that it was clear that the endowment might last until the end of the project, but not beyond, as originally foreseen. For that to happen and to anticipate a growth element due to the encouraging greater demand for small loans, also on the side of the construction enterprises, we needed to have 8 million US dollars instead of the existing 2 million. It was not possible during my assignment to raise these additional funds, leaving the project, which mutated very rapidly into a national program, to a somewhat uncertain future. One more example of a successful idea and project, but without the financial inputs required to make both sustainable.

#### *A rare brush with corruption*

In the context of this project, I also had my first brush with corruption by a national counterpart. In general, the civil service under President Kamuzu Banda was remarkably well-qualified, diligent and resistant to corruptive practices. The political leadership was another matter, but President Banda had emulated very successfully the practices of the British civil service, and it was, in fact, a joy to work with these officials. They owned farms, urban houses and businesses, but they were very conscientious and respected that these had to be separated from their official duties. Mostly during those years, civil servants used these businesses to take care of their extended families and to ensure against a sudden hardship and for their old age. In those years, the normal retirement age for government officials was 55, and, of course, without a second source of income they would be in dire economic straits.

As the rural housing project took off, rumors reached me that the National Project Director,<sup>11</sup> who was also a senior official in the ministry, was running several of the construction enterprises, availing his businesses in more than one location of the loans which the project made available. When I asked the international experts what we should

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<sup>11</sup> All UNDP projects were to have a national project director and a chief technical adviser from among the international expert team. The National Project Director was to assume the overall management, and ensure that the project was well integrated into the national plans and work programs, while the Chief Technical Advisor was to ensure technical soundness of project interventions and adherence to UNDP's rules and procedures in their execution. There was tension between these two, but by and large the system worked well, because of the qualifications and competencies of the Malawian civil servants.

and could do about the situation, they replied that nothing could be done as this person was well-connected to the highest level in the government. I was disappointed by their response, but kept the matter under review.



Roads were well maintained in Malawi

Eventually came the time of the annual review of the project. I tried to attend as many of these project reviews as possible, and I certainly intended to participate in this one. Before the meeting I sent word to the government that I wanted the permanent secretary to also participate in the meeting. This was an unusual request, but by that time I was sufficiently known that I must have my reasons for this request. We conducted the meeting according to the established agenda with the National Project Director and all the international experts in attendance. Everybody was pleased with the progress, and wished to raise more funds for the loan schemes. Under the agenda item “any other business”, I then asked for a closed session with only the permanent secretary, the UNDP program officer, me and one junior official from the Ministry of Finance in the room. All others were to be excused from the meeting. The permanent secretary was somewhat surprised, but acceded to my request. I then made a statement saying that I wanted to raise a matter concerning the National Project Director (NPD). Although it was no skin of my nose, the UN would consider it highly questionable that the NPD was directly and personally benefiting from the project through his businesses. While we had no problem with him being a businessman, as this was general practice in the country, we nevertheless found it detrimental to the reputation of the project and the whole program that he was so actively involved in a dual capacity. I concluded by saying that I would leave the matter in the hands of the government to deal with. The permanent secretary thanked me for my statement and we closed the meeting.

After the meeting the international experts were pumping me to tell them what had transpired during the closed session. I only told them that I had raised the business engagement of the NPD in the program. However, a few weeks afterwards, we learned that the NPD had been relieved of his functions, and had left the civil service in order to attend full-time to his businesses.

I was, of course, curious to learn what had happened on the national side and in my next informal meeting with the Secretary to the President and Cabinet I asked what had led to this decision. He laughed and said that I had left it to them to settle the matter. So they had. Was I not satisfied? I replied by thanking the government for a decision which clearly made it much easier for UNDP to continue to be associated with the program. He then shared with me what had occurred internally. He told me that the process had been quite difficult, but that in the end the President himself had ruled that the official either had to suspend his business or resign from the civil service. Obviously, he had chosen the second option.

### ***Preserving national ownership of projects***

During my first year in the post, I had observed that each time a foreign expert arrived shortly thereafter his or her national counterpart would either be transferred or would go abroad for further training. The technical assistance rationale said that foreign experts should train their national counterparts on the job, and then they should leave. But if these counterparts were not available, then there was no training on the job. During the seminar I took the opportunity to confront the national participants with this observation. First they denied that this was a common occurrence. They wanted to convince me that these were isolated cases. But I insisted. After their initial hesitation, they finally began to talk and revealed that they were taking the initiative to be transferred or to get a fellowship because they could not really learn from the international experts. As national civil servants they had to observe the hierarchy and national protocol. A foreign expert had no such restrictions; they had much easier access to the minister either directly or through me. Therefore, the performance of the national officials would always be less effective and quick than the performance of their international “coaches”. While the interaction between the external expert and his national counterpart was not to work this way, I had to accept the fact that it often did.

As the funding agency, we therefore had two options either to ask the foreign experts from refraining to get involved in the national decision-making process or to reduce the number of foreign experts. Based on my previous China experience I opted for the latter solution. This in the local context was close to being revolutionary. But the results bore me out: the Malawi program became a well accepted, dynamic and fully integrated program supporting the national structure according to their needs and requirements. Other donors also benefitted from our revised approach, as their programs were processed much faster. We thus were

playing the catalytic role the UN was supposed to play, pulling programs of other donors with us and influencing national policies without intruding on the decision-making process.

***Once more, peacefulness in Malawi was deceptive***

But the peacefulness was misleading. Malawi in many ways was also a troubling place to work and live. There was first the political situation. While President Banda could be considered a benevolent dictator, who was willing to respond positively to external advice and advocacy, his rule was hard on the people. Open opposition was an absolute no-no in Malawi. As already mentioned, people would disappear for weeks and months in prison for critical remarks on the President or his government. I cautiously broached the subject with the SPC and some other senior government officials. An easy entry into such a dialogue was the fact that the President was holding many offices at the same time. Apart from being the President of the Malawi Congress Party, which ruled the country as the only officially recognized party, he was President (for Life) of the Republic, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Agriculture, Defense, Communications and Justice respectively. Clearly this accumulation of posts meant that he would be an easy target of any dissatisfaction and criticism. He was somewhere around 90 years old, and the load he was carrying was certainly too big for him and any potential successor. The subject of his succession was in those days a subject nobody dared to raise with him openly, except for Bill Draper, the Head of UNDP, when he came to visit. I understand that the senior government officials had a hard time to convince President Banda, that I had not put up my visiting chief executive to raise this issue.

***Following the President around the country***

For all intents and purposes, Dr. Banda had styled his rule on the model of the traditional tribal chiefs, and accordingly he was hiring and firing his ministers and permanent secretaries and other senior officials at his personal discretion. They all were in fear of falling in disgrace for whatever reason, as this could end their public career from one day to the next.<sup>12</sup> People who had direct access to him were mindful and selective in what they were telling him. He was aware of such self censorship and it was rumored that he heavily relied on reports from the secret police. True or not, he clearly had several sources of information to form his opinion, which he would share publicly in his speeches. There were many opportunities for him to speak, e.g. at the Opening of Parliament, at the launch of the agricultural planting season, on the convocation at the University of Malawi in Zomba, of which he was the Chancellor, and on National Day, to mention only a few. These events would take place in different places around the

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<sup>12</sup> Fortunately, dismissed officials would not be imprisoned or their families punished as well. They could continue to pursue a career in business or in a professional freelance capacity. Often their spouses were also employed by the government, and they would continue in their posts.



country. Like the German emperor in the early Middle Ages, President Banda had several official residences in the country and he would move from one to the other and conduct his official functions from there. Senior officials were therefore often on the road, and so was the small diplomatic corps, as we were all expected to attend these official national functions.

I came to like these functions. Not only would they give the opportunity to see the four corners of Malawi and to take the opportunity to visit some of our ongoing projects on the ground, it also was a wonderful occasion to make a lot of informal contacts with government officials and members of the diplomatic corps. Besides, it was relaxing to spend hours in the mostly pleasant climate of Malawi outdoors and watch a series of traditional dances, in which the “old man” and his first lady would invariably participate at a certain point of the performances. The protocol of these events was British, as were the military displays, the festivities were African and his speeches were a mix of repeated messages and on occasion some new policy statements.<sup>13</sup> It thus was always good to listen carefully, as there could be surprises. He certainly took these opportunities to respond to the pressures which donor agencies were making on him and their critique of his authoritarian and autocratic rule.



Each official function began with a defile of the armed forces and the police

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<sup>13</sup> President Banda’s standard message was that development had to secure for every Malawian a roof which did not leak when it rained, enough food and decent clothing based on hard work. He was still promulgating a *basic needs approach to development*, which the donor community had long abandoned in favor of *structural adjustment*.

I particularly liked the religious service on the eve of the National Day celebrations. It would be attended by all senior party and government officials, the diplomatic corps, civil and business leaders. The service would be conducted jointly by a Christian priest (on a rotational basis between the various denominations active in Malawi), a Muslim Imam, a Hindu preacher and Dr. Banda in his capacity as an Alderman of the Church of Scotland. Coming from Europe, where over the centuries religious rifts had led to many wars and much suffering, such ecumenical practice was inspiring. Dr. Banda having lived both in the US and the UK in his younger years knew from firsthand experience about these religious conflicts, and as President of his country he had done an admirable job in not having such conflicts repeated in Malawi. He had been similarly discouraging tribal affiliations within the modern political setting. He succeeded where many other African countries failed. Both these initiatives survived his fall and are probably among the most valuable elements of his legacy to the country.



Before the end of each official function  
first the President, and then the First Lady would join in the dancing

At one point in time, the President was provoked to explain his rule during the opening of the academic year at the National University in Zomba. He disclosed that for local elections, the Malawi Congress Party was obliged to nominate at least three candidates from which the people could elect their preferred candidate. When I checked on this statement, not only was it confirmed, in addition I learned that about 60 percent of the incumbents were not re-elected. While this was a sure sign that people were taking their voting rights seriously, it also

explained why the party was not willing to allow for a similar competitive situation in case of parliamentary elections. Although for each election to the national parliament a certain number of candidates were replaced by new ones, it was a process heavily controlled from the top. In addition, about 20 percent of the parliamentary seats were filled by appointees of the President. Through these appointments he made sure that neglected groups would be represented, e.g. women, Muslims, Hindus etc. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century in Europe one would have called this an enlightened way of ruling, at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it appeared anachronistic and unsustainable.

### *1989 and its impact on Malawi*

Political developments, which occurred in 1989 in China, Germany and Eastern Europe, gave such advocacy added momentum. Admittedly, African governments were more concerned about the volume of development assistance which they could expect in future, when it became clear that Eastern Europe would attract a lot of attention and funding. Most of the additionally needed public sector funding had to come from existing development aid budgets. Donors in Africa up to 1989 were mostly concerned about the need for African governments to reform themselves in order to remain competitive in the rapidly changing international economy. In the 1990s the donor community began to demand political reforms as a prerequisite for further development assistance.

In Malawi, the World Bank was the largest donor and their staff had a lot of clout. A newly arrived representative politicized their lending program, stopping further loan agreements until the government had given assurances that they would permit and organize multi-party elections. I was in total disagreement with such a heavy-handed approach, besides I was acutely aware that Malawi was facing a much bigger threat to its development in the form of HIV/AIDS and deteriorating conditions for agricultural production.

Malawi was encountering more frequent droughts, and the strategic grain reserve which the government had made partially available for the feeding programs of the Mozambican refugees and starving Malawians had not been fully replenished. For the first time since independence, the country was faced with widespread hunger. Introducing multi-party democracy was, quite frankly, not the first priority on many Malawians' minds, and somehow I agreed with them, as much as I wished for a more open political system and greater political freedom for Malawians.



Women and children – the mainstay of rural Malawi

### *A papal visit*

In early 1990, Malawi was preparing for a papal visit. Some time prior to this visit I had remarked to the Secretary of Foreign Affairs that it was curious that Pope John Paul II had been to several countries in Southern Africa, but never Malawi, although Catholics were among the Christian population the largest denomination. The next thing I heard was that the government had invited the Pope. He came and celebrated several masses in churches and open air.

Preceding the visit, the local clergy was very nervous about the papal visit. While the missionary stations and churches were observing the Pope's conservative family planning policy, local priests were nevertheless counseling their parish members to visit the government clinics when they wanted advice about birth control. These priests did not want to have the Pope speak out openly against condoms and other methods which were freely available in Malawi through non-church institutions. Fortunately, the government had heard about these concerns and requested the Pope not to speak about the subject of family planning during his visit. He indeed did not mention the subject during his sermons in Malawi.



Many Malawians had converted to the Christian faith celebrating it in their way

### *Preparing to leave*

Around this time (April/May 1990) I decided it was time to leave. On the one hand I had proven that I could handle the responsibilities of a resident representative, on the other hand I was getting tired of being at odds with the rest of the donor community. The lack of support from my own organization made me feel that I was left in limbo. The repeated rumors and the gossip concerning my person, not all of which was very friendly, had worn me out. Socially, I still felt isolated and remained on my guard when I spoke to colleagues and others I met. Malawi appeared like a long tunnel which I had entered without knowing what lay ahead. I had not turned back, but had kept going. Now I saw the end of the tunnel. Three years were a reasonable period to have “endured”. I had started to like Malawi and felt a lot of empathy for the Malawians and I was professionally satisfied with the results of our program. But I was frustrated that the World Bank was making political demands which were in this shape and form not in Malawi’s best interest. In spite of all my efforts to the contrary, the World Bank prevailed because other donors agreed. Of course, I was not against more political openness and democracy in Malawi, but I was in favor of a slower pace and smaller steps than what the donor community demanded. I also did not want to be party to a development dialogue which would eventually bring much suffering to the Malawian people.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Widespread hunger and starvation were the consequence of a reduced aid flow to Malawi, which faced the worst drought since independence in 1991 and 1992.

Late in 1989 I asked for my transfer back to New York, and applied for the post of deputy director in our department of information systems. I wanted to learn more about a technology, which in my view held a lot of promise for future development cooperation. I had struggled in vain to get an e-mail connection going in our office in Lilongwe. I felt that changes were at play outside Africa, which were leaving the continent out, and if I remained I would lose out, too. Besides, the challenges facing African societies were of a very different nature, and I felt helpless and somewhat dejected in working on those. Malawi seemed to be in a time warp. While there were many aspects I liked enormously about this country and its people, they were not enough to keep me there.

When I was offered the post I had applied for, I accepted without hesitation. In strict career terms it was a risk I took, but it was worth taking for my own physical and psychological well-being. It began to depress me that development in Malawi and many other African countries was heading in a direction, which was not of their choosing. It was even more depressing to realize that it would take a Herculean effort to rectify the situation. The world was moving on at the beginning of the 1990s, and Africa was being torn apart by old, unresolved and new challenges. All was overshadowed by the AIDS epidemic, which in Malawi was decimating the well-educated few at an alarming pace,<sup>15</sup> but there were the rising economic powers of Asia, there was Eastern Europe and the countries of the former Soviet Union which attracted most of the global attention. What was left for Africa was often civil war and economic failures.

Towards the end of my time in Malawi, I became more outspoken and in a meeting of senior government officials I berated them for not doing enough to get the country out of its economic and social fragile state. The only reactions to my outburst were thank you for caring so deeply for the country and its people.

### ***Moving on***

I left Malawi shortly before Christmas. When I called on the President to bid him farewell, he was gracious in his acknowledgments of my work. He gave me a book about Malawi with a handwritten dedication “in appreciation for the great strides you have made in the UNDP programs in Malawi. We enjoyed very much having you here and we are now sorry to see you go.” I am sure other heads of mission received their fair share of compliments when they left. But his simple words

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<sup>15</sup> A few years later during a UNDP meeting I was joining at dinner the table of African colleagues, who were bemoaning the fact that donors and other partners of Africa were pulling the continent into too many directions. The only thing they wanted was time to think and work it out among them. Years later, matters had even gotten worse. When the world finally woke up to the devastating impact which AIDS had on Africa, political leaders kept donor funded assistance separate from their own programs. They quite understandably were mistrustful of donor funding which came and went not according to need, but according to policy and other considerations of parties outside Africa.

touched me nevertheless. I also sensed that he was feeling the pressure and maybe, for the first time in his life, he was aware that this time he would not succeed.<sup>16</sup>

Other farewell dinners and lunches were similarly bittersweet. The “First Lady” Mama Kadzamira handed me a letter before I met the President for my farewell visit in Blantyre in early December. In her note she said “After a term in Malawi which has shown us new and beneficial activities, we, all your friends are sorry to see you go.” I was particularly moved that she considered me a friend whose “creativity and selflessness have been a great inspiration”. The First Lady had once already hosted a tea party in my honor, to which I almost did not go, because I thought I had more important things to attend to. This time she asked her sister, Esnat Kalyati, who was the permanent Secretary for Community Services, to host a ladies lunch for me. We were approximately 12, and many of the Malawian ladies I met for the first time. They were doctors, lawyers, senior government officials. In amazement I asked them “Where have you been hiding in these years that I have been here?”

It was another example that Malawi was doing well in so many ways, but was not disclosing it to the outside world. A few years later I met Esnat in New York. After the election she no longer was a member of the national government. By then she was working in the UNDP office in Lilongwe. Again, I asked her why Malawi was so timid in showing its achievements. She thought for a moment and then said with a twinkle in her eyes. “Why are you asking me this? You know as well as I do, that Malawians are content with what they have and do. They don’t have to brag about it.” What a response in a time and age of showmanship and an all pervasive commercial PR culture.

I returned a few times to African countries on duty travels after left Malawi, but I never really returned. Therefore I keep a fond memory of my three and half years in this beautiful country among people who were warm, hardworking, and too humble for their own good.

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<sup>16</sup> He did not. In 1992, he was voted out of office in an election which was open to several parties. My successor had provided UNDP assistance to ensure that the elections were organized in a fair and transparent manner, which they were.



A specially commissioned carving from local artists, which was given to the President of the Republic on the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of UN-China cooperation

*Berlin/Germany October 2013*