

Self-interest vs. Altruism: Malawian elites and poverty reduction

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Abstract

Drawing on qualitative and quantitative data from Malawi, the paper seeks to challenge rational choice arguments of self-interest arguing that self interest should not always be seen as negative for the poor. On the other hand, elites may also be driven by ideology, professional pride or a sense of nationalism. It also challenges neopatrimonial arguments of elites as driven by rent seeking needs which fail to explain the different policies, institutional arrangements and outcomes within and across countries. Employing as its theoretical base Abram de Swaanø (1988) theory of social consciousness, the paper also demonstrates that the poverty of most Malawians is viewed as important and an issue that requires urgent action by the Malawian elites. At the same time, Malawian elites feel that the poor will always be a permanent feature of Malawian society. Despite the perception that there is mutual interdependence between elites and the poor, elites are not threatened by growing levels of poverty or by the poor themselves. This leads to the question of what drives elites to support pro-poor policies in Malawi.

Through observations, questionnaires and interviews with elites, it emerged that Malawian elites are at times driven and motivated by self-interest or altruism in their support for pro-poor policy and at other times by both. They believe that they are morally obligated to take action to alleviate poverty but that in doing so, they may positively benefit. Appeals to moral responsibility are very powerful when they are consistent with self-interest. Therefore, goodwill and self-interest should not be perceived as contradictory principles, logically or empirically (Moore, 1999). In the implementation of poverty alleviation programmes, it is important to identify elite motivations and appeal to these. Particularly, if the poor are presented to be similar to the elites sharing the same values, concerns and fears, but also interdependent to the

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extent that the presence of the poor has an impact on the elites, either negative or positive (De Swaan, 2005).

Introduction

Historical accounts of the evolution of welfare states in UK and the USA inform us that elite perceptions of poverty are important as they determine the extent to which elites support or prioritise pro-poor policy and the nature of anti-poverty policy they are willing to support. In developing countries, research and policy on poverty alleviation has largely ignored elites thereby failing to embrace the crucial role elites play in enabling or blocking the successful implementation of pro-poor policy. Instead, there has been an emphasis on the self-interested nature of elites and their inability to support policies that challenges their positions of power. Studying elites has been seen as a mockery of the poor by examining them through the eyes of those that are seen as the architects or the beneficiaries of their unhappy fate. These arguments have limited access to crucial information which is necessary to understand better the conditions in which pro-poor policy is implemented. This has resulted in a limited understanding of ruling elites, their perceptions, motives, values, beliefs and ideas, which is an important component of successful or unsuccessful institutional reforms and policy implementation (Reis & Moore, 2005).

The solution by practitioners and researchers has been to elite-proof programmes or activities that target the poor. Evidence across Africa does suggest that elites may choose to implement policies that harm the poor and adopt institutions that benefit themselves. But it is also evident that other countries in Africa like Botswana have had relative success in development and reducing poverty. Although institutional factors have been used to explain much of this success, it has become evident that elites are an indispensable explanation of this success. Elites in any country are those that determine which policies are implemented, when and how as well as the rules of the game. Malawi is a good example of the importance of elites in the reduction of poverty and development in general.

First, Malawi has been considered a neopatrimonial state since its independence in 1964 and the 'big man syndrome' has been a perpetual feature of its politics. The

three presidents² that have ruled the country since independence have adopted similar styles of ruling through patronage and clientelism. They have failed to distinguish between private and public resources, resorting to the use of force or violence when challenged. However, the three presidents have differed in the way they have practiced neopatrimonialism and the way they implemented policy. The actual impact of neopatrimonialism and policy adopted on poverty has differed in a manner that point to the importance of an effective ruling elite in shaping and ensuring the implementation of sound and appropriate policies towards poverty reduction.

Second, the transition to multi party democracy in 1994 has not had the expected impact on poverty reduction, nor accountability of government or transparency. Instead poverty levels increased or have remained stagnant but increased in severity and the vulnerability of the poor, governance institutions have been undermined and corruption increased. This is true between 1993 and 2004, a period which has been considered as the lost decade by academics. Parliament and political parties have not become institutionalised to provide checks and balances, instead politics is driven by the need to gain access to power and control over resources, not ideologies. Democracy in Malawi has meant freedom from previous restraints, not a system where the people rule and where obligations and rights exist (Booth et al, 2006: viii). Under a one party rule, Malawi seems to have had more success in implementing social policies that positively impacted the levels of maternal deaths, access to health and education.

Last is the nature of Malawi's traditional society, in which social relationships are characterized by inequality and a large power distance, This means that inequality is generally accepted, and citizens gladly defer to authority, such that they are not active participants in the country's development. This explains why abuses by big men are tolerated even when very few benefits trickle down to poor people (Booth et al, 2006). These three aspects on Malawi demonstrate that even though small in number (usually 3 to 5% of the population), elites exercise a great deal of influence on the political and governmental agenda as well as control over the material, symbolic and political

² Dr Kamuzu Banda, 1964 -1993; Dr Bakili Muluzi, 1993 to 2004; Dr Bingu Wa Mutharika, 2004 - present

resources in Malawi. Elites can help define which issues are taken up and which are ignored as political and policy options and how these are tackled (Hossain & Moore, 2001). Owing to the nature of Malawian society, it is the elite that participate in decision making be it those elites that work within the government machinery such as bureaucrats, elites within Non Governmental Organisations, Civil Society Organisations, Business Sector or Members of Parliament.

This growing recognition that elites are the missing link in explaining the success or failure of pro-poor policy has pushed the debate into acknowledging the need to understand perceptions, ideas, attitudes in conjunction with capacity training, good governance and democratic reforms. Elites have a particular mindset formed in a particular culture influenced by particular social norms that provide the fabric in which public initiatives can be sewn or become entangled. They shape or constrain leaders' decisions by creating the space for addressing issues, the nature of approach to deal with them and set of solutions to be considered (Selee, 2005). Perceptions dictate behaviour, therefore pro-poor policies are a reflection of how elites perceive them; in other words, poverty reduction begins in the minds of elites.

Practically the study of elite perceptions assists in preparing and implementing policies that are based on the values and norms of societies. It introduces us to the idea that perceptions are not fixed and that they can be changed through a representation of poverty in more humanistic forms rather than economic forms (Moore, 1999; Reis and Moore, 2005). This represents an opportunity for donors and policy makers to begin to work with the grain of African societies (Kelsall, 2008) by being more tolerant of national approaches to the understanding of poverty (Moore, 1999).

Despite the difficulty in making specific generalized policy prescriptions, Malawi's study on elite perceptions provides lessons that can be applied to other developing countries in sub-Saharan Africa. In countries where the participation of the poor in development is rhetorical, where the fruits of democracy are not fully realised, where inequality is growing, political parties, parliament and civil society are not fully institutionalised, sustainable poverty reduction is dependent upon an elite that is committed to and has the political will to promote pro-poor policies. This study

illuminates the way the dominant conceptualisation of poverty has led to the desensitisation of elites from their obligation towards poor people and the reduction of poverty within their countries. It sheds light on the need to start changing the way we view poverty and the way it is taught as well as the way we formulate policies to alleviate it. As we develop pro-poor policies we need to remove our long held ideas about the nature of elites and find ways in which they can support pro-poor initiatives.

Perception and the understanding of poverty

Perception refers to three things: Cognition (non-evaluative understanding); Norms (internalized ideas about appropriate roles; and Values (ideals about what might be) [Reis and Moore, 2005]. Norms are a shared expectation of behaviour that connotes what is considered desirable and appropriate (Marshall, 1994 in Narayan et al, 2000), further determining the interaction between the poor and elites in society. Hence, poor people's interactions with elites are not governed primarily by laws of the land, but by the norms that dictate who has what value in each interaction. For instance, domestic abuse in India persists despite changes in laws because social norms support these practices. Although laws create the space for change, social practice does not change without supportive changes in social norms. Therefore changing social norms requires a change in mindsets. Otherwise attempts to change the issue of untouchability in India; female genital mutilation in Africa; theft of state resources and reduce the level of poverty in Africa will continue to be defeated by social norms. If elites believe poor people to be lazy, stupid, undeserving and pampered, pro-poor policies are unlikely to be formulated and implemented in ways that serve poor people ((Narayan et al, 2000:278 - 279).

Perceptions held by elites can be used as weapons, embraced and deployed by political actors to justify and further elite's agendas and they can also influence political behaviour by shaping their motivations, interests and preferences. Therefore, perceptions are important inputs in decision-making processes and decision-makers act in accordance with their perception of reality not in response to reality itself. In any event, all decision makers may be said to possess a set of images and to be governed by them in their response to policy problems (Brecher 1986 in Bertelsen, 2004:4; Berman, 2001).

The literature on poverty and the development of anti-poverty policy in the UK and USA indicated that perceptions held by elites have resulted in a phenomenon called 'othering'. This is a dualistic process of differentiation and demarcation by which a line is drawn between us and them; between the more and less; and most commonly between the have and have not. This line is imbued with negative value judgements that construct the poor variously, as a source of moral contamination, a threat, an undeserving economic burden and an object of self pity (Lister, 2004:101).

It is therefore these perceptions or understandings of poverty and the poor that are reflected in the dominant conceptualizations of poverty and pro-poor policy. Welfare policies developed in 19th Century England and the USA are an illustration of the dominant conceptualisation of poverty and the poor held by powerful groups. Hence many studies have shown that welfare policies in England and USA reflect elite perceptions of the poor which has been argued to have an effect on the ways in which development policy will include the chronically poor (Hickey et al, 2005; Moore et al 2005).

The images held by elites in 19th Century USA and UK were reminiscent of early theory that characterised the causes of poverty as based on individual or group deficiencies. There was a belief that the exercise of the virtues of diligence, prudence, sobriety, thrift and initiative was the pathway to affluence. Therefore, poverty was caused by idleness, improvidence, intemperance, defects of character which the individual could, if he chose, overcome. 'Although hazards of life such as unemployment, sickness, old age, death of the breadwinner was acknowledged, it was the mark of a provident man that he set aside savings to cover these risks' (Berthoud et al, 1981:7). However, it was later recognized that among those in poverty were decent hard working, good living, provident people, who in spite of personal effort were defeated by successive and prolonged crises beyond their control. This led to a categorisation of poor people between the deserving, who were poor due to no fault of their own and the undeserving, those whose poverty was due to character defects such as laziness, drunkenness and immorality.

The classification of the poor into deserving and undeserving is politically significant as it leads to a pre-policy making arrangement of policy priorities that has been fed into policy discourse and practices around the world providing justification for ignoring the chronically poor (Hossain, 2005). For instance in Botswana the official policy and inherent strategy is towards the support for those who make the biggest contribution to its growth economy, enabling the leadership to ignore the already impoverished and vulnerable poor people that have nothing to contribute (Good, 1999:199). Similarly, a study on elites and poverty in Bangladesh found that despite the rhetoric in public discourse of the poor as homogenous and deserving of government support equally, the study found to the contrary. It became evident that in practice policy support was targeted towards the economically active than those who lacked such potential (Hossain, 2005).

Lister (2004) lists three ways in which distinctions were made in categorising the poor:

- between pauperism and poverty whose dividing line was thin and permeable as individuals slipped between the two. Hence welfare policy attempted to prevent the poor from lapsing into pauperism; and
- between undeserving able-bodied and the deserving impotent/incapable pauper, which resulted in relief that was restricted to absolute necessities and provided in a form that deterred the recipients from desiring to remain dependent upon it and deterred others from conduct that would result in destitution (Berthoud et al, 1981); and
- the third differentiation was aimed at charting and containing the dangerous and criminal classes which invoked fears of criminality, vice, sexual immorality, pollution and a threat to the social order. Therefore, the poor were to be kept at a distance as they were feared as a source of both physical and moral filth and contamination.

It is this clear connection between elite perceptions and poverty that led Abram De Swaan (1988) to argue that poverty reduction becomes a pressing issue if it is associated with issues such as disorder, disease, economic or electoral threat, threat of rebellion and crime. De Swaan argued that a precondition for elite action was

therefore a development of a social consciousness. He emphasised that a pre-condition for state action was the development of a social consciousness among the elites, hence argued that members of the elite possess social consciousness to the degree that:

1. Elites are aware of the interdependence among social groups in society and most relevantly, of the external effects of poverty upon elites, which they may perceive either as threatening or as promising opportunities. These may come from riots and revolts staged by the poor that could result in civil unrest; or crimes committed against the elites by the poor; and from the spread of diseases such as cholera.
2. Elites realize that as members of the elite they bear some responsibility for the condition of the poor and that it is not desirable to advocate that nothing be done about the poor. Elites have to acknowledge that their fate is intricately tied to that of the poor through the many economic, social and political webs of relations from which neither party can extricate themselves (Matthews, 2008).
3. Elites believe that feasible and efficacious means of improving the lot of the poor exist or might be created. If these opportunities for action towards poverty are not identified by the elite, then it is highly unlikely that they would want to act to alleviate the problem.

De Swaan et al (2005) points out that the three elements of 'social consciousness' refer to three different types of perceptions by elites. The first entailing a factual assessment of the condition of the society in which they live; the second part entails both factual assessments (the identification of a causal chain linking their (in) action to the living conditions of the poor) and moral evaluations; and the last point requires elites to accept the power of collective or public agency to change the prevailing situation. Hence, it is argued that 'to the degree that elites possess a social consciousness, in all three aspects, and if that awareness resonates with personal and societal moral concerns, it should facilitate voluntary and public action to tackle poverty' (De Swaan, 2000:45).

Interdependence in society is a situation where one person's deficiencies and adversities have an impact on another. As a result the interdependence between the

rich and poor or the strong and the powerless is central to the collectivizing process. In feudal times in Western Europe and the United States, the poor presented both danger and opportunity to those established in society. On one hand the established were threatened with violent attack on the person and their property but at the same time the poor presented an opportunity as workers and soldiers in the power struggle among competing elites. As the states further developed into capitalistic states, the poor were considered to be a threat to public order, to labour harmony and also public health. At the same time they were ready labour, recruits, consumers and political supporters (De Swaan, 1988).

Interdependence is best illustrated by nineteenth century Europe where it was realised that the mass outbreak of cholera was a result of the living conditions among the urban poor. Hence those established moved to healthier areas, leading to the creation of slums. It was soon recognised that in order to prevent the spread of diseases beyond the slums and paralyzing the city, action was needed to deal with the problem at hand. Elites were impelled to provide fresh water and sewerage connections to slums using taxpayer's money to insulate themselves from diseases. Implicit in this illustration is the fact that when people settle in common territory, develop resources and build up stocks, they develop mutual dependencies. "The main impetus for collective action came from the struggles between elites which sought to ward off the threats arising from the presence of the poor among them and to exploit the opportunities which the poor represented" (De Swaan, 1988, p218).

The analytical framework that De Swaan formulated to explain the emergence of social policy in 19th Century Europe points out the following that the motivation for action towards poverty alleviation was not only based on altruism but also on elite interests. Elite self-interest to insulate themselves from the threat of disease motivated major municipal and health/sanitation reforms and helped give momentum to continuing public health improvements. Therefore, cholera, the threat of crime, social and political unrest were effective in inducing elites to act and improve the conditions of the poor. On the other hand, De Swaan does acknowledge the altruistic motivation to change the mindset of the elite towards poverty championed by individuals such as Charles Booth in 1889. Booth wrote that one third of the population in London lived below a poverty line and that these were not lazy or undeserving folks, but hard-

working and struggling people. Hence the government and wealthy people should do something to alleviate their poverty (Hossain and Moore, 1999).

Poverty, Politics and Elites in Malawi

The persistence of poverty and inequality in Malawi is a permanent feature of many articles written on Malawi. Malawi is characterised as being good at developing good policies for poverty reduction but these are rarely implemented successfully. The main causes attributed to this failure has been Malawi's neopatrimonial nature, lax fiscal discipline and the personality politics that prevents co-ordination while policies are tailored in such a way that they maximise opportunities for personal enrichment to pay off political debts (Booth et al, 2006). Therefore, the budget which is the main tool for implementing pro-poor policies is hardly implemented in accordance to this objective. There is no realistic estimate of revenue or spending, no attempt to prioritise and spend within the available resources. As a result Malawi has failed to deliver steady improvements in the material and social well-being of its citizens (Rakner et al, 2004; Cammack, 2006).

Malawi remains one of the poorest countries in Sub-Saharan Africa with 52.4% of the population living in poverty and 22.3% of these are ultra poor. This indicates that one in five people live in dire poverty such that they cannot even afford to meet the minimum food requirement. Malawi's per capita income has grown by only 0.2 percent per annum over the last 30 years despite attempts by successive governments and donors to improve the lives of the poor (NSO, 2005). Malawi's gini coefficient, measuring income inequality is at 0.62 revealing inequalities, both income and gender, which affect access to land, education and many other resources. The richest 10% of the population have a median per capita income that is eight times higher than the median per capita income of the poorest 10%. Inequality appears to be increasing as the poor become even more marginalized as their access to public resources such as health and educational facilities, is lower and vulnerability increases (Conroy, 2006; NSO, 2005; DFID, 2007).

Since Malawi's independence in 1964, Malawi implemented various policies towards alleviating poverty. Under the autocratic rule of Dr Banda between 1964 and 1993

there was no purposeful intention to address poverty as the governments priority was to attain financial independence through economic growth. Banda indicated that poverty was not an issue as long as Malawians had enough food, clothes and decent shelter. Therefore his policy favored the estate sector, which was dominated by elites, by extracting rents from the smallholder sector dominated by the poor. Land was also annexed from the smallholder sector for use by estate farmers; the smallholder farmers were not allowed to grow export crops such as tobacco, tea and sugar; and smallholder farmers were paid less for their produce by the estate marketing board which was the only market available to smallholder farmers (Conroy, 2006; Chinsinga, 2002).

Public investment was concentrated in the productive sector and whilst social sectors such as health and education were starved of resources. Policies implemented emphasized raising incomes rather than redistributing income through governmental expenditures on health, education or welfare (Conroy, 2006; Pryor, 1990). Banda's policies were implemented under a repressive and autocratic political system that was also neopatrimonial in nature.

Banda's style of ruling enabled him to implement policies that increased inequality in Malawi at the ensured that Malawians were not able to question his decisions. During Banda's rule there was no popular participation in government's affairs, no free expression, competition or access to political processes was non-existent and public policy was imposed from above. Through the four cornerstones of unity, loyalty, discipline and obedience, Banda created a culture in which Malawians gave him unquestioning loyalty and respect. Those that wanted to question his authority were made to conform through intimidation, coercion, murder, manipulation and patronage (Baker, 2001; Chinsinga, 2002; Power, 1998).

Despite the authoritarian political system, Malawi's notable successes are under the Banda regime. Although, Banda did not place emphasis on poverty reduction there were notable improvements in social welfare. Infant mortality declined from 200 per 1000 in 1964 to 130 and per capita daily calorie intake increased from 2,250 in 1964 to 2,400 in 1975. Malawi's economic performance was impressive as Malawi GDP grew by an average of 8 percent between 1965 to 1973 (World Bank, 1975). This

success was attributed to government's ability to mobilise domestic resources for investment in productive sectors and its outward looking strategy of rapid growth. By 1981 Malawi had raised its domestic investment from 9 percent of GDP at independence to 25 percent whilst domestic savings increased to 17 percent. Clearly, it is this same ability to extract resources from the poor that made Malawi's poor even more vulnerable and resulted in severe poverty. The introduction of Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) in 1981 had a further detrimental effect on poverty in Malawi. SAPs combined with a government already spending little on the poor, meant that the poor suffered as governments were asked to reduce public expenditures, abolish subsidies and service the debt from SAPs (Record, 2007; Gilman, 2002; Chirwa, 1997).

The transition to democracy in 1994 saw a major reorientation in policy towards an emphasis on poverty reduction and the election of Dr Bakili Muluzi. Allocations towards social sectors such as health and education received a major boost in the budget. This saw the introduction of free primary education which increased the number of enrolment, especially that of girls (Nthara, 1994). The Poverty Alleviation Programme (PAP) designed in 1994 guided policy to be achieved through a participatory process with the poor that empowers them to change their livelihoods (Kennedy, 1996; Chinsinga, 2002). To ensure that expenditure towards the poor remained a priority, government ensured this through the budget under the Protected Pro-poor Expenditure (PPE) line. There was never to be a cut in pro-poor expenditures under this line even in the event that there were shortfalls in the budget. Between 1994 and 2004, there was a proliferation of pro-poor policies and programmes from MASAF³, MPRS⁴, and a number of micro loan programmes.

These have had no real impact on poverty and observers have described Muluzi two terms of office as the lost decade as no real economic growth that can have the desired impact on poverty has taken place. Between 1995 and 1998 Malawi's growth rate averaged 4.6 percent per annum; dropped to 1.4 percent between 1998 and 2001; and became negative between 2001 and 2002. Fiscal indiscipline characterised this period with government spending more than its revenues and grants, thereby increasing

³ Malawi Social Action Fund,

⁴ Malawi Poverty Reduction Strategy

internal and external debt. This increased domestic debt to MK9.5 billion at the end of 2001 to MK54.5 billion early 2004 and interest on this debt alone accounted for 10 percent of the national budget (Whitworth, 2004 in Conroy, 2006). At the time Muluzi left office in 2004 GDP per capita remained at US160, the same level as it when he assumed office in 1994. This is a clear indication of the poor living conditions of most Malawians, especially if we account for population growth.

Politically, the transition towards democracy failed to bring with it the associated freedoms of speech, association and the ability to participate in the country's development. The governance institutions were not developed to ensure democratization in Malawi. From the onset of a multi party system, one factor stood out, that was that the main contenders in the political game had learnt their politics under the feet of Banda. This meant that their style of politics closely resembled that of Banda and they often resorted to the use of coercion, intimidation and patronage to ensure conformity to their rule (Power, 1998). By 2002, the ruling UDF government attempted to amend section 83 (3)⁵ of the constitution to allow Muluzi a third term as president of Malawi. This attempt was followed by demonstrations and open challenges from churches and civil society. Muluzi resorted to Banda's tradition of violence to ensure conformity to his rule and banned all public demonstrations against the bill (Maroleng, 2003).

Although the bill was defeated in parliament, it was a revelation of the lengths politicians will go to stay in power and also revealed that democracy did not change the political culture that prevailed under Banda. Democracy has had very little impact on the structural underpinnings of Malawi's neopatrimonial political system. Through patronage Muluzi aimed to satisfy the economic interests of opposition parties in parliament and citizens, which influenced the award of contracts, the appointment and retention of officers, the protection of corrupt politicians and ministers. Populist policies such as the free distribution of seeds and fertiliser through the starter pack programme, promises of free food, shoes, houses, bicycles and credit were preferred by the UDF government (DFID, 2004; Fozzard et al, 2002).

⁵ The President, the first Vice-President and the Second Vice-President may serve in their respective capacities a maximum of two consecutive termsí ..

The presidential election of Mutharika under the UDF⁶ banner in 2004 was surrounded by controversy as he was seen as having been imposed on the UDF party. However, there was a renewed hope when Bingu left the UDF party, formed the DPP⁷ and embarked on the fight against corruption. The overarching strategy that is guiding policy is the Malawi Growth and Development Strategy (MGDS) which focuses on six priority areas of agriculture and food security; irrigation and water development; transport and communication; infrastructure development; prevention and management of nutritional disorders, HIV and AIDS. The main themes guiding these priority areas are sustainable economic growth; social protection and disaster risk management; social development; prevention and management of nutritional disorders; hiv/aids; infrastructure and good governance (GoM, 2008).

The Mutharika government made strong commitment towards improved fiscal performance, reduction of government expenditure and achievement of macro-economic stability. In 2004 the government was able to maintain its expenditure within the approved 2004/2005 budget and successfully completed the IMF's Staff Monitoring Programme. This saw the resurgence of debt relief from donors who had suspended funds under the Muluzi regime. Fiscal discipline has also seen government start to pay off some of the domestic debts incurred by the previous government, inflation has been below 10 percent since 2007 and there has been an increase in maize production due to the subsidy programme (Chinsinga et al, 2008). Bingu's successes go beyond successes in ensuring food security, but he has also attained average growth of 7.5 percent per annum since 2006.

However, politically Bingu has adopted the leadership styles of Banda and Muluzi. The circumstances surrounded his election as president has left him seeking allies and support from amongst the opposition members. Bingu has not only reached out to civil society and the media but has also used patronage and adopted populist policies such as the input subsidies as well as the construction of roads. The use of patronage has involved the promise of public office appointments to encourage opposition politicians to join his party and at other times he has harassed the media and

⁶ United Democratic Front

⁷ Democratic Progressive Party

threatened his opponents (Cammack D., 2007), mostly with prosecution for previous corrupt acts.

Malawi is an illustration of the limited impact the transition from authoritarianism to democracy and the adopted governance institutions have had on poverty and development. There has been a continuity of neopatrimonial practice in the three political systems but what has been different is the way the form of neopatrimonialism they have practiced. Banda's brand of neopatrimonialism was highly centralised and closely controlled by him. He retained control over the way patronage and clientelism was distributed in the process controlling corruption such that only a few people were privy to the practice. Banda ensured that the institutions required for transparency in government expenditure were strengthened such as the Internal Audit and the Public Accounts Offices. Through these institutions, civil servants were called to account for expenditure and those that spent more than their allocated funds were called before a parliamentary committee to account for the over expenditure. Unlike Muluzi Banda's policy was consistent, prioritised and implemented. Malawians were made to feel part of the development process through his crop inspection tours and major inputs, especially towards Development Policy II had major inputs from all ministries (Cammack D., 2007; Booth et al, 2006).

Muluzi's brand of neopatrimonialism was one where policy followed patronage which saw the increasing democratization of corruption at all levels of society. Many of the governance institutions put in place were undermined and were not effective in carrying out their job. Despite the emphasis on poverty alleviation, Muluzi's development strategies and policy were adhoc with no clear long-term vision. Policy formulation, the passage of laws and the implementation of policy were constantly delayed to permit wealth and power to be acquired by UDF people. Corruption under Muluzi was widespread reaching every corner of the civil service. Muluzi not only ate the profits from state owned enterprises such as ADMARC but also ate the capital assets (Booth et al, 2006:12).

The successes that the present ruling DPP has had in Malawi has endeared Bingu amongst Malawians and donors alike, evidenced by the majority votes received during the June 2009 elections. What is interesting in Malawi now is that there seems

to be concerted efforts to deal with corruption, expenditure is within the stated allocations and the institutions meant to ensure accountability and transparency are being strengthened. The 2009 elections have boosted Bingu's position giving him a majority in parliament and therefore the ability to implement policy. Unlike in the past where he had to use patronage to gain support from opposition parties to support the budget, this is no longer necessary. It will be important to observe the extent to which patronage will be used in the next five years and whether there will be continued successes economically. Another interesting development is the way Bingu seems to be sidelining the old MPs whom he had served with under Bakili and when he came into government. His cabinet has excluded senior National Governing Council Members of his political party such as Henry Phoya, Henry Mussa and Ken Lipenga among others. There have also been rumours that Bingu and DPP are supporting the MCP rebel group to ensure that John Tembo is not elected as leader of opposition and is removed as President of the MCP. It is interesting to see whether this is an attempt by Bingu to follow the path of the Asian Tigers whose success started with ensuring that the old elites were sidelined from development, mostly in a more violent manner.

It is clear that in Malawi the ruling elite have played a huge role in the way pro-poor policy has been implemented. Structural explanations have only provided a portion of the answer to the success or failure of development policies in Malawi. Do elites act to reduce poverty as a result of altruism or self-interest?

The Research

This paper is largely based on semi-structured interviews with fifty Malawian elites, complemented by data from eighty questionnaires. The research was conducted from February to August, 2008 and aimed to gather views expressed by elites about poverty and the poor as well as their values, attitudes and norms. The study is interested in powerful individuals, those that are in decision making positions and those that exercise influence over decisions that involve the implementation of pro-poor policy. Therefore an institutional approach was adopted during sampling which complemented the definition of elites adopted for this study as powerful, authoritative and influential people clearly setting out the importance of key formal positions in various institutions.

The sample included Ministers, Principal Secretaries, Members of Parliament⁸, academics, Heads of Media Organisations, and Heads of Civil Society Organisations, Donor agencies and parastatals. The interview topics included a general understanding of the level and magnitude of poverty in Malawi; the causes and solutions towards poverty; the impact of poverty on the elites; priority given towards poverty alleviation in relation to other competing policies such as economic growth; and issues surrounding collective action towards poverty reduction amongst the elite.

Preliminary Results

Poverty is severe and rampant

The Malawian elites view social problems especially poverty as the most important issue facing Malawi. Respondents often started the interviews with the fact that poverty is real, severe, rampant, and is a problem that is negative for Malawi's development. They characterized poverty in terms of lack of access to basic things, most common being lack of access to food, shelter, clothes, and shoes. They argued that in Malawi poverty starts with failure to access these basic things and if one adds access to basic services such as education, medical care, portable water, sanitation and infrastructure, then the situation is severe. Owing to these characteristics elites felt that the official statistics that the level of poverty is at 54 percent is unrealistic. Those within the civil service indicated that to be politically correct then they would say poverty is at a little over 50 percent, but in earnest this is at least 65 percent above. They argued that this estimation of poverty is based on an international understanding of poverty but a local understanding would result in a much bigger number.

Elite ranking of the poor was along those prevalent in the international discourse on poverty. They tended to rank the poor as either ultra poor, those who lack all the basic necessities of life, have no labor, and survive on a day to day basis. The second group was that of poor people who have the energy and ability but lack the economic or social opportunities to live a decent life. The last group is that which is considered better off in relation to the rest of the community. This group can afford at least one meal a day, some form of clothing, and they can access markets. However, elites pointed out that in comparison to international standards of poverty, these three

⁸ This includes ruling party MPs and Opposition members

groups still fall below the poverty line.

There was consensus among the elites that Malawi has one of the highest urbanization rates in the region, which has seen the growth of poverty in urban areas. They believe that suffering from poverty is more acute in urban areas although the majority of the poor is located in the rural areas. The rural poor were considered to be better able to survive because they have access to land, they are living within their own social environment, close to their relatives who can share with them what they have. Whereas in the urban areas if one has no money or is unemployed, they cannot access shelter, food, clothes and educational facilities. The urban poor cannot rely on social networks because those they meet are strangers who are also trying to survive. In discussing the impact the urban poor have on the Malawian elites, respondents tended to compare Malawi's urbanization rates with other countries such as Tanzania or Kenya. They argued that although *"there are such problems as sanitation, big water problems and there have been some outbreaks of cholera but this pressure is not as bad as other countries"* (Member of parliament, United Democratic Front).

Malawi is considered to be a highly unequal country, at times likened to levels of inequality in Brazil and the highest in Africa (Durevall, 2002). Respondents held similar views that there is a wide gap between the rich and the poor in Malawi that both income and gender inequality were concerning. Elites felt that inequality does not lead to any form of civil unrest caused by the poor because poverty has been a constant companion for Malawians. *"It is like a tradition to be poor and not to have access to basic needs is the order of the day, it is normal, it is the way things are. Poor people are resigned to their fate"* (Mr X, Public Affairs Committee). On the other hand, the poor cannot organize for mass action because as Malawians we organize vertically instead of horizontally and any mass action dies a natural death without achieving its intended impact. Poor people consider relationships with MPs or those in authority within the civil service as more important and they will conspire with those in authority, hence report any plans for mass action.

Root Causes of poverty

The most selected answer was the low levels of education of the Malawian people, which has resulted in high illiteracy rates. The poverty reduction policies being

implemented were seen as meaningless if the recipients are uneducated. Education is what determines the extent to which the poor will use the resources made available to them. Education did not refer to higher education only but also to entrepreneurial training which would enable the poor to develop innovative ideas to use the available resources. *“Education is the key as it impacts on the attitudes of the poor and if people are educated, then they have a positive attitude towards development”* (Mr X, Ministry of Economic Planning & Development).

There was a split in the perception elites had in relation to the impact the behaviour and attitudes of the poor have on poverty levels in Malawi. Some stressed that the position of the poor was not due to a fault of their own. They argued that many of the poor are hard working but that they have not been empowered through training or with resources, both land and financial, to make their lives better. If Malawi can reach a point where everyone has access to financial or educational resources then we can conclude that those that remain poor are lazy or they are not hard working. Others argued that the poor are unproductive and lazy leaving a situation where an unproductive 70 percent of the population depends on the productive 30 percent. *“HIV/AIDs has taken most of our productive members leaving the old and the young, but you also find the youth that are lazy and migrate to urban areas to beg”* (Minister).

Other frequent answers included lack of minerals that can spur growth and most importantly Malawi's dependency on agriculture. Respondents noted that Malawi has been heavily dependent on agriculture for decades, but still uses primitive methods of farming which results in poor yields. *“We are still using a hoe, we have not mechanized and we have huge resources of water but we have not gone into massive irrigation schemes. We still wait for the rain and hence only plant once a year”* (Member of Parliament, UDF).

On the other hand, poor implementation of pro-poor policy, lack of political will, corruption and bad governance were considered to also be the cause of poverty in Malawi. Respondents argued that most policies were designed to please donors rather than the Malawian people, making them a failure from the planning stage. Others noted that the donor argument was just an excuse to divert attention from the source

of the problem: the elites. The amounts that Malawi receives from donors are not proportionate to the development that one sees on the ground. Donors are not responsible for our poverty, the government has implemented structural adjustment programmes, poverty alleviation policy, PRSP, MDGs and the Malawi growth development strategy with no real impact on poverty. Instead of developing policy based on these previous policies, elites are requesting to travel to Brazil and South Africa, to study their social protection policy (Hon X, Parliament).

Impact of poverty on elites

Elites distinguished their link to poor people between those that are personal and the professional links. The personal links were through extended family, the poor that work in their households or their farms and those that beg in the cities. Through these links elites are expected to provide financial resources through wages, paying schools fees for relatives' children especially those that have lost their parents through HIV/AIDs, and those seeking alms on the streets. For Members of Parliament, this involved paying fees for children in the constituency, paying for funeral costs, and providing financial assistance towards development projects such as the construction of boreholes. Professionally, there is the link as their representatives in parliament, or through the influence on pro-poor policy and the provision of goods and services. There was consensus that elites have strong connections with the poor because each one has links with their home villages and has experienced poverty at one point in their lives.

Those elites that disagreed with the notion of strong links between them and the poor, argued that these links are minimal and superficial, they are that of master and servant. There is always an agenda for interacting with the poor such as votes or visits to rural areas which are receiving support from NGOs, Donors and government. During meetings with the poor, the poor usually sit on the floor and visitors from these agencies sit on chairs indicative of the power distance that exist. Therefore, there is no real engagement with the poor that can lead to a better understanding of their situation.

Despite these strong views about the interdependence between elites and the poor,

they did not feel threatened by the growing presence of the poor in Malawi. They explained that the poor are too concerned with survival to cause civil unrest, or be involved in criminal activities and are resigned to their fate that they fail to act in any meaningful way. Those that are involved in crime are not the poorest of the poor but they are lazy people who want to get rich quickly. *“The poor simply do not have the energy to be involved in crime because they would not be able to run away”* (Mr X, IPRSE). The factors that increase crime are the high unemployment rates and the breakdown of the social security system itself, not poverty. The few elites that identified a link between poverty and crime noted that police reports indicate that as inflation increases so does crime. However, they tended to compare Malawi to neighboring countries pointing out that Malawi's crime does not have the same impact as in other countries.

Evidence from document analysis of parliamentary proceedings indicates that elites are concerned with growing crime in Malawi. During discussions on a bill to tighten judicial procedures for dealing with criminals in June 2000, elites expressed concern that those who are better off lived in fear of criminals as they were their main targets. They noted that growing crime deterred investment in Malawi and has an effect on the country's growth. It was argued that crime was a result of lack of economic empowerment of the Malawian people and lack of responsibility on the part of the poor towards development

Although elites did not link poverty to crime, they indicated a strong link between poverty and disease. It was argued that poor people are more prone to disease because of poor nutrition and poor sanitation. Elites felt that they are highly insulated from diseases and crime because they have medical security in terms of insurance, they are able to travel abroad for medical care. *“I cannot take my family to a hospital that I know is below standards but that does not mean I am doing nothing to change the situation”* (Hon X, MP). Other elites felt that the evidence from HIV/AIDS which is attacking both rich and poor, is an indication that elites are not insulated from disease that the poor have. Many girls from poor households flock into the cities in search of money and they end up in prostitution. Their targets are the elites and that is how they are getting HIV/AIDS.

A recurring element in the study was that social networks have been seen to have more impact on elite welfare. Political elites pointed out that apart from extended family, they have had to cater to the needs of their constituents. They were weary of the demands pressed on them that they have called on civil society to educate Malawians on the role of a member of parliament. It was the custom to find constituents at the offices of several ministers I was interviewing asking for schools fees, transport to return to the constituency, employment and so on. Elites noted that since government provided ambulances to the rural areas, calls to pick up sick people to take them to the hospital even to transport bodies of the dead to the mortuary have reduced. Elites from the civil service and civil society expressed concern over their failure to personally develop or lead a comfortable lifestyle due to pressure from extended families. There was consensus that social networks are breaking down and that charitable works should not rest solely on elites.

Poverty reduction as a priority

Elites expressed concern that Malawi cannot develop with the present levels of poverty but argued that poverty reduction should not be tackled in isolation from economic growth policies. Elites noted that to effectively deal with poverty, Malawi should stop developing multiple policies and begin to develop consistent, sustainable and coherent policies. The pro-poor policies developed need to be comprehensive enough to ensure that we are not constantly shifting our position or changing our minds.

Elites indicated that many elites profess to care about poverty and the poor, always wanting to appear that we are creating solutions to reduce poverty but this is just rhetoric that does not translate to meaningful implementation. *“We need to find ways of pricking the conscious of all elites about poverty. There is no evidence to show that we are putting a premium on poverty reduction. Our government and elites in general are not doing enough to reduce poverty”* (Hon X, Parliament). Elites differentiated the priority given towards poverty reduction between the Banda, Muluzi and Mutharika regime. They felt that under Banda things worked well and there is need to study the time before Malawi started receiving donor funds as this was the most economically successful time. The Muluzi regime is considered to have displayed less

interest in reducing poverty despite being its main policy and receiving huge amounts of donor funds towards alleviation. Although there was a belief that this was improving under Mutharika, elites noted that there is need for more champions of poverty reduction.

Elites noted that the main problem is that they benefit from the existence of poverty through cheap labor, votes and employment. *“Elites are benefiting from working within the HIV/AIDs industry and would not want to see poverty reduced. Even our donors, if there was no poverty, they would be out of a job”* (Mr X, IPRES). The fact that the Malawian population is uneducated, fear authority and is not confident is a source of gains for the elites. One often hears comments from opposition parties that *‘if only there was hunger or the roads were in bad shape, we could win the elections in 2009’* (Mr X, MEJN). Other elites disagreed with this notion arguing that there is no one who would want poverty to remain at its levels, arguing that it would actually be better if the poor were better off. On one hand, most of the elites run businesses and rely on the poor to buy their products and if there were less poor people, government would reduce its expenditure towards them to more productive areas.

Solutions towards poverty

Despite consensus that the poor were not lazy, therefore there were no deserving or undeserving poor, elites tended to offer policies that favoured the active poor. Policies such as public works, subsidies were favoured over cash transfers or old age pensions. It was common for elites to argue that sometimes no matter what government does to reduce poverty the poor do not work hard. Therefore, it is important to choose between cash for work programmes, cash transfers, pensions or food for work programs. Elites indicated that cash transfers were handouts, which create dependency and targeted an unproductive sector. They expressed concern that it would be difficult to raise taxes to accommodate cash transfers or the social protection policy in general. *“Yes I am my brother’s keeper but the poor also have a responsibility towards poverty reduction. I am not saying all poor people are lazy”* (Hon X, UDF).

The main solution given towards poverty reduction was education in terms of awareness of responsibilities, ability to take advantage of markets and exploit

available resources. There were strong sentiments that there is need to invest in productivity, particularly manufacturing and continue to improve agriculture through diversification.

Responsibility for poverty reduction programs

Government was named as the institution that should take full responsibility towards poverty reduction. Government was seen as better coordinated than the private sector and also responsible for the delivery of goods and services. However, elites noted that to succeed in reducing poverty, coordination was important amongst the different categories of elites, from those in power, opposition, civil servants, civil society, donor community, the media and the poor themselves. Coordination should be from planning through to implementation and poverty reduction should become the goal of all Malawians, They should be united and develop a sense of nationalism.

The media was seen as very important for changing the discourse within the Malawian society which is seen as obsessed with issues of personality politics and ignores development issues. Elites agreed that there was need to change the mindsets of the poor towards work and development and to help Malawians to move away from Banda's four cornerstones of unity, obedience, loyalty and discipline which still dictate the behaviour.

There were concerns that the high corruption rate within the civil service goes unnoticed and that there is need to strengthen accountability systems within government. The anti-corruption bureau, National Audit Office, Public Procurement and Public Prosecutions were identified as the institutions that needed immediate restructuring to be more effective so that real change can take place.

Elites felt that civil society in Malawi does not provide an alternative voice to government and were concerned that they were driven by donor interests and not the interests of the poor. They noted that civil society was not transparent in the way they spent their funds nor accountable to the people on whose behalf they source funding.

Malawian elites and self-interest

Although elites interviewed belonged to different categories from political, social to bureaucratic elites they were homogenous in their responses similar to research carried out in Bangladeshi by Hossain and Moore (1999). There were several recurring themes in the research: the impact of social networks such as extended families and constituents have on elite welfare in Malawi; the impact of HIV/AIDS on elite welfare; there is no fear of crime or civil unrest that may result from the growing presence of poverty; despite a reluctance to categorise the poor between the deserving and undeserving poor, elites tended to prefer policies that went towards the active poor such as subsidies rather than cash transfers; and education was the most popular choice of policy for alleviating poverty in Malawi.

These responses are significant in trying to understand how self-interest might drive the response by elites towards poverty reduction. The impact that social networks have had on the Malawian elite is well documented by Chilowa et al (2000 in Chinsinga, 2002:31). Government's failure to respond effectively to the plight of the poor has led many to seek alternative coping strategies to survive. These strategies have been used in Malawi since the introduction of a dual policy which created a demarcation between the haves and have nots. It became the norm that the poor relied on the rich in society to survive and this has continued to the present. Table 1 shows the results of a three-year study on social policy regarding major coping strategies of poor people.

Table 1: Coping strategies of the vulnerable segments of society

Strategy	Rural	Urban	National
Begging	4.8	1.6	3.2
Assistance from relatives	67.6	45.3	56.5
Assistance from friends	40.7	50.9	45.8
Charitable organisations	1.4	3.0	2.2
Street vending	5.1	8.2	6.6
Past savings	13.2	28.6	20.8
Working for food	17.3	2.0	9.7
Prostitution	0.9	0.9	0.9
Selling used clothes	1.2	4.5	2.8
Buying second hand clothes	13.9	17.5	15.7
Sending kids to relatives	3.9	1.8	2.8
other	57.6	2.7	40.4

Source: Chilowa et al, 2000 cited in Chinsinga, 2002:31

Topping the list is assistance from relatives as the top most strategy used by the poor to survive, followed by assistance from friends. It is interesting to note that elites indicated that they favoured education because through education they can reduce the drain on their resources.

“There are other elites that if their sources of income or capital are not linked to the poor they genuinely do care about the plight of the poor because they become a drain on them economically and on their resources. I sit and think about how my life would have been if my brothers, sisters, aunts and uncles were not looking up to me, I would have been better off. I am worried about their poverty not because I want them to be better off but because I want to cut off this drain on my resources. The elites do care about poverty but it might be for selfish reasons. Because I am doing well, have a job and earn a steady income, I have become a target of relatives and other poor people who come and beg from me. My ambitions are detracted because of the poverty in my family and home village. The little resources I get I have to pay school fees for my families children. The impact that poverty has on the elites prevents them from progressing or become richer” (Mr X, Action Aid).

Similar to the experience in Bangladeshi (Hossain & Moore, 1999) elites in Malawi advocated education as a way of helping the poor to help themselves and reduce poverty. Elites often indicated in their responses that many of them prefer to send their relatives children to school because it is believed that once educated this person will take care of his/her siblings and take off some of the pressure on the elite. Education was seen as the most important reason why the poor are not able to participate in development, are lazy and resigned to their fate. It was therefore education that would enable the poor to effectively exploit the resources available to them. *“In my view, if the poor are able to exploit opportunities, they can alleviate their poverty and in Malawi such opportunities do not exist. However, where opportunities exist the poor might not have the ability to use that opportunity. This is where education becomes critical for dealing with poverty. This is not just university education but an education where people are fully alerted to the possibilities and are able to think of innovative ideas to use the resources that are available. This goes beyond classroom education (MP, Malawi Congress Party).* This is interesting because this meant that despite the earlier assertions that the poor were not to blame for their poverty, poverty was seen as inherent within the poor, rather than in socio-economic relations or patterns of inequality (Hossain & Moore, 1999).

Reis (2005) notes that underneath the support for education amongst the Brazilian elites is a strong preference for equality of opportunity which was confirmed by the lack of sympathy towards affirmative action initiatives. It was not uncommon in for the Malawian elites to refer to their own poverty and had to be steered to the plight of the poor. In discussing specific programmes such as the subsidy programme which is targeted at the poor, elites preferred a universal approach towards distribution so that those farmers growing cash crops such as tobacco should also benefit. The elites were very critical of cash transfers arguing that these increase dependency on the part of the poor, preferring support towards subsidies or food/cash for work programmes. Similar to Brazil, Malawian elites support of education is based solely on an instrumental value to improve their skills and provide skilled labour, to be able to use available opportunities, change their mindsets towards development and earn better incomes. Rarely was education seen as an empowerment mechanism for the poor to assess their condition and demand their rights like in Bangladeshi (Reis & Moore, 2005).

Conclusion

Perceptions do matter but they are not immovable obstacles, as Hossain et al (1999) argues, ideas about poverty are malleable so much so that in Britain, Charles Booth was able to change the perceptions of poverty among the comfortable classes. Although elite perceptions of poverty determine the degree of priority accorded to pro poor policies, these perceptions are not fixed. There is considerable potential to present the character, causes and solution to poverty in ways that mobilise elites to want to do something about poverty (Hossain and Moore, 1999).

Elite perceptions can be changed in the following ways: presenting poverty and the poor as deserving of public support; by reframing the way poverty is understood so that it resonates with the way elites understand it, for instance Charles Booth in 1889 placed emphasis on class and respectability rather than material deprivation presenting poverty as a threat of loss of respectability which resonated with the comfortable classes who identified with ideas about respectability and the fear of losing it; to show the elite that their fate is closely intertwined with that of the poor and lastly by ensuring that these appeals to moral responsibility are consistent with self-interest. Therefore, elites come to understand that they would be better off if the poor were preserved from destitution, otherwise lack of action would result in moral

decay, social unrest and economic dislocation (Hossain & Moore, 1999). It was interesting to see in Malawi that attempts to get support for social protection policy were already attempting to appeal to elites' self-interest. During a workshop to discuss plans to implement an old age pension under the social protection policy, the Ministry of the elderly and the disabled informed those gathered that supporting the pension will also benefit them when they are older. Similarly, during another workshop discussing cash transfers elites were informed of the benefit this has on economic growth by putting money in the pockets of the poor to spend in the market. Owing to the data on extended family, it is feasible to present social protection policy in ways that shows the elite it would have on reducing the burdens on their personal income.

In summary, Malawian elites do not seem threatened by crime or that the poor might cause civil unrest does not indicate that they do not care about poverty. Documentary evidence (parliamentary proceedings) shows that the political elites need to tighten the laws governing the prosecution of armed robbers was this very identification that poverty has an impact on their welfare. *“Robbers concentrate on the few rich people in the country, they do not rob a poor man who has nothing. We are those wealthy people and we are therefore in more trouble. The answer to the cause of insecurity in Malawi is economic empowerment, improvement of civic attitude of our population which should start from primary school so that they have an attitude of responsibility for the maintenance of our roads and self-help projects and an attitude to contribute to the development of our society”* (MP ó UDF, Parliament Hansard, 2000). This concern of the impact crime has on them is evidenced by their insistent to be provided security through their employment as ministers, principal secretaries, heads of civil society organisations or parastatals and others invest in private security. On the other hand, elites do see a correlation between disease and poverty. They were aware that this could result in the spread of diseases like cholera but not necessarily that it would impact them specifically. However, there was much more awareness that the spread of HIV/AIDS has not spared the elites in Malawi. This raises the question whether the introduction of ARV treatment for all Malawians was influenced by the impact it seems to have on the elite as most poor girls target the elite through prostitution. This requires a comprehensive look at the data.

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