

The sad point is that there is no fairness in our world.
But it is not to be like that forever.
CAMA is taking the tobacco buyers to court on price fixing
This is also the hope of our 500,000 tenants ...

TOBACCO TENANTS IN MALAWI'S ECONOMY

By Jos Kuppens*

Lawmakers, parliamentarians have been elected and are paid to chart out the best possible future for a nation. When there is a strong government in place, a strong opposition is needed. This forms a good formula to produce a clash of ideas and so promote better solutions for the ills besetting a nation. An example can be made of the U.K. where there is a relatively strong government but a weak opposition. Commentators have said that this is responsible for the country as a whole loosing out because of poor policies. In Malawi we have the opposite situation, a strong opposition and weak government and similarly the policies that come out of parliament seem not to be for the good of the nation.

One such policy is the fertiliser subsidy. No one has questioned much the fertiliser subsidy for the growing of food, except may be some donors. The only caution that was called for by a few dissenting voices in parliament is that this subsidy should not take the place of TIP, since TIP was targeting resource poor farmers. Parliament brushed this from the table. Instead in addition to the subsidy for fertiliser to grow food, it pushed through a subsidy for fertiliser used to grow tobacco. Our policy makers did not have any problem with this. But Why? Would it be because many of them are growing tobacco and they were targeting themselves. Similarly as when our honourables voted themselves increases in salaries that are way out touch with what most common Malawians are receiving?

Tobacco Tenants

In the early nineties, H.K. Banda singled out some priests in Nkhosakota for criticism. They had started to work with tobacco tenants. This was the outcome of surveys done in the parish in order to find who were the people most in need, most oppressed. Those identified as most in need or most oppressed were the tobacco tenants. So it was that little by little the justice and peace group of the parish started to raise the awareness of the tenants about their situation and their rights. It led to the start of a trade union: Tobacco Tenants and Allied Workers Union in Malawi (TOTAWUM). Already in those days, it became clear that tenants needed the protection of the law. Accordingly, in the mid nineties a first bill was worked out to give the tenants and the landlords a reference point as to their rights and duties. This document has been gathering dust for a long time until it saw a last revision in December 2004. It is now known as the Tenancy Labour Bill 2005.

The working and living conditions of the tenants on tobacco farms are the subject of several studies over these years. We mention three: "Assessment of the potential impact abolition of the tenancy labour system" by Dr. M. Phiri (2004); "The Smoking Business: Tobacco Tenants in Malawi" by Torres (2000); and "Women and Children in Malawi: Hard Work Little Pay" by Torres, L. Matala, (1999), all elaborate on the working and living conditions of the tenants and reflect

about the system of tenant labour.

The Centre For Social Concern, having taken over where the priests who were the object of H.K. Banda's scorn had left off, tried to corroborate these studies by doing a survey in three districts visiting and interviewing close to 900 tenants. Focus groups were held in all three districts. The survey found that the situation has not changed much.

Action Oriented Research

The purpose of the study was not to gather dust but to help change the situation of the tenants for the better. The CFSC did see that to have a lasting impact, the Tenancy Labour Bill 2005 should finally make it to parliament. It launched its study in the presence of a cross section of stakeholders in February 2005 and in the month of March 2005 it provided a summary of the study to all parliamentarians with the request that they table, debate and pass the Labour Tenancy Bill 2005 so that it could be enacted as law. In March it was not possible. In June it did not work out, since the matter of budget and impeachment took front stage. Subsequent sessions including this one seem again preoccupied with matters that are deemed more important. If parliament took time to debate the hunger crisis, one can agree. But for the matter of impeachment, many people will have very serious doubts.

Trade Related Aspects of the Tobacco Industry

In the past months there have been voices that have joined the complaints of the tobacco growers on the low prices being obtained at the auction floors. CAMA took up the comments of C. Stanbrook Q.C. on price fixing and wants to bring the tobacco buyers to court. The CFSC, among others, draws the attention to the fact that the international trade system is working against countries like Malawi. This is actually visible in our tobacco industry both in the buying and further use. In world where fairness reigns, there should not be such a huge difference between the manufactured cigarette and the tobacco that makes up this cigarette as is the case now. In other words, if the growers would receive about 10% of the price a carton of cigarettes costs, for one of their kg of raw tobacco (which is enough tobacco to manufacture 4 cartons of cigarettes), Malawi would have an economy where begging can be a thing of the past. Or if the international community would be really serious in helping Malawi to get out of its present predicament, it would help Malawi to set up cigarette production of its own. The sad point is that there is no fairness in our world. But it is said nowhere that this is to be so forever and ever world without end. Witness the movements for 'Trade Justice' and 'Make Poverty History'. That is why our policy and lawmakers should turn their attention to issues that count. Like the living and working conditions of an estimated 500,000 tenants and other workers on our estates. □

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