

Role of citizen participation in anti-corruption; A perspective of Malawi's National Anti-Corruption Strategy II

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ABSTRACT:- Citizen participation is a crucial factor in the anti-corruption domain. It is associated with improved accountability, an important aspect in corruption control. The study's methodology adopts an analytical approach and reviews literature on citizen participation. This paper uses a model of participation by Arnstein (1969) as a theoretical framework. The analysis identifies weak arrangements on citizen participation characterized by initiatives with weak voice coupled with weak institutional, legal, and regulatory environment to make participation effective and meaningful. However, many collective action efforts are being implemented to address this challenge. This includes the Construction Sector Transparency Initiative (CoST), Institutional Integrity Committees (IICs): Open Government Partnership and in general increased civil society involvement in anti-corruption. The paper concludes by highlighting prospects and opportunities for citizen participation which comprise an enabling legal and policy framework.

Key words: citizen participation, anti-corruption, accountability

I. INTRODUCTION

The fight against corruption is complex and requires a multi-stakeholder approach. Cognizant of this fact, Malawi's blueprint for anti-corruption, the National Anti-Corruption Strategy II (NACS II) adopts a holistic approach in its quest of attaining a national integrity system (NIS). The NACSII identifies twelve pillars that form the NIS that include Executive, Legislature, Judiciary, Civil Society, Private Sector, Media, Traditional Leaders, Local Government, Faith-based Organizations, Academia, Women, and Youth. It is believed that participation of these sectors is critical to the success of the corruption fight. strategy recognizes Citizen participation is thus a bedrock of this NIS. Under the NACS II, citizen participation is represented in the pillars that include civil society, youth, women, faith based, local government and traditional leaders. Each of these pillars has a unique approach to participation which is in line with the roles that they play in their respective sector. This notwithstanding, the NACSII attributes public reluctance and unwillingness to participate in the corruption fight as an attributing factor to the effort that hamper anti-corruption fight (Riedel, 1972). However, any successful strategy for fighting corruption must involve the public to participate in the fight with not only tapping into their ideas and knowledge but also as strengthening the legitimacy of the reform process (Stapenhurst & Kpundeh, 1998). Citizen participation is a major part in the broader quest of a national integrity system. There are many calls for active citizen participation due to the level of dissatisfaction that citizens have on government service delivery which are found wanting (Callahan,2007, p.1184).

II. SITUATION ANALYSIS

The *status quo* in Malawi as regards to Citizen participation in the fight against corruption is a miscellany of positives and negatives. According to OGP (2016) regarding citizen participation in general, there are mechanisms for engaging citizen's democratic process through regular elections, participation in local government development planning and consultations on policy frameworks. However, the levels of citizen's participation are still limited, and the government does not adequately reflect the issues raised by citizens in its final policies and decisions that affect them. Apart from limited consultations, there is lack of mechanisms for providing feedback on performance duty bearers and government. These sentiments are also true in the corruption fight. Currently the level of participation by citizens is low as attested by the 2019 Institute of Public Opinion and Research (IPOR) Survey.

When respondents were asked, a question that do ordinary Malawians see a role for themselves in the war against corruption and do they think their involvement can make a difference? The survey findings show that Malawian citizens are split on whether they think they can make a difference or not in the fight against corruption. On one hand, 36% of the citizens say that they can make a difference in the fight against corruption while 43% said they could not. Further nearly one fifth (17%) said there is nothing ordinary people can do to combat corruption in the country meaning they cannot take part. In this regard, it is not surprising that some citizens are not even willing to report when they encounter corruption. Malawians were further asked if they or anyone in their household encountered a corrupt practice by a public official and if they reported this to the authorities. About 78% reported not countering corruption, 20% indicated encountering corruption but did not report and only 2% said they encountered corruption and reported it. This indicates that most individuals who encounter corruption do not report to authorities (IPOR, 2019). This gives a grim picture of citizen participation in the fight against corruption.

On the other hand, there has been a significant rise in civil society participation in the fight against corruption. In 2020 Human Rights Defenders Coalition (HRDC) launched a corruption whistleblower initiative in which they were reporting corruption allegations to the Anti-Corruption Bureau (ACB). Youth and Society (YAS) has also in recent years taken an active role in the fight against corruption by raising various concerns about how the government is fighting corruption, a recent example being the issuing of a joint statement entitled "*The Quest for fairness: Civil Society's Reflections on Selective Justice in Corruption Combat*" on 13th September 2023. Another positive note has been the way Malawian's demanded justice on the elections alleged bribery case, in which a petition was drawn and submitted to the then Director General of the ACB, Reyneck Matemba demanding a swift action from the ACB.

III. CONCEPTUALIZING CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

Citizen participation has become an important topical issue in public policy arena. Albeit citizen participation is a contested concept depending on the perspective from which it is looked at and what you seek to achieve. Loosely defined, citizen participation may mean an act of taking part by any person or citizen in public affairs (Gaventa, 2002). Relatedly, Cunningham, (1972) posit citizen participation as possession by the ordinary person of some control over those matters that affect members of a community (p.594).

Other scholars advance that citizen participation is about opening public administration and allowing citizens to take part in decision-making processes (Makowski, 2017). According to Rosener (1978), there are three sets of individuals to which the meaning of citizen participation may carry different meanings namely elected official, public official, and citizens. To these groups of people, participation differs depending on the matter at hand. Citizen participation can mean political participation (voting), civic engagement (citizen support to their community through volunteerism and civic activism) and planning and administrative processes (policy formulation and service delivery) issue (Callahan, 2007).

To citizens, participation means the sharing of decision power and means of expressing an opinion (Rosener, 1978). This definition postulates citizen participation by leaning towards political participation. Citizen participation as redistribution of power that enables citizens presently excluded from political and economic processes to be deliberately included in the future (Arnstein, 1969). It is envisaged that citizen participation results in better public policy (Rosener, 1978). On the other hand, Callahan (2007) define citizen participation as participation in the planning and administrative processes of government with a particular focus on policy issues and service delivery (p.1181). Examples include tax issues, environmental issues, and governance. Sometimes, power holder uses the rhetoric of participation to appear politically right while in essence nothing of the people's ideas is not taken on board and the status quo remains the same (Arnstein, 1969). Citizen participation may also refer to ways in which citizens exercise their voice through deliberation, consultation, and mobilization to inform and influence larger institutions and policies (Gaventa, 2002).

Citizen participation can either be direct where citizens are involved in decisions of the state or indirect through elected representatives or officials who act on behalf of the citizens and interest of the state (Callahan, 2007). However, it is argued that direct participation is untenable because it is impractical for citizens to participate in every public sector decision due to lack the time, knowledge, and personal motivation (Callahan, 2007). It must be stated that the choice of the participation method to choose would be determined by the nature of the matter at hand. There are some instances where direct participation would be ideal in some situations while in others it might not and vice versa. Participation in essence is about creating a two-way communication between powerholders and the citizens in an honest and open exchange of ideas with an intent listen to and understand one another (Callahan, 2007).

The popularity of citizen participation is because of the disillusionment with bureaucracy which has resulted in growing frustration with traditional governance models that promote hierarchy and insulate public servants from the public (Callahan, 2007). Values of bureaucratic governance conflict with democratic values (ibid). For effective citizen participation, citizens must be in control of the matter at hand and through owning

the process and being able to articulate what they desire of a policy whereas powerholders would listen from them (Callahan, 2007). According to Burke (1968), citizen participation is not only a democratic process but also an important aspect in public policy because it gives the opportunity to citizens to give voice to matters that affect their destinies. Citizen participation is thus viewed as a strategy which can be used to achieve specific goals and objectives (Burke, 1968). Citizen participation is also envisaged to increase a sense of power and leadership among the citizens which can bring a positive change in their community projects (Burke, 1968). According to Cunningham (1972), in almost all the definitions of participation, there are three essential elements which are key in the participation process namely common amateurs, power and decision (p.595). In the context of citizen participation, common amateurs refer to members of the community without paid office, wealth, special information beyond their numbers, whereas power refers the ability of a person to get others to think and act as that person wants them to think and act and decision refers to the substantive choices that a person can exert in the participation process (Cunningham, 1972). It is important to understand these elements because they affect how participation process. For instance, members of the community can have power but if they cannot do not exercise it to influence decisions that relate to their welfare, there is no participation (ibid).

Citizen participation also enhances acceptability of projects because individuals are more likely to accept group-made decisions where they belong than decisions dictated on them (Burke, 1968). Citizen participation is also important in situations where corruption has become so systemic in all facets of government capturing the very agencies meant to fight the vice (Klitgaard, 2008). In this scenario, citizens' voice becomes critical to destabilize these corrupt schemes. At times citizen participation is undertaken by coopting influential individuals in the community to prevent anticipated obstructionism (Burke, 1968). This can be achieved by whistleblowing and exposing abuses of power, raising standards and public expectations of state performance, and bringing political pressure and encouraging oversight institutions to act (Fox, 2000). Additionally, citizen participation enhances better decision making, facilitates social stability by developing a sense of community, increasing collective decision making, and promoting acceptance and respect of the governance process (Callahan, 2007).

Citizen participation accords an opportunity to citizens to articulate their needs based on community values and interests (Callahan, 2007). Further, with citizen participation there is a collective and shared notion of public interest which helps acceptance of public policy decisions (Callahan, 2007). In addition, citizen participation brings about a relationship of trust between the government and the citizens (Callahan, 2007). Other benefits of citizen participation include promotion of democracy, building trust, increasing transparency, enhancing accountability, building social capital, reducing conflict, ascertain priorities, promoting legitimacy, cultivate mutual understanding, and advance fairness and justice (Callahan, 2007). Citizen participation enhances transparency and responsibility which is touted as a solution for corruption control (Zheng, 2016). In addition, citizen participation ensures that citizens interests are represented in development or public policy issues which is critical for their success (Rosener, 1978).

3.1 Forms of Participation

Grant & Keohane (2005) categorized into two models namely participation and delegation. Participation model is where the performance of power-wielders is evaluated by those who are affected by their actions whereas under the delegation model, performance is evaluated by those entrusting them with powers (Grant & Keohane, 2005). Under the participation model the people entrust a leader or a party to speak for the interests of the people on their interest (Grant & Keohane, 2005).

This study adopts the Arnstein (1969) model of participation which equates citizen participation to steps on a ladder. This model postulates a typology of participation on how public institutions accommodate participation, how the citizens are denied and given power in decision making. This model has eight levels namely: 1. manipulation, 2. therapy, 3. informing, 4. consultation, 5. placation, 6. partnership, 7. delegated power and 8. citizen control. According to this model, these levels are broadly analyzed in three rungs where the bottom levels 1 and 2 represent non-participation, levels 3 to 5 represent tokenism, and the last levels 6 to 8 represent the active and engaged citizen (Arnstein, 1969).

Under levels 1&2, where there is non-participation by citizens, this is out of design by the powerholders not to allow for the views of the citizens to participate. In this regard, public officials make autonomous decisions without involving the citizens even when the policy or issue directly affects them. Citizens' participation in their view can destabilize their plans and derail them in advancing their own agenda. To appear as if the citizens participated, this would end at sensitizing the participants on the project or policy at hand and even at times let the citizens rubber stamp projects or policy decision. Participation at this level is only an illusion.

On the other hand, levels 3 &4 constitute tokenism where the citizens views are heard at this stage but lack assurance that their views are heeded by the powerholders. At this level, the powerholders appear to listen to views of the citizens and pretend to take the views however when they go to their offices, these views are not

accommodated. The process is cosmetic in nature where then citizens would think that their views will be accommodated only to be discarded at a later stage. Level 5 presents a higher level of tokenism where the views of the citizens are heard but the power to decide remains in the hands of the powerholders. At this level. Communication is mostly one way from officials to the citizens. Citizen representatives are at times appointed to boards or national committees overseeing some projects. The idea is to show that there is real participation. Whereas for level 6, the citizens views are heard, and tradeoffs and compromises are met on some decision with powerholders. At levels 7&8, that is where there is full participation with most decision seats. Participation works well if the community has an organised power base with accountable leaders. Roles, relationships and dynamics between citizens and public administration have changed resulting into reforms measures (Callahan, 2007).

IV. CITIZEN PARTICIPATION AND CORRUPTION

Any anti-corruption strategy must involve citizens for it to be successful (Stapenhurst & Kpundeh, 1998). Citizen participation is one of the ways through which citizens directly control and supervise their governments and improve their performance (Zheng, 2016; Makowski, 2017). Citizens can participate in corruption control by desisting from engaging in corrupt practices because if they do so, it means they are contributing to the corruption scourge and share the responsibility (GoM, 2019). Another way through which citizen participation can improve anti-corruption is through detecting and reporting corruption. This view is supported by Klitgaard (2008) who maintain that citizens serve as eyes and ears of the government which can help in providing checks on public service delivery and insure their successful implementation (Klitgaard, 2008). The 2014 Governance and Corruption Survey in Malawi revealed glaring picture in terms of reporting corruption. The Survey revealed that few Malawian report corruption if they have observed it which is a set back to the corruption fight. In addition, the other way through which citizens can participate in fighting corruption is through inculcating a culture of integrity in their children so that they are raised with a spirit of abhorring corruption. Beyond that, the Women and Traditional Leaders Pillars in the NACS II also use their roles in family and community respectively to spread anti-corruption messages.

Another way through which citizen participation is advanced in the NACS II is through the civil society pillar as representatives of the people. Participation is facilitated by civil society playing a role as a watchdog, promoting advocacy in championing initiatives that will benefit the less privileged affected by corruption in their communities and monitoring service delivery. Citizen participation can be implemented by civil society to conduct social audits on public service agencies in the manner they utilize revenue and other resources and assess overall effectiveness of government service delivery (Johnston, 2015). Civil society can also help to monitor and detect illicit activities of public officials. (Stapenhurst & Kpundeh, 1998). Through these interventions, accountability is enhanced in the delivery of government services (Klitgaard, 2008). Further, through civil society, corrupt systems can also be destabilized by holding demonstrations and putting pressure on government agencies responsible for law enforcement (GoM, 2019). Civil society can also pursue public interest litigation on corruption and challenging implementation of government projects that are alleged to be marred by corruption.

One other critical pillar through which citizen participation can be exercised is the private sector. Citizens can contribute to the anti-corruption fight by creating corruption free business in their interactions with the public sector by refraining from paying bribes to public officials in their interactions to access services (Stapenhurst & Kpundeh, 1998). Thus, by desisting from this practice, they will contribute to curtailing the corruption chain.

Another pillar where that advocates for citizen participation is the local government pillar. This pillar focus is on the role that grassroot structures can play in the corruption fight. These structures include area development committees and village development committees. These committees are empowered with training on anti-corruption so that they can advance social accountability programs. They are empowered to monitor corruption in land administration, safety net programs, public works programs and Affordable Inputs Programme (AIP). The above interventions are aimed at enhancing accountability, which is a critical factor in control of corruption. Transparency is one of the key aspects of participation because citizens can only participate when they have the right information to provide checks to the government (Zheng, 2016). Other efforts on anti-corruption utilizing the participation approach are the establishment of anti-corruption clubs in communities. These communities are trained in social accountability initiatives. These include aspects to monitoring public projects and public service delivery in their areas. Other initiatives include the holding of citizen forums where they interact with duty bearers with an aim of holding them to account on how they are discharging their roles.

V. CHALLENGES TO CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

Citizen participation poses its own challenges in that too much of the information from citizens can derail and delay decision making process since the divergent interests of the groups (Shim & Eom, 2008). One of the common challenges with citizen participation is the unwillingness by people to get involved in public-policy issues (Riedel, 1972). On the other hand, citizen participation may also be hampered by public officials who may be unwilling to the citizens to participate out of fear of losing their discretionary power, jealousy, or resistance to change (Burke,1968). In addition, participation is hampered by the limited technical competency of the citizens which limits their meaningful participation (Burke,1968). Often, participation is also hampered by group leaders who at times harbor single interest which consequently reduce their effectiveness since they work alone thus can be easily thwarted since their voice is lessened (Riedel, 1972). In addition, there is resistance to change in the political system and officialdom which discourages participation (Riedel, 1972). Citizen participation is undertaken through citizen committees which are state agency related, which exert some control over the operations of these committees limiting their effectiveness (Riedel, 1972). In addition, matters bordering on state security may not be subject to participation (Burke,1968). For sophisticated projects, participation would need to be done by trained experts whereas the less sophisticated projects that do not require specialized knowledge and affecting small group of people cannot require experts (Rosener,1978).

To public officials, citizen participation is a burdensome process which may delay project implementation (Rosener, 1978). Citizens may be involved in planning but may not support the project which may render participation ineffective. Participation is more than just inputting into the project rather support of the project is what is critical for effectiveness of the public policy issue (Rosener, 1978). Sometimes participation is taken as an end, just participating for participation's sake rather participation should be seen as an end where participation has to result to the achievement of the organizational goal (Rosener, 1978). At the outset of any participation, it is important to know the goals and objectives that the participation is expected to achieve and there must be agreement on the same (Rosener, 1978). Thus, what needs to be accomplished needs to be known on the onset as it will help to manage expectations of both parties in this arrangement (Rosener, 1978).

VI. PROSPECTS AND OPPORTUNITIES

In recent times Malawi has put in place strategies and statutes that provide opportunities for citizen participation in the fight against corruption. Citizen participation should have an enabling legislation that provides for participatory decision making. In addition, there should be clear stipulations of powers and functions of the citizens, the government officials and any other actor involved in the policy making processes (Behn, 2001).

Statutes

- (1) *The Corrupt Practices Act 2004 (CPA)*: This is an Act to provide for the establishment of an Anti-Corruption Bureau; to make comprehensive provision for the prevention of corruption; and to provide for matters connected with or incidental to the foregoing. Section 51A of the CPA provides for the protection of whistle-blowers and other informers. This should encourage citizens to participate in the corruption fight by reporting and not fearing retaliation.
- (2) *Access to Information Act 2016 (ATIA)*: This is an Act to provide for the right of access to information in the custody of public bodies and relevant private bodies; the processes and procedures related to obtaining that information; and to provide for matters connected therewith or incidental thereto. With the ATIA in place, citizens can demand accountability on any transactions by public bodies. Accountability is one of the pillars of corruption prevention, in this regard citizens demanding accountability is a good way of participating in the fight against corruption. A range of literature supports the notion that citizen participation is a mechanism for upholding public accountability in the policy making process (Adams, 2007:3; Friedman, 2006; Yang and Callahan, 2005).

Corruption Prevention Initiatives

- (1) *Construction Sector Transparency Initiative (CoST)*: CoST works with government, private sector and civil society to promote the disclosure, validation and interpretation of data from infrastructure projects. This helps to inform and empower citizens and enables them to hold decision-makers to account. Informed citizens and responsive public institutions help drive reforms that reduce mismanagement, inefficiency, corruption, and the risks posed to the public from poor quality infrastructure. CoST is one of the opportunities that citizens can participate in fighting corruption.
- (2) *Institutional Integrity Committees (IICs)*: These are committees mandated to spearhead anti-corruption initiatives with public and private bodies. IICs provide a platform for citizens to participate in the fight against corruption within the institution they are in. Since their inauguration in 2008, there has been

steady progress on the number of institutions establishing the IICs. In an institution where an IIC exists the members have an opportunity to contribute to the fight.

- (3) *Open Government Partnership (OGP)*: Malawi joined the OGP in 2013, two years after the OGP was founded. However, this 2023-2025 OGP-NAP is the second of its kind. The first NAP was co-created for the period 2016 to 2018. The commitments under the first NAP covered the following prioritized thematic areas: Access to Information, fight against corruption, empowerment of citizens and citizen participation, public sector reforms and public service delivery, and Natural resources (i.e. the extractive Industry transparency initiative-(EITI) – (OGP, 2023). The government of Malawi has therefore prioritized improving civic participation through several long-term initiatives. Civic participation is a focal point in Malawi's long-term development strategy.

Malawi Agenda 2063 (MW2063)

MW2063 provides a good opportunity for citizen participation as it has outlined it as a key element in achieving the Nation's development goals. MW2063 highlights that,

‘Malawi shall have governance systems and institutions that are effective and efficient enough to deliver the aspiration of an inclusively wealthy and self-reliant nation. This shall be guided by the key principles of good governance including: **citizen engagement and participation** and the fair conduct of elections; responsiveness; efficiency and effectiveness; openness and transparency; rule of law; ethical conduct; competency and capacity; innovation and openness to change; sustainability and long-term orientation; sound financial and economic management; human rights, cultural diversity and social cohesion; accountability; and sustainable peace and security (MW2063)’

Further, MW2063 clearly stipulates that,

‘To control corruption, which is derailing the course and pace of development in Malawi, we shall ensure that our corruption combating agencies and governance watchdogs are guaranteed the requisite independence and adequate resources necessary for executing their mandates efficiently and effectively. There shall be a shift in focus more towards how these institutions “function” and less on the “form” of having such institutions in place. Cliques and syndicates that influence the actions of Government will be named, shamed, and decisively dealt with in accordance with the law. These include “politically-connected” individuals in the public and private sector who undermine the struggle against corruption by influencing the award of public procurement contracts. This will be achieved by tapping into the drive to harness **active citizen participation and engagement in the affairs of Government**. It entails the effective protection of whistle blowers and sustenance of safe civic spaces for demanding strict adherence to the rule of law and accountability. (MW2063)’.

V. CONCLUSION

Literature shows that citizen participation can bring about public accountability in the public policy making process (Cornwall & Gaventa, 2001). In several policies making initiatives, public accountability is considered more as a means to achieve other policy objectives (Malamulo, 2012). The study used the 8 level Arnstein model of participation to analyse the participation landscape in Malawi. The study has revealed that Malawi has certain levels of citizen participation in general policy issues and in fighting corruption however there remain some challenges in implementing citizen voice, therefore Malawi is on levels 3 and 4 in the Arnstein model of participation. Nonetheless prospects are available to attain level 7 and 8 where citizen voices are heard and are considered when decisions are made. The various laws, strategies, and the Malawi blueprint for development aspirations the Malawi 2063 all provide avenues for citizen participation in the country what remains is the citizens' willingness to take part in the fight against corruption.

Conflict of interest

The authors have no known conflict of interest.

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