

“A sleeping beauty”

By Mphatso Chapotera

Dust blows around the vehicle while driving on the bumpy, winding roads over Machinga, Phalombe and Zomba rural areas along the way to famous Lake Chilwa. Fishers are busy fishing, farmers cultivating the fields and herding cattle through the dry soil and ash-grey trees. The green elements of the landscape diminish and the availability of water decreases, people are waiting for a miracle while whispering and complaining in their hearts. The Lake is no longer a popular bank for water, fish, birds, other fauna and flora. Under the effect of global warming, the summer is slowly getting warmer and warmer. Day and night the wind is hot and more people sit outside their homes, pubs and cafes cooling themselves. The balance of nature has been disrupted and it seems to have become a doctrine that those who care most about nature are the ones who become the most vulnerable in the modern world.



The photo shows an example of low water level in Lake Chilwa at Mapila Beach, Mposa in Machinga District, fishermen without fish pulling the dugout canoe along the channel to the shores. The low water level means that fishing is poor at the moment. The cyclic behaviour of the water levels is one of the most dramatic effects of climate variability. The lake dried completely in 1967/68 and most recently in 1995/6. The effects of this on the livelihoods are huge-some are positive (new spaces for agriculture) and some are negative (including loss of fishing grounds and biodiversity).

Master Simika commands respect as he enters Mapila landing beach site. Covered in a coloured shirt, black pair of trousers and a white head gear he looks like many other men who have gathered

at the beach. But this trained gauge reader who has spent the past 12 months working with Lake Chilwa Basin Climate Change Adaptation Programme is different.

“Water is life”

Master Simika remembers when Mapila was a large trading beach and the water was deep enough for sailing. “When i was young, it was beautiful and there was plenty of water and fish to eat” he says as he walks along a dry channel-one of the dried up branches of the lake. Water is life, but now that there is not enough, people are suffering,” he adds. “People rely on fishing, yet there is not enough water for the fish to live and multiply, so fishermen no longer catch the fish around this place, they have moved to deeper waters at Njalo and Thongwe.”

Climate Change

Master Simika believes the situation is directly linked to climate change and human activities. “Yes there is a problem with climate change but some of the problems have been caused by us,” he says. “It is clear that nowadays the temperatures have increased and we do not know the exact time when to plant with the first good rains. Each year, more and more of the lake is disappearing due to siltation.” Yet everyone is waiting for the solutions to come from outside. Master Simika also heads up a small local group called Lake Chilwa Child Foundation. It has 30 young members who promote children rights. In addition to this, the group plant trees in the villages and have a small nursery where they grow indigenous seedlings.

“We believe that as a young generation we are responsible for retaining enough water in the lake throughout the year by planting many trees. We have a lot to do to make sure that fish processors who smoke the fish understand the importance of the trees and protect them,” says Master Simika.

All in all, what is important is not what has gone but what is remaining. We all have the power to change and restore the Lake Chilwa basin, so what are we waiting for!!!