

Malawi: Government money-saving measure costs traders dearly

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LILONGWE: The Malawian government's new cost-cutting prohibition on the hosting of conferences, training sessions and workshops on the shores of Lake Malawi has hit small-scale merchants who ply their trade on the roadsides and beaches of the fresh-water lake.

Over the years most official gatherings of the government and its partners, including donors and civil society organisations, were held in hotels and lodges on the beaches of the fresh water lake that abuts the three regions that the southern African country is divided into.

But in March 2010, Malawi's office of the president and cabinet (OPC) released a government circular instructing all government ministries and departments to cease holding functions at the lake. Government correspondence indicates that the decision was made as a cost-cutting measure.

OPC wants all meetings, workshops and trainings to be held in the capital city Lilongwe where government departments have their head offices, or in the duty stations in towns and districts where civil servants are based.

Government argues that it spends large amounts of money on accommodation, food and transportation for the people who travel to the lakeshore resorts for the meetings, according to principal secretary in charge of administration in the OPC, Charles Msosa.

However, Hilda Mapira, who has been running a vegetable stall on the road that leads to the lakeshore district of Mangochi in southern Malawi, is worried about her fresh produce business. She sells different kinds of vegetables such as tomatoes, carrots, cabbages, garlic, pumpkins and onions - depending on which produce is in season.

Mapira told IPS that she has experienced a decline in the amount of stock that she sells on any given day since the government's decision.

"I used to get at least 50 dollars per day from sales but now I count myself very lucky if I manage to make 20 dollars," she laments.

Mapira, a lone breadwinner with four children aged between seven and 16, says she has never worried about her capabilities to keep her children in school until now. "My husband died six years ago and I have been able to feed and send my children to school without major problems. The money from my business has been enough up until now,"

she explains.

Most of her customers - some of whom she knows by name - were government officials who "frequently" stopped by her stall on the way from the lake.

"Most of the people who frequent my vegetable stand are government officials. I know this for sure because they were in vehicles with MG number plates," Mapira told IPS. MG stands for "Malawi Government".

Mapira said she cannot think of another way to earn a living.

Up to 65 percent of Malawi's 13.1 million population lives below one dollar a day.

Mapira is not the only person who has found herself in this predicament.

Fisherman Yusuf Mmadi from Salima, the lake district in central Malawi, told IPS that he is no longer selling as much fish as he has been selling in the 17 years he has been fishing in Lake Malawi.

"There are now very few government seminars happening here and we do not have as many people buying fish from us as before," he laments.

It is not only individuals that have reservations about the government's decision to stop the lakeshore meetings. The Malawi Tourism Association (MTA), a grouping of airlines, hotels, car hire firms, travel agents and tour operators, is also opposed to the decision.

MTA represents the interests of the private sector in the tourism industry and provides government with "realistic and professional input" in policy development, including regulations affecting the tourism sector.

"The decision to stop lakeshore meetings will have negative implications for the tourism industry. Government has been a major player in providing business to the tourism sector through the conferences that are held at the lake," states MTA executive director Sam Botomani.

He is worried that the government, which has been a major customer of the lakeshore hotels, is taking away its revenue contribution to the private sector.

"There are so many Malawians working in hotels and resorts along the lakeshore. These people may eventually lose their jobs if there's no business," he said.

Apart from produce and fish sales, the roads that lead to the beaches of Lake Malawi have always been a hive of trade activities, including artwork, curios, mats, baskets and wicker furniture.

"We have to find other means of earning a living. We just don't know what," laments Mmadi.

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