

# Training and Development Needs in Local Government: Challenges and Lessons Drawn from Malawi's Councillors

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**Abstract:** This paper examines training and development needs for Councillors and the challenges facing skills development in Malawi's local government. This study adopted a qualitative approach. The existing literature on local government, training and development was systematically reviewed. It contends that the quality, applicability and relevance of training and development in local government is complicated by the lack of well-coordinated training and development programmes, as well as inadequate institutional and individual capacities. The study concludes that local government transformation through Councillors' training and development is critical and therefore, attention must be paid to the role of education and training institutions and on-going capacity development. There is need for regular assessment of training needs in local government, as well as the mobilisation of resources in terms of human resources and finances for efficient training and development and effective public service delivery.

**Keywords:** Councillors, Development, Local government, Public service, Training

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## 1. Introduction

This paper analyses the training and development needs and the challenges facing skills development in Malawi's local government with reference to Councillors. As political leaders in local government, Councillors are required to serve their wards, deliver quality services and promote democratic governance (Hughes, 2003). However, the deterioration in local governments is attributed to the lack of effective training and development among Councillors in matters of policy analysis, development management and administration (Ojagbohumni, 1990; Chunga, 2014). According to Ojagbohumni (1990), there is rampant paucity of skills particularly in local government and among Councillors despite the numerous training and development initiatives in the various countries. In the context of Malawi, Chunga (2014) observes that training and development initiatives for Councillors are ad hoc, haphazard, poorly coordinated and unsystematic. Furthermore, there is duplication of training programmes due to lack of coordination among training providers. Thus, the improvement of public service delivery in local government through effective training and development of Councillors is a major concern for both government and development partners. This raises a number of questions including: how can training and development programmes for Councillors be better designed and implemented in local government to achieve the desired goals? What are the skills gaps

among Councillors? Which priority areas need to be addressed in order to enhance knowledge and skills for effective performance and public service delivery? What are the challenges facing training and development in local government?

This paper is organised into parts as follows: theoretical underpinnings relating to training and development, an overview of the legal and institutional framework of Malawi's local government system. In part four the methodological approach adopted for this study is outlined. Part five which is the crux of this analysis presents the findings of the study which include the training needs for Councillors and challenges facing training and development function. Finally, in part six, concluding remarks and recommendations are presented.

## 2. Concepts and Theoretical Underpinnings

From the outset it is important to clarify the key concepts that underpin this analysis, namely, training, development and local government, in view of the wide variation in their usage and interpretation in relation to the public sector.

### 2.1 Training and Development

The concept of the training and development in the public sector has changed over the recent decades.

Traditionally, training is defined as job-focused process, limited to the technical skills and abilities needed to perform specific tasks. For example, training is defined by scholars as 'equipping people with knowledge and skills relevant to the job performance' (Coetzee, 1992:300); 'a systematic and planned process associated with imparting to employees job related skills knowledge and behaviour needed to complete their assigned tasks' (Nel, Gerber, Van Dyk, Haasbroek, Schultz, Sono & Werner, 2004:427); and 'the acquisition technically oriented skills by non-management personnel' (Grobler, Wörnich, Carrell, Elbert & Hatfield, 2016:301). As such, training is differentiated from development which is considered to be broader in scope, more oriented toward a range of future jobs and generally provided by institutions of higher learning. However, the distinction between training and development has become blurred. For example, DeSario, Sue, Faerman & Slack (1994), defines training as the learning experiences designed to enhance the short-term and/or long-term job performance of individual employees. This is similar to the definition of development which is defined as 'a systematic process by which individuals in training and development positions acquire skills, knowledge and abilities to lead and manage organisations successfully' (Cohen, 1995:40); a 'general enhancement and growth of self-awareness, skills and abilities' (Grobler *et al.*, 2016:301) and the learning experiences encompassing education, training, and career development, performance management, coaching and mentoring (Andries, 2016). Thus, the terms training and development are used interchangeably to represent processes that improve the performance of individuals and groups within the organisation.

The literature suggests a number of theories of training and development. The nature of this article does not allow going into more details. The following are highlights of the interrelated approaches and theories underpinning this analysis. According to Chang, Chiang & Kunyi (2012), McGehee & Thayer's three-fold approach is the earliest model which determines the types of training and development experiences that should be implemented, including organisational analyses, task analyses, and person analyses which should be undertaken for effective training and development. Accordingly, organisational analyses focus on the organisation's ability to support training. Task analyses focus on the knowledge, skills, abilities, and other personal characteristics

required to perform the agency's task. Person analyses focus on the needs of the individual, identifying personal characteristics possessed by the particular individual.

The adult learning theory (Andragogy) by Knowles & Vella (1994) provides a set of ideas about how adults such as Councillors can effectively learn new skills or information. Among others aspects, the theory emphasises conducting a learning needs and resources assessment (LNRA) before designing the lesson/training; identifying the learning styles of the learners; setting objectives that focus on what the learners will do with the content in order to learn it; designing the learning so that learners are involved in various interactive activities; and establishing a learning environment that is emotionally and physically comfortable for all learners.

Similarly, the strategic training and development process model which is similar to the systems training and development model underline that before implementing any training programme, there is need for assessment of the needs of the training (Grobler *et al.*, 2006:300-305). The models comprises three interrelated phases, namely, needs assessment; design and delivery; and evaluation. The needs assessment phase is critical because it links training initiatives with the overall goals of the organisation. It also helps evaluate whether training is a viable option for the organisation based on its resources and strategy. In summary, this analysis is concerned with the training needs assessment because it is one the most important phase in the entire training cycle which provides necessary data for the formulation of training objectives to be achieved for efficient and effective performance.

## 2.2 Local Government

Local government refers to that part of government which deals with matters that concern the inhabitants of a particular district or place that is administered by a government or local authorities (also called Council) which is subordinate to the central government (Geldenhuys, 1996). In the Western liberal political perspective, local government is linked to democratic governance in the sense that governing and administration is based on local community organs, which are composed of people elected by the community's population (Leemans, 1970). The local authorities are the key institutions in the local government system, with defined powers, responsibilities and

an area of jurisdiction and citizens (Cloete, 1993). These institutions have corporate powers including substantial fiscal powers. They have the right to determine their own budget, prescribe taxes to be levied, collect fees and charges for services provided, and to incur debt. In addition, local authorities have administrative independence in a defined area, and public responsibilities and functions to be discharged by office holders and elected officials called Councillors. Public responsibilities and functions are discharged by office holders and elected officials called Councillors. The Councillors, who are closer to the public physically, socially and psychologically, are 'a fountainhead for democracy since they provide opportunities for representation, accountability, participation and political education to the citizens' (Ola, 1984:7).

### **3. Overview of the Legal and Institutional Framework of Malawi's Local Government System**

The legal and institutional basis and issues relating to procedures, components, composition, functions, role and status of the local government are articulated in the Constitution, the Local Government Act No. 42 of 1998, and the National Decentralisation Policy of 1998. For example, section 146 of the constitution provides that the local sphere of government consists of local government authorities, which are also called Councils. These include 28 district (rural), 1 town, 2 municipal and 4 city councils according to section 2 and 5 (2) of the Local Government Act of 1998. Sections 5 to 11 of the Act provides council structure which comprises elected Councillors as voting members and of late Members of Parliament (MPs). The councillors are elected from each ward and they hold office for a period of five years. The non-voting members of the Council include traditional leaders and five persons appointed by the Council to represent special interest groups (Local Government Act of 1998, section 5). Thus, the Council's political structure is under the leadership of the chairperson or mayor elected among the Councillors during the first meeting of the council held within 14 days after local government elections (Local Government Act of 1998, section 7). The legal framework confers substantial powers on Councillors. They are required to ensure efficient and effective public service delivery but also sustainable infrastructure and economic development by formulating and implementing local development plans. The areas of concern include health and environment

services, education, sports and culture, clinical and health services, environmental protection, provision of public amenities like markets, postal agencies, water, highways, buildings and structures, licensing of business, censorship and control of entertainment, and development projects and promotion of tourism (Local Government Act of 1998, third schedule, section 1-18). However, as observed by Chunga (2019), most Councillors have inadequate skills and formal education to undertake the numerous tasks required of them. This contributes to the crisis in the administration and financial management in local authorities. According to LAPA (2018) most of the Councillors do not really know their roles and responsibilities. They do not fully grasp the operations of the Council, and are not able to understand and articulate issues in the English Language. The skill challenges have a bearing on the potential of Councillors to play oversight roles, influence the outcomes of decision-making processes in the Service Committees, and play a substantive role in deciding on local government priorities and the allocation of public funds that reflect the needs and aspirations of their Wards.

### **4. Methods and Materials**

This study adopted a qualitative approach. The existing literature on local government, training and development was systematically reviewed. This involved a review of journal papers, conference papers, books, official reports and internet sources. A systematic review of literature attempts to collate all empirical evidence to answer a specific research question and uses explicit methods that minimise bias. This provides more reliable findings from which conclusion can be drawn and decisions made (Cochrane, 2003). According to Mulrow (1994) a systematic review of literature is appropriate in identifying, appraising and synthesising research based evidence and presenting it in accessible format. This methodology was the most appropriate since the research area required a review of a broad range of training and development approaches.

### **5. Results and Discussion**

The section below presents the major findings of the study. The focus is on the policy and legal framework for local government and training and development in Malawi. The major areas critical for Councillors' training and development; and the challenges facing skills development.

## 5.1 The Policy and Legal Framework for Local Government and Training and Development in Malawi

The Malawi Government through the National Training Policy (NTP) of 1996 recognises that the delivery of quality public services depends on the availability of well-trained managers and leaders. The training and development function is undertaken by a network of institutions which include the Department of Human Resource Management and Development (DHRMD) in collaboration with the Office of the President and Cabinet (OPC) and other Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs) and education and training institutions. The OPC provides overall leadership on the implementation of the Malawi Government National Training Policy as well as the Training Guidelines and Procedures for the Public Service. It also ensures that there is a sustainable training financing strategy in place. In order to improve the delivery of public services. The MDAs are responsible for ensuring effective leadership and management development in their institutions. They are required to secure funds either from Government or from development partners to pay for short term and long term specialised and professional training in their respective Common Services. The development partners provide training support by funding scholarships through DHRMD to address human resource capacity gaps. Local authorities are also responsible for the training of their personnel including Councillors. The Malawi Local Government Association (MALGA) has borne the responsibility of coordinating the training for Councillors (Chunga, 2019).

There are several education and training institutions for provision of training and development. The Staff Development Institute (SDI), is the earliest government institution which was first established in 1962 as a civil service institution to train public servants as part of the Africanisation of the civil service (Dzimbiri, 2008). The Malawi Institute of Management (MIM) which was established by Malawi Institute of Management Act No. 7 of 1989 has the primary responsibility to provide to provide high quality training and development programmes. The flagship training programmes which include aspects of local government conducted over the years include Executive Leadership Programme (ELP) and the Public Sector Administration (PSA). The Department of Political and Administrative Studies, (PAS) which was born out of the Institute of Public Administration

at SDI and became part of the University of Malawi offers a wide range of courses for training and development. Currently, the curriculum includes local government courses which lead to specialist training and awards of diplomas, bachelor and post graduate degrees (Dzimbiri, 2008).

## 5.2 The Major Areas Critical for Councillors' Training and Development

### 5.2.1 Representation

The study established that the major function of Councillors is to represent and articulate the interests of the people. The Councillors are elected to represent the people in their electoral ward. Section 146 of the constitution provides that local government authorities shall be responsible for the representation of the people. The mandate of ward Councillors is to represent the views of local people or residents in the council. The representation role requires the Councillors to confirm the development needs and justified expectations of the citizens. They must ensure that the wishes of the public are incorporated into council policies. Therefore in order to solicit input from the public, Councillors must be accessible.

To be able to establish the wishes of the local residents, Councillors should keep in contact with such local residents by, for example, holding meetings and allowing them to participate. In addition, Councillors should acquire the appropriate ability argues that Councillors need to be equipped with political capabilities (Simukonda, 1999) – the ability of the Councillors to govern and execute policy with the performance level that demonstrates high degree of political maturity. Therefore they need leadership skills such as advocacy, and ability to speak on behalf of the people and represent the interests of the stakeholders in the council. Furthermore, they should learn to approach representations and expectations objectively and to make rational recommendations to council during council meetings (Hussein, 2013; Chunga, 2019).

### 5.2.2 Developmental and Public Service Delivery Role

The study also established that Councillors play a developmental and public service delivery role at the local level. Section 14 (2&3) of the Local Government Act of 1998 provides for the creation of committees at area, ward and village levels in order to facilitate councillors and citizen participation in development activities. The developmental

role involves passing appropriate policies, initiating development projects and mobilizing resources and ensuring effective implementation of those development project and motivating voters to participate in local government affairs such as attending public meetings and implementation of self-help projects. However, a substantial number of Councillors are experiencing difficulties in understanding budgeting and a leadership role as they are involved in educating and mobilising the public regarding civic roles and specific development activities (Hussein, 2013; Chunga, 2019). The councillors need familiarity with council procedure and the necessary tools for policy formulation and skills in administration, management and financial mobilisation. They are also required to work within the development planning system, namely, Area Development committees and Village development committees (Dzimbiri, 2008).

To play a meaningful role in development and public service delivery, Councillors must have a thorough understanding of the operations of the council. Among other things, the Councillors must have a clear understanding of the financial processes of the Council, ability to identify the development priorities of Council in conjunction with the communities and utilisation of the budget in the most effective way. The Councillors need to be aware of effective measures for personnel recruitment, appointment and deployment. In summary, the Councillor is expected to serve the community in the ward by performing various functions as a developer, educator and mediator; defender of rights for the community, and motivator. Therefore, the key areas for Councillors' training include leadership, financial management for non-financial managers, budget tracking and resource mobilisation.

### **5.2.3 Participation**

Another major role of Councillors is the participation in the proceedings of Council and standing committee meetings (Hussein, 2013; Chunga, 2019). According to Rallings & Thrasher (1999) political participation in the local political system by Councillors is the essence of local democracy. It is a means through which democratic character and political processes such as elections, accountability and transparency between citizens and decision-makers are facilitated. The Councillors are required to give an account of their stewardship, including both representational accountability and financial accountability. Normanton, (1972:311) argues that the key demands

in terms of a political accountability system are the publication of facts and the submission of reports to the public and higher levels of government. The local people must have the authority and control over decisions and resources to ensure the effective mobilisation and use of limited public resources, and incorporation of local knowledge and priorities into the policy formulation process and the implementation of local development programmes. Committee meetings provide forums for information sharing, problems solving, and where needs and wishes of the community are dealt with in detail and alternative policies and decisions are formulated (Hussein, 2013; Chunga, 2019). For example, the meetings are used for civic education and enlightening residents on local government affairs, resolving and mediating in conflicting demands or responding to complaints of people in the ward. To effectively participate, Councillors should have basic skills in communication, negotiation, mediation and problem solving.

## **5.3 Challenges**

### **5.3.1 Administrative Inefficiencies**

The administrative inefficiencies are evident in the failure by the bureaucratic leadership to strategically plan and project human resource requirements which in turn undermine the implementation of training and development programmes. In Malawi, the Public Sector Management Reforms and Capacity Development Programme Document (PSMRCDPD) (2016) notes that both mandatory induction courses and training and development courses were neglected by government for over 15 years leading to serious leadership and management gaps in the public service and inefficient public service delivery. The focus of the institutions is shifted from that of training and development and transformation of public service delivery to tools of gaining political mileage by the existing regime. The education and training institutions are reactive rather than proactive towards training and development. The rampant corruption in bureaucratic circles has resulted in diverting public resources and capital for investment necessary for effective training and development for private gains (Matonga, 2013). The massive plunder of over MK14.5 billion (US\$20 million) by public servants within six months through payments to non-existing suppliers, deletion of transactions, dubbed 'Capital Hill Cashgate scandal' has been a reference point of grand corruption for the past six years (Gwede, 2016:3). In short, effective implementation of training

and development programmes cannot be attained in the face of high-level corruption.

### **5.3.2 Lack of Skills and Expertise in the Design and Implementation**

There is a lack of skills and expertise in the design and implementation of systematic training and development programme. As observed by Kutengule, Watson, Kampanje, Chibwana, Chiteyeye, Matenje, Chunga & Stanley (2004) the shortage of skills and expertise in the design and implementation is pronounced in local authorities. This is attributed to the non-responsive human resource policies towards training and development which have resulted in serious competency gaps and the inability to attract and retain quality personnel in the public service due to poor conditions of service (LAPA, 2018). The effects of the pandemic are manifested in reduced capacities of officers involved in training and development. Furthermore, public universities are unable to design new postgraduate courses in local government. The pace at which new courses are introduced does not tally with what Government expectations due to lapses in needs assessment (Chunga, 2019).

### **5.3.3 Inadequate Resource-Personnel and Finances**

The training activities are beset by inadequate finances for training and development for Councillors. According to the PSMRCDPD (2016), the demand for training and development programmes exceeds capacity and resources available. This is compounded by rapid expansion of the local government operations as well as increase in the number of reforms and activities (LAPA, 2018). The situation has resulted in haphazard design and delivery of training and development programmes for councillors. The financial resource constraints translate into the inability to sponsor public officials for training and development courses (LAPA, 2018). As argued by Kamanga, Banda, Chunga & Phiri (2000), the chronic problems of local authorities since independence has been acute shortage of trained personnel and Councillors, and inadequate funds which hamper Council operations. According to the circular CS.S/001 of 19<sup>th</sup> June 2016, MDAs have failed to dedicate 70% of their internal training budget towards training of public officials at MIM and SDI as required. Furthermore, although DHRMD has lobbied for increased funding for training and development, the level of funding is far less than 2% of the GDP which is a statutory requirement provided in the Malawi Government National

Training Policy. The limited availability of finances makes it difficult for sectors and training and education institutions to offer short and long term training programmes in priority areas including training and development for Councillors. The reliance on external training for some of the short term training and postgraduate training depletes the much needed foreign exchange. According to PSMRCDPD (2016), the lack of finances and competence culminate into the glaring lack of commitment to quality training and development not only for Councillors but also employees in the local government sector.

## **6. Conclusion and Recommendations**

To conclude, the quality, applicability and relevance of training and development in Malawi's local government is complicated by the lack of systematic and well-coordinated programmes, vested interests of public officials and inadequate and elusive quality and quantity of human resources. However, local government transformation through Councillors' training and development is critical and therefore, attention must be paid to the role of education and training institutions and on-going capacity development. The political and bureaucratic leadership's must have clear vision and commitment towards implementing relevant and well-structured training and development programmes. The coordination of Councillors' training and development must be enhanced through the establishment of the National local government education and training board. The mandate of the board should include the development of curriculum covering relevant subjects to Councillors and resource mobilisation. In short, there is need for regular needs assessment for Councillors' training and development and the mobilisation of resources both human in terms of quality and quantity for efficient and effective training and service delivery.

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