



Citizen Voice for Good Governance and Development: The Case of Citizen Fora in Malawi

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Introduction

Welcome to this lecture on citizen voice for local governance and development. I am Michael Chasukwa from University of Malawi, Chancellor College based at the Department of Political and Administrative Studies. Basically, I will bring to the table matters related to engagement of the grassroots in local governance and development. I will use the case of Citizen Forum, also referred to as Interface meetings, as one of the spaces that offer members of the community a platform to actively participate in the running of local affairs.

In this lecture, the goal is to showcase initiatives that have been successful in promoting participation of members of the community in pursuit of good local governance in Malawi. It is important to note that, at the time the concept of citizen fora was being introduced in around 2004 by local and international civil society organisations, there was resistance from bureaucrats.

Bureaucrats thought citizen forum will be time wasting considering high illiteracy level in rural areas. Despite Malawi Local Development Planning System Handbook, National Decentralization Policy and Local Government Act emphasizing on the need to take participatory approach when addressing governance and development problems, bureaucrats thought members of the community have less technical know-how that would add value to the whole process of local development planning. Resistance to the welcoming of citizen fora was a setback to the realization of good local governance considering that Malawi has had experience of 31 year rule of dictatorship.

The window of opportunity to implement citizen forum emerged in 2005 when term of councillors expired. Currently, many civil society organisations are implementing citizen forum as a means of widening the local space for policy deliberations.

Citizen Forum: The Concept

Briefly, a Citizen Forum is a means of linking the members of the community to district council employees, public officials and services providers. Citizen Forum works on the theoretical underpinnings of demand and supply sides of governance with special interest in local governance. Basically, what transpires in Citizen Fora is that public officials are engaged in a discussion whereby people ask questions on issues that are affecting their daily lives. Public officials provide responses and both parties agree on the way forward. Participation in the Citizen Fora is open as such everybody is free to attend.

Citizen fora have gained ground in Malawi because of the positive impact they have had on local governance. I will now focus on the successes of citizen fora.

Citizen Forum: Successes

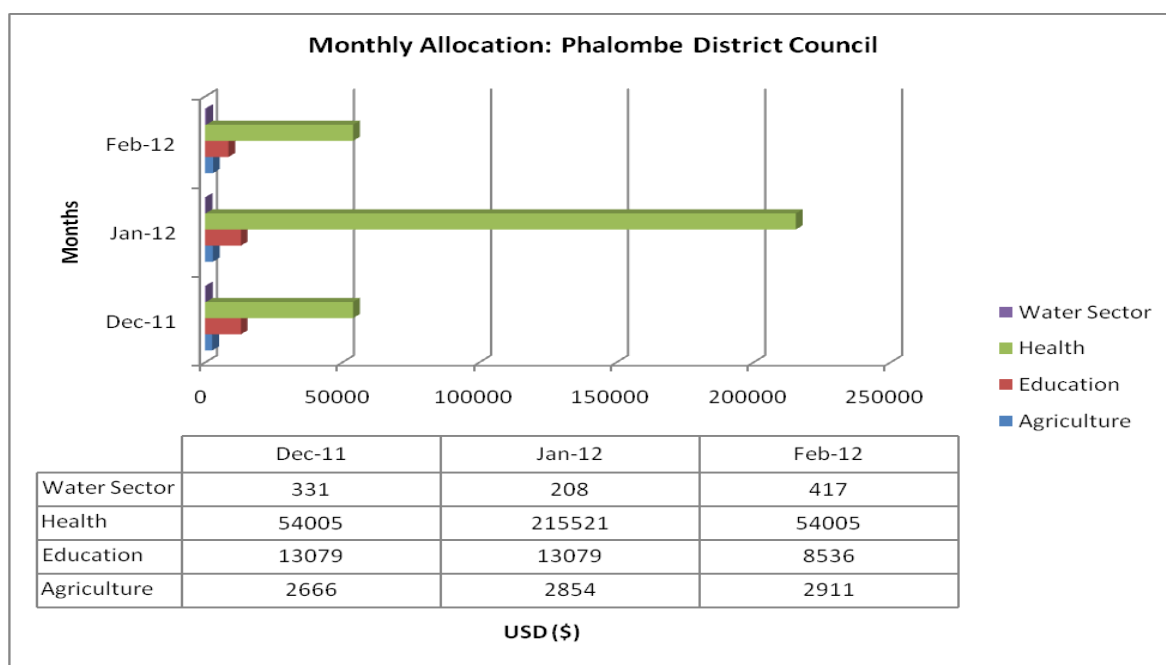
First, citizen fora have enhanced **the ability of citizens to demand improved quality public services**. This is against the backdrop of poor service delivery emanating from the irresponsiveness of service providers. Citizen Forum uses scorecards to generate credible evidence that is presented to public officials in interface meetings. Because community members are now critical of the services being delivered by public machinery, public officers are up to task and more alert so as to meet the expectations of the people. It should be appreciated here that Citizen Fora are also contributing to the generation of critical citizenry that is much requirement for sustainability of democratic governance and delivery of public services (Norris, 2011; Kymlicka, 2002).

Another positive thread emerging from Citizen Fora is their **ability to update the so-called ‘governance software’ at the local level**. In this regard, Citizen Fora have been considerably successful in weakening patrimonial tendencies entrenched by Members of Parliament. In the recent times, Members of Parliament have consolidated their political power at the local level by

using the Constituency Development Fund and distributing resources in a manner that is perceived to be skewed to their loyalists. Whilst Constituency Development Fund is a tax payer's fund, MPs give impression that it is because of their generosity that projects funded by the Constituency Development Fund are being implemented. Some of the interface meetings have centered on Constituency Development Fund and have been helpful in civic educating people hence correcting the deliberately distorted picture of Constituency Development Fund.

Citizen fora have also **served as means of getting input meant to review district council policy documents.** District Councils in Malawi have outdated policy documents in particular; District Development Plan and District Socio-Economic Profile). District councils have failed to update the policy documents due to lack of funds. Through, interface meetings, public officials get feedback from communities on what is to be included in the policy documents meant to guide service delivery.

Interface meetings have created huge demand for services that may not balance well with the resources available at the District Council. As a blessing in disguise, **high expectations have been utilised by District Councils to mobilize resources.** A practical example is from Phalombe district, southern part of Malawi, where the district council constructed three water reservoirs with extra funding sourced from central government and NGOs (**refer to figure/table**). The bottom line is that if the demand generated is used creatively, it has the potential of attracting extra resources. Below is a figure depicting monthly allocation of funds to Phalombe District Council.



On last account, **voice raised during interface meetings goes a long way to represent the concerns of public officials who are not willing to take it head on with central government.** In this regard, interface meetings bring forth issues that some junior staff cannot typically raise before their superiors. This is to say that interface meetings also function as a mouthpiece of public officials who may not raise criticism about government because they want to protect their jobs. The point worth noting is that through members of the community, bureaucrats have a chance to influence decisions that are politically sensitive. The implication is that members of the community need to collaborate with bureaucrats in pushing matters that are of interest to the local people but cannot originate from offices of the bureaucrats.

What makes Citizen Fora work?

Cordial relationship and trust between communities and interlocutors has contributed to the success of citizen fora. Trust is a condition to the construction of local constructive voice and effective state-citizen engagement.

Civil society organizations helping communities with interface meetings highlight the importance of training communities on how to make a voice, how to time the voice, and how to lobby effectively in different environments. Emphasis on capacity building pays dividends because communities have necessary skills to engage the duty bearers.

Members of the community taking lead in organizing interface meetings other than civil society organizations doing everything for the community is a condition for the success of interface meetings. By staying away from direct involvement in the community-public officials' dialogue, civil society organizations avoid the risk of being accused of 'using the voiceless to achieve their own personal interests.'

Use of credible empirical evidence that is generated through scorecard makes the case of members of the community strong. The scorecard generates community based qualitative and quantitative data that sometimes challenge data held by policy makers.

Successes of interface meetings are not out of coincidence but rather out of commitment on the part of members of the community and different stakeholders. As discussed, certain conditions will have to be prevalent if interface meetings are to be successful.

Perfecting Citizen fora to achieve much more successes

Having appreciated the success stories of Citizen Fora in trying to get the grassroots engaged in local governance, it is critical as well to highlight some of the issues that will have to be improved if we are to get maximum benefits from Interface Meetings. I will now highlight issues that have to be worked on to fine tune interface meetings.

- 1) Interface meetings have to move away from being project based to institutionalized fora. If Interface meetings are managed as activities in a project, activeness of members of the community is depended on availability of resources as such duty bearers know pretty well that citizen fora may not be a force to reckon with when the NGO run out of funds or indeed, if there has been a shift of thinking by donors.
- 2) Currently Interface Meetings are only targeting public duty bearers. Interface meetings should also be extended to CSOs as they are also service providers complementing efforts of government. It is high time that CSOs should walk the talk and practice the message they are preaching. Days of 'Get the Message and Ignore the Messenger' seem to be numbered. The dog has to be watched too.

- 3) CSOs wanting to outdo each other because they want attention of donors. This mentality has frustrated networking among CSOs hence failing to build the much needed critical citizenship and take advantage of synergies.

Conclusion

As a matter of concluding this lecturer, I have argued that citizen fora are doing wonders in opening up and widening local spaces for local governance. Interface Meetings have contributed to public officials duty bearers being committed to their job and deliver services as expected to avoid being taken to task by members of the community. Citizen fora have served as monitoring tools for the work being done by public officials. Interface meetings have challenged notions that the grassroots are helpless when it comes to negotiating with experts on what programmes to be implemented. They have also proved helpful in influencing outcomes of local policy processes at the district council.

In this lecture, I have also argued that basic conditions have to be in existence if citizen fora are to work. The conditions include trust among stakeholders, good advocacy skills possessed by members of the community and credible evidence.

I thank for your attention. I hope this lecture has deepened your interest in initiatives that bring public machinery close to people where action takes place.