

# The Challenges Facing Development Policy and Projects Implementation in Malawi

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**Abstract:** Malawi has introduced numerous policy reforms and projects with the aim to promote development at the national and local level. However, despite the policy reforms and a major influx of donor aid, Malawi remains one of the least developed countries of the world. Effective development policy and projects implementation for sustainable national development is a major concern for both government and development partners. Therefore, this paper examines the major hurdles facing development policy and project implementation in Malawi since the advent of multi-party democracy in 1994. The central argument is that much as effective development policy and project implementation is a function of many factors, the disposition of political and bureaucratic leadership and the lack of capacity in institutions are the major constraints in Malawi. The public bureaucracy is not only politicised, but there is a severe scarcity of skilled labour and finances. In addition, corruption is rampant in both political and administrative circles. The paper concludes that pragmatic strategies which include conducting political leadership and management development programmes, enforcing mechanisms for combating corrupt practices and mobilising resources both human and financial must be executed in order to promote efficiency and effectiveness in the development policy and project implementation.

**Keywords:** Development, Malawi, Policy implementation, Project management, Public bureaucracy

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## 1. Introduction

This paper examines the major hurdles facing development policy and project implementation in Malawi since the advent of multi-party democracy in 1994. The overall aim is to stimulate the much-needed debate on the significance of effective development policy and project implementation. The paper also places emphasis on the need for pragmatic strategies for the public bureaucracy to achieve the desired development goals. Most African countries including Malawi have adopted some overarching development policy in form of Visions. For instance, Vision 2040 for Zimbabwe, Vision 2036 for Botswana, Vision 2030 for Zambia, South Africa and Kenya. These Visions are long term policies which seek to accelerate national development which are often implemented through five year medium term strategies and projects. However, the concerns for effective development policy and project implementation have taken centre stage in developing countries due to unsatisfactory outcomes of policy reforms in most countries. Policy failures in developing countries such as Africa and Latin America are attributed to among others, adverse behaviour of political elites and interests of bureaucrats, scarcity of resources and lack of capacity in terms of both quantity and quality of human resources (Dick, 2003; Egonmwan, 2009).

Clearly, effective development policy and project implementation is the most vital phase in the policy making process which determines the success or failure of a policy and project. However, as argued by Pressman and Wildavsky (1973:166), there is little literature about implementation in the social sciences and attempts to provide more rigorous and systematic research to address policy implementation failures tends to be limited. According to Nwankwo & Apeh (2008), development policy and project implementation phase is often taken for granted. It is assumed that once a policy and project are adopted by government, implementation and the desired goals will automatically be achieved. Thus, unless the major challenges facing policy implementation are understood and pragmatically addressed, the various development policies and strategies will yield minimal results. Therefore, this paper focuses on the challenges facing development policy and project implementation in Malawi since the advent of multi-party democracy in 1994. The paper is therefore outlined as follows: presentation of the theoretical and conceptual underpinnings of this analysis, the context of development policy and project implementation frameworks in Malawi and the challenges facing Malawi's public bureaucracy in the implementation process. The conclusion and recommendations are presented in the sixth part.

## **2. Theoretical and Conceptual Underpinnings**

### **2.1 Public Policy and Implementaion**

There are several public policy definitions, for instance, 'authoritative statements made by legitimate public institutions about the way in which they propose to deal with policy problems and a proposed programme or course of action of government directed at achieving certain desired goals or objectives' (Dye, 2005); 'a purposive course of action followed by an actor or set of actors in dealing with a societal problem or matter of concern' (Anderson, 1997). According to Cloete and de Coning (2011:137) public policies which include development policies must be authoritative (authorised by government institution), enforceable, flexible and adaptable, feasible, clear and made known to the public in order distinguish public policy from mere collection of goals and administrative actions. In summary, despite the several definitions, public policy boils down government's course of action designed to address a societal problem area. On other hand, scholars define policy implementation in various ways. For instance, it is defined as 'conversion of mainly physical and financial resources into concrete service delivery outputs in for of facilities, and services or into other concrete outputs aimed at achieving policy objective' (Cloete & de Coning, 2011:137); 'organised activities by governments directed towards the achievement of goals and objectives, articulated in authorised policy statements' (Kraft & Furlong, 2007); 'the stage of the policy cycle which involves processes whereby programmes and policies are carried out, or the translation of policies into practice' (Howlett & Ramesh, 2003:186); More elaborately, Edwards III (1980) defines policy implementation as: 'a process which involves a wide variety of actions such as issuing and enforcing directives, disbursing funds, making loans, awarding grants, signing contracts, collecting data, disseminating information, analysing problems, assigning and hiring personnel, negotiating with stakeholders like citizens, businesses, interest groups, organisational units and even other countries'. In summary, policy implementation represents the stage of the policy cycle which involves the conversion of laws, policies, programs and projects into practice.

### **2.2 Theoretical Frameworks**

There several controversies surrounding policy implementation theoretical frameworks and models. Broadly, the public choice theory gives

theorists a plausible weapon to use in the explanation of policy implementation failures in the public bureaucracy. The theory contends that the bureaucrats are inefficient and motivated by their own self-interests, maximisation of their own utility and welfare rather than public interest and as result policy implementation is neglected and fails. The conceptual distinction made between policy formulation and policy implementation has attracted debate among scholars. This is a notion based on the politics -administration dichotomy traced to Woodrow Wilson's publication in 1887 of an article entitled 'the study of administration' (Okuli & Onah, 2003). It distinguishes policy making (political activity) and policy implementation (administrative activity) and takes the two as separate governmental functions. On the one hand, policy formulation which involves the determination of the will of the state and people is regarded as the sole concern of politicians. On the other hand, policy implementation which involves putting into effect the will of the state and people once it is made clear by the political process and giving attention to efficient means of implementing policies is the concern of the public bureaucracy (administrators) (Ezeani, 2006). However, scholars such as Pressman and Widdavsk (2000) reject the politics-administration distinction. They argue that factors such as vague and ambiguous legislations, lack of technical knowledge and difficulties in monitoring and controlling bureaucratic behaviour translates into the active involvement by administrators in both policy formulation and policy implementation. Thus, policy implementation is not separated from policy making as it is considered as one of the stage in the policy making process (Dye, 2005:42).

Another controversy relates to the factors which are critical in the determination of the success or failure of policy and project implementation. Cloete and de Coning (2011) present the 5c's protocol for policy implementation. These are Content of policy express as goals, objectives and how policy aims to solve the problems; Context-nature of institutional context; Commitment of implementers; Capacity-administrative capacity and support of clients and lastly Coalition interests. According to Smith (1973), the four components critical in policy implementation analysis are the goals and objectives, the target group the organisation's structure, leadership and capacity; and the environmental factors (this is considered as the first model of policy implementation). According to Van Meter and Van Horn (1975)

policy success depends on how well bureaucratic structures implement government decisions and characteristics of implementing agencies including economic, social and political environmental factors and disposition of implementers. However, Edwards III's (1980) typology which comprises four major determinants of effective development policy and project implementation, namely, bureaucratic structure, communication, resources and disposition provides relevant framework for the examination of the challenges facing Malawi's public bureaucracy in development policy and project implementation. Firstly, the bureaucratic structure refers to 'the formalized arrangement of interaction between and responsibility for tasks, people and resources in an organisation often depicted a pyramidal chart with positions, titles and roles in a cascading fashion' (Pearce *et al.*, 2010:355). The bureaucratic structure is critical in the sense that it presents the political and bureaucratic leadership, coordination, collaboration and the degree of cooperation among implementers which in turn affects the efficiency in scarce resources mobilisation and utilisation, and minimisation of duplication of activities.

Secondly, communication which refers to 'a process of a process of transferring information, feelings, emotions, thoughts and ideas from one person to another; the exchange of ideas, among two or more people so as to share a common understanding' is a major determinant of effective implementation of development policy and projects. As argued by Edwards III's (1980), communication provides channels through which public bureaucracy transmits instructions and orders to the appropriate personnel for implementation. Therefore, adequate, clear, accurate and consistent information of policy goals and objectives are important as they affect how development policy and project are implemented.

Thirdly, the availability of resources which include 'tangible and intangible assets and organisational capabilities' are important for effective development policy and project implementation (Pearce *et al.*, 2010:169). According to Edwards III's (1980), the availability of adequate personnel both quality and quantity, material and financial resources are critical for successful development policy and project implementation. These include staff and skills; information, authority and sanctions, and physical facilities and equipment which affect the efficiency and effectiveness of policy implementation (Okuli & Onah, 2003).

Finally, predisposition which refers to 'the behavioural aspects' which include interests, attitudes, discretion, motivation and commitment or sympathy, neutrality, or hostility of actors and agency/support of political elites to the implementing agency are critical in policy implementation according to (Egonmwan, 2009). As argued by McLaughlin (1978), the amount of interest, commitment and support by implementers or actors determines the success of development policy and project implementation. The policy that threatens interests is bound to be opposed while supportive behaviour of political elites to the policy implementing agency may mean greater access to resources and likelihood to implement policies successfully. In summary, the four variables, namely, bureaucratic structure, communication, resources and predisposition which guided this study are highly interwoven and interact with each other to aid or hinder policy implementation.

### **3. The Context of Development Policy and Project Implementation in Malawi**

Since the advent of multiparty democracy in 1994, Malawi embarked on public policy reforms and project implementation in areas such as National Decentralisation Programme, performance management; budgeting, planning and financial management, privatisation, declaration of assets, anticorruption, civil service, police reforms; local government, agriculture and land reforms among others (Tambulasi, 2009). However, the 'Malawi Vision 2020' which was launched in March 1998 has been the overarching long-term development policy in the multi-party dispensation. The aspiration is that: "by the year 2020, Malawi as a God fearing nation, will be secure, democratically mature, environmentally sustainable, self-reliant with equal opportunities for and active participation by all, having social services, vibrant cultural and religious values and a technologically driven middle-income economy" (GoM, 1998:3).

However, Malawi remains one of the low income and least developed countries of the world. It is among the countries with the lowest Human Development Index (HDI) in the world ranked 170 out of 187 countries. Out of the 17.2 million people, 75 percent earn less than USD 1.25 per day. Poverty remains deep and widespread with about 50.7% still living below the poverty line and almost a quarter of the population is estimated to live in extreme

poverty (MEPD, 2017). The situation is attributed to ineffective and inconsistent implementation. For instance, the MGDS II which was launched in 2012 and implemented up to 2016 with the aim to create wealth and develop infrastructure as a means of reducing poverty was 'hampered' by fuel and foreign exchange scarcity which resulted in a serious economic slow-down and the government had to develop a Malawi Economic Recovery Plan (ERP) for a quick monetary (GoM, 2018). The major challenges facing Malawi's public bureaucracy in the implementation of development policies and projects are presented in the section below.

## **4. Findings and Discussion**

The study established that that the two major factors, namely, the political and bureaucratic leadership and weak institutional and individual capacities lead to policy fragmentation which undermines the ability by the public bureaucracy to effectively implement policies and achieve the desired policy objectives.

### **4.1 Political and Bureaucratic Leadership**

The nature of the state governance and commitment at the highest political and bureaucratic level are prerequisites for any successful development policy and project implementation. The Malawi government has adopted Sector Working Group (SWG) committees as a way of bringing the much-desired policy consistency and inter-sectoral coordination. The SWGs are inter-ministerial committees established to develop Joint Sector Strategies (JSSs) and implementation plans and to facilitate collaboration in the implementation of national development strategy. However, the study revealed that the lack of effective leadership, communication, coordination which are complicated by patronage, politicisation of the bureaucracy, discontinuity of successor's projects and corruption are the major challenges facing Malawi's public bureaucracy in the development policy and project implementation. These factors are discussed below:

#### **4.1.1 Ineffective Leadership, Communication, Coordination and Collaboration**

A major challenge in policy and project implementation by the public bureaucracy is ineffective leadership, communication, coordination and collaboration in policy and project design and implementation. According to GoM (2017) development

policy and project implementation is yet to produce meaningful results in Malawi because of ineffective leadership reflected in 'policy inconsistencies, ineffective design, prioritisation and the absence of a clarity and consensus among key stakeholders on the philosophy and principles to guide the implementation'. Furthermore, the lack of effective communication which engender poor coordination and collaboration attributed to weak SWGs and absence of consultation as well as individualistic rather than a holistic approaches adopted by sectors and Ministries complicate the implementation of policies and projects (GoM, 2017). More often than not policies and projects are made and implemented to achieve selfish and egoistic interest of the political leaders and to attract public acclaim and attention with less regard to the practical appropriateness to effective implementation by the public bureaucracy (Matonga, 2014).

#### **4.1.2 Politicisation of the Bureaucracy**

Another challenge facing the public bureaucracy in the development policy and project implementation is the politicisation of the public bureaucracy. The Public Service is meant to be the obedient servant of the state and politically neutral, credible and with integrity (Fry & Nigro, 1996). However, according to MNISAR (2013:78) in the multiparty dispensation, the public bureaucracy is characterised by undue political influence, partisan politicisation and other narrow, particularistic interests which undermine its independence in policy and project implementation. Thom (2017) observes that the majority of senior public officials are political appointees vulnerable to removal from their posts on political consideration. As a result they tend to subject their official decisions and actions to the wishes, preferences, control and endorsement of their political masters. The practice is complicated by the requirement that public servants must be loyal and committed to the policies and programmes of the government. Thus, public servants serve in a manner that gives more control rights, accountability and sympathy to politicians and particularly to the ruling party (MNISAR, 2013:78).

#### **4.1.3 Discontinuing Policies of the Previous Regime**

The practice of discontinuing policies of the previous regime by the political leadership once government changes without sound basis is another challenge facing public bureaucracy in policy and project implementation. Examples include the abandonment of the United Democratic Front's (UDF) 'Starter Pack' programme (this involved provision of free

farm inputs – seed and fertiliser to the poor) by the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) regime, which introduced a similar programme called Fertiliser Input Subsidy programme (FISP) (Tambulasi, 2009); the low cost housing policy introduced by the UDF which was changed by the People Party (PP) under Joyce Banda and introduced a similar low housing scheme called 'Nyumba m'midzi' (low cost houses in the villages) (Chimjeka, 2017). The Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) further changed the 'Nyumba m'midzi' programme and introduced the 'Cement and Malata subsidy' (iron sheets). The constant shifts in policies despite similarities in policy focus contribute to policy fragmentation in terms of switch over to entirely different priorities and objectives, which require new planning and organisation of resources (Chimjeka, 2017).

#### **4.1.4 Rampant Corruption**

Another critical factor in policy and project implementation is the rampant corruption in the political and bureaucratic circles. Tambulasi (2009) shows that some public policies and projects, for example, the Fertiliser Subsidy Programme, only exist as conduit pipes to divert and drain state resources by corrupt elements for private gains. MIM (2016) underlines that all the political regimes since the advent of the multi-party dispensation in June 1994, have been associated with some form of corruption. The Capital Hill Cash Gate scandal in 2012 has been a reference point of grand corruption in Malawi for the past six years. This involved a massive plunder of over US\$20 million of public money by high profile public officials through payments to non-existing suppliers, deletion of transactions, procurement done without the knowledge of the Office of the Director for Public Procurement (ODPP) and inflation of prices (Matonga, 2013). According to Chimgwede (2013) the public resources which were lost through 'cash gate' was enough to fund the entire Ministry of education, the Malawi Revenue Authority and all government sub vented organisations for a fiscal year without donor support. Clearly, effective implementation cannot be attained in the face of high-level corruption involving abuse of public resources for private gains at the expense of development project.

## **4.2 Lack of Institutional Capacity**

Another challenge to effective policy and project implementation is the weak institutional and individual capacities attributed to the resource

constraints in terms of inadequate material or physical and human resources both quality and quantity, financial constraints and lack of commitment or poor motivation (MNISAR, 2013). According to GoM (2012), policy implementation of the national development agenda in Malawi is undermined by strategic capacity gaps at policy, institutional and individual levels. Similarly, MNISAR (2013) argues that institutions such as the Anti-Corruption Bureau (ACB), Office of the Ombudsman, the National Audit Office (NAO) fail to translate policies into action due to weak human resource capacity and high staff turnover.

### **4.2.1 Inadequate Physical/Material and Skilled Human Resources**

The lack of expertise and skilled personnel translate into reduced capabilities by the public bureaucracy to effectively implement policies and projects. The situation is attributed to a number of factors. Firstly, the non-responsive human resource policies towards training and development have resulted in serious leadership and management gaps in the public bureaucracy. According to GoM (2012:11), the mandatory induction courses in leadership and management have not been offered for over 15 years. The public bureaucracy is unable to attract and retain quality personnel (due to poor conditions of service), the appalling working conditions particularly at the local level are evident in poor housing, salaries and inadequate facilities like computers, vehicles, and telephones that are usually not working (Kutengule *et al.*, 2004:51). Thirdly, the limited skilled professionals in government is depleted by the HIV/AIDS pandemic with the 8% and 14% national prevalence rate among the production ages of 15-49. The effects of the pandemic are manifested in reduced capacities and capabilities of officers involved in policy and project implementation

### **4.2.2 Limited Availability of Finances**

The limited availability of finances makes it difficult for sectors to provide adequate and continuous support to policy and project implementation. Njera *et al.* (2016) observes that the establishment of management committees in the Fisheries department as provided by the Forestry, Fisheries, Parks and Wildlife Act of 1997 has not materialised due to limited finances and investments in natural resource management and 'the failure to establish the National Irrigation Board, which was approved in the National Irrigation Act of 2001, and delayed

approval of new staff establishments in several institutions' to the lack of finances. Furthermore, National Decentralisation Policy of 1998 has not achieved most of its policy objectives partly because of the chronic financial shortages in local government authorities. The functions and responsibilities devolved to local institutions are not commensurate with the available resources. In short, the lack of finances makes it difficult for sectors to implement policies effectively (Kutengule *et al.*, 2004:51; Njera *et al.*, 2016).

#### 4.2.3 Adverse Disposition by Bureaucrats

According to Edward III (1980), policy or project implementation is negatively or positively affected directly by public servants' disposition, attitudes and behaviour. That is, if they are negatively disposed to the policy, there is lack of commitment to the implementation process. Seppo (2017) observed that Malawi is often referred to as a country that is 'policy rich but implementation poor'. This implies that despite the availability of policies that stand to better the lot of the average Malawian, the public bureaucracy lacks the will to realize the policy objectives. According to GoM (2012:8-9), the lack of finances, lack of skills and competence, and poor incentives and workings conditions culminate into the glaring lack of commitment to quality implementation. The adverse disposition and lack of commitment by public officials is attributed to their tendency to see the policy in terms of how it affects their personal interest and aspirations. While there are a number of dedicated bureaucrats in positions of power who genuinely strive to ensure effective policy implementation the majority lack the commitment and do not approach policy implementation with the enthusiasm and zeal that is required.

## 5. Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, the study shows that much as effective development policy and project implementation is a function of many factors, the disposition of political and bureaucratic leadership and the lack of capacity in institutions are the major hurdles in Malawi. The public bureaucracy is not only politicised, but there is a severe scarcity of skilled labour and finances. Policies are rolled out regularly but most of the time, without achieving the desired results. The reduction of the gap between the policy formulation and achievement of the desired

needs requires the political and bureaucratic leadership to champion well-coordinated policy making and implementation. The political interference in bureaucratic activities must be minimised to allow Principal Secretaries to exercise real control and authority in the administrative processes and procedures. The public officers should be regularly trained to change the mind-set, attitudes, and work ethics and encourage efficiency and effectiveness. In short, pragmatic multi-dimensional strategies, which include political leadership and management development programmes and mobilisation of both human and financial resources are required to ensure availability of adequate quality and quantity of personnel and finances to promote effective policy implementation.

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