



*Proceedings of the Sixth International Permaculture Conference
September-October 1996, Perth, Western Australia*

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Permaculture in Malawi

Harrings Kachali (Malawi)

[Submitted Paper]

Malawi, 360 000 square kilometres, with a population well over 11 million people, is a small landlocked country in the south eastern part of Africa. The land is beautiful and its people cheerful. Its economic life is totally dependent on agriculture, counting tobacco as its main cash crop. However, people in rural areas live below the poverty line. With drought and exorbitant fertiliser prices, many people are unable to utilise their lands comprehensively.

Peoples' impression

The name permaculture at first sounded strange and difficult to be fixed in our current chemical farming philosophy. Mrs June Walker's determination and proper approach have indeed revealed the truth and advantages of farming organically. This time the local support and membership is available in almost all districts in Malawi. With local permaculture training, which involved members from all regions, chances to expand nationwide exist.

Availability of demonstration centres

I wonder if it is acceptable to say that having demonstration centre is paramount, and a most influential ingredient in the permaculture framework in Malawi. This was discussed at our previous permaculture meeting and we arrived at a resolution that areas should be identified to act as nuclei. When identifying these places, special importance should be attached to the following requirements:

1. Access to the place, dependable roads;
2. Close to town for reliable markets;
3. Local population and participation around the area so as to act as a training centre;
4. Water resources available to allow dry season farming.

Our place, 30 hectares and 12 kilometres away from the Northern Region city, has all the above requirements. If similar places can also be identified in the central and southern regions it would certainly be advantageous.

Personal assessment and vision

People I have talked to and worked with, of all classes, are emphatically excited and wish to go organic. This has also been revealed by the huge membership covering all districts in Malawi. With local permaculture courses, permaculture know-how has been planted in many minds. But their thirst to see practical achievements first, at demonstration centres, should seriously, urgently and effectively be quenched.

The identified places will work as a catalyst to accelerate the participation of the surrounding communities. People would come and see, and sometimes participate physically, once or twice a month depending on their interest.

Nucleus demonstration centres

These sites should be managed by somebody practically conversant with permaculture technology and should be socially motivated so as to capture people's attention. He or she should be working hand-in-hand with the permaculture main body and the people surrounding the area, monitoring developments taking place.

Financial support

The financing of such centres could be from a number of sources:

1. Individually, one can open up a demonstration garden if financially stable;
2. If the main permaculture body can financially support such centres;
3. Sympathisers could donate something to make such establishments a success.

Activities and goals of demonstration centres

These sites should have short- and long-term income generating activities to eventually create for themselves a financially stable future to stand independently strong.

Short term activities

These are fast money-making activities which would enable the formation of a future sister demonstration centre. The main centre would be engaged in the following short term income generating activities:

- Vegetable growing for: money, food, chicken food, compost manure, fish ponds;
- Poultry farming for: money, food, manure for vegetables, manure for fish ponds;
- Fish farming for: money, food, fish pond manure for vegetable growing;
- Woodlot for: money, timber, fuel;
- Cattle farming for: food, money (to fatten and sell), manure for vegetables and fish ponds;
- Crops (intercropping), one ridge having maize, beans and potatoes which are companion plants. This method is used for a number of reasons:
 - It increases long lasting fertility;
 - It is a cheaper way of farming;
 - It avoids soil and water chemical contamination.

Long term income generating activities

- Possibly Cob Building Construction projects

The money realised from the above-mentioned activities would be used for maintenance and expansion of the main demonstration centre and to be given on loan to capable local participants to start their own demonstration gardens in their areas, having the advantage of being supervised by a well-qualified trainer from the main centre.

To encourage participants, prizes should be given to the best three participants in the form of money or materials. The best of the three should be recommended to start a second demonstration centre. When the loan is fully paid back he can stand on his own and start sharing the fruits of permaculture.

This vision builds in me the understanding that people would be highly encouraged. It would also create a happy social atmosphere when people live and work together for the good of the whole community. This would mean a joy-giving and more sustainable environment for this and coming generations.