



ZOMBA CIVIL SOCIETY
ORGANIZATION NETWORK

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

24TH JUNE 2025

**From Forest Plunder to Broken Bridges, Who Pays the Development Price?
A call for Immediate Solutions and Accountability!**

1.0 Zomba Civil Society Organizations (ZCSOs) Network is a grouping of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) currently implementing various projects under Zomba district and city councils. We represent community voice in light of socio-economic development interests of the people of Zomba.

2.0 We have noted with great and disturbing concerns **two critical issues** that have enduring effects for not only the current generation of residents of Zomba communities but also the future generations. We have therefore convened this press conference to amplify our voice to all stakeholders from duty bearers and community leaders to business communities and all the residents of Zomba on the said issues and demand for immediate solutions and accountability.

❖ **The continued Deforestation of Zomba Mountain: A looming Crisis**

3.0 We note with heavy hearts the free-for-all destruction of Zomba Mountain forest reserve by unlicensed timber harvesters. Despite a January 2024 government promise during stakeholders meeting at Kuchawe to deploy the Malawi Defence Force (MDF) to guard the mountain, illegal logging continues. Gangs openly carry logs from the forest to areas like Chikanda, Mpondabwino and places beyond Zomba city and district. Sadly, it is this kind of environmental destruction that threatens water sources like Mulunguzi Dam, which is at its lowest level this year, and increases the risk of climate disasters. The deadly mudslides during Cyclone Freddy were a stark warning to everyone that the Mountain will speak brutally in the near future. And, on that day, everyone including visitors to Zomba shall have a stake of their price to pay.

4.0 As a Network, we are collaborating with well-meaning Malawians that include Southern Region Water Board (SRWB), Blantyre Walkers, Lilongwe Walkers, Joggers, hikers from Zomba as well as surrounding Districts under Friends of Mulunguzi in trying to replant the lost trees as well as erect firebreaks. We therefore encourage business communities, institutions, students, development partners and all the residents of Zomba to do their part in the efforts to restore the lost glory of our Mountain.

Our Demands

1. **24/7 MDF Protection:** We therefore call upon the State President, His Excellency Dr. Luzarus Chakwera, as Commander-In-Chief of the MDF, to exercise his powers by immediately issuing an order for the MDF to establish permanent camps on Zomba Mountain for the round-the-clock protection of the forest. This is the most effective short-term solution to stop the deforestation while medium to long-term solutions are being identified and put in place.
2. **Community Engagement:** We call upon strong collaboration of local government agencies in Zomba to engage the communities on alternative livelihoods for loggers and raise awareness on the urgent need to preserve our mountain by all stakeholders. We also request the **National Economic Empowerment Fund (NEEF)** to extend their economic empowerment interventions to these groups. We appeal and urge development partners to come and join our efforts with resources that can fast-track restoration of the mountain.
3. **Prosecution of Enablers:** We call upon the law enforcers to investigate and hold accountable not only illegal harvesters of the trees but also buyers of the timber from the trees, including complicit business people and officials in accordance with section **46 read with section 64 of the Forest Act, 2020.**

❖ Mpondabwino Bridge: The Broken Trust

5.0 ZCSOs Network expresses shock over the heart-breaking substandard construction of Mpondabwino Bridge, a project which in 2021 cost nearly **MK200 millions** of tax payers' money, overseen by the Zomba City Council. Barely two years after completion and handover to the community, the bridge has been reduced to a death trap due to glaring structural failures.

An Assessment by the Malawi Engineering Institution (MEI) reveal Alarming Defects

- I. Cracked concrete on the bridge deck, exposing steel reinforcement bars.
- II. Missing critical documentation, including concrete strength tests and material certificates.

- III. Deviation from agreed specifications, such as incorrect slab thickness.
- IV. No completion certificate issued by the consultant, coupled with missing inspection records.
- V. Willful hiding of defects by use of black sheets.

(See Malawi Engineers Institute report titled ‘Final Report- Defect Investigation Report on Mpondabwino Bridge, Zomba,’ dated 30th May 2025, pages 20-22)

6.0 This is not only a technical failure but also a clear reflection of gross negligence, weak oversight, and possible corruption on the part of duty bearers for this project. It is also a betrayal of public trust and violation of the right to safety and mobility, and ultimately a gross violation of the right to economic activities and development by thousands of people who, on daily basis, rely on the bridge to access affordable means of transport for their businesses.

7.0 Sadly, as duty bearers, the City Council has chosen to mislead the general public by claiming that the Malawi Engineers Institute have not yet released their final report. We can only regard this as guilty conscious and an attempt to shield their liabilities and accountability to the public especially communities around Mpondabwino. This represents broken trust between citizens and the leaders whom they have always looked forward to realize their basic socio-economic aspirations.

Our Demands

1. **Immediate Redress:** We call for urgent repairs to the bridge with effective oversight to restore safety and easy mobility. We request **central government through Ministry of Transport and Public Works** to intervene and fast-track the process. This is a life-line for struggling small-scale businesses due to expensive transport of goods and services as a result of the broken bridge.
2. **Accountability:** We call upon **National Construction Industry Council (NCIC)** to make use of the findings by Malawi Engineers Institute and intervene to discipline the contractor (**Shimmering Towers Construction**) and the consulting engineers (**Jatula Consulting Engineers Ltd**) who delivered this heart-breaking substandard bridge leading to loss of Millions of public funds. Further, we call upon law **enforcers and the Anti-Corruption Bureau (ACB)** to investigate for possible theft and corruption between the contractor, the consulting engineers, and city council officials involved.
3. **Systemic Reform:** We encourage our local councils and all duty bearers to always remember that they are in positions of trust. They hold fiduciary duties which they must discharge in a manner that sustains people’s trust. They must demonstrate urgency on matters that expose citizens to life-threatening environmental shocks and

strive to observe strict observations of regulations and procedures that were put in place to prevent loss of public resources.

Conclusion

To the People of Zomba: The two issues we have highlighted in this press statement, represent many other issues that demand for concerted efforts with duty bearers to arrive at optimal solutions. These are issues that directly hinge on our survival as a district and city. Nobody is in a better position to protect our resources than ourselves for we shall have ourselves to pay the heavy price for failing to collaborate or engage with duty bearers. We therefore call upon all residents and development stakeholders of Zomba to embrace active citizenship approach towards community development issues. It requires participation in initiatives that protect our resources. It also requires showing interest towards public projects in the local communities and engage with duty bearers to demonstrate transparency and accountability in the implementation of public projects. This will safeguard our resources and prevent future losses of public funds.

**SIGNED
CHAIRPERSON
ZOMBA CSOs NETWORK
24TH JUNE 2025**