
Malawi: too many people?

Malawi, a country with a total land area of 118,484 sq.kms, is located in Southeast Africa. Its lowlands, which receive heavy rainfall, are covered by grasslands, temperate forests and rainforests, but the country has suffered deforestation at an annual rate of 1.3% (1981/90).

The country has a total population of 9,845,000 inhabitants (1996) and four times more people per square kilometre than Sub-Saharan Africa as a whole, of whom four fifths depend on agriculture. On average, each farmer has only one hectare and the estate sector holds only a small portion of the land. Thus the big farmers don't seem to be responsible -as they are in many other places- for most of the deforestation. The population grows 3.2% per year and in many regions farmers have no way to expand their operations except by clearing new areas of forest. Malawi might therefore seem to be a good candidate to prove what many believe to be a main cause of deforestation: population growth.

Nevertheless, the recently published research 'Agricultural Land Expansion and Deforestation in Malawi' by I. Minde, D.Ngugi, J. Luhanga, and G. Kowero presents a broader picture. The authors make it clear that population growth alone cannot fully explain deforestation in Malawi. Using original household survey data from three regions, they show that average farm size grew substantially between 1992 and 1996. Such increase, which put additional pressure on forests, was the result of government decisions to liberalize maize markets and other agricultural policies and not due to population growth.

According to the authors' findings, Malawi's people clear about 50,000 hectares of forest each year, which implies that each rural family deforests about one hectare every thirty five years. If we compare the deforestation occurring in this "overpopulated" country with the one taking place in a clearly non-overpopulated country such as Brazil, the Malthusian simplistic approach crumbles: only one big cattle rancher can deforest that area in only one or few years.

The conclusion seems to be that generalizations linking deforestation to population growth cannot be made without taking into account all the other variables -internal and external- which may either increase or relieve pressures from forests. Such approach can provide explanations of why very densely populated countries like Japan (332 inhabitants/sq.km), the United Kingdom (238/sq.km) or Germany (230/sq.km) are currently not facing the deforestation process which is occurring in a much less populated country as Malawi (83/sq.km).

If you would like to request an electronic copy of the paper, please write to Godwin Kowero.

Sources: David Kaimowitz, 22/6/99, World Guide 1999/2000.