

Zomba- Participant Guide

Country Profile

Zomba lies in the heart of Africa, a large nation of 738,426 square kilometers, somewhat larger in size than Texas. It has a tropical climate, tempered by its altitude, with a rainy season occurring from October to April. Zomba's broad coastal plain on the Gulf of Guinea gradually rises to a high central plateau with hills and mountains in the north and northeast, reaching their highest point at Mount Summa at 5,199 meters. Zomba is bound on the southwest by the Atlantic Ocean and shares its borders with three neighboring countries.

Environmental issues include water pollution from urban and industrial wastes; air pollution and resulting acid rain in the mineral extraction and refining region; chemical runoff into watersheds; degradation of water quality from increased use of pesticides and fertilizers; deforestation; soil erosion; and desertification. A lack of adequate water treatment presents human health risks throughout most of the country.

Zomba's population of 11.4 million has an age structure of 51.3 percent between 0-14 years, 46.3 percent between 15-64 years, and 2.4 percent 65 years and older.

Literacy among the population is officially estimated at 65.5 percent, with males accounting for 76.2 percent and females 55.1 percent (2014 estimates). The Zomba national educational system is modeled on the British system with primary school (6 years), secondary school (6 years), and university. With recent government efforts to promote the importance of education, primary school enrollment has increased significantly in the past three years. Primary and secondary school education are free and compulsory. Despite increased funding and support from the government, however, secondary graduation rates continue to hover at around 60%. This is slightly less than the overall national literacy rate of 65.5 percent. The system relies primarily on standardized test scores for advancement. Students can attend secondary school in public schools run by the government or in schools run by the private sector and individuals. The quality of secondary education varies widely in both sets of schools. In general, fees in private schools are more than 50 times that in public schools. The education system in Zomba faces many challenges in most areas including issues of access, equity, quality and internal efficiency.

Like many nations in the developing world, the percentage of students continuing on to university or technical school remains rather low, although the overall number of students attending Zomba higher education has increased in recent years to approximately 10%. The University of Zomba, the nation's flagship institution, is considered one of the best public universities in Africa. It offers a range of undergraduate and graduate degrees and has annual enrollments of approximately 3,000 undergraduate and 1,000 graduate students. The University of Zomba operates three regional branch campuses. Infrastructure at the University of Zomba main campus has improved in recent years but is still considered far behind western standards in terms of academic quality, safety and security, technology, and basic infrastructure (i.e. student housing, classrooms, and water and electricity supplies). While the University of Zomba attracts several hundred students from neighboring countries, it has only limited experience with students from western nations. In 2012, a local business person founded a private university just outside of the capital city. This university, although small and very new, is designed to provide highly-motivated students in Zomba and surrounding countries with a

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challenging western-style education. The founder of the university has developed an internationalization strategy that includes specific plans to recruit visiting foreign students from Europe, the United States, and other foreign countries. Finally, Zomba has a strong technical college system that has gained in popularity with Zomba's students in recent years.

The median age is 16.5 years and the population growth rate is currently estimated at 2.57 percent. Major infectious diseases include bacterial and protozoal diarrhea, Hepatitis A, schistosomiasis, and typhoid fever. Malaria is high risk in some locations. The adult HIV/AIDS prevalence rate was officially estimated at 7.9 percent in 2014.

Despite progress in privatization and budgetary reform, Zomba's economic growth remains somewhat below the 6 percent to 7 percent needed to reduce poverty significantly. Privatization of government-owned copper mines in Khanda relieved the government from covering mammoth losses generated by the industry and greatly improved the chances for copper mining to return to profitability and spur economic growth. As a leading grain producer, several years of bountiful harvests helped Zomba boost gross domestic product and agricultural exports. Cooperation continues with international bodies on programs to reduce poverty, including a new lending arrangement with the International Monetary Fund. A tighter monetary policy will help cut inflation, but Zomba still has a serious problem with high public debt.

Zomba's telephone system is aging but still one of the better ones in sub-Saharan Africa. High-capacity microwave radio relay connects the larger towns and cities. There are several cellular telephone services in operation and Internet service is widely available in the larger towns and cities. In 2013, it was estimated that 94,700 telephone main lines and 946,600 mobile cellular lines were in use. Services are limited, though, in the mountainous northeastern part of the country.

Transportation systems are fairly extensive in the coastal plain and central plateau, but are much less developed in the northeastern part of the country. There are 91,440 kilometers of roadways, of which 20,117 are paved. Public and private transport is available including: buses, minivans, taxis and private cars for hire. Hitchhiking is common because of the erratic schedules of public transport. Coastal islands are served by irregular private ferries and small, open boats. Zomba also has a network of narrow gauge rail linking the major agricultural and mining areas with the ports and five airports plus many unpaved bush runways. Infrastructure maintenance is often spotty to poor with road conditions deteriorating away from the major cities and with little regulation or inspection of passenger vehicles.

The public sector in Zomba exhibits many of the obstacles encountered in other developing countries including: limited resources; inadequate personnel compensation and benefits; corruption; and low morale. Many government employees have other employment and income production streams to augment their monthly salaries, which are not always paid on time. Associated complexities of working with government are evident and it is challenging to work through local systems to gain appropriate licenses and approvals to operate.

Although relatively stable politically, tension exists among the three predominant ethnic groups in the country. They include the Zeggawa, primarily Muslim, who live in the central region and have the power base; the Khanada, primarily Christian, who live in the coastal region and feel disenfranchised; and the Lalao of the isolated northeast who follow strong animist traditions and Shamanistic practices. Ethnic tension between Zomba's Muslim and non-Muslim populations has risen recently, and the Zeggawa are much attuned to international events and are increasingly critical of the role of the United States in the Middle East.

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The security situation has deteriorated in the last few years along with the Zomban economy. Crime against international volunteers is reportedly on the rise with 70 percent of volunteers reporting at least one incident of petty theft and several reports of sexual assault in Zomba. An area of increasing concern is transportation safety. There have been a number of incidents where international volunteers have been injured, some seriously, in minivan accidents that are becoming more and more common as the roadways deteriorate. Many of the minivans and private taxis that are in use are old and in poor condition, held together by baling wire and hope. When hitchhiking, passengers often wind up riding with drivers who have had too much to drink.

Several years ago a tourist nearly drowned while swimming at a Zomban beach which is notorious for its dangerous rip tides and strong currents. Another safety concern is transport to a favorite holiday destination for visitors: a group of coastal islands famous for their white sand beaches, clear blue waters, and excellent diving spots. Unfortunately, travel to the islands is available only by expensive private plane charter or by hiring local fisherman for the trip across 10 kilometers of open water on traditional small fishing boats.

Peace Corps reports that its Volunteers are living in or near border towns that are often closer to major towns in neighboring countries where they can find goods, services, and recreational activities at much lower prices than they can in Zomba. In a number of cases, many higher quality consumer items, such as imported toothpastes, laundry and bath soaps, and some personal hygiene products, are not available in Zomban towns, aside from the capital and some regional centers.

The government of Zomba works with the International Volunteer Organizations in what can best be described as an attitude of benign neglect. Zomba needs to import contract teachers from other countries to meet its needs, so volunteer teachers often complain that they are just cheap labor. Although the sponsoring agencies are pleased to be associated with the Peace Corps, they are not all that engaged in project design, development or monitoring, but remain gracious and cordial.

Peace Corps Volunteers have provided support to the people of Zomba since 1967. More than 3,200 Volunteers have served the people of Zomba to date. Volunteers were initially assigned to work in agriculture, education, and water and sanitation activities, but as the program evolved, Volunteers became involved in forestry, fisheries and small enterprise development projects. Currently, Peace Corps Zomba fields approximately 138 Volunteers in math and science education at the secondary school level, health and nutrition, and environmental education projects.

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