

# **WOMEN AND WATER DEVELOPMENT: THE CASE OF CHIRADZULU DISTRICT (1930 –2004)**

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## **Abstract**

*The paper explores the role played by Malawian women in development of water resources. The paper argues that the Mang'anja, Ngoni, Yao and Lomwe women did inhabit a hostile environment. The paper further argues that the Colonial state intervened by sinking boreholes to convince African population for their benefits to be derived from the colonial government. However, the government and some agencies promoted the sinking of boreholes to supplement shallow wells during the postcolonial era mainly for social and political reasons. The paper then argues that women did actively participated in water developments by dominating in water committees and carrying out domestic duties during construction stages of water points. Finally, the paper argues that inadequate coverage of water points, lack of adherence to rules and regulations and water levels going down were problems women faced. However, benefits included improvement of health and living standards and empowerment of women.*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The paper examines the role women played in development of water resources in Chiradzulu district between 1930 and 2004. The paper argues that women with assistance of men played an important role as decision makers in the location and management of water points in the country.

The paper begins by looking at the historical background of Chiradzulu as district in relation to water development. It then explores the major water developments that have taken place in the district. After this, the paper examines the role women played in these projects. Lastly, the paper examines the challenges and opportunities women faced, ways by which women overcame these challenges.

Three sources have been used in the study. Firstly, government files from the Malawi National Archives were consulted to identify some major projects that the Government of Malawi had carried out in the period of study. Secondly, books have also been consulted in the development of theoretical framework of the study. Lastly, oral sources were also used in the construction of roles women played an active participation. The oral sources included oral testimonies from the local people interviewed in four different villages in the areas of Traditional Authorities (T.A.s) Likoswe and Mpama. Oral sources involved oral testimonies from twenty-one respondents.

In addition to oral testimonies, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) from different groups of people mostly women found in water points and interviews with key individuals in the community such as chiefs, District Commissioner, members of Water Points Committee were done in order to arrive at deeper understanding of issues related to the experiences of women in the development of water resources in Chiradzulu district.

In collection of data, a number of problems were encountered. First and foremost was the reluctance of some villagers interviewed to give accurate information on the topic. However, interviewing many people more especially those who were interested in giving information solved this problem. The second problem was financial problems. The study was not funded; as such the areas visited were limited. However, a few respondents were able to give some piece of information.

Historians concentrate on political, social and economic issues<sup>1</sup>. While the study of water in history is scarce, history demonstrates that water has along been at the centre of history<sup>2</sup>. It is observed that the major civilizations rose from people's interaction on the use of water for irrigation, recreation use, and hydroelectricity and upon which they were able to exercise power. The people of Southern Africa have a rich heritage of managing and living with the environment, including water. The traditional African demonstrated themselves to be effective custodians of water<sup>3</sup>. Rainfall and water were central to their lifestyle, influencing the activities in which they were involved. The knowledge of nature's indicators, for instance has been used for generations to locate groundwater supplies before digging shallow wells. Communities, for instance, in the slopes of Tanzania's Mount Kilimanjaro and Angola had been used for irrigation to meet the needs of high population<sup>4</sup>.

At global level, demand for water is increasing steadily with general trend toward diversification of use away from agricultural activities. Moreover, with increasing population and improved living standards, domestic demand for water for water has grown significantly in all parts of the world, including Africa<sup>5</sup>. In this context, the past decade has seen massive expansion of water projects in Malawi<sup>6</sup>. Although Malawi is still the least irrigated and least industrialized country in the world, sustained efforts continue to be made to provide safe and reliable sources in rural and urban areas throughout the country, both for domestic consumption and agricultural purposes<sup>7</sup>.

Meanwhile, environmental historians have argued that there is a relationship between women and the environment. Women have acted as food producers, water collectors, as

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<sup>1</sup> E. Mufema, "An Analysis Of Inequitable Allocation Of Water Resources And Poverty In Southern Africa" p 2.

<sup>2</sup> E.W. Latham, "Water Resources And Water Development In Nyasaland." In Nyasaland Journal. Vol xvii. No, 2 July 1964. p 62.

<sup>3</sup> M. Chenje, & P. Johnson, (ed) Water In Southern Africa. Harare: SADC. 1994. p 3.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p.3

<sup>5</sup> M. Chenje, & P. Johnson, (ed) Water In Southern Africa. Harare: SADC. 1994. p 7.

<sup>6</sup> W.O. Mulwafu, & S. Khaila, "Conflicts Over Water Use In Malawi: A Socio-Economic Study Of Water Resources Management Along The Likangala River In Zomba District" p 7.

<sup>7</sup> M. Falkermark, (ed) Rural Water Supply And Health: The Need For New Strategy. Uppsala: Scandinavian Institute of African Studies. 1982. p 52.

fuel wood gatherers, rural women are in frequent and direct contact with water<sup>8</sup>. The development of women in relation to water management has been seen as important for a number of reasons. Women are seen as the traditional custodians of natural resources and they are the people who suffer most from degradation of water and other natural resources<sup>9</sup>. It was seen as important that women were represented at all levels and in all spheres of water managerial positions. It was therefore seen as the function of the state to make sure that rural women had equal accesses to economic opportunities and enjoy adequate living conditions in relation to water supply and sanitation<sup>10</sup>. In short, feminization of water management was being supported. It should be noted, however, that historians have not adequately studied the study of water resources.

Against this background, the study has been attempted. Not only does it provide a brief history of water, it also assesses the validity of the ecofeminist idea.

The period covered in this paper is from 1930 to 2004. This period is important in the study of water resources for a number of reasons. It was in the 1930s that the colonial government began to show interest in providing local inhabitants with clean and portable water through sinking of boreholes<sup>11</sup>. It was from 1964 to 2004 that the post colonial government embarked on water development projects that included the involvement of the beneficiary members of the community taking part in the construction works of water points.

## 2. THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF CHIRADZULU DISTRICT PRIOR TO 1930

Chiradzulu district is located in the southern region of Malawi. Chiradzulu according to traditional beliefs is njanja word coming from the words “Mchira wa Dzulo”. There is a

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<sup>8</sup> M. Chenje, & P. Johnson, (ed) Water In Southern Africa. Harare: SADC. 1994 p3

<sup>9</sup> H.M. Simpson, “Women And Water” World Health. July - August, 1992. p 1-12.

<sup>10</sup> M. Falkenmark, (ed) Rural Water Supply And Health: The Need For New Strategy. Uppsala: Scandinavian Institute of African Studies. 1982. p 55.

<sup>11</sup> E.W. Latham, “Water Resources And Water Development In Nyasaland.” In Nyasaland Journal. Vol xvii. No, 2 July 1964. p 63.

story about the Ngoni settlers who went to hunt in the mountain and caught an animal. The tail was left in the mountain. The next day the hunters went again to the mountain and they found the same tail, which was left the previous day. Then they started arguing among themselves and later they started calling that place Mchira wa dzulu. Hence, the name Chiradzulu. The word “wa” was later omitted<sup>12</sup>.

The early inhabitants of Chiradzulu district are not known exactly. However, according to oral sources, the early inhabitants of the district were the Lomwe, Mang'anja, Yao and Ngoni. The Mang'anja, Lomwe, and Yao are believed to be the first people to arrive in the district. The Lomwe, who are found in Jekete village settled in the area some time around late 1800s<sup>13</sup>. The Ngoni who are the dominant group in the district came later and settled in different places. In Makanani village, the Ngoni under the leadership of Chimkwezule were the first inhabitants<sup>14</sup>. They arrived and settled in the area in around 1870's. In Katoleza village, the Ngoni under the leadership of Katoleza were first inhabitants and settled in the area in 1902. In Anderson Jumbe village the Yao were the first people to arrive in that area. However the year when they first arrived is not known.

However, although the Ngoni claimed to be the first people to arrive in the district. Other reports indicate that before the Ngoni came, there were also other smaller groups of people who lived in the area. The Ngoni are said to have found the Lomwe, Yao, and Manga'anja already settled here and living peacefully in coexistence with one another in this village in around 1800s<sup>15</sup>. Upon the arrival of the Ngoni, there broke a fight between the Ngoni intruders and earlier inhabitants that is the Lomwe, Yao and Mang'anja. These earlier smaller groups united to fight together against the Ngoni. Later the Ngoni fled away to Nguludi where many of them perished upon eating 'kolongonda' that was left there by other groups of people.

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<sup>12</sup> Interview: Bambo I, Gondwe, Anderson Jumbe Village. T.A Likoswe. 26<sup>th</sup> February 2005.

<sup>13</sup> Interview: Mayi Mfumu Jekete, Jekete Village. T.A. Mpama. 23<sup>rd</sup> February 2005.

<sup>14</sup> Interview: Mayi, L. Mtambalika. Makanani Village. T.A. Mpama. 22<sup>nd</sup> February 2005

<sup>15</sup> Interview: Mayi Mfumu Jekete, Jekete Village. T.A. Mpama. 23<sup>rd</sup> February 2005.

Chinyanja is a widely spoken language in the district. Most of the groups of people found in the district have used this language for a long time and it has become a uniting force behind different groups of people who once fought against each other. This language is used as means of communication in business cycles in almost all the villages. However, other people still use lomwe and yao languages, but not at a larger scale, as means of communicating in their families. Thus the only language that has disappeared is Ngoni. Almost all the groups found in Chiradzulu district follow matrilineal lineage, meaning that inheritance is passed on from one generation to another through the mother's side. In this case therefore, women are seen as the uniting force and receive high prestige than men in all quarters of the society.

The Ngoni, Lomwe, Yao, and Mang'anja upon their arrival they all settled in areas that were close to the source of water. As is the case with most other districts, the people in the area depend on natural water resources for livelihood. Water the most important source of life was obtained from four main sources; rivers such as Mbombwe and Mombezi, streams from Chiradzulu Mountain and Midima hill, springs and hand-dug wells. The water was mainly used for drinking by humans and animals, cooking, bathing and irrigating plants. Agriculture that depends on availability of water was the major economic activity of the people.

Water was the main factor people had to look for before they settled apart from choosing places that were free from frequent attacks. However, the early settlers faced more problems related to water.

The first problem that the early settlers experienced upon settling in Chiradzulu had to do with water levels getting lower<sup>16</sup>. This happened more especially during the hot dry season and in times of drought when each household mostly needed water. The reason was that water sources such streams and springs needed constant supply of water from rains. During the hot dry season more especially in the months of March to November

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<sup>16</sup> Mrs. P. Konyani, Katoleza Village. T.A. Mpama. 26<sup>th</sup> February 2005.

the water levels went down. This meant that women had to wait for longer hours to get water.

Another problem with water at that time was the long distance women had to travel in search of clean water. This happened more especially during the rainy season and sometimes during the months that followed soon after rainy season. During this time they were using water from the springs, which in most cases was found to be contaminated with animal excreta. This meant that spring water was only good for washing clothes and bathing. But for drinking purposes, it meant that women had to travel longer distances to places where they felt they would get clean water.

Water borne diseases were also major problem that affected every member of the household. The diseases that the people were suffering from upon drinking contaminated water were diarrhea, bilharzias and cholera. Women more especially because of their household chores that put them in constant contact with water were heavily affected. Every time there was an outbreak of water borne diseases, it was women who lost their lives than their counterparts, the men.

Water pollution was also a major challenge the Ngoni, Lomwe, Yao and Mang'anja had to face upon their arrival in Chiradzulu. This water pollution occurred in many ways. Through people urinating directly into water bodies such as streams, and rivers. This pollution of water also occurred mostly during the rainy season. Rainwater carried with it many dirty materials such leaves and animal dung that came into contact with water. This made water found in streams and rivers not to be good for drinking and even cooking.

Siltation of shallow wells during the rainy season was another problem. Women were finding it difficult to take clean water straight from the rivers. The reason was that the rivers or streams carried with it dirty materials such as sand and leaves. The only way these women had to get clean water was through digging of shallow wells along the streams. However, shallow wells had some problems. During the rainy season, the

wells got filled up with mud. This meant that the wells were closed up. It was also very much difficult to get clean water, as the streams were in flood. In some cases there were reports of deaths of people who had drowned for trying to get water along the streams.

The wells proved a failure in times of drought. The wells were depending on constant supply of water from the streams. If there was drought, for instance the droughts of 1949, 1989 and 2001 led to the lowering down of water table<sup>17</sup>. This meant that wells had no water too. This created a burden over women who had to walk longer distances to other streams where they believed that they will find clean water which was safe for drinking<sup>18</sup>.

### 3. STATE INTERVENTIONS IN WATER DEVELOPMENTS DURING IN THE COLONIAL PERIOD, 1930-1964

From 1930's, the colonial government got involved in the supply of clean water to all the people residence in Malawi. This involved the supply of water to the people through provision of boreholes. The reason for sinking boreholes or wells was that the water supply for Blantyre townships was inadequate to meet all the people and there was need to extend the water supplies to rural areas as well. This also involved some parts of Chiradzulu district surrounding Blantyre district. In all these water schemes that were to be carried by the Government were to be considered by the Director of Public Works who was based in Zomba<sup>19</sup>.

According to the Colonial Government, it was discovered that most streams and rivers in the country were heavily polluted and continuously liable to pollution in the future. During that time, according to some health officers and methods of purifying water at that time were only adequate during the dry weather and not rain season. Hence, the need to provide adequate supplies of water to the people through sinking of boreholes.

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<sup>17</sup> Interview: Mrs. Januwale, Katoleza Village. T.A. Mpama. 22<sup>nd</sup> February, 2005

<sup>18</sup> Interview: Mayi, F. Chikakuda, Makanani Village. T.A. Mpama. 22<sup>nd</sup> February, 2005

<sup>19</sup> NS1/34/1 Blantyre, Limbe And Zomba. 1925 Nov-1939 Oct.



However, the boreholes of the 1930's had some problems. The problem was that the bottom of the well in which the borehole was to be sunken was in sand<sup>20</sup>. This created problems of sand getting the perforations in the bottom casing. This was found to be problematic because it needed well-trained persons to pump water using such machines. The solution was found by getting security guards who were put in charge of guarding the pumps with instructions to allow only permit holders to draw water. Thus although boreholes of the 1930's were aimed at providing portable water to the people in Malawi, only a few people benefited and yet the majority of these people had still to depend on other sources of water such as shallow wells and streams in their day to day life.

The Provincial Commissioner of the Southern province was the one responsible in the drilling of boreholes of the 1930's. This was done upon receiving request from the District Commissioner of the District in need of boreholes. The District Commissioner of the district was the one responsible for choosing sites for boreholes during the rainy season. The District Commissioner for Chiradzulu for instance requested two boreholes to be sunken at Chiradzulu Boma and hospital in 1934<sup>21</sup>. The funds for drilling the boreholes came from the Federal Government Funds.

By the year 1952, 45 boreholes were sunken in Chiradzulu District under the project called Drilling Programmes under Colonial Development in Chiradzulu. These boreholes were sunken in selected villages of Mwapasa, Kamwana, Chapweteka, Mchame, Chikaonda, Likalawa, Kajawo, Mombezi, Chisombezi Court, Mkumbay, Kwacha, Salimu among others in the Native Authorities of Mpama, Nkalo, Kadewere and Mchema<sup>22</sup>. However, there was no consultation of women.

Upon drilling a borehole, inspection teams were sent from time to time to check the wells and boreholes if they needed to be repaired. This was seen as part of the government to improve the welfare of the people and to encourage the people to

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<sup>20</sup> PCS 1/30/1 Borehole Drilling Programmes Under Colonial Development. 1935.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> PCS 1/30/1 Borehole Drilling Programmes and Progress Report. 1955.

support the government. However, transport was found to be a major obstacle on part of the government. In this case therefore, it was difficult to travel in jungle to areas where the boreholes were mostly needed during the rainy season. This resulted into inadequate coverage of boreholes.

#### 4. WATER RESOURCES DURING THE POST COLONIAL PERIOD

In 1968, the Government carried out a major water supply in Chiradzulu District. This was a major project that started at Mikolongwe Veterinary Station<sup>23</sup>. The Mikolongwe borehole supply was reinforced by gravity intake up hill. In total three boreholes were sunken. The boreholes together with the small stream up from Midima hill reinforced water supply at Mikolongwe.

The aim of the Mikolongwe Water Supply Scheme of 1968 was to provide portable water to the Mikolongwe Veterinary School. This was upon receiving complaints from the District commissioner of Chiradzulu who requested the Government to drill boreholes at the school. During this time the school was at the verge of being closed due to shortage of portable water to the students' and members of the staff. Therefore the water from the three boreholes was to be used by the students in washing themselves, flushing toilets and watering garden plants.

The other major water project that took place in Chiradzulu District was the construction of the Dam called Sable. This is a dam that is found in the area of village head woman Jekete. It is argued that the dam was constructed in the late 1980's. The dam is found on a river that is popularly known as Mombezi. Originally the dam was constructed to provide water for to the Sable Farming Company that is found on the other side of the dam. Thus the water from this dam was originally used for irrigating plants such as Macadamia and coffee on this farm<sup>24</sup>. Although the digging of the dam led to the loss of garden land to the inhabitants, on the other hand, the dam has helped

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<sup>23</sup> HW/47 Mikolongwe Water Supply. 1968.

<sup>24</sup> Interview: Bambo G. Dikimolo, Jekete Village. T.A. Mpama. 27<sup>th</sup> February 2005.

the surrounding people to turn their livelihood into fishing to get some supplement of income through selling of fish found in the dam.

In the construction of the dam, permission was sort first from the District Commissioner of Chiradzulu then later Traditional Authority (TA) Mpama was consulted. Later the village headman of Jekete village was also consulted on the project to be carried out on this river. In the process of digging the dam, the people of Jekete village who had their gardens along the Mombera River were compensated in form of money for the loss of their gardens<sup>25</sup>.

Between 1990 and 2004, Borehole drilling was the major water and sanitation development. Many Agencies, Government and Politicians have contributed to these borehole-drilling projects. These agencies included Red Cross, Christian Service Committee, Concern Universal, Muslim Association, Blantyre Water Board, Inter-aide, Africare and by the Government through Malawi Social Action Fund (MASAF).

In Makanani village for instance, the borehole were sunken by the C.C.A.P synod of Blantyre. In the area three boreholes were sunken by the C.C.A.P. synod of Blantyre in the late 1990's. One borehole was sunken near the C.C.A.P. church, and the remaining two were sunken at other central positions of the village. Dr. Malindi, a member of the C.C.A.P. Church was the one who took the initiative of asking the synod to sink boreholes in the village<sup>26</sup>. This was upon receiving complaints from the people through their village headman. The people were complaining about diseases such as Cholera and diarrhea that was coming in as a result of drinking bad water from the wells.

The Government through the Malawi Social Action Fund (MASAF) in the years between 1994 and 2004 has brought some of the boreholes in Chiradzulu. However, the boreholes were sunken in very few selected villages. Between 1994 and 2004, MASAF has managed to sunken boreholes in some few villages like Anderson Jumbe village

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<sup>25</sup> Interview: Mayi Mfumu, Jekete. Jekete Village.T.A. Mpama 27<sup>th</sup> February 2005.

<sup>26</sup> Mrs. L Sitima. Makanani Village. T.A. Mpama. 22<sup>nd</sup> February 2005.

and Jekete village. There were no MASAF funded boreholes in Makanani village and Katoleza village although they were close to the headquarters at the Chiradzulu Boma.

The MASAF boreholes were brought in the villages for a number of reasons. They acted as part of self-help development projects that was being encouraged through out the country. Under these projects, the communities were encouraged to take an active role. The water projects were also aimed at providing the community with portable water for drinking purposes. This, it was assumed, would help to reduce the number of people contracting water borne diseases. Boreholes were also aimed at reducing the distance women had to walk in search for portable water in their respective households<sup>27</sup>. In addition, politicians also brought in their boreholes. Party officials brought in boreholes as a tool for campaign reasons or fulfillment of their promises during the campaign period.

On MASAF water projects, the parliamentarians, ward counselors were the ones who called for water developments from MASAF<sup>28</sup>. The counselors or parliamentarians would call for a meeting with all village members from which the villagers would ask for water development projects. The officials from MASAF would then come and view the area where the borehole would be located. Later the village headman would call for another meeting whereby the people in the village were mobilized for the construction work.

Other Non-Governmental Organizations such as Concern Universal were also involved in provision of portable water to the local villagers. However, Concern Universal was not actually involved in the construction works but in repairing the broken boreholes. Concern Universal started repairing broken boreholes in the year 2004 in the villages of T.A. Nkalo<sup>29</sup>. Southern Region Water Board (SRWB) was also involved in supplying piped water at the Chiradzulu Headquarters and in other trading centres surrounding Blantyre such as Thomas, Chiradzulu Secondary School, Chilembwe, Nguludi Mission,

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<sup>27</sup> Interview: Mr Chikuni, (DC). Chiradzulu Boma. 8<sup>th</sup> February 2005.

<sup>28</sup> Interview. Mayi Mfumu, Jekete. Jekete Village.T.A. Mpama 27<sup>th</sup> February 2005.

<sup>29</sup> Interview: Mr Chikuni, (DC). Chiradzulu Boma. 8<sup>th</sup> February 2005.

and Yasin<sup>30</sup>. There was also a gravity fed system in the Thuchila Phalombe Plain that covered most areas under T.A. Nkalo and T.A. Kadewere.

Statistics by the year 2004 showed that 6% of the population of people had access to piped water, 17 % used water from streams, 44% were using water from boreholes 11% were using water from protected wells, 3% were using water from springs and 19% were using water from unprotected wells. In total Chiradzulu had 1139 water points. Of these 1139 water points, only 77% were functional. The population without access to safe water was 22%<sup>31</sup>.

## 5. WOMEN'S ROLE IN WATER DEVELOPMENT, 1994 – 2004

Women's role in water development projects came to be recognized recently starting from the 1990's. However, prior to that, women were greatly excluded from water development projects. Water projects such as digging boreholes were seen as men's work. Officials from the Government were the ones responsible for making decisions regarding the location of water points. On the other hand women were involved in the digging of shallow wells that was the initiative of the community.

Shallow wells that were found along river banks or streams involved excavation. The reason was that women were seen as the primary collectors, managers and users of water in the home<sup>32</sup>. They were the providers of health care to their families. Women in some communities in Chiradzulu are still using these shallow wells even today. Good examples were hand-dug wells on the banks of Mbombwe River. In the excavation of shallow wells, women were the ones who actively participated. Women in the whole village organized a day when they all went to the stream or river to excavate a shallow well. While there, all the women helped one another in the excavation until the well had reached a depth they were assured that they would be able to get enough water for

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid

<sup>32</sup> Interview: Mrs L Mtambalika. Makanani Village. T.A. Mpama. 22<sup>nd</sup> February 2005.

longer period.<sup>33</sup>. Men did not form part of excavation of shallow wells because the issues of water were left to women. The practice of excavating shallow wells was an old method dating back from the 1900's up to date. According to women, water from shallow wells was used to supplement water from boreholes during the dry season.

The problem was women used simple tools such as hoes, sticks, and basin for carrying mud. However, despite the attempts shown by women in digging of Hand-dug wells, problems arose on the basis that shallow wells were not deep enough to contain large volumes of water more especially during the dry season when water was mostly needed.

Back to the late 1980s, the government encouraged community involvement in the construction of Rural Piped Water Project<sup>34</sup>. The aim was to motivate the community and prepare them to accept the need for water. As a result, the community that included both men and women participated in the construction of Rural Water Supply Projects. Under this project the Government was training Water Project Operators (WPO's) whose job was to organize large numbers of self-help people at work and physical installment of water supply using his technical skills in for instance; pipe laying, fitting connections, concrete work construction of bridge and gully crossings.

Women within the rural community were encouraged to play an active role in water development since they were responsible for collection of water on a day today basis. In line with this, women were expected to provide labour, however, they had little real power in decision-making. The Government was responsible for providing financial for maintenance of rural water schemes to communities that could not afford to contribute and if the maintenance of the projects needed higher costs. However, the issue of concern was that male project staff in the selected projects thought of men as capable of doing such a labor-intensive work and more suited than women to technical tasks. Therefore, the selected projects provided technical training exclusively to men and

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<sup>33</sup> Interview: Mayi G. Lupiya, Katoleza Village.T.A. Mpama. 26<sup>th</sup> February 2005.

<sup>34</sup> RES/PRO/13: Community Participation In Rural Water Supply. 1980.

recruited men as paid workers and women as volunteers<sup>35</sup>. This was contrary to the Government policies of allowing participation of women. In addition, women had no power to make decisions regarding location, location of water points; instead it was the Government responsibility. This continued up to the year 1994 when Malawi attained democracy. Not consulting women during the planning phase also resulted in poor location, inconvenient design and subsequent wrong use of the water points.

Since the dawn of democracy, dispensation and development of water policy allows, communities, more especially women to make decision on water points location and construction<sup>36</sup>. The Malawi government tended to see the maintenance of family health through safe water and sanitation a primarily as female responsibility. Thus, the water developments moved beyond a purely functional perspective on women's responsibility was a deliberate attempt to pursue the policies that emphasized the need for women to become key actors in water supply and sanitation, with input into decision-making and knowledge about technical maintenance of local water and sanitation systems. This was reinforced by decentralization policy whereby all water points demands came from the community themselves<sup>37</sup>. From 1994 to the year 2004, the community more especially women had been involved in MASAF projects that were funded by the Government. Women involvement was great from the beginning, where they contributed labor to the projects.

Women involvement was very great at all levels. Water Points Committees (WPC's) consisted mostly of women. These women were trained in drilling, leadership and maintenance skills. The Malawi Government through MASAF and some Non-Governmental Organizations facilitated this kind of training. For instance, Concern Universal apart from repairing broken boreholes was also currently involved in training of women in leadership skills on how to ran a committee and carrying out maintenance works to women in the villages of T.A. Nkalo. Women's participation in water

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<sup>35</sup> Interview: Bambo I, Gondwe, Anderson Jumbe Village.T.A Likoswe. 26<sup>th</sup> February 2005.

<sup>36</sup> Interview: Mr Chikuni (D.C.) Chiradzulu District. 8<sup>th</sup> February 2005.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

development projects played a key role in terms of projects long-term sustainability. Women were generally more committed to projects from which they benefited.

## 6. PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

Women faced a number of problems in their participation of water developments. The first problem was shortage of water during the dry months of the year. Water levels going down was the major challenge women faces each and every year in relation to boreholes, shallow wells and other water sources. Boreholes on the other hand failed to produce as much water as recorded by meters. It was also argued that most boreholes and shallow wells were not completed to provide large volumes of water. To complete a well which might dry up towards the end of the season caused no end of grumbling from the local inhabitants more especially men and no appreciation that it would supply them with good clean water for some ten or eleven months out of twelve<sup>38</sup>. This put women in an awkward position whereby they had to wait longer hours on the queue to get water.

The second problem was increased number of incidents of water borne diseases. People and animals shared the same water resources more especially water obtained from shallow wells. This made the water not safe for drinking purposes as animals sometimes made the water were cases when the supplies were considered unsafe by the general public, others where they were believed to be taken from the sacred site. However, this implied lack of appreciation on part of the community on implications of safe water.

The third problem was also an increased number of broken boreholes<sup>39</sup>. This forced women to walk longer distances to other villages where they believed they would get good clean water from the boreholes. Boreholes tended to break down due vandalism by some local villagers and lack of knowledge on how to use boreholes. The problem

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<sup>38</sup> GW/ 1 /BMP. Borehole Maintenance Policy. 1986.

<sup>39</sup> RES/PRO/13: Community Participation In Rural Water Supply. 1981.



was that once a borehole was constructed and completed in certain area, the project staff moved on and maintenance was left to village pump attendants. Frequently repairs were beyond their resources; consequently pumps were out of order for longer periods. The reason was that the water supply did not belong to the village; its maintenance was considered to be Government responsibility. “The Government would send a team into village for a day or so to sink a borehole and attach a pump, then leave, the villagers feel very little sense of involvement. When the borehole becomes silted up, or the pump breakdown they feel it is not their responsibility and waited for the Government workers to retain to mend it”,<sup>40</sup>. This was a serious matter as people’s attitudes towards development projects was greatly affected and people found it difficult to believe in the benefits of new technology.

The fourth problem was lack of adherence to rules set up by the Water Points Committee on the use of boreholes<sup>41</sup>. Some people more especially those who did not appreciate developments tended not to use the boreholes properly. They did not hold the handles properly, some children playing around the boreholes and used the place as latrines; other women not following rules of ‘first come, first serve’ in which all water users had to stay on the queue to avoid conflicts. This led to frequent quarrels more especially during the dry months when water was mostly needed but the supply was very low.

The fifth problem with boreholes was the growth of moulds inside the equipment. In addition lumps grew due to contamination of water with the iron equipments<sup>42</sup>. This meant that the water that came out of the borehole was of low quality. Thus the people from the villages did not use such water that was of bad taste or no taste and bad smelling. In some instances if such water was taken home it led to quarrels within households and even breakages of families. The reason was that men felt suspicious of such water to be contaminated with poison. This resulted into loss of credibility on part of the Government in water development projects.

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<sup>40</sup>Interview: Miss. D. Kang’ombe. Anderson Jumbe Village. T.A. Likoswe. 1<sup>st</sup> March 2005.

<sup>41</sup> Interview: Miss. D. Kang’ombe. Anderson Jumbe Village. T.A. Likoswe. 1<sup>st</sup> March 2005.

<sup>42</sup> Interview: Mr. I. Gondwe. Anderson Jumbe Village. T.A. Likoswe. 1<sup>st</sup> March 2005.

The sixth major challenge faced by women concerning water development projects of the 1980s had to do with funding<sup>43</sup>. The funding of virtually all rural supply boreholes were coming from sources alien to the receiving community. The community felt removed from the participating in the construction of water points. The installation of water points was considered a foreign property or property of the Government that could be offered and withdrawn from service irrespective of the needs of the community involved. This compelled the community not to engage in self-help water development coming from the Government even though the Government was encouraging the practice.

The seventh problem was political interference regarding location of water points. This became the major challenge in water development projects more especially those being funded by MASAF. Most politicians' tended to interfere regarding the location of water points. This was in part due to the fact that most politicians liked to use water developments as tool for campaign. In this case politicians liked to chose location points more especially to areas where they felt they would have support. This meant that the water development projects were invested much in wealthier villages than in the remote rural areas, although the majority of the population was poor and lived in the remote areas. More over in the villages themselves, local leadership in water points was mostly delegated to men. This meant that women remained subordinate to men, even though water issues had to do mostly with women.

Finally, water developments managed to make women receive less assistance from members of the society in carrying of water from water points<sup>44</sup>. Despite the claim of the projects to improve the lives of women by reducing their work burden, their workload had actually increased. Although the projects made water services more accessible than before, women received less assistance from other member of the family, such as men, cousins, in fetching of water when water was made more

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<sup>43</sup> RES/PRO/13: Community participation In Rural Water Supply. 1981.

<sup>44</sup> Interview: Miss. J. Nkhoma. Anderson Jumbe Village. T.A. Likoswe. 1<sup>st</sup> March 2005.

accessible. Thus men refused to share women's responsibility in water hauling which had increased tremendously owing to greater use of water by family members in majority of households. The women pointed out that in the past they used to collect water four or five times a day. But after water was supplied nearer their homes they fetched eight to ten times a day with households using much of this water for drinking and bathing<sup>45</sup>.

Despite the challenges, women had a lot to benefit from the water developments. As a result of using safe water for drinking and cooking purposes, women's health and hygiene had improved<sup>46</sup>. The coming in boreholes funded by MASAF and other Non-Governmental Organizations also helped to reduce the distance women walked in search of good clean water. A growing number of women no longer wasted time on the road to fetch water. They were able to engage in more productive activities such as weaving, gardening and working in small industries. More important children were going to school instead for fetching water, as was the case in the past.

Water development projects also helped to reduce the burdens of women. With water nearby, women spent the newly available hours working in agriculture, learning new methods of agriculture and food processing, or studying nutrition, child care, literacy and raising the living standards of the community. Thus the coming in of boreholes gave women more time to do profitable activities that they were not able to accomplish as a result of spending more hours on the queue so as to get water from the shallow wells that were also located very far from their homes.

The water points such as shallow wells, boreholes became forums where women communicate and share ideas. At the wells or borehole, the women came to share ideas on cooking and some important aspects of life they could not do in the presence of their husbands at home. Thus, the introduction of new water sources especially the provision

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid

<sup>46</sup> Interview: Mrs. L. Kauwa. Katoleza Village.T.A. Mpama. 22<sup>nd</sup> February.

of house connections greatly affected this existing traditional pattern of communal activities.

From 1990s to 2004, the Government and other Non-Governmental Organizations had increasingly tended to assign responsibilities for water system maintenance and repair to women, under the assumption that women had the more strategic interest in ensuring operational efficiency to enable them to meet their domestic needs<sup>47</sup>. Consequently, Non -Governmental Organizations working in water developed women's projects, sponsored workshops, seminars and short course aimed at breaking down stereotypes about women and technology. This had introduced women to aspects of water technology and exposed them to some basic technical skills<sup>48</sup>. However, it had also reinforced the idea that women should continue to take primary responsibility for meeting household water needs and maintaining family health, especially in relation to water borne diseases. In this sense, it reinforced the existing status quo and the notion of socially reproductive labor as being almost entirely a female responsibility.

The colonial Government on its part also tried to put some measures to ensure that people had access to safe water. Under the Native Authority Orders section 8(e), it was forbidden for any native to spoil water that was used by humans or animals for drinking<sup>49</sup>. This was applied to wells, streams and springs from which drinking water was obtained. In addition it was forbidden for people to play around wells. The orders were in practice from 1936 to 1953. However, the orders did not go well with some Native Authorities who refused to make dams in streams as they prevented the proper flow of water to other villages and they led to pollution of water. More importantly, it should be noted that throughout the 1930s and 1950s, although concerted efforts were made to increase water accessibility, little effort was done to integrate the economic roles of women into resource planning.

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<sup>47</sup> Interview: Mr Chikuni (D.C.) Chiradzulu District. 8<sup>th</sup> February 2005.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> PCS 1 /20/13. Native Authority Orders: Water Population And Streams Construction. 1953.

In the 1980's, the Government through the Ministry of Works improved the administrative aspects of the work by involving both the local and user communities using water points. This decision came in as a result of increasing number of water points breaking up as result of remaining prolonged periods of time unattended. This included the creation of caretakers committee for every water point or groups of water points located within the same village which, among other things, was responsible for simple baseline maintenance work, cleaning the pump surroundings, certifying repair work carried out by Government personnel and reporting pump breakdowns to the appropriate authorities on a more systematic and regular basis. However, this failed to address the role of women in water resource management.

However, in the light of democracy, the communities have been encouraged to form Water Points Committees responsible for managing water points and were automatically dominated by women. The results were encouraging. These committees became more active due to women's constant presence and direct interest. With appropriate training, women had gained self-confidence and became effective managers of the communal water points, including their operation and the maintenance. The Water Points Committee were elected democratically by members of the community and were left with all the powers and mandate of looking after the boreholes located in their respective areas. The women in the villages paid some cash as agreed by the committee to be used for buying repair parts of the borehole. The Water points Committee decided the amount of cash to be contributed to meet the capital cost and operational and maintenance costs. Each household was required to pay, for instance, K20 to this committee if the borehole had broken down while in use.

However motivations for men and women to pay for portable water differed and in unequal power relationship, where men were regarded as superior to women, the interest of men usually prevailed<sup>50</sup>. Because of provision of water was considered a basic duty of women, the lightening of that task was not necessarily given a high priority by men, who made decisions about expenditure of household incomes.

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<sup>50</sup> Mr K. Chewera, Jekete Village.T.A. Mpama 27<sup>th</sup> February 2005.

Consequently, the number of women defaulters tended to increase and were not allowed continued access to water resources. This raised danger as the households who refused to pay money reverted to using unhygienic water source, risking the health of everyone in the family.

The women in the villages also worked hand in hand in the cleaning of the surrounding area of boreholes. In any village, any woman from the particular household was given the responsibility of making sure the surrounding area of the borehole or well was clean at all times<sup>51</sup>. The women with the assistance of Water Points Committee (WPC) organized time tables in which any woman who collected water from the borehole went to clean on the day allocated to her. This cleaning of water points prevented the growth of bush and algae. However, some women for their own reasons refused to work on the allocated day simply because they did not like to participate in self-help development projects. If such cases occurred, being asked to pay heavy sums of money heavily punished the women who refused such voluntary work. This applied to all members of the community regardless of the position they held in the society. Sometimes women were reported to the local village headman who punished them by being asking them not to use water from the borehole any more. This also showed the power that was held by local chiefs in matters concerning the community.

The Water Points Committee had also some rules and regulations regarding the use of water points. The rules and regulations stipulated that the water points should not be used as bathing place, the borehole be used properly, getting water in one bucket at a time and getting water on first come first serve<sup>52</sup>. Thus, any woman who failed to follow the rules and regulations was reported and was severely punished by not being allowed to get water sometimes for as long as two months. However, some women who faced such punishment resorted to get water at the boreholes at their own risk during nighttime. At other instances, deserters got water from other boreholes located in other villages upon agreements with that particular community.

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<sup>51</sup> Interview: Mr. N. Chewera, Jekete Village.T.A. Mpama 27<sup>th</sup> February 2005.

<sup>52</sup> Interview: Mrs. E. Lambula. Jekete Village.T.A. Mpama 27<sup>th</sup> February 2005.

In case of broken down boreholes, arrangements were made with the nearby villages to be allowed to get some water in the boreholes located in their villages. In this case, the Water Points Committee members of the villages concerned agreed some terms that each water user had to follow. This went on until the borehole from that particular village was rehabilitated and maintained. Sometimes, the people located near piped water supplies resorted to using water from leak pipes. However, this was on condition that there was leakage on one part of the underground pipe.

## 7. CONCLUSION

The analysis presented suggests that development work in the area of water resource management in Malawi has tended to build on the traditional roles of women. Firstly, the people of Chiradzulu did inhabit a hostile environment. Firstly, the Mang'anja, Yao, Ngoni, and Lomwe women used water obtained from springs, streams, rivers and shallow wells found along rivers and dambo areas. The women whose productive and reproductive roles did put them in constant contact with water resources faced a number of problems. The problems include: long walked distance in search of clean water, shortage of water in times of drought, increased number of water borne diseases and shallow wells got sealed with mud. Secondly, the colonial state intervened in water issues through sinking of boreholes throughout the country to needy people. These boreholes were sunken upon request from the Provincial Commissioner through the District commissioner. The boreholes were of general benefit to the protectorate on point of convincing African population of the benefits to be derived and ensured cooperation of Africans. Thirdly, the water resources of post colonial period took different direction. Major water developments of this period were dams, boreholes funded directly by the government, later through Malawi Social Action Fund and other agencies. The projects were aimed at improving the living standards of women; reduce the hardships of women in carrying water from very far away areas and mainly for political gains. Fourthly, women made decisions regarding location, maintenance and repair of boreholes. In addition, women were involved in carrying sand and cooking

food workers involved in construction of boreholes. Finally, women's participation in water developments was met by both challenges and opportunities. The problems faced by women included; increased number of broken down boreholes, growth of moulds inside the equipments, failure to receive assistance from men in terms of monitory support and political interference which led to inadequate coverage of water points. The benefits included; reduction of burdens of carrying water, water points acted as forums on part of women, leadership skills in Water Points Committees and improved health. Solutions to the problems included formation of Water Points Committees, contributions of money for maintenance, set up of rules and regulations and participation by all members in keeping the water points clean.

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