**The Concept of ‘Social License’: Lessons from the Past**

When initiating a project in an area, even at feasibility study level, community members see the initiative as an intrusion. Their assessment and perception of the initiative is informed by their past experience with similar initiatives. Such was the case when the Shire Valley Irrigation Project (SVIP) feasibility studies were initiated in 2015. The area had a similar experience with the establishment of another project, the Nchalo Estate under the Sugar Corporation of Malawi (SUCOMA). SUCOMA was a company of Ronrho Conglomerate whose Chief Executive Officer (CEO) was Tiny Rowland (aka Roland Walter Fuhrhop). SUCOMA was later bought by ILLOVO who are the current owners of the Estate.

During the establishment of Nchalo Estate, the Government acquired the land without proper consultations. People were resettled and were not compensated for the land except for the development thereof. The communities lost tens of hundreds of customary land to the Company without compensation guided by the land laws which treated customary land as a reserve to be tapped on whenever and wherever development needed to take place.

Hence in 2015 when the SVIP feasibility studies started, people reacted as expected. The chiefs sounded doubts about the intention of Government. They claimed that the real motive of Government was to, once again, grab their land for ILLOVO (formerly SUCOMA). In one awareness meeting organized by the Project Technical Team (PTT), one senior local leader stated that he did not believe the PTT as he had had consultation with the team leader for Korea Rural Corporation (KRC) who showed him a map which showed that the canal will take water from Kapichira to ILLOVO Nchalo estate. He concluded that he and his fellow local leaders had agreed not to accept the SVIP, claiming that the Project is there to grab land from people in the area in the same way land was grabbed by SUCOMA in the 1960s.

This situation created numerous challenges to the consultants doing the feasibility studies since community members were suspicious of their activities. For instance, KRC whose Terms of Reference requested them to carry out soil surveys, had challenges collecting soil samples in the field. In a coordination meeting in February 2015, KRC complained that they were unable to conduct soil surveys in certain areas as they were chased by angry people who didn’t want them on their land.

In the same month COWI Consult reported that “generally, the integrated field study progressed well with the full cooperation of the leaders and residents. However, it was not possible to conduct the integrated field study in some villages. The team had to withdraw due to the hostile environment which posed a risk to the field teams. People were suspicious that the team was representing a politician who had previously acquired some land through dubious means. People, especially the youth, were angry and chased the field team away. In one instance the leaving team was followed by two people on a motorbike to make sure they left the area. Intervention of the district and traditional authorities did not result in reducing the risk to the team. Therefore, a decision was made to leave out this area.”

Following these reports, the PTT organized intensive awareness and sensitisation meetings starting with traditional authorities, the Group Village Heads all the way to the community members. During one meeting involving Chikwawa District Commissioner, Paramount Chief Lundu, STA Ngowe, Group Village Heads and Village Heads which was held at Sub-Traditional Authority Ngowe which at that time was the epicenter of the conflict, the case of SVIP was presented. Questions from community members were answered. STA Ngowe gave the green light to proceed with the SVIP work. He commented that if such a meeting had been organized much earlier before the consultants started their work, the experiences they faced could have been avoided. In the process, he gave the project a social license. After the intensive community engagement in the entire area, the project was finally accepted.

This is a good lesson! A social license was provided by the local leaders and the wider community for the SVTP to function as a legitimate and respected operator in their midst. Hence, it is a good practice to always obtain a social license before commencing a project.