

Between Citizenship and Clientship: The Politics of participatory governance in Malawi

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Abstract

In the twenty years since the post-Cold War wave of democratisation spread across Africa, experiments in participatory governance have revealed fundamental contradictions between their normative bases and their practical application on the ground. Responding to calls for a greater focus on ‘the politics of everyday life’ including the actions of local actors in the context of less-westernised aspects of indigenous political culture, and drawing on the experiences and actions, over a six year period, of the principal civic network involved initially in Malawi’s PRS process, this paper illustrates how contemporary Malawian politics at local level comprises a complex mix of the old and the new. Charting the evolving agency and activities of network members at district level, the paper demonstrates how, in the ongoing struggles for resources for everyday life, normative discourses of participation and representation are combined with more traditional cultures and practices in shaping, moulding and ultimately, it is proposed, invigorating contemporary political agency in Malawi.

Introduction

It is now over twenty years since a wave of democratisation swept across Africa heralding, in the words of Thabo Mbeki, an ‘African renaissance’¹. This renaissance was perhaps more Western than African however, with high levels of donor support targeted at facilitating the smooth and swift importation of Western liberal democratic institutions and norms to African contexts. While, following Western liberal tradition with its emphasis on electoral representation, democratisation was initially largely synonymous with multiparty elections (the number of multiparty African states grew from 9 in 1988 to 45 in 1999)², subsequent donor support for citizen participation across a range of initiatives – from district-level project planning committees to national level Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS) processes – revealed the democratisation project to be broader and deeper than simply electoral reform and multipartyism alone. The era of participatory governance had arrived.

Aimed at opening up political spaces and affording a voice to citizens in development policy and practice, participation in its many guises – from Participatory Rural Appraisals (PRAs) to Participatory Poverty Assessments (PPAs) to PRS processes – is now virtually ubiquitous across Africa. While Western donors, NGOs and policy makers continue to extol its virtues, the concept and exercise of participation within contemporary governance has also drawn sharp critique from a range of commentators. While their concerns and areas of focus of certainly vary, a core

¹ For more background on this see E.K. Bongmba, ‘Reflections on Thabo Mbeki’s African Renaissance’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 30, 2 (2004), pp. 291-316.

² M. Bratton and N. van de Walle, *Democratic Experiments in Africa: Regime Transitions in a Comparative Perspective* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 1997), p.6.

concern across this literature remains the politics of who gets to participate and to what end. In relation to the 'who' within PRS processes in particular and how this relates to the 'to what end', it has been variously argued that the involvement of a narrow grouping of elite NGOs results in a reinforcement of existing inequalities³, lending legitimacy and support to the hegemonic development project which, while ostensibly engaging the poor through their NGO representatives, results paradoxically in their further marginalisation⁴. Some commentators, highlighting the inevitable contests between global and local imperatives, have called for a greater focus on 'the politics of the local' including the actions of local actors in the context of less-westernised aspects of indigenous culture⁵, drawing attention to the importance of local contestation and resistance and exploring how local inequalities and power relations are harnessed in consolidating inequitable developmental outcomes⁶. This inherent contradiction between the normative, idealised theories of participatory governance and its practice on the ground has recently been discussed in some detail in a thought-provoking paper by Robins et al who highlight the disconnect between

³See for example A. Cornwall and K. Brock, 'What do Buzzwords do for Development Policy? A Critical look at "participation", "empowerment" and "poverty reduction"', *Third World Quarterly*, 26, 7 (2005), pp. 1043-60; J. Gould, *The New Conditionality: The Politics of Poverty Reduction Strategies* (London and New York: Zed Books, 2005), p. 142; A. Fraser, 'Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers: Now Who Calls the Shots?', *Review of African Political Economy*, 32, 104 (2005), pp. 317-40; H. Weber, 'A Political Analysis of the PRSP Initiative: Social Struggles and the Organisation of Persistent Relations of Inequality' *Globalizations*, 3, 2 (2006), pp. 187-206.

⁴D. Craig and D. Porter, 'Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers: A New Convergence', *World Development*, 31, 1 (2002), pp 53-69; Weber, 'A Political Analysis of the PRSP Initiative: Social Struggles and the Organisation of Persistent Relations of Inequality'; T. Zack-Williams and G. Mohan, 'Africa from SAPs to PRSP: Plus ca change plus c'est la meme chose', *Review of African Political Economy*, 32, 106 (2006), pp. 501-3.

⁵G. Mohan and K. Stokke, 'Participatory development and Empowerment: The Dangers of Localism', *Third World Quarterly*, 21, 2 (2004), pp. 247-68. J. Lwanda, 'Kwacha: The Violence of Money in Malawi's Politics, 1954-2004', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 32, 3 (2006), pp. 525-44.

⁶While, for some, the 'tyranny of participation' (B. Cooke and U. Kothari, *Participation: The New Tyranny?*, London and New York, Zed Books, 2001) leaves little scope for local resistance, others draw attention to the inevitable contests for primacy between local and global imperatives and knowledge (see for example, Craig and Porter, 'Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers: A New Convergence', Weber, 2006, 'A Political Analysis of the PRSP Initiative', and J. Lazarus, 'Participation in Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers: reviewing the past, assessing the present and predicting the future', *Third World Quarterly*, 29, 6 (2008), pp. 1205-21).

the Western model of citizenship and the varying political cultures and practices in the places into which it has been imported. As the authors note, ‘there is a glaring disjuncture between everyday political practices and the models of democracy, citizenship and participation that are exported throughout the world’⁷. All of these contributions raise important questions in relation to the ‘how’ of participatory governance – most notably, who participates?, how do they do so?, and how do the imported institutions of participatory governance interact with existing political cultures, practices and constellations of power? These questions form the subject of this paper which explores the relational implications of contemporary participatory governance arrangements in Malawi. Drawing on experiences and the fractious journey from 2000 to 2006 of the principal civic network involved initially in Malawi’s PRS process, the Malawi Economic Justice Network (MEJN), the paper illustrates how contemporary politics comprises a complex mix of the old and the new, where, in the ongoing struggles for resources for everyday life, normative discourses of participation and representation are combined with more traditional cultures and practices in shaping and moulding contemporary political agency in Malawi. This hybridised political complex – falling between citizenship and clientship – highlights the importance of bearing in mind ‘the politics of everyday life’⁸ when both thinking about and setting expectations for contemporary governance.

Fieldwork for the study from which this article draws was carried out by the author over the summers of 2005 and 2006 in Malawi. Forty-five semi-structured interviews were carried out with people involved, at different stages and at different levels, in

⁷ S. Robins, A. Cornwall and B. von Lieres, ‘Rethinking “Citizenship” in the Postcolony’, *Third World Quarterly*, 29, 6 (2008), pp. 1069-86.

⁸ *idem*, p. 1085.

both the PRS process and its successor, the Malawi Growth and Development Strategy (MGDS). These included representatives from MEJN's member organisations, committee members from 8 of MEJN's District Chapters⁹ and commentators on the evolving socio-political climate more generally. An additional piece of research (commissioned by MEJN) on the network's District Chapter Program (see below) was carried out in 2005. This research involved extensive travel throughout the country with MEJN staff and meetings with many of the network's local 'members'. While falling short of a full-scale ethnographic study, the time spent with MEJN staff and collaborators 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 paper is structured as follows. In the following section I begin the story of the arrival of participatory governance in Malawi with the introduction of the PRS process. I show how, at the time, it represented, for many actors involved, a new departure in how politics was to be carried out, carrying the potential to open up the political space, reorienting power relations. In the next section I discuss the research approach employed which, breaking with more conventional approaches which have tended to focus on either the policy formulation phase or policy outcomes of specific participatory governance processes¹⁰, takes a longer term approach focused on agency

⁹ Group interviews were held with Chapter committee members in Chitipa, Karonga, Mangochi, Mchinji, Mzimba, Nkhatabay, Nsanje and Ntcheu districts.

¹⁰ See for example Craig and Porter, 'Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers: A New Convergence'; R. McGee, J. Levene and A. Hughes, 'Assessing participation in poverty reduction strategy papers: a desk-based synthesis of experience in sub-Saharan Africa', *Research Report 52* (Sussex: IDS, 2002); D. Booth, 'Introduction and Overview', *Development Policy Review*, 21, 2 (2003), pp. 131-59 (special edition on PRSPs); E. Bwalya, L. Rakner, L. Svasand, A. Tostensen and M. Tsoka, 'Poverty Reduction Strategy Processes in Malawi and Zambia', *Report 2004:8*, Chr. Michelsen Institute, <http://www.cmi.no/publications/file/?1829=poverty-reduction-strategy-processes-in-malawi-and-zambia>, 2004, accessed December 15th, 2009; R. Driscoll and A. Evans, 'Second-Generation Poverty Reduction Strategies: New Opportunities and Emerging Issues', *Development Policy Review*, 23,1

and power dynamics over time. This focus on the longer term, I argue, allows us to see participatory governance not as a unique and discrete set of time-bound projects and strategy approaches, but rather as an ongoing dynamic characterised by shifting relations and constellations of power. Given that the norms, strategies and institutions of the democratisation project do not arrive into institutional, strategic and cultural vacuums, in the next section I attempt to draw a historical and context-specific picture of the political and social cultures on which they have been transposed and with which they interact in Malawi. Drawing specifically from Malawian sources, but also from broader established writings on the political legacies of colonialism, I highlight the fundamental tensions and contradictions between the imported tenets and norms of democracy and participation on the one hand, and existing (yet ever changing) political cultural legacies on the other.

The final section then turns to the politics of participation both within the institutions of participatory governance and without, and traces the heady and fractious journey of MEJN as it mediates and negotiates, as both broker and client, the interests and requirements of actors at a range of levels within the new 'democratic' dispensation. MEJN's ongoing journey, I argue, highlights the ongoing importance and power of a hierarchy of 'big men' (local, national and international) in Malawian life, with the brokering of resources a daily necessity for all. As becomes apparent, these brokers or 'big men' need their clients as much as their clients need them however, and the particular character of Malawian political culture and practice, a complex mix of old and new, is revealed in 'clients' appropriation of Western democratic discourses of

(2005), pp. 5-26; Gould, *The New Conditionality: The Politics of Poverty Reduction Strategies*; Zack-Williams and Mohan, 'Africa from SAPs to PRSP: Plus ca change plus c'est la meme chose'; J. Lazarus, 'Participation in Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers: reviewing the past, assessing the present and predicting the future'.

‘participation’ and ‘representation’ in demanding accountability and action from their ‘big men’. In an era of widespread disillusionment with democracy in the West, the question is posed as to whether this hybridised political complex represents, in fact, a more dynamic and active form of citizenship than its normalised and often idealised Western variant.

Importing democracy: The arrival of participatory governance to Malawi

It was 1994, with the country’s first multiparty elections bringing the 30 years of rule under ‘Life President’ Hastings Banda to a close, when democracy set up its stall in Malawi. The broader institutional trappings soon followed with the *Local Government Act* of 1998 providing for the creation of local district assemblies under the new policy of decentralisation¹¹, together with the introduction of the PRS process, as a condition for HIPC debt relief, in 2000¹². Our focus here begins with the introduction of the PRS process (though, as we will see, it later interacts with the decentralisation process) as, with international attention focused on it, this potentially represented a significant new departure in governance practice and relations.

With the advent of the PRS process, development policy was no longer to be dictated from the plush interiors of the World Bank’s headquarters in Washington. In contrast, PRS strategies were to be country-driven and participatory, with all relevant

¹¹ H. Meinhardt and N. Patel, *Malawi’s process of democratic transition: An analysis of political developments between 1990 and 2003* (Lilongwe, Konrad-Adenauer-Foundation, 2004).

¹² R. Jenkins and M. Tsoka, ‘Malawi’, *Development Policy Review*, 21, 2 (2003), pp. 197-215.

stakeholders participating in both their formulation and implementation¹³. This represented a significant normative shift from traditional hierarchical political relations. Drawing on the process' participatory claims in Malawi, members of the country's Jubilee campaign for debt cancellation lobbied for involvement in the PRS formulation phase. With initial funding from Oxfam, a loose network, of, initially, twenty-seven Malawian NGOs, religious groups, academics, trade unions and community groups known as the Malawi Economic Justice Network (MEJN), was formed. Its express intention was to open up the political space provided by the PRS, affording a voice to the most marginalised, thereby challenging traditional elite relations. This was a time of heady optimism as the new era of democratisation was seen to herald real changes to political culture and practice. As one of the original members of the network observed...

...there was an air of excitement in Malawi that we have changed from Dr Banda into this new government. And even the government really had people's trust. We really thought things were going happen. We didn't expect [that] things were going to change in the next two or three years the way they have degenerated. We had thought now we are on the right track. So civil society opened up, there was no sense of fear, we thought we can be free to do everything.

(MEJN member)

However, as we will see, the network has travelled a long and rocky road since that time as its leaders have attempted to mediate relations within and outside of the dominant hegemonic terrain that is encompassed in Malawi's PRS process. Before tracking this journey however, let us first examine in finer detail the political culture onto which this process was grafted.

¹³ World Bank, *PRSP Sourcebook* (Washington, World Bank Publications, 2000).

History, Culture and Context: The Challenges and Contradictions of Participatory Governance in Malawi

The diversity of 53 countries across the continent notwithstanding, accounts of post-colonial politics in Africa converge in highlighting the neo-patrimonial nature of the post-colonial state, with legitimacy and support for political leaders afforded through a combination of ‘big man’ rule¹⁴ and a complex network of clientelist relations¹⁵.

The continuities of these cultures and practices with those of the colonial period have been explored in fine detail through the writings of Mahmood Mamdani and Jean-François Bayart¹⁶, among others. Bayart’s *politique du ventre* sees political leaders making subjects of their citizens in a manner reproducing colonial forms of authority, in the process generating cultures of dependency wherein political expression is mediated by the *patron*, broker or ‘big man’ upon whom the clients’ access to resources and means for daily survival rests.

These more general characteristics are echoed in analysis and commentary on political culture in Malawi also. In particular, a strongly hierarchical structure of social relations incorporating clientelist mechanisms of legitimacy and exchange, coupled

¹⁴ N. Chazan, R. Mortimer, J. Ravenhill and D. Rothchild, *Politics and Society in Contemporary Africa* (Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1999); C. Young, ‘The African Colonial State and its Political Legacy’, in D. Rothchild and N. Chazan (eds.), *The Precarious Balance: State and Society in Africa* (Boulder: Westview, 1988), pp. 25 – 66.

¹⁵ C. Allen, ‘Understanding African Politics’, *Review of African Political Economy*, 22, 65 (1995), pp. 301-320; C. Clapham, ‘Discerning the New Africa’, *International Affairs*, 74, 2 (1998), pp.263-69; C. Clapham, *Africa and the International System: The Politics of State Survival* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999); J. Hubst, *States and Power in Africa: Comparative Lessons in Authority and Control* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2000); N. van de Walle, *African Economies and the Politics of Permanent Crisis, 1979-1999* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2001).

¹⁶ J. F. Bayart, *The State in Africa: The Politics of the Belly* (Longman, London, 1993); M. Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (London, James Currey, 1996).

with a strong authoritarian strain has been identified¹⁷ whereby patronage is bestowed on political representatives - ‘big men’ at all levels (MPs, councillors, Traditional Authorities (TAs), civic leaders) mediating between citizens and the administrative apparatus of the state¹⁸. In many cases, what in the new democratic dispensation are regarded as citizen rights, are accorded through the mediation of a broker. Examples include the siting of bore holes, road improvements, access to grain reserves or the attainment of certain employment positions. Such clientelist relations are described as constituting not just a feature of political culture, but of society more broadly¹⁹.

Taking this more historical and contextualised view, it would appear that the main features of Malawian political culture lie somewhat at odds with the normative ethos of participatory governance. In particular, the hierarchical, authoritative nature of society characterised by asymmetric power relations coupled with ongoing practices of clientelism, appear to leave leaders and citizens alike ill-prepared for engagement

¹⁷ L.B. Dzimbiri, ‘Democratic Politics and Chameleon-like Leaders’ in K.M. Phiri and K.R. Ross (eds.), *Democratisation in Malawi: A Stocktaking* (Blantyre, CLAIM, 1998); K.M. Phiri, ‘Reflections on Party Ideologies and Programmes’ in M. Ott, K.M. Phiri and N. Patel (eds.) *Malawi’s Second Democratic Elections: Success, Problems and Prospects* (Zomba, Kachere Press, 2000); S.J.S. Nkhoma, ‘Traditional and Elected Representatives in Decentralisation’ in B. Immink, S. Lembani, M. Ott and C. Peters-Berries (eds.) *From Freedom to Empowerment: Ten Years of Democratisation in Malawi* (Lilongwe, Forum for Dialogue and Peace, Konrad Adenauer Foundation, Malawi-German Programme for Democracy and Decentralisation, National Initiative for Civic Education, 2003); J. Lwanda, ‘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* (Bakala, Montford Media, 2005).

¹⁸ For a detailed account of neo-patrimonial politics and the role of *achikulire* (patrons or ‘big men’) in Malawi as a methodical and systemic practice arising from postcolonial anomalies (as opposed to Chabal and Daloz’s politics of disorder and chaos – P. Chabal and J-P. Daloz, *Africa Works: Disorder as Political Instrument* (London, James Currey, 1999)), see Lwanda, ‘Kwacha: The Violence of Money in Malawi’s Politics, 1954-2004.

¹⁹ H. Englund, ‘Introduction: The Culture of Chameleon Politics’ in H. Englund (ed.) *A Democracy of Chameleons: Politics and Culture in the New Malawi*, (Blantyre, CLAIM, 2002); H. Englund, H. ‘Does Civic Education Disempower?’ in Immink et al, *From Freedom to Empowerment: Ten Years of Democratisation in Malawi*; N. Patel, ‘Troublemakers and Bridge Builders: Conflict Management and Conflict Resolution’ in Ott, et al, *The Power of the Vote: Malawi’s 2004 Parliamentary and Presidential Elections*; D. Booth, D. Cammack, J. Harrigan, E. Kanyongolo, M. Mataure and N. Ngwire, ‘Drivers of Change and Development in Malawi’, *ODI Working Paper 261* (UK, ODI, 2006).

in participatory processes which implicitly (and somewhat naively) presume the ready adoption of a power-sharing ethos by all involved. However, it is important to note that political cultures are neither static nor immutable and there are some signs, as Malawi's traditional legacies of authoritarianism weaken somewhat, of shifting relations between clients and brokers at all levels.

While evolving trends within political cultures are difficult to analyse, evidence from both attitudinal surveys (Afrobarometer data as analysed by Khaila and Chibwana²⁰) and popular discourse, as recorded in the national and local media, suggest that, although adherence to liberal values remains strong, trust in political leaders has fallen significantly²¹. With the mass media increasing its role as '*the decisive space of politics*'²², the motivations and behaviour of political leaders have come under greater scrutiny in recent years. In the post-democratisation era, the media in Malawi, in particular the liberalised press²³, and increasingly radio²⁴ which is popular in rural areas, enjoys relative freedom and political life dominates public discourse. While political reporting during the early years of press freedom was characterised by '*mud-slinging, muck-raking, character assassination*'²⁵, more in-depth investigative

²⁰ S. Khaila and C. Chibwana, 'Ten years of democracy: Are Malawians getting what they voted for?', *Afrobarometer Working Paper No 46*, (Afrobarometer, February 2005).

²¹ *idem*, pp. 20-24.

²² M. Carnoy and M. Castells 'Globalisation, the knowledge society, and the Network State: Poulantzas at the millennium' *Global Networks*, 1, 1 (2001), pp. 1-18; see also M. Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, 2nd ed., (Oxford, Blackwell, 2000); J.G. Blumer and M. Gurevitch, 'Rethinking the Study of Political Communication' in J. Curran and M. Gurevitch (eds.) *Mass Media and Society*, 4th ed., (London, Hodder Arnold, 2005).

²³ S. Chimombo and M. Chimombo, *The Culture of Democracy: Language, Literature, the Arts and Politics in Malawi, 1992-1994* (Zomba, WASI Publications, 1996); E.N. Chipangula, *Political Reporting Trends in Malawi*, (Makwasa, Malamulo Publishing, 2003).

²⁴ T. Neale, 'Malawi's Media – 2004 and Beyond' in Ott et al, *The Power of the Vote: Malawi's 2004 Parliamentary and Presidential Elections*.

²⁵ Chimombo and Chimombo, *The Culture of Democracy: Language, Literature, the Arts and Politics in Malawi, 1992-1999*, p. 32.

journalism is reported to be on the increase²⁶. The media's exposure of abuses of public office may be argued to have had two consequences for political culture. First, as evidenced in both popular discourse and falling voter turnout²⁷, it has resulted in increasing public disillusionment with, and apathy towards, political institutions and their elites. Newspaper articles with headlines such as *Why our leaders fail*²⁸; *The State of Malawi*²⁹; *Political leaders need to consider cost of impasse*³⁰; and *Never trust politicians*³¹, to cite a few, exemplify the widespread disillusionment and distrust of political leaders. An excerpt from the latter article provides a flavour 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.³²

In an era where much politics is played out in the media, citizens are acutely aware of the motivations and interests of their political leaders. This is aptly encapsulated in the astute observation of a Malawian peasant to John Lwanda³³ who noted that *'Politicians cannot buy my brain, just my hungry stomach* (referring to ex-President Muluzi's practice of campaigning with hand-outs) *but in your case* (Lwanda being perceived as a wealthy Malawian elite) *they buy both your stomach and your brain.'*

²⁶ Chipangula, *Political Reporting Trends in Malawi*.

²⁷ see B. Dulani, 'The Elections under Scrutiny: Process – Results – Lessons', in Ott et al, *The Power of the Vote: Malawi's 2004 Parliamentary and Presidential Elections*.

²⁸ *The Sunday Times*, October 9th, 2005.

²⁹ Opinion, Kamkwamba Kalea, *The Nation*, October 10th, 2005.

³⁰ Editorial, *The Nation*, October 5th, 2005.

³¹ Levi Kabwato, *The Sunday Times*, September 25th, 2005.

³² idem.

³³ J. Lwanda, 'Changes in Malawi's Political Landscape between 1999 and 2004: Nkhope ya Agalatia' in Ott et al, *The Power of the Vote: Malawi's 2004 Parliamentary and Presidential Elections*, p. 56.

It would appear that traditional loyalties and deference to authority, among ‘ordinary people’ at least, may be weakening, as ‘clients’ political astuteness challenges both the legitimacy and the hegemony of their erstwhile brokers.

The key issue of interest here is how, and to what degree these ever-changing legacies impact upon actors’ agency within the new era of participatory governance. It is to this question that we now turn.

Between Citizenship and Clientship: Culture, politics and participation in Malawi

The MEJN network initially came into being through its engagement in the PRS process. Within its literature, MEJN consistently describes itself as a ‘bridge’ between civil society and the state³⁴. As the following section will show, this ‘bridge’ function initially saw leaders operating as brokers, securing participation for a wide range of the network’s member organisations in the PRS formulation process. While on the one hand, with member organisations interested in using the opportunity to make contacts with donors in the hopes of securing funding for further activities, MEJN’s relations may be characterised as clientelist, with MEJN playing a ‘big man’ role in a triadic relationship between member organisations (clients) and potential funders, on the other, MEJN’s actions also succeeded in opening up the political space, potentially enhancing citizenship through the process. As the following section will also show, donor interest in and support for MEJN resulted in its role as broker

³⁴ MEJN, *MEJN Programme Support Document* (Malawi, MEJN, 2004), p.1; MEJN, *The Malawi Economic Justice Network Profile* (Malawi, MEJN, 2005), p.1.

declining over time. Clientelist relations work both ways however – brokers and ‘big men’ need their clients as much as clients need their brokers – and the increasing marginalisation of its members fuelled questions of legitimacy and representation vis-à-vis the network’s leadership. The political space was opened once again as MEJN leaders set about securing representation in each district throughout the country. As we will see, this move brought its own conflicts, with contradictory views as to their role and function emerging between MEJN’s leadership – negotiating the demands of donors – and its new client base, its district-level members themselves. With MEJN’s new ‘clients’ appropriating both the spirit and the language of good governance to demand greater accountability and responsiveness from MEJN’s national level leadership to their own efforts to broker solutions to the everyday challenges of their local communities, the reality of ‘everyday politics’ as a composite of old and new becomes apparent. This ‘everyday politics’ – a hybridised political complex sitting between citizenship and clientship – reveals a dynamism and vibrancy to contemporary political life in Malawi, with the political space remaining open and contested, and the actions of political actors at all levels under constant scrutiny and challenge.

MEJN as broker?

Upon hearing of plans for an upcoming PRS process, a meeting was organised by activists in the country’s Jubilee campaign to discuss their involvement in the PRS. At this meeting, which was held in Mangochi, it was decided to form a loose network, thereafter known as MEJN, and a core group within this network was selected to lobby for inclusion in the process. As one of the participants in the meeting outlines below, this core group became the effective broker, selecting participants for inclusion in each of the processes’ thematic working groups (TWGs).

What the team that was put in place in Mangochi, what they did was to go to government, get documents from them, get information from them, and circulate it to the other members. And when the meetings, the TWGs happened, what used to happen was the government would invite us through that core team, and this core team is the one which would send invitations to whoever is supposed to attend that meeting.

(MEJN member)

Through its lobbying, this core group gained places for network members in seventeen of the process's twenty-one thematic working groups. Moreover, invoking the discourse of 'participation' underpinning the process and arguing that the three-month timeframe left insufficient time to consult with member groups and their constituents, the core group also succeeded in extending the overall timeframe for the formulation process to nine months in total.

The emphasis at this time within the core group was very much on opening up the political space, providing a voice to different groups and interests representing the poor and marginalised. An implicit assumption often imbuing newly imported participatory processes is that the principal interest of civic participants is policy influence, representing 'the poor' and their interests. However, when asked in interview as to their motivations in becoming involved, many participants noted that the process afforded them access to a range of major donors and hopefully thus further funding. Elements of the old and new were thus apparent from the outset as MEJN core group leaders brokered potential clientelist relations between the networks' members and state and donor actors³⁵, while at the same time, succeeding

³⁵ These developments bear similarities to the 'elite solidarity' relations observed by Sumich among political actors in Maputo in the early 2000s. Sumich argues that Mozambique's period of democratic transition promoted a hardening of elite class structures rather than a strengthening of vertical clientelist structures as argued by others. In the Malawian case however, as we will see, this solidarity was short-lived. See J. Sumich. 'Politics after the Time of Hunger in Mozambique: A Critique of Neo-

in opening up the political space and enhancing the democratic potential of the process.

MEJN as client?

MEJN's engagement in the nine-month formulation process, and the relations fostered over that time were certainly felt by network members to have brought them to the attention of donors and state actors alike. With a technocratic policy discourse dominating the process, the technical proficiency of select actors within particular working groups was highlighted as key in this regard. As the network's Director, reflecting back on the process some five years later 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)

Following completion of the formulation of the PRS in 2001, MEJN decided that its focus should move to monitoring the strategy's implementation. This move corresponded to donor interest in monitoring the use of public (and their own) funds, countering corruption, and supporting the 'good governance' agenda which, in the post-Cold war era, had become synonymous with democratisation. With MEJN moving into a new area of work which dovetailed neatly with donor agendas, funding began to pour in. 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). Its public profile grew significantly and network leaders made regular appearances in the press and on the airwaves. By late 2006, MEJN was

Patrimonial Interpretation of African Elites', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 34, 1 (2008), pp. 111-25.

receiving support from over ten international donors, the majority of whom were funding specific programs of their own choosing. And so, it appears that MEJN had moved significantly from its original mandate of colonising the country's political space, and brokering broad-based participation in the PRS and its allied political processes, to what, reflecting the widespread popularity of the globalised 'good governance' discourse, was now ubiquitously referred to as its 'watchdog role'. In this, MEJN's trajectory had seen it move from a broad-based activist network challenging elite relations to what could be described as a donor 'client' or contractee, carrying out specific programmes aimed at monitoring the use of donor funds and bolstering donor programmes³⁶.

As might be anticipated, these developments were not without their challenges. Most significantly, they necessitated a growing professionalism and specialisation which network leaders felt was lacking among its members. As the network's Director notes.

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.

(MEJN Director)

However, with MEJN's leadership feeling network members were not 'qualified' enough to engage in these new activities, new more specialised staff were recruited to

³⁶ The characterisation of MEJN as a donor 'client' is somewhat problematic in that MEJN was not providing political support to its patrons in the manner of clientelist relations as traditionally conceived. Indeed, donor relations with MEJN, which effectively amounted to a contracting of the network's human resources and relations for monitoring donor investments (as argued by Gould (in *The New Conditionality*) in relation to PRS processes elsewhere) possibly bears more in common with the indirect rule of the British colonial era than traditional 'patron-client' relations.

do so. And so, MEJN leaders transformed the network into an organisation in its own right, with an increasingly professionalised staff capable of carrying out the donor-sponsored programmes which were now the life-blood of the organisation. Relevant experience and academic qualifications were now required to be involved.

I think one positive thing that has seen MEJN moving much more tremendously than the other organisations 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.

(Representative of MEJN member organization)

This acrimony demonstrates the conflict between member organisations' own expectations of MEJN as a broker and donors' demands on MEJN as a client. While member organisations anticipated that MEJN leaders would broker ongoing work arising out of the formulation process for them (as 'implementers'), the technical demands of such work left MEJN leaders sourcing expertise elsewhere and carrying out this work themselves.

MEJN at this point certainly appears guilty of many of the charges fuelled more widely against Southern NGOs by the end of 1990s, whereby NGOs were accused of uncritically swallowing the agendas of donors and turning development ‘*into just another “business”*’³⁷. Its impetus at the time of its establishment – that of bringing a wider set of voices to the PRS table thereby potentially enhancing citizenship – 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 (clients), and the people it was purporting to represent. However MEJN’s story does not end here as, in actions demonstrating a demand for ongoing accountability and legitimacy within Malawian political society, MEJN’s leaders were forced to once again open up the democratic space.

With the growing gap between its members (clients) and the leadership (brokers) occurring at a time when MEJN was gaining both national and international renown, the network’s leadership began to lose the support of its members as its legitimacy and accountability as a political civic actor became increasingly brought into question. Although marketing itself as the ‘*bridge*’ between society and state, as well as a specialist in ‘*participatory economic governance*’³⁸, the network’s leadership was faced with a growing public consciousness that it had not consolidated a grassroots base which might feed into policy and advocacy activities. Indeed, with policy and programs in the country becoming more and more decentralised following the *Local*

³⁷ J. Pearce, ‘Development, NGOs and civil society: the debate and its future’ in D. Eade (ed.) *Development, NGOs and Civil Society* (Oxford, Development in Practice Reader, 2000), p. 4; see also D. Hulme and M. Edwards, ‘NGOs, States and Donors: An Overview’ in *NGOs, States and Donors – Too Close for Comfort?* (New York, Save the Children Fund, 1997); D. Lewis and P. Opoku-Mensah, ‘Moving forward Research Agendas on International NGOs: Theory, Agency and Context’, *Journal of International Development*, 18 (2006), pp. 665-75.

³⁸ MEJN, *MEJN Programme Support Document* (Malawi, MEJN, 2004), p.1; MEJN, *The Malawi Economic Justice Network Profile* (Malawi, MEJN, 2005), p.1.

Government Reform Act, 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, cognisant 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 District Chapters: Clients or brokers?

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. Chapter 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. Although MEJN leaders now appeared to have established a locally-based membership structure, fundamental contradictions soon emerged between the leadership’s view of the Chapter’s role and Chapter committee members’ own views. MEJN’s leaders’ aim in developing the local structures was to put in place structures to assist in carrying out donor programmes, with committee members engaging in monitoring local budgets and systematically gathering data and information in specified areas (food security, health, education etc.) and feeding this upwards to leaders for what MEJN, reflecting the dominant donor policy discourse, terms its *‘evidence based*

*advocacy*³⁹. In essence, these new structures were to become MEJN leaders' new client base. Significantly however, Chapter members had very different visions of their role. These principally involved acting as 'bridges' or brokers themselves between district authorities and local populations, negotiating and brokering everyday resources and services for their communities (itself a problematic concepts and generally mediated or 'brokered' through a Traditional Authority or village chief). Committee members from a number of different Chapters explain the everyday problems facing people in their areas and the role they see themselves playing in this regard.

People are complaining about roads, people are complaining about drugs, that they are not receiving enough drugs in the hospitals... issues of fertiliser subsidies. People do not have money to buy fertiliser. What are you supposed to do?

Karonga Chapter member

I give you a case where the road – this MASAF programme⁴⁰ – the one who was given the contract was getting at least some money in conjunction with the chief [Traditional Authority]. And people were so concerned to say 'why the road is not finished and the money is gone. And you people are doing the work'. So they came to complain here. So I went to consult somebody at the District Commissioners office, I said 'this is happening, can you do please do something? I want you to rectify this problem'. So at least everybody was paid and that road is finished by now.

Mchinji Chapter member

One time the pump closed. And we went to the DC [District Commissioner] ourselves, at night even, around nine o'clock. We went to the DC and said 'what's happening'? And the DC then knew and saw that it was opened again.

³⁹ MEJN, *MEJN Programme Support Document* (Malawi, MEJN, 2004), p.2.

⁴⁰ The Malawi Social Action Fund (MASAF) – is a World Bank funded safety net programme which has been in place since 1995. The third phase of the programme (MASAF 3) commenced in 2008. There have been widespread allegations of abuse and political manipulation of funds. For more on the programme itself see www.masaf.org. For a more critical view of the programme by a Malawian academic see P. Kishindo, 'Community Project Funding in Malawi under the Malawi Social Action Fund (MASAF) Demand-Driven Approach: Potential for Perpetuating Imbalances in Development', *Journal of Social Development in Africa*, 15, 1 (2000), pp. 5-14.

Chitipa Chapter member

Chapter members have introduced themselves and have become known to local District authorities – both Assembly structures and MPs. In this way, they provide an outlet for people to voice their concerns and problems and it appears they have been somewhat successful in gaining some small, yet important, benefits for local people.

While Chapters' roles might seem superfluous given the remit of local authorities in meeting local needs, in a context where significant gaps exist between authorities and local people and where the language of rights and entitlements remains a relatively recent import, this brokerage function fills an important gap. Moreover, while, as we have seen, there are signs that political culture is changing and authoritarianism weakening somewhat, it is important not to overstate these shifts. Memories of the past are ever present⁴¹, as a member of the Chitipa Chapter articulates.

Fear is still there. And you know, Malawi, of course we have been under dictatorship for 31 years. And the principle was 'lie low and live low, lift up your head and it will be choked'. So with that kind of principle of living, people are still afraid to say anything against the government, anything against the politicians.

Chitipa Chapter member

While the Chapters' brokering of people's concerns and demands echo more traditional clientelist relations, where many members note that the status acquired locally by virtue of being associated with MEJN is important, it is also important to note that they offer a space for citizens to speak and voice real concerns. When asked

⁴¹ Jack Mapanje, a well-known Malawian poet, himself jailed for a number of months during the Banda era, provides a vivid account of the violence and repression of the time – see J. Mapanje, 'The orality of dictatorship: In defence of my country' in Englund, *A Democracy of Chameleons: Politics and Culture in the New Malawi*. See also Africa Watch, *Where Silence Rules: The Suppression of Dissent in Malawi* (London, Africa Watch, 1990).

why they voluntarily give their time to work in this manner, many Chapter members noted the importance for people to have an outlet to speak and be heard. As one member of Ntcheu Chapter noted, '*Myself, I am satisfied when I see that people can talk now*'. The new layer of clientelism created through MEJN's District Chapters clearly carries significant potential for enhanced citizenship and political voice at local level also, once more demonstrating a porosity between old and new cultures and practices.

Of course, the lines between Chapters as brokers for local communities and as clients of MEJN leaders are similarly blurred. With MEJN's success in attracting donor funds well-known as its public profile has grown (in no small part due to its own intensive media profiling), Chapter members also harbour expectations that some of this funding will filter through to them. All eight Chapters interviewed spoke about the real constraints imposed by the lack of resources. At the times of interview (2005), although plans had been in place for almost a year to provide a modest monthly allowance for phones and transport, this had not yet materialised. All Chapters were paying their own expenses – including transport to outlying villages and farms, and members of Nsanje's Chapter had even rented a room themselves at 3000 Kwacha per month for people to know where to access them. Their real financial constraints notwithstanding, Chapter members' clientelist support is not easily bought as they remain emphatic that their role remains that of brokers for their local communities. A member of the Nsanje Chapter articulates this clearly, '*We are not here for the secretariat [MEJN's leadership], we are here for the community. And what we need is for the secretariat to help us with certain issues. If they are failing to help us, it means that this is not working as things should be...*', while a member

from Ntcheu is emphatic that more efforts (and consequently resources for transport) are required to access people in outlying rural areas and villages, '*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*'.

Conclusion

The politics of patronage and the cultures and practices of clientelism it engenders tend to evoke one of two reactions from commentators. There are those who, focusing on the formal institutions of governance, blame it for many (if not all) of Africa's ills, and there are those who close their eyes and choose to ignore its existence altogether. Yet the reality is that these cultures, though not immutable or unchanging, nonetheless persist. The wholesale importation and superimposition of new models and cultures, no matter how well intended, will not readily or speedily lead to their demise. The challenge therefore becomes one of engagement with the contemporary politics of everyday life – both in the formal arenas but also at the less visible micro-sites of struggle and contestation. In an attempt to understand the dynamics of contemporary political life, our attention needs to turn to how old and new interact, and what new variants emerge.

In the Malawian case, this paper has uncovered a particular hybridised variant hovering somewhere between clientship and citizenship. And, contrary to the more negative overtones of much of the political science literature, the news is not all bad. While the brokers and the clients animating this variant may be characterised as traditional actors operating within and reinforcing traditional hierarchical, asymmetric cultures, the ongoing accountability and responsiveness required by clients of brokers

arguably represents a more open, democratic and accountable form of governance than that provided by five or seven-yearly ballot box contests⁴². MEJN's experiences have amply shown Malawi's hybridised variant to possess its own inbuilt checks and balances where accountability and legitimacy remains an ongoing challenge to actors at all levels. Moreover the brokerage element of Malawi's political culture and practice, when combined with new discourses on participation and representation has, at times, proven very effective in opening up political spaces and affording a voice (albeit still mediated through brokers at present) to many of the heretofore voiceless.

What lessons does MEJN's experience in Malawi bring? First, for those interested in or engaged in transformative social change, it shows the ongoing importance of 'the politics of the everyday'. Challenging us to move beyond our more traditional conceptual boundaries, MEJN's story uncovers a hybridised political complex which may, in fact, represent a more dynamic and active form of citizenship than its normalised, and often idealised, Western variant. And second, MEJN's experience shows the inherent dangers of donors choosing to ignore the political context in which they operate. In Malawi, donor exigencies in respect of MEJN's agency threatened to close down the political space opened up by MEJN (and its supporters' / clients') actions. Moreover, it was clients' own challenges to MEJN's legitimacy (and not donor actions) which led to a re-opening of this space.

⁴² Similar findings have been found and a similar argument has also been made with respect to ongoing popular demands for accountability from elected leaders in Botswana. See both J. L. Comaroff and J. Comaroff, 'Postcolonial Politics and Discourses of Democracy in Southern Africa: An Anthropological Reflection on African Political Modernities', *Journal of Anthropological Research*, 53, 2 (Summer, 1997), pp. 123-46; and D. Durham, 'Uncertain Citizens: Herero and the New Intercalary Subject in Botswana, in R. Werbner (ed.), *Postcolonial Subjectivities in Africa*, (London and New York, Zed Books, 2002), pp. 139-70

The specific case of MEJN provides a doorway into the multiple sites of political struggle and contestation in Malawi. Does it teach us anything about politics further afield? Clearly, Malawi's history and development is unique and its realities do not pertain everywhere. However, elements of the political legacies and culture found here – the 'big man' politics, clientelism, authoritarianism, and loyalty – are to be found elsewhere in Africa, and indeed more widely⁴³. This makes Malawi's situation, with its complex dialectics of old and new, one from which we, commentators, practitioners and donors alike, might draw broader lessons on how citizenship and clientship combine in shaping unique, yet constantly changing, models of political agency in contemporary African democracies.

⁴³ Robins, Cornwall and von Lieres, 'Rethinking "Citizenship" in the Postcolony'; For a detailed account of the culture and ongoing practice of clientelism in Ireland, see also N. Gaynor, *Transforming Participation: The Politics of Development in Malawi and Ireland* (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).