

Volunteerism, youth and the transition to democracy in Malawi

By Catherine M Fairley [5]

Over ten years since the advent of democracy in Malawi, many Malawians lament the lack of genuine volunteerism amongst its citizens, particularly the youth, and blame such erosion of civic pride on the new democratic dispensation. [6] But how accurate is this perception that youth no longer take an interest in their country's development? Historically, how has participation in civic service changed in Malawi?

During the regime of the late former President Dr Hastings Kamuzu Banda, when Malawi was a one party state, civic service was an everyday part of rural community life, expected to benefit all. For example, various methods of communal food storage were used, so that if hunger came, the community knew that they would have access to food. Young people would be expected to help the elderly and vulnerable people in their communities, fetching firewood and water, building traditional grain stores and helping in their fields.

In addition, community members would be mobilised by their chiefs and local party leaders to participate in civic activities in and around their villages: road clearing, cleaning of public places, maintaining bridges and boundaries around graveyards, construction of bus shelters etc. Many of these activities were organised under 'Youth Week', an annual event that, according to those who participated, young people looked forward to and gave youth a sense of pride. This concept of civic duty was also supported by the teaching of 'civics' in schools, a subject that taught young people about community activities, the importance of courtesy to elders, the need to volunteer their services, the need to help others and to participate in communal activities.

Politicisation of the youth

President Kamuzu Banda established the 'Malawi Young Pioneers', which was set up to train young people, both boys and girls, over a period of several months, in a range of practical skills to become self-reliant, productive citizens. Unfortunately this vision of an empowered and development-orientated youth was lost as the movement became increasingly politicised in the later days of Kamuzu's reign. The movement was armed and, along with the Youth League of his Malawi Congress Party, became synonymous with the violence and terror meted out to all those suspected of disloyalty to the party and the head of state. At the same time, other youth organisations with an ethos of civic service, such as the Boy Scouts and Girl Guides, were effectively banned.

However, the politicisation of the youth in Malawi has not been exclusive to the one-party state. The first democratically elected party, the United Democratic Front (UDF), also resorted to the use of its own youth wing, the Young Democrats, to further its political agenda, often with violent results.

Multiparty democracy and the UDF's rise to power in 1994 saw fairly rapid and major changes in the concept of civic service. Many structures associated with the previous regime were castigated and disbanded. The new head of state, Bakili Muluzi, equated 'Youth Week' and other voluntary community development activities with an abuse of rights and a denial of personal freedom, whilst assuring communities that his government would take care of their needs. In the wake of these developments, communal civic service floundered as individualism flourished and communities waited for government to solve their problems.

Impact of donor funding

Furthermore, increased donor activity in the country and the rapid establishment of many international NGOs, that provided allowances and other incentives to community members for development work, has been blamed for instilling a dependency culture in Malawi. This has, paradoxically, further undermined participation in, and the sustainability of, grassroots development. For example, in recent years, donor and NGO-supported programmes have made efforts to increase the involvement of communities in tackling issues of quality in primary schools by encouraging them to volunteer their services in construction work and school management. It appears, however, that efforts have been hindered in areas where 'food-for-work programmes' provide both monetary and non-monetary incentives for community participation in, say, road-building, because community members are often unwilling to volunteer their services to schools, when elsewhere they would receive payment.

Youth participation in development

Whilst many look back with nostalgia on the civic spirit of the younger generation under the one-party regime, it is a fallacy to say that the youth no longer participate in development. After the onset of democracy, the establishment of a

constitution supporting human rights and freedoms and the disbanding of the Malawi Young Pioneers, Malawian society opened up. Self-established youth clubs and organisations proliferated, so that today there are approximately 2 000 such clubs and organisations registered with the National Youth Council. Many of these clubs are geared towards emerging development issues:

- raising awareness about HIV and AIDS and voluntary counselling and testing (VCT);
- supporting home-based care for orphans; and
- advocating on rights and governance issues.

The emphasis on such issues may not only reflect the concerns of the youth, but is to some extent donor-driven – the majority of youth clubs and community-based organisations are funded with money from the National AIDS Council (NAC), the Malawi Social Action Fund (MASAF) and UNICEF. The youth are well aware of this, and since they aspire to get their activities funded (with additional benefits such as training and allowances accruing in the process), they are likely to fit in with the agendas of the donor agencies.

What is clear, therefore, is that although civic service in Malawi still exists, the landscape of volunteerism is changing, and nowadays many youth offering their services have greater expectations of personal gain. If the youth are to continue to participate in the sustainable development of their country, efforts must be made to harness their natural enthusiasm by looking critically at possible incentives to encourage youth to offer their services – not just to programmes heavily funded by donors, but other relevant, community-based activities – and finding the means to resurrect a sense of civic pride in the youth and all Malawians.

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[6] This is based on findings of a study undertaken by the author on civic service and volunteering in Malawi.