



Participation, Democracy and Citizenship in Malawi

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#TowardsAnInclusiveSociety

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About The African Citizenship Index

Citizenship is a multi-faceted concept that is shaped by the political, economic, and social life within a place. The African Citizenship Index aims to understand the ways in which ordinary people interact with each other in economic, social-support focused and political networks across the continent. The inaugural survey was conducted by SIVIO Institute in March – April 2021 across 5 African cities: Harare, Zimbabwe and Lilongwe, Malawi in Southern Africa, Nairobi, Kenya in East Africa, Yaoundé, Cameroon in Central Africa and Accra, Ghana in West Africa.

For more information:

www.africacitizenshipindex.org

About SIVIO Institute

SIVIO Institute (SI) is an independent organisation focused on ensuring that citizens are at the centre of processes of socio-economic and policy change. It aims to contribute towards Africa's inclusive socio-economic transformation. It is borne out of a desire to enhance agency as a stimulus/catalyst for inclusive political and socio-economic transformation. SIVIO's work entails multi-disciplinary, cutting-edge policy research, nurturing citizens' agency to be part of the change that they want to see, working with communities to mobilize their assets to resolve some of the immediate problems they face.

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1. Introduction

It is widely acknowledged in literature and it is also the notion that is at the heart of this study that democracy and development cannot be adequately discussed without considering civil society and participation (Malamulo, 2012, Chirwa et al 2021). The importance of an active and open civil society space has brought about progressive societies around the world where citizens have the space to participate on issues that affect their lives and livelihoods. A number of formalized organisations working within the civil society space have carved a niche as an alternative to an ineffective and corrupt state and a rapacious business sector and have positioned themselves as the unelected and legitimised voice of the citizens. They have not necessarily invested in developing the voices of the poor and bonds of trust that can be used to unleash community participation in local and national processes outside of the framework of the scope of a defined project. This study did an assessment of selected civil society institutions to understand some of the issues that citizens do in the political, economic and social space besides voting in a general election. Most of the institutions that facilitate citizens' engagement have various challenges that need attention. However, as this study has noted, the presence of these institutions is pivotal to any thriving democracy.

The study in Malawi was done with a group of randomly selected individuals who were selected in the streets of Lilongwe and we hope this provides an overview of what citizens engage in within the country.



2. Context and Background

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Much of the struggle for independence in Malawi was championed by native Association, trade unions and cooperatives

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Malawi became an independent African country on the 6th July 1964 with Dr Hastings Kamuzu Banda as the first president. During the earlier years of his reign as the president of Malawi, he initiated a number of populist interventions that were aimed at changing what was perceived as colonial oppressive institutions against the black Africans (MacCraken, 2012; Newbury, 2014). However, after Dr. Banda had consolidated power and had gained patrimonial authority, he declared himself the president for life in 1971 following the abolition of multipartyism in Malawi (Chinigo, 2015; Green 2011; Kayuni and Tambulasi, 2010). This left his Malawi Congress Party as the sole political party in Malawi and Dr Banda as its sole leader. Dr Banda's political party had total control of the economy and the affairs of the state. He instituted one of the most repressive, corrupt, predatory and violent political system in Africa. (Hodder-William, 1994; Ihonvbere, 1997). Furthermore, this oppressive regime maintained itself through a combination of bribery, intimidation, election malpractices, and the suffocation of civil society. Banda not only closed all democratic openings inherited at independence in 1964 like multiparty politics, but also erected the structures of a corrupt and highly repressive one-person and one-party state. During the 30 years of his reign from 1964 to 1994, there was hardly a separation between public and private funds as Dr. Banda himself owned almost half the economy. The civil society space was controlled and the civil and political rights were denied the citizens. The stifling of the civic space did not only end on the civic and political institutions but also the social and economic associations. For instance, much of the struggle for independence in Malawi was championed by native Association, trade unions and cooperatives, however, after independence was gained, there were a number of institutional changes and directives outlawing groupings that were deemed as fertile grounds for the growth of political dissent. One such landmark institutional change was the directive that put a ban on the existence of agricultural cooperatives in Malawi. During the early, 1970s cooperatives found themselves to be at loggerheads with the prevailing political situation as the principles



of cooperative management requires that democracy and ownership of the institution should prevail. Additionally, the farmers in the cooperatives were becoming economically empowered, something that posed a threat to the prevailing political institution. Any grouping, be it social or economic, were being viewed with suspicion, which led to a lot of conspiracies against the cooperative movement leading to its outlawing in favour of loose farmers' clubs that the political establishment could easily exploit.

However, in much of the early 1990s there was a shift in the political landscape in most Southern African countries including Malawi, towards multi-party politics that led to popular participation in governance systems. Despite the repressive regime that was in place in Malawi, the ground was set for a shift towards multiparty politics. A number of issues played together to bring about this change. Firstly, the economy was in a deep quagmire with indicators like inflation around 22% at the end of 1993 leading to unemployment, crime and hunger and these had reaching unprecedented proportions (Ihonvbere, 1997). The drought of 1992 and the withholding of donor aid that was imposed by the western countries on Malawi, made matters worse as displaced peasants migrated to the urban centres (Chirwa, 1997, Chirwa et al, 2005).



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The introduction of the IMF- and World Bank-supervised Structural Adjustment Programme in 1980 unintentionally facilitated the march to multiparty democracy

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The introduction of the IMF- and World Bank-supervised Structural Adjustment Programme in 1980 unintentionally facilitated the march to multiparty democracy through the unequal distribution of the pains and costs of adjustment (Kydd et al, 1986, Harrigan and El Said, 2000). The second point was to do with the position especially the Catholic Church took, which played a major role in forcing Banda to recognise the pressures for change. On Sunday 8 March 1992, the then country's eight Catholic bishops released a pastoral letter entitled Living Our Faith in which they denounced the corruption, indiscipline and repressive policies of Dr Banda. This pastoral letter ignited the confidence of the local opposition force leading to several strike actions to protest at human rights abuses. Additionally, when the Catholic bishops released their pastoral letter criticising human rights abuses and repression in Malawi, the students at the University of Malawi led open riots and demonstrations against the government

This pressure on Dr. Banda led him to declare a national referendum on whether the country should return to multiparty democracy. A referendum was held in 1993 and the people of Malawi voted overwhelmingly for multiparty democracy. A new republican constitution was drafted, which among others provided for the right of association and the reestablishment of the civil rights for the citizens. The spirit of cooperatives and association was revived after 1994 with the coming in programs like the Sustainable Agribusiness Development Program (SADP) which led to the formation of the National Smallholder Farmers Association of Malawi (NASFAM). Following this, a number of commodity-based associations and cooperatives have been established in Malawi. In response to this, the government also came up with a Cooperative Development Policy in 1992 that was followed by the Cooperative Act in 1997.



3. The Civic Space in Malawi

The civic space can be broadly understood as the space between the state and individual citizens, inhabited by all sorts of socio-politico-economic organisations working to realize all sorts of interests and aspirations for all sorts of constituencies in society (Chingaipe, 2021). The civil society is a cardinal element of any democratic political system. Its status, at any point in time, indicates the health status of democracy in the polity (Chingaipe, 2020, Dulani, 2005).

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Malawi's civic space opened up in the early 1990s as part of the wave of democratization that saw the one-party state unravel.

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As pointed out earlier, the Malawi's civic space opened up in the early 1990s as part of the wave of democratization that saw the one-party state unravel. Supported by a progressive constitution containing a bill of individual and collective rights adopted in 1995, civic actors (both individuals and organisations in all forms and shapes) mushroomed to participate in and/or support ordinary citizens to engage in public life demanding and supporting inclusive, accountable and responsive governance and service delivery (Kopecky and Mudde (2003), Chandhoke, 2007). The present study looks at some of the roles that citizens play within the civic space in between the elections as facilitated by the civil society institutions. Generally, civil society organisations as noted by this study performs, inter alia, the following functions:

- ▶ Complementing government in service delivery, especially the NGOs in health, education, agriculture and environmental conservation among many other sectors;
- ▶ Sharing or disseminating information on laws, policies and other information on governance to the public and educating them on civil rights and duties in various domains of life;
- ▶ Promoting participation in governance at all levels by making relevant information available to citizens and empowering them with skills for engaging duty bearers to ensure inclusive, accountable and responsive governance and service delivery;



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A defining characteristic of democratic political systems is that citizens have the opportunity to freely voice out and express their policy preferences and to participate in the policy-making process.

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- ▶ Demanding accountability by checking the exercise of state power and privilege through a range of methods including public protests to check impunity perpetrated by public duty bearers and political executives;
- ▶ Monitoring the performance of the public sector and private sector institutions and advocating for reforms to ensure compliance with laws and improve functionality and quality of service delivery to citizens;
- ▶ Bringing governance and policy issues to the attention of policy makers and sustaining the position of the issues on the Government's agenda for resolution;
- ▶ Aggregating and promoting the interests of ordinary people in a way that political parties do not and carrying out advocacy work to inform policy analysis and adoption at sectoral and national levels;
- ▶ Mitigating social and political conflicts as part of alternative dispute resolution mechanisms at various levels

In Malawi, the civil society organisations have played a crucial role in consolidating democracy and facilitating the people's engagement in the public space. A defining characteristic of democratic political systems is that citizens have the opportunity to freely voice out and express their policy preferences and to participate in the policy-making process. Mass political participation is traditionally considered a crucial element of any well-functioning democracy. (Hickey and Mohan, 2003). This also involves participation in social, cultural and economic activities that determines people's livelihoods.

Benjamin Barber (2014) and Gaventa (1999) are among the contemporary authors who have most strongly defended the importance of participation. According to Barber, "strong democracy" should be based on the assumption that citizens can participate in numerous ways in political, economic and social decision-making and that in practice they will also do this in a routine manner, thus reviving the republican ideal of citizens who are actively involved in the politics of their society. Typically, citizens have different means at their disposal to participate. By far the most widespread act of political participation is voting in elections. In systems of representative democracy, citizens use their vote to select the political personnel who will be responsible



for day-to-day political decisions. Empirical research, however, shows strong differences with regard to voter turnout, both between individuals with specific background characteristics and between political systems. Citizens also have numerous other ways to express their preferences, like taking part in demonstrations, joining political action groups, or other forms of protest behaviour (Gaventa, 2019). Although these acts are performed less frequently, they allow citizens to voice their preferences in a very clear and sometimes highly effective manner. As this study is also interested in understanding the citizens economic and social undertakings especially in the inter-elections period, it has to be noted that the social and economic activities are very much influenced by the political stability and the general political economy.

While there is a strong consensus about the importance of political participation, other questions remain open and are hotly debated in the political science literature. There is obviously a clear normative preference for “high” levels of participation, but there is no agreement on how high this level should be, nor of the precise impact of varying participation levels on the functioning of democratic politics. Elevated levels of political participation might equally indicate satisfaction or the occurrence of widespread discontent about the political regime. Conflicting demands from public opinion might also imply that political decision-making becomes more difficult as politicians are confronted with an overload of demands from society (Dalton, 2008). Nor will all authors agree that taking part in elections is the first and foremost form of political participation. Tambulasi (2010) argues that during elections, citizens only have a limited set of options to voice their



preferences, while in non-electoral forms of politics the options on timing, scope, and intensity can be much wider. We also know that in many democracies, the frequency of election-related participation has been declining, while non-electoral forms of participation are on the rise. We do not know, however, whether this implies that citizens are better able to prevail in the decision-making process. While there are some well-known examples of how demonstrations like the Arab spring and also, closer to home, those led by the Human Rights Defenders Coalition (HRDC) in Malawi and strikes in general have toppled regimes that looked quite solid, we also know that most demonstrations do not have all that much effect on policy.

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Democracy should no longer be judged only on the basis of how elections are conducted but more importantly on the extent to which citizens, through participatory processes and platforms shape the public agenda and also on how citizen-needs are addressed.

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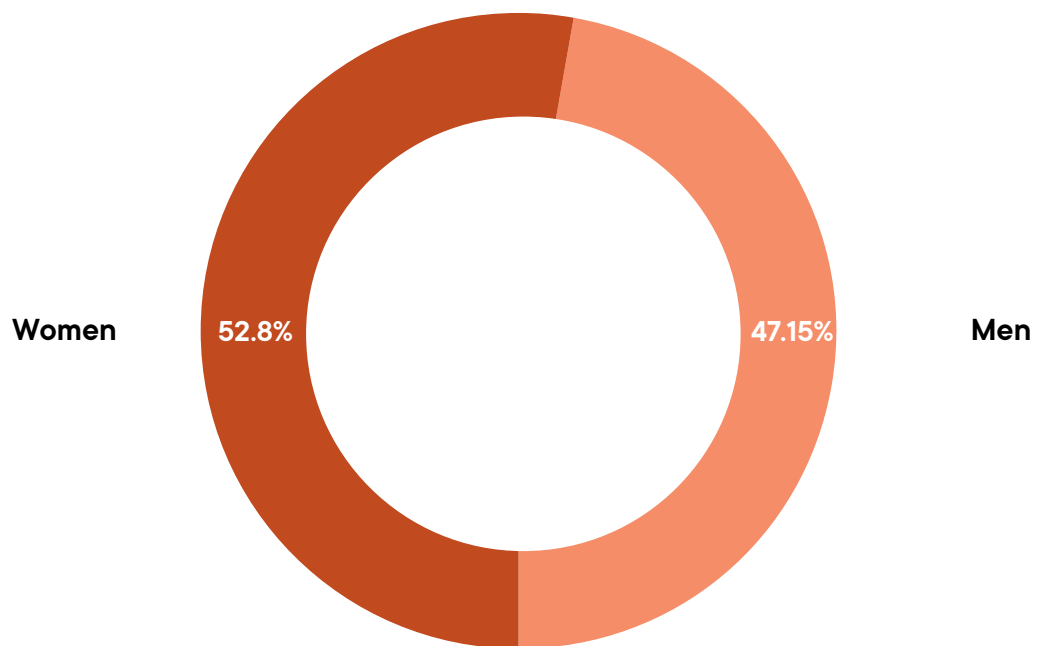
Continuous mass demonstrations clearly played a role in the downfall of Arab autocracies in 2011, but a vast majority of all demonstrations are not even picked up by the radar of mass media, let alone by political decision makers. An additional question is whether it makes sense to continue to broaden the definition of political participation (Dalton, 2008). In the 1950s, the focus of empirical research was on electoral forms of participation, but in more recent work, non-institutionalized forms of participation have increasingly received attention. Political consumerism—that is, the buying or boycotting of products for political reasons is now also routinely included in definitions and operationalizations of political participation. But scholars disagree whether various acts of what has been called life-style politics also should be included in the standard definition of political participation. While these activities might have a clear political relevance, it is less clear whether they are actually meant to influence political decision-making.

This study therefore believes that democracy should no longer be judged only on the basis of how elections are conducted but more importantly on the extent to which citizens, through participatory processes and platforms shape the public agenda and also on how citizen-needs are addressed. The study explores the role and potential of citizen formations in enhancing/nurturing new forms of civic agency and how they respond to official processes of democracy and development. It explores what initiatives, whether social or economic do citizens get involved in during the inter-elections periods that keeps them engaged.

4. Description of the Sample

The study was carried out via a survey instrument. We collected responses from 403 respondents mainly drawn from the city of Lilongwe of which 52.8% were female and 47.15% were male.

Figure 1: Distribution of respondents by gender



The majority of the respondents were within the age range of 26–35 years, constituting 34.24% of the respondents, and the second largest group are those within the age range of 36–45 years

Table 1: Distribution of respondents by age

Age range	Responses (%)	Number of respondents
18–25	19.35	78
26–35	34.24	138
36–45	27.54	111
46–55	13.90	56
56–65	3.97	16
65+	0.99	4
Total		403

Furthermore, the study also noted that 56.58% of the respondents indicated as being married, 31.02% as being single, 7.69% indicated as being divorced and 4.71% as being widowed.

Table 2: Distribution of respondents by marital status

Marital status	Responses (%)	Number of respondents
Single	31.02	125
Married	56.58	228
Divorced	7.69	31
Widowed	4.71	19
Total		403

As regards the level of literacy of the respondents, 94.54% indicated as being literate with 56.33% attending tertiary education, 38.46% reaching secondary school while 3.72% attended only primary school. 1.49% had no formal education.

Table 3: Distribution of respondents by level of literacy

Literate	Responses (%)	Number of respondents
Yes	94.54	381
No	5.46	22
Total		403

Table 4: Distribution of respondents by level of school attainment

School attainment	Responses (%)	Number of Respondents
Primary School	3.72	15
Secondary School	38.46	155
Tertiary School	56.33	227
No formal education	1.49	6
Total		403



It has also to be pointed out that much of the study was done in Lilongwe urban as 94.04% indicated themselves as being town dwellers while 5.96% indicated as being rural. These dynamics are crucial as they determine the level and the extent of participation and the influence people may have in the civic engagements.

In terms of income levels. A large number of the respondents at 39.95% indicated that they were within the income levels of under USD250.00 per month and 34.49% indicated that they were within the range USD251 - USD500. The highest earners of the group earning above USD 5000 were only 1.9%. As regards the sources of income, 35.48% indicated that they were in formal employment while 16.13% are engaged in a formal business. 7.69% are in informal business while 7.69% are in informal employment.

Table 5: Income level of respondents

Income levels	Responses	Number of respondents
Under USD\$250.00	39.95	161
Between USD\$251 and USD\$500	34.49	139
Between USD\$501 and USD\$1,000	14.14	57
Between USD\$1,001 and USD\$3,000	7.94	32
Between USD\$3001 and USD\$5,000	1.49	6
Above USD\$5,001	1.99	8
Total		403

As regards participation in formal voting process, the majority, 83%, indicated that they are registered voters while 17% are not. Out of those that voted 75.43% voted in a local government election, 3.72% were registered but chose not to vote in the local government election. For the parliamentary, 76.43% were registered and they voted while 3.76% were registered but did not vote and for presidential election 78.16% were registered and voted while 3.23% were registered but chose not to vote.



5. Mapping of Citizen's Initiative in Malawi

The study found that almost all the respondents that took part, belong to some form of an association or some sort of a grouping, be it economic, political or social. These groupings are what makes most of the people occupied and politically engaged in between the political process of casting the ballots to vote for the President, Members of Parliament or Ward Councillors. In as much as casting a vote is probably the single most important engagement in any political process by the citizens, what happens in between these elections are cumulatively more important as they have a direct impact on people's livelihood and the fulfilment of what was put forward during the election process.

Listed below are some of the dynamics that exist in some of the economic, political and social institutions that brings people together and facilitate their involvement in civic space in between the general elections.

5.1 Citizens and the Economy

5.1.1 Levels of belonging

The community economic institutions that the study assessed are as listed in Table 6: below. As regards the level of belonging within these groups, the study found that a large number of the respondents (42.18%) belong to a Buying Club. These are usually women's groups that pull their resources together over a certain period of time to have joint procurement of items, especially groceries although construction materials like cement have been bought by some groups. The second most favourite group listed was the Savings and Lending group at 41.44%. These are groups locally known as 'banki m'khonde' have become one of the popular groups that supports women with resources, especially capital for small business.



However, there is one issue that needs to be noted in these groups as it corresponds to the gender categories and sample that was used in this study. As noted earlier, most of the people that participate in these kinds of organised economic groupings are women and at time these groups have multiple functions where one group could be doing lending and savings and also collective buying of groceries. This probably suggest that the responses of most respondents were based on the functions of the groups and not necessarily the kind of a group.

Table 6: Level of belonging of the citizens to selected economic associations

Association	Yes		Total
	#	%	
1. Savings and Lending Group	167	41.44%	403
2. Labour pooling group	29	7.20%	
3. Production Cooperative	55	13.65%	
4. Buying Clubs (e.g., collective group to buy groceries)	170	42.18%	
5. Marketing Cooperative (involved in jointly selling commodities)	69	17.12%	
6. Common Property Group (natural resources)	26	6.45%	
7. Asset Pooling Group	27	6.70%	
8. Market Group/Platform (a place or network where members sell goods/services to each other)	65	16.13%	
9. Business Promotion Council	28	6.95%	
10. Business Advocacy/Lobby Group	20	4.96%	
11. Business Mentorship/Training Group	56	13.90%	
12. Housing Cooperative	21	5.21%	
13. Multi-level marketing schemes (e.g. Avon, Tablecharm, Tupperware)	12	2.98%	



Above all, every person that the study interacted with, indicated to have been part of some sort of an economic undertaking whether in a group or not.

5.1.2 Description of what economic focused associations do. (The case of Savings and Lending group)

The study was done with about thirteen different types of groups as shown in Table 6 above. Different individuals interviewed indicated that they belong to these groups for various reasons and they also derive different economic benefits. For instance, taking the case of a Savings and Lending Group, 29.94% of the respondents, indicated that these organisations are formed to provide collective economic security where individuals can get a loan easier than in the formal lending institutions. About 52.10% of the respondents indicated that these groups provide improved access to much easier financing apart from the credit that circulates within the group. Furthermore, these groups are at times used as collateral with some micro lending. A number of micro-lending institutions have made it a requirement that for someone to access loans they need to belong to an organised group. There are some (36.53%) within these groups that see them as providing an opportunity for exchange of information about market opportunities and also collective bargaining for goods they would want to sell as individuals but also as a group. These groups have also been used for advocacy. They aggregated their voices to rally around an issue requiring policy attention where as a group they have improved voice in engaging with officeholders (25.55%). Through these groups, about 45.51% of the respondents have also been exposed to new concepts or ideas while 43.11% benefited through skills exchange. These economic group generally provide a good social capital and organised welfare support.

Table 7: Benefits the people gets when belong to the groups (Lending and Savings group)

Benefits of belonging to a group	Responses (%)	frequency of responses
Collective security	29.94	50
Improved access to financing	52.10	87
Pooling together assets	27.25	43
Exchange information about market opportunities	36.53	61
Organising welfare support	34.13	57
Improved voice in engaging with officeholders	25.55	41
Exposure to new concepts of ideas	45.51	76
Collective ownership of assets	23.35	39
Skills exchange	43.11	72
Additional income	68.26	117
Others	0.60	1

5.1.3 When and how were the associations established?

The majority of the savings and lending groups (64.67%) and also buying clubs (74.71%) were established between 2011 and 2020. The concept of “banki m’khonde” as we know it today is relatively very new and has gained ground in the past decade. However, there has been a good spread over the years starting from 1990 to 2020 in terms of percentage growth of most of these groups ranging from of 0.00% for some groups that never existed then to 74.71% being highest number recorded. This indicates that almost every year, groupings were being established.

As regards the internal governance of these groups, it has been noted that most of them, (50.30%) had no formal registration. This corresponds well with the kind of groupings that have been



indicated above like the buying clubs which are very informal and do not need any registration. However, the savings and lending clubs are required to have formal registration as a Savings and Credit Cooperative (SACCO), but in practice some remain unregistered due to the mode of lending that usually happens in the groups. About 26.96% of the respondents indicated that they belong to an established association, meaning that they belong to a group that has some sort of formal registration, while 10.78% indicated that they are not aware of whether their grouping is registered or not. This demonstrates some governance and information flaws in these groups as the registration status of a group is supposed to be common knowledge for the group members.

Table 8: Year when most of the economic institutions were established

Association	1990 – 2000		2001 - 2010		2011 - 2020		Other (Unspecified)		Total
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	
1. Savings and Lending Group	15	8.98%	31	18.56%	108	64.67%	13	7.78%	167
2. Labour pooling group	3	10.34%	11	37.93%	14	48.28%	1	3.45%	29
3. Production Cooperative	15	27.27%	19	34.55%	15	27.27%	6	10.91%	55
4. Buying Clubs (e.g., collective group to buy groceries)	10	5.88%	25	14.71%	127	74.71%	8	4.71%	170
5. Marketing Cooperative (involved in jointly selling commodities)	10	14.49%	27	39.13%	32	46.38%	0	0.00%	69
6. Common Property Group (natural resources)	2	7.69%	12	46.15%	12	46.15%	0	0.00%	26
7. Asset Pooling Group	0	0.00%	15	55.56%	11	40.74%	1	3.70%	27
8. Market Group/Platform	8	12.31%	10	15.38%	42	64.62%	5	7.69%	65
9. Business Promotion Council	4	14.29%	11	39.29%	13	46.43%	0	0.00%	28
10. Business Advocacy/Lobby Group	4	20%	5	25.00%	11	55.00%	0	0.00%	20
11. Business Mentorship/Training Group	2	3.57%	14	25.00%	32	57.14%	8	14.29%	56
12. Housing Cooperative	2	9.52%	5	23.81%	13	61.90%	1	4.76%	21
13. Multi-level marketing schemes (e.g. Avon, Tablecharm, Tupperware)	0	0.00%	3	25.00%	6	50%	3	25.00%	12

In terms of office holding, the majority of the respondents, 62.05% indicated that they do not hold any position while 37.95% had been officer bearers. Most of the office holders (37.72%) in these associations are selected through a democratic process of elections. The second largest cohort (34.13%) indicated that they became leaders through appointment and 23.64% volunteered to be members.

In terms of formal meetings of the groups, most of these groupings (41.32%) meet on a weekly basis, while (40.12%) meet monthly, 17.37% meet daily while 1.2% meet annually. In many instances (57.49%) of this interaction is combination of a face to face interaction and using digital platforms like WhatsApp groups.



Table 9: General modality on how office bearers are selected

Selection Modality	Responses (%)	Number of Respondents
Elections	37.72	152
Appointed	34.13	137
Hereditary	0.00	0
Voluntary	23.64	95
I don't Know	4.51	19
Total		403

5.1.4 Gender dynamics within associations

Gender in leadership and governance structures is one of the growing important issues as the balance in gender representation helps to balance the concerns of the men and women as well in the groups. The study has noted that there is some sort of a balance in terms of gender categories holding office, where it was indicated that 45.40% of the groups are chaired by a male member while 43.56% are chaired by female. However, the trends changed as we further asked about the other offices like the vice chairperson, the secretary, treasure and the committee members. These positions are mainly being held by females in most of the group as 59.21%, 65.16%, 53.25%, 50.43% respectively.

Table 10: Level of office holding by gender categories

Economic Groups					
Association	Frequency of Male Office Holders		Frequency of Female Office Holders		Total
	#	%	#	%	
Savings and Lending Group	377	38.16%	611	61.84%	988
Labour pooling group	118	51.08%	113	48.92%	231
Production Cooperative	214	48.86%	224	51.14%	438
Buying Clubs (e.g., collective group to buy groceries)	353	32.90%	720	67.10%	1073
Marketing Cooperative (involved in jointly selling commodities)	269	50.19%	267	49.81%	536
Common Property Group (natural resources)	95	46.57%	109	53.43%	204
Asset Pooling Group	102	51.78%	95	48.22%	197
Market Group/Platform (a place or network where members sell goods/services to each other)	222	47.74%	243	52.26%	465
Business Promotion Council	99	45.00%	121	55.00%	220
Business Advocacy/Lobby Group	79	49.69%	80	50.31%	159
Business Mentorship/Training Group	204	51.26%	194	48.74%	398
Housing Cooperative	78	48.75%	82	51.25%	160
Multi-level marketing schemes (e.g. Avon, Tablecharm, Tupperware)	26	32.50%	54	67.50%	80

It should also be noted that most of the groups that were interviewed under the economic groups are predominantly women dominated groups. For instance, the savings and Lending groups and the Buying Clubs had 61.84% and 67.10% women chairperson leadership respectively.

5.1.5 Types of problems that need fixing within associations

The major problem in most of these organisations has to do with the registration. Most of these associations are still operating informally. This was indicated by 34.94% of the respondents. Furthermore, 33.13% of the respondents indicated that funding of these groupings is a huge challenge for them to maintain their operations and this is another issue that needs much attention. About a fifth



(20.48%) of the respondents indicated that leadership is a problem. Most of the leaders have been in office since the inception of the groups and in some of these groups they suffer from the ‘founder’s syndrome’ where the study observe that group founders still yields power though out all of formal group leadership. Other challenges indicated include gender discriminations as indicated by 19.28%, Low levels of participation was indicated by 17.47% and corruption by 15.66%. Most of these associations do not have common assets. This was indicated by 88.02% but those who do, like in 11.98% of the respondents, 90% indicated that land was the commonly held asset.

5.2 Citizens and Politics

The second category of institutions that the study looked at were the political associations or platforms to which the respondents belong. The questions sought to understand the ways in which these associations and platforms contribute to the members’ engagements in political processes. Table 11 below demonstrates that the majority (52.62%) of the respondents belong to a political party. However, this belongingness is mostly not formal but through a vote they casted for the candidate of that political party. Formal memberships through party cards or other forms of party formal identity is currently rare in Malawi as was the case during the one-party state era (Tambulasi, 2010). The study also found that 34.01% did not only belong to a party but took an active role in the campaign processes of some kind. These campaign groups have solely been either women groups as indicated by 25.87% of the respondents or as youth groups as indicated by 16.28% of the respondents.

Table 11: Belonging Across Political Associations

Association	Yes		Total
	#	%	
Campaign Group	117	34.01%	344
Political Party	181	52.62%	344
Social Movement	48	13.95%	344
Joint Public Petition	13	3.78%	344
Local Peace Committee	24	6.98%	344
Residents Association	20	5.81%	344
Online Based Civic Coalition	9	2.62%	344
Women's Group	89	25.87%	344
Youth Group	56	16.28%	344

Furthermore, 13.96% indicated that they belong to a social movement. The major social movement that had a huge impact on the political processes in Malawi was the Human Rights Defender Coalition (HRDC). This is a grouping that organised demonstrations, which led to the nullification of the 2019 Presidential vote. Most of the youth that took part in this study, participated in the demonstrations that were organised by the HRDC and this gave them a sense of belonging to a social movement.

5.2.1 Description of what political focused associations do

These political associations and groups help most of the people to have a sense of belonging in as far as political processes are concerned, these groups have helped in political mobilisation, fundraising, campaigning and bringing a common voice for the different categories of people.

5.2.2 When were the associations established?

Table 12: Year when political associations were established

Political Association	1990 - 2000		2001 - 2010		2011 - 2020		Other (Unspecified)		Total
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	
Campaign Group	18	15.38%	31	26.50%	55	47.01%	13	11.11%	117
Political Party	34	18.78%	46	25.41%	55	30.39%	46	25.41%	181
Social Movement	5	10.42%	12	25.00%	23	47.92%	8	16.67%	48
Joint Public Petition	1	7.69%	5	38.46%	7	53.85%	0	0.00%	13
Local Peace Committee	3	12.50%	8	33.33%	12	50.00%	1	4.17%	24
Residents Association	7	35.00%	4	20.00%	4	20.00%	5	25.00%	20
Online Based Civic Coalition	0	0.00%	2	22.22%	7	77.78%	0	0.00%	9
Women's Group	15	16.85%	11	12.36%	58	65.17%	5	5.62%	89
Youth Group	7	12.50%	13	23.21%	28	50.00%	8	14.29%	56

The study found out that most of these political associations are seasonal in nature, in the sense that they become active towards general elections when the political hype is high. As indicated earlier, most of these institutions are formed to help in political mobilisation and in most cases such a necessity comes closer to the general elections. However, the study also noted that apart from the political parties, most of these groups like the HRDC, formed in the past two years have been very active after the elections. Additionally, the coming in of social media channels like Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter have also helped in creating platforms for political debates and participation in the inter-elections period. About 77.78% of respondents indicated that they have been part of an online political grouping formed in the past two years. Additionally, 65.17% of women groups and 50% of youth groups were all formed in the past two years mainly because of the 2019 general elections and 2020 presidents' fresh elections. These were initiatives of the political parties for political mobilisations. Furthermore, there had been an increase in joint public petitions between 2000 and 2020. The study noted an increase from 12.50% in 2000 to 53.85% in 2020.



These have also come with a corresponding increase in social movements that facilitate these public petitions from 10.42% in 2000 to 47.92% in 2020.

In terms of ownership of assets, 83.33% indicated that they do not own any joint assets with only 16.67% of the respondents indicated that they do. Most political parties indeed have assets in form of land, offices, vehicle and others.

5.2.3 Gender dynamics within politically focused associations

There is a balance in terms of gender dynamics within the political associations. There is also a balance in office holding in most campaign groups. The study indicated a 50 – 50 balance in office holding and participation patterns except for specially gender biased groups like women groups. Furthermore, for political parties, most offices are held by men who hold about 52.44% as opposed to 47.56% for women. Women leaders have also been predominant in social movements at 51.02%. As for resident associations, which may not necessarily be political in nature but can also at time play the role of a political institution, the study has shown that the leadership can vary, however at the time of the study, the majority of the leadership are males at 50.70% and females at 49.30%.

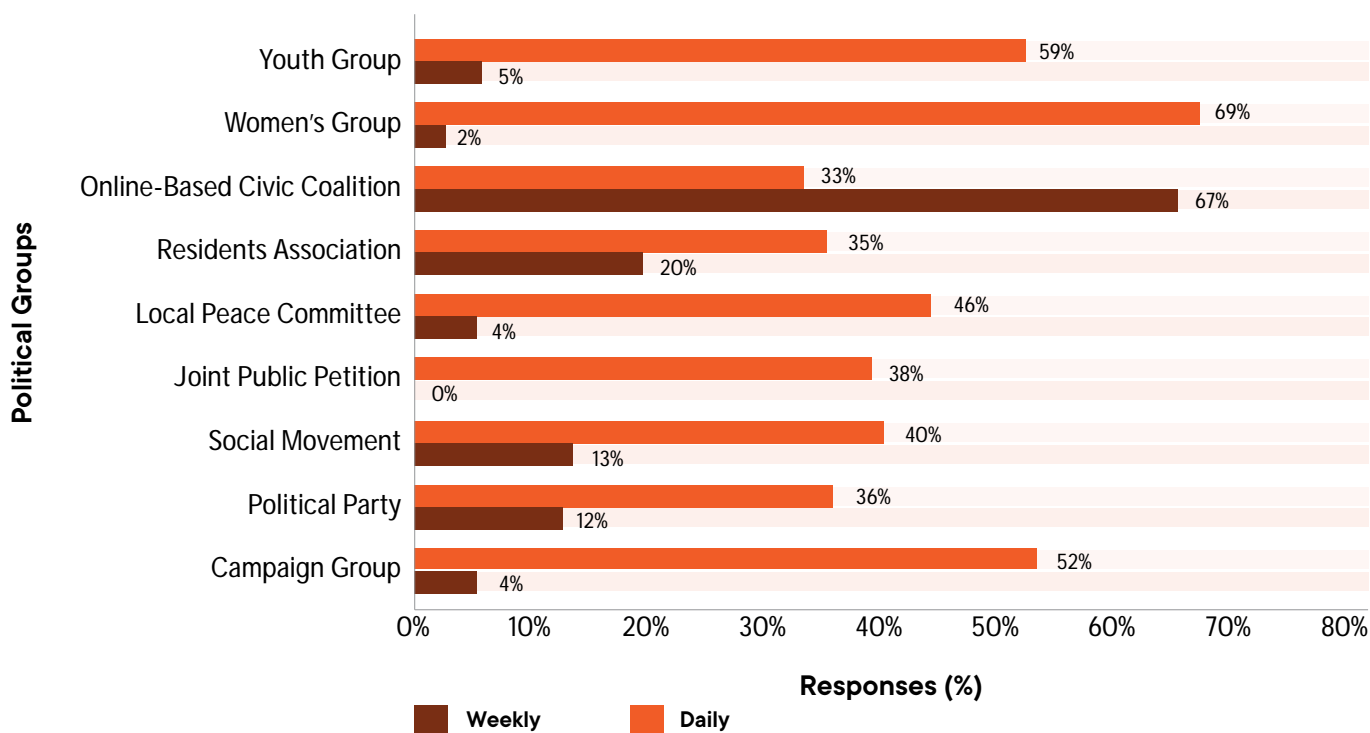
Table 13: Gender Dynamics in political associations' leadership

Political					
Association	Frequency of Male Office Holders		Frequency of Female Office Holders		Total
	#	%	#	%	
Campaign Group	573	50.00%	573	50.00%	1146
Political Party	818	52.44%	742	47.56%	1560
Social Movement	216	48.98%	225	51.02%	441
Joint Public Petition	73	56.15%	57	43.85%	130
Local Peace Committee	125	54.11%	106	45.89%	231
Residents Association	72	50.70%	70	49.30%	142
Online Based Civic Coalition	41	50.00%	41	50.00%	82
Women's Group	82	9.70%	763	90.30%	845
Youth Group	235	47.86%	256	52.14%	491

5.2.4 Ways and frequency of interaction

As regards the frequency of meetings for these institutions, most political groups indicated that they interact weekly. Women's group had the highest percentage indication of weekly interactions (69% of respondents indicated they met weekly) while online based civic coalition groups had the highest percentage of daily interaction (67% of respondents indicated they met daily). The high indication of daily interaction of online based civic coalition is attributed to the nature of the group and mode of interaction which is online thus it is convenient.

Figure 2: Frequency of meetings across political associations



The major benefits that accrue to them for belonging to these groups is that they provide them with the space for participating in political processes but also a sense of belonging and identity. Through these groups they can defend their political right through voting and petition but also to mobilise for the political parties and candidates who meet their political views, this was indicated by 47.01% of the respondents, while 39.32% indicated that they joined these groups because they wanted a change of government regardless of who will be in power afterwards and 32.48% wanted a change in social order and people's livelihood.

5.2.5 Types of problems that need fixing within associations,

The major challenges that needs to be fixed in the majority of these groups is leadership. This was indicated by 43.49% of the respondents, gender discrimination was indicated by 29.06% of the respondents and 23.08% indicated corruption as the main challenge. As regards the registration status of these groups, most of these institutions especially the political parties are duly registered organisations with a

constitution while most of the women and youth groups are just informal and are affiliates of these political parties.

5.3 Citizens and Social Institutions

Table 14: Distribution of how respondents belong to social institutions

Social Support			
Association	#	%	Total
Fellowship Group /Religious Group (temples, churches, mosques, shrine etc)	230	66.86%	344
Burial Societies	9	2.62%	
Sporting Association	39	11.34%	
Entertainment Group (dance, choir etc)	63	18.31%	
School Association Parent/Teacher Group	34	9.88%	
Alumni Association	16	4.65%	
Book/Reading Club	16	4.65%	
Community Development Association	20	5.81%	403
Service Organisation or Club (e.g. Lions Club; Rotary Int'l)	15	3.72%	
Neighbourhood Watch Committee	22	5.46%	
Communal Granary	2	0.50%	
Community Feeding Group	8	1.99%	
Community Foundation	4	0.99%	

The third category of associations that the study examined had to do with the creation of social solidarity. These are generally associations that support social cohesion in the communities and they range from religious groups, sports association, entertainment groups and others. These groups keep the community together as a social unit and strengthens the social capital of the individuals concerned. The majority (66.86%) belong to a religious group, 18.31% belong to an entertainment group while 11.34% belong to a sporting group. These are the three most popular



associations and are some of the major activities that keep people occupied apart from their participation in political activities.

5.3.1 Description of what social focused associations do

As noted, earlier on, these social associations help to build the social capital that is necessary for building up of communities. This social capital provides a collective security for the communities as indicated by 25.97% of the respondents, 22.65% belong to these groups for welfare support while for 51.93% of the respondents, these institutions give them a sense of belonging and identity. Approximately 57.46% of the respondent, feels that belonging to a group could easily help them defend their rights. In 49.17% of the times, these social institutions help in bringing social order to the communities.

5.3.2 When were the associations established?

Table 15: Year social institutions were established

Association	1990 - 2000		2001 - 2010		2011 - 2020		Other (Unspecified)		Total
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	
Fellowship Group /Religious Group (temples, churches, mosques, shrine etc)	65	28.26%	37	16.09%	74	32.17%	54	23.48%	230
Burial Societies	2	22.22%	5	55.56%	2	22.22%	0	0.00%	9
Sporting Association	14	35.90%	9	23.08%	13	33.33%	3	7.69%	39
Entertainment Group (dance, choir etc)	9	14.29%	12	19.05%	32	50.79%	10	15.87%	63
School Association Parent/Teacher Group	10	29.41%	6	17.65%	12	35.29%	6	17.65%	34
Alumni Association	4	25.00%	2	12.50%	7	43.75%	3	18.75%	16
Book/Reading Club	0	0.00%	3	18.75%	12	75.00%	1	6.25%	16
Community Development Association	5	25.00%	5	25.00%	9	45.00%	1	5.00%	20
Service Organisation or Club (e.g. Lions Club; Rotary)	3	20.00%	3	20.00%	4	26.67%	5	33.33%	15
Neighbourhood Watch Committee	2	8.33%	5	20.83%	9	37.50%	8	33.33%	24
Communal Granary	0	0.00%	2	100%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	2
Community Feeding Group	0	0.00%	4	50.00%	4	50.00%	0	0.00%	8
Community Foundation	0	0.00%	1	25.00%	3	75.00%	0	0.00%	4



Most of these institutions have been in existence for quite some time with the majority of those interviewed to have been formed in the past 20 years. For instance, 32.17% of the religious institutions were established in the locality of the respondents between 1990 and 2000, 16.09% between 2001 and 2010 while 32.17% between 2011 and 2020. For entertainment groups 14.29% were formed between 1990 and 2000, 23.08% between 2001 and 2010 while 50.79% were established between 2011 and 2020. Most of these organisations, like the churches are duly registered, with a constitution. Approximately 63.54% of respondents interviewed indicated that their associations have a constitution while 19.34 indicated that they are just a grouping of people without any formal registration.

5.3.3 How do they organise themselves?

As regards the gender categories of office holder in these institutions, the trend has been the same as is the case with the economic and the political institutions. There are more males who generally hold leadership positions except for predominantly women's groups. The first three social associations, which includes religious organisations, entertainment and sporting institutions have 52.30%, 48.28% and 48.25% males and 47.70%, 51.72% and 51.75% females in top leadership positions respectively. However, men dominate in other associations such as school associations, neighbourhood watch committees and community granary groups. For instance, the communal granary committee had 85% male with 15% females in the committees. In terms of modes of selection of office bearers most of the members are elected through a democratic process (42.29%) while 25.99% indicated that they were appointed to their positions and 20.26% volunteered to be in their positions.

As regards the level of engagement, most of them (75.44%) especially church fellowships meet every week, while 19.74% meet annually. These meetings are usually face to face as indicated by 53.28% of the respondents but also a combination of face to face and digital online platforms.

Table 16: Frequency of office holding by gender

Association	Frequency of Male Office Holders		Frequency of Female Office Holders		Total
	#	%	#	%	
Fellowship Group /Religious Group (temples, churches, mosques, shrine etc)	934	52.30%	852	47.70%	1786
Burial Societies	63	70.79%	26	29.21%	89
Sporting Association	152	48.25%	163	51.75%	315
Entertainment Group (dance, choir etc)	267	48.28%	286	51.72%	553
School Association Parent/Teacher Group	152	53.33%	133	46.67%	285
Alumni Association	67	48.55%	71	51.45%	138
Book/Reading Club	51	53.68%	44	46.32%	95
Community Development Association	93	51.96%	86	48.04%	179
Service Organisation or Club (e.g. Lions Club)	51	50.50%	50	49.50%	101
Neighbourhood Watch Committee	80	64.52%	44	35.48%	124
Communal Granary	17	85.00%	3	15.00%	20
Community Feeding Group	33	41.25%	47	58.75%	80
Community Foundation	21	52.50%	19	47.50%	40

5.3.4 Benefits of belonging to these groups

According to those that participated in the survey (As is the case with those belonging to Sporting associations), 56.41% indicated that these groups provide them entertainment and 61.54%, a sense of wellbeing. Approximately 43.59% indicated that these groups provide them with exposure to new ideas and additionally they are able to interact with the office bearers on a unified voice. Sports is a very important aspect of social cohesion in Malawi, as they have power to unifying of communities and people of different age groups.

5.3.5 Types of problems that need fixing within associations

According to 43.23% of the respondents in the study, the main problem facing most of the social grouping is the issue of



resources to manage these groups. About a quarter (25.58%) indicated that leadership is the main issues while 22.27% indicated that the levels of participation are too low for the success of these groupings. Yet 16.16% indicated the issues of gender-based discrimination and 10.48% indicated that corruption is the main challenge. A considerable number of the people, about 38.24% are further discouraged from participating in these group mainly due to prohibitive membership cost.



6. Conclusion

The Malawi political and civic space has enjoyed stability over the past thirty years as the laws of Malawi starting from the Republican Constitution and others like the NGO Act, guarantees freedom of association and of speech among others. However, it must be noted that despite these provisions in the law about it, citizen participation is about power and its exercise by different social actors in the spaces created for the interaction amongst citizens and with the local authorities. A recent study commissioned by the Council for Non-Governmental Organisations (CONGOMA) has shown that there has been an increasing threat that is trying to limit the level of citizens' participation in the civic space through the creation of the NGO Act that has put place conditions for participation in the civic space like imposition of exorbitant fees for registration of civil society organisation and at times revoking of registration of the CSOs which at times is influenced by politics. The findings of this present study have corroborated, the findings of the CONGOMA study, that in some cases, the control of the structure and processes for participation that includes defining spaces, actors, agendas, procedures are usually in the hands of state institutions and can become a barrier for effective involvement of citizens.

However, this study has revealed that despite these challenges, the level of participation and also the general interest of the citizens to participate in civic issues that affects their lives and livelihoods is very high. The study has assessed the economic, political and social institutions that facilitates various forms of participation, the challenges that these organisations face and the kind of dynamics that exists within these institutions. The study has found out that though voting in the general elections is one single most important political exercise by the citizens, there is much more that the citizens do in between the elections that influence the outcome of policy and also their livelihood.



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