The Global Development Project Contested: The Local Politics of the PRSP process in Malawi

Word count: 7,909

The Global Development Project Contested: The Local Politics of the PRSP process in Malawi

Abstract

Development, in an age of globalizations, has indeed become a global project. However, this project remains contested and contestable. While much attention has been given to this contestation at a macro-policy level, the dynamics of such contestations on the ground remain less studied. Noting that development projects, policies and programs are themselves products of power relations and social struggles, this paper focuses on the dynamics of these relations and struggles in relation to the dissemination of the global development project in Malawi. Drawing from the experiences and fractious journey from 2000 to 2006 of the broad-based civil society network involved in Malawi's ongoing PRSP process, the paper shows how local actors draw creatively on globalized discourses of participation and representation to contest and confound the objectives of the elites, thereby complicating the channels through which the global development project is promulgated.

Introduction

Development, in an age of globalizations, has indeed become a global project. Much attention has focused on the apparent global convergence on the objectives of this project as articulated both through its strongly normative 'buzzwords' such as democracy, participation, empowerment and poverty reduction (Cornwall and Brock, 2005, Hickey and Mohan, 2004, Cooke and Kothari, 2001) and through its global frameworks such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) (Weber 2007, 2006, Gould, 2005, Craig and Porter, 2002). While the ubiquity of these concepts and frameworks within the development literature would appear to point to a global consensus on this project, this vigorous and lively critical literature reminds us that the project in fact remains both contested and contestable.

At a macro level critical attention has been drawn to the role and power of both global frameworks and their attendant discourses in disseminating and consolidating the globalized development project. Craig and Porter (2002), characterizing PRSPs as '*a third way for the Third world*' argue that, in favoring technical and juridical components over the political economic, they represent a '*mode of "inclusive" liberalism, in which the <u>disciplined </u>inclusion of the poor and their places is a central task*' (2002: 54 – emphasis in original). Weber (2006) is of a similar view, arguing that PRSPs represent a comprehensive attempt to consolidate in legal (constitutional terms) as well as ideological and social terms, a unified political project for development. Focusing on this project's attendant discourses, Cornwall and Brock

(2005) highlight how politically ambiguous 'buzzwords' and 'fuzzwords' such as poverty reduction, participation and empowerment are being used by elites to shape their practical application in ways which serve their own purposes together with those of the global development project.

While, for some, the '*tyranny of participation*' (Cooke and Kothari, 2001) leaves little scope for local resistance to the spread of this project as social forces dedicated to equality and accountability are undermined (Gould, 2005: 142), others draw attention to the inevitable contests for primacy between local and global imperatives and knowledge (Craig and Porter, 2002, Lazarus, 2008). These contests are of specific interest to Weber (2006) who stresses the importance in exploring the social and political contexts in which PRSP policies are implemented as it is here, she asserts (2006: 189) that '*the contradictory, strategic and contested nature of the [global development] project can be exposed*.' In a later paper, noting the global relational dimensions to such struggles, Weber (2007) argues for the incorporation of such social struggles as an analytic category into research in this area as it contributes to the foregrounding of the contested nature of development.

In this paper I attempt to contribute to this literature by moving from the macro level to the micro and examining the interface where the global development project meets with local imperatives, knowledges and concerns. Focusing on the dynamics of local relations and struggles in relation to the dissemination of the global development project throughout Malawi, in particular as promulgated through the ongoing PRSP process, I demonstrate how local actors draw creatively on globalized discourses of participation and representation to contest and confound the objectives of the elites, thereby complicating the channels through which the global development project is promulgated. Drawing from the experiences and the fractious journey from 2000 to 2006 of the principal civic network involved in Malawi's PRSP process, the Malawi Economic Justice Network (MEJN), I show that the '*disciplined inclusion*', as Craig and Porter (2002: 53) term it, of 'the poor' into the neo-liberal order has met with resistance as local actors, appropriating and harnessing globalized 'fuzzwords' of participation and representation to challenge elites, have significantly complicated the channels through which the project is disseminated. I argue that, while ideologically loaded, global development concepts and discourses can nonetheless serve as

powerful political tools, fuelling imaginations and actions in the ongoing struggle against the inequities generated by the global development project.

Fieldwork for this study was carried out over two summers (2005 and 2006) in Malawi. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with forty-five state and civic actors. These included both people involved in the ongoing PRSP process and commentators on the evolving socio-political climate more generally. In addition, I carried out a piece of research (which was commissioned by MEJN) during the first summer on the network's District Chapter Program (see below). Involving extensive travel throughout the country with MEJN staff and interviews with many of its local 'members', this facilitated a more in-depth study of the network's culture, practices and ongoing challenges, providing a rich source of material on evolving relations within the network and beyond. The specific case of MEJN provides a doorway into the multiple sites of struggle in Malawi, and the actions of its different actors illustrate concrete ways in which globalized discourses and frameworks may be locally employed to challenge and contest the spread of the global development project. In this manner, MEJN's specificity provides us with ways of thinking more generally about how local contestation takes place in a globalized world.

The argument advanced in this paper proceeds as follows. A brief overview of the context for the introduction of the PRSP to Malawi is firstly provided wherein it is noted that a long legacy of external intervention has resulted in a deep penetration of globalized discourses and debates across Malawian society. Introducing the theoretical framework employed in the study which draws heavily on the work of Michel Foucault, I go on to argue that the dissemination and exercise of power, including the power of globalized discourses and frameworks, is less a zero-sum game between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots', than a dynamic, with the potential to challenge as well as to consolidate dominant frameworks and prescriptions. The third section of the paper then employs Foucault's theorization to chart the MEJN network's arduous journey within and without the process, from its inception as a dynamic new force mobilizing marginalized voices throughout Malawian society, through its disciplined and disciplining actions excluding these voices, and onto its struggle and re-invention in response to popular charges of illegitimacy. Drawing from the views and analyses of MEJN's local 'members', I demonstrate that the

'disciplined' inclusion of the poor into the neo-liberal project is far more problematic than its proponents and agents may realise. The findings demonstrate that contestation is alive and well in towns and villages throughout Malawi. I conclude by arguing that the specificity of MEJN's case, in drawing our attention to the shifting dynamics of how politics in conducted more broadly in the globalized world, highlights the need for further empirical work at these micro-sites of ongoing struggle and contestation.

Malawi: PRSP and globalized discourses

From its colonization in 1889 to its independence in 1963, and on through the structural adjustment years from 1981 onwards, Malawi has a long history of western penetration into its economy, politics and society. Colonialism, with the introduction of corporate enterprise and wage labor, together with the commodization of peasant agriculture through cash crop production, brought significant changes in political and economic structures (Kanyongolo, 1998). Western influence continued, following independence, with Hastings Banda's modernist development vision (paradoxically combined with a strong ethnic (Chewa) cultural traditionalism) being nurtured through a close relationship with western donors (Mkandawire, 2003). Global influences were set to increase when, following the oil shock of the late 1970s and the attendant declining terms of trade, rising interest rates and declining aid (exacerbated by a drought in 1980-1981 and the influx of refugees from war-ravaged Mozambique), in 1981 Malawi became the first African country to succumb to the IMFs structural adjustment program (Chinsinga, 2002).

In Malawi, as elsewhere, the structural adjustment years resulted in the twin-edged sword of increasing poverty and indebtedness. The gini ratio deteriorated from 0.48 in 1968 to 0.61 in 1995 (Chirwa, 1997b in Chilowa, 1998: 556) while external debt stocks rose from US$ 0.9 billion in 1982 to US$ 2.7 billion in 1999 (World Development Indicators Online). In 2000, Malawi qualified for the IMF/World Bank Highly Indebted Poor Country (HIPC) initiative under which the government was obliged undertake the PRSP process in order to qualify for debt relief. Malawi's PRSP formulation process began in late 2000, following IMF and World Bank approval of an interim PRSP strategy in December 2000. The resultant three-year

strategy was formally launched in April of 2002 (Jenkins and Tsoka, 2003).
Following its completion work began, in mid-2005, developing a follow-on strategy.
This five-year strategy, known as the Malawi Growth and Development Strategy
(MGDS) brings together elements of the PRSP and an economic growth strategy, the
Malawi Economic Growth Strategy (MEGS). It was completed in 2006 and launched
in early 2007.

The PRSP process, in theory, heralded a new departure in national governance in that
development policy was no longer to be dictated from the plush interiors of the World
Bank's headquarters in Washington. In contrast, PRSPs were to be country-driven
and participatory, with all relevant stakeholders participating in both their formulation
and implementation (World Bank, 2002). In Malawi however, where such a broad-
based participatory approach represented a radical shift from traditional hierarchical
political relations (Booth et al, 2006, Patel, 2005), the initial process was slow. In
2001 as the process commenced, just four civil society organizations were invited by
the state to participate in the strategy formulation process. These included two
international NGOs (Oxfam and Action Aid), a German research institute (the Konrad
Adenauer foundation), and the state umbrella organization for NGOs (the Congress of
NGOs in Malawi, CONGOMA). No radical change seemed likely therefore as the
traditional dyad of donors and state appeared set to continue. However, these
traditional relations were jarred as members of the country's Jubilee campaign for
debt cancellation, learning of the process through the campaign's global networks,
and emboldened by the process' normative participatory claims, pushed for
involvement. Spurred on by globalized discourses of participation, Jubilee campaign
members decided to form a broad-based network, thereafter known as the Malawi
Economic Justice Network (MEJN), to lobby for inclusion in the PRSP process. With
initial funding from Oxfam International, MEJN, a loose network of, initially, twenty-
seven Malawian NGOs, religious groups, academics, trade unions and community
groups, was thus formed with the express intention of opening up the political space
provided by the PRSP, affording a voice to the most marginalized and challenging
traditional elite relations. However, as we will see, the network has traveled a long
and rocky road since that time as network leaders have attempted to mediate relations
within and outside of the dominant hegemonic terrain that is encompassed in

Malawi's PRSP. Before tracking this journey however, let us first turn to the theoretical framework employed in doing so.

In pursuit of the invisible: Analyzing power relations

Many critical analyses of PRSP processes to date have drawn, either implicitly or explicitly, on neo-Gramscian or constructivist frameworks of analysis where the focus has been on the policy outcomes of different processes. These analyses have proven extremely useful in highlighting the hegemonic ideologies, policies and practices which underpin PRSPs worldwide, irrespective of the country in which they are based. In this paper I attempt to build on this work by focusing on the mechanisms through which this hegemony is disseminated at local level and the power dynamics around these. This paper is thus less a contribution to the 'what' of the globalized development project, than the 'how'. A Foucauldian framework has been chosen as most appropriate to the task as Foucault provides a framework through which the 'how' – the mechanisms of power – may be analyzed over time regardless of their function or outcome. As he notes in a lecture delivered in 1980 '*if power is exercised, what sort of exercise does it involve? In what does it consist? What is its mechanism?*' (1980: 89). In particular, Foucault's focus both on discourse as an '*instrument of domination*' (1980: 95) and his '*capillary*' conception of power (1980: 96) come closer to the dynamism which underpins political relations over time and so prove particularly useful to the analysis of local dynamics around Malawi's PRSP process examined here.

In Foucault's perspective, power is something which circulates among people. Accordingly, power may not only pressurize individuals and/or groups to conform to prevailing or dominant norms, truths, and knowledge (such as that embodied within the global development project), but may also move in another direction toward the development and articulation of new norms, truths and knowledge. Foucault's interest specifically lies with the agents – groups and individuals – of power and the mechanisms whereby they exercise this power. '*We need to identify the agents responsible for them (repressions and exclusions), their real agents… and not be content to lump them under the formula of a generalised bourgeoise. We need to see how these mechanisms of power… have begun to become economically advantageous and politically useful.*' (1980: 101).

7

While much of Foucault's work focuses on highlighting the 'disciplining' and controlling force of power over individuals (in particular in his work *Discipline and Punish* where he asserts that *'discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, 'docile' bodies'* (1977: 138)), he consistently draws attention to how power circulates, transforming individuals, groups and networks. Its transformatory nature is thus also evident whereby its mechanisms *'have been – and continue to be - invested, colonized, utilized, involuted, transformed, displaced, extended, etc…'* (1980: 99). Following Foucault's theory of power, norms are constantly being remolded, processes and procedures transformed. As power circulates, political relations are thus in a state of constant renegotiation and transformation.

One of the principal mechanisms through which such power is exercised and extended is, according to Foucault, through discourse. Discourses shape not only what is said and done but also what is say-able and do-able in any given social space, constituting what counts as knowledge and whose knowledge counts. Iris Marion Young has defined discourse as follows:

> *…the system of stories and expert knowledge diffused through society, which convey the widely accepted generalizations about how society operates that are theorized in those terms, as well as the social norms and cultural values to which most of the people appeal when discussing their social and political problems and proposed solutions.*
>
> (Young, 2003: 115)

Within this perspective, power is established, exercised and consolidated through discourse which, in turn, shapes what is understood as knowledge and 'truth' within particular fields such as public policy.   Foucault argues that particular forms of knowledge or discourses vie with each other for control or power over what becomes established as the 'truth'.

> *…in a society such as ours, but basically in any society, there are manifold relations of power which permeate, characterize and constitute the social body, and these relations of power cannot themselves be established, consolidated nor implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation and functioning of a discourse. There can be no possible exercise of power without a certain economy of discourses of truth which operates through and on the basis of this association. We are subjected to the*

> *production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth.*
>
> (1980: 93)

Discourses, like power, can thus be transformed, thereby transforming knowledge and truth. The key factor here, Foucault asserts, is *'a modification in the rules of formation of statements which are accepted as scientifically true'* (1980: 112). It is not the content of the statements (or submissions or positions in the case of policy fora), but the rules which dictate how they should look, what form they should take, which is key. And we will see, this is a key issue in relation to what discourses dominate within Malawi's ongoing PRSP process. We now turn to an examination of this in an exploration of the political implications of the process.

The political implications of Malawi's PRSP: MEJN's journey

As we have already briefly seen, the PRSP with its allied discourses of participation and poverty reduction provided an initial opportunity to prise open the traditionally narrow political space, offering the potential to transform political relations. However, relations, like power and discourse, are dynamic. While traditional political relations may be challenged, the forces favoring their consolidation remain strong. This section charts MEJN's journey within and without the dominant hegemonic discursive terrain of the ongoing PRSP process and illustrates how globalized discourses have been employed by different actors, both to challenge and to consolidate traditional relations at different times throughout the process.

Promising beginnings: Challenging relations and colonizing spaces

In late 2000, MEJN entered the political arena as a formidable force, drawing on the power of its global networks to open a space for its members in the PRSP process. Aware that their difficulties in gaining access to meetings and information made a mockery of its participatory claims, MEJN's leaders quickly colonized (in a Foucauldian sense) and capitalized on the globalized norms of the process. As one of the founding members explains, an email claiming that participation within the process was 'just a joke' sent across global networks proved instrumental in securing the network a place in the process.

> *And that* [the email] *actually was the clinch because immediately after that there was a meeting of all the heads of* [the PRSP] *thematic groups in the ministry, and then they called us in and they said 'ok, you want to participate now, let's make you participate'. And they were actually quite annoyed that this had gone out on the internet. And it actually, I think it was what clinched things.*

(MEJN member)

And so, by throwing a global spotlight on the Malawian state's hollow claims to participation, MEJN managed, at the outset, to open up the process and colonize to some degree the political space afforded. Through its lobbying employing both national and global media, network leaders gained places for its members in seventeen of the process's twenty-one thematic working groups. Moreover, again invoking the discourse of 'participation' imbuing the process and arguing that the three-month timeframe left insufficient time to consult with member groups and their constituents, network leaders also succeeded in extending the overall timeframe for the formulation process to nine months in total. There was a widespread mood of optimism with the process and many people genuinely seemed to feel that the political space had been opened and that power was shifting with political elites being challenged and a wider range of voices engaged. This period proved short-lived however as the power balance again shifted and network members quickly moved from harnessing and transforming to internalizing and passively adopting the dominant discursive norms of the process and the global development project it espoused.

Internalizing globalized discourses: disciplining members

While securing a politics of presence within the process was MEJN's first priority, very quickly Foucault's 'disciplining' came into play with the network's leadership resolving that, to develop its status as a 'serious' player, certain norms of behavior were required. The dominant discourse within the process was highly technocratic and dominated by a 'problem-solving' approach. Within this framework, technical policy discourses were privileged and the opportunities for what we might call 'problem-framing' or an examination of the underlying causes of these problems and their connection to the global development project were foreclosed. Significantly, these norms were quickly internalized by MEJN leaders who attribute their growing status to their technical competencies. As the network's director notes…

> *I think the caliber of people we featured in the TWGs* [thematic working groups] *but also in the drafting, the technical drafting team of the PRSP, was caliber that wouldn't be doubted, by the government, the donors, and everybody else.*
>
> (MEJN director)

These norms left no room for more emotive forms of communication and behavior favored by many of MEJN's member associations.

> *Many civil society organizations in Malawi, they just want to make noise out of emotions without investing in the research. This unwillingness to invest even in proper human resources has been a stumbling block.*
>
> (MEJN staff member)

The extent of the network leaders' internalization of these dominant communicative and behavioral norms is apparent from a comment by MEJN's director in 2006, five years on from his first involvement in the PRSP process, on the substance of development policy from his point of view - '*these documents, time and again, should have a matrix which should contain detail on the activities that are going to be done…'.* Thus, *à la* Foucault's theory of disciplining, 'truth' is now seen as emerging through dominant, technocratic norms of communication and practice.

Following completion of the formulation of the first PRSP strategy in 2001, the network decided that its focus should move to monitoring the strategy's implementation. This move corresponded to donor interest in monitoring the use of funds and countering corruption, part of the globalized 'good governance' agenda that dominates public discourse in Malawi. With MEJN moving into a new area of work which dovetailed neatly with the global aid agenda, additional demands began to be placed on network members. Donor funds began to drive the work of the network in new and somewhat disparate directions, with a focus on monitoring of policy outcomes rather than, as was originally envisaged, challenging traditional political relations and opening up a space for network members themselves. A board member outlines the problem,

> *But part of the MEJN lack of funding made us look for funding and sometimes go into kind of agreements that weren't very good. And it kind of scattered our attention a little bit all over the place… instead of being more focused and maybe sticking to some of the original objectives that we had set.*

As the years evolved, MEJN successfully secured funds and carried out programs in a wide range of areas including budget training for NGOs and government officials, budget monitoring and research (on trade, service delivery and maize distribution).[2] Its public profile grew significantly and network leaders made regular appearances in the press and on the airwaves. Funding support diversified and MEJN, by late 2006, was receiving support from over ten donors[3], the majority of whom fund specific programs of their choosing. And so, it appears that MEJN had moved significantly from its original mandate of colonizing political spaces by securing broad-based participation in the PRSP and allied political processes, to what, reflecting the widespread popularity of the globalized 'good governance' discourse, is now ubiquitously referred to as its 'watchdog role'. In this, MEJN's trajectory has seen it move from a broad-based activist network challenging elite relations to something more akin to the globalized normative NGO so beloved of donors at the beginning of the 'good governance' era (see Hulme and Edwards (1997) for an overview of the rise of NGOs during this period).

These developments were not without their challenges however. Most significantly they necessitated a shift in network members' own direction and strategy, requiring them to move from more active campaigning and direct representation of their own members views and perspectives, to new, more technical, 'professionalized' areas of work, such as budget monitoring. However, despite training workshops run by the network's leadership, member organizations proved resistant to these changes, resisting an internalization of the dominant norms, or the 'disciplining' being pressed upon them by network leaders. With network members refusing to comply with the PRSP process' discursive, communicative and behavioral requirements, network leaders decided to take on an increasing amount of work directly themselves. The network's director (in a move perhaps reflecting these shifts, as the years evolved the coordinator's role became transformed into that of a director) explains the challenges these shifts posed.

> But this shift … has brought with it a number of challenges. Because the expectation in the membership of MEJN has been that they would be involved

> *in the actual implementation of economic governance activities or programs that MEJN has on the ground. Now the first challenge that this has come with has been that the organization members of MEJN have not sufficiently reworked their work plans, or their own programs to have like a specific line on economic governance. Which means that any direct link to implementation has been left to the* [MEJN] *secretariat.*
>
> (MEJN director)

Moreover, reflecting its increasingly 'professional' profile, MEJN secretariat members were now selected from an elite class. A third level education was now required to work within the secretariat.

> *I think one positive thing that has seen MEJN moving much more tremendously than the other organizations is our pragmatic approach in terms of staffing, because we say the minimum is we are going to recruit somebody who has got say a Bachelors degree, or indeed whose experience is closer to having a Bachelors degree.*
>
> (MEJN director)

With MEJN leaders increasing the size of the secretariat and increasingly taking on much of the work themselves, conflict was inevitable. Network members, feeling excluded and sidelined, accused MEJN leaders of turning the network into an NGO. In the words of one member…

> *MEJN is a network. They should not be implementers. Let them use their members… Of course there have been some clashes between MEJN and their members… And people have moved away from getting interested in MEJN. Because MEJN wants to be the implementer. … I think that's a conflict, that's where the conflict comes in now. So let them identify what is their role. Are they facilitators or implementers? MEJN is not an NGO. The way I understand it, it is a network.*
>
> (Representative of MEJN member organization)

While some of this acrimony may well be due to competition for resources ('NGO-ism' is big business in Malawi, as elsewhere), it is clear that MEJN had strayed far from its original objectives and mandate. Its leaders were effectively closing the political space and consolidating hegemonic elite relations. They were perhaps facilitated in this attempted disciplining and control over the membership by dominant cultural norms. Malawian society has been described as comprising hierarchical and asymmetric structures and systems in which loyalty and conformity

to political leaders remains strong, and conflict and dissensus is not readily tolerated. (Booth et al, 2006, Patel, 2005, Englund, 2002, 2003). These features clearly lie at odds with the discourses of participation and democracy espoused by the globalized development project and its frameworks.

However, political cultures are neither static nor immutable and, while evolving trends are difficult to analyze, evidence from recent attitudinal surveys (Afrobarometer (2003) data as analyzed by Khaila and Chibwana (2005)), combined with popular discourse, as recorded in Malawian media, suggest that, although adherence to liberal values remains strong, trust in political leaders has fallen significantly. Newspaper articles with headlines such as *Why our leaders fail*[4]*; The State of Malawi*[5]*; Political leaders need to consider cost of impasse*[6]*;* and *Never trust politicians*[7], to cite a few, exemplify the widespread disillusionment and distrust of political leaders. An excerpt from the latter article provides a flavor of public perceptions of politics in contemporary Malawi

> *But then politics in Malawi is always seen as an all-important opening to social cachet and wealth… Avarice, jealousy, distrust and hate soon give birth to uncontrollable political maelstroms and fierce fighting erupts. More struggles, more defections, more noise and more change. And to bank my trust on people with inflated egos and bloated self-interest, politicians who can't make up their minds on one thing and stick to it? No thanks.*[8]

Undoubtedly, this debate is fuelled by the globalized 'good governance' discourse which is well rehearsed throughout Malawian society. Notably, this critique of political leaders extends to those within the civic sector also in Malawi however where global cynicism with the mushrooming of NGOs among Southern professionals (see Lewis and Opoku-Mensah, 2006 and Pearce, 2000) has fuelled a growing public critique in Malawi. In particular, global critiques of NGOs as *'charlatans racking up large salaries… and many air-conditioned offices'* (Holloway, 1999 - cited in Pearce, 2000: 4) operating within a neo-liberal agenda and failing to represent the poor (Ayers, 2006, de Santisteban, 2005 Roy, 2003, Tembo, 2003) are mirrored within popular discourse on Malawi.

Certainly MEJN appears guilty of many, if not all of these charges, as it appears that that the impetus at the time of its establishment – that of bringing a wider set of voices

espousing the concerns and agendas of the poor thereby challenging elite political relations – had become over-ridden by the agendas of funding agencies – the professional requirements of which led to a widening gap between the network's leadership, its membership and the people it was purporting to represent. However MEJN's story does not end here as wider national debates and critiques, in turn informed by global debates, began to make their mark and the narrowing of the political space was once more challenged.

Appropriating global debates and discourses: Contesting the global development project

With the growing gap between its members and the secretariat occurring at a time when MEJN was gaining national and international renown through its widespread use of the mass media, the network's leadership began to find itself confronted with charges of illegitimacy, both from within its own membership and within Malawi society more broadly. From its early days of relying on the World Bank's *Voices of the Poor* (Naryan et al, 2000) as a basis for its inputs to the PRSP, MEJN's leadership was faced with a growing public consciousness that the network had not consolidated a grassroots base which might feed into policy and advocacy activities, thereby putting into practice the theory of *'participatory economic governance'*[9] that the network espoused. Indeed, with policy and programs in the country becoming more and more decentralized following the global, post-Cold War penchant for decentralization, the MEJN network appeared the very embodiment of the 'elite' NGO divorced from its roots as depicted in the critical development literature of the late 1990s. The network remained largely urban-based, purporting to represent the poor, yet with an office and entire staff in Lilongwe. In 2002, cognizant of these issues and attempting to respond to public critiques, MEJN's leadership began to build a local network of representation in the form of what became known as the District Chapter Program.

MEJN's District Chapter Program consists of locally elected voluntary committees of eight to ten people who aim to represent the interests of their communities at district level. Committees have been established in twenty-seven of Malawi's twenty-nine districts. Each district has its own local government in line with the country's

decentralization policy. Committees consist principally of representatives of both local NGOs and local community-based associations including youth groups, women's groups, faith-based groups, and trade and business associations.

This new model for the network represents an interesting development in a number of ways. First, it unveils the richness and diversity that is civil society in Malawi. Contrary to many accounts in the literature which, equating civil society with the NGO partners of the globalized neo-liberal order, speak of civil society as a relatively 'undeveloped' phenomenon (see for example Chirwa, 2000 on Malawi) - a form of what Comaroff and Comaroff call 'social revisioning' (1999: 3), Malawian civil society has long encompassed a diverse range of associations underlain by complex webs of values, priorities and relations (see Lwanda, 2005 for a unique, non-revisionist account of Malawian civic associationalism). In tapping into this diversity, MEJN has challenged many of the normative assumptions upon which it was founded and, with global backing, certainly developed. Second, the innovative model, linking MEJN's 'elites' at national level with associations and groups on the ground, potentially provides a channel for local voices to articulate their knowledges and truths thereby offering the potential to transform political relations, both at local level, and nationally. And third, this development illustrates the power and potential of globalized discourses and debates to challenge and contest the network (in this case both charges of illegitimacy from the wider arena of Malawian civil society, including the media, and the globalized policy of decentralization with its attendant discourse of participatory governance[10]) despite its consolidated relations with both the state and international donors[11].

Responding to public critiques, MEJN's leaders' aim in developing the District Chapter structure was to institutionalize a national structure of representation which would enable the secretariat to bring people's issues from the ground – their local knowledges – to the national policy arena. However, the discursive requirements at national level were left unchallenged and the 'disciplined inclusion of the poor' did indeed seem to be the order of the day. Representation was to be achieved by Chapter committee members systematically gathering data and information in specified areas (food security, health, education etc.) and feeding this upwards to the secretariat for what MEJN, in the globalized discourse of the PRSP process, terms its *'evidence*

based advocacy'[12]. Significantly however, Chapter members have a very different vision of their role. In interviews, Chapter committee members in eight different districts all emphasized that wished to represent their local communities by bringing issues of local concern and interest to local government structures and ameliorating the rapidly deteriorating living conditions experienced since the advent of structural adjustment. In particular, members were interested in moving beyond the main town within the district (where many committee members live) and going out to villages and settlements in outlying areas. Members were emphatic that MEJN's role lay in facilitating people at the grassroots to articulate their views, concerns and analyses. As one Chapter member put it... '*MEJN is for the people... If MEJN is only for the boma* [district main town] *then we are a failure. It's the people in the grassroots who need MEJN more*'. There is, therefore, clearly a divergence of views on the role and function of local committee structures. While for MEJN's disciplined leadership, having internalized dominant norms of communication and discourse, this structure is there to collect 'evidence', i.e. carry out research on specific areas as selected by the MEJN's leadership (often following donor requirements), committee members, employing more popular forms of communication and alternative discourses, appear to view their role as a portal for the views and perspectives of local 'communities' (in itself a problematic concept and generally mediated through the local TA (Traditional Authority[13])) to be fed upward to key decision makers, both through their own Chapter committee representatives at district level, and through those of the MEJN secretariat at national level.

This bifurcation is not lost on Chapter members. Repeatedly the question of representation was raised by committee members, as articulated by one member... '*who do we represent – do we represent MEJN or do we represent our communities?*'. When prompted to respond to their own question, committee members replied that they felt they represented their communities and that MEJN leaders should facilitate them in doing so. The committee members' question is illuminating in that it highlights the contradiction between the discursive and communicative norms adopted by MEJN within the PRSP process and the competing discourses of local communities. In this, it highlights the contestation between dominant and local knowledges and the power relations circulating around these. While MEJN's leaders, enmeshed in donor and state relations, are keen to direct

committees in meeting donor and state agendas by collating select pieces of evidence to support its 'evidence-based advocacy', thereby forestalling agendas and issues that might be raised, committees themselves, enmeshed in local relations, appear more keen to take their agendas from local 'communities' (however these may be defined), thereby offering a channel to communities through less bounded, open dialogue and communication, challenging and complicating the channels through which the global development project is disseminated.

Committee members have begun to challenge MEJN's leadership to listen to and support their plans for the future. A number of committees have put forward concrete plans for projects they wish to carry out, and there are calls for more supports and less directives from MEJN's leaders. It would seem that the heretofore-neglected local associations and actors within Malawian civil society countrywide have found their political voice and are keen to use it. Illustrating the capillarity of power and discourse as theorized by Foucault, local actors have become vocal and active in both contesting the validity of the global development project and in complicating its key channel of dissemination, the MEJN network.

While MEJN struggles to maintain its status within the PRSP process therefore, in itself a crucial portal to national policy fora more broadly, its locally-based membership, emboldened by global debates on the contested meanings of 'good governance', 'participation', and 'poverty reduction', lies waiting in the wings, with members of some District Chapter committees becoming increasingly vocal about MEJN support in their efforts to bring their diverse knowledges, truths and discourses to national level, thereby putting into practice the real 'participative governance' that network leaders espouse. It remains to be seen how MEJN leaders will negotiate the conflicting normative demands of the state and donors on the one hand, and Chapter members and their 'communities' on the other. One thing is clear however, bridging these relations and poised with one foot in, and one foot out of the hegemonic order, MEJN's journey has served to demonstrate how, at the micro-sites of struggle and contestation, globalized discourses and frameworks can be harnessed and appropriated to both challenge as well as to consolidate traditional political relations. In this, MEJN's experience demonstrates that the disciplined inclusion of the poor within the global hegemonic order is far from an easy task.

Conclusion

While the onward march of the global development project, through its strongly normative discourses and frameworks, is certainly a grave cause for concern, this march is not agentless, nor is it inevitable. Much attention has rightly been focused on the project's prominent promoters, those who stand to gain. However attention also needs to be paid to what some might term its 'subjects', those who will lose, economically, politically and culturally, as they become increasingly marginalized by the neo-liberal tenets of the globalized project. While an impressive body of literature on new social movements has highlighted resistance to this project in celebrated sites such as Porto Alegre and Seattle, MEJN's experience demonstrates that such resistance is also alive and well in more 'ordinary' sites, and among more 'ordinary' individuals.

And within these sites, remote yet globalized, politics appears to be changing. Inspired by global discourses and frameworks new tools have emerged which, fuelling imaginations, are being appropriated to challenge the channels through which the global development project is disseminated. Viewed through the specific case of MEJN, Malawians nationwide appear to be less subjects than citizens, active and vocal in contesting their own disciplined inclusion within the global development project.

Is Malawi's case unique? Are Malawians unique? Perhaps so, but they stand together with countless other 'ordinary' individuals, restless and angry at the failures of modernization. A country placed close to the bottom of most development indices[14], its people are all too aware of the failings of the global development project and have found new tools with which to fight it. The ongoing journey of MEJN and its many adherents and critics, in drawing our attention to the shifting dynamics of how politics in conducted more broadly in the globalized world, highlights the need for further empirical work at these – in many ways more ordinary, and for this reason, all the more inspiring – micro-sites of ongoing struggle and contestation.

Notes

1. One of the principal initiatives in the 'post-democracy' era is NICE (the National Initiative for Civic Education). This is a comprehensive programme of voter education which, in place since 1999 and funded by the EU, operates throughout the country with offices and staff in all districts.
2. At the time of field research (2005-2006) MEJN's core staff had increased from one to seven with some research work being outsourced to consultants.
3. MEJN donors include the following: the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), Christian Aid, the German development agency, Deutscher Entwicklungsdienst (DED), the UK Department for International Development (DfID), Capacity Building International Germany (InWENT), Irish Aid, the Open Society Initiative for Africa (OSISA), the US-based National Democratic Institute (NDI), Oxfam International and Trócaire.
4. *The Sunday Times*, October 9th, 2005.
5. Opinion, Kamkwamba Kalea, *The Nation*, October 10th, 2005.
6. Editorial, *The Nation*, October 5th, 2005.
7. Levi Kabwato, *The Sunday Times*, September 25th, 2005.
8. Levi Kabwato, *The Sunday Times*, September 25th, 2005.
9. See *MEJN Programme Support Document* (MEJN, 2004).
10. The new Constitution Act No. 7 of 1995 (Chapter XIV) provided for the creation of local government authorities whose responsibilities include the promotion of local democratic participation.
11. It should be acknowledged that, cognisant of wider critiques, these relations also appear to be increasingly dependent on MEJN demonstrating an institutional capacity to represent the poor.
12. See *MEJN Programme Support Document* (MEJN, 2004).
13. In Malawian political life elements of both modern and traditional co-exist. TAs or Chiefs, a hereditary title, form part of the local government structures (together with locally elected councillors and MPs) and mediate many local, community-based, socio-political relations.
14. For example Malawi occupies 166th place (out of 177 countries) in the United Nations Development Programme's Human Development Index (UNDP, 2006).

References

Ayers, A. J. (2006) Demystifying Democratisation: the global constitution of (neo) liberal polities in Africa, *Third World Quarterly* 27(2), pp. 321-338.

Booth, D. Cammack, D., Harrigan, J., Kanyongolo, E., Mataure, M. & Ngwire, N. (2006) Drivers of Change and Development in Malawi, *ODI Working Paper 261*, ODI, UK.

Castells, M. (2004) *The Power of Identity* (Oxford: Blackwell).

Chilowa, W. (1998) The impact of agricultural liberalization on food security in Malawi, *Food Policy*, 23(6), pp. 553-569.

Chinsinga, B. (2002) The Politics of Poverty Alleviation in Malawi – A Critical Review, in H. Englund (ed) *A Democracy of Chameleons: Politics and Culture in the New Malawi* (Malawi: CLAIM).

Chirwa, W. (2000) Civil society in Malawi's Economic Transition, in M. Ott, K. M. Phiri and N. Patel (eds) *Malawi's Second Democratic Elections: Process, Problems and Prospects* (Malawi: CLAIM).

Comaroff, J. L. and J. Comaroff (1999) Introduction, in J. L. Comaroff and J. Comaroff (eds) *Civil Society and the Political Imagination in Africa*: *Critical Perspectives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).

Cooke, B. and Kothari, U. (2001) *Participation: The New Tyranny?* (London and New York: Zed Books).

Cornwall, A. and Brock, K. (2005) What do Buzzwords do for Development Policy? A Critical look at 'participation', 'empowerment' and 'poverty reduction', *Third World Quarterly,* 26(7), pp. 1043-1060.

Craig, D. and Porter, D. (2002) Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers: A New Convergence, *World Development*, 31(1), pp. 53-69.

De Santiseban, A. V. (2005) The poor will always be with us – and so will NGOs, *Development in Practice* 15(2) pp. 200-209.

EIU, Economist Intelligence Unit (2006) *Country Profile: Malawi* (London and New York EIU).

Englund, H. (2002) Introduction: The Culture of Chameleon Politics, in H. Englund (ed) *A Democracy of Chameleons: Politics and Culture in the New Malawi* (Malawi: CLAIM).

Englund, H. (2003) Does Civic Education Disempower?, in B. Immink, S. Lembani, M. Ott and C. Peters-Berries (eds) *From Freedom to Empowerment: Ten Years of Democratisation in Malawi* (Malawi: Forum for Dialogue and Peace, Konrad Adenauer Foundation, Malawi-German Programme for Democracy and Decentralisation, National Initiative for Civic Education).

Foucault, M. (1977) *Discipline and Punish* (UK: Harmondsworth and Penguin).

Foucault, M. (1980) *Power / Knowledge – Selected Interviews and other Writings 1972-1977* (New York: Pantheon).

Foucault, M. (1981) *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* (UK: Harmondsworth and Penguin).

Gould, J. (2005) *The New Conditionality: The Politics of Poverty Reduction Strategies* (London and New York: Zed Books).

Hickey, S. and Mohan, G. (2004) Towards participation as transformation: critical themes and challenges, in S. Hickey and G. Mohan (eds) *Participation: From Tyranny to Transformation* (London and New York: Zed Books).

Hulme, D. and M. Edwards (1997) NGOs, States and Donors: An Overview, in *NGOs, States and Donors – Too Close for Comfort?* (New York: Save the Children Fund).

Jenkins, R. and Tsoka, M (2003) Malawi, *Development Policy Review*, 21(2), pp. 197-215.

Kanyongolo, F. E. (1998) The Limits of Liberal Democratic Constitutionalism in Malawi, in K. M. Phiri and K. R. Ross (eds) *Democratization in Malawi: A Stocktaking* (Malawi, CLAIM).

Khaila, S. and C. Chibwana (2005) Ten years of democracy: Are Malawians getting what they voted for? *Afrobarometer Working Paper No 46*, February 2005.

Lazarus, J. (2008) Participation in Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers: reviewing the past, assessing the present and predicting the future, *Third World Quarterly*, 29(6), pp. 1205-1221.

Lewis, D. and Opoku-Mensah, P. (2006) Moving forward Research Agendas on International NGOs: Theory, Agency and Context, *Journal of International Development,* 18, pp. 665-675.

Lwanda, J. (2005) Changes in Malawi's Political Landscape between 1999 and 2004: Nkhope ya Agalatia, in M. Ott, B. Immink, B. Mhango and C. Peters-Berries (eds) *The Power of the Vote: Malawi's 2004 Parliamentary and Presidential Elections* (Malawi: Montford Media).

MEJN (2004) *MEJN Programme Support Document* (Malawi: MEJN).

Mkandawire, T. (2003) Freedom and Empowerment, in B. Immink, S. Lembani, M. Ott and C. Peters-Berries (eds) *From Freedom to Empowerment: Ten Years of Democratisation in Malawi* (Malawi: Forum for Dialogue and Peace, Konrad Adenauer Foundation, Malawi-German Programme for Democracy and Decentralisation, National Initiative for Civic Education).

Narayan, D. with Patel, R., Schafft, K., Rodemacher, A. & Kock-Schulte, S. (2000) *Voices of the Poor: Can Anyone Hear Us?* (Oxford University Press / World Bank: Washington).

Patel, N. (2005) Troublemakers and Bridge Builders: Conflict Management and Conflict Resolution, in M. Ott, B. Immink, B. Mhango and C. Peters-Berries (eds) *The Power of the Vote: Malawi's 2004 Parliamentary and Presidential Elections* (Malawi: Kachere).

Pearce, J. (2000) Development, NGOs and civil society: the debate and its future, in D. Eade (ed) *Development, NGOs and Civil Society* (Oxford: Development in Practice Reader).

Roy, I. (2003) Development and its Discontents: Civil society as the new lexicon, *Development,* 46(1), pp. 80-87.

Stewart and Wang (2003) Do PRSPs empower poor countries and disempower the World Bank, or is it the other way round?, *QEH Working Paper Series – QEHWPS108*, http://www.globalpolicy.org/socecon/bwi-wto/wbank/2003/10doprsps.pdf, accessed January 5th, 2009.

Tembo, F. (2003) The multi-image development NGO: an agent of the new imperialism?, *Development in Practice,* 13(5), pp. 527-533.

Weber, H. (2004) Reconstituting the 'Third World'? Poverty reduction and territoriality in the global politics of development, *Third World Quarterly*, 25(1), pp. 187-207.

Weber, H. (2006) A Political Analysis of the PRSP Initiative: Social Struggles and the Organization of Persistent Relations of Inequality, *Globalizations,* 3(2), pp. 187-206.

Weber, H. (2007) A Political Analysis of the Formal Comparative Method: Historicizing the Globalization and Development Debate, *Globalizations,* 4(4), pp. 559-572.

World Bank (2002) *PRSP Sourcebook* (Washington: World Bank publications).

Young, I.M. (2003) Activist Challenges to Deliberative Democracy, in J. S. Fishkin & P. Laslett (eds) *Debating Deliberative Democracy* (London: Blackwell).

Zack-Williams, T. and Mohan, G. (2006) Africa from SAPs to PRSP: Plus ca change plus c'est la meme chose, *Review of African Political Economy*, 32(106), pp. 501-503.