

'Government doesn't have the muscle': state, NGOS, local politics, and disaster risk governance in Malawi

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‘Government doesn’t have the muscle’: state, NGOs, local politics and disaster risk governance in Malawi

Stern Mwakalimi Kita

Abstract

The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, 2015-2030, calls for countries to strengthen disaster risk governance systems as a pathway to disaster risk reduction. This paper assesses the disaster risk governance system in Malawi, Sub-Saharan Africa, to understand how the positioning of multiple actors is contributing to the creation of an environment generating either positive or negative outcomes. The study utilises a landscape governance analytical framework grounded within network governance theory and predominantly relies on qualitative approaches. The study finds that non-governmental organisations are delivering the majority of disaster risk management services in the country. However, there are shortfalls within and across key actors and institutions that are frustrating progress and could reverse isolated gains that the country has made. While central government is largely detached from community level implementation, its incapacity is worsened by politicians and local government actors who have positioned themselves to capture risk reduction finance. The paper, therefore, questions the rationale behind the urgency in decentralising disaster risk governance before addressing critical challenges within the local government system. These findings, while specifically for Malawi, are also pertinent to other developing countries struggling to deal with the consequences of climate variability and change.

Key words: *disaster risk governance; Malawi; decentralisation; climate change; NGO*

Introduction

The significance of governance in disaster risk management (DRM) is evidenced by the inclusion of disaster risk governance as the second priority for action in the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, 2015-2030: '*strengthening disaster risk governance to manage disaster risk*' (UNISDR, 2015). Effective disaster risk governance is instrumental to successful disaster risk reduction (DRR) and adaptation to climate change and variability. Governance has been seen to play an important role in defining vulnerability to disasters, either by protecting or increasing the ability of those exposed to hazards to protect themselves where governance is effective or by increasing vulnerability where it is ineffective (Werg et al., 2013). Disaster risk governance as a process involves political commitment, participation and coordination of a network of actors operating at different scales with the aim of achieving certain DRM goals (Tierney, 2012; Melo Zurita et al., 2015; van Niekerk, 2015). Each actor, while working within a network, may have their own agenda, approaches and perceptions, which may lead to both complementarity and contradictions (King, 2007; Bankoff and Hilhorst, 2009).

Malawi is a key recipient of adaptation finance in Africa, though data for 1996-2011 show that, of total aid received, only six percent of activities, four percent of projects and one percent of committed funds were directed towards climate change (Baker et al., 2013; Barrett, 2013, 2014). Most of this aid is channelled through a network of non-state actors. However, the financing has not translated into enhanced disaster resilience, with climatic disasters becoming endemic. The 2017 Global Climate Risk Index by Germanwatch ranked Malawi as the third most affected country in the world by weather-related extreme events in 2015 (Kreft et al., 2016). Concerns have also been raised on the absence of a decentralised disaster risk governance system in Malawi. However, the overall decentralised system in Malawi has largely been inefficient and previous studies have attributed this to absence of local councillors,

inadequate fiscal and human resource devolution, political settlements and related principal-agent challenges (Kayuni and Tambulasi, 2011; Tambulasi, 2011; Chasukwa and Chinsinga, 2013; O'Neil et al., 2014; Chiweza, 2015).

The aim of this paper is, therefore, to assess how Malawi's disaster risk governance architecture is contributing to either positive or negative DRM outcomes, or both. In doing so, several questions guide the analysis, which include: Who are the key players in disaster risk governance in Malawi and at what scales do they operate? To what extent do the stakeholders and institutions collaborate and what are the incentives and disincentives? How feasible is decentralised disaster risk governance? How effective and accountable are the institutions and stakeholders? In answering these questions, the paper adopts a theoretical framework based on multi-level and network governance theories. The rest of the paper is organised into four main sections. The first section starts by providing the theoretical and analytical frameworks for the paper, and then reviews key literature in disaster risk governance. This is followed by the methodology section. The third section presents and discusses the results of the study, while the last section summarises the key conclusions and contributions of the study.

Network governance and governance landscape

Multi-level governance theories attempt to understand the interplay across multiple actors, multiple scales of government, multiple sectors and multiple implementation arrangements in addressing complex challenges and wicked problems like climate change and disasters. It promotes both vertical and horizontal cooperation across actors and institutions, thereby closing the policy gaps that may exist across levels of government (OECD, 2016; Bulkeley, 2010; Vedeld et al., 2015). *Network* governance theory is a component of multilevel governance that recognises that service delivery has become more complex, necessitating a shift from bureaucratic and rigid hierarchical systems of governance (Provan and Milward,

2001; Goldsmith and William, 2004; Bulkeley, 2010). A *hierarchical* governance mode adopts a multi-level command-and-control coordination approach, where decisions are made following established rules and policies at the top (Hanssen et al., 2013).

Key to the network governance theory is the recognition that development outcomes do not just result from combined efforts of agents and institutions, but arise more from a network within which agents and institutions exist and co-exist (Jones et al., 1997). The aim is to provide the best services as a whole, distinct from what could have been produced individually without collaborating, where diverse expertise and resources are collectively at the disposal of the network (Goldsmith and William, 2004).

Two key forms of networks are relevant to this study. In a *joined-up government* network, service delivery is jointly done by different government agencies, where they coordinate their efforts and share information (Goldsmith and William, 2004). In *third-party government*, non-state actors are used to deliver public services (Goldsmith and William, 2004). States that strongly rely on non-state actors for single or joint delivery of public services are considered ‘hollow states’, though they may retain monitoring and coordination functions (Milward, 1996; Goldsmith and William, 2004).

Writing within the context of earthquake risk reduction in Nepal and India, Jones, Owen and Wisner (2016) propose a governance landscape analytical framework that considers three contexts: *stakeholders*, *institutions* and *incentives*. The stakeholder context is about the players involved in DRR and how these relate and interact, who include both state and non-state actors. The institutional context focuses on the agencies responsible for enforcement of standards and regulations and delivery of DRR services. The incentives and disincentives can affect the performance of government officials and other actors.

To bring the key issues together, the study adapts Jones et al.’s (2016) governance landscape analytical framework and applies it within a network governance theory. While

maintaining the three key elements of the framework, the study integrates additional elements within network governance theories. For instance, stakeholders and institutions are considered jointly as, in the context of this study, it becomes challenging to disentangle institutions from stakeholders or actors. The paper is thus organised along three key analytical areas: first, *network actors and institutions* that focus on network governance systems, politics and decentralisation. The second part looks at the *incentives and disincentives* for collaboration, and the last element looks at *accountability* aspects.

Disaster risk governance

Disaster risk governance comprises norms, actors and practices that are established primarily to reduce the impact and losses from disasters. The norms include legal and policy frameworks as well as other mechanisms that promote collective action (Tierney, 2012). Good disaster risk governance can be achieved when there is “existence of public capacities and local institutions designed to support vulnerability reduction measures” (Werg et al., 2013, p. 1615).

It is generally acknowledged that the most critical engagement of actors and actual implementation of global and national policies occur at the local level, where the actors are close to, or within, the policy issue (Wisner et al., 2004; Scott and Tarazona, 2011; Melo Zurita et al., 2015; Garschagen, 2016). Decentralisation of power and resources to local authorities is therefore an important facet of disaster risk governance. In theory, decentralisation of disaster risk governance does not just bring government closer to the people, but empowers them through their participation while at the same time improving the capacity of local government and communities to undertake DRM functions (Allen, 2006; Manyena, 2006; Parthasarathy, 2016; Rumbach, 2016).

While decentralisation has been seen to be beneficial, evidence also reveals multiple challenges. Studies from Vietnam (Garschagen, 2016), Pakistan, (Mustafa and Wrathall, 2011), Thailand (Marks and Lebel, 2016), Indonesia (Djalante and Thomalla, 2012), Cameroon (Bang, 2014), Zimbabwe (Manyena, 2006), South Africa and Mozambique (Scott and Tarazona, 2011) show that decentralisation has not achieved the desired goals at the local level. For instance, DRM decentralisation has given powers to political elites to use resources meant for disaster response for clientilistic relationships (Scott and Tarazona, 2011; Blackburn, 2014; Parthasarathy, 2016). Like most developing countries, Malawi's decentralisation process under democratic governance has met challenges to the extent that some scholars have described it as a 'black box' (O'Neil, 2014), 'chaos' or 'crisis' (Kayuni and Tambulasi, 2011). Wunsch (2001, 2013) argue that most challenges facing decentralisation in African states can be explained by the inclination of the centre or local elites to continue capturing resources and authority, thereby creating principal-agency challenges.

NGOs and DRM

NGOs perform multiple generic functions: they deliver services on behalf of government, collaborate or compete with government in delivering services, pilot new or alternative interventions, advocate for change in policy and practice and criticise government mishaps (Luna, 2001; Bankoff and Hilhorst, 2009; Batley and Rose, 2011). In disaster risk governance, NGOs have been seen as important players in countries that are less prone to disasters, where government's interest in DRR is limited (Izumi and Shaw, 2012b). For most developing countries, capacity shortfalls and inadequate state funding have shifted the locus to NGOs who undertake most of the states' functions, including adaptation and DRM (Benson et al., 2001; Allen, 2006; Batley and Rose, 2011; Tierney, 2012; van Niekerk, 2014, 2015; Jones et al., 2016). Compared to the state, NGOs' are at an advantage as they use participatory and

community-based approaches, are considered to be quicker in provision of services and are able to work with the marginalised (Benson et al., 2001; Bankoff and Hilhorst, 2009; Johnston, 2014).

However, challenges have been noted in NGOs' efforts in DRM. Most NGOs concentrate on humanitarian response and there have been questions on the effectiveness of NGOs' interventions and their lack of accountability (Izumi and Shaw, 2012a, b; Tierney, 2012; Espia and Fernandez, 2015; Cheema et al., 2016; Jones et al., 2016). Islam and Walkerden (2015) post-disaster study in two villages in Bangladesh found that NGOs' relief efforts are marred by corruption, favouritism, delays, high interest rates on microcredit and coordination challenges. In some cases, the focus of NGOs on humanitarian relief makes communities view them as outsiders who only come to the community to provide aid and leave thereafter (Espia and Fernandez, 2015).

Methodology and study location

This paper is based on data collected over two years between September 2014 and October 2016, with fieldwork being carried out in Malawi between July 2015 and June 2016. The study collected qualitative data through semi-structured interviews with key informants, participant observation and document analysis. Interview participants were purposively selected from government ministries, departments, NGOs and development partners involved in DRM or climate change. While at least 20 national-level interviews were primarily formal, several informal interviews were conducted during meetings and participation in other activities. Interviews were also held with 15 district level government and NGO officers actively involved in DRM or climate change adaptation from twelve districts of Phalombe, Mulanje, Nsanje, Chikwawa, Blantyre (rural), Balaka, Machinga, Mangochi, Salima, Dedza, Nkhatabay and Rumphu, all of which are vulnerable to multiple hazards according to Malawi's

hazard and vulnerability atlas (fig. 1). Follow-up interviews were also conducted with 13 key informants between July and November 2016 through emails, skype and mobile phone calls. Interviews primarily focused on roles of different actors in DRM; funding sources, funding arrangements and accountability; past, present and future DRM projects or interventions; plans; perceptions about the country's DRM system; challenges and best practices.

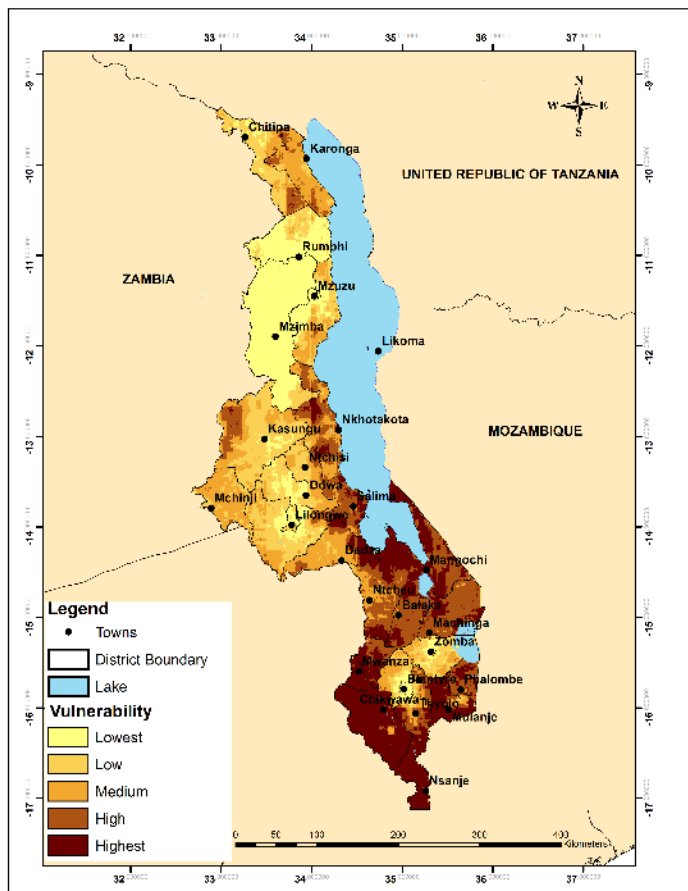


Figure 1: Malawi's population vulnerability to multi-hazard. Source: DoDMA/Regional Centre for Mapping Resource for Development, *Malawi hazard and vulnerability atlas*, p. 24

At least 20 workshops and meetings at national and district level were attended. Part of these workshops involved development of national tools such as training manuals, resilience plan and DRM bill, while others were organised to share lessons or as consultative processes towards development of plans and frameworks. The author also accompanied government,

donor and NGO officials in more than 30 district and community-level project monitoring and supervisory exercises on DRR, response and recovery across Malawi. The study also benefitted from a National DRM Platform Conference held in May 2016 in Lilongwe, Malawi's capital city. The conference brought together 210 participants from NGOs, central and local government, academia, media, councillors, chiefs and donors where several actors shared progress on project activities, policies and plans. Informal discussions were held with several participants. The focus during such workshops and field exercises was on observing the DRM practices at different levels, who the key players were, what they were doing (also where and how), challenges, while also conducting informal interviews. Relevant documents, including policies, plans, legislation and national budgets were also analysed. OECD data on climate finance to Malawi for 2013-2014 were also accessed and analysed.

MS Excel was used in analysing the quantitative data to produce descriptive statistics and graphs. Qualitative data in form of transcripts, field notes and from documents were analysed using thematic analysis, where the key themes were generated (Bryman, 2016). In addition, quotes from transcribed data have been used to support the analysis.

Results and discussion

This section presents and discusses the results within the three broader structures explained within the analytical framework in the introduction. Within the network actors and institutions, it focuses on government sectors, NGOs, decentralised scale and political actors. This is followed by the incentives and disincentives that focus on the motivation and demotivation for DRM across actors and scales. The last sub-section deals with accountability issues across actors and institutions and is specifically meant to demonstrate the threat posed by corruption and accountability failures to DRM decentralisation.

Network actors and institutions

Joined-up government, policy and legislative framework

DRM and climate change management functions are often handled by different government ministries, though they often overlap (Schipper and Pelling, 2006; Birkmann and von Teichman, 2010; Ireland, 2011; Koivisto, 2014). In Malawi, climate change falls under the Ministry of Natural Resources, Energy and Mining while DRM is under the Office of the Vice President through the Department of Disaster Management Affairs (DoDMA). Despite having different structures and policies, approaches used to address disasters and those for climate change adaptation are largely the same and involves the same actors. The most common disasters in Malawi – floods and drought – are also climatic.

Limited capacity and the multi-dimensional nature of DRM also means that most DRM functions have to be sub-contracted. From the government side, disaster risk management activities are executed by government sectors in form of joined-up government networks. As of 2016, DoDMA had five donor-funded projects on DRR and recovery, three funded by the World Bank and two by UNDP. Of the two UNDP projects, one was on early warning systems and the other one was a generic DRM programme support. However, DoDMA's implementation of the DRM programme support was restricted to development of governance instruments such as policies, while much of the early warning project was implemented by two other government departments. Within the UNDP programme support, there was a community-based DRR component whose implementation was delegated to NGOs, community-based organizations and civil protection committees through sub-grants. Similarly, all three World Bank projects were subcontracted to service providers, who include government departments and other non-state actors. A DoDMA officer justified this:

DoDMA's role is coordination and as such sectoral government ministries and departments, who have specialist expertise in their sector, are allowed to lead implementation of interventions under their sector under the coordination of DoDMA. By doing this, DoDMA is of the view that different government ministries and departments will appreciate their role in DRM and know that this is not the responsibility of DoDMA alone.

Government's DRM implementation at local and community level, when it does so, is largely hierarchical, with minimal participation of communities. When a disaster occurs, officers from central government mobilise and distribute relief items with local government officers, with communities just on the receiving end. In DRR, the department of water resources deployed equipment and personnel to three districts to rehabilitate dykes and did not involve the community.

Despite being guided by a 1991 Disaster Preparedness and Relief Act, there has been a recognised shift from response orientation to risk reduction and a DRM bill has been drafted. A DRM policy aligned to the Hygo Framework for Action was approved in 2015 and institutional structures at national, district and local level also focus on DRR. The first priority area of Malawi's DRM policy is about mainstreaming DRM into sustainable development. The common causes of vulnerability to disasters in Malawi point to the fact that disaster risk governance requires policy changes not just within the office responsible for DRM, but across all relevant government sectors. Mainstreaming has been shown to facilitate placement of DRM at the centre of development planning and implementation processes at all levels (Rumbach and Kudva, 2011; Jones et al., 2013). This has necessitated the review of enabling policies and laws such as those on water management, health, education, urban planning and construction so that they integrate disaster risk. The Ministry of Lands, Housing and Urban Development, for instance, is developing a national urban policy, national building regulations, a national resettlement policy and national safer housing construction guidelines that factor in DRM. The Ministry of Health is also developing a policy aimed at addressing the threats posed by climate change to the health sector.

Malawi has had two national development strategies, Malawi Growth and Development Strategy I (2006-2011) and II (2011-2016). For both strategies, DRM was one of the thematic areas jointly with social protection and has been included in the successor development plan. In the education sector, as many as five universities have introduced programmes at undergraduate and postgraduate levels on DRM. The primary and secondary curricula have been revised with DRM topics appearing in agriculture, geography and social studies. According to an officer from the Malawi Institute of Education (MIE) that develops national curricula for primary and secondary education:

MIE realises that impacts of disasters can be addressed if we are well prepared and ready to act and are equipped with knowledge for effective disaster risk management. Knowing that children are agents of learning in their homes and communities, MIE has integrated DRM issues in the primary and secondary school curricula in order to increase awareness on disasters amongst learners and communities at large so as to build a culture of safety and increase preparedness.

Decentralised government

There are various actors and institutions involved in disaster risk governance at the local government scale. There also exist a web of local committees responsible for different aspects of rural life and livelihood. Under the 1998 National Decentralization Policy, ministries and departments at central level are required to devolve their functions and resources to local authorities. At present, DoDMA has not devolved its functions. Before decentralisation is undertaken, a devolution plan is developed that outlines the functions that will be devolved. The process commenced in March 2014 and by the end of 2016, the plan was not yet approved. Both government and NGOs felt the process should be sped up, and in the words of one respondent: “*we need to move away from seeing central government directing everything at local level.*”

Only 11 of Malawi's 28 districts have DRM officers who, apart from being at junior grade, are employed on non-established positions. *"Our job security is the major threat as we have to renew our contracts every year since 2010, and sometimes twice a year. We don't know what will come tomorrow,"* said one district DRM officer. In the majority of districts, government relies on desk officers who belong to other government departments with their own core mandate where DRM often receives limited attention. The junior grade of existing officers has also raised concerns in some districts as the officers fail to command authority since most of the people they have to work with are senior to them. One officer shared his experience:

Whenever I make decisions or organize a meeting, some do not make themselves available just because I am a desk officer and being less educated than them. I remember this other time a certain sector head in a meeting when I crashed his point on managing DRR funds, he rose and said 'who are you, young man? I started working long ago and what can you tell me? Moreover, you are just taking care of the post temporarily.' This was demoralizing...

However, DoDMA indicated that plans are in place to recruit permanent officers in all districts.

Third party government: the prominence of NGO

Consortia of at least five NGOs implement the majority of DRR and adaptation projects in Malawi. Networks are often coordinated and regulated by some administrative organ, which also channels funds to members (Provan and Milward, 2001). In Malawi, donors are deliberately promoting working through networks or consortium and most of the funds to local NGOs are channelled through UN agencies or international NGOs such as Christian Aid, Catholic Relief Services, Care, Oxfam and Save the Children. NGOs working on climate change and DRM issues have formed the Civil Society Network on Climate Change whose membership for 2016 was 47. The networks is an active forum for coordinating and sharing of information among members, with full-time paid officers. NGOs in Malawi are governed through the NGO Board and coordinated through the Council for Non-Governmental

Organisations in Malawi (CONGOMA), both established under the NGO Act of 2001. The NGO Board is appointed by and reports to government and is perceived by NGOs as an imposition on their autonomy, while CONGOMA is led by NGOs. Information provided by CONGOMA secretariat shows that Malawi has 1031 registered NGOs. As of 2016, paid-up NGOs totalled 537, of which 165 were international and 372 local. Records compiled from government and NGO sources show that there are more than 80 NGOs involved in DRM in Malawi.

Unlike findings presented by Espia and Fernandez (2015) showing that NGOs are considered outsiders by communities, most communities in Malawi consider NGOs to be closer to them than government. Their involvement in both humanitarian and risk reduction activities means that their presence in the community is not just dependent on disasters. But what form do their implementation take at sub-national level? Maskrey (2011) discusses two common types of local level implementation arrangements: community based disaster risk management (CBDRM) and local-level disaster risk management (LLDRM). LLDRM is mostly focused on building the capacity of local governments while CBDRM targets the community and places the community at the centre of implementation. As opposed to government, NGO use CBDRM approaches: ‘community-based,’ ‘participatory,’ or ‘integrated’ have become the mantra in project titles on DRM and adaptation. The importance of participation in improving outcomes have already been document elsewhere (Maskrey, 2011; Samaddar, et al., 2015). As also argued by Izumi and Shaw (2012a, b), the proximity of NGOs to communities makes them better placed to understand the needs at the local level and bridge the gap between policy and practice, by implementing interventions that address actual community vulnerabilities.

Most community-based DRR and adaptation practices in Malawi have been introduced or championed by NGO networks. The majority of DRR activities are embedded within broader adaptation projects since, as also shown by Koivisto (2014) in neighbouring

Mozambique, adaptation attracts more international funding than DRR. Some of those observed during fieldwork included community mapping, participatory vulnerability and capacity assessments, simulation exercises, community-based early warning systems and community grain silo. This agrees with Maskrey (2011) who has argued that the rise and spread of community based DRM and local level DRM can be attributed to networks.

However, NGO operations are multifaceted and multilevel. At district level, they provide capacity-building support to council technical staff. Some NGOs such as Concern Universal (now United Purpose) provide direct financial support to district councils to implement DRM activities. They also play prominent roles in development and funding of national instruments such as policies and plans, carry out advocacy work and participate in coordination structures such as the National DRM Platform. Every year during the budget session of parliament, some NGO networks lobby MPs to increase funding to government sectors with DRM and climate change mandates. Just as observed in South Africa by van Niekerk (2015), NGOs played key roles in the drafting of Malawi's DRM policy and bill. However, this participation reveals that networks are not devoid of bureaucracy as each group wants its contributions considered, which often causes delays. For instance, around February 2016 Malawi initiated the development of a national resilience plan and planned to complete the process by June. However, there have been back and forth comments from donors, NGOs and academia to the extent that - one year later - the plan was still being drafted. A donor representative justified this:

What we want from the development community is to have a perfect national framework that speaks to all key resilience areas and that everyone is happy with. Otherwise we risk developing another document that will just be gathering dust on people's shelves.

So, mostly, government and NGOs have formed symbiotic relationships. *“The relationship between government and NGOs is very good. Government provides space for NGOs to voice out their views and sometimes such are taken into consideration,”* said an NGO

officer. NGOs' legitimacy and resource mobilisation largely rely on government. Completion of most grant application processes for NGOs require government's endorsement. In implementing LLDRM and CBDRM projects, NGOs often seek technical support from relevant government departments, thereby promoting collaboration and coproduction. For NGOs to operate in a district, they need approval from government. Section 23 of the NGO Act 2001 gives government powers to cancel or suspend the registration of an NGO.

Politicians and DRM

Elected politicians are important actors in DRM at all governance scales. They facilitate mobilization of resources for local and community implementation and also play crucial roles in enacting laws aimed at reducing disaster risks. At local government level, a few cases were cited where councillors or members of parliament (MPs) had been helpful in DRM. These included providing transport for relief items or facilitating delivery of disaster reports to the council. In a few cases, MPs used resources from the constituency development fund to support community-level disaster risk reduction efforts. Responding to a question on the role of MPs and councillors in DRM, a council official said: *“For risk reduction, they are helpful since they influence communities in taking a leading role on risk reduction works. On humanitarian works, they are very destructive...”*

For the majority of cases, most MPs and councillors are seen to be more interested in realising personal goals than the common good. With frequent disasters, humanitarian aid has been taken as a tool for vote buying and bolstering clientilism. Indeed, as also observed elsewhere by Scott and Tarzona (2011), while government rarely funds disaster risk reduction, it is very rare for disaster response funding requests to be rejected. Confirming this, a senior government officer stated: *“When a disaster has occurred, funding will come for the*

department to be able to provide emergency response to those that have been affected. But the same doesn't happen with DRR interventions.”

While the Local Government Act of 1998 requires local councillors to be champions of transparency and accountability, some of them focus on exploiting resources that come to the councils as pathways to political hegemony.

Most politicians always want things to happen in their areas. Even if no significant disaster happens in their area, you find them producing a huge list of the affected people. They always want to be viewed as helping their people. They are not a good tool to use for information regarding issues of disasters. (Interview with a district-based NGO officer).

Incentives and disincentives for collaboration

Jones et al. (2016) have called for more attention to be paid to the role that ‘champions’ play in incentivising DRR. Both Jones et al. (2016) and Van Niekerk (2014) have argued that DRM functions are often placed in the highest political office to support effective implementation. Most participants interviewed agreed that the placement of DoDMA in the Vice President’s (VP) office offers multiple opportunities and visibility, while also signifying political will. With minimal ministerial responsibilities, the DRM function offers the vice presidency a platform to champion disaster risk reduction. A respondent from the academia said: *“this guy (VP) is result-oriented and is changing the shape of DRR in Malawi.”* In a number of DRM meetings with various players that the VP chaired, he emphasised on resilience. The national resilience plan was his initiative and he has been promoting the participation of private sector in DRR.

The major reason for NGOs prominence in Malawi relates to government’s funding and governance challenges and shift in donor funding policy to Malawi. The majority of adaptation and DRM finance in Malawi comes from donors. From around 2012/2013, reduced donor confidence in government’s financial accounting system and other governance shortfalls

forced donors to freeze direct budgetary support. Since then, most of the resources have been channelled through NGOs as off-budget support. A 2016 World Bank report shows that off-budget support from donors for the government's official development assistance in the 2015/16 fiscal year rose to 70 percent, from 51 percent in 2012/13 and 31 percent in 2008/09 (World Bank, 2016).

Project-level data on official development assistance for 2013-2014 from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) shows Malawi receiving US\$625 million (current price) aid as grants (82 %) and loans (18 %) for climate-related activities. 74 percent of this amount was delivered through non-state actors, with government receiving 21 percent. 81 percent of the aid that went to government were loans. Of the 199 total projects, 155 were for non-state actors of which 60 percent were by NGOs (**fig. 2 and fig. 3**).

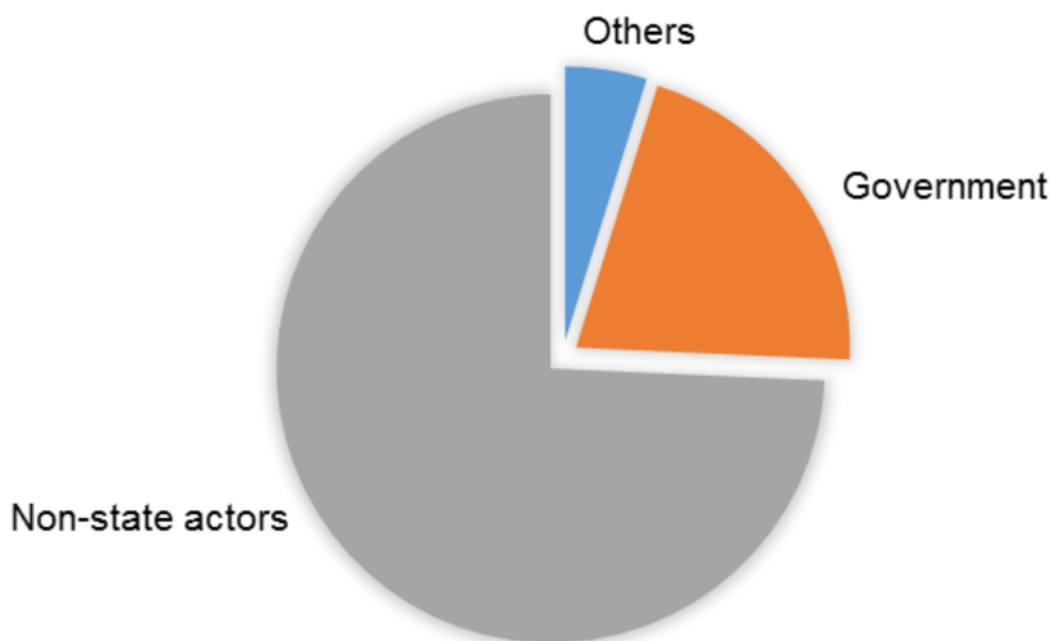


Figure 2: Distribution of climate-related development aid to Malawi, 2013-2014, by delivery channel. Data source: OECD, 2016

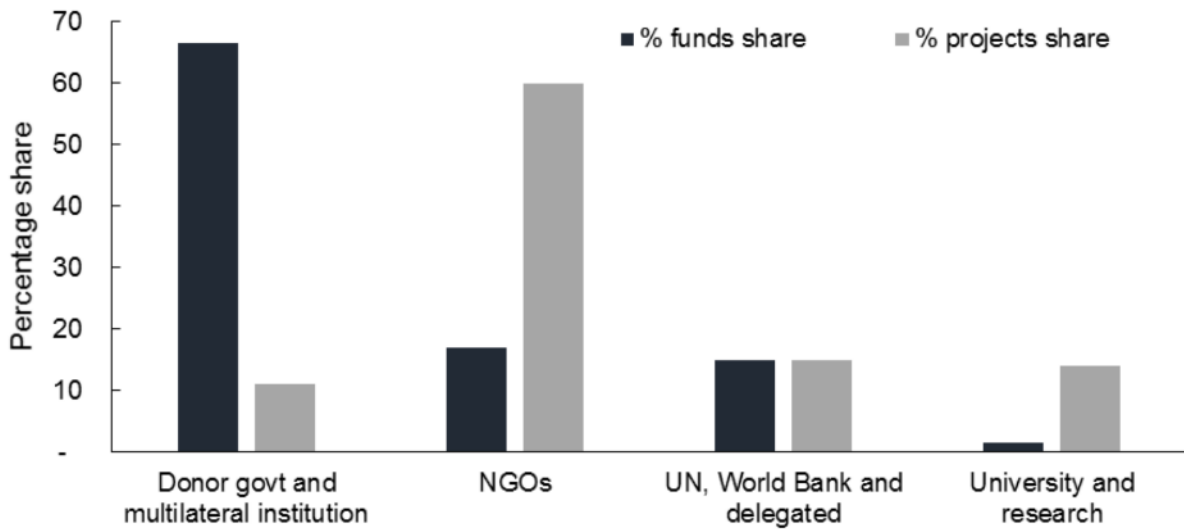


Figure 3: Percentage share of projects (N=155) and funds (US\$464,609,999) among non-state actors. Data source: [OECD](#), 2016

But what primarily motivates NGOs to undertake DRR work? The executive director of a local NGO that champions DRR summarised the most common reasons:

NGOs like Centre for Environmental Policy and Advocacy are driven by the understanding that DRR is more sustainable as it potentially contributes towards resilience building; DRR is cost effective in the long term although the short-term costs are enormous; DRR builds a foundation for less need for response in future; and moreover, often, response reduces the human dignity.

Major disasters also act as another incentive for NGOs to mobilise resources and provide humanitarian aid. Most NGOs, as also observed by Freeman and Tobin (2011) in Niger, do not respond to small-scale disasters. In the words of a government official: *“When a major disaster occurs, you will see most of them coming to government asking it to declare a state of disaster so that they can mobilise resources”*

What are seen as incentives for NGOs are sometimes the disincentives for government. Key disincentives to disaster risk governance efforts in Malawi include inadequate financial and human resource and capacity challenges both at central and local levels. A common

challenge mentioned was that government allocates inadequate resources in the national budget that cannot be used for any meaningful DRM work. For instance, excluding ad hoc resources for disaster response, DoDMA had an annual budget allocation of only US\$108,000 (MK78 million) in 2014/2015, US\$125,000 (MK90.75 million) in 2015/2016 and US\$139,000 (MK99.95 million) in 2016/2017. An NGO officer working at local level argued: “*because of lack of funding, district officers mostly go by what the NGOs that are found in the district are doing. They lack the incentives to spearhead government’s agenda.*” Another NGO officer explained the disincentive towards DRR funding by government:

They are not prioritising risk reduction; it is not a political tool that would make someone winpeople look at the immediate things like distribution of maize....and some people even take floods as political opportunity for them to be known that they came to distribute maize..., but they forget about those long term programmes that will reduce problems such as floods.

An officer from DoDMA agreed that lack of resources explains the invisibility of government at local level:

NGOs appear to be leading implementation because of their presence at district and community level where they are implementing a number of DRR interventions in support of councils. The inability of DoDMA to provide financial resources to the districts for the coordination of DRM activities at district level makes the department not be very visible at community level. Communities then interact more with NGOs in DRR activities.

Capacity challenges at local level mirror the national level. The national office for DRM has two sections (disaster risk reduction and disaster response and recovery), manned by eleven technical officers. Some key informants cited this as affecting operations. While most are satisfied with competencies, a few raised concerns relating to bureaucracy and dedication to direct disaster risk governance:

Oftentimes, when a national level staff comes down to the ground to interface with people for advice, the advice is never adequate. It appears people come down to make their allowances and not to work as expected. This does not mean they cannot

work or they do not have the capacity but there is a laissez-faire attitude in them. Oftentimes, they do not become useful.

Accountability and other bottlenecks

Since network governance entails that government is not involved in the delivery of public services, the legitimacy of government will depend on how it properly coordinates the partners and ensures that they are accountable (Page, 2004; Goldsmith and William, 2004). Networks involve coordinating several actors which can raise coordination, accountability and enforcement challenges (Innes and Booher, 2002; Moynihan, 2009; Egan and Tischler, 2010). While most council officials cited lack of resources as a common issue affecting disaster risk governance at local authority level, it was noted that capacity to adequately utilize and account for resources was also a major challenge. Most respondents at national, local government and community levels cited corruption and abuse of resources at the local authority level as a threat to DRM decentralisation, which agrees with findings of previous studies on decentralisation in Malawi (Tambulasi and Kayuni, 2007; O'Neil et al., 2014; Chiweza, 2015). It was reported during discussions with central government officials that on two occasions in 2015 and 2016, DoDMA disbursed funds to some councils through a UNDP-funded project. The resources were meant for coordination and disaster assessments and were to be used over a three-month period. However, after eight months, only two out of 17 councils that received the funds had submitted liquidation reports to account for utilization of the funds and some had not even used the resources.

A prominent government-led programme at local level is a donor-funded local development fund that supports local level sub-projects using public works arrangements. A community member can work up to 24 days in a cycle and be paid about US\$0.84 a day. One of the aims of the fourth phase of the fund was to cushion against the impact of disasters such as the 2015 floods and 2016 drought. A 2015/2016 audit report of the fund revealed several

cases of fund abuse by councillors, council staff and committees managing the sub-projects. According to officials from the fund secretariat, the issues included cases where ghost projects were created by council staff in collusion with local structures; failure to liquidate funds; councillors and local committees failing to furnish a list of beneficiaries; sidestepping communities in beneficiary selection; sub-projects that were approved at council level being changed on the ground; working on the same project several times; disregard of procurement procedures, and; collusion between council account staff and local committees to divert wages. The measures taken to deal with these would affect communities as according to an officer from the fund's secretariat:

Resources for public works programme will not be transferred to councils that have not liquidated their funds. So far, only 14 councils out of the 35 have liquidated and resources will only be given to these in the next cycle.

Stakeholder groups that have an interest in ensuring that the needs of the community are met take the oversight role over resource utilisation (Provan and Milward, 2001). One such group are local councillors and MPs. However, in the case of Malawi, these very same people are also leading in resource abuse and corrupt practices at local level. Respondents cited numerous cases where councillors or members of parliament disregarded or dissolved established community structures for disaster risk governance; diverted recovery funding from one area to another; presented developmental issues as disasters so as to benefit from humanitarian finance; added names of relations or supporters to lists of beneficiaries when they were not affected; or produced parallel lists of affected people to benefit from relief supplies. In a number of cases, councillors and MPs competed to control or be seen to be in control of relief supplies.

The findings conclusively contradict previous assertions that absence of local councillors was paralysing the governance of local councils (Kayuni and Tambulasi, 2011; Tambulasi, 2011; Chasukwa and Chinsinga, 2013). What comes out clear is that local

councillors and MPs do provide oversight role, but this is usually during disasters and often done to ensure that relief items go to their areas. When they raise concerns of corruption, it is often because they have not benefitted. One commonly cited positive outcome from the January, 2015 floods for disaster risk governance was the ‘window of opportunity’ (Penning-Rowsell et al., 2006) it created for the speedy adoption of the national DRM policy. However, the floods also led to the creation of camps in almost all the affected districts. Local councillors and MPs in one district took advantage and created fake camps and requested council officials to supply them with relief items so that they could gain political mileage with communities.

While council officials can overrule some actions by politicians, they indicated that this is difficult in politically connected areas where the incumbent belongs to a ruling party or is a senior figure.

This is worse when that MP is a minister and tries to tell you how certain things should be done... They also act in a manner as if they are the ones providing aid and try to prevent provision of aid to political party opponents (Interview with district council official).

On the part of NGOs, accountability remains another contentious issue. Matlin (2001) and Batley and Rose (2011) have also argued that NGO accountability may be absent at times but may also be questionable as they have to reconcile with the various stakeholders they have to be accountable to and who give them their legitimacy. In the end, this may also affect how they relate with government. Government officials indicated that they have limited information on what some NGOs are doing on the ground as very few report on their operations. Section 22 of the NGO Act requires NGOs to submit to the Registrar audited annual financial reports and activities reports. Most NGOs have ignored this requirement. In 2016, the media covered a story that revealed that up to 90 percent of resources NGOs received in 2015/2016 were not accounted for (Khunga, 2016). In response, CONGOMA issued a statement refuting the claims, arguing that NGOs’ failure to report to government does not mean they are not accountable as they submit their reports to donors (CONGOMA, 2016).

A key challenge with NGOs cited by key informants is that their primary interest is on mobilising resources to sustain themselves. As a result, they sometimes focus on showing results that would please their donors and attract more funding than addressing the actual needs of communities. In the words of one respondent:

Some NGOs would want to implement activities which donors would want just to please them but cannot have impact or reduce risks on communities and this ends up draining resources as objectives are not achieved.

Another respondent from the academia wondered:

There are just so many NGOs on the ground, but with little results to show. If these NGOs are really doing something on the ground, we would have seen a reduction in disasters. However, floods are happening every year and food insecurity is now a norm.

However, networks' effectiveness is also assessed by how individual members of the network benefit from the process. Individual member survival and success is also key to the survival and success of the network as a whole (Provan and Milward, 2001). Most NGOs said, while their main aim is to reduce disaster risks, they also join networks with the question 'what's in it for us?'

While Izumi and Shaw (2012b) have argued that NGOs are important players in countries that are not disaster prone, this does not seem to be true at sub-national and community levels. Almost all the NGOs undertaking adaptation or DRM functions in Malawi are concentrated in districts that are considered disaster prone. As a result, not all communities benefit from NGO or government's DRM work. Even within disaster prone areas, some areas receive more attention than others. For instance, Rumphi district had just one NGO active in DRM, Nkhatabay had none, while Nsanje had about ten, yet all three are classified as disaster prone districts.

Some NGOs felt government is not doing enough on its side to coordinate the activities of the NGOs, and this could be contributing to the limited impact at community level. By nature, governments are bureaucratic and hierarchical entities and managing a network

governance system requires reconciling these two positions, which calls for alternative management approaches (Goldsmith and William, 2004). For government to monitor humanitarian response programmes being implemented by non-state actors on its behalf, it mostly relies on funding from them, which in recent times has not been forthcoming. An officer from an NGO implementing CBDRM projects decried government's lack of leadership in DRM and its absence that is jeopardising risk reduction efforts:

Government has not come out clearly, the policies are not there and it's like the government is begging people ...nobody is decisive enough to say that this is what we are really going to do. And because government is not coming out clearly, it leaves communities to decide whether to remain there and risk their lives or to relocate upland....that is the greatest challenge....government doesn't have the muscle.

Sustainability of NGOs interventions was another challenge that was cited by a number of government officials and communities. Most NGO support is through short-term projects and once the project comes to an end, it becomes a challenge for communities to sustain the interventions. Some support has created relief dependency syndrome, where households continuously rely on humanitarian aid or other forms of social protection. When asked about their major worries, most people at community level cited cessation of humanitarian support from NGOs.

Implications for policy and practice and conclusion

So, does Malawi's DRM system fit a 'hollow state'? Yes it could, but perhaps not in absolute terms. Its overreliance on NGOs in delivery of DRM services makes it so. Yet, government has also been directly involved in delivering DRM services, albeit marginally. Particularly in the context of a least developed country where government finances are thin, this hollowness of the state cannot be considered a shortcoming, but is a strategic manoeuvre that ensures that communities still access DRM services.

This study sought to analyse the disaster risk governance system in Malawi to understand how it is contributing to either positive or negative DRM outcomes, or both. In answering this it began by showing that disaster risk governance in Malawi can be seen at three scales: central government, local government and community. Often, central government cannot reach the community without going through local government and NGOs. Local government in turn needs NGOs, local elites and other institutions to reach the community. Success of NGOs also hinges on the cooperation and support they get from government. Local councillors and MPs are considered the legitimate representatives of communities in government. Collaboration among actors and institutions is, consequently, unavoidable and this is typical of multilevel and network governance systems.

However, this paper has demonstrated how the incentives and disincentives present themselves to a network of actors and institutions, and how they react. Presently, disaster risk and adaptation finance can be seen as both a blessing and a curse. In part, the results suggest that it is largely how the actors and institutions individually and collectively position themselves vis-à-vis the incentives that can explain whether disaster risks facing developing countries in Sub-Saharan Africa and beyond will be reduced. There are three important conclusions to be drawn from these findings.

First, while this paper does not argue that decentralisation of disaster risk governance is irrelevant, it questions policies that are championing devolution of functions without considering the derelict structure of the local governance system. Devolution of disaster risk governance would mean that in times of disasters, a lot of resources would be channelled through the councils for response. There is disconnect at the decentralised scale of governance, where resources are being captured by the wrong people. This suggests that it is actors and institutions that are given the mandate to manage DRM and adaptation finance that could be the major stumbling block. Some of the resources made available through NGOs, central

government and other channels are often abused or not accounted for, not just by government's local council officials, but also elected politicians who are supposed to be safeguarding the resources. The system cannot be said to have been created by those working in it, but they too adopt a business-as-usual approach and fail to bring it on course. The optimum scenario with decentralised disaster risk governance is where local governments are capacitated to lead implementation of interventions, with central government and NGOs only providing support. Strong local capacity is a prerequisite to DRM decentralisation (Scott and Tarazona, 2011). Without addressing local government shortfalls, rushing into decentralising DRM functions and attendant resources could be another major disaster in the making.

Secondly, and related to the first point, the evidence presented in this paper and from other sources (eg. Malakar, 2012) show that most politicians look to the next election and will utilise every opportunity presented to them to canvass for votes. Some of them get elected without clear understanding of what disaster risk governance entails, other than that it provides political incentives. However, politicians also hold important positions in allocation of national and local resources and are responsible for passing laws. Grants and loans for disaster finance from bodies such as the World Bank require parliamentary approval. Some of them are cabinet ministers who approve policies. They can, therefore, not be completely isolated from disaster risk governance systems. Scholars such as Penning-Rowsell and colleagues (2006) have already argued that the occurrence of a major disaster presents a window of opportunity for policy adoption or change. As this paper has also shown, this is one time when politicians want their presence to be felt and DRM actors can capitalise on it. Already, there is evidence in Malawi that cabinet's approval of the DRM policy in February, 2015 was largely a reaction to the devastating floods that occurred a month earlier. In line with the disaster risk governance priority in the Sendai Framework, positive collaboration with politicians should provide opportunities to lobby for adoption of disaster risk reduction policies and legislation as well as

increased disaster risk financing. These collaborative efforts should also extend to building their capacity.

Finally, the study has also shown that presence of a strong network of NGOs offers some hope in reducing vulnerability to disasters. Where government is incapacitated and where donors prefer channelling their resources through non-state actors, NGOs will flourish and may remain the primary conduit for delivery of disaster risk and adaptation finance and services. As Batley and Rose (2011) also argue, in the current disaster risk governance setup in Malawi, NGO networks have the upper hand in that they have forged both vertical and horizontal relationships with the state, donors and communities, influencing both policy and practice, largely without losing their autonomy. In addition, a number of NGOs in Malawi are international, which means that practices that are successful in other countries and regions are being introduced in the country and adapted to suit the local context.

But this too calls for caution. The evidence presented in this paper suggests that government's leadership and active presence is also critical. While this could be defeating a core requirement of network governance, but where government's presence is not being felt communities can choose to ignore its policies. The challenge with NGOs is that their support and presence in communities is largely short-term. Where communities largely depend on NGO support for disaster resilience as observed in this study and also by Allen (2006), the departure of an NGO from an area can have devastating effects. In addition, NGOs are concentrated in certain geographical areas, leaving other communities unattended. They also focus on major disasters and have broader accountability challenges. These, therefore, call for governments not just to be active in policy formulation, but also to be seen to be active in coordinating actors. Achieving this does not just require adequate financial resources but also calls for DRM managers that understand and can wade through the complexities presented by a network of actors with divergent interests and capacities.

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Notes

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