



Life as a Fellow: Martin Weale, Director, National Institute of Economic and Social Research, London National Statistical Office, Malawi, 1977–79

Speech presented at the ODI Fellowship Scheme 40th Anniversary: 15 July 2003

This text was originally published in the Fellowship 40th Anniversary Publication, 2003

I took up my ODI Fellowship in 1977 at the National Statistical Office in Malawi. The office was located in Zomba, which had been set up as the capital city in 1890 when Sir Harry Johnston set up his residency in the building constructed as the British Consulate slightly earlier. In 1975 a new capital was established in Lilongwe and all the important government offices had already moved. Only the National Statistical Office and Parliament, with its plaque from Britain thanking the people of Nyasaland for the gift of Spitfire aircraft in 1940, remained. I discovered on my arrival that the need for expatriate statisticians arose, in more than small part, because a number of able Malawians had been dismissed. The Chichewa formed the majority of the population but the Tumbuka came from the North where there was a longer tradition of mission schools. In consequence more of them tended to be well educated giving rise to resentment and, from time to time purges. Had I known this I would probably not have taken up the job, but on my arrival there was little I could do. It could, nevertheless have been much worse. The statisticians who lost their jobs surfaced working for the United Nations in Addis Ababa.

I was put in charge of the retail price indices. Some of my early questions showed my naivety. I remember asking why we didn't price chicken by weight instead of just using the price of a chicken. The answer was that it wouldn't keep still. There were other problems, particularly with the cost of living index for people on high incomes. Many of the items in the index were imported from South Africa and supplies were erratic. It became difficult to standardise and I found that a previous policy of assuming no price change when a good was unavailable had biased the index substantially downwards. All the calculations were, of course, manual; there were some electronic calculators, but I could work as rapidly with a hand adding-machine of the type I had leaned to use as school. I had a staff of an Executive Officer, a Senior Clerical Officer and three Clerical Officers.

Zomba is beautifully situated on the side of a mountain. It became the university town after the move of the capital. I was allocated a pleasant flat close to the centre of the town. It had three rooms and three servants' rooms. I recruited a cook who came to the door and spoke to me in French; he had worked for some French diplomats and it was difficult to imagine a better qualification. He was literate, obviously intelligent and a ready source of information about what was going on in the town.

From time to time I would go with friends to Mount Mulanje where there were a number of mountain huts in which one could stay overnight. It occurred to me that my cook might like to come and I rapidly gained a reputation among expatriates as someone who travelled with retinue to the mountain. It did not seem to occur to people that a cook might also enjoy the walks and the distant views. John said it was like being in a different country because there was no Congress Party.

Lake Malawi was also a popular excursion. The Lonely Planet guide describes the District Council Resthouse there as "disgusting". When I stayed there four of us had to share a room and we were initially only offered one lantern between all four of us. The noise of music all night was quite remarkable for a place which did not have electricity. I am intrigued to know whether it has changed.

After about nine months I started working with an Australian labour statistician developing a household expenditure survey so as to update the basis for the cost of living index. We ran a pilot study in Zomba drawing the sample from information collected in the Census in 1976. This had divided the country into enumeration areas and the population in each area in 1976 was known. So we chose enumeration areas on the basis of population and then asked our enumerators to list all the dwellings in the selected enumeration area. The Census Adviser explained one had to ask around to make sure that no dwellings were left out. He had carried out the first Census in Hong Kong in 1936 and one wonders whether his advice would have been helpful in the United Kingdom in 2001.



Supervising the enumerators gave me some quite remarkable insights into the layout of the town. There were “traditional housing areas” where people lived in huts with grass roofs which were more or less invisible from the roads and of which it was possible to be quite unaware. There were also densely populated areas of one-roomed brick housing where perhaps fifty people would share a tap. I cycled round to see what the enumerators were up to. This led to me being invited into the houses they were visiting and usually being offered cups of very sweet tea, which I would rather not have drunk. Inevitably the fact that the survey was local meant that we knew the background of some of the respondents, although that did not seem to affect the response rate which was about 90% for people who lived in low-income housing and 60% in high-income housing. One of the respondents was known to be a secret policeman but we did not recode the occupation he had given us.

After we concluded that the pilot had worked, we extended the study to the four towns, Blantyre-Limbe, Lilongwe, Mzuzu and a full survey in Zomba. This had problems of its own. I insisted on having Tumbuka speakers to work in Mzuzu since it was a Tumbuka-speaking area which upset the Chichewa staff. I had to explain that in some parts of Britain people did not speak English but that did not stop them being British. Lilongwe, like Zomba turned out to be designed so that much of it was invisible. It is a town of broad roads with tall hedges on either side. Behind the hedges and invisible from the road were large areas of very basic housing.

The survey was processed by computer. There was an ICL machine in Blantyre which, of course, worked on punch cards. I became adept at using a hand-punch which allowed one to punch up to eighty characters on a card, with each character represented by up to four holes in appropriate locations. The cards had to be numbered immediately they were punched so as to be able to cope with the inevitable mishap when a stack was dropped. One also had to learn how to correct mistakes by filling in holes using the chads which had been punched out. We worked in Cobol, then one of the main computer languages.

I think it is fair to say that my time in Zomba probably had more of an impact on me than it did on Malawi. Data of the type I was working on were not a major bottleneck, or the key to the country's successful development. But the job taught me the importance of data issues in applied economics and has influenced the way I have approached my subject ever since.