



TRAVELER'S LOG



Stories from the field: Can video footage of smallholder farmers in East Africa have an impact at the policy level?

MARCH 4, 2016 | MILO MITCHELL

In February, I joined San Francisco-based photographer Mitchell Maher on a trip to Tanzania and Malawi. The two of us journeyed out together to make films and collect images for some ongoing projects IFPRI is involved with in the region.

In Tanzania, we joined IFPRI senior research fellow [Ephraim Nkonya](#) and his German collaborators, on the massive [Trans-SEC project](#). This project spans a handful of villages across Tanzania, and includes more than 100 researchers, each one focusing on a different technical area ranging from bioenergy to chicken farming. Our footage highlighted Ephraim's portion of the project, which involved surveying sunflower seed oil production in Tanzania. Currently, Tanzania relies heavily on imported palm oil for cooking, despite a high potential for localized sunflower oil farming and processing. We traveled the country, visiting sunflower farmers, processors, policy makers, and oil barons, in search of a solution for increasing the production of edible oil within Tanzania, which in turn would raise farmer incomes and benefit the country's struggling economy.

In Malawi, we worked with IFPRI's [Stefan Meyer](#) on the Food, Energy, and Water Nexus (FEW) Project. This project surveys the linkages between agriculture, forestry, energy, and water resources. We traveled into a handful of villages around Lilongwe, learning about the adoption of improved cooking stoves and their positive impact on the environment. These new stoves consume minimal firewood, which reduces deforestation and smoke inhalation as well as the time women spend gathering wood-based fuel for cooking. While chasing the smoky trails of these stoves, we witnessed firsthand the myriad connections between deforestation and food and energy production. We traveled to roadside markets, where bundles of firewood and contraband charcoal are sold. We also visited hydropower plants and water treatment stations, and learned about the negative effects this reliance on forest wood is having on other sectors. Finally, we



[Flickr \(M. Maher/IFPRI\)](#)

This woodsman earns only 1,000 MWK (equivalent to \$1.25) for a hard day's work of chopping firewood under the sun. Dzalanyamo Forest, Tanzania.

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and learned about the negative effects this reliance on forest wood is having on other sectors. Finally, we spoke with researchers and government officials, in the hope that we can compile a film compelling enough to encourage the different ministries to work more collaboratively in protecting the country's dwindling natural resources, all the while supporting smallholder farmers.

On one of our final days of shooting, Mitchell, Ken (our driver), and I were lost in an uncharted forest. There were no marked roads, and we were using a crude map to navigate our way to a location of rumored deforestation. We turned at the edge of a grove of trees and saw the blur of a man race away into the undergrowth. Near a tattered stump, stood another trembling figure. These two woodsmen had heard our engine and mistaken us for the forest police. The one closest to the road had fled, but the other was cornered and had given up hope of escape. Luckily, we were able to explain that we were not police officers, and that we worked for an organization that helps farmers like him. His sorrow immediately transformed into a smile, and he told us that we could spend the afternoon with him, and document his way of life.

We joined the woodsman as he resumed piling wood on his bicycle, arranging the cords of timber in an arc that towered well over his head. As he tied the knot to keep the branches secure, he told us he is worried about food, revealing that he has yet to eat anything on this day. We left him with some water and a tangerine to combat dehydration beneath a sweltering midday sun and watched him disappear into the trees as he began his 50 kilometer bicycle ride to the nearest city. By the time he has completed his journey over bumpy dirt roads, the sun will have sunk below the mountains. If lucky, this woodsmen will sell his bundle for about 1,000 Malawian Kwacha (MWK), or the equivalent of just over US\$1. Had we been the forest police, the woodsman would have been issued a ticket for 5,000 MWK, an amount equivalent to about five days of work.

Our encounter with the Malawian woodsmen brought more questions than answers. Figuring that an entire forest could be felled for as little as \$50,000, the hidden nature of this unsustainable market economy and its undervaluation of the natural resource base underscores significant challenges at the policy making level. A key step toward addressing the issue involves raising awareness about the scope of the problem, which is supported by sharing stories, conducting research, and promoting policies that address the root of the problem. Over the course of the next month, we will begin cutting a new series of films at IFPRI that will help spread our work to new audiences. These films will target policy makers in the hope that they will be able to enact policies based on the latest and best research available with the aim of helping small farmers and protecting vulnerable natural resources in their countries.

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