

Reimagining 21st Century Development in Malawi: Generating and Sharing Knowledge Beyond the Traditional Development Establishment

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Abstract Policymaking on development in Malawi has long taken place in a heavily government, NGO and donor-run system. Policymakers are invariably informed by the usual types of evidence from established sources, which reinforce existing agendas. Online communities present a free space, bringing together a spectrum of people and perspectives in a setting where debates can evolve, are continuously updated and interaction is key. This space can provide a fertile environment for ideas, knowledge and evidence that can create new agendas and develop existing ones in innovative ways. This article examines the role of the Malawi Development Exchange (MDE) as provider of an open space for development discourse. We assert that the online space is highly conducive to exploring a wide range of idea and value shifts, and to encountering alternatives that are less constrained and could be more challenging to the status quo than those generated by engagement in formal forums.

1 Introduction

Shortly after Malawi gained independence from Britain in 1964, Dr Hastings Kamuzu Banda declared himself 'Life President' (Magolowondo 2007). He held on to absolute power for the next 31 years. Due to both internal and external pressure for social and political reform, a referendum on the continuation of the one-party system was held in 1993. People voted against the status quo, which led to Malawi's first Presidential and Parliamentary elections in 1994, which Banda lost to Bakili Muluzi. Malawi's new democratic constitution came into force in 1995. Civil society groups, including the media, academia and civil and human rights organisations emerged as major winners, as the new constitution provided for freedom of expression, freedom to gather and disseminate information without coercion and freedom of association (Patel 2000).

The constitutional provisions presented much needed opportunities for people to be creative, take part in issues of public concern and engage in policymaking. Seventeen years on, have these

principles of open discourse been adopted? What space exists for alternatives to emerge and is it being fully utilised? If not, how can alternate viewpoints be supported? These questions will be addressed in this article, using specific case studies and an analysis of an online discussion that was specifically designed to test this hypothesis.

2 Methodology

To analyse these issues, we sought to encourage discussion through the Malawi Development Exchange (MDE), an online social networking platform that facilitates the exchange of development-focused news and research produced in Malawi. Members of the MDE encompass a young, largely non-traditional audience of development actors, including information and communication professionals, writers and bloggers, grassroots civil society groups, students, journalists and business professionals.

Members were asked in a poll to identify the key development issue in Malawi. With food security emerging as the key concern¹ (40.3 per cent), an opinion article was commissioned from a well-

regarded Malawian journalist, and members were encouraged to comment. The idea was to unearth as much knowledge as possible from members on food security in Malawi and, more importantly, to examine the extent to which the MDE platform represents a space for discussion to inform policy and harness and encourage people to participate in finding solutions to prominent development issues.

The discussion was moderated to maintain focus, and participant analysis was the prime methodology to analyse contributions on the basis of the content of the comments, the employment status and profile of the participants themselves. This was supported by secondary sources, particularly literature reviews.

3 Background to food security in Malawi

That food security was identified as the most pertinent issue in Malawi is not entirely surprising. The outcome is supported by various studies, including a 2010 report by the Famine Early Warning System (FEWS), which indicates that Malawi is hungrier today than it was a year ago.

Malawi has not always been hungry, however. Dorward *et al.* (2008) and Sahley *et al.* (2005) observe that Malawi was a food-secure country from independence until the late 1980s, largely due to the policies of the government of the day. These included the banning of small-scale production of export cash crops, the introduction of universal fertiliser and small-scale credit subsidies, and also controlling maize prices through parastatals. These policies boosted smallholder maize production, which ensured food security at the household level. However, the oil shocks of the 1970s and the World Bank removal of its fertiliser subsidies in the 1980s worsened the effects of the country's 1992 and 1994 droughts (Sahley *et al.* 2005).

Market liberalisation in the late 1990s and the lifting of the government's ban on small-scale production of cash crops in 2000 led to many farmers abandoning small-scale maize production in favour of the cash crop tobacco. This resulted in food deficits and forced Malawi to become a food import-dependent nation.

Malawi's food insecurity deteriorated further between 2000 and 2005 due to flooding and drought, respectively (Menon 2007). Crop

production during this period was reduced by approximately 36 per cent (USAID 2005). In 2005, the government confirmed that about 4.7 million Malawians had been food insecure in 2004.

The election of President Bingu wa Mutharika in 2004 signalled not only a change of political position, but it also came with a shift in agricultural policies. Mutharika appointed himself as Agriculture Minister and made agriculture and food security his main priority.

Mutharika's first policy initiative was the re-introduction of the fertiliser subsidy in 2005, against the advice of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (BBC 2008). In 2009, *Africa Focus* reported that in 2005, individual farmers on the subsidy programme increased yields from 0.8 to 2 tonnes per hectare. In 2006, the country was said to have become food self-sufficient (Fleshman 2008) and Malawi began exporting maize to its neighbouring countries. The Government even donated 10,000 metric tonnes to the UN World Food Programme (WFP). Mutharika's policies convinced donors such as the World Bank and USAID to resume their support towards subsidy programmes (Ryan 2010).

4 Current situation and public responses

The quantitative availability of maize has not translated directly into national food security. A 2010 FEWS report indicated that the number of food insecure people has increased from 147,492 in 2009 to about 1.5 million in 2010. In September 2009, the WFP launched a US\$5.2 million international appeal to help feed more than half a million Malawians. The WFP argued that the national maize surpluses did not 'automatically and directly trickle down to vulnerable groups such as the chronically ill and orphans'.

These two cases not only correlate with MDE members' observation, it also shows that surplus food production does not necessarily translate to food security. A report by Lewin and Fisher (Makombe *et al.* 2010) shows that one in three households in Malawi fail to meet its daily *per capita* caloric requirement. 'Even despite recent bumper crops of maize, acute and chronic food insecurity are major challenges faced by the people and government of Malawi'.

The good news is that the Malawi government seems to accept the problem; the 2010/11

National Budget allocated the biggest share to the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security. The contradiction between public exclamations of being a food secure nation followed by clear budgetary prioritisation has ignited little debate of note among Malawians. Our literature review and an investigation by the commissioned journalist point not merely to a lack of participation in public discourse but the total absence of public discussion on the issue, be it in the national media, online communities or elsewhere.

However, contributions to the online discussion suggest that the silence does not necessarily mean that people have no opinion or are unaware of the situation. Nearly all contributors acknowledged the increase in maize surpluses following the government's re-introduction of the fertiliser subsidy, against the advice of the IMF and World Bank. Yet this is not enough:

Policymakers and professionals need to realise that food security is not just about food availability... Reports from the MVAC² that over a million people will miss food entitlements and [the] current malnutrition levels (35%) should be worrying to policymakers and technocrats and raise critical questions about the realities on the ground. (Contributor 05)

Several made the practical suggestion that Malawi cannot rest on the evidence of increased maize production based upon recent years that have seen good rains. Instead, they suggest that improved irrigation must be a key long-term solution to improve food production security. The discussion space produced some practical suggestions of ways to improve food security, such as better farming practices and irrigation:

The four to five years of back-to-back maize harvest surpluses has been at the back of good weather and input subsidy programme. The latter can continue to be provided (though at an increasing cost) but the former requires deliberate efforts by authorities to move towards irrigation. (Contributor 02)

For those of us who have traveled across Malawi, you can agree with me that the green belt has already started. In some cases with funding, and yet in others without. Malawians who have listened and believed the President, when he declared an end to hand outs, started working on small scale irrigation projects which have born fruits.³ (Contributor 03)

When making suggestions of this kind, contributors are quick to refer back to the successes of government policy:

It's so gratifying to observe that the Malawi President is now bent at making this a reality under the 'Green Belt Initiative'.⁴ (Contributor 02)

Interestingly, members did not comment on or question political decisions on the issue. In fact, one contributor began with the comment, 'Without being political about it...' – withdrawing from the inherently political nature of any discussion about food security in Malawi. Comments addressing the culture of MPs securing votes through giving handouts came from a Malawian student, based in the UK. Equally, almost all comments challenging the *status quo* were made by Malawians living or working outside of the country. This indicates that Malawians currently living abroad feel more confident about expressing critical viewpoints. They are removed from the constraints that resident Malawians live and work under.

The comments in the discussion are almost exclusively from educated Malawians in white-collar jobs and display significant familiarity with development issues and actors. This may be due to the fact that white-collar employees have access to IT facilities and are largely information and communication technology (ICT) literate. Just 4.6 per cent of Malawi's 15 million population use the internet (Internet World Stats 2011). This brings into question the ability of other people further from the development mainstream to gain access to and participate in this space for discussion.

A need for a cultural shift was brought up a number of times during the discussion. It emerged that Malawians who grew up in the Banda era were very much taught not to question authority. That these points were made by well-educated urban Malawians is indicative of the gap that exists between those engaged in development discourse and those who are not.

Prompts and questions posed by the discussion moderator that encouraged participants to expand and clarify with respect to deeper meanings were in each and every case ignored, reflecting the reluctance to address political or institutional problems and highlighting the

divergence between Malawians living and working in Malawi and those abroad, who appear bolder in raising such questions.

5 Conclusion

The majority of people who joined the discussion were not very far from the development mainstream. Most were highly educated, in white-collar jobs and had prior knowledge of development issues and actors. Consequently, the discussion did not include ‘unusual’ suspects – those who would not normally engage in such debates. It may be that people far from the development mainstream did not have access to this online space for a variety of reasons, including limited internet availability and poor ICT literacy. Or, it may be that people with more challenging views or who consider that their knowledge is not of the ‘right’ type for such technical discussions

Notes

- 1 It was important in the initial stages of the project to contextualise the meaning of the term ‘crisis’ in a country where crisis is often a normal condition of everyday life. MDE members were simply asked via an online survey: *What do you think are the most important issues facing Malawi today?*
- 2 MVAC – Malawi Vulnerability Assessment Committee.

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did not feel willing or able to engage. This discrepancy warrants further investigation.

It seems clear that a culture of reluctance to question authority and limited freedom of speech that has been embedded since the Banda era remains a major barrier to open discourse. The most challenging comments in the discussions came from Malawians residing outside the country, away from social pressures and the government’s prying eyes. An online space, such as the Malawi Development Exchange, can therefore provide a mechanism for challenging different and alternative viewpoints of Malawians internationally, to enter the more limited and less open discourse within the country itself. It may take time, however, for Malawians in-country to be able to enjoy these opportunities to the same extent.

- 3 The researchers ascertained that the term ‘hand outs’ in this context refers to an end to dependence on aid from western donors.
- 4 Contributor 02 is alluding to: ‘Malawi’s plans to maximize irrigation potential of Lake Malawi. Not even 3 per cent [of irrigable] land is irrigated [at present], but Malawi intends to create a 20-kilometer wide Green Belt along the lakeshore, forming much of the country’s eastern border’ (FAO 2010).

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