Forests and Woodlands

Executive Summary

Forests and woodlands have since time immemorial been central to livelihood and wellbeing of all living and non-living creatures on earth. The forest sector in Malawi plays an important role in the livelihoods of many communities and in their economic development and that of the country. They provide energy, food, timber and non-timber forest products (NTFPs) and are important contributors to wealth and health at the household, community and national levels. Forests and woodlands are also key components of the environment and provide essential services that are critical to combating land degradation and climate change, as well as to conserving wetlands, coastal areas and freshwater systems.

However, forests and woodlands are degrading at an alarming rate in Malawi. The Policy Brief highlights basic facts about forests in Malawi as well as the initiatives that are being implemented for sustainable management of forests. It also gives recommendations and what more can be done to ensure our forests are managed sustainably.

Introduction

Forests and woodlands provide social, economic and environmental benefits to all Malawians. They support livelihoods through the provision of shelter (materials for house construction, and furniture), energy (fuel wood and electricity distribution poles), shade and health (medicinal plants and food). Forests and trees also contribute to rural incomes through collection and sale of various forest products including non timber forest products (figure 1) such as mushrooms and honey and recycled materials e.g. post cards and folders (figure 2). Forests contribute to the economy of the country through timber exports and the provision of jobs in forestry. For example, forestry resources can contribute up to 4.4% of the GDP (GoM, 2010) if sustainably managed. They are also important in the provision of ecosystem services such as nutrient cycling, soil formation, catchment conservation for water bodies, and offer habitat...
How are Malawian Forests Classified?

Malawian forests are either classified based on land tenure or by type. When defined by type, forests are grouped into natural/indigenous or plantation forests. When classified by land tenure, Malawian forests are classified as public, customary or private (GoM, 2002).

Public forests include forest reserves, national parks and wildlife reserves. In 1998, Malawi had a total of 94 protected areas, comprising 85 forest reserves, 5 national parks and 4 wildlife reserves occupying a total of 1,869,974 ha. Data from the Department of Forestry shows that the number of forest reserves has now increased to 88, for a total of 97 protected areas that occupy about 2,018,198 ha. This means that land under protected areas has increased by 148,224 ha (8%). In addition, there are over 240,000 ha of unallocated land that is being considered for formal protection. National Parks and Wildlife reserves comprise an estimated 1.1 million hectares; 11.7% of Malawi’s total land area. However, not all Parks are forested; some, such as Nyika and Kasungu, are partly grasslands.

Customary forests are those located on unallocated common access land, and Village Forest Areas (VFAs) under the jurisdiction of Traditional Authorities (TAs). They cover about 1.1 million hectares, 11.7% of total land area.

Natural forests are the major vegetation cover of Malawi. Malawi’s vegetation is dominated by miombo (Brachystegia) woodlands, which are found in most of the forest reserves and on customary land. According to FAO Statistics, forests (comprising indigenous forests and plantations) are estimated to occupy about 3,336,000 ha, representing about 36% of Malawi’s land area. This is an increase from 1991 as estimated by the Forest Resources Mapping and Biomass Assessment (1993) which estimated 2,638,010 ha to be under forest cover (or 27% of Malawi’s land area). Most vegetation types are found in National Parks, Wildlife Reserves, Forest Reserves, on protected hill slopes, and on customary land.

Plantation Forests, mostly plantations owned by the Government cover 90,000 ha while, private plantations cultivate 275,000 ha (FAO, 2010). The largest Government plantation is Viphya, which covers 53,000. Other notable plantations include those in Chongoni in Dedza, Zomba and Mulanje. The Viphya plantations were established for pulp production, but are now used for timber production after the establishment of a paper factory proved unfeasible. Timber plantations are mostly planted with pine. Eucalyptus plantations, which were established to meet the growing demand for fuel-wood and poles, are also common. Almost all Government plantations have been established in forest reserves.

What are the State and Trends of Forests in Malawi?

Malawi Forests and woodlands are estimated to cover 3,237,000 ha, about 34% of the total land area of Malawi (FAO, 2010). Nationally, the total forest cover is estimated to be declining at the rate of 1.0 to 2.8% annually due to deforestation for fuel-wood, settlement and agricultural expansion. The Forest Resource Mapping and Biomass Assessment of 1991 showed that in 1973, Brachystegia forests occupied 45% of total land area of Malawi (excluding Lake Malawi), while in 1990/91 land under forest cover was estimated to be 25.3%. This indicates that land under Brachystegia forest declined by 44% in less than twenty years. In flat areas, the level of decline in coverage is far higher, nearly 62%, as a result of agricultural expansion. One of the contributing factors to the dwindling forest cover is deforestation, which is largely due to charcoal burning. In coverage is far higher, nearly 62%, as a result of agricultural expansion. One of the contributing factors to the dwindling forest cover is deforestation, which is largely due to charcoal burning.

What are the major threats of Forestry Resources?

The main challenge facing Malawi’s woodlands is the increasing rate of deforestation due to human activities such as agricultural expansion; human settlement; unsustainable harvesting for energy and timber requirements; and uncontrolled fires. The damage caused by these activities is exacerbated by emerging issues such as climate change and invasive alien species.

Although charcoal is dubbed lucrative business by the players, the trade has proved not worthwhile because it does not significantly contribute to the country’s GDP since there is no tax accrued from it. The other challenge on charcoal production is its unsustainable mode of production and processing. For example, 10 tons of fuel wood produce 1 ton of charcoal. Compounding this problem is the use of indigenous tree species, which are mostly slow growing. This implies that wanton cutting down of indigenous tree species significantly contributes to deforestation. Indigenous trees are also known to have substantial biological variability compared to exotic species. This poses a threat to loss of genetic material (biodiversity).

Uncontrolled - fires have been a common occurrence in most forest reserves and plantations. Zomba and Dedza Forest Reserves and the Viphya plantation have experienced frequent fire outbreaks which have cost Government a lot of resources and caused general loss of biodiversity.

What are the Policy Lessons and Recommendations?

There are many opportunities for sustainable forest management. The following strategies are currently being used in order to control deforestation and promote sustainable management of forests and woodlands;