



AFRICAN FUTURES Project

Mzimba Futures

Operationalising the Nature Futures Framework in Malawi

12 August 2022

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THE NAME MZIMBA WAS CREATED IN 1907. AS WE WERE ENTERING THE NYASALAND PROTECTORATE, WE WERE ENTERING AS ONE BODY. SO MZIMBA MEANS ‘ONE BODY.’

- DR. AUPSON NDABAZAKE THOLE

Background

The failure to meet global sustainability goals, most notably for biodiversity, highlights the need to develop transformative strategies to restore the planet. Scenarios are powerful tools to examine how different choices could affect nature and human wellbeing in the future. However, global scenarios largely ignore the fundamental role of the biosphere in supporting a good quality of life and, furthermore, do not allow participants to experiment with the transformative changes necessary for the achievement of sustainability goals. To address this gap, the African Futures Project aims to co-produce scenarios of how transformative change could lead to more sustainable futures for people and nature in Africa. Building on work by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) Task Force on Scenarios and Models to develop multiscale scenarios based on positive human-nature relationships, we adapt a method to co-produce transformative scenarios for the African continent using the Nature Futures Framework.

Although Africa will be hit hard by environmental change, its largely intact biocultural diversity holds much potential for equitable sustainable development. Undertaking this exercise with African stakeholders to generate scenarios where Africa transforms towards sustainability will result in novel academic outputs as well as build futuring capabilities on the continent. By creating new scenarios that foster inclusivity and promote imagination, the Project addresses a key knowledge gap on how to enable transformative change towards sustainability and will also contribute a case study to the ongoing IPBES work plan to operationalise the Nature Futures Framework.

The underlying ethos of the project is to employ a decolonial approach to creating futures that fully acknowledges structural and historical injustices on the continent. We seek to build an African network of changemakers and create a space that facilitates frank and difficult conversations about identity, aspirations and diverse ways of being and knowing and how these will shape the future. The project builds on the foundation of Africa's rich bio-cultural heritage and storytelling to help create more desirable African-centered visions of the future through methods such as speculative fiction, thereby contributing to the growing field of Africanfuturism. We have a strong emphasis on acknowledging and foregrounding Indigenous and Local Knowledge (ILK) and Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK). At the same time, we will interrogate what it means to categorize knowledge as ILK and TEK in the African context.

Through collaboration and knowledge co-production (rather than extraction) with participants in this research, we will produce a variety of transformative future scenarios that promote positive human-nature relationships. Futures capacities provide a valuable tool to communities and organizations to have more say in the futures they want to build, and so this project will also act to increase those capacities and knowledge exchanges. As meaningful and decolonial co-production is a cornerstone to our research approach, throughout the project we will seek input and feedback in our research design, and to receive comments upon anything that would make your participation feel more meaningful.

It is against this backdrop that the African Futures Project, Mabilabo Social Support Forum (MSSF) and the Mzimba Heritage Association (Mziha) convened 2 future envisioning workshops of the traditional leaders (amakhosi), women and youth of the M'mbelwa Ngoni Kingdom of Mzimba, Northern Region, Malawi. Background interviews with key stakeholders were undertaken to understand the context of the region (See Appendix 1,2,3) and working with a local organisation was essential for creating buy-in and a shared ownership of the process.

The visioning exercises were grounded in the IPBES Nature Futures Framework (NFF) to focus on desirable human-nature interactions. As part of this activity, we commissioned the writing of three short speculative fictions stories and three artworks with the aim of providing insight into the positive future possibilities for humankind and nature as imagined by the Ngoni in the Mzimba region. Each painting and story aims to highlight a future dominated by one of the three NFF value perspectives, namely; nature for nature, nature for society and nature as culture.

Workshop structure

We held two iterations of the workshop, with distinct “clusters” of participants. Participants consisted of one female representative, one youth representative, and the amakhosi from each of Mzimba's 10 kingdoms. The first workshop was held in Mzimba town on Friday 8 July 2022, and included six of the ten kingdoms. The second workshop was held in Jenda on 11 July 2022, and included the remaining four kingdoms. See Table 1 for a breakdown of kingdoms present at each workshop.

Regrettably, the Inkosi Mabulabo Jere, Euthini Chindi, and the Inkosi ya Makosi were unable to attend the workshops themselves. Those Inkosi sent representatives in their place. Those kingdoms are marked with an asterisk in Table 1.

Table 1: Kingdoms represented at each workshop. Kingdoms whose inkhosi were unable to attend physically are marked with a star.

Workshop 1 (8 July, Mzimba Town)	Workshop 2 (11 July, Jenda)
Kingdoms represented: • Chindi * • Jalavikuba • Kampingo • Mpherembe • Muthwalo 	Kingdoms represented: • Mmbelwa * • Khosolo • Mabulabo * • Mzikubola • Mzukuzuku 

The workshops were structured in 3 stages:

1. First, project members led participants through creating a system map of important natural elements and corresponding drivers of change in Mzimba. System map formats included causal loop diagrams, rich pictures, and lists of drivers linked to NFF value perspectives. This stage enabled participants to reach a common understanding of the current system, its challenges, and its opportunities.
2. In stage 2, participants identified seed initiatives and possible sources of positive change. Using the NFF triangle as a visual aid, they mapped these possibilities to value perspectives. Through these conversations, participants clarified the perspectives by which their imagined changes would be desirable and set the ground for imagining larger-scale transformation.
3. Finally, participants extended their seed initiatives into visions of a bright future in Mzimba, with prompts from the speculative fiction writers and artists to push their thinking.



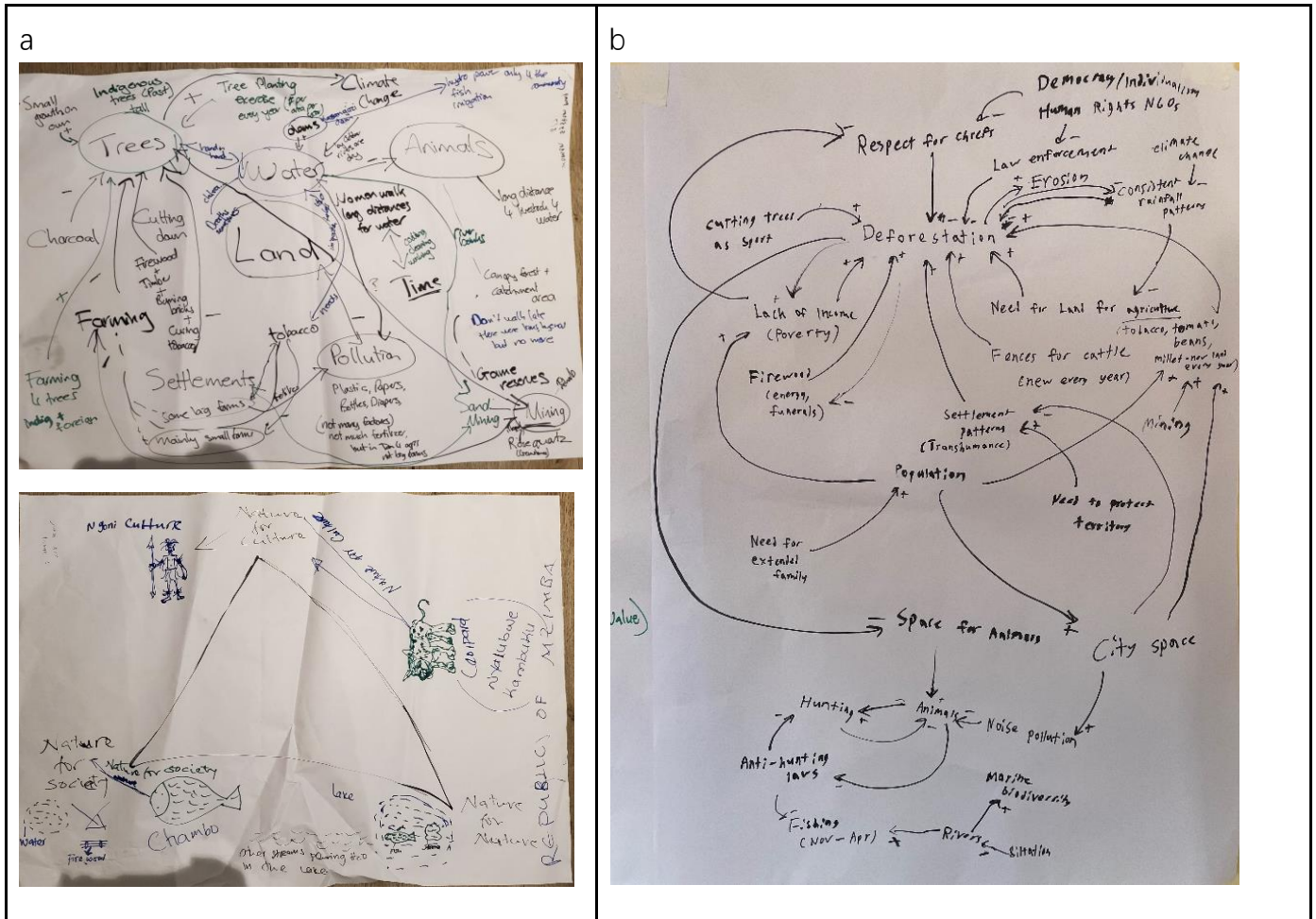


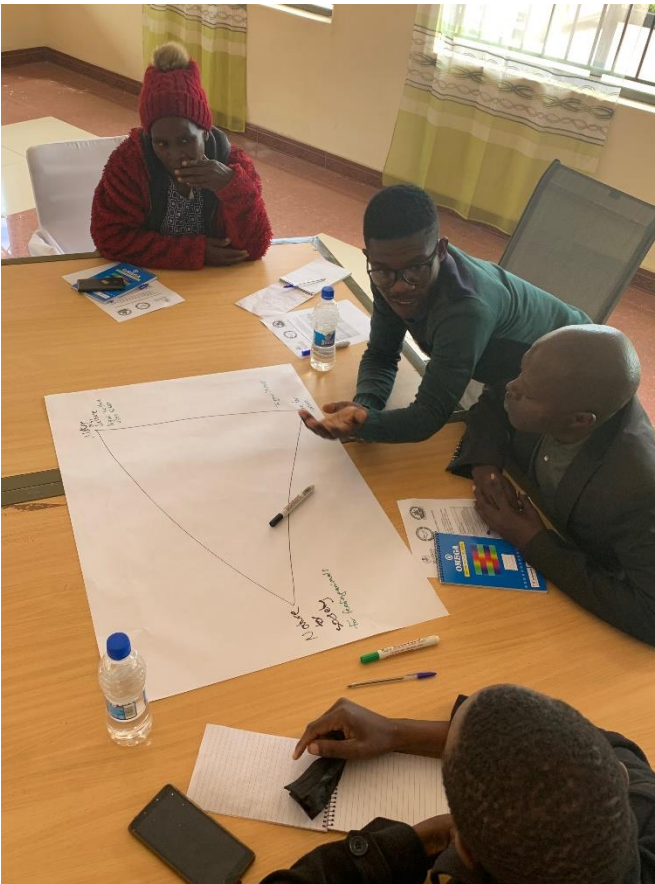
Figure 1: a) System map and NFF diagram produced by women's group during Workshop 1. b) Results of Workshop 2's full-group system mapping exercise.

Discussion was mostly held in Chichewa, with occasional translations for English-speaking project team members. There were also large stretches of discussion held in English, and some conversations were held in Ngoni.

Topics and issues that came up in both workshops included:

- Connections between natural and cultural degradation
- Returning to the past/tradition (in light of the disruption of colonialism)
- Gender and traditional leadership
- Regional autonomy
- Connections between poverty and deforestation (especially via charcoal production)

The forest's contributions to climate regulation, food provision, defense, wildlife habitat, traditional medicine, and sense-of-place were often noted, as well as its importance as a cultural site. For those reasons, reforestation was especially important to all participants.



FORESTS HIGHLY RECOVERED, PRODUCING
NATURAL FRUITS WHICH WILL SUPPORT DIET.

TOURISM WILL IMPROVE, WHICH WILL
BOOST INCOME TO THE LOCAL
GOVERNMENT.

WILD SPACE WILL MULTIPLY. ANIMALS WILL
ROAM.

RIVERS WILL OVERFLOW WITH WATER.
RAINFALL WILL COME ALL THE YEAR ROUND.

- FROM "MUSSO WAKUTOWA WA
MMBELWA," A FUTURE IMAGINED DURING
WORKSHOP 2

Visions

There was a common trend among the 3 visions proposed by the groups in Friday's workshop. Each of the 3 groups consisted entirely of amakhosi, women, and youth representatives respectively. To some extent, every group imagined Mzimba's future as a return to its past, which was interrupted by colonialism. Their futures were primarily concerned with restoration of natural abundance and recovery of cultural tradition. Other important topics included soil health, independence for Mzimba, and female leadership.

Table 2: Visions from Workshop 1.

Title	Group	Details
Mzimba Kingdom	Amakhosi	Mzimba is an independent state. Peace reigns. Forest cover and animal populations have recovered due to intense and robust conservation policies.
Republic of Mzimba	Women	Mzimba is an independent nation in which women can become amakhosi. Cultural traditions have recovered due to dedicated education initiatives. Forest, water bodies, and food provision have recovered due to conservation initiatives.

Unthu Withu (Human, Ours)	Youth	Targeted cultural initiatives have cultivated a common sense of connection to and responsibility for the landscape. This cultural shift bolstered by increased opportunities for sustainable livelihoods and a resurgence of traditional agricultural methods. As a result, water bodies, forest cover, and soil health have recovered. Seeds and seedlings from the forest are exported from Mzimba, bringing sustainable income from the forest.
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In Workshop 2 the project team refined our process. We introduced the NFF before the system mapping, allowing participants more time to familiarize themselves with the framework. We led the entire group through the system mapping together, which yielded a richer image of the system. Because the project team did not need to separate, our Chichewa-speaking team members could lead the discussion in Chichewa rather than in English. Finally, the smaller group size allowed us to divide participants into two groups, mixing the three demographic groups.

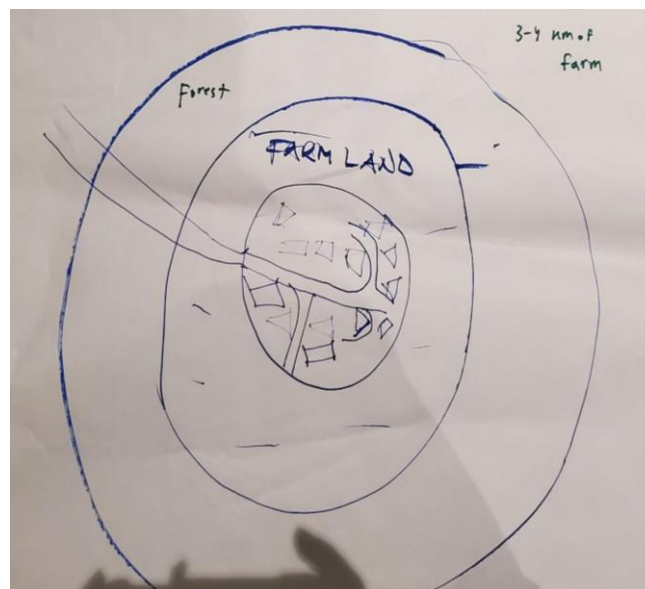


Figure 2: Village structure as pictured by one of Workshop 2's groups. Farmland is contained to prevent sprawl from interfering with forest health. Space between villages is dominated by forest, which offers both climate regulation and military protection.

Workshop 2's participants seemed to find it easier to look into the future. They had clearer visions of more transformative changes. The two groups' visions were quite similar, in broad strokes (Table 3). Both futures pictured Mzimba as a largely autonomous region, with the decisions of traditional courts supported by the Malawi national government. Both imagined Mzimba's population returning to village life, but not without quality-of-life improvements brought about by technology and global commerce. Both groups also specifically imagined synthetic zibinya (ceremonial attire traditionally made from leopard skins), which they imagined would enable people to perform ceremonies without endangering fragile animal populations. Other important topics included land rights, culturally significant uses of firewood and lumber, and negative impacts of international NGO presence.

Table 3: Visions from Workshop 2.

Title	Details
Musso Wakutowa Wa Mmbelwa (The Beautiful Kingdom of Mmbelwa)	People live in nested villages (See Figure 2), surrounded by thriving farmlands and a healthy forest. Mzimba is governed by the amakhosi's courts, which are supported by the national government. Stronger enforcement of traditional environmental law has enabled full recovery of forests and rivers. Villages are full of traditional round dwellings, which have been fitted with modern technology powered by renewable energy. The bulk of energy production is hydropower and solar. A thriving tourism market provides additional income to local governments and communities.
Umotheto Mmbelwa	The image shows two pieces of handwritten notes on a yellow background. The left piece of paper is titled 'Planting school tree' and lists various tree species and their uses. The right piece of paper is titled 'New Generation Mmbelwa Kingdom' and lists various activities and products. People live in multi-story traditional houses within villages. E-commerce offers opportunities to participate in national and international markets. Everyday life is enhanced by locally developed personal-use technology (e.g. computers, food processing equipment, and agriculture equipment). Children participate in obligatory cultural and technical education.

Conclusions

Overall, the workshops were a success in engaging local communities and traditional authorities to reimagine desirable futures and the prompting from the artists and writers helped to push thinking into a more transformative realm. A key reflection on connecting ILK with futures thinking through a more decolonial approach was that all the groups found it difficult just to imagine more desirable futures based on the present, but instead needed to return to a pre-colonial past in order to envision what a culturally appropriate future may entail. This was also an important reflection in the story-writing process, which is still underway.

In terms of the Nature Futures framework, this resonated with the participants and prompted interesting discussions, especially with regards to nature as culture. The final images that emerged were able to capture these discussions in a synthesised way (Figures 3,4,5).

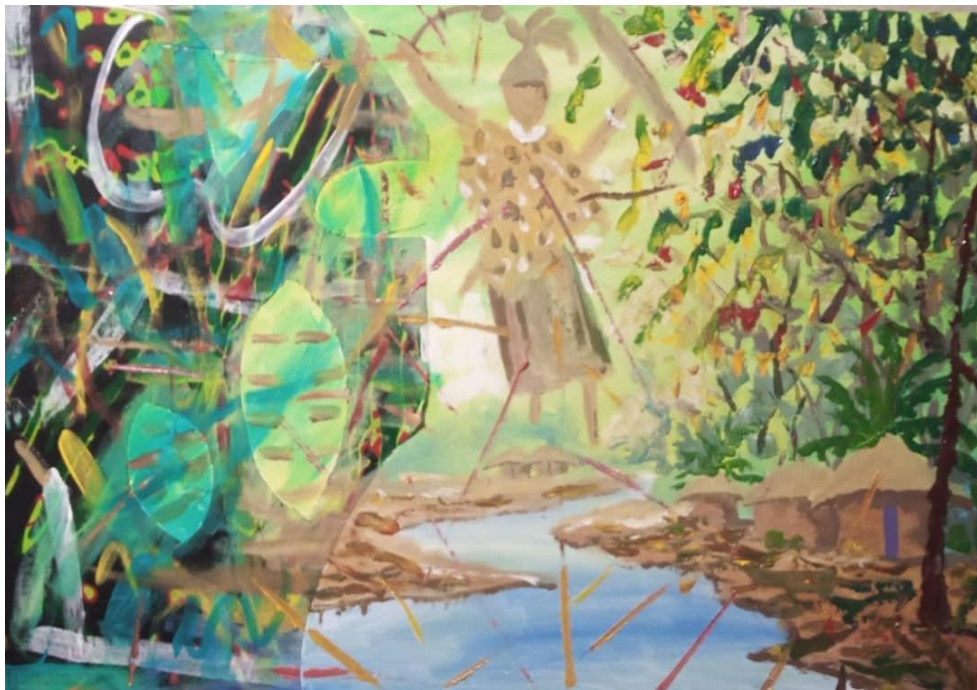


Figure 3a: Nature as Culture by James Tambula



Figure 3b: Nature for Nature, Maputo Soko

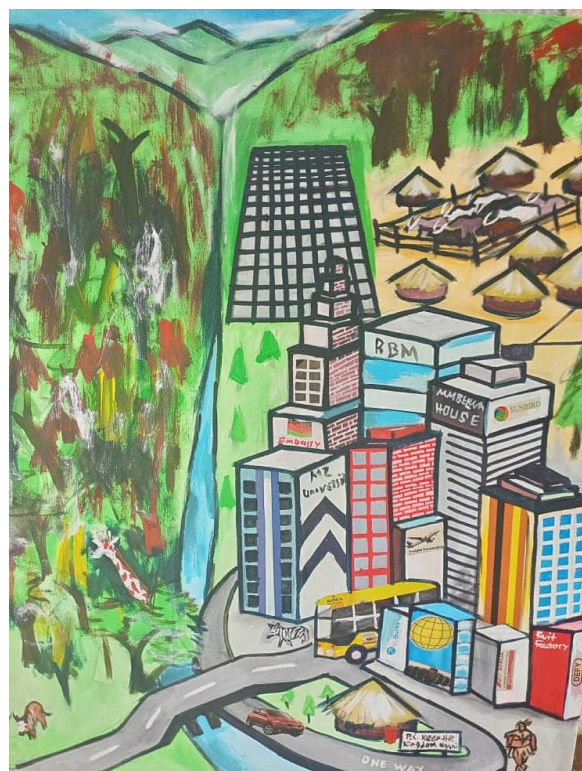


Figure 3c: Nature for Society, Jimmy Malinga Manda

These artworks will be presented to the community for their own use and future engagements, but will be free to use with acknowledgement of the artists. Next steps will include a finalisation of the systems mapping process and an academic write-up that includes reference to the speculative fiction stories. Feeding the outputs from this workshop into regional workshops under the project and then into the overarching futures workshop will also be critical. This project is a key outcome of how the Nature Futures Framework can be used in the context of ILK and is a novel attempt to mix methods to generate more creative outputs. Further learning on the process and how the outputs are used will be important further work.





THE LAND BELONGS TO THE PEOPLE. WE JUST NEED TO PROTECT IT.

- FUTURE VISION PRESENTED BY THE MZIMBA
WORKSHOP'S YOUTH GROUP.