
Youth, service and development in Malawi

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Abstract

Following the advent of democracy, many in Malawi lament the decline of genuine volunteerism and civic responsibility among its citizens, particularly the youth. This article maps the changing landscape of service and volunteering in Malawi, and argues that negative perceptions of youth, and their role in development, are at odds with the extent of youth involvement in volunteering in Malawi; rather, they reflect assumptions based on a concept of service as solely beneficiary-orientated. This contrasts with current expectations of many young people who, in the context of high unemployment, see volunteering as a strategy for personal development.

Key words

Youth; civic service; volunteerism; social development; peer education

Introduction

Civic service is increasingly being recognised as an important social institution and emerging social phenomenon in the global context (Patel, 2003). Civic service can be broadly defined as “the provision of service through volunteering and citizen action, contributing to the local, national or global community and promoting public good” (GSI, 2002, cited in Patel, 2003). Globally, service assumes a continuum, with informal, occasional volunteering at one end and more structured, intensive and long-term civic service at the other (Moore McBride et al., 2003; Patel & Wilson, 2004).

In Malawi, as in many other developing countries, the focus of service is strongly humanitarian, addressing the provision of basic needs and supporting both community and national development (Patel, 2003). Although largely undocumented, civic service and volunteering is widespread in Malawi and, building on a tradition of community self-help, is based on local level programmes implemented through mainly non-governmental organisations. A broad distinction can be made between well-established, structured, national organisations that implement specific projects (e.g. the Malawi Red Cross Society) and smaller organisations based in a particular community or district (Smith, 2005).

The potential for engagement of youth in service, and as a valuable human resource for development, has been the source of much discussion in recent years (Sherraden, 2001; Alessi, 2004). While globally, the practice of genuine and active engagement of youth in development may not yet be fully accepted (Alessi, 2004), in Malawi there has been a strong tradition of youth-led volunteerism and participation in development activities. During Malawi’s recent transition to democracy, however, the conceptualisation of service has been changing, and many Malawians lament a perceived lack of genuine volunteerism amongst its citizens, particularly the youth (Fairley, 2006).

Young people in Malawi face many challenges. Access to secondary education is limited². Despite improved enrolment rates in recent years, the majority of young people who exit the formal education system drop out early in the primary school cycle, and only around a tenth enter the formal economic mainstream (Kadzamira & Nell, 2004). Long-term unemployment among youth is high, particularly among young women,³ and many young people depend upon subsistence farming for their survival. Youth in Malawi are also disproportionately affected by HIV and AIDS: the majority of new infections are amongst the youth, with young women four times more likely to be infected than young men⁴ (National Statistics Office, 2005).

In recent years there has been a renewed call to engage youth in development activities and to see youth as a crucial resource for change. In a concept paper

for Innovations for Civic Participation (ICP), Alessi (2004) suggests that the use of structured service programmes is a key strategy in addressing issues directly affecting youth today. Such programmes will also empower youth to take an active role in tackling development priorities in their communities. The paper argues that issues affecting youth, such as unemployment, lack of education and life skills, marginalisation and risky behaviour can be addressed by service programmes that provide youth with opportunities to develop new skills and improve access to further training or employment. As such, these offer constructive alternatives to risky and negative behaviours (Alessi, 2004).

Based on a research study into service and volunteering in Malawi (Moleni & Gallagher, 2006), and part of a wider, five-country study on civic service and volunteering in Southern Africa,⁵ this article focuses on youth engagement with service and the youth's role in development, in light of Malawi's transition to democracy. It highlights the ways in which political, social and economic changes have affected the conceptualisation of service in Malawi, and demonstrates that, despite the changing landscape of volunteerism in the country, young people are still actively involved in the provision of service within communities and among their peers. This article describes how some youth initiatives are taking a lead in challenging the perception of service as primarily for the benefit of beneficiaries rather than servers, by providing meaningful incentives for young people to volunteer. This article also highlights some of challenges facing the participation of youth in Malawi's developing voluntary sector. It is hoped that this contribution will show that, despite challenges, youth volunteering and service in Malawi can potentially be a powerful force, not just for community and national development, but to empower and uplift youth through opportunities for their own personal development.

Service in transition: Conceptualising service in Malawi

In pre-colonial days, systems of inter-household co-operation existed at the village level, with age-mates working together in an individual household's fields. One such system of mutual help and service, culturally expressed as a moral obligation, was known as *thangata*. However, during the colonial period, the meaning of *thangata* changed to mean forced or bonded labour – as the estate owners turned the existing social system to their own purposes, using it as a cheap mode of economic production (Kandawire, 1979).

Following independence in 1964, communal civic action, whereby local chiefs mobilised their people to participate in development work, became increasingly

institutionalised. Local self-help projects, using voluntary contributions of time, resources and labour, were selected, planned and overseen by district development committees (Christian Services Committee, 1979) under the close scrutiny of political leaders and party members. The leader of the newly independent Republic of Malawi, who was to be made life-president in 1971, Dr Kamuzu Banda, quickly established a national youth service – the Malawi Young Pioneers (MYP) – which was seen as central to his vision of nation-building (Government of Malawi). As with many national service programmes that are government sponsored, this was primarily concerned with promoting unity and patriotism (Patel, 2003), and producing disciplined and productive citizens. In contrast to national youth service in many other African regimes, however, this programme was not compulsory and focused on uplifting the rural poor, rather than utilising elite university graduates (Patel & Wilson, 2004). Unfortunately, the vision of a self-reliant and development-orientated youth was lost as the movement became highly politicised, armed, and eventually disbanded during the struggle for democracy in 1993.

Taking the premise that “civic service is not a politically neutral activity” (Patel, 2003:89) and that its conceptualisation is shaped by wider political, ideological, social and economic ideas that frame dominant social policy, the promotion and development of service in Malawi during its transition to democracy can be seen as an “ongoing contestation of ideas” (Patel, 2003:99) regarding the role of service and relations between the state and society. The advent of democracy in Malawi, following multi-party elections in 1994, saw an abrupt shift away from the prevailing government-led, authoritarian and paternalistic approach to service, as development structures and service initiatives of the previous regime were quickly dismantled. The new head of state, Bakili Muluzi, described civic service programmes and communities’ obligatory self-help projects as an abuse of rights and a denial of personal freedom – equating them with the colonial system of *thangata* – while assuring communities that the state would provide for their needs. However, such assurances of institutionalised state support were short-lived as continuing poor economic performance saw the new government being forced to adopt severe financial austerity measures, cutting social services in the process (Lucas, 2004). Increasingly, as the state was unable to provide many essential services, non-governmental organisations reliant on voluntary service provision stepped in to fill this gap. By the late 1990s, international concerns over widespread poverty, the disparity of wealth distribution and a lack of food security pressured government into adopting pro-poor economic policies and making poverty alleviation central to the government’s development strategy. This marked a definite shift towards what remains the current dominant social policy, heavily advocated by development

agencies and foreign donors, which enabled the emergence of a social development approach to service.

A social development approach to service is essentially a people-centred approach that promotes the active participation of all citizens in decision-making, seeking to empower and uplift those previously excluded. It focuses on making tangible improvements in the quality of people's lives through human, community and local socio-economic development. Its pluralistic stance relegates government's role in service to one of facilitation and support (Patel, 2003). In Malawi, this approach is supported by active civil society networks, increasing decentralisation of state authority, and a Constitution that promotes the full participation of citizens in development and democratic processes (Government of Malawi, 1995). However, while many development programmes emphasise the importance of community participation for implementation, and are heavily reliant on volunteers, the policy environment for local service and volunteering is weak. Furthermore, current collaboration between non-governmental service providers and local government is poor, and districts often lack the resources and capacity to provide regular supervision and support. Despite these challenges, a social development approach to service offers the youth of Malawi the democratic space to take up an active role in civil society, and supports their genuine participation in development.

The role of Malawian youth in development

Reflecting the trend observed in the recent assessment of civic service globally (Moore McBride et al., 2003), findings from this research study indicate that, as a group, youth in Malawi would appear to be more involved in service than in any other country.

Areas of service

While the transition to democracy saw the disbanding of the Malawi Pioneers and an ending of other institutionalised forms of service, new opportunities for youth to participate in development arose as Malawian society opened up and civil society flourished. In the absence of a centralised, highly structured national youth service, locally based community development and volunteering became the dominant form of service available to young people. As a new, vibrant civil society emerged, local youth non-governmental organisations (NGOs), community-based organisations (CBOs) and self-established youth clubs proliferated, so that, according to one key informant, approximately 2 000 such clubs and organisations registered with the

National Youth Council in the ten years following the advent of democracy.

Findings show that, currently, the Ministry of Youth's Youth and Participation programme, which promotes youth organisations as a platform for participation of young people in Malawian society, involves as many as 3 500 youth clubs and CBOs. Many of these locally based organisations implement civic education activities in their communities, offering information and raising awareness on issues such as health, HIV and AIDS, gender, environmental conservation and human rights. Others support home-based care for orphans and promote girls' participation in education and training.

Many youth were also found to be actively involved in a range of volunteer-based organisations that did not specifically target young people, either as servers or as beneficiaries. Several of the programmes analysed, which included national civic education and literacy programmes, humanitarian aid, environmental conservation, social welfare, and HIV and AIDS prevention and care, indicated that youth were the main source of volunteers. For example, the long-established National Adult Literacy Programme, a government-initiated programme implemented throughout the country, uses locally based volunteer instructors to teach basic functional literacy skills to villagers. Where previously instructors were recruited from older members of the communities, the majority of the 1 000 to 1 200 instructors are now said to be school-leavers aged around 20 years or more. In a less formalised role – and as a coping strategy by communities to address understaffed schools – community members volunteer their services to teach at local primary schools. Data from a recent study into teacher attrition in Malawi shows that almost half of all volunteer teachers (45 per cent) in districts surveyed were school-leavers of less than 24 years of age (Moleni & Ndalama, 2004).

Service for social change: Peer education

In line with a social development approach that advocates servers as agents of change, youth in Malawi are being used to great effect as peer educators. This study found that about a third of all youth clubs registered under the Youth and Participation programme were involved in a Youth and Health project set up to promote health and well-being among the youth. With funding from international development agencies, selected members of these clubs were trained as peer educators to deliver health messages related to HIV and AIDS, reproductive health and family planning to their fellow youth, and also to promote outreach activities in their communities. Currently, approximately 1 200 peer educators aged between 16 and 22 years are in place.

One key informant noted that several other development-orientated organisations use these club members to implement their own programmes. For example, Banja la Mtsogolo, a donor-funded NGO that operates reproductive health clinics, recruited peer educators and trained them to be youth community-based

distribution agents (YCBDA) – volunteers that deliver health messages, provide counselling and distribute contraceptives, including condoms (Nhlane, 2002). This means of mobilising young people to take an active role in the fight against HIV and AIDS has shown itself to be a key strategy in addressing issues pertinent to young people and ensuring their access to much-needed support.

Profile of volunteers in Malawi

Most youth volunteers are deliberately drawn from programmes' target communities. As such, they may live in similarly poor socio-economic circumstances; and will be unemployed or active in the informal economic sector. This commonality with beneficiaries was found to be particularly true for those living in rural areas. During focus group discussions it was noted that "most people who volunteer are the vulnerable ... the very poor". This reflects the observation that volunteering can contribute to greater inclusion in the development progress, as "excluded people are breaking new ground in voluntary service" (Gillette, 2003).

While it was found generally that few criteria exist for servers, programmes involved in civic education and peer education often expected servers to have completed at least two years of secondary education. In the case of the Youth and Health project, servers were required to have completed primary schooling. Given the low educational status of many young people in Malawi, this, in itself, excludes many from volunteering. In addition, while volunteering programmes were open to both males and females, a concern was the comparatively low level of participation of female youth in development activities such as the YCBDA programme (Nhlane, 2002). Noting that many youth clubs were dominated by boys, a sub-component of the Youth and Participation programme – the Development and Participation of Adolescent Girls Project – encouraged the setting up of girls-only clubs.

Commitment to service

As defined by Moore McBride et al. (2003) in their preliminary assessment of civic service worldwide, the service role of a volunteer has expectations of a manner similar to that of a paid employee. In terms of commitment, the vast majority of service programmes – international or national service programmes – require a specific period of service of relatively long duration and of high intensity, usually on a full-time basis (Moore McBride et al., 2003). In Malawi, where most service is provided through locally based volunteering, this level of commitment is generally seen only among servers with international volunteer-sending agencies. While some locally based programmes will expect servers to commit to a specific length of service – such as the National Adult Literacy Programme, which requires volunteer

instructors for a period of ten months – findings from this research show that for many other programmes, this level of commitment, while hoped for, is rarely enforced. Findings also indicate that programmes expect youth to serve on a part-time basis only, and with a flexibility that allows them to structure their service activities around their daily lives. This is done with the assumption that these young people – as with volunteers of all ages – will be involved in other activities, such as farming or casual labour, in order to meet their basic needs.

Motivating factors and incentives

Respondents suggested that in Malawi, poverty is an important driving force to volunteer, and that stipends that accrue to some programmes, although small,⁶ are sufficient to motivate many to volunteer. While not all programmes analysed in this study offered this form of financial compensation for service provided, most did offer some type of incentive to volunteers, although this was highly dependent on the level and nature of funding that projects received. In addition to small stipends, other types of incentives included training, resources to carry out project activities (e.g. bicycles), gifts (T-shirts, caps) and handouts (e.g. fertiliser). It was noted that, for young people in particular, perceived increased opportunities for employment through skills development and work experience were also seen as an incentive. As such, the provision of training is an important motivating factor for young people. This is related, however, not just to the acquisition of transferable skills, but also to small lunch, travel and/or out-of-pocket allowances provided by some funding organisations during training sessions.

In Malawi, as elsewhere, the receiving of monetary benefit by servers, whether as stipends or allowances, is controversial. During this study, many respondents agreed that any financial gain by the servers is not true to the spirit of volunteerism and encourages dependency. For others, the provision of financial compensation or material benefit was seen as an essential element of the successful provision of service, acknowledging that most of their volunteers were of low economic status and required assistance to sustain their participation.

Negative perceptions of the provision of financial or material rewards for service in Malawi still tend to dominate, however, related to a conceptualisation of service that focuses primarily on the beneficiary. This understanding reflects a global phenomenon where programmes originating in developing countries “tend to emphasise the impact of service on beneficiaries versus the impact on servers” (Moore McBride et al., 2003:14) This is in contrast with service programmes from developed countries, which acknowledge and stress the importance of the service experience on the servers. In Malawi, this concept is underlined by the fact that

the programme goals of many development organisations using volunteers are predominantly beneficiary-based.

However, youth-specific programmes are taking the lead in acknowledging the importance of incorporating benefits for both servers and beneficiaries into their programme design. For example, under the Youth and Health project, volunteer peer educators are expected to develop their capacity through training in several areas such as leadership skills, communication skills, assertiveness and other life skills, all of which would allow them to compete more successfully on the job market. The project also links up with livelihood and economic development programmes, so that servers are equipped with skills to become self-reliant and can become role models in their communities.

Challenges to youth involvement in service

As with service and volunteering in Malawi in general, one major challenge of promoting youth participation is the lack of clear policy direction and guidelines. While, from a global perspective, it is argued that greater impact and benefit to both youth and wider society requires strong co-ordination between national youth policy and youth service (Angel, 2003), there is little evidence of this in Malawi. Concerns have arisen over a lack of guidelines to frame development activities and the role of service, leading to wide discrepancies between the conditions of service and support available for youth volunteers.

Illiteracy and low levels of education generally among the communities from which volunteers are drawn is seen as a major factor hindering the development of service. As noted earlier, this excludes many young people from participating on programmes and has been suggested as one of the reasons why females are under-represented among youth volunteers.

Over half of the key informants who participated in this study stated that the high turnover among volunteers was a major factor hindering the effectiveness of service provision. This was often attributed to the high personal workloads of many volunteers in relation to their own requirement to meet basic needs. Among the youth, high turnover was also related to changes in their opportunities for employment, particularly in urban areas where access to formal employment is greater than in rural areas. During focus group discussions, one participant commented, "Somebody ... will do it [a volunteer] because he has nothing else to do ... but once he gets a better job or something permanent, then he will get out".

Other factors that impinge on the development of the voluntary sector in Malawi, and the participation of youth in particular, include a lack of resources, poor capacity and inadequate monitoring and supervision, although these factors

vary depending on the level and continuity of funding available. In Malawi, concerns have been raised that some foreign development agencies and international donors – who fund many of the development activities in Malawi – prescribe activities instead of responding to the needs and interests of those initiating action (Public Affairs Committee, 2003). This underlines wider concerns over the dependence of service provision programmes on donors, and the appropriateness of their perspectives in the African context (Patel & Wilson, 2004). In Malawi, many young people who seek support for their youth clubs and CBOs are well aware of donors' interests and, since they aspire to get their activities funded (accruing additional benefits such as training and allowances in the process), they are likely to focus on areas that fit in with donor agendas rather than other priorities (Fairley, 2006).

Another issue arising from the heavy reliance of many youth initiatives on donor funding is that of sustainability. While funding is often available for start-up activities and initial training, long-term, continued support is less forthcoming. As one representative of a major development agency observed, "We will ... support this project for two years, three years ... and train people and we expect people to continue with that, but these people are so poor and so dependent on external support that once you pull out, the likelihood of that project continuing is low. And again, even the government lacks capacity to continue supporting them".

Conclusion

This article demonstrates that, despite challenges, youth are found at the forefront of social and human development in Malawi, where their active engagement in community-based initiatives, as well as more formal, well-established national programmes, drives much of the service provision. A social development approach to service that promotes genuine participation in development efforts, and views servers as potential agents for change, has seen the use of trained peer educators as an effective strategy to tackle issues affecting youth today. Such an approach also provides opportunities for marginalised young people, often excluded from mainstream society, to achieve a degree of empowerment, involvement and self-worth (Gillette, 2003). However, issues relating to criteria for service remain, and may still exclude some young people from full participation.

To create an enabling environment for the continued expansion and positive impact of youth service in Malawi, steps need to be taken to strengthen capacity at all levels; develop policies and guidelines that acknowledge and support the role of volunteers in social development; explore ways to formalise and co-ordinate the myriad local organisations working with volunteers; and open up dialogue on the

relevancy and sustainability of programmes that are heavily dependent on donor funding.

A major challenge in the area of service and volunteering in Malawi is the need to find motivating incentives for volunteers, and to include such incentives in service programme design and implementation. Youth-specific programmes appear to have taken the lead in recognising the importance of providing benefits to both the server and the beneficiaries. Such approaches, that seek to impact positively on the server through, for example, skills development and economic empowerment, have been seen to encourage the participation of young people and the longevity of their commitment to development programmes.

However, to gain wider acceptance of server-orientated goals for youth programmes and, service programmes in general, there is a need to address a certain mindset among many in Malawi who perceive volunteerism as an extension of a civic duty that requires no financial compensation for service, and precludes incentives that confer direct personal benefit to the server. A focus on non-monetary benefits and greater transparency and regulation of stipends or allowances can assist in tackling such resistance. For youth, such non-monetary benefits could include programme components that provide training to enhance their future livelihoods, such as improving literacy levels, income-generation, and vocational and life skills. Recognised accreditation for training and work experience would also be valuable for youth in accessing future employment opportunities. As argued elsewhere, in order to have a serious and sustainable impact on both the youth in Malawi and wider development priorities, service programmes need to offer young people a chance to serve that presents a real opportunity to change their social and economic circumstances (Alessi, 2004).

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Endnotes

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- ² The gross attendance rate (GAR) for secondary schooling in 2004 was estimated at approximately 33% for males and 25% for females and the net attendance rate (NAR - the proportion of secondary school-aged population [14-17] who are actually attending) is even lower, estimates at 10% for males and 12% for females (NSO, 2005).
- ³ Amongst 20-24-year-olds in 2004, 43% of females and 29% of males had not been employed in a period of 12 months (NSO, 2005).
- ⁴ Currently, the estimated HIV prevalence rate amongst 15-24-year-olds in Malawi is 6%: 9% amongst females and 2% amongst males. The national estimated HIV prevalence rate for 15-49-year-olds is 12% (NSO, 2005).
- ⁵ This five-country study in Botswana, Malawi, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe was undertaken under the auspices of Volunteer and Service Enquiry Southern Africa (VOSESA) in association with the Centre for Social Development in Africa, University of Johannesburg, and was funded by the Global Service Institute (GSI) at the Centre for Social Development, Washington University, St Louis, USA.
- ⁶ The National Adult Literacy Programme (NALP) gives a monthly honorarium of K1000 (\$7) to its volunteer instructors (personal communication, District Community Development Officer, Zomba, Malawi).