

Appreciating the good life: a Malawian working class perspective

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Development is generally understood to mean elevation of the entire society towards living a better and more humane life. Being wealthy is not just about being able to access one's basic needs in daily life such as housing, food, clothes, water and others but it is also about the quality and quantity of these things being in tandem with the latest modern world trends. To most African countries, the West is usually considered as the yardstick/measure of good life. By saying this, I am trying to argue that both the poor and the rich eat but the quantities and the quality of the food they consume is in many ways very different. The same can be said of the other basic human needs mentioned above such as clothes and housing. This essay will attempt to express the common ways of appreciating the good life among the working class in Malawi most especially among the teaching fraternity.

Firstly, according to me, to be considered wealthy, one ought to be highly educated. Highly educated people in Malawi today are the ones who are doing well in life. They are the envy of everyone in the country. Previously, it used to be tobacco farmers and business people but education has taken over due to the fact that tobacco is no longer fetching good prices at the market. Once someone is well educated, the fruits of his/her labour will be enjoyed for life while the future of business people and farmers is never guaranteed. Even in rural areas nowadays, Malawians have learnt that the biggest gift that a parent can give to his child is education. That is why school enrolment has gone up. Even those who are working, many are busy upgrading themselves in education in order to rise.

In my opinion, to be rich is to have a decent house. In towns, people who are admired are those who live in good houses with iron sheets, baked bricks, tiles on the floor, running water and electricity. In the Malawi context, a standard house should have at least three bed rooms, a lounge, a dining room, a kitchen, a garage, a courtyard and a family garden with a brick fence all round for security reasons. If such a house is built in either medium or low-density areas of the city, then it's even better. This is where most Malawians dream of living.

Thirdly, in Malawi, there is a general perception that to live a good life is to have food of good quality and quantity. No one is rich without food. Hunger and famine makes one a slave and a beggar. To have food, therefore, is to be the master of one's life. He who shares food with someone is sharing life. Therefore to have food is to have life. This is one of the best ways of defining wealth.

Lastly, in Malawi to be rich is to have a nice car. A car is still up to now a valuable asset. Once someone has bought a car, he/she is considered rich. So, a car is a measure of whether one is doing well in life or not. It is not surprising, therefore, that many Malawians are trying their best to purchase and drive a nice car to get to work, to go church or better still drive to the lake for leisure once in a while with one's family

LOCAL CHALLENGES FOR AN ECOLOGICALLY SOUND AND GLOBALLY JUST WORLD

Malawi is facing a number of ecological challenges, which have emanated mainly from misunderstanding *democracy*. Before 1994 when Malawi adopted multiparty politics, the country was very good at conserving its natural resources. Forest reserves were highly feared and no one could think of going there to cut down trees without permission. Poaching of wild animals in protected areas was unthinkable in the one party era. There was a common thinking among all Malawians, then, that everything belonged to *Kamuzu* (the father and founder of the nation who was a dictator who ruled Malawi from 1964–1994). To this effect, there was a famous song on Malawi Broadcasting Corporation (the national broadcaster): *Zonse zimene nza Kamuzu Banda—Everything in the country belongs to the State President*.

May 1994 changed the life of Malawians, not only politically but also socially, religiously, economically and otherwise. Malawians who were once known for respect towards nature became its very destructors, wantonly cutting down trees, poaching wild animals, dumping waste anywhere. All acts of vandalism of public institutional infrastructure and natural resources were perceived as being within one's right.

One phenomenon that is being witnessed all over the country in Malawi is rapid urbanization of the three cities: Blantyre, Lilongwe and Mzuzu. This is bringing with it a lot of environmental challenges as well. For instance, Blantyre has always depended on the nearby districts for its energy for cooking i.e. charcoal and firewood. Less than 8% of Malawians have access to electricity in their homes and worse still even those who are connected, prefer to use firewood and charcoal for cooking because electricity is very expensive. As a result, when travelling by road into the country, one can clearly see vast areas of bare lands in the outskirts of the three cities and the surrounding districts. One wonders what it will be like in the coming twenty years if nothing is done about it. This is one of the biggest challenges regarding conservation of trees in the surrounding districts of the cities.

The cutting down of trees carelessly without replanting others has led to loss of soil fertility. Consequently, in order to have a good yield, one has to apply artificial fertilizers. Food production over the past years has drastically dropped in the rural areas, which are the breadbaskets of the country, because the cost of fertilizers is high. Unless farmers are given farm input subsidies, they can't manage to grow enough food to feed themselves, let alone for sale.

In January 2015, Malawi had floods, which killed 276 people and destroyed over 4000 houses in the Southern part of the country. This natural disaster was attributed to the ecological damage that Malawians have exerted on their environment. For instance, all those residents of Blantyre who were swept away by the floods had their houses constructed on wetlands of rivers, which is against the city by-laws. Of course other factors such as climate change have contributed as well to the occurrence of the floods but failure to implement good environmental practices has worsened the situation. While Malawi and Mozambique were among those seriously

affected by floods this year; they are not among the heaviest industrial polluters of the atmosphere. They are simply victims of circumstances.

Another ecological challenge that Malawi is facing is pollution of land, water and air due to improper disposal of waste from homes and industries. Most of our people don't know how to dispose of waste properly; as a result, cities and schools are heavily littered with plastic, paper, empty juice bottles and wrappers of sweets as well as biscuits. Our cities look untidy due to this bad behavior. Blantyre city hires hundreds of casual laborers to sweep the city streets every day but even as they are cleaning, other city dwellers can be seen throwing more garbage and littering street corners. It is a very deplorable situation.

Another challenge of great concern to Malawians is the killing of elephants and illegal exportation of hardwood timber to the East. Of late, some unscrupulous Chinese nationals have been caught red handed by immigration officials, illegally exporting ivory and hardwood timber. Before 2000, Malawi had over 2500 elephants and today the estimate is that only 450 remain due to poaching for their tusks. It is a battle, which Malawians are slowly losing due to the economic power of the people who are involved in the trade. Despite a government ban on exporting of hardwood, hardly a month passes without someone being arrested with a truckload of hardwood. The biggest worry is that if one or two individuals are caught doing this, how many more manage to do it without being caught?

LOCAL INTERVENTIONS TO COUNTER ECOLOGICAL CHALLENGES

Through the *Aware and Fair* school project, members under my guidance agreed to start raising awareness among students to learn to dispose waste in bins and rubbish pits. Now, the plan is to replicate the same project in other schools so that we could be living in a cleaner and more hygienic environment.

The newly elected Mayor of Blantyre City has also assumed to take to task companies that are responsible for polluting rivers that pass in Blantyre's industrial sites. On the other hand, the First Lady of the Republic also has a trust called BEAUTIFY MALAWI. Its major objective is to encourage cleanliness in homes and cities. Gradually, Malawi is getting better due to these initiatives.

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You can view his complete profile and the organisation he is associated with at: http://www.learn2change-network.org/?About_Us__Our_Network__Activists#anker_lozu