

## Building Community Resilience with SLM : A Case for Malawi

By Charles Kamwendo  
District Forestry Officer, Chikwawa District  
Email: ckamwendo@gmail.com

Henry Sibanda PhD  
UNDP, P.O.Box 30135, Lilongwe, Malawi  
Email: henry.sibanda@undp.org

### Abstract

It all started in 24<sup>th</sup> April 2012 when In Balaka the Mawelanyangu hills were burnt and women were already digging for water in the sand bed of the Mkandabwako stream a tributary of the Nkasi river which is a tributary of the Shire River. This dire situation prompted action. The GVH Silika Communities were mobilized and the situation explained to them and that the answer lay with them since they owned the land. This led to the revival of the VDC subcommittees when the village decided to take responsibility for their area, as well as the VNRMC to lead the formation of a bushfire control committee under the VNRMC and an action plan drawn-up with the assistance of the DFO and DLRCO. The plan spelt out how they would manage the land and its resources. Of the almost 3000ha only about 10ha was burnt by the end of that dry season and as the rains set in there was little runoff due to the grass cover and the trees and coppices. The encouraged villagers went on to cut a firebreak round the boundaries of the GVH's land resources and with advice further they cut other internal firebreaks dividing the land into 7 sections. During the 2013/14 the Nkasi river was flowing up to mid-Sept as opposed to the April scenario. The 2014 dry season saw the river flow up to October and the ensuing storms that led to floods made no dent in this landscape as the well grassed well treed landscape absorbed all the rain water and minimized runoff, which was contrary to the neighbouring communities which sustained massive damages to their croplands and homesteads. This land management has given this community resilience to floods to crop failures and food security. The GVHs of Muotcha, and Simbota that followed the footsteps of the Silika GVH sustained some damages but not like the other none participating GVHs, damage was proportionate to the level of improvement they had achieved in two seasons. This pathway had its own challenges like the desponded charcoal burners who wanted to continue their trade. This process was just as good as the village leadership and his/her community. We are telling the masses how to be resilient, hence on 28<sup>th</sup> February an article was put on The Nation and the Standard and we will not stop telling the success story.

### Introduction

This Case Study of Building Community Resilience with the Sustainable Land Management (SLM) Project, is based on a Case of the Mawelanyangu hills in Group Village Headman (GVH) Silika in Balaka District. It attempts to do the following: Tell a Step by Step Approach that was used for this success story; Elaborate the challenges encountered; Tell the Success Story that has seen the building up of the resilience of this community against floods in 2014/15 rainfall season. Having reached this juncture "Where do we go from here, do we tell the story to the masses or do we keep it to ourselves", we chose to tell it to everybody hence they might change their behavior and follow suite.

### Background

The UNDP/GEF funded Sustainable Land Management (SLM) project started in August 2011 in the four selected districts in the middle Shire basin of Balaka, Blantyre, Neno and Mwanza. The project focusses on the rehabilitation of the Shire River basin and its tributaries, and in Balaka it started from the upper catchment areas of Mpale, Nkasi, Mwayi and Nkonde rivers. Balaka district borders the Ntcheu, Mangochi, Machinga, Neno and Zomba districts, with a total area of 2193square km or 2.4% of the country. Balaka has 3 types of landscapes ie the plateau at around 800metres above sea level (asl), the floodplain of the Shire around 400m asl and the escarpment in between the two major landscapes. Although the district has an average of 900mm of rainfall most of it coming between December and March there is a lot of variability especially between the plateau and the floodplains of the Shire. Administratively it is divided into 5 Traditional Authorities (TAs) namely Kalembo, Nsamala, Amidu, Nkaya, Chanthunya.

### SLM Project Implementation:

At the onset of the project, at the district level the project concentrated on the provision of knowledge and skills to the managers through the capacity building for the officers and extension workers and then lead farmers subsequently. At the rolling out of the project communities were mobilized and briefed and allowed to identify

degradation hotspots where the project could intervene. Initially the trainings were focused at the following subject areas Soil and Water Conservation, gully reclamation, tree planting and conservation agriculture. The project also learned from the establishment of Village Forest Areas (VFAs) and Forest Management Plans which had by-laws from the European Union funded Improved Forest Management and Sustainable Livelihoods (IFMPSL) as well as the JICA funded Community Vitalization and Afforestation in the Middle Shire (COVAMS) which had developed a number of training manuals on soil and water conservation, gully reclamation, ridge alignment. The approach that was being followed produced a lot of disjointed interventions like a hectare of trees planted in one hotspot, a few trees planted along the Mwayi, Nkasi and Nkonde rivers, a three 3 ha woodlot on the fringes of the Mpale river and a couple of farmers dotted all over the landscape practicing conservation Agriculture. This apparent success spots did not produce any impact on the Shire River basin as was the intentions of the project.

### **The Case for Maweleanyangi Hills**

These hills which derive their name from their appearance look like the breast of a woman are named after the legendary story that they were the hiding place of Nyangu ie John Chilembwe's mother during the Chilembwe Uprising in 1915. These hills constitute an area of 81.3ha and are the source of the Mkandabwako stream which flows into the Mwaye river that flows into the Nkasi, one of the main rivers draining the Balaka plateau and escarpment and eventually going into the Shire River.

On April 24, 2012 the PMU for SLM were on a monitoring visit to the district, and on reaching this area they found the Maweleanyangi hills smoldering after a bushfire had gone through them the previous day. A discussion then ensued between the PMU the forestry officer, the land resources officer and the Group village headman about the bushfires and their impact because some 400 – 500metres below these burnt hills was a group of women digging for water in the sand of the Mkandabwako stream

This stream was already dry by 24<sup>th</sup> April. The questions from the PMU team were that if the women were already digging about 0.5m in the sand to get drinking water in April where would they be getting water from by the end of the dry season in October or early November. The PMU team then related to the GVH the relationship between the burnt hills and the deforestation on the hills and the dry streams just at the end of the dry season. It was agreed in conclusion that the forestry officer and land resources and conservation officer should convene meetings in the GVH area. This was done and they discussed with the rest of the community that important relationship described above. Fortunately a few rain showers fell before the end of that season helping the grasses and coppices to grow that season even after that early burn. By the end of the dry season that year the place looked different because it had some grass and coppices of about 50cm in height. The community then started expanding this approach to the rest of their area ie GVH Silika.



**April 24,2012 a burnt out Maweleanyangi hills and silted dry Mkandabwako stream**

The boxed caption below describes the genesis of what we are today calling a best practice for the SLM project as well as the genesis of the SLM pathway. This story marked the beginning of the consolidated approach that was later adopted by the SLM project and polished up to form the Up-Scaling concept for the project.

### **The Mkandabwako-Mwaye-Nkasi Success Story**

The above story led to the following activities in the area especially the GVH Silika. That first day team PMU team just inspired the GVH, but that was just the beginning of the work. The GVH and the two officers mentioned above organized the communities through a number of meetings where they eventually worn over the entire community to agree to work with them and to run the affairs of their community and make a better future for themselves and their future generations. At that point the pathway was not clear nor well defined. Having revived the GVH management structures they then revived the Village Natural Resources Management Committee (VNRMC) to pave and lead the way in the natural resources management. The community with the guidance of the two officers then developed a Participatory Forest Management Plan (a concept borrowed from the EU funded project) for the Maweleanyangu hills and a season later the for the Chikowa hills which are the catchments for the Mkandabwako and Mwaye rivers respectively. They expanded the plan to encompass the entire land resources under the GVH Silika and established firebreaks around the area as well as established forest management blocks with bounded by firebreaks. The Figures 1,2 & 3 illustrate the state of various parts of the area before the intervention of the area.



Fig 1: Part of Maweleanyangu hill after a fire



Fig 2: Mwaye river with muddy water



Fig 3: Silted and dry part of Mwaye river

The interventions mentioned above had the following impacts, the zero bushfire regime allowed the grass cover to persist throughout the year as well as encouraged natural forest regeneration. The cropland blocks had their ridges aligned along the contour for all the farmers and swale(water catchment toughs) were constructed above the croplands. These activities had the following impacts, reduced rainfall runoff, increased water infiltration into the soil hence reduced volume of water reaching the Mkandabwako and Mwaye rivers and subsequently the Nkasi river which then seized to overflow its banks. Basically these catchments retained most

of the rain water during the rainy season and continually discharged through seepage into the rivers which then eventually kept flowing into late September each year as opposed to the starting point when they dried up by April. Further evidence was the fishponds in the area which stayed filled with water throughout the dry season and the shallows for village drinking water and gardening were recharged and useable throughout the dry season. Figures 4,5,6&7 are testimony to the improvements realized with the intervention of the project.



Fig 4: Forest regeneration on its 3<sup>rd</sup> year in the Maweleanyangu area



Fig 5: River bank of Mwaye with reeds and syzgium trees in August



Fig 6: Mwaye river flowing early September



Fig 7: Well conserved catchment above the Mwaye river with gardens

These activities were further reinforced by the tree planting and vetiver grass planting along the river banks to protect the fragile banks. Permanent crops like bananas were introduced into the river banks and naturally reeds and water plants like the *Syzgium* species started spreading the banks further reinforcing them.

It was then realized that with the 2014/15 season floods with water swelling beyond a 100year record that some amount of resilience had been achieved by these communities as the impact of the floods were minimized in these areas compared to the adjacent areas outside the project area. It has to be noted here as well that the success in this community was so evident to the surrounding communities leading to a wave of request by the neighbouring communities to be assisted to do similar activities by the project. The GVH Muwotcha, GVH Simbota, GVH Kalembo and GVH Ndenga have all joined and are now practicing the same sustainable management on their land. The first GVH Silika consisted of just about 2865ha and today (2015) protected block in this area is over 18000ha.

### Challenges Encountered

Among the challenges that the PMU and government officers and the communities encountered in this journey

to resilient communities, the following stand out.

-The constant transfer of senior government staff had significant negative impact, eg District Commissioners has been changed twice in the four years, the key architect, the District Forester has been transferred etc

-Some NGOs and Other Development partners were offering food and/or cash to communities for doing certain activities, which made it difficult when this project was only offering knowledge and skills to the communities. No stand approach or package is agreed upon.

-Duplication of similar activities in the same areas resulting in double claims by different organization for the few achievements is common, but not peculiar to this district.

-The Land Tenure and related policies and legislations sometimes are found to be contradictory or misinterpreted resulting in an uncondusive environment for SLM, as well as the absence of dedicated land-use planning policy and a bushfire control policy in the country.

-The project was confined to specific areas/districts some of which are bounded by rivers eg. the boundary between Balaka and Mangochi districts. The SLM project attended to half the Mpale river catchment on the Balaka side rendering the effort useless since the more mountainous side is in Mangochi which discharged huge volumes of runoff water resulting in damages even of same of the protected river banks.

Lessons Learnt

***“We went in to Balaka with our heads full of chuff and book knowledge, but we are emerging out of Balaka thinking and listening like development agents”***

-Governments and projects do not develop communities and their areas they can only facilitate development to take place hence time, patience and listening skills are needed. This facilitation requires a multi-sectoral approach which involves all the relevant agencies or departments. When it comes to planning its even more important, “not to plan for communities, but to facilitate their planning process”. The need to own the plan.

-Clear pathway to Sustainable Land Management emerged and was polished in the field to the extent that today we have what we have called “An Up-scaling Approach for SLM”

-The community member out there (farmer/ forester/livestock keeper) is an intelligent environmentalist who has manipulated this land and its resources and survived its rigours for centuries, he/she ought to be listened to, ie we need to tap into Indigenous Knowledge, secondly they can pick and choose what they want from ill-defined projects especially whenever they are incentives like handouts etc

- The management of the land and its natural resources can only be managed from within the society/community and never from the outside, our role as outsiders is to make the landusers/insiders appreciate what they have and own to want to conserve it better. We can only reinforce the internal management structures

WAYFORWARD FOR SLM Project

SLM might claim to have a good and plausible PATHWAY for achieving Sustainable Land Management, but is just as good as the communities that have designed it and are going to implement it, therefore each situation is different with likely different problems and different root causes to these problems. Therefore the Pathway is just a guide which should be used intelligently and adapted to each situation as it avails itself.

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