

The Role of Traditional Leaders in Rural Development, a Case Study of Karonga District in Malawi

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Abstract: *In Malawi traditional leaders have well defined power, authority and influence which they exercise on their subjects within their area (Lule Godfrey, 1995). Historically the institution of traditional leadership is dated back to the pre-colonial era. Since then its governance structure has undergone several changes in order to fit in the modern democracy. This institution was established in accordance with the Chiefs Act, 1967 and operationalized by the Local Government Act, 1998. During colonial rule Traditional Leaders were mostly involved in tax collection, administration of customary land and maintaining peace and order. While in the present day they are responsible for initiating development projects, community and resource mobilization and monitoring development, (Chinsinga Blessings, 2010). This indicates that there is a close link between role of traditional leaders, decentralization and rural development. They are considered as reliable and dependable eyes and ears of people and they act as entry points for rural areas. Since Rural Development also involves Traditional leaders in order to uplift the living standard of the rural poor they are considered as catalyst of development. However they are faced with challenges ranging from high levels of illiteracy, corruption, nepotism, favoritism, politicization of development work, conflict with politicians to scarcity of resources. In respect to this the aim of this paper is to critically examine the role of traditional leaders in rural development, 'A case study of Karonga District in Malawi.'*

Keywords: Traditional leaders, decentralization, rural development, resource mobilization, local Councils

1. Introduction

The term development, deals with universally cherished goal of individuals, families, communities and nations. It is an activity that occurs continuously, (Katar Singh et-al, 2016). It intends to fulfill specific goals for the benefit of man. It is mostly manifested in improvement in distribution of income for people; political and economic freedom; equitable access to resources, education, health care, employment opportunities, justice and security of life and property.

In developing countries like Malawi there are high levels of poverty as seen from the unsustainable use of resources mainly in rural areas. This scenario points to the overall development of rural areas with a view to improve the quality of life. Rural Development as a concept emphasizes on the development of agriculture and its allied activities, village industries, village art and crafts, socio economic infrastructure, community services and facilities and human resources in rural areas. The purpose is to involve poor people so that they are able to seek a livelihood where they can manage to demand and control the benefits. When rural development is fully embraced in people possess abilities to make a self-assessment of their customs and beliefs and start to drop those practices that are considered to be harmful, detrimental and counterproductive to development, (Katar Singh et-al 2016). In a nutshell the process of Rural Development must represent the entire gamut of change where society moves away from a state of life perceived as unsatisfactory towards a materially and spiritually better condition of life while addressing the basic elements of rural development including; poverty, unemployment and inequality.

In Malawi Rural Development is an absolute and urgent necessity because people are subjected to several hardships

as a result of poor standard of living. Actually Malawi is one of the poorest countries in the world with 50.7% of the population living below the poverty line and 25% living in extreme poverty, (Malawi Economic Development Document for Malawi; Country Report, 2017). Malawi has a population of 18,628,747 (NSO, 2018) where 85% of the people live in rural areas. The country is faced with major challenges of over-reliance on rain-fed agricultural production systems which are prone to climatic shocks; animal and plant diseases which lead to major crop and livestock losses, HIV/AIDS, Malaria, tuberculosis and anaemia. These issues ultimately put monetary burden on rural population. Hence there is a strong link between Rural Development and Traditional leadership at grassroots level. Consequently, the role of traditional leadership in rural development is very crucial in addressing rural socio economic challenges.

Malawi is a sovereign state with a democratically elected system of government adopted in 1994 and has a Multi-Party system of government. Malawi constitution gives a legal mandate for the establishment of Local Governments at district level in accordance with the Local Government Act (1998). This legislation recognizes traditional leaders as active players in rural development. Traditional leadership is believed to have a significant role in rural development since they lead and manage development activities in their respective areas. Scholars have argued that the level of development in a rural setting tells a story about the caliber of traditional leadership, (Chinsinga Blessings, 2010). In this regard traditional leadership is considered as one of the determining factor in bringing development in rural areas. However in order for them to bring positive change in rural areas they should possess some competencies to enable them deliver positively i.e. inherent nature, patriotism, allegiance, attitude and style of leadership, (Subburaj.L et-al, 2016).

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Consequently, the assertion that traditional leaders are better placed to contribute positively towards rural transformation is considered to be true. Further to that traditional leaders are an immediate remedy for the promotion of decentralization, democracy and civil society strengthening. Chinsinga et-al (2010) argued that traditional leaders act as a catalyst in the public reform process in the country to address pertinent issues in rural areas. Hence they become easy targets for the satisfaction of the desires of politicians.

The Malawi Constitution stipulates that local authorities should have traditional leaders serving within their areas of jurisdiction, meaning that the constitution empowers traditional leaders to exist in various parts of the country and contribute to the development of the country. It also indicates that local leaders should facilitate establishment of wards within their areas of jurisdiction to create room for the participation of the elected leaders known as Councilors, as provided for in the Electoral Commission Act. Therefore it is important that traditional leaders and Councilors should work in close collaboration in development matters. Although traditional leaders are recognized in fostering development in rural areas the Constitution and other legislation do not give a clear picture on development role. This has led to conflict of interest with councilors who are political representatives of wards.

On the other hand the Chiefs Act, 196 stipulates that traditional leaders are custodians of culture. The act provides for the recognition, appointment and functions of paramount chiefs, and other lower level chiefs i.e. Group Village Headmen and Village Headmen responsible for maintenance of peace, law and order and managing traditional law in line with the relevant statute. But the irony comes when development partners like Non-Governmental Organizations and Donors heavily require the involvement of traditional leaders when they want to undertake development work in rural areas. They believe that traditional leaders would be more instrumental in community and resource mobilization since they are reliable, trustworthy and readily available. This observation makes their position to be crucial in rural development, hence a great need to formalize their role in rural development.

The Local government system in Malawi has thirty five local councils comprised of 28 Districts, 4 Cities, 2 Municipalities and one Town Council. This categorization shows that many local Governments are located in rural areas where 85% of the total population lives.

Traditional Leadership, Local governance and Rural Development

In Malawi the institution of traditional leadership is dated back to the pre-colonial era. The chronology of state local governance structures has undergone four distinct phases as follows;

First Phase was between 1891 and 1912 when the British colonialists had adopted an indirect rule over Malawi and it became a British protectorate, (Cammack Diana et-al, 2009). The Second Phase was between 1912 and 1933 when the indigenous leaders were formalised and got recognized by the British and raised the foundations for indirect rule and

created a new hierarchy of traditional authorities which provided for the Principal Village Headman at the top and Village Headman at the bottom, both reporting to the District Commissioner. They had the responsibility to keep law and order, tax collection and livestock control amongst others. The Third Phase was between 1933 and 1953 when the British indirect rule revised the hierarchy of Traditional Authorities once again in the following order; Native Authorities, Sub-Native Authorities, Group Village Headman and Village Headman. These traditional leaders were given powers of local government with the role to oversee issues of farming, peace, security, general administration, and case adjudication. Finally between 1953 and 1964 when Malawi became independent Local Councils were established as independent units consisting of appointed members with District Commissioner as chairman of the councils, (Cammack Diana et-al, 2009). They were responsible for making by-laws and providing social services. Then traditional leaders' power and authority was moved to Local Authorities to become ex officio members.

In 1967 District Development Committees were created under the direct control of the Office of the President and Cabinet with lower Village Development Committees and Area Development Committees chaired by chiefs. This structural arrangement for development planning is still used till this day in Local Councils. The enactment of the Chiefs Act in 1967 led to the creation of Traditional Authorities. However their legislative and judicial powers were limited to culture, customary law, peace and welfare of people. In order to consolidate their position Government provided them an incentive in form of a monthly honorarium. Since then the responsibility of appointing, removing and creation of new chieftaincies in new areas was vested in the Presidency.

When Malawi attained multiparty democracy in 1994 liberal democratic norms were reflected where local government authorities were established to be responsible for representing people, promotion of socio economic development, promotion of local democratic institutions and democratic participation. Then local councils were abolished and a new set of decentralised governance system was put in place. This resulted in the devolution of powers and responsibilities to the district level and government ministries and agencies were merged into councils comprised of Members of Parliament, Councillors, and ex officio members including; Traditional Leaders and special interest representatives with executive and legislative powers.

Chiefs Act, 1967, only recognizes the Traditional Authorities and their subordinate Chiefs. The highest level in the ladder is either the Paramount Chief or Traditional Authority with Traditional Authority, Sub-Traditional Authorities, Group Village Headman, and Village Headman under him. Currently, there are seven Paramount Chiefs in the country, namely; Inkosiyi Makosi M'belwa of the Northern Ngoni, Inkosiyi Makosi Gomani of the Southern Ngoni, Chief Lundu of the Mang'anja, Chief Mkhumba of the Lomwe and Chief Chikowi of the Yao, Kyungu of Nkhonde, Chikulamayembe of the Tumbuka and Paramount Gawa Undi of Chewa or Nyanja. And there are 24 Senior Chiefs; 121 Chiefs; 61 Sub-Chiefs; 2 360 Group Village

Headmen; and 18 361 Village Headmen. Karonga district has six Traditional Authorities as follows; Paramount Chief Kyungu, Senior Chief Kalonga, Kilupula, Mwakaboko, Mwirang'ombe and Wasambo. This setup is further subdivided into 39 Group Village Headmen with 50 Village Development Committees and 336 Villages.

2. Literature Review

The review of Literature is very vital for this research work. It shows the originality of the study, and helps in avoiding the plagiarism. Due to the Literature review the possibility of repetition of study can be eliminated and another dimension can be selected per study. The present literature is about role, authority and functions of Traditional Leaders in Rural Development reviewed by various authors and thinkers.

Diana Cammack et-al (2009) explored the authority, legitimacy and accountability which traditional leaders have in their routine work. She indicated that they work with Community Development Committees and act as entry points to communities. Keulder Christian (2010) discussed that in Namibia traditional leadership is still relevant. He said they have control over rural communities and dominate rural survival strategies i.e. allocation of land, natural resources, communal labor practices and law and order. Tshitangoni et-al (2014) discussed that in Zimbabwe traditional leaders are responsible for managing customary courts within their areas of jurisdiction, registration of births, deaths and customary marriages.

3. Objectives of the Research Study

- 1) To explore the major roles of traditional leaders in rural development
- 2) To examine the working relationship between traditional leaders, and councilors in rural development
- 3) To find out the mechanism for monitoring the contribution of traditional leaders in rural development.
- 4) To find out the barriers for effective performance of traditional leaders in rural development.
- 5) To establish the significance of traditional leaders in rural development.

4. Research Methodology

This is a descriptive and qualitative type of research study where both Primary and Secondary data sources were used. The Primary Data involved the collection of fresh data from the area of study in order to get first-hand information through the use of Questionnaire Method which was administered as a schedule. Secondary Data involved collection of data that had passed through the statistical processes from published or unpublished sources available in form of publications, books, magazines, newspaper, reports, articles and journals.

This study was done in Karonga district which is located in the Northern Region of Malawi. The district is bordered by Chitipa district to the West, Rumphi district to the South, and Tanzania to the North and East. The district headquarter

is 50 km south of the Tanzanian border, and 585 km north of the capital city of Malawi, Lilongwe. It has a population of about 365,028 people (NSO, 2018). The district has six Traditional Authorities namely; Paramount Chief Kyungu, Senior Chief Kalonga, Kilupula, Mwakaboko, Mwirang'ombe and Wasambo. Specifically the study was done in Traditional Authorities Kyungu and Kilupula.

On the part of sampling population, a sample size of 76 people from both traditional authorities was used where only 61 respondents managed to respond to the questionnaires that were administered. Simple Random Sampling Method was used. This method is also called Chance sampling or Probability Sampling where each and every item in the population has an equal chance of inclusion in the sample and each one of the possible samples has the same probability of being selected (Kothari C.R., et-al 2019). The samples included government officers, communities, members of the Village Development Committee, traditional leaders and the civil society.

5. Findings

The purpose of the study was to assess the role of traditional leaders in Rural Development in Malawi; A case study of Karonga District. The study findings are described as follows;

- 1) On Traditional Leaders playing a development role in rural development it came out that 97.1 % of the respondents said that traditional leaders play a development role in rural development. This was also confirmed by Dr.L.Subburaj et-al (2016) who concluded that village leadership is responsible for shaping rural community development solidarity, promoting and uplifting the human spirit among the village people.
- 2) On development needs in rural areas being addressed more often by traditional Leaders the results showed that 98.5% of people are aware that development needs are addressed more often by traditional leaders. This is in line with Tsoko N.L (2014) who argued that traditional leaders act as middlemen between government and the people where they are regarded as a mouth piece and ear piece of both government and people.
- 3) In regard to measures being put in place to assess the performance of traditional leaders in development work by Ministry of Local Government it was revealed that 48% of the respondents are not aware of the measures put in place by the Ministry of Local Government to assess the performance of traditional leaders. It can be concluded that there is lack of monitoring and evaluation framework to track performance of traditional leaders in development work at community level.
- 4) On sustainability mechanisms for developments initiatives in rural areas the results showed that 82.1% of the respondents were aware of the mechanisms prevalent in at local level. It was reported that each and every Village has a Village Action Committees to oversee development in their respective villages and is answerable to their respective Village Headmen who later report to the Village Development Committee.

- 5) In areas where councilors and traditional leaders are mostly in conflict development it is a hindrance to development and they face more poverty. The results showed that 84.5% of the respondents were in agreement with the finding. This is confirmed by Keulder Christian (2010) who argued that there is generally conflict of interest between traditional leaders and elected councilors due to the issue of hegemony resulting in continuous squabbles.
- 6) It came out as an indisputable fact that when traditional leaders and Councilors are working together in development activities communities benefit more positively as 95.3% of the respondents were in total agreement. This means that development can easily be attained in rural areas if traditional leaders and councilors work jointly in harmony.
- 7) Pertaining to development partners' preference to work with traditional leaders in their development initiatives the results indicated that 83.6% of the respondents were in support of the idea. The respondents argued that development partners look at traditional leaders as reliable, trustworthy and available since they stay with people in villages. This is confirmed by NtandaNgwelela (2017) who argued that traditional leaders occupy strategic positions and privilege amongst communities which can be easily used to bring development since they are generally respected, listened to and their views and actions have a huge impact in development circles.
- 8) In regard to the working relationship in development activities between traditional leaders and councilors it was revealed that 54.1% of respondents said that the relationship is very bad. This means that the respondents are aware that the relationship is not healthy and it has negative implications on development. Some respondents indicated that there is lack of trust between traditional leaders and councilors. For instance George K et-al (2011) argued that Mgwalana Traditional Authority in South Africa was finding it difficult to deliver socio economic development because of poor relationship with the Local Municipality in which it was located since governance and development were considered to be issues that had nothing to do with chiefs.
- 9) As regards strategies for promoting community development in rural areas 51% of respondents said that the major strategy used is promotion of community empowerment through resource mobilization, participation and strengthening decentralization at grassroots level. This was also confirmed by Chiweza Loraine et-al (2007) that the rule of traditional leaders expresses democratic principles aimed at creating opportunities for competitive local level institutions that are accountable to the local populations through strengthening decentralization.
- 10) There are many conflicts between councilors and traditional leaders in rural areas. It was found that 87% of the respondents were of the view that these conflicts were caused by supremacy, power struggle, and corruption, lack of communication, impartiality, greed, favoritism and nepotism. This was argued by Keulder Christian (2010) that traditional leaders dominate in important rural survival strategies like allocation of land and communal labor. However this increasing authority has resulted in conflict of interest with their elected councilors.
- 11) On the part of hindrances to better involvement of traditional Leaders in community development, 90% of the respondents said that they aware that hindrances to better involvement of traditional leaders in community development emanate from high illiteracy levels and allowance syndrome by traditional leaders. According to the Karonga District Commissioner's office about 30 % of the traditional leaders in Karonga do not read and write. This revelation is counterproductive to development considering the fact that Traditional leaders are entrusted with a big responsibility of overseeing development in their respective areas.
- 12) Regarding traditional leaders contribution to rural development work the results showed that 87% of the respondents said that traditional leaders were responsible for the promotion of community participation, resource mobilization and that traditional leaders act as a point of entry, contact, mediator and disseminator of information to grassroots are key in contributing to rural development. Cammack Diana et-al (2009) said traditional leaders work closely with community development committees in project identification and plan development within their area, and they act as entry points to communities for Non-Governmental Organizations.
- 13) Pertaining to the functions of traditional leaders in rural development work in their respective areas, 77% of the respondents said that traditional leaders are responsible for enhancing community participation, resource mobilization and creating a favorable working environment for development work.

6. Suggestions

The study revealed that the role of traditional leaders in Rural Development is crucial in order to have transformative development in rural areas. As such below are a few suggestions;

It has been proved beyond any reasonable doubt that traditional leaders are equally central to the development process in rural areas therefore they have to be fully empowered to handle development issues through a tangible and well stipulated policy document to legitimise their developmental role.

Regarding political interference, if the issue could be left unattended it could easily degenerate into an uncontrollable situation that could have negative and serious implications to the whole development process. Therefore Government should quickly come in and establish a proper working framework so that politics should not be featured highly at local level or they should be a proper cut off point. Much as there should be no dichotomy between politics and administration of development it is important that there should be tolerance and cooperation.

Illiteracy level is high amongst traditional leaders. This can heavily compromise on the quality of development work.

Therefore government should introduce compulsory Adult Literacy scheme for all traditional leaders.

On the issue of conflict between traditional leaders and councillors in regard to supremacy and power struggle there is need for leaders to cooperate in a sustainable manner. Culture of tolerance and oneness should be encouraged to improve the strained relations through proper division of labour. But above all there is need for cooperation. There is need to strengthen community consultation amongst all stakeholders to remove bias, doubt and strengthen cohesion.

A challenge on allowance syndrome where traditional leaders are in the habit of demanding allowances from service providers should be discouraged by engaging these leaders directly through civic education on evils of corruption. Additionally they should be oriented on principles of good governance as a way of addressing the problem of corruption, nepotism, favouritism, greed and selfishness.

Problem of mobility can be addressed through introduction of bicycle loan scheme

In order to address the issue of vandalism on development projects traditional there is need to strengthen community policing forums at community level and promote a spirit of ownership through civic education. And lastly there is need to enhance continuous community participation in development work through civic education

7. Conclusion

In conclusion it evident that traditional leaders have a big role to play in rural development as indicated in the findings. On the other hand there are some numerous hindrances that ought to be addressed in order to create a good environment which could assist in enriching their contribution to development work. The institution of traditional leadership in Malawi has a very long history as it dates back to the pre-colonial era. Since the adoption of Multi-party system of government in 1994 the power, authority and influence of the traditional leaders has remained strong as seen by the heavy reliance of government on them in many ways.

In general the government of Malawi has made some effort to legitimise the existence of traditional leadership. However more effort and focus has been on cultural, custom and traditional issues as stipulated in the Chiefs Act, 1967 as well as the Constitution of Malawi. But since their involvement in rural development cannot be avoided it is necessary to find ways and means of addressing the gaps that exists for the benefit of the rural poor. For instance the Chief Act, 1967 stipulates that generally traditional leaders must be involved in the system of local government. That is why among other roles they continue to serve as spokesmen of the people. In so doing they bridge the gap between, government, district council and the communities at grassroots level. Chinsinga Blessings (2010) opined that any hope for sustainable democratization, decentralization and development depends on the courage, honesty and imagination with which the interface between tradition, democratization and decentralization is addressed. This

sentiment entails that in order to achieve a fruitful transformation of the rural areas traditional leadership should be placed at the helm of the whole development process.

This suggestion proposes that the western models of governance should be complemented with political forms rooted in African imageries since to disregard or trample on traditional institutions is to antagonize the people and perhaps even earn their opposition. But it is equally important to give the required capacities to the traditional leaders so that they can ably and competently handle development activities. Therefore the study has revealed that traditional leaders are doing good work in rural development in Karonga and they remain pillars in uplifting the lives of the local communities if at all they are properly engaged activities. And probably the idea or act of using them on ad-hoc basis should be discouraged but rather a proper functional system should be put in place. Their involvement is significant because they are always with people and can be reached on a 24/7 basis.

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