

# The tenacity of the Zambian stonecrushers

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BY BIVAN SALUSEKI

Although the Zambian environmental legal framework has grown over the years, this has not been matched by improvement in the quality of natural resources and the environment. There are weaknesses in the legislation and in the implementation and enforcement of environmental legislation. Even more so in the reporting of environmental activities by the media.

The effects of these inadequacies cry out to be seen. Specifically, in downtown Lusaka, illegal stone crushers with mini-quarries continue to dig and deface the city, even as close as the military airport in the capital city. To them, defacing the landscape is nothing but a way of eking out a living from the soil, especially with the rising pangs of poverty. An estimated 86% of the more than 10 million Zambians are poor and live on less than US\$ 1 a day. This explains why minefields dot the edges of the capital. Zambians, like Moffat Zulu, can be found blasting a huge stone with a hammer, laws or no laws; he would surely never give up his trade. He does not want to be like the other "lazy bones" that take up prolonged leisure in their uncomfortable beds and those who are resigned to their fate. Zulu surely does not want to be one of them. With improvised tools, sporting the physique of weight lifters from the effects of their energy-sapping occupation, he, like hundreds of others, are the professional stone crushers and, he has a quarry he calls his own.

Over the years stone crushers have withstood the rigours of the stone crushing business and ironically, they claim not to have contracted any respiratory illness arising from the nature and hazards associated with the work they do and the environment in which they work. Some say they have managed to educate their children and pay for medical services in government hospitals which ask for money before treatment.

There are weaknesses within the sector ministries and in the formulation of environmental legislation due to gaps, overlaps, conflicts and inconsistencies. There is inadequate research and legislative review and enforcement mechanisms and procedures. It becomes ping pong when the issue of stone crushing is raised in Zambia. The local city council blames the environmental body and the environmental body shifts the blame back onto the council. Who is supposed to enforce the legislation?

Meanwhile the crushing goes on, and once in a while when council employees dare get on the streets to remove the crushers, it's at great personal risk – they get stoned and then retreat to their offices.

This explains the stone crushers' fierce tenacity. They are oblivious to the law that prohibits illegal stone quarrying, especially in undesignated places. Hundreds of these people have taken advantage of the laxity in the law regarding many forms of environmental degradation.

## WHEN THE LAW SLEEPS

The law is in a slumbering stupor, and it is not clear who should do what to the crushers. They are determined to mint money at whatever cost to the environment. They do not know that the craters formed are a breeding ground for mosquitoes after rainwater is trapped in it. And in Mutendere, one of the poverty stricken townships in Lusaka, the craters are used as toilets. It's an ugly scene. But, certainly the illegal injudicious

exploitation of natural resources and activities that are inimical to a well-balanced environment, will certainly go on unabated.

Recently, the Environmental Council of Zambia held a workshop for media personnel, in which I was a participant. It was noted that the stone crushers do their business with a tinge of remorsefulness, but maybe they do so because their livelihood depends on the soils.

In fact, when some of them are reminded about the attendant health risks associated with the craters, and other damages linked to illegal stone quarrying, most of them say they cannot afford to sit back because they cannot eat the law.

Many people toy with the idea that whatever the law may be, no one has the right to stop them from exploiting God-given natural resources.

It is in this context that the need to synchronise environmental laws and co-ordinate their execution was whipped to the fore at the workshop. However, other impediments to enforcement of environmental legislation were brought to light.

## WHO IS SUPPOSED TO DO WHAT?

Who is supposed to enforce what? The Zambian environmental council, though given powers to enforce environmental legislation, is constrained regarding large scale operations because of lack of funding.

How ironic for a country that is trying to diversify from mining to agriculture and tourism. Apart from illegal stone crushing, there are also subtle but effective activities like charcoal burning which continue to endanger most of Zambia's forests. Only recently, Zambia's biggest rivers supplying water to most of the major towns were clogged with the hyacinth weed. The extent of the problem was so serious that stories on the weed even got prominence in the Zambian media.

In Zambia reporting on the environment starts and ends with official statements from government ministers and other officials. A glance at the Zambian media, particularly the print media, and you'll see there is only one government paper that has a column on the environment and unfortunately most people do not read it. There are a lot of reasons for that, but my guess is that it could be the style of writing.

Zambia is endowed with a rich natural resource base and an environment that is relatively unspoiled. However, the government is realising that a threat to sustainable use exists. Based on potential social costs, it has been identified that health effects from the lack of clean water and sanitation facilities, particularly in urban areas, is the most critical environmental problem in the country.

The other major problems are the interrelated soil erosion and soil fertility decline on agricultural lands, deforestation, potential depletion of wildlife and fisheries resources and air pollution problems in the Copperbelt cities. The general economic decline over the past decade has led to high rates of unemployment and lowered output. This puts even more pressure on natural resources as people turn to the exploitation of the natural resources for survival. These problems are compounded by the inadequate policy and legal frameworks that integrate the socio-economic development objectives with environmental management objectives. It is these issues that need to be highlighted. And they will certainly need the help of the media.