

MAKANDAY

weekly

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24TH - 30TH APRIL 2026



ISSUE. NO 0035

CHILDREN IN THE FIELDS: The Hidden Cost of Tobacco in Serenje

• A livelihood for some. A childhood lost for others.



By Ennety Munshya

Just after sunrise in Mankanda village in Serenje, central Zambia, 14-year-old Peter* lifts a bundle of wet tobacco leaves onto his shoulder. The leaves are heavy, still cold from the morning dew. He steadies himself, then walks toward a dark, low-roofed barn where they will be hung to dry. He does this every day.

He used to wear a school uniform, but now remembers it faintly. Grade seven was the last time he sat in a classroom. Today, his hands are stained a yellowish-brown, the colour of the crop that has replaced his childhood.

“I wasn’t like this before,” he says quietly, turning his palms upward. “The leaves change your hands.”

Around him, the farm is already alive. Ox-carts arrive from the fields. Men and women sort leaves into piles. Boys his age move quickly between them, lifting, carrying, tying, stacking. No one here calls it unusual. They call it work.

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A childhood absorbed into the fields

In Serenje district, tobacco is steadily reshaping rural life. For many families, it offers something rare: cash. In places where income is uncertain and options are limited, the crop has become a lifeline. But that lifeline runs through children like Peter.

Children are part of the system. They harvest, carry, sort, and prepare tobacco alongside adults, often for long hours under demanding conditions. Some, like Peter, have stopped going to school altogether.

Locally, this is often described as “helping at home.” But the law draws a much sharper line. Zambia’s Employment Code Act prohibits hazardous labour for anyone under 18, and international conventions classify such work as among the worst forms of child labour. Yet it continues in the open.

The quiet risks children carry

For Peter, the risks are not abstract. Handling wet tobacco exposes workers to nicotine that can be absorbed through the skin, a condition sometimes called green tobacco sickness. It can cause dizziness, nausea, and long-term health problems, particularly for children.

The risks extend beyond nicotine exposure to heavy loads, sharp tools and chemical handling, often over long hours that replace time meant for school and rest.

Agriculture accounts for about 70 percent of child labour globally and more than 90 percent in Zambia, according to the International Labour Organisation. In Serenje, those numbers are visible in the fields.

A system built on pressure

Tobacco farming is labour-intensive at nearly every stage, from planting to harvesting to curing. Farmers do not deny that children are working. Many say they cannot manage without them.

“Tobacco has a lot of work,” one farmer explains. “During harvesting, you need many hands.”

Those hands are often the cheapest available. Piecework can pay as little as K1 per bundle prepared for curing. For struggling households, every contribution matters.

Farmers operate under contract arrangements with large companies, receiving inputs such as fertiliser and seedlings on credit. When the crop is sold, these costs are deducted, leaving farmers with an uncertain balance, especially as companies control grading and pricing.

“If they say your tobacco is low grade, you lose,” one farmer says. “You cannot argue.”

MakanDay found that this system steadily tightens the pressure. Debt accumulates, margins shrink, and labour demands increase. In that strain, children are drawn into the workforce.

The land is also changing

Beneath Peter’s feet, the soil is quietly weakening. Tobacco is a demanding crop, stripping nutrients from the ground and leaving fields less fertile with each cycle. Farmers respond by applying more fertiliser or by moving to new land.



In Serenje, both patterns are visible. Fields that once produced strong yields begin to fail. New areas are cleared and trees fall. What begins as farming gradually turns into expansion.

Forests feeding the barns

Not far from where Peter works, stacks of cut logs lie in neat piles, ready to feed curing barns where tobacco leaves are dried over several days. This process consumes large amounts of wood.

“We need a lot of firewood,” a farmer says. “We have already finished what was on our farm. Now we buy.”

Across the district, forests are thinning. In some cases, clearing is pushing into protected areas, including parts of the Serenje National Forest.

Globally, tobacco farming has been linked to the loss of around 200,000 hectares of forest each year, according to estimates cited by the World Health Organisation.

Promises that do not take root

While the Tobacco Act No. 10 of 2022 places responsibility on regulators and industry to promote sustainable production, MakanDay found little evidence of meaningful reforestation. Seedling distribution programmes exist, but survival rates are low and monitoring is limited. In practice, trees are being cut faster than they are replaced.

The Tobacco Board of Zambia (TBZ) says growers are required to comply with regulations on child labour, afforestation and curing practices, and that inspections are

including Japan Tobacco International (JTI) and other global tobacco leaf merchants with roots in the United States.

These companies are not just buyers. They are part of a global commodity chain that links smallholder farmers in places like Serenje to multinational cigarette manufacturers through a structured, contract-driven system.

“It is possible to do it on your own, but it is very hard to sell your tobacco as an independent farmer,” one farmer said.

In response to a press query, JTI Zambia said it has systems in place to prevent child labour and promote sustainable production through its agricultural labour practices and Achieving Reduction of Child Labour in Support of Education (ARISE) programme. The company added that it works with the Ministry of Labour and Social Security to conduct inspections and raise awareness of labour laws.

An agricultural extension officer, who requested anonymity, said that while some companies distribute tree seedlings to farmers, many are either not planted or fail to survive, limiting their impact.

The Ministry of Agriculture said it provides a policy and regulatory framework for crop production and supports farmers through extension services. Questions on child labour and environmental enforcement were referred to other ministries, which had not responded by publication.

What emerges is a pattern of fragmented responsibility, with institutions slow or overstretched even as children remain in the fields and forest loss continues.

At district level, the Department of Forestry acknowledges the scale of deforestation but cites limited capacity to respond. The district agricultural office confirmed increased tree cutting and said it is not currently implementing afforestation programmes with tobacco companies operating in Serenje. It is encouraging farmers to plant species such as *Faidherbia albida* and moringa to help restore depleted soils.

conducted. According to Corporate Affairs and Communications Manager Lee Haamunji, inspections are conducted and non-compliance is addressed under the provisions of the law. But the situation on the ground suggests a gap between policy and practice.

A global chain, local impact

Tobacco production in Serenje is tied to a network of multinational and local companies,

CHILDREN IN THE FIELDS: The Hidden Cost of Tobacco in Serenje cont....

Who carries the cost?

Tobacco links Serenje to global markets. Zambia earned over US\$193 million from tobacco exports in 2021, according to United Nations trade data, as the crop moves far beyond the district where it is grown. But the consequences remain concentrated at source.

In Mankanda, Peter lifts another bundle of leaves onto his shoulder and walks it to the barn, work that now defines his day. For children like him, the realities of tobacco production are not reflected in export figures, but in the demands of the fields they return to each morning.

*** Name changed to protect the identity of a minor**



A TRADE IN THE SHADOWS: Tracking Muchinga's Vanishing Forests

From page 1

By Richard Simbaya | Isoka

According to estimates by the World Wide Fund for Nature, Zambia is losing between 250,000 and 300,000 hectares of forest every year.

In Muchinga, northern Zambia, that loss may be moving faster than the numbers suggest. An investigation by ISO FM Radio in Isoka, along the Great North Road, reveals a pattern of night-time charcoal movement — raising urgent questions about licencing, enforcement, and whether authorities are keeping pace with a trade largely hidden from view.

As dusk settles over Chinsali, the rhythm of the Great North Road begins to change. By 18:00 hours, trucks line the roadside between Lavushimanda, one of Zambia's newer districts and Nakonde. Their engines idle. Men move quietly in the fading light, loading sacks of charcoal under the cover of darkness. What appears at first to be routine trade soon reveals a pattern. The movement is deliberate. Mostly at night. Largely out of sight.

Over several weeks, this investigation followed that trail.

On one evening, this reporter boarded a goods truck heading toward Nakonde. Inside, drivers spoke cautiously. Some described strategies to avoid checkpoints. Others alleged that charcoal is sometimes concealed within other cargo to evade detection.

Follow-up observations revealed Fuso trucks being loaded with charcoal sacks. During packaging, traders claimed that charcoal is occasionally mixed with other consignments. If true, this would suggest a deliberate attempt to bypass border controls.

These claims could not be independently verified. However, they raise serious concerns about the integrity of inspection systems at Zambia's borders.

To understand where the supply begins, the investigation moved away from the highway into forested areas. The sound of axes cuts through the bush. Trees fall. Kilns burn slowly beneath earth mounds.

Peter Sichinga, a long-time charcoal producer, says he has been in the trade since the early 1990s. For him, it is a livelihood shaped by necessity. But other voices point to deeper concerns.

Another villager, Peter Mulenga, alleges that some officials provide money or protection to facilitate tree cutting for charcoal and timber. These claims remain unverified, but they suggest possible institutional weaknesses, or worse, complicity.

Further north, the trail leads to Nakonde border post, where trucks cross daily between Zambia and Tanzania. Sources indicate that charcoal sometimes makes its way across, driven by higher prices on the Tanzanian side.

If charcoal is indeed being exported, key questions arise about whether these exports are licensed and, if illegal, how they are passing through.

To seek answers, queries were submitted to the Forest Department in Isoka to establish whether charcoal exports are permitted in Muchinga, how many licences have been issued, how many inspections and seizures have been recorded, and whether authorities are aware of allegations that charcoal is being concealed within copper consignments.

Officials acknowledged enforcement challenges but denied knowledge of systematic smuggling.

“We are not aware, as a department, (that transporters conceal charcoal),” said Kennedy Banda, Senior Forestry Technologist for Isoka District. “At checkpoints, we focus on ensuring that those transporting charcoal have the required documentation.”

Further questions were directed to border authorities and other enforcement agencies, but by the time of publication, no comprehensive response had been received.

Charcoal production is driven by demand, both within Zambia and across its borders. Yet there is little publicly available data detailing how much charcoal is legally exported from Muchinga. Without transparent records of permits, inspections, and seizures, it becomes difficult to establish the scale of charcoal leaving the province, identify the individuals or networks profiting from the trade, and assess whether enforcement systems are functioning effectively.

This lack of clarity creates space for potential abuse. Forests play a critical role in regulating rainfall, protecting soil, and sustaining rural livelihoods. But along the Great North Road, the steady, largely night movement of charcoal suggests a system operating faster than oversight.

This story was produced by ISO FM and fact-checked by MakaanDay Centre for Investigative Journalism.



Opinion | Are Zambia's Leaders Ready to Fix the Youth Jobs Crisis?

Election years in Zambia are noisy. Promises multiply. Candidates compete to convince voters they have solutions to the country's problems.

But one question lingers: do they fully grasp the scale of what needs fixing?

Ask many of them how they plan to address the growing population of young people, and the answers often fall back on familiar ground, jobs in government schools, hospitals, the police, and the military.

Yet solving Zambia's unemployment crisis requires thinking beyond these traditional pathways. It demands a broader vision, one that includes new opportunities in emerging sectors such as technology, artificial intelligence, and digital platforms.

And the scale of the problem is already clear. Official figures place unemployment at around 12 to 13 percent. But youth unemployment is significantly higher, exceeding 26 percent, revealing a deeper crisis of underemployment and exclusion from formal work.

One of our recent stories from Mbala, in Northern Province, offers a sobering reality check. It reveals a generation of young people trained for work, yet locked out of the very opportunities they prepared for.

On one side of the road, development is visible in brick and cement. Construction sites are active. Investment is tangible, measurable, and unfolding in real time.

On the other side stand young people, trained, certified, and idle, watching that same development pass them by.

This is not just a story about unemployment in Mbala. It is a story about a system that is working in parts, but failing in purpose.

Through the Constituency Development Fund (CDF), government is doing what policy would recommend: investing in skills. In Mbala alone, 883 youths were trained between 2022 and 2025, backed by nearly K5 million in public funds.

On paper, that is progress. It signals intent and reflects an understanding that skills are central to economic participation.

But the outcome tells a different story.

Only about five percent of those trained have secured formal employment.

That figure should concern anyone who believes in youth empowerment. Because what it reveals is not just a gap, but a structural disconnect.

We are training young people for an economy that is not prepared to absorb them.

Employers demand experience. Young people say they are never given the chance to gain it. Councils fund training but do not track outcomes. National plans promise job creation, yet local realities show a stalled transition from classroom to workplace.

Everyone is doing something. But no one is connecting the system.

And in that gap, frustration grows.

You hear it in the voice of Travel Chizu, who did everything expected of him: trained, completed, returned home. Yet the job never came. His story is no longer an exception. It is becoming the pattern.

You hear it even more starkly from parents like Lightwell Chongo, who speaks of sleepless nights, rising pressure, and the quiet fear of watching children lose direction.

Because youth unemployment is never just an economic statistic. It is a social fault line.

Idle young people become vulnerable to frustration, to substance abuse, to disengagement from the very systems meant to uplift them. When opportunity is visible but out of reach, exclusion becomes deeply personal.

What makes Mbala especially revealing is that demand for these skills clearly exists. Construction is happening. Work is ongoing. Yet trained local youths say they are being overlooked, sometimes in favour of experienced workers, sometimes, they allege, in favour of outsiders.

If true, that raises serious questions about labour enforcement, fairness, and whether public investment in local skills is being protected.

But even beyond that, the central issue remains: training alone is not enough.

A skills programme without a pathway to employment is not empowerment. It is postponement.

What is missing is the bridge.

Where are the apprenticeship systems that allow young people to gain experience on active sites? Where are the incentives for contractors to hire locally trained youths? Where are the tracking mechanisms that follow beneficiaries from training to employment, ensuring public funds translate into real livelihoods?

And perhaps most importantly: where is the accountability?

The Auditor General has already flagged weak monitoring systems. That is not a minor oversight.

It is a fundamental flaw. Because if outcomes cannot be tracked, success cannot be measured. And if success cannot be measured, failure risks being repeated, at scale.

Mbala is not alone. It is simply visible.

Across Zambia, the same pattern is likely unfolding quietly: certificates issued, expectations raised, and then... silence.

Meanwhile, growth continues in pockets, often disconnected from the very people it is meant to uplift.

This is the paradox of our development moment. We are building. We are training. We are investing. But we are not yet aligning.

Until that alignment happens, between policy and practice, between training and industry, between investment and outcome, young people like those in Mbala will remain on the margins of a growth story they helped prepare for, but are not allowed to enter.

And that is not just inefficient. It is unjust.

Poison for Profit: Malawi's Expired Insulin Scandal

How a pharmaceutical company traded defective medication, leaving vulnerable patients exposed due to regulatory loopholes.

By Golden Matonga and Tumpale Ngámbi | Malawi

Behind the gleaming mahogany desk in the managing director's office, a wall of polished trophies projects order and success. But an investigation by the Platform for Investigative Journalism (PIJ) reveals a darker story about one of Malawi's largest pharmaceutical companies. Documents show the company has supplied expired and falsified medicines to public hospitals and has largely avoided charges and sanctions for these violations over more than a decade. For many poor Malawians, the consequences have been deadly.

In 2022, regulators in Malawi found that a company trading as GPSL Wholesale Ltd relabeled expired insulin and distributed it to five major hospitals in Malawi. Records confirm that this is the same company that was sanctioned and closed down. In 2013, Galaxy Pharmaceutical and Surgical Logistics Ltd was found to have supplied hospitals with faulty antibiotics linked to infant deaths.

The question PIJ set out to answer in a three-month investigation is how a medicine supplier that was previously disciplined and

Poison for Profit: Malawi's Expired Insulin Scandal cont....

shut down by regulators was allowed to change its name and continue supplying drugs to state hospitals in Malawi.

During its investigation, the PIJ filed an Access to Information Act request for documents used in the Pharmacy Medicines Regulatory Authority (PMRA) inquiries. Records relating to expired insulin were released, but requests for files linked to newborn deaths caused by antibiotics were denied. The PIJ can confirm this case file was stolen from the PMRA offices during the authority's investigation. PMRA documents also state that the theft was part of a cover-up by government officials implicated in the fraud.

Killer antibiotics

In 2013, doctors at Mzimba District Hospital reported deaths of babies born to women who had received an antibiotic called Chloramphenicol. Galaxy Pharmaceutical and Surgical Logistics Ltd supplied the medication to hospitals.

"They had seen a trend of deaths, probably five or six babies. They seized the product and brought it here," recalls Mphatso Kawaye, who was PMRA Registrar at the time and is the current PMRA Director General.

But, the company was tipped off about the probe, and by the time PMRA investigators arrived at the hospital to inspect the medicine, all stock had been removed. The company subsequently issued a recall, but those batches also disappeared before regulators could examine them. While these actions constitute serious violations of PMRA regulations, Kawaye confirmed that the authority summoned the company for disciplinary proceedings, found it guilty of supplying faulty antibiotics, and ultimately revoked the company's license and that of its owner. The company quietly closed.

While all medical evidence of the deadly antibiotics was buried in infant graves in Mzimba, Galaxy's closure was short-lived. In 2019, it re-emerged under the name GPSL Wholesale Ltd. Documents confirm that the PMRA, which is the same authority that closed it down 6 years earlier, approved its application to operate

a wholesale pharmacy. It was business as usual until 2022 when GPSL was caught out for supplying expired insulin to five major public hospitals.



Tarang Makecha, GPSL Managing Director

Insulin and the poison of greed

Between January 19 and March 29, 2022, there was a critical shortage of insulin in Malawi. GPSL capitalised on the situation.

Documents track how the company bought expired insulin that had been stolen from Queen Elizabeth Central Hospital (QECH) in Blantyre, where it was waiting to be destroyed.

In Malawi, the disposal of expired medicines is tightly controlled. It requires approval from the Ministry of Health, the PMRA and the National Audit Office. Until that process is complete, expired stock must remain on hospital premises. In this case, the expired insulin was kept in a ward with a broken lock and no guard on duty.

This gave Michael Lemeka, a pharmacy technician at QECH, all the opportunity he needed. According to a PMRA investigation, he spent his lunch breaks over several weeks smuggling vials of expired insulin out of the hospital in his laptop bag. The investigation also found that Lemeka contacted Habib Goba, an illicit pharmaceutical dealer known for finding buyers for stolen hospital drugs. The Goba family's role in this trade is well known. In 2013, Habib's father, Bashir Hassan Goba, was arrested with stolen public medicines worth K50 million.

Habib Goba reached out to officials at GPSL and the company bought the stolen, expired insulin. GPSL recorded the purchase as if it had legitimately

sourced the stolen, expired insulin from multiple suppliers.

**GPSL offices in Blantyre**

Under Malawian law, wholesale pharmaceutical companies like GPSL can only buy medicine and supplies from registered foreign suppliers and manufacturers. For example, there was only one authorised supplier, Intermed, for the brand of insulin GPSL supplied in Malawi.

In an attempt to hide the origin of the stolen insulin, the GPSL listed several companies as the suppliers of the medicine, including Brisim Medical Suppliers and Tandy Scientific & Pharmaceuticals. None of these are registered insulin suppliers, which raises questions about how they got away with it.

Company records for the period January to March 2022 also show that GPSL declared an expenditure of K38,159,500 (R365 000) for the insulin. Investigators found that the company bought the stolen stock at K5,000 (R48) per ampoule, significantly below the typical market price of K7,500, (R71) thereby making a significant margin at the expense of patient safety.

The stolen insulin was repackaged with new labels to hide the August 2021 expiry date and the original batch number JT6R236. New labels included the KS6BR28 batch number and listed the expiry date as October 2022.

Over a period of 64 days, the company distributed the relabeled insulin across five major hospitals, including 2000 vials to Mzuzu Central Hospital, 754 to Kamuzu Central Hospital, and nearly 300 to Zomba Central Hospital. Most notably, 1000 vials were supplied back to QECH from where the expired drugs had been stolen.

The scheme started to unravel when an intern at Kamuzu Central Hospital noticed the fake labels peeling off in the cold of the hospital's refrigerator.

"KCH discovered that the insulin had expired at QECH and a technician stole and sold it to us," KCH Director Amos Msekandiwana told PIJ.

The discovery at KCH caused alarm. On April 7, 2022, the director of Mzuzu Central Hospital formally petitioned the PMRA for an investigation. Within a week, the PMRA closed GPSL's offices in Lilongwe and Blantyre, leading to the arrest of several company directors. For a moment, it looked like meaningful accountability would follow.

The PMRA's Technical and Disciplinary Committee found that culpability extended far beyond low-level staff. GPSL's business manager, listed as Mr Mayank, was identified as a "central figure" who, according to documents, was "fully involved" in sourcing stock from a network of illegal, unlicensed dealers.

A PMRA report noted that reduced efficacy in expired insulin could lead to serious complications or death.

PMRA disciplinary records show that when investigators raided GPSL's offices on 14 April 2022, expired insulin was found at its branches in Lilongwe and Blantyre. The company's managing director, Tarang Makhetcha, later admitted to authorising payments for the goods. He denied involvement in stealing the insulin.

PMRA Board minutes record his explanation: "He indicated that after realising this mistake, he instructed his pharmacist to initiate recall of the product from the hospitals and that he had written to PMRA... although it was discovered that PMRA first received notification of this issue from Mzuzu Central Hospital (not Makhetcha)."

In May 2022, the PMRA disciplinary committee recommended that GPSL's operating licenses be revoked and that the sanctions be made public. The PMRA board declined to adopt these recommendations. Instead, it issued a warning to the managing

Poison for Profit: Malawi's Expired Insulin Scandal cont....

director and advised the company to strengthen its internal controls to detect irregularities.

The PIJ tried to contact the GPSL for comment. The PMRA registry lists Balakrishnan Bhavani and Felix Thyoka (a pharmacist who the PMRA found negligent in the insulin scandal) as GPSL contacts. The company is owned by the Maketcha family. Both the company and the family refused to respond to questions PIJ sent for this story.

The Ministry of Health told PIJ that an internal investigation found that the expired insulin distributed by GPSL caused no deaths, but PMRA documents confirm that no investigation was conducted to verify this claim.

The criminal case against GPSL that followed the insulin case has stalled in court for several reasons, including the deaths of two of the accused, including Goba, the stolen drugs vendor.

George Jobe, Executive Director for Malawi Health Equity Network (MHEN), a civil society coalition of health governance watchdogs, says:

“Medicines are meant to save lives. Any act that compromises the safety, quality, and efficacy of drugs in the health system is a grave violation of patient rights and undermines public trust.”

Links between Galaxy and GPSL

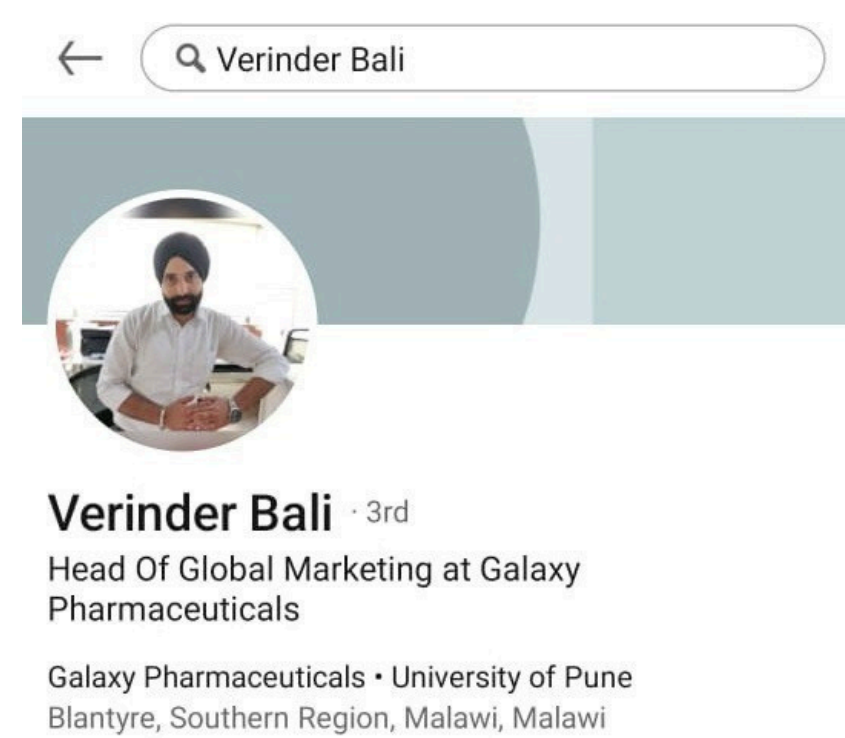
What the PMRA never investigated is any connection between GPSL and the company they had earlier closed. Those links are everywhere.

Ask a government official why GPSL is still allowed to supply medicines to state hospitals, and many will insist that Galaxy Pharmaceutical and Surgical Logistics Ltd and GPSL Wholesale Pharmacy are separate entities. But a review of official documents obtained by the PIJ tells a different story. It also shows that the PMRA itself recognizes GPSL Wholesale Pharmacy as the same company as Galaxy Pharmaceutical Ltd.

In a letter dated 11 May 2022, addressed to GPSL's managing director, Tarang Makhetcha, and inviting him to a disciplinary hearing over the insulin

case, the PMRA referred to the company as Galaxy Pharmaceutical and Supplies Ltd.

“The Pharmacy Committee, sitting as Disciplinary Committee, has received a report that you, as the Director of GPSL, have committed offences under the Pharmacy and Medicines Regulatory Authority Act,” reads part of the letter Online, some company employees still list Galaxy Pharmaceutical and Surgical Logistics Ltd as their employer. The phone number recorded in the PMRA registry for GPSL supposedly belongs to Felix Thyoka, but the PIJ was able, using mobile money records, to trace it to Verinder Bali. Bali's LinkedIn profile identifies him as Head of Global Marketing at Galaxy Pharmaceuticals and not GPSL.

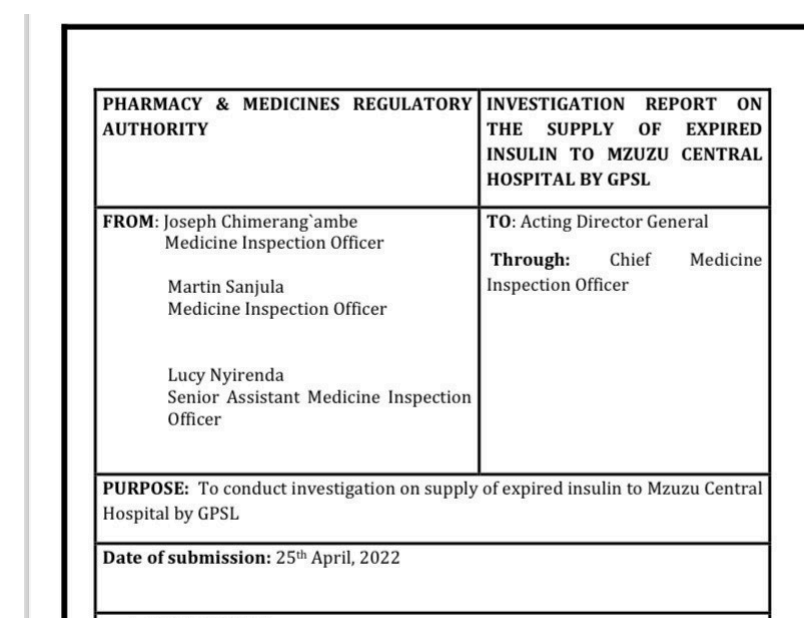
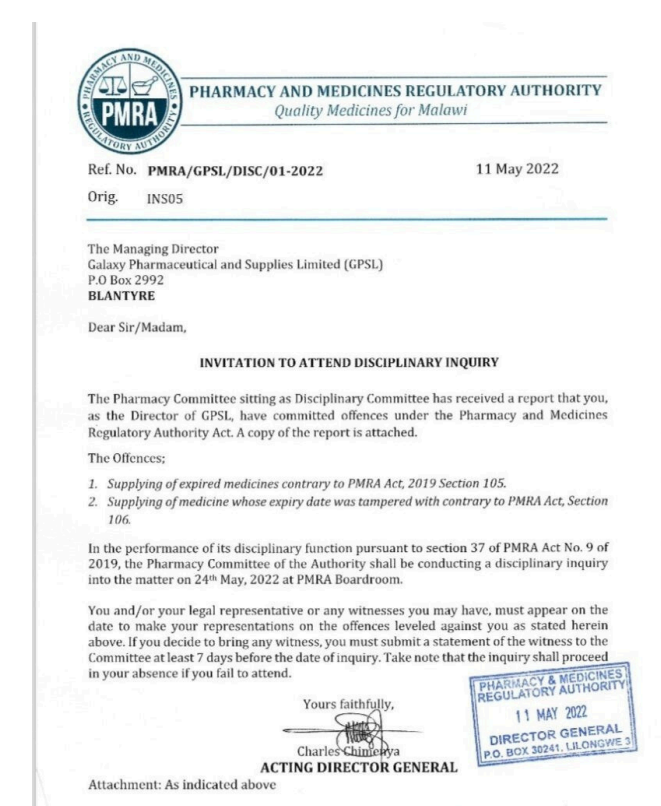


When PIJ contacted him using the number, he denied owning the company but confirmed that the two entities are effectively one.

“Galaxy Pharmaceutical Company and GPSL are the same company,” he said.

Galaxy Pharmaceutical and Surgical Logistics Ltd may no longer appear on the government registry, but through GPSL it continues to trade freely, supplying the same public hospitals it previously provided potentially harmful drugs.

That irony of all this was evident when PIJ journalists paid the GPSL's Blantyre offices an unannounced visit in March this year. A government ambulance was parked at the loading dock, collecting medical supplies.



Who took the blame?

When it came to sanctions over the expired insulin, the PMRA Board focused on individual negligence rather than holding the company itself accountable. It also overlooked the 2013 antibiotic case for which Galaxy Pharmaceutical and Supplies Ltd. was stripped of its license and shut down.

Following the insulin investigation, the PMRA suspended QECH Pharmacy Head Christina Mwinjiwa for failing to secure the “theft-prone” dental ward. It also recommended criminal proceedings against Michael Lemeka, the QECH pharmacy technician who removed the drugs in his laptop bag. GPSL pharmacists Felix Thyoka and Wilfred Kantchiala were suspended for six months for allowing unlicensed employees to manage company procurement.

The PMRA also only ordered the closure of the Lilongwe office. Despite stolen insulin found in their main Blantyre office as well, and despite alleged involvement of GPSL directors, the Blantyre office remained open.

“It’s a bewildering ruling,” one PMRA officer told PIJ. “What stops a company based in Blantyre from supplying drugs anywhere else in the country?”

Allegations of attempted bribes and intimidation surfaced. Current and former employees told PIJ journalists that senior government officials and politicians from the then-ruling Malawi Congress Party (MCP) applied pressure on the PMRA during its investigations. One source claimed the PMRA Board Chairperson rejected a 60 million kwacha (R566, 730) offer to drop the case.

“We don’t know if other committee members were approached, but given the final decision, your guess is as good as mine,” the source said.

Allegations that the PMRA went easy on GPSL have also been raised in the context of no evidence

of a thorough forensic investigation. The PMRA report makes no mention of a forensic review, noting only that “it was observed in the clinical departments that the product was not effective in the management of diabetic emergencies, which prompted hospital users to scrutinise the product.”

Despite a PMRA board resolution ordering a public notice of the PMRA investigation's findings, there still isn't one. Until PIJ asked, the Diabetes Association of Malawi was completely unaware of the insulin scandal. It suggested that any investigation must have been in secret. The association's president, Clement Mandala, said the association will gather evidence before taking legal action.

“It’s very shocking and sad. I am very angry that someone could deliberately inject our patients with expired insulin. It’s like they gave our members poison.”



When PIJ asked why, Ministry of Health spokesperson Adriene Chikumbe said the matter is regulatory and in court.

“Until the court makes its determination, the ministry will wait. If not satisfied with the outcome, the ministry will decide on the next course of action,” he said.

University academics in Malawi who have been researching fake medicines in the country point to the close ties between PMRA and companies like GPSL and Galaxy Pharmaceuticals, which rely on licensing fees, as a reason such violations go unchecked.

A 2022 study by Kamuzu University of Health Sciences (KUHES) underscores the broader problem: 14.3% of antibiotics, antimalarials, and antidiabetics in Malawi were found to be substandard or falsified.

The human cost is clear. Among those most at risk is Mike Mackson. He is 18 years old but looks no older than ten. Dark,

Poison for Profit: Malawi's Expired Insulin Scandal cont.,.,

unhealed marks cover his head. Tethered to a drip at Kamuzu Central Hospital, he can barely speak. His diabetes is critical. Diagnosed in 2020, he's been in and out of the hospital ever since.

"This means my son's life is in danger," said his father, Mackson Gwandali of TA Chadza, Lilongwe. The company, GPSL Wholesale/Galaxy Pharmaceuticals, seems to have escaped with minor punishment. It may have gotten away with murder.

This story was produced by the [Platform of Investigative Journalism](#) and syndicated by the [IJ Hub](#) on behalf of its member centre network in Southern Africa.



This week in the Bulletin & Record

Teddy Chilambe, salaula folk singer and mine captain

After a hard day's work at the then ZCCM Mufulira Division, one miner armed with an acoustic guitar and harmonica entertained fellow workers at the mine recreation club and other popular venues. This was Teddy Tandeo Chilambe, a man who had risen from being a Lasher to Mine Captain but could also not resist the power of music. Leonard Koloko reports.

In the days when western pop and Zam-Rock flourished among youth Teddy Chilambe filled in the void left by the likes of Stephen Tsosti Kasumali, Alick Nkhata, Bartholomew Bwalya, Wilson Makawa and Isaac Mapiki in the world of Zambian popular folk music.

Chilambe picked up the rudiments of his craft while at Kantanshi Secondary School, demonstrating massive talent with guitar, mouth organ and flute. At weekends he would hang around welfare centres to watch his predecessors play. And when he left school he joined the mines at the lowest level of workman underground.

In 1976, and already a household name in Mufulira, Teddy Chilambe hit national fame when he debuted on Show of the Week, a TV programme produced and anchored by another great folk musician, Emmanuel Mulemena, where he unveiled his first big hit, Chula-Chula. The song received mixed reactions as it advised young married women to suffer silently and endure their husbands' misdemeanours.

Another popular hit was Amafiga -- all that glitters is not gold. In it a man falls for a woman's shapely figure only to discover that she is a chronic flirt. Another man, adored for his fashionable suits, turns out to be a beer-poisoning crook.

Chula-Chula went on to be the title of his best selling debut album released by Teal Record Company in 1977. The multi-themed vinyl LP record track-listed Motoka Wandetelela, Amafiga, Ubushimbe, Ilyo Nali Umulumendo, Ibala, Ama Pensioni, Abalume Bandi, Indalama and Safety is my Friend. All these were educative social commentaries that people easily identified with.

Most of Chilambe's earlier songs were written around real life experiences in the townships. Among them were Chisekeseke, condemning the mocking of disadvantaged people; Tamulala Pafililo, advocating collective mourning; and the touchy Nine Mukamfwilwa, exposing the ill-treatment of widows and widowers through some cultural practices.

There was also Insekete (cheeks) highlighting the misdemeanours of Congolese paramilitary policemen, infamously known as 'Ba Kaboke', who at checkpoints on the pedicle road demanded emeralds from Zambians with pot bellies, fat cheeks, bald heads, hunchbacks, and even pregnancies.

With Zambia's economic woes escalating from the mid-1980s onwards, Teddy Chilambe broke new ground by commenting on the crumbling socio-economic conditions. The shortage of bread inspired the song Toba Umutwe in reference to a new recipe for maize meal fritters that many households were forced to serve for breakfast.

In the classic masterpiece Salaula the Congolese were now praised for introducing second-hand clothing. The song was later used by researcher and anthropologist Karen Tranberg Hansen to describe the clothing crisis in Zambia. The song's original lyrics are also published and translated in her book -- 'Salaula: the World of Second hand Clothing in Zambia' (University of Chicago Press, 2000):

*Salaula, Salaula, Salaula mayo
Ishi nsapato mulefwala
ishawama
Namatoloshi mulefwala
ayawama
Namashati mulefwala
ayawama
Ni Salaula, mayo
Uno mwaka tulelumba ku
bena Zaire
Pama balo mwatupela,
tata... "*

*(Select, select, select,
mother
These nice shoes you are
wearing
And the nice trousers you
are wearing
And the nice shirts you
are wearing
It is salaula, mother
This year we are praising
the Zaireans
for these bales you have
given us, father ...)*

Bwasha-Bwasha, was another thrilling hit calling for a quick reduction of escalating prices -- "or else we shall resort to stealing". But politicians were mainly concerned with the line in the lyrics saying "Come voting time we should vote for those who would reduce prices". The 1988 general elections were around the corner and Zambia had experienced its first ever food riots in 1986.

The song came during the single party era and indicated a loss of

confidence in the government of the day. Chilambe later issued a sequel Bashimakwebo (businessmen) to clarify the message in Bwasha-Bwasha -- shop owners were specifically blamed for the price hikes: Kaunda, alibwasha mwilalila (Kaunda has reduced prices so don't cry).

Interestingly, in 2000 Bweshako imitengo twapapata (reduce prices, we plead) was the main punch line for a Zam-ragga masterpiece of the same title by Callen Chisha a.k.a "Twice", authorised by Teddy Chilambe Jr, a budding rapper who has had the huge task of fitting into his fathers shoes.

Chilambe's acute eye for spotting society's bottlenecks continued in the evergreen Imilongo, inspired by the long queues for essential commodities experienced back then: Imilongo, imilongo tayakapwe (Queues! Queues! will never stop) he sang. Nowadays the common scenario at our bank ATMs and supermarkets on paydays rekindles memories of that song. On the other hand Umukaya tackles the problem of corruption and nepotism.

Though he lingered much on domestic issues the apartheid situation in South Africa was not spared with the candid Balekana Fwe Bantu (they are segregating us Africans) which condemned racism and preached tolerance and harmony.

As a proud miner, he devoted three songs to this profession. These were Mining as a Career, Safety is my Friend and the third Natulumbe Bashimaini (Let's praise the miners). They highlighted the mining industry's contribution to Zambia through good schools, roads, farms, hospitals, housing etc.

Chilambe further stretched his artistry to theatre when in 1989 he acted as "Squealer" in the controversial stage adaptation of George Orwell's Animal Farm at Mufulira Arts Council.

Teddy Chilambe, who passed on in 1998, mentored the then budding folk singer and fellow miner Pontiano Kaiche with whom he released a number of singles like Alale Ubukwebo and Na Musenge among others. And to help him record and tour incessantly he formed a backing band aptly called The Salaula Boys.

This week in the Bulletin & Record



This story first appeared in the April 2024 edition of The Bulletin & Record magazine.