

Support to local problem-solving: Lessons from peri-urban Malawi

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Malawi faces severe economic and political constraints in the form of widespread shortages of fuel and foreign exchange, and political instability. This makes it harder than usual for the state to deliver the public goods on which the welfare of people depends, such as health and public security.

Even in normal times, Malawi's town and city governments are incapable of providing these public goods well or consistently. To obtain them at all, people rely on a variety of non-state actors, including 'town chiefs' (informal leaders), NGOs, churches and political parties as well as, to some extent, themselves. The major bottlenecks that undermine the adequate provision of public goods explain, in large part, the poor conditions in which people in peri-urban settlements live.

An emerging conclusion from research by the Africa Power and Politics Programme (APPP) in several African countries is that such bottlenecks are seldom addressed effectively by adopting international 'best practice' institutions that are not properly adapted to the local context. Solutions need to be realistic about material and social constraints and build on local arrangements that are known to work. Local problem-solving capacities should be enabled, not suppressed.

This brief summarises the support for this thesis provided by research in Malawi. It reviews the major institutional causes of bottlenecks in the provision of public goods and considers how they might be addressed. It draws on field research carried out by the Local Governance team of APPP.²



Collecting water in Ndirande. © Diana Cammack

The research

APPP research undertaken between 2008 and 2011 explored governance institutions surrounding the delivery of public goods in a number of peri-urban areas in Malawi, including Ndirande (Blantyre), Kachere (Blantyre), Kauma (Lilongwe), Kasungu (Central Region) and Rumphu (Northern Region). The research focused on the adequacy of provision in four areas:

- Safe birthing (low rates of maternal mortality)
- Public order and security
- Markets and enterprise facilitation
- Water and sanitation.

Three institutional factors were found to be consistently important in explaining why public goods were delivered adequately in some cases and poorly in others:

- The extent of policy (in)coherence and cross-agency coordination
- The intrusion of unhelpful national political logics into the resourcing and local governance of service delivery
- The capacity of residents to work collectively for their own benefit, and the role of local leadership.

Coherence and coordination

There is a profound need for greater coherence among state policies, structures, systems and norms in Malawi.

In the large informal settlement of Ndirande, for example, the research team concluded that it is close to impossible to address water and sanitation challenges because of a complex web of coordination and resource problems. In general, town chiefs are capable of providing other public goods in their jurisdictions. But they have only limited impact in the water and sanitation sector, where the agencies with the required resources, skills and authority have conflicting or overlapping mandates. Some of these agencies have little interest in assisting informal settlements.

This contrasts with the situation in some towns, such as Kasungu and Rumphi, where improvements to services (latrines, water, market stalls, etc.) are made possible by the proximity of, and coordination and cooperation between, several organisations (city authorities, NGOs, market committees and chiefs). Kachere, even though it is an informal settlement like nearby Ndirande, has had more success in delivering water to its residents because the working relations between chiefs, politicians, parastatal and NGO staff, and the state bureaucracy are more cordial. They are geared towards public service provision rather than the capture of water revenues for political and personal gain.

Coordination challenges are not, however, restricted to water and sanitation or to Ndirande. Malawi is the inheritor of pre-colonial, imperial and autocratic ways of doing things that continue to hold sway alongside democracy. It also bears the marks of a succession of donor-driven reforms (from structural adjustment to the Millennium Development Goals) and of the very different policies pursued by its three post-independence regimes. The institutional legacies of each era continue to be felt, even though some of these have been partially abandoned or changed while others have only been incompletely adopted. This means that any single intervention requires the coordination of multiple jurisdictions and agencies that are ill-equipped and ill-disposed to

cooperate. Making matters worse, many actors within these organisations are concerned with protecting their own interests. A reluctance to take responsibility is common, even among those paid to manage service delivery. Evidence of this was found in various sectors in Ndirande, ranging from environmental health to market construction.

Since the democratic transition in 1994, successive governments have shown little inclination to sort out this mess. Donors might help but they need to do so 'intelligently' – with a deep understanding of the context (the history of national and local institutions) and without being wedded to the imposition of 'good governance' norms.

In this field and others, governments and donors should think in terms of 'just enough governance'.³ Even a minimum of improved policy coherence and coordination across domains and jurisdictions (chiefs, politicians, civil servants and NGOs), and between sectors, ministries, town, city or state agencies, projects and programmes, would be a worthwhile and realistic goal.

Perverse political logics

The effects of bad coordination are compounded by systematic rule-breaking by citizens and civil servants – a result of the weak regulatory environment. It is difficult to follow regulations in Malawi because incentives work against it. Hiring and career advancement are rarely based solely on merit, for instance. More often these are dictated by behaving in prescribed, socially acceptable ways, or in extreme cases by being a member of a particular tribal, political or regional grouping. Because it is nearly impossible to dismiss civil servants who are corrupt or performing poorly, there is little motivation for others to follow the rules. Add to this the paucity of resources available to carry out programmes effectively and it is easy to understand why many public servants are demoralised and self-seeking.

This is, fundamentally, a political problem. There is a clear need to incentivise compliance with regulations within government. Many technocrats long for the 'political space' to provide public goods fairly and efficiently, but find themselves in a civil service that no longer rewards such behaviour.

Reversing this trend requires an understanding of the various logics that underpin it. Historically-rooted norms might be drawn upon to motivate compliance – as appears to be happening in Rwanda –⁴ but this calls for a better understanding than most outsiders can muster of how discipline was instilled historically in Malawi. Residents

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themselves are aware of the breakdown in obedience and respect for rules within government and society more generally, blaming it on multiparty democracy, which brought ‘too much freedom’, or on the decline in *ubuntu* (social responsibility) that has accompanied urbanisation.

The pattern of politics in Malawi also undermines the delivery of local-level public goods in other ways. Local public goods are scarce resources of high financial and political value. National leaders, their clients and their networks want to control them in order to collect rents, gain votes and reward loyalists. The ‘capture’ of projects by political-party bosses to generate grassroots support is common, and the local state bureaucracy often accepts this as the norm.

Take the case of water kiosks in the informal settlements. Politics plays a central role in water kiosk management because water supplies are a valuable resource worth capturing. The same applies to the management of markets. The inability of Ndirande market to make any obvious progress stems from a weak unity of purpose among vendors, which is exacerbated by the meddling of political parties in market management and the City administration’s connivance.

In several ways, then, political events, actors and trends mould the institutions and incentives at national and local levels that shape the provision of public goods. Aid programmes intended to enhance public service delivery should, therefore, take the politics – especially civil servants’ incentives and their compliance with the party-politicisation of public goods – as the starting-point, not the excuse invoked when results prove disappointing.

Local problem-solving and self-help

The Western notion of ‘active citizenship’ (volunteering and demanding state accountability to citizens) offers only a weak basis upon which to build local-level development in contemporary Malawi.

In places like Ndirande, the residents are ‘translocal’ (their livelihoods require them to move between towns and farms). Few of them are accustomed or equipped to demand services from the state. In town, they rarely see state or local public servants or MPs. Instead, they refer to town chiefs and their advisors (*nduna*), who perform many of the public functions expected by citizens. In short, the concept of a public that expects transparency and services from the state and senior politicians is very new and not well entrenched.

“ *It is time to build on what is working on the ground in Africa.* ”

Residents’ experience of volunteerism has been limited to working in villages for chiefs, perhaps for a political party, a religious organisation or, latterly, an NGO. Some residents are organised by party-political workers, but they expect payment for any work for parties, NGOs or government organisations such as health committees or neighbourhood watches.

Hierarchy is the norm in Malawi and, in rural and peri-urban areas, people expect leaders to take a prominent role rather than organising on their own. In many places, groups will not form or remain vibrant for long without clear leadership. Moreover, few ordinary people have had access to the facilities or skills needed to organise and carry out projects of common interest. It is rare that people build networks and generate trust beyond the very local level. It is difficult to ensure the sustainability of groups, as members rarely stay involved unless funding and benefits become available.

The creation of citizen groups that ‘bridge’ to more distant groups and are effective over the long term will require organising skills, capacities to communicate over distances, getting to know strangers and learning to trust them. In the meantime, local problem-solving and self-help are likely to revolve around the quality of local leadership, especially ‘chiefs’.

Chieftaincy is abused by politicians in Malawi. Successive regimes have turned chiefs into ruling-party minions. But many of the 20,000 or more formal chiefs (and the thousands of unpaid chiefs) perform essential roles in maintaining security and order, delivering justice, attracting aid and organising civic action. This is necessary partly because formal local government is poorly resourced, under-staffed and largely absent at the grassroots. Chiefs can – and do – abuse their powers (e.g., over land allocation and management of state and donor resources) as they are largely unregulated. Nonetheless, it is better for government and aid agencies to work with, rather than around, chiefs and ‘town chiefs’, as they are the key to collective action and self-help.

There are good reasons to encourage Malawian chiefs to follow formal rules, based where possible on historical institutions, against which they can be held to account. But they should not be forced to change so fast that they shed their legitimacy and with it their proven capacity to deliver public goods. Programmes to teach community-organisational skills are also needed, but this is a task for the much longer term.

Implications for governments and aid agencies

The diagnosis of public goods problems offered in this brief suggests that beginning with western 'good governance' ideals is not a sound starting point for reform. Rather than addressing the real constraints, such an approach will bring more of the same sort of failures in promoting development that have been seen over the last fifteen years. It is time to begin building on what is working on the ground in Malawi and other parts of Africa. That means:

- A realistic, just-enough, approach to eliminating the worst examples of policy incoherence and lack of coordination in government systems

- A serious national debate about the political causes and not just the symptoms of poor civil service discipline and party-political capture of service delivery
- A focus on self-help and local problem-solving that recognises the centrality of leadership and aims to harness, rather than deny, prevailing popular concepts of good leadership.

For donors, the focus should be on providing assistance 'intelligently'. That means, in this context, understanding the deeply rooted historical factors that influence behaviour, the social and cultural views that establish incentives and define agendas, and the political logics at local and national levels that drive the use of resources.

References

1. Diana Cammack is a Research Associate of the Overseas Development Institute and leads APPP's Local Governance research stream.
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