



Malawian Poor in Need of Effective Social Protection Measures, By Mathias Burton Kafunda¹

Introduction

Malawi's population is estimated at 14.8million.² More than 46 percent of the country's population is younger than 25 years old³. Malawi's real GDP growth has averaged about 7 percent since 2005, with a peak of 9.7 percent in 2008, and decreased to 2.5% in 2013. Nearly two-thirds of the population still subsists on less than US\$1.25 per day.⁴ It has been recognized that the programmes being implemented by Government and major stakeholders designed to achieve sustainable economic growth and development have neither in the short nor in medium term translated into improved quality of life for the ultra and moderately poor. The process of economic growth and development, due to its complex and competitive nature has invariably excluded a certain sector of the population from taking full advantage of the benefits of economic growth. As a result, most of the excluded people remain poor and live in abject poverty, destitution and squalor.

In Malawi, while urban poverty continues to rise at an increasing rate, however, Malawi's poor and destitute are mostly found in the rural areas where they are engaged in agriculture and other informal economic activities. Many of them rely on the complex traditional social network for social protection. But the continued weakening of extended family support in the face of harsh economic realities and rapid rate of urbanization means many people including children, the elderly and the disabled, are left to struggle for survival. Despite some period of relatively high economic growth in the country, the majority of the people still lack social protection. Social protection exists for only a tiny fraction of the population working in the formal segment of the economy including those employed in the public sector and a few others in the private formal sector. The sections of the population who desperately need social protection are those who do not have access to it.

Previous Social Protection Measures

The policy makers in Malawi have for long recognized that managing poverty and vulnerability is essential for pro-poor growth and that social protection policy and concrete actions in this regard are essential especially for Malawi's rural societies where the majority of people are poor. However, policy makers seem to understate the fact that social protection is an investment that the country

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² <http://data.worldbank.org/country/malawi>

³ World Bank. 2012. World Development Indicators. Washington DC.

⁴ UNDP, 2013. Human Development Report. Washington DC.

cannot afford not to make. In Malawi, government together with other stakeholders, have previously developed several safety net programmes and social protection measure to address the various risks affecting the most vulnerable groups. These have included the *National Safety Nets Strategy* in 2000 and the *National Safety Nets Programme (NSNP)* under the Malawi Poverty Reduction Strategy in 2002. The *National Safety Nets Programme* consisted of four sub programmes: *the Public Works Programme, the Targeted Nutrition Programme, the Targeted Inputs Programme* and *Direct Welfare Transfers Programme*.

Despite implementing an increasingly diverse range of safety net and social protection measures, levels of poverty and vulnerability in Malawi remain extremely high; the evidence that vulnerability is rising rather than falling suggests that these interventions have not been adding up. Such occurrences of policy failure have worsened the vulnerability position of the ultra and moderately poor. One reason for this is the uncoordinated and patchy nature of the policy and social protection instruments which were further aggravated by insufficient commitment by implementers and poor funding. In fact when it comes to social protection policy and measures in Malawi, it could be said that the country is caught in a viscous circle of ill-conceived policy decisions and malfeasance such as poor allocations of resources, and inefficient delivery systems that don't convert intentions and policies, efficiently, into actions that could make a positive impact on the vulnerability position of the ultra and moderately poor.

Learning from previous Failures?

For 2 years since 2010, the government had been consulting stakeholders on social protection with the view of developing a comprehensive and responsive social protection policy that would guide intervention that protect vulnerable Malawians against livelihood shocks and life-cycle stages. By 2012 the government had developed the *National Social Support Policy* that encompasses public and private programmes which aim at providing income and consumption transfers, to protect the poor against vulnerabilities and to enhance their social status and rights. The policy is however bound to face several challenges and barriers in the course of implementation. One existing challenge is the unavailability of adequate data that could be used for planning interventions for ultra-poor and vulnerable households.

Looking at the previous attempts, the policy makers are being cautioned that social protection must not be ``projectised``, it must be institutionalized; it must not be donor-driven it must be government-owned (*though donor financing may be required in a poor country like Malawi*) and lastly social protection must not be seen as “charity or welfare” but ultimately as a right of citizenship.