Lake Chilwa, a tropical lake without an outlet, is the second largest lake in Malawi located in the southern region of the country with its catchment comprising Phalombe, Zomba and Machinga districts. It lies on the border with Mozambique. The lake and its beautiful wetland is roughly 40 km across and 60km from north to south, giving a total of 2400 km². In normal years, one third of the lake is open water, one third is swamp and marsh, and one third is floodplains.

Lake Chilwa is one of the most productive lakes in Africa. The lake provides over 20% of all the fish caught in Malawi and economically sustains over 6000 fishers who ply their trade on its salty waters. An estimated annual income of about 800 million Malawi Kwacha (US$10 million) is realised through the fish trade from Lake Chilwa. The lake is home to a dozen fish species but only three are important in fishery.

The lake and its wetland are also a home to large populations of breeding waterfowls and an estimated 100 bird catchers are rely economically on the birds. The wetland and catchment has an estimated bird population of 350,000 stationery birds plus a very large number of migratory birds. There is an increased demand for bird meat by the local communities, which has made bird catching a worthwhile activity for many. It is estimated that about one million birds are trapped per year.

The fertile wetland also has a lot of agricultural activities with two main crops grown, maize and rice, and sustains thousands of people through rice farming and cultivation of a variety of vegetables. It is estimated that about 50% of the rice harvested in Malawi comes from the Lake Chilwa Wetland. The water from the lake is also used as a product for irrigation and domestic use. The wetland itself has a vegetation that is for economic activities like making mats, brooms, baskets, fish traps, building materials for roofs, walls and fences. The grassland also forms a basis for the existence of livestock, which also is a source of income through the sale of meat and milk.
Ramsar Site

The Lake Chilwa Wetland and its catchment is very rich in natural resources and if put to sustainable use these resources are of economic benefit not only to the people in the catchment but the entire Malawi. To this effect, Malawi in 1997 ratified an international treaty on wetlands of international importance especially as waterfowl habitat called the Ramsar Convention and listed Lake Chilwa as a wetland of international importance.

The government of Malawi therefore now taken on an obligation to ensure that the human use of resources in the wetland is done wisely, i.e. in a manner that would yield the greatest and continuous benefit to present generations while maintaining its potential to meet the needs and aspirations of future generations.

The biggest challenge facing development today is the application of people-centred strategies that emphasise active participation of the people at grassroots level. Much as people or communities will be willing to conserve and utilise natural resources, it will not be a possible exercise unless the question of ownership is critically looked into. Government and communities need to know and agree that communities are owners and custodians of natural resources and that it is their responsibility to conserve and utilise them.

Since fisheries remain the main product from Lake Chilwa, there has been the formation of a Fishing Association, which brings together eleven Traditional Authorities (TAs) and fifteen Group Village Headmen in the management of the fish resources from the lake. In the association are 52 beach village committees (BVCs). The BVCs come together in an umbrella organisation called the Lake Chilwa Fisheries Management Association, which is leading the community-based natural resources management process. In a recent development, the bird catchers are forming resource user communities similar to BVCs in order to regulate the off take of birds, which is considered far too high at the moment.

With the development objective for the utilisation of natural resources of Lake Chilwa wetland and catchment by local communities in a sustainable manner, a number of Community-Based Natural Resources Management (CBNRM) groups have been formed to manage different resources like fish, waterfowls, soil and trees.

However, despite these initiatives, user rights and legal tenure are yet to be given to those user groups. It is foreseen that the district assemblies will play a key role in this process because the Local Government Act enables districts to come up with their own by-laws. However the decentralisation process in Malawi has just started and devolution of power to districts is a slow process.

First Wetland Management Plan

The Lake Chilwa Wetland and Catchment Management Project has for the past two years helped in promoting a development approach aimed at helping communities to help themselves by conserving and sustainably utilising natural resources in the wetland through active participation. The Project helped the government of Malawi meet its obligations in the Ramsar Convention by producing the Lake Chilwa State of the Environment Report, which formed the basis for a Management Plan. By July 2001, the Lake Chilwa Wetland Management Plan is the first management plan from a wetland in Malawi.
The Project also helped the three lake districts of Machinga, Phalombe and Zomba to come up with a District State of the Environment Report (DSOER), which formed the basis of District Environmental Action Plans (DEAP), and verification of hotspots has also taken place. In collaboration with partners like government departments, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and community based organisations (CBOs), the Project in its first phase, which ends in September, encouraged the formation of Community-Based Natural Resources Management (CBNRM) groups and committees.

The Thondwe River (right)

Activities of the Lake Chilwa Wetland and Catchment Management Project were being implemented through the Ministry of Natural Resources through its Department of Environmental Affairs. District Assemblies in the three lake districts of Zomba, Phalombe and Machinga were the central focus with Environmental District Officers (EDOs) playing a major role.

In an effort to sensitise and keep reminding people of the richness of Lake Chilwa Wetland, the Project erected six large billboards in the three districts. The signposts, standing in strategic centres, remind people in the Lake Chilwa districts that they have enough resources that they can be proud of and, if sustainably utilised and well managed, the people can economically benefit from them for many years to come.

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A note from the Ramsar Bureau:
In addition to the issues raised by the author, some important challenges are worth noting and the current management plan for Lake Chilwa, which was published in September 2001, will have to address a number of significant issues if the "Wise Use" concept that has been endorsed by the Ramsar Convention is fully to be achieved. Those important issues to be addressed include some concerns such as:

Allocation and management of water for maintaining ecological functions: In this regard the Ramsar Convention is preparing specific guidelines to help Contracting Parties ensure that the allocation and management of water resources take into account human health, food and water security, and poverty alleviation, but also the water required for maintaining critical wetlands ecosystem functions. These guidelines will be considered by Ramsar COP8 for adoption.

Cutting down the negative impacts of human activities, including the following trends:

Ecosystem degradation that brings about flood increase subsequent to deforestation, burning and poor agriculture practices

Natural resource over-exploitation: In this regard it is important to note that the Lake Chilwa Management Plan recognizes the following serious concern to be addressed: "the waterfowl are heavily utilised for human consumption and at least 461 bird trappers in the area are trapping 1.2 million birds every year". Bearing in mind that the management plan document points out that the recent estimate of the bird population in the wetland is around 1.5 million resident and migratory waterfowl, one of the obvious and palpable challenges for sustainable use in the area is the intensity of migratory waterfowl use. Let us encourage all relevant players at local, national and international levels to help achieve sustainable use of the lake resources.

Improving the level of international support for the efforts that are made at local and national level:

It is encouraging to note that a project has been developed with DANIDA support both for the development and the implementation of the management plan.

-- Anada Tiéga, Regional Coordinator for Africa