

## Reflections from a trip to Malawi

I visited Malawi in November. I wanted to help somehow. Call it a mid-life crisis if you like. I had reached 50 in June, many years past the average lifespan of a Malawian. For some time I had been asking myself 'what is life all about and had I really achieved anything of significance in my half-a-century to date?

I called myself a Christian but with Muslim and Hindu friends I felt uneasy with the whole concept of formal religions and the many doctrines associated within them. They just didn't make sense, especially considering the discrimination and conflict caused. Surely we'd be better off without them? I thought Christianity was simply about unconditional love, and how you practised that in life? Three years ago I attended a talk on HIV/AIDS. There's no discrimination with this disease, except for the poor who can't afford the anti-retroviral drugs to give their life quality. I became aware of the orphaned children and the extended African families who looked after them. Was there not a message here?

I arrived in Malawi not really sure what I was going to do. Maybe it was folly being there at all, nothing more than a romantic notion. What sort of possible impact could an individual make? My MP, Anne McGuire, had suggested a potential source of support, the Scottish International Development Fund. Malawi was a priority area and water a priority theme. Mulanje in Southern Malawi was also an area of interest since my community had recently developed a link there with one called Likhubula.



Some months before I had read a true story about an Antipodean bankrobber who escapes to India, is robbed himself and finishes up living in the slums of Bombay tending to the sick. During that time he meets up with an Afghan who shares his understanding of the meaning of life. He believed that in the beginning there was an intense point of light. At the 'Big Bang' this light exploded outwards, creating space, time, matter and consciousness as it did so. Everything began in unity, and even as the universe expanded all things remained connected from that time of birth. For me this was very significant, if true. It meant individual thoughts and deeds not only affected each other but also impacted on the universe as it continued to create. My actions were of universal consequence, both positive and negative.

The harvest had been very poor in Malawi in 2005. Insubstantial rains had severely affected maize, the staple diet. The World Bank was already preparing for emergency relief. In Blantyre I had expected queues of people at feeding stations. The UN had estimated more than 1 in 3 severely malnourished. Instead the city bustled with all the life you would expect of an African town. The supermarkets were full of food and drink – there was plenty if you could afford it. The real poverty lay unseen by the casual observer, hidden away in the rural depths of this



agricultural dependent economy.

What was noticeable were whole mountainsides stripped bare of wood. Wood supports many of the local industries like tobacco curing and brick making. Even in the cities it is used in stoves to cook food. Unfortunately deforestation is a real problem. It is thought to contribute to local climate change. It definitely affects water and electricity supply through pipes silting up.

A trip over the Mulanje massif had been arranged in advance. An ascent up the northern side, an overnight stay in a mountain lodge, and a descent into the tea plantations in the south.



The massif is a 650 square kilometre upland area peaking at 3000m above sea level, one of the highest points in Southern Africa. A 1000m high escarpment surrounds the massif. Walking is the only access. The landmass is sufficiently high to interrupt prevailing trade winds, resulting in over 2m of rain a year. The water flows over the sides in torrents, causing flooding on the plains during heavy rainfall. This abundance of water supports an exciting diversity of plants and animals on the escarpment sides - multi-coloured lizards, orchids, exotic

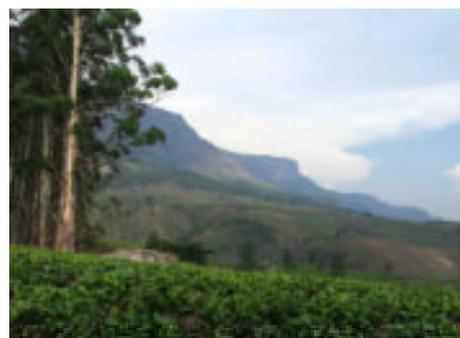
birds and butterflies, monkeys, an infinite variety of trees and bushes. It also supports a series of gravity fed pipe networks designed by a Scot, the Rev. Lindsay Robertson, now retired and living in Oban. These networks extend up to 60 km from the base, supplying 1 million people with water. Unfortunately during low water flows the sediment increases, blocking the pipes in the process. OXFAM and ActionAID are amongst those currently trying to rehabilitate them.



Reaching the top the lush surroundings were replaced by open moorland. Significantly, there were no reservoirs. Why? Could not water

containment sustain flow to these gravity networks? A few days later I met representatives from Blantyre Water Board. They are responsible for supplying 1 million people in Blantyre City. The reservoir outside the office was not in use. The feeder pipes were clogged up with sediment, caused by deforestation on the surrounding hills. The Shire river, the only outlet from Lake Malawi, and the only source of water for people in Blantyre at this point, 800m below that of Blantyre and many kilometres away, was becoming too expensive to use. There was possibly only 2 months of supply left. Yet the massif was higher than Blantyre. Reservoirs up here could be used as a base of water supply for Blantyre using simple pressure difference.

During the next 2 weeks I visited many government organisations and NGO's discussing the feasibility of reservoirs on the massif, trying to understand why there were none. After all, there were many examples around the world where dams had been built in almost



inaccessible locations. It soon became clear. Their engineers didn't have the right 'tools' to properly assess the feasibility. If they had modern large-scale maps, engineering design softwares, and geospatial information like geology, topography and gravity-fed feeder intake points they could begin. This was all something I could do!

Last month I submitted a proposal to the Scottish Executive. If approved, it will allow a feasibility study to proceed that could lead to 2 million people having access to a clean sustainable water supply. So, maybe it is possible for an individual to make a significant difference after all. I really hope so. Now isn't that a positive thought?

Paul Shaw