

Globalising Resistance: Social Movement Activism in Malawi

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Abstract

Attendant with the rise of the good governance discourse of the 1990s and beyond, contemporary research on social activism in Africa has tended to be rooted in normalised conceptions of civil society operating in partnership with the state. The proliferation of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) over this period has attracted considerable attention from international donors and researchers alike – so much so that, for many, NGOs have now become synonymous with civil society. As a consequence, considerable gaps are evident in the literature on social movement activism and what this means in specific African contexts.

Drawing from an empirical study of political and social activism in Malawi over a six year period (2000-2006), this paper aims at making a contribution in this regard, focusing on the agency and activism of a civic network of organisations and individuals known as the Malawi Economic Justice Network (MEJN). Arguing that MEJN constitutes a social movement in that it embodies many of the associated characteristics identified within literature (a decentralised structure; an emphasis on popular participation and direct democracy; a dynamic membership; and a strong internal solidarity (Pichardo, 1997; della Porta and Diani, 1999; della Porta, 2009), the paper follows the journey of the network – from its genesis within the Jubilee campaign for debt cancellation, to its consolidation through the Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS) process, to its fragmentation with the attraction of donor funding, to its re-invigoration through challenges posed by its local district membership base – and identifies both the enabling factors and the constraints to its success in effecting social and political change over this time. MEJN's experience and journey demonstrates the increasingly globalised nature of African social movement activism and highlights both the opportunities and constraints to strategies for change posed by this globalisation.

Globalising Resistance: Social Movement Activism in Malawi

Introduction

In tandem with countries throughout the world, the 1990s was a period of significant political change across the African continent. As the end of the Cold War heralded the so-called ‘third wave of democracy’, multiparty elections were followed by a range of political reforms brought together under the guise of good governance. With non-governmental organisations (NGOs) increasingly celebrated as the new magic bullet of development (Lewis, 2002), social struggles were now to be addressed through consensus-based partnerships of state and civil society. For international donors, the key to addressing developmental challenges now lay in institutional reform and capacity building of national civil society, or more correctly NGOs who within the aid literature were treated as synonymous with civil society, to effectively operate within these institutions.

A decade later, cracks had already begun to appear in this rosy, normalised vision. The dangers of negating the inherently political character of social struggle were revealed as criticisms of NGOs as representing just another layer of an unaccountable elite grew. Yet, with a focus on NGOs as the key civic actors within newly ‘democratised’ Africa, large swathes of civil society and social activism had been effectively ignored and large gaps remained in our understanding and appreciation of social activism within an African context¹. Calls for NGOs to ‘return to their roots’ (Edwards and Hulme, 1997; Pearce 2000) were accompanied by calls for a new generation of research into the diversity of civic activism and the dynamics of power relations within them (Henry, Mohan and Yanacopulos, 2004; Lewis and Opoku-Mensah, 2006).

Drawing from an empirical study of political and social activism in Malawi over a six year period (2000-2006), in this paper I attempt to respond to this latter call. Following the journey of the Malawi Economic Justice Network (MEJN) – from its genesis within the Jubilee campaign for debt cancellation, to its consolidation through the Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS) process, to its fragmentation with the attraction of donor funding, to its re-invigoration through challenges posed by its local district membership base – I argue that MEJN constitutes a New Social Movement (NSM) and demonstrates the increasingly globalised nature of African social movement activism. Drawing from MEJN’s experience, I highlight both the opportunities and constraints to strategies for change

¹ An exception to this is to be found within a growing literature on social movements in South Africa. More generally however, empirical studies on civil society across Sub-Saharan Africa have tended to focus on the actions of specific NGOs.

posed by this globalisation. The paper proceeds as follows. In the following section I discuss the marginalisation of NSM activism within the literature on civic activism in Africa from the 1990s forward and include an account of the richness and diversity of civil society in a Malawian context. I then introduce the case of MEJN and chart its journey from NSM to NGO and back to possible NSM once more. In the final section I draw some broader lessons from MEJN's experience, highlighting both the positive and negative aspects of the globalisation of social movement activism.

New Social Movements in the era of Good Governance

A revival of academic interest in the concept of civil society within international development literature commenced in the aftermath of the Cold War, with Eastern European intellectuals such as Andrew Arato and Vaclav Havel highlighting the role of civil society in the downfall of authoritarian regimes. Throughout the 1980s authoritarian regimes collapsed and a wave of democratisation swept through Africa, with Malawi attaining democracy in 1994. The 'lost decade' of the 1980s also witnessed the failure of structural adjustment and its exacerbation of poverty and inequality for many people (see Clapham, 1996, Chossudovsky, 1997 on Africa in general; Chinsinga, 2002 on Malawi). With growing anti-statist sentiments and a reluctance to attribute rapidly deteriorating economic and social conditions to the inappropriate policy prescriptions of structural adjustment, a donor discourse of 'good governance' was borne. This posited a central role for civil society in the 'democratisation' of political relations, enhancing accountability, and opening a space for the participation of citizens in the development process (Doornbos, 2003, 2004). The discourse of good governance thereby gave birth to a new role for civil society.

Within this discourse, which dominated the early 1990s, the concept of civil society became exclusively equated with NGOs, many of whom were newly established following 'democratisation' in their respective countries. Although the concept of civil society incorporates a far wider array of associations and networks, it is useful, given the prevalence of this discourse, to firstly examine debates around this narrow section of the rich tradition that is civil society within an African context. The rise of NGOs in this period coupled with the surge in aid flows toward this sector has been well documented (Hulme and Edwards 1997, Pearce, 2000). NGOs were seen to possess a 'comparative advantage' vis à vis 'corrupt' governments in both the more traditional arena of service delivery, as well as new areas of democracy building, human rights work, policy analysis and research. An exponential growth in both numbers of NGOs and the diversity of their actions characterises this period. By the mid 1990s however, as Pearce (2000) and Lewis and Opoku-Mensah (2006) recount,

a growing cynicism with the inevitable mushrooming of NGOs among Southern professionals was becoming apparent. Southern NGOs were accused of uncritically swallowing the agendas of donors and turning development ‘*into just another “business”*’ (Pearce, 2000: 4). By the end of the 1990s the tide appeared to have turned, with NGOs facing a barrage of criticisms neatly encapsulated by Holloway.

While people inside the NGO world still think of themselves as occupying the high moral ground, the reality is now that few people in the South outside the NGO world think of NGOs like this. The word in the street in the South is that NGOs are charlatans racking up large salaries... and many air-conditioned offices.

(Holloway, 1999 - cited in Pearce, 2000).

Also writing toward the end of the millennium, Edwards and Hulme (1997) in their tellingly titled publication *NGOs, States and Donors – Too Close for Comfort?*, argue that, in their rapprochements (both financial, but also in terms of values, interests, methods and priorities) with both donors and their own states, NGOs were losing their relationship with the poor, and with the radical alternatives to the orthodoxies of the rich and powerful that they once espoused. Urging NGOs to ‘*return to their roots*’ the authors asserted that ‘*their ultimate achievements are not their scale, budgets or reputation, but their capacity to support effective association at the local level*’ (1997: 283). Pearce (2000) argued that NGOs had, by and large, failed to develop a critique of the global order, instead opting for a problem-solving approach underpinned by ‘*an intellectually lazy reliance on a handful of concepts and words as a substitute for thought*’ (2000: 32). This charge was reiterated repeatedly as the years progressed with many commentators criticising NGOs for operating within a neo-liberal agenda and failing to offer any alternatives (Roy, 2003, Tembo, 2003, de Santisteban, 2005, Ayers, 2006).

In common with many other African countries, the period following ‘democratisation’ in Malawi (1994 onwards) saw a proliferation of new NGOs hailed as the new guardians of civil society. This brief honeymoon period was followed by public criticisms of elitism, lack of patriotism, succumbing to donor-driven agendas, and seeking personal enrichment. While some of this criticism emanated from the ruling elite unhappy with NGO opposition to the so-called ‘third term debate’², more emanated from systematic empirical research as the growing international mood of cynicism reached Malawi Wiseman Chirwa (2000), examining the role played by Malawian NGOs in the 1990s,

² Following his election for a second term of office in 1999 then President Muluzi began a campaign to alter constitutional provisions which prevented him from running for a third term when the time came in 2004. The so-called ‘third term debate’ became a major political issue dominating political discourse for the next five years. It was vehemently opposed by church leaders and ultimately failed.

concludes that they have failed to shift public debate and discourse to wider socio-economic issues, while Harri Englund's research on a national civic education programme demonstrates how an inherently political project is being implemented in a manner which negates both power inequalities and relevant political and historical specificities (Englund, 2003). The findings of both pieces of research echo critiques of Southern NGOs more generally which charge them with unquestioningly adopting dominant frameworks and failing to operate critically within them. By 2006, surveying the global scene, Lewis and Opoku-Mensah, signalled a downturn in global enthusiasm for NGOs asserting that *'there are (nevertheless) signs that NGOs are no longer seen today as being in the mainstream of development'* (2006: 667).

With the elevation and reification of a particular version of civil society through high levels of financial support provided in the 1990s, the complex and diverse nature of civil society within African contexts has been largely ignored. Indeed civil society is often described as weak or non-existent in many African countries and existing or alternative modes of social and political organisation together with social relations within and between civic associations have tended to be ignored.

A notable exception to this general trend is the work of Jean and John Comaroff who, in their 1999 publication *Civil Society and the Political Imagination in Africa*, explicitly set out to uncover the *'social revisioning'* (1999: 3) they assert has taken place over the previous two decades. Arguing that there is a critical difference between the bourgeoisie and civil society within African society (1999: 17), their publication uncovers a diversity of civic associationalism inhabiting African public spheres, in the process drawing attention to *'uncool'* forms of African civil society, forms often dubbed partisan, parochial or fundamentalist.

Few have considered the sorts of public sphere presumed by specifically African relations of production and exchange, codes of conduct, or styles of social intercourse, by African markets, credit associations, informal economies, collective rituals, modes of aesthetic expression, discourses of magic and reason; by the various strands, in other words, that 'weave the fabric' of the civil here beyond the official purview of governance.
(Comaroff and Comaroff, 1999: 23 – emphasis in original)

In this conceptualisation, civil society in Africa is seen to encompass a far more diverse range of associations underlain by complex webs of values, priorities and relations.

In Malawi, this diversity and complexity is also apparent. Lwanda (2005) draws attention to the wide variety of indigenous groups that existed in colonial times, including Bao societies, Malipenga

groups, Beni troupes, and various 'native' associations. Minnis (1998) argues that these traditional associations in Malawi offered a buffer against the excesses of the colonial state. Although more politically assertive groups were quashed during the highly oppressive Banda³ regime, local associations are currently numerous and varied within the country despite frequent assertions of an 'undeveloped' civil society (see Chirwa, 2000). Despite this diversity, the equation of professional groups with civil society is self-reinforcing, as professional civil society members repeatedly refer to themselves as 'the civil society', largely ignoring other forms. In Malawi, Lwanda (2005: 54) notes that '*most elements of articulate elite 'civil society' (represented by NGOs, churches and other urban organisations) ignore the various cultural, traditional and economic groups at village, community and district level...'*

Recent research on civil society within Africa (although still focusing largely on NGOs) has begun to engage more with its reality rather than normative, idealised conceptions as heretofore. The ethnographic work of both Michael (2004) and Igoe and Kelsall (2005) are examples of this. While Michael's contribution, following a presentation of the findings of her empirical work, falls back on a more normative set of prescriptions as to how NGOs may gain more power within the socio-political arena, in the process once again negating issues of power differentials and the complexity of social interactions involved, Igoe and Kelsall's volume problematises the concept in more detail, in particular drawing attention to the interface between state and civil society, wherein it is argued that the line between both is increasingly blurred. This intermingling of civil society and state, a more Gramscian conceptualisation than the idealised Tocquevillian one conceived in much of the normative literature, is a recurring theme within the small body of empirically based literature. Karlstrom (1999), writing of civil society in Uganda, draws attention to the difficulty in attempting to distinguish neatly between it and the state wherein sometimes the same actors are engaged at both levels (1999: 105). The churches in Malawi (Catholic, Presbyterian and Muslim), often identified as significant actors within Malawian civil society (Minnis, 1998, Von Doepp, 2002, Jenkins and Tsoka, 2003, Ross, 2004), also exemplify this porosity between civil society and state, as highlighted in Von Doepp's research which demonstrates a prevalence of class interests among local clergy, with many of them forging links with strategic powerful interests, including those of the state. In this vein, Lewis and Opoku-Mensah (2006) highlight the need for more empirical research in the area that will do justice to the complexity and diversity of civil society in all its forms and contexts. As we will see, MEJN, although at a given moment appearing to be 'just another NGO', has, through its journey over time, highlighted this complexity and diversity in Malawi.

³ Dr Hastings Banda ruled Malawi from 1964 to 1994 under an increasingly brutal and oppressive regime. A vivid account of the violence and oppression of the time is provided by Jack Mapanje, a well-known Malawian poet, himself jailed for a number of months during the Banda era for his literary criticisms of the regime (Mapanje, 2002).

MEJN: New Social Movement or NGO?

In Malawi, as elsewhere, the structural adjustment years resulted in the twin-edged sword of increasing poverty and indebtedness. The gini ratio deteriorated from 0.48 in 1968 to 0.61 in 1995 (Chirwa, 1997b in Chilowa, 1998: 556) while external debt stocks rose from US\$ 0.9 billion in 1982 to US\$ 2.7 billion in 1999 (World Development Indicators Online). In 2000, Malawi qualified for the IMF/World Bank Highly Indebted Poor Country (HIPC) initiative under which the government was obliged undertake the Poverty Reduction Strategy Process (PRSP) in order to qualify for debt relief. Malawi's PRSP formulation process began in late 2000, following IMF and World Bank approval of an interim PRSP strategy in December 2000. The resultant three-year strategy was formally launched in April of 2002 (Jenkins and Tsoka, 2003). Following its completion work began, in mid-2005, developing a follow-on strategy. This five-year strategy, known as the Malawi Growth and Development Strategy (MGDS) brings together elements of the PRSP and an economic growth strategy, the Malawi Economic Growth Strategy (MEGS). It was completed in 2006 and launched in early 2007.

The PRSP process, in theory, heralded a new departure in national governance in that development policy was no longer to be dictated from the plush interiors of the World Bank's headquarters in Washington. In contrast, PRSPs were to be country-driven and participatory, with all relevant stakeholders participating in both their formulation and implementation (World Bank, 2002). In Malawi however, where such a broad-based participatory approach represented a radical shift from traditional hierarchical political relations (see Booth et al, 2006; Patel, 2005), the initial process was slow. In 2001 as the process commenced, just four civil society organisations were invited by the state to participate in the strategy formulation process. These included two international NGOs (Oxfam and Action Aid), a German research institute (the Konrad Adenauer foundation), and the state umbrella organisation for NGOs (the Congress of NGOs in Malawi, CONGOMA). No radical change seemed likely therefore as the traditional dyad of donors and state appeared set to continue. However, these traditional relations were jarred as members of the country's Jubilee campaign for debt cancellation, learning of the process through the campaign's global networks, and emboldened by the process' participatory claims, pushed for involvement. Spurred on by globalised discourses of participation, Jubilee campaign members decided to form a broad-based network, thereafter known as the Malawi Economic Justice Network (MEJN), to lobby for inclusion in the PRSP process. With a small amount of initial funding from Oxfam International, MEJN, a loose network of, initially, twenty-seven Malawian NGOs, religious groups, academics, trade unions and community groups,

was thus formed with the express intention of opening up the political space provided by the PRSP, affording a voice to the most marginalised and challenging traditional elite relations.

MEJN as New Social Movement

In late 2000, MEJN entered the political arena as a formidable force, drawing on the power of its global networks to open a space for its members in the PRSP process. Aware that their difficulties in gaining access to meetings and information made a mockery of its participatory claims, MEJN's leaders quickly colonised and capitalised on the globalised norms of the process. As one of the founding members explains, an email claiming that participation within the process was 'just a joke' sent across global networks proved instrumental in securing the network a place in the process.

And that [the email] actually was the clinch because immediately after that there was a meeting of all the heads of [the PRSP] thematic groups in the ministry, and then they called us in and they said 'ok, you want to participate now, let's make you participate'. And they were actually quite annoyed that this had gone out on the internet. And it actually, I think it was what clinched things.

(MEJN member)

And so, by throwing a global spotlight on the Malawian state's hollow claims to participation, MEJN managed, at the outset, to open up the process and colonise to some degree the political space afforded. Through its lobbying employing both national and global media, network leaders gained places for its members in seventeen of the process's twenty-one thematic working groups. Moreover, again invoking the discourse of 'participation' imbuing the process and arguing that the three-month timeframe left insufficient time to consult with member groups and their constituents, network leaders also succeeded in extending the overall timeframe for the formulation process to nine months in total.

MEJN as this point embodied many of the characteristics associated with NSMs. It was an informal network comprising active members engaged in sharing resources and expertise (della Porta and Diani, 1999) with a decentralised structure (Pichardo, 1997; della Porta and Diani, 1999) and an emphasis on popular participation and direct democracy (Evers, 1985; Pichardo, 1997, della Porta, 2009). There was a strong internal solidarity among members with similar values and aims (della Porta and Diani, 1999) working together in collective action (della Porta and Diani, 1999) employing a range of techniques including an extensive use of the media as well as protest when required (della Porta and Diani, 1999). While actively seeking to challenge traditional political relations within the

state, MEJN's strategy was to do this through direct interactions with state officials and through state institutions (Cohen, 1982, 1983; Tarrow, 1994; della Porta, 2009). In so doing, as now will now see, MEJN succumbed to some of the key challenges for NSMs which choose this route. Both Minkhoff (2001: 287) and della Porta (2009: 115) have argued that resources and institutional dependencies fundamentally shape NSM development. Writing from an associated network perspective, Henry, Mohan and Yanacopulos (2004: 839) argue the same thing and point to the fact that *'the development industry has created networks for its own purpose'*. Della Porta's research on global justice movements (2009) points to collaboration with public institutions carrying dangers of co-option together with trends towards increased formalisation in organisational structure, greater professionalisation, and the attraction of greater amounts of financial resources. As we will now see, MEJN's trajectory corresponds closely to these findings. However, another characteristic attributed to NSMs is their self-reflexivity and constant self-questioning (Cohen, 1995; Pichardo, 1997). Hence, again as we will see with MEJN, their trajectory is continually challenged from within as well as without, and their strategy and direction is constantly changing.

The 'NGO-isation' of MEJN

While securing a strong and vocal presence within the PRSP process was MEJN's first priority, quite quickly the movements' members succumbed to the ultimate danger of partnership governance – co-option and an internalisation of the dominant communication and behavioural norms of the process. The dominant discourse within the process was highly technocratic and dominated by a 'problem-solving' approach. Within this framework, technical policy discourses were privileged and the opportunities for what we might call 'problem-framing' or an examination of the underlying causes of these problems and their connection to the global development project were foreclosed. Significantly, these norms were quickly internalised by MEJN leaders who attribute their growing status to their technical competencies. As the network's director notes...

I think the calibre of people we featured in the TWGs [thematic working groups] but also in the drafting, the technical drafting team of the PRSP, was calibre that wouldn't be doubted, by the government, the donors, and everybody else.

(MEJN director)

The extent of the network leaders' internalisation of these dominant norms is apparent from a comment by MEJN's director in 2006, five years on from his first involvement in the PRSP process, on the substance of development policy from his point of view - *'these documents, time and again, should have a matrix which should contain detail on the activities that are going to be done...'*

Following completion of the formulation of the first PRSP strategy in 2001, the network decided that its focus should move to monitoring the strategy's implementation. This move corresponded to donor interest in monitoring the use of funds and countering corruption, part of the 'good governance' agenda. With MEJN moving into a new area of work which dovetailed neatly with the global aid agenda, additional demands began to be placed on network members. Donor funds began to drive the work of the network in new and somewhat disparate directions, with a focus on monitoring of policy outcomes rather than, as was originally envisaged, challenging traditional political relations and promoting more direct democracy. A board member outlines the problem,

But part of the MEJN lack of funding made us look for funding and sometimes go into kind of agreements that weren't very good. And it kind of scattered our attention a little bit all over the place... instead of being more focused and maybe sticking to some of the original objectives that we had set.

(MEJN board member)

As the years evolved, MEJN successfully secured funds and carried out programs in a wide range of areas including budget training for NGOs and government officials, budget monitoring and research (on trade, service delivery and maize distribution). Its public profile grew significantly and network leaders made regular appearances in the press and on the airwaves. Funding support diversified and MEJN, by late 2006, was receiving support from over ten international donors, the majority of whom fund specific programs of their choosing. And so, it appears that MEJN had moved significantly from its original mandate of colonising political spaces by securing broad-based participation in the PRSP and allied political processes, to what, reflecting the widespread popularity of the globalised 'good governance' discourse, is now ubiquitously referred to as its 'watchdog role'. In this, MEJN's trajectory has seen it move from a broad-based activist movement challenging elite relations to something more akin to the globalised normative NGO so beloved of donors at the beginning of the 'good governance' era.

These developments were not without their challenges however. Most significantly they necessitated a shift in members' own direction and strategy, requiring them to move from more active campaigning and direct representation of their own members' views and perspectives, to new, more technical, 'professionalised' areas of work, such as budget monitoring. However, despite capacity building workshops run by the network's leadership, member organisations proved resistant to these changes, resisting an internalisation of the dominant norms. With network members refusing to comply with the PRSP process' discursive, communicative and behavioural requirements, the movements' leaders decided to take on an increasing amount of work directly themselves. MEJN's

director (in a move perhaps reflecting these shifts, as the years evolved the coordinator's role became transformed into that of a director) explains the challenges these shifts posed.

But this shift ... has brought with it a number of challenges. Because the expectation in the membership of MEJN has been that they would be involved in the actual implementation of economic governance activities or programmes that MEJN has on the ground. Now the first challenge that this has come with has been that the organisation members of MEJN have not sufficiently reworked their work plans or their own programmes to have like a specific line on economic governance. Which means that any direct link to implementation has been left to the [MEJN] secretariat.

(MEJN director)

Moreover, reflecting its increasingly 'professional' profile, MEJN secretariat members were now selected from an elite class. A third level education was now required to work within the secretariat.

I think one positive thing that has seen MEJN moving much more tremendously than the other organisations is our pragmatic approach in terms of staffing, because we say the minimum is we are going to recruit somebody who has got say a Bachelors degree, or indeed whose experience is closer to having a Bachelors degree.

(MEJN director)

With MEJN leaders increasing the size of the secretariat and increasingly taking on much of the work themselves, conflict was inevitable. Network members, feeling excluded and sidelined, accused MEJN leaders of turning the network into an NGO. In the words of one member...

MEJN is a network. They should not be implementers. Let them use their members... Of course there have been some clashes between MEJN and their members... And people have moved away from getting interested in MEJN. Because MEJN wants to be the implementer. ... I think that's a conflict, that's where the conflict comes in now. So let them identify what is their role. Are they facilitators or implementers? MEJN is not an NGO. The way I understand it, it is a network.

(Representative of MEJN member organisation)

While some of this acrimony may well be due to competition for resources ('NGO-ism' is big business in Malawi, as elsewhere), it is clear that MEJN had strayed far from its original objectives and mandate. Its leaders were effectively closing the political space and consolidating hegemonic elite relations. They were perhaps facilitated in this by dominant cultural norms. Malawian society has been described as comprising hierarchical and asymmetric structures and systems in which loyalty and conformity to political leaders remains strong, and conflict and dissensus is not readily tolerated. (Booth et al, 2006; Patel, 2005; Englund, 2002, 2003).

However, political cultures are neither static nor immutable and, while evolving trends are difficult to analyse, evidence from recent attitudinal surveys (Afrobarometer data as analysed by Khaila and Chibwana (2005)), combined with popular discourse, as recorded in Malawian media, suggest that, although adherence to liberal values remains strong, trust in political leaders has fallen significantly. Newspaper articles with headlines such as *Why our leaders fail*⁴; *The State of Malawi*⁵; *Political leaders need to consider cost of impasse*⁶; and *Never trust politicians*⁷, to cite a few, exemplify the widespread disillusionment and distrust of political leaders. An excerpt from the latter article provides a flavour of public perceptions of politics in contemporary Malawi

*But then politics in Malawi is always seen as an all-important opening to social cachet and wealth... Avarice, jealousy, distrust and hate soon give birth to uncontrollable political maelstroms and fierce fighting erupts. More struggles, more defections, more noise and more change. And to bank my trust on people with inflated egos and bloated self-interest, politicians who can't make up their minds on one thing and stick to it? No thanks.*⁸

Undoubtedly, this debate is fuelled by the globalised 'good governance' discourse underpinned by an implicit cynicism for African politics which is well rehearsed throughout Malawian society.

Notably, this critique of political leaders extends to those within the civic sector also in Malawi however where global cynicism with the mushrooming of NGOs among Southern professionals has fuelled a growing public critique in Malawi where NGOs are accused of failing to represent the poor and differing little from traditional political elites.

Certainly MEJN appears guilty of many, if not all of these charges, as it appears that that the impetus at the time of its establishment – that of bringing a wider set of voices espousing the concerns and agendas of the poor thereby challenging elite political relations – had become over-ridden by the agendas of funding agencies – the professional requirements of which led to a widening gap between the network's leadership, its membership and the people it was purporting to represent. However MEJN's story does not end here as wider national debates and critiques, in turn informed by global debates, began to make their mark and MEJN's transformation from NSM to NGO was once more challenged.

The 're-NSM-isation' of MEJN

⁴ *The Sunday Times*, October 9th, 2005.

⁵ Opinion, Kamkwamba Kalea, *The Nation*, October 10th, 2005.

⁶ Editorial, *The Nation*, October 5th, 2005.

⁷ Levi Kabwato, *The Sunday Times*, September 25th, 2005.

⁸ Levi Kabwato, *The Sunday Times*, September 25th, 2005.

With the growing gap between its members and the secretariat occurring at a time when MEJN was gaining national and international renown through its widespread use of the mass media, the network's leadership began to find itself confronted with charges of illegitimacy, both from within its own membership and within Malawi society more broadly. From its early days of relying on the World Bank's *Voices of the Poor* (Naryan et al, 2000) as a basis for its inputs to the PRSP, MEJN's leadership was faced with a growing public consciousness that the network had not consolidated a grassroots base which might feed into policy and advocacy activities, thereby putting into practice the theory of '*participatory economic governance*'⁹ that the network espoused. Indeed, with policy and programs in the country becoming more and more decentralised, MEJN appeared the very embodiment of the elite NGO divorced from its roots as depicted in the critical development literature of the late 1990s. The network remained largely urban-based, purporting to represent the poor, yet with an office and entire staff in Lilongwe. In 2002, cognisant of these issues and attempting to respond to public critiques, MEJN's leadership began to build a local network of representation in the form of what became known as the District Chapter Program.

MEJN's District Chapter Program consists of locally elected voluntary committees of eight to ten people who aim to represent the interests of their communities at district level. Committees have been established in twenty-seven of Malawi's twenty-nine districts. Each district has its own local government in line with the country's decentralisation policy. Committees consist principally of representatives of both local NGOs and local community-based associations including youth groups, women's groups, faith-based groups, and trade and business associations. This new model represents an interesting development in a number of ways. First, it unveils the richness and diversity that is civil society in Malawi. Contrary to normalised accounts in the literature, in tapping into this diversity, MEJN has challenged many of the normative assumptions which led to its NGO-isation. Second, the innovative model, linking MEJN's 'elites' at national level with associations and groups on the ground, potentially provides a channel for local voices to articulate their analyses and perspectives thereby offering the potential for more direct forms of democracy, both at local level, and nationally. And third, this development illustrates the power and potential of globalised discourses and debates to challenge and contest the movement (in this case both charges of illegitimacy from the wider arena of Malawian civil society, including the media, and the globalised policy of decentralisation with its attendant discourse of participatory governance¹⁰).

⁹ See *MEJN Programme Support Document* (MEJN, 2004).

¹⁰ The new Constitution Act No. 7 of 1995 (Chapter XIV) provided for the creation of local government authorities whose responsibilities include the promotion of local democratic participation.

Given the potential to re-open the political space – by decentralising itself structurally and affording opportunities for more direct forms of democracy – the key question is to what extent (if any) has this reversed the ‘NGO-isation’ of the movement. In other words, have these developments led to a ‘re-NSM-isation’ of MEJN? Left to MEJN leaders alone (now heavily influenced by donor funding and exigencies), there appears little chance of a change. However, as we will now see, the capacity for self-reflection and challenge from among the wider membership has led to a more complex situation.

Responding to public critiques, MEJN’s leaders’ aim in developing the District Chapter structure was to institutionalise a national structure of representation which would enable the secretariat to bring people’s issues from the ground to the national policy arena. Representation was to be achieved by Chapter committee members in their districts systematically gathering data and information in specified areas (food security, health, education etc.) and feeding this upwards to the secretariat for what MEJN, in the globalised discourse of the PRSP process, terms its ‘*evidence based advocacy*’¹¹. Significantly however, Chapter members have a very different vision of their role. In interviews, Chapter committee members in eight different districts all emphasised that wished to represent their local communities by bringing issues of local concern and interest to local government structures and ameliorating the rapidly deteriorating living conditions experienced since the advent of structural adjustment. In particular, members were interested in moving beyond the main town within the district (where many committee members live) and going out to villages and settlements in outlying areas. Members were emphatic that MEJN’s role lay in facilitating people at the grassroots to articulate their views, concerns and analyses. As one Chapter member put it... ‘*MEJN is for the people... If MEJN is only for the boma [district main town] then we are a failure. It’s the people in the grassroots who need MEJN more*’. There is, therefore, clearly a divergence of views on the role and function of local committee structures. While for MEJN’s more professionalised leadership, having internalised dominant communicative norms, this structure is there to collect ‘evidence’, i.e. carry out research on specific areas as selected by the MEJN’s leadership (often following donor requirements), committee members, employing more popular forms of communication and alternative discourses, appear to view their role as a portal for the views and perspectives of local ‘communities’ (in itself a problematic concept and generally mediated through the local TA (Traditional Authority¹²)) to be fed upward to key decision makers, both

¹¹ See *MEJN Programme Support Document* (MEJN, 2004).

¹² In Malawian political life elements of both modern and traditional co-exist. TAs or Chiefs, a hereditary title, form part of the local government structures (together with locally elected councillors and MPs) and mediate many local, community-based, socio-political relations.

through their own Chapter committee representatives at district level, and through those of the MEJN secretariat at national level.

This bifurcation is not lost on Chapter members. Repeatedly the question of representation was raised by committee members, as articulated by one member... *'who do we represent – do we represent MEJN or do we represent our communities?'*. When prompted to respond to their own question, committee members replied that they felt they represented their communities and that MEJN leaders should facilitate them in doing so. The committee members' question is illuminating in that it highlights the contradiction between the discursive and communicative norms adopted by MEJN within the PRSP process and the competing discourses of local communities. In this, it highlights the contestation between dominant and local knowledges and the power relations circulating around these. While MEJN's leaders, enmeshed in donor and state relations, are keen to direct committees in meeting donor and state agendas by collating select pieces of evidence to support their 'evidence-based advocacy', thereby forestalling agendas and issues that might be raised, committees themselves, enmeshed in local relations, appear more keen to take their agendas from local 'communities' (however these may be defined), thereby offering a channel to communities through less bounded, open dialogue and communication, challenging and complicating the channels through which the global development project is disseminated.

Committee members have begun to challenge MEJN's leadership to listen to and support their plans for the future. A number of committees have put forward concrete plans for projects they wish to carry out, and there are calls for more supports and less directives from MEJN's leaders. It would seem that the heretofore-neglected local associations and actors within Malawian civil society countrywide have found their political voice and are keen to use it.

While MEJN struggles to maintain its status within the formal political arena therefore, its locally-based membership, emboldened by global debates on the contested meanings of 'good governance', 'participation', and 'poverty reduction', lies waiting in the wings, with members of some District Chapter committees becoming increasingly vocal about MEJN support in their efforts to bring their diverse issues to national level, thereby putting into practice the real 'participative governance' that the movement's leaders espouse. It remains to be seen how MEJN leaders will negotiate the conflicting normative demands of the state and donors which seek to NGO-ise the movement on the one hand, and Chapter members and their 'communities' which, implicitly operating out of a NSM model, seek a meaningful decentralisation of power and more direct forms of participation on the other. One thing is clear however, bridging these relations and poised with one foot in, and one foot

out of the hegemonic order, MEJN's journey has served to demonstrate how, at the micro-sites of struggle and contestation, globalised discourses and frameworks can be harnessed and appropriated to both challenge as well as to consolidate traditional political relations.

Conclusion: Globalising Social Activism

While Africa is sometimes described as having been left behind in the onward purposive march of globalisation (Castells, 2000; Hoogvelt, 2001), from colonisation onward global influences have played a significant part in political and social as well as economic life across the continent. In today's era of electronic media and information flows, these influences reach further and deeper than ever. In doing so, as is evident from the Malawian case, they offer both valuable opportunities and significant constraints to transformative change across the continent.

On the positive side, the globalised ideals and discourses of good governance promoted since the 1990s have opened the political space to a range of actors heretofore marginalised from the political process. The most significant impacts in this regard have been two-fold. First, the institutional changes brought about through processes such as the PRSP and its successors together with those of decentralised governance have formally opened up the space for the political engagement of civil society groups. And second, the globalised discourses of participation, democracy, representation and accountability which have infused public debate have emboldened civic actors to challenge their so-called leaders to represent, in a substantive manner, their issues and concerns. As the Malawian case illustrates, resistance is clearly alive and well in towns and villages across Malawi, with local actors appropriating both globalised discourses and institutionalised spaces to make their voices heard.

On the more negative side, global influences – most notably in the form of donor ideals, discourses and funding to the NGO sector – have reduced the avowedly political project of development and resource distribution to an apolitical technocratic exercise in policy formulation and budget monitoring where all that is deemed necessary in addressing the stark inequalities in wealth distribution (globally and nationally) is capacity building in select technical areas. Moreover, as we have seen in the MEJN case, this approach, in equating NGOs with civil society, has risked marginalising and disenfranchising important sections of civil society, both ignoring the diversity and richness of voices that make up Malawian civic society and, through an attempted silencing of dissent, further marginalising key actors.

Perhaps the most important lesson from the Malawian experience for scholars and practitioners alike is that resistance and conflict are key elements of any societies where people are actively marginalised. An exclusive focus on normalised, liberal-democratic models of civil society organisation as a means of addressing this marginalisation ignores the political and social realities of everyday life and undermines the potential to transform traditional political relations – the necessary pre-requisite to any real and lasting moves towards poverty reduction across the continent.

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