

## **Between a rock and a hard place: the need for and challenges to implementation of Rights Based Fisheries Management in small-scale fisheries of Southern Lake Malawi**

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### **Abstract**

There has been a decline in commercially valuable fish species, especially the Chambo (*Oreochromis* spp), in southern Lake Malawi. Although there might be lack of reliable and scientifically backed evidence, most experts and experienced fishers concur that productivity of most fish stocks in the area is much below par compared to their productivity about two to three decades ago. This leads to the hypotheses that the fish stocks are generally over-exploited. This trend will continue or their productivity will remain at these depressed levels unless appropriate measures are taken. This article argues that Rights Based Management (RBM) could hold the best hope for moving towards sustainable fisheries management in the southern Lake Malawi (Southeast and Southwest Arms) area while recognizing the need for a broad human rights approach for fishing communities. Even then, the implementation of the RBM approach will not be easy given the historical developmental open access management approach and general unorganized characteristics of the small-scale fisheries sector. Of note is that co-management was introduced in area in the early millennium as part of attempts to strengthen user fishing rights, local accountability and stewardship - with mixed results.

### **1. Introduction**

About 20% of Malawi's 118,484 km<sup>2</sup> constitutes water. As such, fishing is an important economic sector and contributes to the livelihoods of hundreds of thousands of Malawians. In addition, fisheries provide food and nutritional security to both the rural and urban poor. It is estimated that the fishing sector contributes about 4% to the Gross Domestic Product (FAO 2014). While fish contributed 70% of the animal protein in the diets of Malawians in the 1970s, this has declined as a result of declining catches and population growth. As a result, Malawi's per capita fish supply had fallen from 14kg in the 1970s to about 5.7 kg per person per year by 2011, a 60% decline (FAO, 1992, 2012). This implies a serious decline in fish protein supply to the nation, especially for the vulnerable poor that rely on fish as a cheaper source of protein. In addition, the sector employs nearly 60,000 fishers and over 500,000 other people in secondary and support services (Department of Fisheries (DoF), 2013a). Since 1974, the estimated total annual























































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