

Discursive Construction of Citizen Participation in Democratic Decentralisation Discourses in Malawi

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Abstract

This paper examines the discursive construction of citizen participation in democratic decentralisation discourses in Malawi. The aim is to understand how rural Malawians have appropriated the notion of citizen participation that is embodied in district development planning processes- a major plank of democratic decentralisations and, how this has influenced the ways in which they take up their positions in the formal participatory processes and the actual nature of citizen participation taking place. Drawing from a mixed methods study which employed a household survey and qualitative key informant interviews, this paper argues that the way village chiefs have been declaring participation and engaging communities to prepare in a particular way, has produced a particular discourse of participation that has set the platform for the ways rural citizens understand participation. As a result, communities appear to have internalised this discourse, so that the phenomenon of participation became one of voluntary work and contribution of voluntary resources for brick-driven projects; a limited conception that does not fully capture the notion of citizen voice, influence, monitoring, and evaluation that is evident in the official government decentralisation documents.

Keywords:

Democratic Decentralisation, Participation, Discursive Power, Chiefs

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Introduction

Citizen participation emerged as a buzzword in development cooperation by external development agencies in the 1970s, and has become a recurrent and an important issue in the on-going debates about democratic decentralisation,

development, and local governance (Koch and Steiner, 2017). In Africa, the question of citizen participation has been of particular focus since the early 1990s when most African countries transitioned from authoritarian to democratic regimes (Chasukwa, Chiweza & Jamali, 2013; Hussein, 2019). Decentralized arrangements are normatively supposed to allow for more and better public participation in decision making, in turn making locally accountable representatives and institutional bodies more responsive to the demands of the public, and leading to greater efficiency and equity in the use of public resources (Blair, 2000; Crook & Sverrisson 2003). However, one of the challenges of decentralisation has been how to build institutions of accountable local representation for effective community participation (Ribot, 2003). Participation is considered beneficial because it can enhance learning processes, improve the quality of decisions, contribute to empowerment, or promote democratic citizenship (Cornwall, 2002; Ballard et al., 2008; Kuper et al., 2009). However, frequently citizen participation is ideally viewed as a panacea, overlooking the difficulties inherent in participatory processes (Koch & Steiner, 2017). The practical application of citizen participation is often limited (Mostert, 2005). The real issue has been the question of determining ways of integrating citizen or popular participation into the community representation process (Marfo, 2007). In addition, its interpretations and applications have not been static but have evolved along with ideological and practical trends in development over time and hence different meanings are ascribed to citizen participation in different contexts (Seohee, 2019). In practice, participation can take diverse forms and may have diverse results. Consequently, countries may have legal and policy frameworks to promote participation in place but this may not guarantee that the principle of citizen participation will be followed. This conceptual complexity and fluidity calls for an in-depth exploration to examine the nature of citizen participation and how it is taking place in specific empirical contexts (Marfo, 2007).

This paper examines the discursive construction of citizen participation in discourses of democratic decentralisation in Malawi. In 1998, Malawi adopted a democratic decentralisation policy whose main objective was to create a democratic environment and institutions in Malawi for governance and

development at the local level and was meant to facilitate the participation of the grassroots in decision making. Over the years, an enduring question in Malawi's local governance and development discourses has been the question of whether indeed citizen participation is occurring and whether the nature of participation that is taking place is what was envisaged by the policy. For instance, in 2003, as the country was debating and reflecting on Malawi's democratic process and its future potential at a conference titled, "From Freedom to Empowerment: Ten Years of Democratisation in Malawi", the issue of decentralisation and participation was found to be elusive. In a paper presented by a government official on the progress, status, and challenges of decentralisation in Malawi, the question of how far the decentralisation process had promoted popular participation in development and governance was described as a question with a million answers (Sikwese, 2003, p.144). Similar concerns have been raised by a variety of scholars that have examined participation within a number of government programmes whose implementation is anchored within the decentralisation framework. For instance, in his examination of the concept of community participation in Malawi Social Action Fund (MASAF) projects, Dulani (2003, p.22) concluded that the definition of community participation in MASAF was very narrow and took on a passive tokenistic nature and did not appear to satisfy the attributes of 'citizenship' engagement in the policy places. Consequently, the projects failed to generate the benefits that are attributed to community participation in development initiatives while at the same time failing to empower the local community to take charge of decisions that contribute to their well-being and social advancement. Chinsinga (2003, p.139) also noted that the major challenge really is how to institutionalize participation effectively in grassroots development programmes. Through his examination of participation in poverty alleviation programmes, he observed that the manner in which participation was being institutionalised was as if it is a neutral concept that lacks any component of a negotiation and presupposes that development facilitators can extricate themselves from their world views, beliefs, convictions, and perceptions when they are engaged with the potential beneficiaries of development interventions. Indeed, the idea that power differences

between various actors are balanced in processes of participation is hardly realistic (Golubovic, 2010). On the contrary, power differences are always reflected in participatory processes (Fung & Wright, 2003). For Betancur (2009, p.110), participation can be “a mechanism of technocratic coercion or manipulation when there is no real empowerment or significant increase in the required skills and knowledge among the parties involved” (cited in Koch & Steiner, 2017).

This paper builds on these discussions and seeks to further illuminate on the apparent failure of the decentralisation policy to achieve the desired goals of citizen participation. The point of departure is that the analysis in this paper focuses on the discursive construction of citizen participation in discourses of democratic decentralisation. The analysis goes beyond the institutions promoting such participation to an examination of how the rural citizens themselves understand the notion of citizen participation that is embodied in district development planning processes – a major plank of democratic decentralisation – and how this influences the ways in which they take up their positions in the formal participatory processes and the actual nature of citizen participation taking place. The paper takes a historical approach and draws on data that was collected between 2004 and 2005, during the early years of the implementation of decentralisation policy in Malawi. It complements this data with literature drawn from other studies to illuminate on citizen participation over time up to 2019. Thus, the paper begins with an overview of participation in global governance discussions, and then it examines the construction of citizen participation in Malawi’s legal and policy framework and in the district development planning system in particular. Thereafter, the paper pays attention to discussing the nature of participation that the rural citizens have internalised and how this departs from the notion of citizen participation evident in official decentralisation documents, arguing instead that the citizen’s constructions have been influenced by the context of participation, in particular the performative acts of village chiefs. The paper reflects over these findings in relation to other recent studies and concludes that this has been a continuing thread over the twenty-one-year period that democratic decentralisation policy has been in implementation in Malawi.

Data, methods, and analytical framework

The paper is based on a mixed methods field study which was conducted in three districts of Zomba, Mangochi and Nkhata Bay in 2005, during the early years of the implementation of the policy. Mangochi district in the southern region and Nkhata Bay district in northern Malawi were the areas where decentralisation efforts were first piloted for four years before being replicated to the other parts of the country. In order to provide some contrast with the two older districts, Zomba was chosen because it is one of those where decentralisation initiatives were implemented at a later stage during the replication exercise. The study adopted a mixed model design which is associated with the pragmatist paradigm. It slightly differs from earlier conceptions of mixed studies as defined by Creswell (2017) in the sense that the mixing of the quantitative and qualitative approaches in the mixed model design goes beyond the method level to include other phases of the research process such as problem definition, data analysis, and report write up. This research design was deemed useful because an examination of participation as arising out of issues of agency, power relations, and its links to the context in which it is occurring, calls for methods that allow an exploration and an account of local participatory dynamics, while at the same time providing an indication of the prevalence of the various participatory activities in which people engage. The evidence of participation that is being discussed in this paper is largely a result of quantitative interviews with ordinary men and women, and qualitative key informant discussions with chiefs, elected local government councillors in the selected villages, and members of various committees and associations operating within the study areas. There are of course many others in Malawi who provided insight into the creation of meaning concerning participation, not least officials working in the District Council offices in the three districts, officials in the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development, Decentralisation Secretariat, and other agencies dealing with decentralisation in Malawi. In total, a sample of 305 individuals were interviewed in the household survey; there were 42 focus group discussions, and 26 key informant interviews. The paper complements this data with literature drawn from other studies on citizen participation that were done in 2012, 2018, and 2019 to see how these issues have evolved over time.

In the analysis of discursive constructions of citizen participation in discourses of democratic decentralisation, the paper draws from discursive institutionalism. The objects of discursive institutionalist explanations consist of both ideas and discourse (Schmidt, 2008). Ideas differ in levels of generality: they may be specific to policy, encompass a wider program, or constitute an underlying philosophy. They also differ in type: cognitive ideas are constitutive of interests, and normative ideas appeal to values. Discourse, as defined herein, is a more generic term that encompasses not only the substantive content of ideas but also the interactive processes by which ideas are conveyed. Schmidt (2008) notes that discourse serves not just to represent ideas but also to exchange them through interactive processes of (a) coordination among policy actors in policy and program construction and (b) communication between political actors and the public in the presentation, deliberation, and legitimation of those ideas within particular contexts. Thus, discourse refers not only to what is said, or where and how but also to agency in terms of who said what to whom (Schmidt, 2008, p.304). The discursive processes help to explain why certain ideas succeed and others fail because of the ways in which they are projected to whom and where. In the policy sphere, the coordinative discourse consists of the individuals and groups at the centre of policy construction who are involved in the creation, elaboration, and justification of policy and programmatic ideas. These are the policy actors—the civil servants, elected officials, traditional chiefs, experts, organized interests, and activists, among others—who seek to coordinate agreement among themselves on policy ideas. Drawing insights from the linguistic anthropological works of Judith Butler (1993), I argue that the articulations of participation of the studied communities are somewhat related and conditioned by the actual practice obtaining in the communities as defined by their leaders' understanding of the participatory process, particularly understandings held by village chiefs. On performativity, Butler argues that:

for discourse to materialise a set of effects, discourse itself must be understood as complex and convergent chains in which effects are vectors of power. In this sense what is constituted in discourse is not

fixed in or by the discourse but becomes the condition and occasion for further action (Butler, 1993 p.187).

Butler's performativity works through normative force and the practice of reiteration: a speech act can produce that which it names only by reference to law, accepted norm, rule, regulation, code or contract which is cited. Powerful actors may control the discourse in the invited spaces (Haricharan, 2019). Invited spaces are those into which people are invited to participate as users, beneficiaries, or as citizens by various kinds of authorities such as government or non-governmental organisations (Cornwall, 2002b). The key characteristic of such spaces is that external agents such as government or donors bring them into being and deliver a frame for participation to be used by the participants. In invited spaces, 'the institutions of the participatory sphere are framed by those who create them and infused with power relations and cultures of interaction carried into them from other spaces' (Cornwall & Coelho, 2007, p.11). While the invited space is participatory in nature, Gaventa (2006) argues that we have to analyse what goes on in the space, what the quality of participation is and what forms of power are exercised. The Institute of Development Studies Powercube is one of the frameworks that helps to analyse the nature of power in participatory spaces (Gaventa, 2006). It identifies three forms of power: visible, hidden, and invisible. Of particular interest in this paper is invisible discursive power. The Powercube conveys the idea of invisible power as 'internalisation of powerlessness' embedded in belief systems, values and understandings of how things work (Haricharan, 2019, p.61).

Discursive power is a type of invisible and subtle form of power which rests primarily on ideational sources, such as values, norms, and ideas, when trying to influence an agenda or a process (Gaventa, 2006). Knowledge and the control of it are key sources for the exercise of discursive power (Gaventa & Cornwall, 2008). Thus, considering power in the study of citizen participation allows for a deeper analysis of deliberative democracy while also addressing the question of why some participatory processes succeed and others do not (Koch & Steiner, 2017, p.170). Therefore, in Butler's performative act of speaking, reality is incorporated but that

reality nonetheless remains a social construction influenced by powerful actors within a particular context. The critical point here is that describing an object, a person, a practice, or a phenomenon such as participation in certain ways forms it as an object or subject, thus shaping its reality. Thus, citizen participation in project planning processes, like all political action, is a 'performative' action whose reality is not fixed or given, as in constitutions or other legal statutes or guidelines, but is continually produced and shaped through linguistic constructions of powerful actors in which individuals participate every day.

Citizen participation in global decentralised governance discourses

While participation is considered an essential element in democratic decentralisation, the concept itself "is so widely and loosely used, like many other catchwords in development jargon, the meaning has become blurred" (Mikkelsen, 1995, p.62). Mostert (2005) draws attention to the fact that there is no consensus about the meaning of participation and its purpose. Mostert further argues that the understanding and practice/application of participation depends on ideological views of the role of government, citizens, and organized interests. Cohen and Uphoff (1980) and Grant (2002) also argue that although the term is popular, it is at the same time ambiguous; that to ask what is participation is misleading because participation is not a single phenomenon and participatory situations and actions vary widely. They emphasise that participation is rather a rubric under which a number of distinct though related activities can be analysed and promoted.

In the literature, a distinction is made between developmental and political participation (Cohen and Uphoff, 1980) and between direct and indirect participation (Crook and Sverrisson, 2001). In a seminal work that traces the history of participation from the 1970s, Cornwall (2002a) argues that since the mid-1970s, as the basic needs approach to development came to be defined, popular participation also gained prominent support. With this move, emphasis began to be placed on people participating through all the stages: from decision making to implementation and evaluation of development policies and projects, and on participation of people in decisions which affect them through organisations of

their own choice (ILO, 1977). In this perspective, Cornwall (2002) argues that participation was a matter of achieving cost effectiveness and compliance and one of the ways this was done was to get local people organised either in self-help groups or in committees through which they could have some input into project implementation if not identification and design. She further argues that the primary emphasis appeared to be on relocating the poor within the prevailing order, bringing them in and finding them a place, rather than a process that enables people to recognize and exercise their agency as conceptualised by Freire (1970).

However, as neo-liberal economic policies began to take hold, in the context of prescriptions of rolling back the state, beneficiaries of development assistance were increasingly seen as more active participants in implementation and in meeting the costs of development. Participation continued to be located in development projects and programmes but in this case as a means of strengthening project relevance, quality, and sustainability. An influential definition of this understanding comes from the World Bank which defines participation as a process through which stakeholders influence and share control over development initiatives and the decisions and resources which affect them (World Bank, 1995). From this perspective, the locus of participation was in all phases of a project cycle, from needs assessment, to appraisal, implementation to monitoring and evaluation.

This led to a confluence of interest in self-reliance and self-provisioning in what Cornwall (2002a) calls the 'do-it-yourself ethos of the 1980s' in which beneficiaries became to be seen as consumers, users, and choosers. Emphasis began to be placed on participation through contributions of cash or kind as a way of buying in to development initiatives for the people's benefit. It was argued that people value things more if they pay for them and by buying into these projects, they would gain greater voice and choice (Cornwall, 2002a). Over time, participation became moulded into the World Bank's market language that eventually gave rise to the growth of cost recovery, co-financing, and co-management schemes. As Paul's (1987) review of World Bank experiences reveals, cost sharing and efficiency emerged as the principal objects of community participation initiatives and little

attention was paid to two objectives of empowerment and capacity building that emerged directly from the alternative development of the 1970s.

A related aspect to this discussion of participation in regard to project processes is the discussion of forms and varying degrees of control that people have over the project participatory process in terms of defining goals, formulating policies and implementing and managing projects. Hoddinott, Adato, Besley, and Haddad (2001) note that the most widely view is that local communities should be involved in the design, implementation and monitoring of interventions for reducing poverty. At one end of the degree of control is what is termed as genuine participation (Rose, 2003) or self- mobilisation (Pretty, 1994). This is related to what Arnstein (1971) calls citizen control on the topmost rung of her ladder of participation, or what is labelled as joint decision making in McGee and Norton's (2000) ladder of participation. The basic message implied in all these varied classifications is that citizens have ability to take part in real decision making and governance and are able to negotiate their interests.

At the other extreme end of the scale are degrees of control variously described as tokenism (Hart, 1992), manipulated participation (Arnstein, 1971), passive participation (Rifkin, 1985), and pseudo participation (Bray, 2000). Here participation is at best a consultative process whereby citizens are kept informed of developments and are expected to accept decisions that have already been made (Rose, 2003). However, Arnstein (1971) argues that consultation can be a legitimate step toward full participation but, if it is not combined with other modes of participation, it becomes a sham since there is no assurance that citizen concerns and ideas will be considered. Also included in this category are forms of participation that limit citizen involvement to contributing resources for project implementation (Rose, 2003). The discussion above reflects the broad nature of development participation and the fact that interpretation is necessarily linked to an agency's development perspective. As a result, there are no universal interpretations of participation applicable to all development programmes. This observation underlies the importance of unearthing how participation is being

comprehended in each particular case, in order to understand the strategies being implemented and evaluate its outcomes.

However, the turn to democratic decentralised governance in international development and the engagement of ordinary people in policy processes have brought questions of representation, agency, and voice to the fore (Loewenson, 1999). Increasingly, around the world, a number of mechanisms are being explored which can foster more inclusive and deliberative forms of engagement between citizens and the state (Gaventa, 2002). According to Fung (2002) this involves linking bottom up and top down forms of governance to create a new architecture of governance. Innovations around the world which incorporate this approach range from provisions for participatory planning at local government level, participatory budgeting, citizen monitoring committees, to other forms of public referenda that involve new legal frameworks for local governance which incorporate a mix of direct forms of popular participation with more representative forms of democracy (Goetz and Gaventa, 2001). This has led to a fundamental rethinking about the ways in which citizen's voices are articulated and represented in the policy process and a reconceptualisation of participation in relation to local governance. A body of literature has emerged that challenges traditional approaches to participation and situates participation within the discourses of citizenship as the exercise of agency, rather than the liberal traditional notion of citizenship as a national identity (Cornwall, 2002a; Gaventa & Valderrama, 1999). These discourses have led to a redefinition of the concept of participation that shifts the focus from a concern with beneficiaries or the excluded to broader forms of engagement by citizens in the policy formulation and decision making arenas. Cornwall and Gaventa(2000) argue that strategies such as democratic decentralisation that emphasise inclusive participation as the foundation of democratic practice, by seeking to engage citizens more directly in policy negotiation and in holding government accountable, suggest a more active notion of citizenship which recognises the agency of citizens as the shapers and makers of their own development other than beneficiaries. Emphasis here is being placed on engaging the poor in policymaking processes, moving from poverty targets to political agency (Whitehead & Gray-Molina, 2003).

Lending support to these views, Gaventa and Valderrama (1999) argue that the good governance agenda draws attention to relations with citizens and tends to encourage heightened interaction to improve democracy. They point out how this starts to overlap with project participation because development projects are key arenas for interaction or because development is a big issue on the social and political agenda. As a result, the practice of direct participation that is explicit in democratic decentralisation extends political participation beyond the electoral process and positions the citizen as the key decision maker in the local governance process by drawing on traditions of community participation in identifying local priorities, planning and implementing programmes.

Clearly, the argument here is that with the adoption of democratic decentralization and inclusionary politics, participation has come to signify a new emphasis that embodies possibilities of the marginalized engaging with state decision-making processes. What participation comes to mean in these kinds of settings transcends older practices of consultation to open up new possibilities for voice, influence, and responsiveness in which participation goes beyond making use of invitations to participate to more activist and autonomous forms of actions through which people create their own opportunities and terms for engagement (Fung & Wright, 2001; Goetz & Gaventa, 2001). These discourses have led to a notion of participation termed citizen participation that links participation in the political, and social sphere (Gaventa & Valderrama, 1999). Citizen participation here expresses multiple meanings and involves direct ways in which citizen's influence and exercise control in governance beyond traditional forms of indirect representation. Citizen participation in policy processes is regarded as a critical ingredient of participatory democracy whose underlying role is not to replace representative democracy but to supplement it and make it work better (Golubovic, 2010).

The construction of citizen participation in Malawi's legal and policy framework

Citizen participation is prescribed in Malawi's legal documents including the Constitution. Since 1994, when Malawi adopted a new Constitution based on liberal democratic principles, decentralization reform efforts have in effect being linked with democratization. The Constitution and the Local Government Act (1998) creates decentralized local governments and gives them responsibility for welfare provision, the consolidation and promotion of local democratic institutions and participation, and the promotion of infrastructure and economic development through the formulation and execution of local development plans (Malawi Government, 1994). Although the concept of popular participation plays a fundamental role in the discourses of democratisation and poverty reduction in Malawi that have contributed to the adoption of democratic decentralisation, it has not clearly been articulated in all policy documents, except in the district planning guidelines. Both the Constitution and the Local Government Act expect local government authorities to strengthen the democratic principles of accountability, transparency, and the participation of local people in decision making and development processes (Malawi Government 1998; Cross & Kutengule 2001) but the nature and notion of participation that was to be promoted was not clarified in these documents. Even the commission that was appointed by government in 1996 to carry out a review of decentralisation and made recommendations for a decentralisation policy based on devolution of powers to locally elected local governments neither provided guidance on the types of institutional arrangements that should be instituted for decentralisation at the sub-district level, nor about how local government and communities should relate to one another to promote the goals of participation.

Due to this lacuna, government, in the process of implementing post 1994 decentralisation reforms, institutionalised a District Development Planning System (DDPS) in 1999 as a key mechanism of facilitating the participation of communities in local decision making. The basic template of the DDPS as an

invited participatory space was constructed under the previous District Focus decentralization arrangement,¹ in which traditional chiefs chaired sub-district committees at the area and village levels. What this means is that although on paper Malawi had adopted democratic decentralization policy reforms in 1998, in practice it decided to continue utilising an old institutional arrangement that comprised of the District Development Committee² at the district level, and two sub-district committees namely the Area and Village Development Committees at their respective levels. These committees, first constituted in 1966 under the one party's deconcentrated system of decentralisation were organised around the hierarchy of traditional chiefs in Malawi.

The discourse of participation promoted in the DDPS Handbook

The District Development Planning System (DDPS), together with the creation of sub-district committees, constitute the “opportunity structure” which the implementation of post- 1994 decentralization initiatives in Malawi has by and large relied on to make linkages through which to attain the objective of citizen participation in development processes (Chiweza, 2007, p.65). It is an invited space and it articulates the nature of citizen participation that is expected by the technocratic architects of decentralisation in Malawi. The District Planning System guidelines articulate citizen participation as: ‘the community’s involvement in selection of the project, design of the project, implementation, monitoring, or evaluation and contribution of at least 25% of the project costs in cash or kind’ (Department of Local Government, 2001, p.99).

Cornwall (2002b) suggests that what participation is taken to mean makes available particular positions for participants to take up within particular spaces, bounding the possibilities for inclusion as well as agency. In this case, the definition of citizen articulated in the guidelines suggests that the main concern of this participatory space is involvement of people through the various stages of a development project. The planning system as seen from the guidelines incorporates notions of both direct and indirect participation through representatives revolving around development of micro-project processes. Citizens can participate directly in

the identification and implementation of development projects and also indirectly through their representatives in the Village and Area Development Committees (VDC and ADC). Its principles indicate an emphasis on local knowledge by starting from their local needs and interests, and stressing a regard for and recognition of the centrality of local people in the process of planning. However, the planning process itself, the structure, and the roles assigned to the sub-district structures, VDCs and ADCs circumscribe the boundaries of a participatory process that leans more towards consultation, whose primary emphasis is on ‘collecting’ needs of ‘beneficiaries’ or generating data for district strategic planning, while real decision making as far as project selection and design is concerned rests with the committees, most particularly the Area Development Committee.

The District Planning guidelines also emphasise community contributions in the form of human and other resources in the implementation of development projects. Thus, applications are supposed to be made on the basis of communities prioritising their needs and showing a commitment to provide 25% of the resources for their proposed project (in cash or kind with labour and materials valued at prevailing market rates). Community co-financing or what is also known as co-production in these projects is seen as a way of encouraging community commitment and ownership, a reflection of true demand, and a mechanism of establishing a culture of joint ownership (Brandsen & Honingh, 2018; Parker & Serrano, 2000). In this way individual and community obligation is being advocated alongside visions of empowerment derived through the project selection process. A discourse analysis of the ‘power to the people’ song aired on Malawian radio and television that government used as part of creating citizen awareness on the implementation of the 1998 Decentralisation Policy also reveals the emphasis of choosing a development project and working with leaders as constituting participation. Table 1 below indicates the words of the song:

Table 1: The ‘Power to the people’ song

| Decentralisation song in vernacular | English interpretation of the song |
|---|--|
| <p>Tikanena kutimphamvu kuanthu, Tigwirire ntchito ndi makhansala, m’ Mizinda m’ matauni ndi m’ maboma.</p> <p>Kusankha chitukuko chomwe tifuna, kudera kwathuko,</p> <p>Mphamvu, mphamvu kuanthu x 2.</p> <p>Tisankhe ngati tikufuna miseu, zipatala, sukulu, kapena milatho.</p> <p>Malingana ndi zosowa zathu.</p> <p>Kusankha chitukuko chomwe tifunaku dera kwathuko.</p> <p>Mphamvu, mphamvu kuanthu x2</p> | <p>When we say power to the people, It is working with elected councillors in our cities, towns, and districts.</p> <p>Choosing a development project that we want in our community.</p> <p>Power, power to the people x2.</p> <p>We should choose whether we want a road, hospital, school or bridge.</p> <p>According to our needs.</p> <p>Choosing a project we want in our community.</p> <p>Power, power to the people x2</p> |

Source: Civic education office, Decentralisation Secretariat

Lefebvre (1991) argues that particular ways of thinking about society are played out in ways in which the spaces are conceived, organised, and occupied. The call to participation embodied in the philosophy of the district planning system and the decentralisation awareness song demonstrates an attempt by government to provide a mechanism for allowing local citizens to make their voices heard in local development processes. However, what do the citizens themselves make of this call to participation? What do they think this is all about?

Citizen's articulation of participation

In all the three study districts, the study found evidence of a rote assignment of self-help contributions to the community as the persisting view and modality of participation at the village level. Evidence from the household surveys as displayed in Table 2 below shows that communities defined participation largely as taking part in the implementation of community development projects in terms of providing labour and other material resources and as called upon by the chief or government. Although choosing a project is one of the main areas being emphasised in the decentralisation awareness song and district development planning guidelines, very few individuals defined participation as the idea of communities choosing a project, contributing ideas, making decisions, or even choosing a leader.

Table 2: People's understanding of participation

According to your understanding what is participation?

| | Frequency | Percent |
|---|-----------|---------|
| Providing sand, water, labour and making bricks in the implementation of community development projects | 206 | 67.5% |
| Doing development self- help activities in your area | 59 | 19.3% |
| Don't know what it means | 31 | 10.2% |
| Right and freedom to choose development projects | 6 | 2.0% |
| Being able to access loans | 2 | 0.7% |
| Taking part in electing leaders | 1 | 0.3% |
| Total | 305 | 100.0% |

This understanding of participation is one that does not entirely reflect the articulation of participation evident in the guidelines of the planning system and

is also not consistent with the expectations of local government officials at the district level. Local government officials expressed an understanding that:

the ideal participation being advocated in the decentralisation programme is one where communities should decide, contribute, and even take over management of the project. In reality people have narrowed it down to moulding of bricks. That is the widespread form of participation (Key informant interview with, Nkhata Bay District Local Government Officer).

The study noted that articulations of participation by communities are somewhat related and conditioned by the actual practice obtaining in the communities as defined by the understandings held by village chiefs. In the context of the planning process in the rural communities, where citizens can barely comprehend the narrations of the planning guidelines, and in practice rarely have access to such documents, their understanding is received from those who interpret the planning guidelines, mainly from those who are in constant contact with the communities. The experiences of citizens in the studied communities revealed that most meetings and discussions concerning participation in development processes were initiated and facilitated by chiefs, particularly at the level of village and group village headmen. Through my discussions with chiefs it was also evident that the chiefs interpreted the district planning system's requirement to have community contributions of at least 25% of project costs to mean that they had to have a cache of bricks to show to the project appraisal team, so that they could be considered for funding from the government. In many project communities that were visited, chiefs attributed the local government's approval of their requested project to them having a cache of bricks ready to display. For the chiefs, local government decisions on projects were related to having some bricks as a token of preparedness to participate. Therefore, in many of the development meetings that chiefs organised, they focused on inculcating in community residents the importance of doing development work, of self-reliance, and encouraging communities to take an active role in development activities by having bricks ready in order to attract funding for a project from government. As one village headman beamingly explained:

we usually mobilise communities to start moulding bricks with the hope that we will attract a development project. Bricks are very important and that is where our participation is evident. Without bricks there is no development that we want. Therefore, if you talk about participation, our part is to mould bricks, draw water, and collect sand. This project that you see in this community, we had to mould bricks first and then ask government to help us with the rest. That is how we got it. (An interview with a Group village headman from Nkhata Bay district).

On the one hand, this interpretation could be related to the means by which district local government officials passed on information to the chiefs concerning which projects can be accepted for funding within the District Development Planning framework. The reality is that although communities were asked to identify projects, donor funding provided through District Development Fund only catered for a restricted menu of projects, mostly capital development projects. On the other hand, the positions chiefs took to marshal communities towards voluntary work reflect traces of the past: the role the chiefs used to perform in the previous District Development Committee system that operated from 1967 to 1993. In this system, the chiefs' role as prescribed by the operational guidelines was 'to enlist the latent enthusiasm of the villagers into productive work in support of the national development plan' (Government of Malawi, 1967b, p.21). What moulded the operations of village chiefs in the present system of decentralisation? A response that was common among village chiefs I interviewed in the three districts was that:

ever since we started in the new system, as village chiefs we have not received any training from government about how we should help in development matters. We just help each other from what we have always been doing for a long time as chiefs in these communities, but we also rely on instructions that our senior chiefs [the Traditional Authority] give us through the Group Village Headman (An interview with a Village headman from Nkhata Bay District).

The implication here is that although the ethos of participation in the revised District Development Planning system is different from the one advocated

previously, on the ground, among chiefs, it was still development and participation as usual. What this suggests is that, without an institutional capacity to establish and enforce new rules of the game, patterns of interaction that are deep-rooted from the past can be replicated within newly created arenas, limiting the possibilities for change. However, while the research points to chiefs as the dominant actors in shaping the participation discourse among rural Malawians, there is other literature that shows how civic education participation abstractions by non-governmental organisations also play a role in creating this partial understanding of participation. In the absence of any government-organised activity for the rural areas, nongovernmental organisations have, since the political changes of 1994, assumed the responsibility for conducting civic education on democracy and human rights in Malawi. Englund (2003), operating as a participant observer in a field study on civic education provided by an organisation called National Initiative for Civic Education in rural Malawi reveals that information imparted to villagers on participation centred on urging them to work more, and that the civic educators implicitly scolded the audience for not providing free labour. The civic educators spoke the same rhetoric of participation as the village chiefs. Cammack and O'Neil (2014, p.40) in their study of local governance and service delivery noted that when asked how communities participate in district development planning, members of development committees and other local stakeholders (e.g. NGOs, district officials) tend to describe how the system should work. They found that that the system often works differently in reality and there are discrepancies between the system on paper and in practice include and the influence of chiefs extends beyond advice.

Therefore, situating chiefs' speech acts in Butler's performative analysis, the argument here is that the way the chiefs declare participation and engage communities to prepare in this particularistic way, produces a particular discourse of participation that sets the platform for the ways rural citizens understand participation. Thus, the ways in which village chiefs explained the essence of participation, they inculcated a reality of participation among rural citizens that was not fully in tandem with the official discourse. As a result, communities appear

to have internalised this discourse, so that the phenomenon of participation became one of voluntary work and contribution of voluntary resources for brick-driven projects other than the notion of citizen voice, influence, monitoring, and evaluation that we see in the government documents.

There is a deeper explanation for all these observations. Cornwall and Coelho (2007) notes that the possibility of participation inherent in an invited space is linked to the past experiences and the dispositions of actors. They argue that “citizens who have been on the receiving end of paternalism or prejudice in everyday encounters with state institutions may bring these expectations with them into the participatory sphere” (Cornwall & Coelho, 2007, p.12). Due to the weakness of the state at the local level, traditional leaders in Malawi have wielded considerable power and influence in rural areas since the colonial right through to the postcolonial democratic Malawi. They enjoy significant public trust, even more than elected leaders (Kayuni et al. 2019; Logan, 2009); and they exert authority that extends beyond their official role as custodians of culture to also to influencing land management. (Kishindo, 2011), and local law enforcement (Cammack, Kanyongolo, and O’Neil 2009; Margolies, Aberman, and Gelli, 2017). Traditional leaders also play critical roles in citizens’ economic and social welfare and as key agents in distributing disaster relief items and farm subsidies (Basurto, Dupas, and Robinson 2017); even in health and gender-related issues such as HIV and women’s rights interventions (Dionne 2018; Hussein and Muriaas, 2019). Due to the multiple roles and the sanctioning powers that go with those roles, citizens usually defer to their advice and instructions. This is consistent with Mengisteab (2019), who argues that Africa’s rural communities, who largely operate under subsistent economic systems, overwhelmingly adhere to the traditional institutional systems for a variety of reasons.

To date the Village Development Committees are still organised around lower level chiefs at the level of village and group village headmen, while the Area Development Committee is under the jurisdiction of senior chiefs at the level of Traditional Authority and Sub-Traditional Authority. According to key government

officials involved in the decentralisation policy process at the time, the issue of sub-district structures and the role of traditional leader were topics of heated discussion during the post 1994 decentralisation policy development process. The feeling of some reformers was that, in order to reflect democratic constitutional provisions, Ward Committees should be created as appropriate forums for the elected members, instead of continuing with the area - and village-level committees. In the end, the position adopted by the government was to maintain the status quo because of the chiefs' popularity within their own communities, a decision that reflected the government's fear and hesitation about upsetting the position and status that chiefs had acquired under previous programmes (Chiweza, 2007, p.66). Thus, even in these seemingly revitalized "democratic" bodies, traditional chiefs were given responsibilities for mobilizing support for local development processes.

Not surprisingly, fourteen year later, in a study of citizen participation in Malawi, Chingaipe and Msukwa (2012) also found that chiefs were still deemed by ordinary rural citizens to be their significant participatory mechanism. They found that chiefs have an ambivalent effect on citizen participation as they constrained free expression of ideas of their people, but they mobilised them for the implementation of community projects (Chingaipe and Msukwa, 2012). This is contrary to the policy intentions of decentralization that was passed in 1998. The nature of participation the chiefs were promoting among rural local communities is not consistent with the notion of agency embedded in discourses of citizen participation and democratic decentralisation that relates to issues of: capabilities, self-confidence, and recognition of the dignity of the powerless to shape, influence, and negotiate their positions in decision making processes that concern their lives (Haricharan, 2019). A few years down the line, in 2018, Msukwa and Taylor (2018), found that the nature of participation was superficial, paternalistic, and ineffective and they pointed to a failure to embed democratic governance in Malawian rural society. In 2019, Hussein found that citizens were unable to meaningfully participate in local planning processes because the government planning system had institutionalised participation in state regulated sub-district institutions of Village and Area Development Committees whose deliberations were effectively controlled by chiefs.

Concluding reflections

The evidence presented in this paper shows that the District Development Planning System is an invited space through which the citizens are being offered a model that prescribes a specific way in which they should practice their participation. The implementation of the model gives considerable attention to developing 3-year development plans at the district level and requires specific imposed engagements from the participants towards the achievement of those plans. However, there is a disjuncture in the way the rural citizens have internalised the notion of participation on the ground. What is evidently coming out from the citizen narratives in the three case studies during the early years of democratic decentralisation can best be regarded as articulations resulting from context-specific interactions with chiefs as local powerful actors. Similarly, evidence from the other studies conducted between 2012 and 2019 concludes that this has been a continuing thread over the twenty-one-year period that democratic decentralisation policy has been in implementation in Malawi.

This paper is an example of how powerful actors can control the discourse of participation in particular contexts. Thus, discursive institutionalism is key to understanding the challenges of translating citizen participation from decentralisation policy blue prints into actual practice. The contextualized analysis of the substantive content of the ideas of chiefs as key agents of implementing and communicating decentralisation to citizens on the ground enables us to explore the ideational root causes of the way citizen participation has been internalised among rural community members. The examination of the discursive dynamics of decentralisation policy coordination and communication at the local community level calls attention to the circulation of ideas in discursive communities, and the role of ideational leaders in a democratic context. Discursive institutionalism also lends insight into questions of power, including how chiefs as ideational agents have been able to use their persuasive power through their traditional positioning of power and influence and their limited knowledge of decentralisation to inculcate a particular notion of decentralisation that is not fully in tandem with the desired

forms of participation. Examining participation as a performative practice illustrates how well-meaning participatory initiatives may generate a variety of intended and unintended responses and considers both the initiators and the participants as actors in the sense that they act and shape participatory processes. Therefore, to overcome the problem of participation becoming rhetorical, it is imperative that policy initiatives that seek to promote particular forms of participation should pay attention to how the concept of participation is being contextualized and the nature of actors who are influencing the internalisation processes among communities. Although some studies done between 2012 and 2019 display the dominant role of chiefs in participatory processes, this paper raises a need for carrying out similar types of studies in places where civil society local governance interventions have been implemented. In particular, since 2014 a governance programme by the name of Tilitonse supported many Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) to play an active role in promoting decentralised planning and local governance that is increasingly inclusive, accountable and responsive to citizens. A pertinent assessment worth pursuing is to see whether and how these non-state actors have provided counter prevailing power to the dominant power of chiefs and enabled citizens to grasp and practice the rightful modes of participation.

Notes

1. The District Focus arrangement started in 1994 under the UNDP Fifth Country Programme when the new multiparty government directed that the country should explore a policy of decentralization that would be suitable for a democratic Malawi.
2. District Development Committees no longer exist. Since 2010 they have been replaced by a Council and Development Service Committee.

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