

The World Bank and Malawi's Main National Highway

“In 1958, there was no road worth speaking about between Zomba and Blantyre—a dusty track, wooden bridges all along. You remember that yourself, wooden bridges, bridges that were being washed away during the rainy season. Over there at Liwonde, a little boat. You had to wait hours and hours, hours and hours. Well you see now. To build that road...money from the World Bank.

‘I have come here to open this road for you officially. You have already used it but now I open it for you so that you can use it even with more pride – with cars, bicycles, walking. So I now declare this road officially and legally open.’”

With this Malawi's first President Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda opened the World Bank-financed Zomba-Lilongwe Road on 10 November 1971.

The Zomba–Lilongwe Road was the fruit of the World Bank's first lending operation in Malawi, approved by the Bank's Board on October 4, 1966. Malawi, formerly Nyasaland and a territory of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland (1953-1963), was not a beneficiary of any of the Bank loans to the Federation.

The first credit of US\$490 000 was to cover three activities: First, detailed engineering studies, design and preparation of tender documents for the 168-mile Zomba–Lilongwe Rd; Second, review and revision as necessary of the detailed engineering and cost estimates prepared by the Ministry of Works for the 90-mile Lilongwe–Mchinji Rd. Third, engineering and economic route-selection studies for the Blantyre/Limbe–Lilongwe Rd.

After the design studies for the M1, the second lending operation was for Highway Project 1, worth US\$11.5 million and approved by the Bank Board on February 5, 1968. This credit financed the reconstruction and bituminous paving of the Zomba–Lilongwe Highway, whose engineering studies were done in the first lending.

The second credit also financed a study of Malawi's road transport regulations and road-rail co-ordination. By the end of 1971 the Zomba–Lilongwe Highway had been completed and officially opened. This road has remained Malawi's main national road: the M1.

The M1 now spans the length of the country from Nsanje in the south to Karonga in the north. Over the 40 years of its support to Malawi, the Bank went beyond the Blantyre-Lilongwe stretch to finance other sections of the M1 road as well.

Highway Project 2 (\$10m), approved in December 1974, supported improvement to two lanes of the Lilongwe–Kasungu Road, including a bypass around the Lilongwe Industrial area and the reconstruction of the Lingadzi Bridge.

The Third Highway Project (\$10.5m) approved in December 1977 focused on assisting the government in the general strategy of developing the northern half of the country. The project constructed the Kasungu–Jenda Road to two-lane bituminous surfaced standard. It also funded feasibility and engineering studies of the Jenda-Mzuzu road.

From Jenda, the Bank continued to support the construction of a two-lane bituminous paved road to Luwawa Turnoff (32km) and Mbowe and Ekwendeni (37km). This was through Highway Project 4, worth \$33 million and approved in February 1981. This project also financed the District Road Improvement and Maintenance Program (DRIMP), provided road maintenance equipment, expanded the government’s road maintenance capacity, and trained Ministry of Works’ personnel.

The third and last phase of DRIMP and construction of a two-lane bituminous road between Luwawa Turn-off and Champhoyo was financed by the Bank through the Fifth Highway Project, approved in December 1983. This project also provided weigh bridges and vehicles for axle load control. It also financed a four-year maintenance and rehabilitation program for the main and secondary road networks. All this was at a cost of US\$44.9 million.

The Bank continued maintaining and rehabilitating Malawi’s roads at a cost of \$39.5 million through the Road Maintenance and Rehabilitation Project (ROMARP), approved in June 1999. ROMARP closed on 30 September 2006 leaving behind new look roads in Malawi’s cities: Chilambula Road in Lilongwe, Churchill Road in Limbe, and Soche Road in Blantyre.

ROMARP also upgraded some roads from earth to gravel and others from gravel to paved, and strengthened road sector institutional framework—National Roads Authority, and established the National Construction Industry Council.

Roads continue to be a priority in Malawi’s Growth and Development Strategy. Under the infrastructure theme of the MDGS, government recognizes the need to improve Malawi’s road network. “We consider transport and communications infrastructure to be essential for growth and development and a good candidate for international partnership. We are convinced that through well developed road networks, we will improve not only movement of goods and services from rural areas to urban, but also enhance domestic and international trade,” said Malawi’s President Bingu wa Mutharika told the 2006 UN General Assembly in September.

The World Bank will continue to support Malawi in infrastructure development. The new Country Assistance Strategy for 2007-2010 will focus on infrastructure, in addition to agricultural development, public sector management and governance, HIV/AIDS, and education.