

Participation: Reality or Rhetoric in Rural Communities of Malawi?¹

Asiyati Lorraine Chiweza

Department of Social Sciences, Curtin University of Technology, Australia.

About the author: Asiyati Chiweza is a lecturer in the Department of Political and Administrative Studies at Chancellor College, University of Malawi. She has extensive experience in issues of local governance and decentralisation in Malawi. Currently she is pursuing her doctoral studies at Curtin University of Technology in Australia.

Popular participation can have meaning only where the structures exist for meaningful, not symbolic participation. A spirit of 'give and take' must prevail among the participants and herein lies the major obstacle facing the realization of meaningful participation.

Oyugi, 2000.

Abstract: Participation is an important theme in the decentralisation literature. The emphasis tends to be upon its political dimension, exploring the extent to which decentralisation effectively involves people in decisions about local development and governance. Participation in this sense, emphasises that there is an expectation that it can make a difference in the decision making process. Managing one's own affairs is now held by aid donors, development specialists, and proponents of decentralisation to be an integral element of human development: the objective is to maximise the opportunities for individuals to participate in the decisions that affect their lives.

Decentralization and participation are assumed to be positively linked in much of the development literature. The underlying proposition is that local decision-making structures offered by decentralisation will facilitate genuine involvement of people in issues of direct concern to their needs and interests. This, in turn, assumes both the desire of individuals to take part in local government, and the existence of appropriate forums that allow and encourage effective participatory practices. The challenge however is to ensure that participation is more than a pro forma process with little chance of affecting outcomes and that those who participate are as far as possible representative of the stakeholders of development.

This paper traces the issue of participation in Malawi's decentralisation initiatives since the colonial period. It highlights the rhetoric on participation that marked the colonial regime through to the post-independence one-party regime in Malawi. In effect, it problematises notions of participation constituted in decentralisation attempts through various historical periods. The work argues that the historical insights are of relevance in contemporary times as Malawi and most of Sub-Saharan African countries are currently employing unchallenged notions of participation in progressing the decentralisation agenda. Will current moves towards participation under the guise of democracy and decentralisation make a difference to rural Malawians' involvement in decisions about local development and governance in their communities?

Introduction

In Malawi since the colonial period, each government found it necessary to put in place a new institution for linking national government with a system of popular participation at the local level and mostly a local government system was considered essential for such purposes. Based on a review of literature, this paper explores these decentralisation efforts and traces the issue of participation in the Malawian system of local government beginning with the colonial period when Malawi was still a colony of Britain in the 1960s down to the post independence period of the Malawi Congress Party period.

This paper does not dwell so much on debates of what participation is and is not. The focus of this paper is rather on how participation was conceived within the decentralisation initiatives of each political regime in Malawi, what the goals

were, what structures were put in place and whether any meaningful participation took place.

The concept of participation

Participation is often used as a descriptive term that includes a variety of activities and situations. As a result the concept lacks clarity and has many definitions. As Mikkelsen (1995) observed, the concept itself "is so widely and loosely used, like many other catchwords in development jargon, the meaning has become rather blurred". Broadly speaking, two different interpretations of the term can be distinguished in literature. One such interpretation sees participation primarily as a means to an end that is, as a tool to increase the effectiveness and efficiency

¹ This paper was first presented at the Alchemies: Community Exchanges. The Seventh Annual Humanities Graduate Conference organised by Curtin University in November 2003.

of development projects. In another quite different sense, it is viewed in terms of active broad based involvement in political decision making, as an end in it itself.

As an end in itself, participation is seen as a means of influencing decisions rather than a means for securing support for decisions already made by leaders. It focuses on acts and processes that aim at influencing government either by affecting choice of personnel or choices made by government personnel as opposed to participation where citizens 'take part' by endorsing government decisions, by marching in parades, working in development projects and participating in youth or other groups organised by the government (Verba and Nie, 1972).

The emphasis here is on the flow of influence upwards from the masses and it is part of a process by which notions of national interest or interests are promoted. This involvement is thought to have a democratic influence on other actors, particularly political institutions.

These two aspects are also referred to as "developmental" and "instrumental" participation respectively (Parry, 1972 as cited in UNDP, 2003). Schonwalder (1997) argues that what distinguishes the two views is the degree of decision-making power to the agents of popular participation: 'Means - ends' approaches often reserve a more prominent role for people in the execution of developments that are planned and designed by others, and they limit the extent of participation to consultations about popular needs and concerns. 'The ends' approaches typically go a step further by enlarging the sphere of popular participation to the stages of planning and evaluation and by insisting that popular participation has to encompass participation in decision making at each of these stages. In practice this distinction is not always clear-cut although it does usefully reflect two approaches to thinking about participation.

A useful way to analyse participation in different contexts has been proposed by Cohen and Uphoff (1980). Based on their work in rural development participation they developed a framework in which participation is treated as a 'rubric' under which a number of clearly definable activities or elements can be analysed. The framework makes a distinction between dimensions of participation and the context within which participation is occurring. The use of the framework entails analysing such questions as: what kinds of participation are taking place? Who is participating? How is the process of participation occurring? What are the purposes of participation and why is participation taking place? Although their analysis was limited to rural development participation, their work becomes useful in understanding this phenomenon in different contexts and situations.

Decentralisation

Decentralisation is any act in which the central government formally cedes powers, authority and resources to actors and institutions at lower levels in a political- administrative and territorial hierarchy (Mawhood, 1983). It takes various forms such as devolution, deconcentration, delegation and

privatisation. These forms could be categorised into political and administrative decentralisation.

Political decentralisation occurs when powers and resources are transferred to political actors and institutions representative of local populations. It is about creating a domain of autonomy in which local representatives are enabled to make decisions on behalf of the local population either for delivery of services, development, tax or use of public resources (Ribot, 2002). Devolution is a form of political decentralisation. The local government institution has been considered one of the most appropriate domain of autonomy in which people can exercise their right to elect their representatives and participate in decision making through their local government structures.

For decentralisation to be democratic, it implies more than the devolution of power and authority to political actors and institutions at the lower level. Crucially, it entails a system of governance in which citizens possess the right to hold local public officials to account through the use of elections, collective action and other democratic means (Johnson, 2001). From Blair's (2000) perspective, democratic decentralisation entails 'Meaningful authority devolved to local units of governance that are accessible and accountable to the local citizenry', blending together elements of participation and accountability- through this means, subjecting local authorities to people affected by the decision-making process involving local governments. In this connection, Ife (2002) observes that 'decentralisation is not without its problems, and like all such policies it solves some problems and creates others...but from the perspective of democracy these are outweighed by its advantages'.

Administrative decentralisation on the other hand (sometimes known as deconcentration) concerns transfers of power to local branches of the central government who are primarily responsible to the central government for carrying out of centrally defined functions such as support for development, tax collection and efficient service delivery. In administrative decentralisation such as deconcentration, the central government is not giving up any authority; it is simply relocating its officers at different levels in the national territory (Crook and Manor, 1998).

Decentralisation and Participation

Decentralization and participation are often assumed to be positively linked. The underlying proposition is that local decision-making structures offered by decentralisation will facilitate the genuine involvement of people in issues of direct concern to their needs and interests. Arguments in favour of decentralisation on the basis of greater participation of citizens in governance can be found in the writings of de Tocqueville (1945) and Mill (1991) and Webster (1992). In certain instances, this, in turn, assumes both the desire of individuals to take part in local government, and the existence of appropriate forums that allow and encourage the free expression of people's interests. Moreover, as de Tocqueville problematises notions of participation, he cautions against overlooking the significance of

'elitist' civil associations, arguing that when simply seen as a question of mass participation, these processes can have the paradoxical tendencies result that reinforce conformity, mediocrity, and tokenistic modes of participation (cited in Gamble 1981).

Participation in decentralised institutions is assumed to enhance the prospects of effective implementation of government programs by making it more responsive to the needs of the poor. This argument is based on the assumption that a substantial gap exists between government bureaucracy and the poor such that policy makers are often poorly informed about the circumstances in which implementation of programs takes place and that the poor are often unable to articulate their needs. Therefore public participation helps to surmount these problems by creating opportunities for the poor to communicate their needs to officials and enhancing the ability of the poor to oblige government officials to respond to them (Echeverri-Gent, 1992). It is also argued that participation makes plans more relevant, it gives people more self-esteem and helps to legitimise the planning process and the state as a whole (Conyers, 1990; Ife, 2002; 1995).

Participation is assumed to be important not only because it communicates the citizen's needs and desires to government, but also because it has other more direct benefits. It has been viewed as an educational device through which civic virtues are learned. As Mill (1991) puts it, "among the foremost benefits of free government is that education is carried down to the very lowest ranks of the people when they are called to take part in acts which directly affect the great interests of the country". Thus participation through decentralisation is thought to contribute to political education and creation of a seed bed for political leaders to develop skills in policy making and other areas through their role in the selection of representatives, in deciding and having a say in the nature of local policies and in development and budgeting. As such it transforms the poor from objects of development into knowledgeable subjects of progress (Mill 1958 as cited in Echeverri-Gent, 1992).

While all these justifications remain, the experience of decentralisation in Africa including Malawi shows that various forms of decentralisation have been implemented. These decentralisation efforts have displayed a variety (sometimes a mix) of kinds and layers of local authorities being engaged and developed; a variety of explicit and implicit goals and purposes, sometimes conflicting; a mix of powers and responsibilities being devolved, a variety and mix of actors such as chiefs, government bureaucrats, local people (Ribot, 2002). The new demands for participation in most African countries have components of both instrumental and developmental aspects. These in turn have shaped the expected outcomes of decentralisation. Therefore how the stated goals of decentralisation such as participation are translated into reality at the local level largely depends on the interaction of these factors and the specific environment within which decentralisation is taking place.

What this means is that the structure and form of decentralisation that a particular country takes is a useful starting

point for understanding the issue of participation within a given context. Therefore by examining the structural arrangements and analysing how participation is occurring in a particular country one gets a glimpse of what kind of participation is under consideration in the given country and whether that participation is producing desired results such as accountability and responsiveness to the needs of the rural people. It is against this framework that the analysis of participation in Malawi's system of local government and administration is being made.

The decentralisation and participation experience during the colonial period (1891- 1961)

Prior to the introduction of colonial rule in 1891, decision - making authority rested with the chiefs and their communities. When Malawi became a British protectorate in 1891, for administrative purposes, the country was divided into three provinces. The three provinces were divided into districts and the districts into sections and the sections into villages². The lowest official unit was the village. A system of administration was set up that was headed by the governor who acted as the chief representative and agent of the British Empire. Below him were provincial commissioners. At the lowest level of this hierarchy was the district commissioner who was in direct contact with the local communities. The district was considered the keystone unit of district administration and it is from here that district commissioners controlled all aspects of local administration such as police, security, justice, finance and tax. Although the colonial government found indigenous chiefs heading the various villages before 1891, they were not included as part of the administrative system because the first priority of the colonial government was to maintain stability and continuity for itself. This imperative for stability brought with it a strong urge for central administration and control and led the colonial government to shatter the supremacy of the more powerful chiefs.

It did not take long for the colonial government to realise that it was not possible to administer the country by themselves because they had few district commissioners and were widely spaced in a country where communication was difficult. Despite a clear realisation that the commissioners needed the help of local chiefs in administering the rural areas, the government was uncertain as to how much power it should grant back to chiefs and they found it somewhat a difficult question (Baker, 1995). After contemplating these difficulties in 1912, the indigenous chiefs were incorporated into the administrative structure to assist in the elementary functions such as tax collection and

² This subdivision remains to this day. The provinces were later named regions. There is the Northern, Central and Southern Region and their populations (according to the 1998 census) are 1,233,560, 4,066,340, and 4,633,968 respectively. The country has 27 districts and the district, like the colonial period, continues to be the key unit of administration and governance in Malawi. On average the district population is 367,921; with the largest district having a population of 809,397 and the smallest having a population of 8,074

maintenance of law and order. In search of best lines on which to administer local affairs in Malawi a Native Authorities ordinance was introduced in 1933. This ordinance introduced indirect rule and chiefs were the unit of authority, power and status.³ In most of the British colonies in Africa this became the predominant form of government (Mawhood, 1993). The purpose as stated by the colonial government was to formulate a subsidiary local government in the districts that would be manned by the people themselves...chosen by the people themselves under the superintendence of the District Commissioner (Malawi Government, 1969).

What this meant was that the native authorities would be forums where the indigenous Malawians would have a voice in the choice of their leaders as well as a say in decision making concerning issues of direct interest. In practice this system did not make room for representation or expression of popular opinion. Olowu (2001) notes that in the colonised countries where this system was implemented it meant rule by a few colonial officials with the aid of the most compliant traditional officials and the underlying objective was the maintenance of law and order, taxation and justice for the colonial order. Likewise in Malawi, the 'native authorities' comprised favoured traditional chiefs. The chiefs were not representatives of the people; instead they functioned as district commissioner's agents in the maintenance of law and order, the administration of justice, tax collection and other functions as deemed fit by the commissioner. It has therefore been concluded that while this system succeeded in guaranteeing colonial conquest, it failed to provide genuine avenues for political participation and empowerment for the growing number of the educated elite (Olowu, 2001). However, as Mamdani (1996) argues, the indirect rule was created to penetrate and manage rural Africa in favour of colonial interest, rather than benefiting local people in the first instance.

During the closing stages of British rule and after the second World War, decolonisation came to top the agenda in international relations for reasons such as reward for colonized people's participation in the war, agitation by a growing number of educated elites in the colonies and the ascendancy of social liberal parties in the colonising countries of Britain and France (Olowu, 2001). The result was that in 1947 there was a shift in

3 After independence in 1967, a chiefs Act was introduced which abolished the title and position of Native Authorities (NA). The former native authorities were now known as Traditional Authorities (TA) with no powers to make rules or issue orders. The system of traditional authority is elaborately structured. It starts with the village headman at the lowest level, then group village headman as an in charge over a collection of villages then Traditional Authority on the top. The traditional authorities operate on a larger territorial administrative scale. As of 1998 census they were 30 TAs in the northern region, 56 in the central, and 74 in the South. They were integrated as an administrative extension of the state and had to continue to maintain law and order and to cooperate with the party and the District Commissioner.

government policy and some thought was being given towards the development of an efficient and democratic system of local government as a key to the success in African administration. Traditional administration could no longer do the job of linking up the government with the people. Various ways were therefore thought of putting structures and channels of participation to regulate citizens' decision-making input. This policy shift led to the development of a system of local government throughout British and later Francophone Africa.

For Malawi the result was that in 1953 the Local Government (District Councils) ordinance was passed providing for the establishment of formal statutory district councils as structures separate from the native authorities. The councils were given limited authority to make bylaws and provide health, education, agriculture and other services. The purpose from the perspective of the colonial office was to provide political education through local practice. 'Nevertheless, none of the members of these bodies were elected but were government appointees' (Kaunda, 1999) and the district commissioner was made the chairman of the district council. Despite being the overwhelming majority, the indigenous Malawians could not participate in choosing government, and their few civil society organisations had limited influence on governance (Chijere et al., 2001).

The rising of nationalism in the late 1950s led to more centralisation because the colonial government feared that nationalists would capture the councils to further the anti-colonial struggle. This led to an amendment of the Local Government Act introduced in 1953. The councils were stripped of all rule-making powers and relegated to mere providers of services and facilities dependent on finances collected through the Native Authorities, but controlled by the DC (Kaunda, 1992).

While it is notable that the foundations of a system of local government were laid during this period, the government's main interest was to collect revenue and prevent insurrection. Although the colonial government appreciated the need for provision of channels of participation through local government, they were shying away from the implications it had on power sharing. As a result there was a desperate endeavour to "fine tune" the structure in such a way that real power and decision making remained at the centre. For the same reason the essence of participation got "stolen" away with one hand while the other was giving so that eventually the whole issue of local participation was rhetorical.

Decentralisation and participation in the post independence one party period: (1961- 1994)

When Malawi became self-governing under the Malawi Congress Party (MCP) in 1961, statutory district councils were reintroduced throughout the country under The Local Government (District Councils) (Amendment) Ordinance of 1961. This ordinance introduced a system of decentralisation based on devolution of powers to local government bodies with

locally elected councils and it permitted universal adult suffrage in the election of councillors. The councils were to have a chairman, elected by council members from among the elected members who replaced the District Commissioner. Instead District Commissioners were given new roles in relation to local government. They had to guide and advise the councils and train local government staff and in 1963, the District Commissioners became official advisors to the council. Chiefs remained ex-officio members of the council. Alongside these statutory district councils were field offices of the central government that linked them to the centre through the office of the District Commissioner. The result was that a dual approach to district governance and development was created in Malawi; a situation in which two sub systems existed at the district level. It was hoped that through these local government councils (elected councillors); local people would participate in decisions concerning their development.

However, the nature of political and administrative relations took another turn in 1966 when Malawi was formally proclaimed a one party state after independence in 1964. From then on, a rapid transition towards further centralisation followed, accompanied by growth of executive dominance in the political system (Kaunda, 1999). All state and local government institutions were constitutionally subordinated to the party. All local government councillors had to be Malawi Congress Party members bound by the party's rules and constitution and they were ex-official members of the area committee of the party. The people's right to vote for a councillor of their own choice was also altered. Instead each ward had to nominate at least three candidates and their names would be forwarded to the president of the party, Dr Banda, who would then select a councillor to represent the ward. The role of the elected representatives was limited to discussing policies put forward by the executive branch of government (Malawi Government, 1965a). This meant that effective local participation was limited. Similarly, people's participation in development-related decision aimed to enhance livelihoods was problematic because the representatives were meant to discuss policies put forward by the central government and not input from the general populace.

Therefore while the central government transferred power to the local government councils at the district level purportedly created as a means to broaden citizen participation, it resulted in a district council in each locality which effectively enhanced the leading role of the ruling party through party officials, and political appointees both of whom were subject to tight central control. In a sense, this transfer of power broadened opportunities to participate in local decision making but this was strictly constrained by the one party structure such that the councils primarily exerted functions of political mobilisation and control for the regime. Local elected government during this period was neither representative nor spontaneous, but was instead a contrivance of an entrenched ruling party. It can be argued that like the colonial chiefs, local government councillors during this period were more answerable to their political and administrative officers than they were to the local population.

From the mid 1960s an important development in the decentralisation movement in Africa was the realisation that

development goals in the field could not be effectively pursued in situations in which field offices and local government systems operated in isolation of one another in the development process. This need led to the creation of District Development Committees (DDC) to give expression to that concern. 'By the close of the first decade of independence district development committees existed in practically all Anglophone Africa, and the common practice was for one country to replicate the structures in operation in a neighbouring country; often there would be a consultant from a donor country initiating such replication' (Oyugi, 2001). This development led to the turning away from district councils as the prime instrument of rural development in favour of district development committees (Mawhood, 1983). It was expected that through these mechanisms, enhanced forms of participation would lead to communities playing a greater role in defining and identifying development projects suited to meet their individual and community needs.

In Malawi, DDCs were established in rural districts in 1967. The prime function of these committees in Malawi was to provide decentralised planning of local development projects in each district through people's participation. These committees came under the district administration system and were composed of the District Commissioner as the chairperson, district heads of government departments, chief executives of local government councils, and chairperson of political party in the district, all chiefs in the district, chairpersons of local authorities, representatives from non-governmental organisations and representatives from the business community. The committees had no directly elected element. Channels of popular participation below the district were created in the form of Village and Area Development Committees. The ward, which is the lowest unit of the local government structure, was sidelined.

It has been recorded that although these committees were providing a valuable service to the government in the dissemination of information and in some cases in changing the attitudes of many farmers, members were confined only to supporting government approved programmes with little influence as to which development projects took place in their districts (Miller, 1970). The system ignored the real needs and aspirations of the majority of poor village communities (UNDP and UNCDF, 1997). Village community involvement in the implementation of "top down" projects by providing labour and other resources was maintained only through fear of the wrath of the Malawi Congress Party.

In 1993, in an attempt to improve the level of people's participation in planning and decision-making in the District Development Committee system, the government under the aegis of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) adopted a new decentralisation policy called District Focus for Rural Development (DFRD), whose main features were largely borrowed from Kenya. This policy called for the strengthening of the role and capacity of the DDC system through four main elements: empowerment of local institutions, sub-national planning, District Development Fund and community participation. The major objective of this strategy was to make the district the centre for rural development activities and popular participation became the cornerstone of this policy. The

introduction of this policy led to the following changes: DDC membership was changed; district heads of government and chief executives of councils were removed from the committee in order to be more representative of local communities. A district development fund was established to fund development projects identified by the people. A district development office was established responsible for facilitating the planning functions.

The commitment of the political executive to the implementation of the District Focus for Rural Development programme enhanced the standing of DDCs at the expense of locally elected local government councils. In essence 'throughout the years of single party state and through the 1990s, the district development committees were operational as the 'decentralized' decision making authority, while the rural councils declined although they existed on paper' (UNCDF, 2001).

An appraisal study of the system indicated that while the District Development Planning System of the District Focus for Rural Development framework was sound, genuine participation of the local people at the planning stage was weak though stronger during implementation. It also indicated that proposals were often influenced by the political elite, seeking to manipulate the system to gain credit for themselves (UNDP, UNCDF, 1997). Although a fund was introduced, people had no say in the allocation or control of such funds.

Therefore, although it was hoped that local participation would be secured through popular participation in the district development committees, in practice these committees turned out to be mechanisms of regulation for the central government with popular participation gradually going down as a result of ever increasing bureaucratic controls. The whole edifice in sum did have a hint of citizen representation but it was carefully controlled representation, kept tightly under wraps at all levels. It was in many ways managed and guided. Participation was thus reduced to getting people (a) to involve themselves in project implementation by providing labour and other resources such as bricks sand in return for what was considered to be a development project such as a school, road or health, and (b) to support externally designed initiatives motivated by an outsider's perception of what constitutes a development problem and how it should be addressed. Such was the experience in many African countries. One of the arguments that has been advanced to explain why participation did not materialise in post independence Africa is the fact that although participation was a stated political objective, it was carried out mainly through consultative committees, which had no real powers over government officials in charge of local government (Olowu, 2001). This state of affairs was best captured by Philip Mawhood (1983) who stated that: In the 1960s there followed for most countries a swing away from local autonomy in favour of central planning and greater control of public resources. A deconcentrated administration was left in charge of the locality, similar to but weaker than the colonial one. It was aided by committees, which hardly had a role beyond discussing development plans and giving help in their implementation.

Despite this picture the quest for participation is still popular and as Uphoff and Cohen, (1980) says 'it is often endorsed unambiguously on normative grounds even though its empirical basis is not clear'. Meshed with the language of decentralisation and democracy, it is now being identified as an essential element of development. Decentralisation is now being considered in the context of a pluralist discourse and it is viewed as a way of supporting local governance and development in terms of poverty reduction across a number of African countries. It is based on the idea that with greater participation and local democracy, the benefits of local activities may be retained and reinvested in local needs. Greater participation is believed to lead to more relevant planning processes, empowerment of the poor, the delivery of more useful local services, and poverty alleviation is often assumed to be one of the positive outcomes of decentralised governance.

This was the Malawian context in which the new multiparty government came into power in 1994; its main, albeit self appointed task was to redress this situation, to build a new Malawi politically from the grassroots up to the national level, involving a radical reform of local government

Decentralisation in the multiparty democratic era: 1994 to present

Following internal and external pressures for democratisation of the political process, a multiparty political system was established after the general elections of 1994 led by the United Democratic Front (UDF). Following this political change a new constitution was adopted. The new constitution, which was officially promulgated in 1995, provided for the establishment of local government authorities which 'shall be responsible for the representation of the people... for their welfare, and shall have responsibility for the promotion of infrastructural and economic development, ...consolidation and promotion of local democratic institutions and democratic participation' (Malawi Government, 1994). The government abolished all local government councils and it was anticipated that elected councils would be set up soon at the district level. As it turned out, elections were never held despite constitutional provisions and a declared intent to do so. The reasons were somewhat unclear. Instead the government opted for the continuation of the District Focus for Development approach to decentralisation up until four years later.

In 1998 the government commissioned a review of the country's decentralisation efforts and requested for a proposal of an appropriate, sound and effective decentralisation system based on the spirit of democracy, and devolution of powers that would facilitate the participation of people in decision-making. From comparative studies of existing options in Africa, the major recommendations were that rural and urban administration and political authority be devolved to the district level and that government agencies at the district and local level be integrated into one unit known as the 'Assembly'. When the policy was adopted in 1988 a number of changes were made to the structure: (1) regional local government offices were abolished

(2) the office of the District Commissioner was abolished and instead it merged with the council at the least in the rural areas. The council remained the same geographically but it was renamed assembly, a change symbolising its new status and importance. Under the new system the assemblies are composed of elected members, traditional authorities, members of parliament that fall within the local government area and five other persons appointed by the elected members to cater for special interest groups within the district as determined by the assembly.

The new structure inherited the District Development planning system, the District Development Fund that was established as part of the District Focus for Rural Development. Similarly, decision-making bodies below the district are still based on the District Focus approach of Area and Village Development Committees although the policy stipulates that the assemblies can create lower level structures to facilitate participation as they see fit. Under the new system, the central government is required to cede authority to district local governments in a number of fields such as development planning, health education etc. Thus district governments whose powers had previously been circumscribed were now to take full responsibility for such important areas as education, health. The rationale behind this district focused decentralisation were several: First the legislation's architects argued that shifting authority to the district would promote democratisation and that district based autonomy would bring decision making to a level where communities were more inclined to participate and where they could hold politicians accountable for their actions.

Ribot (2002) argues that in this most recent wave of decentralisation, the language of decentralisation has made an important shift from emphasizing the terms of management of local populations to a discourse more focused on democratisation, pluralism, and rights. It seems to be based more on the assumption that decentralised planning and participation can achieve effectiveness and efficiency by resolving implementation problems of rural development planning. Thus it represents a continuation of past approaches and a search for local institutions that are participatory and responsible to the local citizens. How such a system promotes genuine democratic participation and responds to the needs of the people remains to be seen.

Literature Cited

Baker, C. 1995. *The Evolution of Local Government in Malawi*. Ile- Ife: University of Ife Press.
Blair, H. 2000. *Participation and Accountability at the Periphery: Democratic Local Governance in Six Countries*. *World Development* 28(1): 21-39.

Conclusion

It is clear that in both the colonial and single party periods, there has been some effort on the part of government to decentralise decision making power to the local level although what constitutes decentralisation has not been the same. Each of the decentralised structures put in place while reflecting the need for possibilities of citizen participation in decisions also represented a widening of the idea of participation over its predecessor. While the reasons for such participation differ, in most cases this did not go beyond rhetoric and the efforts failed to adequately engage the effective participation of local people in decisions concerning their lives.

While statutory representative local governments were created, powers were devolved to non-representative or upwardly accountable institutions so much so that local government institutions became local administration institutions even though they continued to be referred to as local government. Further, participation efforts largely focused on development participation and committees. In addition, the nature of the kind of local participation and the attendant public sector roles to support that kind of participation was not fully clarified. Instead official bureaucrats dominated local decision-making. Therefore regardless of the design of the local government system, the prevailing centralising tendencies on the part of the central government rendered any meaningful system of participation a myth.

The current return to representative local government and its potential role in development in Malawi and many other Sub Saharan countries pursuing such strategies marks a shift of emphasis from bureaucratic committees to political institutions. It is difficult to be optimistic about the future of participation in decentralisation programmes in Malawi and it is not obvious that the change from one party to multiparty democracy and the ongoing local government reforms will automatically create a fertile ground for participation because much of the country's current experience parallels that of the late 1960s favouring centralising trends, which destroy the spirit of local governance. It is how the political aspects and power relations are played at this local level that will determine the impact of decentralisation programmes that emphasises devolution and locally elected councillors. We can only wait for the outcome as Malawi's democracy takes root and the various reforms are implemented.

There is therefore a need to gain a better understanding in Malawian communities and Sub Saharan Africa in general of the possibilities of the nature of popular participation and under what circumstances it can contribute towards development.

Chijere, Patel and Kanyongolo. 2001. *Democracy Report for Malawi*. Prepared for Institute of Democratic and Electoral Affairs. Pp2. Available at <http://www.idea.int/search-results.cfm>.
Cohen, J. M. and N. T. Uphoff. 1980. *Participation's place in*

- Rural Development: Seeking Clarity through Specificity. World Development. 8:213-235.
- Conyers, D. 1990. "Decentralization and Development Planning: A Comparative Perspective". In P. De Valk and K. H. Wekwete. Decentralizing for Participatory Planning. Comparing the Experiences of Zimbabwe and other Anglophone Countries in Eastern and Southern Africa. Aldershot: Avebury Press. Pp 15-36.
- Crook, R. C. and J. Manor. 1998. Democracy and Decentralisation in South Asia and West Africa. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Pp 7.
- De Tocqueville, A. 1945. Democracy in America. London: Oxford University Press.
- Echeverri-Gent, J. 1992. Public Participation and Poverty Alleviation: The Experience of Reform Communists in India's West Bengal. World Devel. 20(10):1401-1422.
- Gamble, A. 1981. An Introduction to Modern Social and political Thought. MacMillan: Houndmills. Pp 161.
- Ife, J. 2002. Community Development: Community-Based Alternatives in an Age of Globalisation. 2nd ed. Pearson Education Australia/Longman: NSW. Pp129.
- Ife, J. 1995. Community Development: Creating Community Alternatives – Vision, Analysis and Practice. Longman: Melbourne.
- Johnson, C. 2001. Local Democracy, Democratic Decentralisation and Rural Development: Theories, Challenges and Options for Policy. Development Policy Review. 19(4):521-532.
- Kaunda, M. 1999. State Centralisation and the decline of local government in Malawi. International Review of Administrative Sciences. 65(4):579-595.
- Kaunda, M. 1992. The Administrative Organisation and Processes of National Development Processes in Malawi in Guy C. Mhone (ed.) Malawi at the Crossroads: The Post Colonial Economy, Harare: Sapes Trust. pp 50-89.
- Malawi Government. 1994. The Republic of Malawi Constitution of 1994. Zomba: Government Print.
- Malawi Government. 1969a. Summary of Proceedings of the Legislative Council of Nyasaland. Zomba: Government Printer. 1: 12.
- Malawi Government. 1965a. Proposals for a Republican Constitution of Malawi. Zomba: Government Printer. Pp12.
- Mamdani, M. 1996. Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the legacy of late colonialism. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Mawhood, P. (ed.). 1993. The Experience of Local Government in the Third World: Experience of Decentralisation in Tropical Africa. Africa Institute of South Africa. Second Edition.
- Mawhood, P. (ed.). 1983. The Experience of Local Government in the Third World: Experience of Decentralisation in Tropical Africa. Africa Institute of South Africa. First Edition Pp8 and 95
- Mikkelsen, B. 1995. Methods for Development Work and Research: A Guide for practitioners. New Delhi: Sage Publications. Pp 62.
- Miller, R. 1970. District Development Committees in Malawi: A case study in rural development. Journal of Administration Overseas, ix. 2:129-142.
- Mill, J. S. 1991. Considerations on Representative Government on Liberty and other essays, Oxford: Oxford University Press. Pp 327.
- Olowu, D. 2001. Decentralization Policies and Practices under Structural Adjustment and Democratization in Africa. UNRISD programme for Democracy, Governance, and Human Rights. Paper No. 4:4-5.
- Oyugi, O. W. 2001. Decentralization in Africa. In J. S. E. Walter B Stohr, and Devyani Mani (Ed.), Decentralization, Governance and Planning for Local Level Development. Westport: United Nations and United Nations Centre for Regional Development. 3:95-122.
- Oyugi, O. W. 2000. Decentralization for good governance and development: The unending debate. Regional Development Dialogue. 21(1): 3-22.
- Ribot, J. 2002. African Decentralization: Local Actors, Powers and Accountability. UNRISD programme for Democracy, Governance, and Human Rights. Paper No. 8: 3.
- Schonwalder, G. 1997. New Democratic Spaces at the Grassroots. Popular Participation in Latin American Local Governments. Development and Change. 28:753-770.
- United Nations Capital Development Fund. 2001. Empowerment through Governance and Development Management as a Strategy towards poverty alleviation. A Concept Paper. Malawi: UNCDF. Pp5.
- United Nations Development Programme. 2003. CSOPP Documents: Empowering People: A Guide to Participation. Retrieved 5th May, 2003.
- United Nations Development Programme, and United Nations Capital Development Fund. 1997. Capacity Building for Decentralisation: A component of the Local Governance and Development Management programme. An Appraisal Report. Malawi: UNDP. Pp 8.
- Verba, S. and N. H. Nie. 1972. Participation in America: Political Democracy and Social Equality. New York: Harper and Row. Pp 2.
- Webster, N. 1992. Panchayat Raj in West Bengal: Popular Participation for the people or the party? Development and Change. 23(4): 128-63.