

## **Media in Public Resource Use Accountability: Lessons from the past 50 years in Malawi**

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### **Introduction**

The role of the media in ensuring the promotion and sustenance of efforts towards transparency and accountability in the generation, management and utilization of public resources cannot be over-emphasized. It is almost taken for granted or generally assumed that inherent in any democratic dispensation, the role of the Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), trade unions, general citizenry, the legislature, the judiciary, the executive and the media comprise strategic ingredients for promotion of social accountability and transparency in the governance systems and public financial management processes.

Whilst to many this maybe obvious, history testifies that this understanding is not obvious to all. The state, the legislature, the general citizenry and the media are often riddled with contradictions, antagonistic elements, vicious cycles and sometimes betrayal of the noble ideals implied in the understanding above. The so-called fourth estate is prone to human error just like any other manmade system or process. It is bound to sidestep from its noble ideals. It is liable to manipulation and exploitation and in essence it encounters all manmade vices since it is a human institution.

This notwithstanding, the history of Malawi provides lessons we can draw from in consolidating the positive ideals and concrete efforts the media thrives to fulfill in sustaining strides in social accountability and transparency in the management of public resources. However, on the onset, this paper concedes that it is departing from the Civil Society view and perception. It proceeds by looking at the evolution of the media in Malawi firstly, the emergence of the democratic culture within a rights-based discourse, it further reflects on the persisting Malawian socio-economic context before reflecting on the context in which the media in Malawi operate. Later, the paper examines the interventions of the media and how CSOs perceive them. It ends up with noting success stories and media challenges and draws recommendations for future possible interventions.

### **The evolution and diversification of the media in Malawi's recent history**

The print and electronic media in Malawi is part of the Malawian history. The colonial settlers used newspapers and radio to communicate important administration issues just like they used media for political reasons in promoting their colonial government and later in promoting the federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland (see Chitsulo and Mang'anda, 2011). From the onset of Nyasaland (now Malawi), therefore, the media has been at the centre of the governance systems and processes. Contextually, the media was used for both the domestication of peoples' minds just as it was used

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for the liberation of peoples' minds from the societal beliefs that bordered around politics, economics, religion and many other dimensions of life.

The same is noted, 50 years later in Malawi, that there has been multiplicity of media houses or outlets such as newspapers, radios, online spaces, newsletters and magazines. What has not changed is the functional value or purpose of the emerging media. In this case, provision of broad-based information either for critical mass awareness, sensitization, and propaganda, educating and marketing among many others. However, it is good to remember that in the one party state, the state just like during the colonial era controlled the media. The media during this time was an ideological state apparatus (Althusser, 1971) for citizen control, purveyors of ruling party hegemony and the mouthpiece of the government of the day providing the official version of issues of that government. Whilst the state monopolized the media, it still sought to pursue the edutainment, the domestication of minds through propaganda and the provision of state censored information to its citizenry. Girded by the single state policy and legal framework, the media was an extension of the state so that the views of the state and that of the media were the same.

### **One party state and its legacy**

The evolution into the multiparty politics through the democratization project from the early 1990s opened up new spaces for the growth and diversification of the Malawian media. More radio stations, more newspapers were established creating a political and social context characterized by the multiplicity of media outlets, the multiplicity of audiences, the multiplicity of views and subsequently world views and the emergence of a culture of relativism; among many other features. Malawi, in the media sector just like in other life dimensions became, to an extent, a more open society than ever before. Private ownership of media houses evolved into commercial, religious, community, public and even anonymous entities.

### **Emerging needs of the current Malawian society**

With the colonial and one party state emphatically characterized by “closed/ controlled” media, the prospects for transparency, accountability, responsiveness, professionalism and multiple sources of information were completely state controlled. The human rights discourse with its attendant language of freedoms was critically absent. As such the state controlled media only became the mouthpiece of the state geared at ensuring loyalty, discipline, obedience and unity. Citizens were thus, passive participants in the governance systems and processes.

The multiparty democratic dispensation has led to an evolution of fundamental values of transparency, accountability, responsiveness, freedom of expression and assembly, the role of the market and the private sector and the flourishing of non state actors like Civil Society Organizations, Community Based Organizations, Faith Based Organizations and trade unions.

A culture has evolved subsequently of freedoms and rights introducing a new paradigm in governance processes of claims/entitlements or demands juxtaposed to fulfillments and responsibilities. The state is no longer seen as a confined entity that must define “truths”, what must be heard or what must be seen. The state in the multiparty era in seeking to fulfill the people's socio-economic and political needs must provide such openly, transparently, accountably, responsively. These must be done through multiple means. A new chapter, therefore, has created an unprecedented pressure for an increased role for the media. The country needs a diversified media existence.

Government, therefore, must account for its decisions, its choices, and its omissions since it is only carrying its duties upon sustained trust from its citizens. Through multiple media avenues, the government can no longer operate as if its controlled state media are the only ones citizens will listen to for news, education and civic engagement programs and political propaganda.

With the new media outlets in place, the democratization processes have inherently accorded the media a critical responsibility to tackle everyday issues of accountability, transparency and responsiveness. It is a responsibility that can be fulfilled at the advantage of the media or abdicated at the peril of the media houses in this democracy. Therefore, the label that the media is the fourth estate is not far fetched.

### **Core functions of the state**

The core functions of the state include generating resources (through taxes and other economic endeavors) and utilizing the same to fulfill socio-economic development of its citizens who today belong to different political parties and possess multiple political interests and orientations. The provision of water, education, health, food, security and many others is no longer seen as sheer government provision of services like gifts but is rather turned into rights of citizens that if not fulfilled, they must be demanded.

With competing interests, the state finds itself interacting with non-state actors overseeing its operations. CSOs, NGOs, opposition political parties, a quasi-independent parliament and the media have taken up a once non-available role of “watchdogs” to raise alarm, debate, awareness and questions on any queer decisions or government choices including generation and apportioning and utilization of public resources. Any current government therefore can only ignore the role of such non-state actors at its own peril. This is the glue liked or hated between the government and the non-state actors like the media find themselves.

This relationship has scintillated concerns, worries, excitement, frustration; hopes in both camps and these keep on evolving through passage of time. However, the media needs to be transformed into an instrument of liberation that is critical but truthful: a media that is worthy of its freedom,’ Duncan (2003) cites President Thabo Mbeki as once saying.

### **Contemporary issues affecting Malawian society**

The Malawi of today is visibly seen as a society with many challenges. The adage of getting 50 years since independence is becoming a painful realization to many that these years seem to have achieved little of what possibly would have been obtained in such a period. For example, political leaders more than the general citizenry, seem to have spun the wheels of misfortune of this country. They have raised hope and later dumped people into an abyss of frustration and fatalism due to their accumulation of power not for service, but for exploitation and subjugation of the citizenry.

In turn after 50 years is Malawi a hungry nation, has its education and health services over-stretched and quality compromised, has limited access to clean and portable water, has over dependency levels on natural resources as sources of energy leading to massive deforestation and desertification, has high child mortality rate, has high maternal death rate and many other challenges. Complicating this reality, Malawi with its own resources and complementary resources from bilateral and multilateral partners is sluggishly moving towards poverty eradication and economic self-reliance. The human face of poverty in Malawi is appalling and shocking yet within the same Malawi a two-tier society has emerged.

This two-tier society is characterized by those who can afford privatized services like in health, education and agriculture and, even, access to justice assured of timeliness, quality and efficiency. On the other hand the majority are those abandoned to depend on government services that are over-crowded, untimely, inaccessible, quality compromised, inefficient and ineffective. Dangerously, new societal values are emerging like individualism with limited communal values, spirit of not getting concerned with public goods, a get-rich-quick syndrome, an abandoning spirit, limited hardworking spirit and shrinking patriotism, among many other vices.

With local and equally global processes, the state is emerging weak replete with politics of predators. Periodically, therefore, political parties exchange state authority through ballots to access the national or public goods/ resources that are looted for personal enrichment. The small section of the two-tier society is in a network of patronage directly or indirectly pillaging national resources into private capital, resources that would be used effectively for socio-economic development of Malawi as whole with visible developments in the 50 years we currently cry for or celebrate.

The cries from the poor for accountability and transparency have therefore heightened given the visible societal difference and the clear observations that this is largely man-made poverty. Systems, procedures, policies and laws are being made and are simultaneously over-ridden to benefit a few people that are connected with those that govern the state. Desperation and anger for justice are, therefore, visible in our society while lawlessness and injustices are perpetrated in higher places.

### **The media in the milieu of Malawi's socio-economic and political life**

It is in this context that our Malawian media finds itself. This is its operating context. Whilst there is multiplicity of media; whilst there is freedom of expression being enjoyed; whilst some laws and policies have been created to create an enabling free and open society, the media people are operating in this socio-economic context giving them an impetus for the promotion of transparency and accountability. This is also a context that limits the effectiveness and pro-activeness of our media since just like the general citizenry, they are faced with survival, economic and moral challenges. They are trapped in the milieu of the power of money and this drives the way they will inform, educate, sensitize, and raise alarm on governance issues. Speaking at the 2002 World Social Forum, Global Media Watch noted that:

Communications media have been subject to abuse by the other political and economic powers, even in democratic nations. The fourth estate is no longer able to discharge its functions as a counter power. In a global economy that has shifted radically from industrial capitalism to financial capitalism, a capitalism of financial speculation, the economic structure of the media has been transformed. There's an ever increasing lack of differentiation between journalism, publicity, marketing and propaganda (cited in Duncan, 2003:16)

### **Recent experiences in the public finance management processes**

It is our contention that the use of the term 'national interest' in relation to news gathering and dissemination is too restrictive and can have a narrow political connotation. Journalists work in the public interest which is much wider. Politicians of a ruling party may decide that there should be secrecy over an issue "in the national interest" – where the meaning of "national interest" is defined by the

politicians. Journalists work in the “public interest”, a sounder, much wider base which might override “national interest” (MISA 2002 cited in Duncan, 2003:6)

In this democratization context, the public finance management act regulates how public resources are generated, utilized and accounted for. The constitution recognizes the responsibility of the state to ensure development for all people just and provides for citizens to access information held by the state for the public good. That will be just on paper is on paper. Without going into details of laws and policies, the continued absence of the access to information law has rendered the constitutional provisions challenging to many citizens including the media.

The political practices and state behaviour in our recent administrations have shown established trends to limit citizen participation in the governance processes. Citizen desire for accountability and transparency is crippled by a continued legacy of a closed government system; unwilling government machinery to provide information and to actively engage with citizens in openly publishing or presenting government transactions.

Several trends and recent practices testify to this. For example, the sudden wealth of UDF and its leadership from 1994 to 2004, the failure to publish the proceeds from the mining sector, the sudden accumulation of wealth by the DPP and its leadership, the failure for parliament to have an assurance committee to oversee and track the utilization of revenue generated through government contracted loans on many unfinished projects like Phalombe-Chitakale road, Nkhatabay district hospital, Phalombe district hospital, the former MDC hotel now Msonkho house, the continued shortage of drugs in public hospitals, the unfinished construction of numerous primary schools across Malawi reported in 1997, the secret development agreement between Paladin-Kayerekera and the Malawi government, the sudden wealth accumulated by the PP and its leadership, the proceeds from the sale of the presidential jet, the loss of huge sums of money dubbed cash-gate among others.

All these have shown Malawi that governance systems and processes though on paper are being manipulated for personal gains and as such poverty in Malawi is a self-made victimization of fellow Malawians. The laws and policies including procedures are there whether effective or shallow but generally the human factor is trying its best to keep Malawi at bay.

Despite the grim picture highlighted above, several players like CSOs, cooperating partners and the media have taken various initiatives to curb the malpractices. However, our CSO interest is on the contributions coming from the media and the levels of collaboration between CSOs and the media on these issues.

### **Intervention by the media and the trends that have emerged**

Both the print and electronic media have made commendable strides in uncovering financial malpractices in our recent administrations. To a large extent, without the private print and electronic and online media, the examples highlighted in this paper could not have been known. Therefore, our Malawian media have recently done the following:

- raised an alarm of financial irregularities and misappropriations.
- investigated sometimes government internal decisions and omissions that have led to prosecutions or court actions in so doing contributing to justice.
- informed citizens on wrong decisions and illegal choices made by our recent administrations.
- collaborated with CSOs in popularizing CSOs interventions and demands on public finance management issues.

- become the voice of the voiceless on public financial mismanagement issues in so doing jointly with the CSOs creating the platform for citizens' voices on national burning issues.

However, further from this CSO perspective or assessment, our Malawian media has not managed to timeously uncover public financial malpractices. In so doing the media have been more reactionary than proactive and intrusive; continuously set, define and sustain the agenda on financial malpractices experienced in our country so that to an extent, our media have only raised alarm, but have not further dug deeper to provide information to the citizens until some reported issues are effectively concluded.

The media have sometimes not been independent. Just like some institutions, the media have sometimes shown signs of being co-opted into the state machinery so that instead of promoting transparency and accountability they have seemingly promoted a state machinery concocted propaganda and fossilization of critical public finance management irregularities. In this case, the Malawi media instead of informing, have participated in drumming up misinformation, in hiding of information, in disguising real issues from citizens. In turn, the Malawian media are deemed to have sometimes left their noble ideals and entered into an arena of commoditization of news, commercialization of news, setting their own agenda and creating their own worldview to create a smokescreen of real burning issues affecting the nation. Our media, just like many other institutions seem to have been riddled with bribery and corrupt tendencies as certain published or presented news items seem to champion invisible economic masters involved in allegations of financial irregularities. Instead of being critical and contributing to the liberation of the nation, our media have taken away from the public domain real issues and promoted partisan perspectives. Sometimes, we have believed our media have been preoccupied with the market and abandoned their inherent noble ideals of being the “watchdog” of the state. We have noted the media getting crippled with unprofessional tendencies, promoting incompetence and unqualified personnel and opting for sensationalization of critical issues.

We have further noted that whilst the media seek to inform and promote transparency and accountability, the media or journalists and publishers themselves do not want to be accountable and to act transparently. This creates suspicions and perceptions that “vested interests” do affect media roles in the promotion of transparency and accountability

### **Notable gaps in the intervention from the media**

There are still recognizable gaps in personnel resource, financial resource, capital and equipment resource limiting the effectiveness of the media. This exposes the media to manipulation and exploitation by economically viable entities. Apropos, Jessica Weiss (2008) once wrote:

African journalists work and talents shine against the odds, which include a lack of equipment, infrastructure, training, resources and a decent salary to make ends meet. More deeply rooted societal problems include poverty and corruption, and governments that try to control the media.

### **Recommendations**

The recent history of Malawi and the role of the media in it is a mixed bag. As said earlier in this paper, the media are not insulated from national or societal emerging challenges like poverty,

corruption and bribery, lack of patriotism and the get-rich quick syndrome. These vices take away the critical importance of the media. As such, instead of effective collaboration with CSOs, sometimes there is a cat and mouse relationship that affects the realization of the ultimate goal of ensuring transparency and accountability in the utilization of public resources by our governments.

However, the following can be done:

- Jointly with CSOs, the media can advocate for access to information laws to create an enabling environment for the thriving of critical and informative media.
- Media ethics ought to be promoted and encouraged by media schools and oversight bodies such as the Media Council of Malawi to ensure media personnel are professional and stick to their core mandate.
- Media houses need to diversify their resource bases so that in a competitive world, they do not only depend on government advertisements that trap them more into politics of propaganda than investigative journalism and promotion of accountability and transparency in the public resources management.
- Media houses must pay their officers reasonably well to limit the temptations of perceived “buying” of individual journalists or editors (see Manda and Kufaine, 2013).
- Government must try to reduce the tax on media related equipment so that media houses are capable of purchasing advanced and modern media equipment to effectively and timely deliver their products.
- With a narrow economy of countries like Malawi, development cooperating partners must support the media in areas of capacity development in equipment and personnel training so that new ideas and strategies are put in place for the attendant result of contributing to the national ideals of ensuring transparency and accountability in the utilization of national or public resources
- A structured platform and resource centre between CSOs and media could be erected to ensure free flow of information on national issues without creating a perception that CSO leaders or media personnel “use” each other to their own specific ends.

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