

SWET puts weight behind saving forest

Can we save our forests? Our forests are disappearing. Everyone can see it, everyone talks about it, but can we do anything about it?

This question is addressed in a third radio debate produced by the Story Workshop with funding from the European Food Security Programme. Statistics show that Malawi has the highest deforestation rate in Sub-Saharan Africa, says the Story Workshop.

Although government and the donor community have responded to the deforestation problem with policy reforms and participation in a number of international agreements and conventions, and although government spends MK130 million and the donor community approximately MK240 million a year on forestry projects, one merely has to take a look around to see that something is not working.

Marvin Story Workshop managing director says "This debate brings together key stakeholders from ministries, civil society, the private sector and local farmers with the hope that through constructive dialogue, we can solve the deforestation problem in Malawi."

"The monthly radio debates are an extension of issues raised in our popular soap opera Zimachitika and in our weekly farmer-to-farmer radio magazine show, Mwana Alirenji. These programs are also supported by the European Commission and tackle the issues with different media formats."

Redge Masupayi, Story Workshop coordinator for these debates, says that although the demand for firewood is an issue that must be addressed through appropriate technologies, both poverty and the poor relationship between forestry

officials and local communities also contribute to the rapid deforestation Malawi is experiencing.

Although a co-management system of forest conservation has been introduced, there are still restrictions placed on the 'users' or the local communities.

"It was like the officials were policing and punishing in whatever way they wanted. Now there is a shift in policy and they want to involve the local communities in management but they don't explicitly deal with the use of the forestry resources," says Masupayi.

Co-management of forest resources represents a policy shift from the old custodial management through policing policy to a participatory management method. While this shift has exciting potential for the future of forest conservation, it is also rife with potential conflict and mistrust.

Story Workshop says that government and the general public have good reason to worry about deforestation. The sustainable use of natural resources is associated with attaining food security, meeting energy needs, poverty alleviation and protection of the environment, which form the basis of any meaningful and sustainable development of the country.

Elube Kunsomati, one of the panelists from Mpemba in T/A Nsomba in Blantyre describes the problem from a villagers point of view: "Environmental problems hit women and girls hardest. Firewood scarcity as a result of deforestation is increasing every day. In our village, women have to walk long distances in search of firewood."

Most Malawians have no alternative to firewood and charcoal for their cooking and heating needs. So the market is there for anyone who wants to supply it, and this is the main cause of deforestation. Because of poverty and a lack of capital, there is no better income source than firewood or charcoal.

"It requires no original investment to start a business selling firewood, all income is profit and the demand is great. Even the most environmentally conscious vendors are tempted by this quick way to get money as there are few opportunities for generating income in most rural communities," says the Story Workshop.

By providing policy makers and local communities with a forum for discussion, the Story Workshop hopes to encourage a compromise that will provide local communities with an incentive for managing and conserving their local environment.

The radio debate on Saturday October 28 will include Daulosi Mauambeta, executive director of the Wildlife Society of Malawi, Foster Solijala, deputy regional forestry officer (South), Wiseman Kajiwazi and Daudi Bauleni, Escom's marketing and environmental officers respectively. Other participants are Maxwell Bauleni, Clement Mandanda and Elube Kunsomati, local farmers all affiliated to Blantyre City Project and Redge Masupayi, rural development programme officer for the Story Workshop.

Chris Nditani, Story Workshop's communications manager says, "If you care about your environment and would like to know some of the reasons why Malawi is

failing to curb deforestation, then tune into MBC Radio One on Saturday 28th October from 11 am to noon."

NGOs unite to fight deforestation

Dry pools of sand where blue waters once roared, stunted maize stalks where maize once grew without manure and silted reservoirs, probably describe Malawi, the warm heart of Africa, well.

Once a land of green bushes harbouring chirping birds pecking on masao fruit, Malawi now enjoys less pride in its environmental friendliness. Its wildlife is under threat from man's habits that have wiped the land of trees and sent those that depend on it into disarray.

Siltation in Lake Malawi due to soil erosion remains a great worry, drying of rivers due to cultivation of river banks is a great concern and unproductive soils due to poor environmental management a headache.

But is there anything that can be done to bring back the lost glory of timely rains and seasonal plenty?

Just as was the case with human rights organisations that mushroomed in the country soon after democracy, so have environmental NGOs after realising human rights can only be sustained where the environment is conducive to healthy occupation.

Organisations such as the Lake Chilwa Wetland Project, Coordination Unit for Rehabilitation of the Environment (CURE) and now the Story Workshop, just to mention a few have started a vigorous fight against environmental degradation.

Unlike in the past when communities were told what to do with forests in their areas, the NGOs have come up with a strategy they think will bring back the lost glory, making people take on their environment.

What is remaining is to see whether such a new approach will pay off at the end of the day.

The government and the donor community have

responded to the deforestation problem with policy reforms and participation in a number of international agreements and conventions, spent MK130 million and the donor community approximately MK240 million on the environment, yet victory remains doubtful.

That is probably the reason the NGOs have decided not to commit all their resources to human rights issues, but also to the environment which directly affects the lives of the people.

Story Workshop - a local NGO with a mission to advocate for policy changes that support food security, environmental and rural development - believes the new approach is the only way out.

That is why it has embarked on radio debates involving local farmers, decision makers and other local NGOs.

The idea is to engage them in dialogue so that they can discuss problems facing natural resources and find a way forward.

For a long time Malawians have been keeping their ideas quiet, for fear of being labelled trouble makers. Such an attitude has contributed negatively because imposed rules have always resulted in failure.

"The issue of participatory development is very important. Everyone has to be involved if we are to make headway," says Story Workshop Rural Development Programme Officer, Redge Masupayi.

His observation is that there is no other way the natural resources can be well conserved if rural communities are sidelined.

"Time for imposing rules on people is gone. This is the time to involve all stakeholders in natural

resources conservation. The radio debates provide a medium for rural people to speak out about their natural resources and how they think they can be productively used," says Masupayi.

As an advocacy organisation, the Story Workshop is currently campaigning for food security which is being threatened by land degradation.

His observation is that the land has become unproductive because of soil erosion that results from wanton cutting down of trees.

On average Malawi is losing 50,000 hectares of forest land to agriculture every year with only 7,000 being replaced. Many more trees are being lost through charcoal and firewood consumption.

The government including the civil society has long recognised the problem and a number of steps have been taken to directly or indirectly address deforestation problems.

However, deforestation continues and Malawi tops the list of countries with the highest deforestation rates, with the disturbing figure of 2.8 per annum in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Research has shown that initiatives fail because rural communities who are directly affected by the forests are not involved in such exercises.

"That is why we are mobilising the people to make a say and pave the way for solutions," says Masupayi whose idea is backed by the Lake Chilwa Wetland Project community liaison officer Hastings Maloya.

The project organises local communities in the Lake Chilwa basin into groups that can appreciate their

environmental woes and think of ways of fighting them through discussions.

"Let the people recognise natural resources as their own, let them under your guidance, find solutions and help them implement them. That way the battle will be won," says Maloya.

During a recent radio debate, farmers from Somba village in Blantyre challenged forestry officials and NGOs to first provide them with alternative income generating activities before stopping them selling charcoal and provide people with an affordable energy alternative.