



## Research Brief

# Take the Lilongwe: Coming Home to Water in Africa

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When I first heard that my family was to be posted in Malawi, I was thrilled. In the early 1990s, I started my career in water policy and law in South Africa, working on community engagement in managing the transboundary Limpopo River Basin. I fell in love with the region and with the work. Upon graduating law school at the University of Virginia, I became a Law Fellow at ELI and have since had the privilege of co-directing ELI's Africa Program and of founding and directing the International Water Program.

Last year, a new opportunity arose that would combine these regional and substantive areas of focus. My husband was offered a position with the U.S. Centers for Disease Control in Lilongwe, Malawi. When I told my colleagues and friends that we were moving to Malawi, most responded with an enthusiastic, "That's terrific! Where is that, exactly?" Malawi is a small strip of a country (slightly smaller than Pennsylvania) in southeastern Africa that sits just below Tanzania, right between Zambia and Mozambique. One-third of the country is made up of one of Africa's Great Rift Lakes

— Lake Malawi, or Lake Nyasa, depending on where you're from. The Lake is physically shared by Malawi, Tanzania and Mozambique, but its political borders are still contested.

Spending two years in southern Africa would afford ELI a unique opportunity to expand and strengthen our partnerships and to build projects that would benefit from my full-time presence in the region. And so, with the support of ELI and a commitment to having at least three Internet companies functioning in my home office at any one time, I have been able to transition the International Water Program headquarters to Lilongwe.

We celebrate our one-year anniversary in Malawi this month. Next week, I am flying to Johannesburg to participate in a planning meeting for a project that is assessing the progress of transboundary basins toward meeting the goals of the Southern African Development Community's regional water protocol. I have just finished the first stage of a project with the World Bank's Malawi office helping to identify how to set up and operationalize a new institutional framework

governing integrated water resources management in the Shire River Basin, which covers one-third of Malawi and is shared with Mozambique. As part of our ongoing work in Jordan on reforming the water sector, I have also been able to bring colleagues from the Jordanian Ministry of Water and Irrigation to South Africa on a study tour that drew on the similarities between the regions in addressing issues of water scarcity and reform. It has been an incredibly rewarding year, both personally and professionally, and I believe that ELI's Africa presence has been and will continue to provide unique opportunities for both the Institute and our partners.

I also hope that our presence can contribute positively to Malawi's sustainable development. Malawi is known as "the Warm Heart of Africa" and it's not just advertising. People here are warm, friendly, and generous to a fault. They are also among the poorest people in the world. Malawi ranks 160th out of 182 countries on the Human Development Index. Most of the population is rural and depends on subsistence agriculture for livelihoods. This past

August, four districts in the South of the country were declared by the World Food Program to be in "emergency" status with respect to food security, with other parts of the country assigned as "crisis" areas. This is as much to do with a faltering economy as with an untenable agricultural system.

As an environmental lawyer, I automatically searched for the links between this endemic poverty and resource governance. The fact that several major donors are freezing aid to Malawi over a massive corruption scandal in the government is indicative of the lack of accountability and weak governance frameworks plaguing Malawi's ministries of environment, water, and forestry.

Our work in the Shire Basin is a promising start, but there are pressing needs for governance reforms throughout the environmental sector here. And at home, I hope that my daughter (Emmy, who is five) will remember what it was like to live among people who have so little and still share everything. I know I will. I don't feel a long way from home anymore. I feel right at home in Lilongwe.