



EDUCATION OUTLOUD  
advocacy & social accountability



**FOUR YEARS TO DELIVER**

**A CIVIL SOCIETY ASSESSMENT OF MALAWI'S  
PROGRESS TOWARDS THE SDGS AND FIRST  
IMPLEMENTATION PLAN (MIP-1)  
OF THE MALAWI 2063**

**2026**

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report has been developed at a critical moment in Malawi's development journey as the country enters the final years towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the First 10-Year Implementation Plan (MIP-1) of Malawi 2063. The report seeks to contribute to national dialogue by presenting a civil society perspective on progress, challenges, and opportunities for accelerating sustainable development and ensuring that no one is left behind.

We express our sincere appreciation to the many citizens whose experiences, concerns, aspirations, and realities have informed civil society advocacy, monitoring, and accountability initiatives over the years. These include women, young people, smallholder farmers, persons with disabilities, informal sector workers, traditional leaders, faith communities, community-based organisations, and citizens from both rural and urban areas. Although this report is primarily based on a synthesis of existing evidence and assessments, it is their lived experiences, captured through citizen scorecards, community engagements, social accountability initiatives, public dialogues and development programmes that provide the foundation for many of the issues highlighted in this analysis.

We particularly acknowledge the resilience and determination of Malawians who continue to contribute to national development despite facing persistent challenges, including poverty, unemployment, climate shocks, rising living costs, and service delivery constraints. Their experiences serve as an important reminder that development

must be measured by improvements in people's lives.

Special appreciation is extended to the Education Out Loud under the Global Partnership for Education's (GPE) fund for providing financial support towards the development of this report. Its commitment to youth empowerment, citizen participation, accountability, and sustainable development has made this important reflection possible.

we also acknowledge the Government of Malawi, development partners, research institutions, and civil society organisations whose reports, studies, and data informed this analysis. In particular, the Voluntary National Reviews, SDG Acceleration Report, Malawi 2063 implementation reports, citizen scorecards, and various thematic studies provided valuable evidence for assessing progress and identifying priority areas for action.

we further extend our sincere appreciation to Mr. Simekinala Kaluzi and Mr. Richard Batch, who coordinated and compiled this report. Their dedication to policy engagement, evidence-based advocacy, and citizen-centred development has been instrumental in bringing together the analysis and perspectives presented herein.

It is our hope that this report will stimulate constructive dialogue, strengthen accountability, and contribute to bold actions that accelerate progress towards the SDGs and the aspirations of Malawi 2063.

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## **ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS**

|         |  |
|---------|--|
| AIP     | Affordable Inputs Programme                          |
| ATI     | Access to Information                                |
| AU      | African Union  |
| CONGOMA | Council for Non-Governmental Organisations in Malawi |
| CSO     | Civil Society Organisation                           |
| CPI     | Corruption Perceptions Index                         |
| FAO     | Food and Agriculture Organisation                    |
| GAYO    | Girls Activist Youth Organisation                    |
| GDP     | Gross Domestic Product                               |
| IFF     | Illicit Financial Flows                              |
| ILO     | International Labour Organisation                    |
| IMF     | International Monetary Fund                          |
| MIP-1   | First 10-Year Implementation Plan (2021–2030)        |
| MW2063  | Malawi 2063  |
| MWEITI  | Malawi Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative |
| MGDS    | Malawi Growth and Development Strategy               |
| NSO     | National Statistical Office                          |
| OGP     | Open Government Partnership                          |
| RISDP   | Regional Indicative Strategic Development Plan       |
| SADC    | Southern African Development Community               |
| SDGs    | Sustainable Development Goals                        |
| UN      | United Nations                                       |
| UNDP    | United Nations Development Programme                 |
| UNICEF  | United Nations Children’s Fund                       |
| VNR     | Voluntary National Review                            |
| WHO     | World Health Organization                            |

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The year 2026 leaves Malawi with four years to achieve the ambitions of the 2030 Agenda and the First 10-Year Implementation Plan (MIP-1) of Malawi 2063. This milestone provides an important opportunity to reflect on progress made, challenges encountered, and the actions required to accelerate implementation during the remaining years.

Since the adoption of the SDGs in 2015, Malawi has demonstrated strong commitment to sustainable development through the domestication of the global agenda into national planning frameworks, including Malawi 2063 and MIP-1. The Government has produced Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) in 2020, 2022, and 2026, alongside the Malawi SDG Acceleration Report of 2023, which collectively provide the official account of progress and challenges. These reports highlight achievements in expanding access to education, healthcare, social protection, water services, climate resilience initiatives, infrastructure development, and governance reforms, among others.

However, while progress is evident, the pace of implementation remains insufficient to achieve many SDG targets by 2030. Malawi continues to face persistent poverty, food insecurity, inequality, unemployment, climate vulnerability, fiscal pressures, governance challenges, and weak institutional capacity. According to the 2025 Sustainable Development Report, Malawi scored approximately 57 out of 100 and ranked among the lower-performing countries globally on SDG implementation. Poverty remains widespread, economic growth continues to lag behind population growth, and climate-related disasters are repeatedly reversing development gains.

This report presents a civil society perspective on Malawi's SDG journey so far. Drawing on Government reports, previous citizen scorecards, civil society assessments, community monitoring initiatives, policy analyses, and development data, the report examines both the official narrative of progress and the realities experienced by many citizens. It seeks not to dismiss achievements, but to assess whether reported progress is translating into meaningful improvements in people's lives.

The report finds that Malawi does not suffer from a shortage of policies, strategies, plans, institutions, or development partners. Rather, the country suffers from persistent implementation deficits, weak accountability, limited productivity, policy inconsistency, and insufficient political commitment to reform. Over the past 11 years, Malawi has adopted numerous development frameworks and policy commitments. Yet many of the structural barriers that constrained development in 2015 remain largely unchanged today. Poverty remains widespread, youth unemployment continues to rise, service delivery challenges continue, and economic transformation has been slower than anticipated.

The report identifies a widening gap between policy commitments and development outcomes. While access to services has generally expanded, improvements in quality, sustainability, and impact have been less evident. Schools have been built, but learning outcomes remain weak. Health facilities have expanded, but shortages of medicines and personnel continue. Agricultural support programmes have reached farmers, but food insecurity remains widespread. Governance reforms have been introduced, yet corruption continues to undermine public trust and development effectiveness.

The analysis identifies several structural factors that continue to undermine progress towards the SDGs and Malawi 2063:

***a. Corruption has become a development crisis***

Citizens increasingly view corruption not merely as a governance issue but as a direct threat to development. Procurement irregularities, abuse of public resources, and weak accountability mechanisms continue to divert resources away from essential public services and development investments.

***b. Debt is growing faster than development***

Malawi's public debt has increased enormously over the past decade, while improvements in productivity, industrialisation, and service delivery have struggled to keep pace. Debt servicing is consuming an increasing share of public resources, reducing fiscal space for development spending.

***c. Politics often takes priority over development***

Development planning and public resource allocation are frequently influenced by short-term political considerations. As a result, reforms that threaten entrenched interests are often delayed or only partially implemented.

***d. Youth are being left behind***

With one of the youngest populations in the world, Malawi possesses an admirable demographic potential. However, high levels of youth unemployment, underemployment, skills mismatches, and limited economic opportunities risk turning the demographic dividend into a demographic challenge.

***e. Climate change is reversing development gains***

Recurring droughts, floods, cyclones, and environmental degradation continue to destroy livelihoods, infrastructure, and public investments, disproportionately affecting poor and vulnerable communities.

***f. Dependence on external financing remains high***

While development partners continue to play a critical role in supporting Malawi's development agenda, the report finds growing concern regarding long-term dependence on aid and the limited progress in domestic resource mobilisation and economic self-reliance.

The report further reveals that development gains remain unevenly distributed, with several population groups continuing to be disadvantaged, and some areas, particularly hard to reach ones, being deserted. Without targeted interventions, these groups and areas risk remaining excluded from the benefits of development and economic growth. These groups include:

- Rural women;
- Young people;
- Persons with disabilities;
- Smallholder farmers;
- Informal sector workers;
- Older persons;
- Prisoners and correctional populations;
- Climate-affected communities;
- Remote rural populations.

The report argues that the remaining years to 2030 should focus less on producing new strategies and more on implementing existing commitments. Eight priority actions are identified:

- a. Place youth at the centre of development and economic transformation.
- b. End procurement secrecy and strengthen public accountability.
- c. Restore fiscal discipline and improve debt management.
- d. Transform agriculture from subsistence to industry.
- e. Strengthen decentralisation and localise development.
- f. Recover stolen public resources and combat corruption.
- g. Manage natural resources transparently for the benefit of citizens.
- h. Rebuild the social contract between citizens and the state through transparency, participation, and accountability.

The report concludes that Malawi stands at a critical crossroads. The country possesses the policies, institutions, human capital, natural resources, and development partnerships necessary to achieve meaningful progress. What remains uncertain is whether sufficient political will, institutional discipline, and collective leadership can be mobilised to address the structural barriers that continue to impede development. The next four years represent perhaps the last realistic opportunity to align Malawi with the ambitions of the SDGs and Malawi 2063. The challenge is no longer identifying solutions. The challenge is implementing them. The choice before Malawi is clear:

- Continue managing poverty, or finally build prosperity.
- Continue protecting systems that benefit a few, or build institutions that serve the many.
- Continue postponing difficult reforms, or embrace the transformation required for future generations to thrive.

# 1.0. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1. Background and context

In September 2015, Malawi joined other United Nations Member States in adopting the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These goals established an ambitious framework aimed at ending poverty, reducing inequality, protecting the environment, and promoting sustainable prosperity.

Malawi subsequently integrated the SDGs into national development planning frameworks, including the Malawi Growth and Development Strategy (MGDS I, II and III), Malawi 2063 (MW2063), and the First 10-Year Implementation Plan (MIP-1). Government reports indicate approximately 82 percent alignment between national priorities and the SDGs. Malawi's development agenda is also aligned with the African Union's Agenda 2063 and SADC's Regional Indicative Strategic Development Plan (RISDP) 2020–2030.

Government has presented Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) in 2020, 2022, and 2026, complemented by the SDG Acceleration Report (2023). Civil society organizations have similarly generated citizen scorecards and independent SDG reviews to assess progress from the perspective of ordinary citizens.

Despite these efforts, Malawi continues to rank among the lowest-performing countries globally on SDG implementation. The SDG Index 2025 places Malawi around position 139 out of 167 countries, reflecting challenges in poverty reduction, hunger eradication, quality education, infrastructure development, and governance.

## 1.2. Purpose of the report

This report provides a civil society assessment of Malawi's progress towards the SDGs and the aspirations of Malawi 2063 as the country enters the final four years to 2030. It seeks to complement official reporting by examining the extent to which policy commitments, programmes, and investments are translating into tangible improvements in the lives of ordinary Malawians, particularly those most at risk of being left behind.

The report aims to stimulate informed dialogue among Government, civil society, development partners, the private sector, media, and citizens on the country's development trajectory. By bringing together evidence from Government reports, civil society assessments, community experiences, and development data, it highlights both the achievements made and the persistent structural barriers that continue to undermine progress.

In this regard, the report serves as an advocacy and accountability tool, identifying priority actions required to accelerate implementation of the SDGs and Malawi 2063 during the remaining years to 2030. It seeks to encourage a shift from commitments to results, from policies to impact, and from managing poverty to creating sustainable prosperity for all Malawians.

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1. Malawi 2063 <https://npc.mw/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/MW2063-VISION-FINAL.pdf>

2. The Malawi 2063 First 10-Year Implementation Plan (MIP-1) – 2021-2030 <https://npc.mw/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/MIP-1-WEB-Version-8-November-2021-Fast-view.pdf>

3. United Nations Malawi: Common Country Analysis 2023 [https://malawi.un.org/sites/default/files/2023-07/UN%20CCA%20Malawi\\_Final\\_0.pdf](https://malawi.un.org/sites/default/files/2023-07/UN%20CCA%20Malawi_Final_0.pdf)

4. SDG Index Score <https://dashboards.sdgindex.org/profiles/malawi/>

### **1.3. Methodology**

This report adopts a civil society evidence synthesis approach to assess Malawi's progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Malawi 2063 (MW2063) at 11 years of implementation. The analysis is based on a review of Government reports, civil society assessments, citizen-generated evidence, and regional and international development reports.

Key sources consulted include Malawi's Voluntary National Reviews (2020, 2022 and 2026), the Malawi SDG

Acceleration Report (2023), Malawi 2063 and MIP-1, National Statistical Office publications, sector performance reports, and relevant studies produced by development partners. The report also draws on evidence generated through previous CONGOMA SDG Citizen Scorecards (2020 and 2021), the CONGOMA SDGs Mid-Point Report (2023), Civil Society Reality Check report on SDGs (2025), community monitoring initiatives, social accountability processes, district and sector network engagements, and reports produced by civil society organisations working directly with communities across Malawi.

While the report is not based on a standalone national citizen perception survey, it reflects recurring concerns, experiences, and priorities consistently documented through civil society engagement with communities over time. As the national coordinating body for NGOs, CONGOMA is uniquely positioned to consolidate perspectives emerging from diverse sectors, districts, and population groups, particularly those most at risk of being left behind.

The analysis compares official accounts of SDG progress with realities emerging from communities, with particular attention to poverty, inequality, youth development, governance, economic transformation, climate resilience, and service delivery. Special focus is placed on groups that continue to face exclusion, including women, young people, persons with disabilities, smallholder farmers, informal sector workers, older persons, prisoners, and climate-affected communities.

The report is intended as an advocacy and accountability tool to stimulate dialogue, inform policy reforms, and support accelerated action towards the achievement of the SDGs and the aspirations of Malawi 2063.

## 2.0. UNDERSTANDING MALAWI'S DEVELOPMENT PARADOX

Malawi presents one of Africa's most striking development paradoxes. Over the past several decades, the country has developed an extensive architecture of policies, strategies, institutions, and partnerships designed to accelerate social and economic transformation. At the national level, Malawi has adopted Malawi 2063 (MW2063) as its long-term development vision, supported by the MIP-1. These frameworks are complemented by numerous sectoral strategies covering agriculture, education, health, social protection, industrialisation, governance, climate change, and public financial management.

Malawi's development agenda is also closely aligned with the SDGs, the African Union Agenda 2063, and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Regional Indicative Strategic Development Plan (RISDP).

The country has also benefited from substantial international support. Development partners continue to finance an enormous share of public investment and social sector expenditure, while CSOs play an active role in policy advocacy, service delivery, citizen engagement, and accountability initiatives. At the same time, Malawi possesses natural assets, including fertile agricultural land, water resources, mineral deposits, tourism potential, and a youthful population that could provide a demographic dividend if effectively harnessed.

Yet despite these advantages, development outcomes remain disappointing. Poverty remains widespread, particularly in rural areas where the majority of the population resides. Food insecurity continues to affect millions of households, often exacerbated by climate shocks and structural weaknesses in agricultural systems. Public debt has increased considerably over the past decade, reducing fiscal space for development investment. Industrialisation remains limited, productivity growth is slow, unemployment and underemployment among young people persist, and corruption continues to undermine public confidence and resource efficiency. Furthermore, many citizens continue to experience poor service delivery outcomes in sectors such as health, education, water, and local governance.

This apparent contradiction raises a fundamental question: Why does Malawi continue to struggle despite having numerous plans, strategies, institutions, development partners, and policy commitments?

The answer does not primarily lie in a lack of knowledge about what needs to be done. Malawi's development challenges are well understood, and many policy solutions have been identified repeatedly across successive development plans, reviews, and evaluations. Rather, the gap lies in the political economy that shapes how policies are prioritised, financed, implemented, monitored, and enforced. The challenge is often less about policy formulation and more about incentives, institutions, governance systems, resource allocation decisions, and accountability mechanisms that determine whether agreed reforms are translated into meaningful action.

Understanding this political economy context is essential for explaining why progress toward the SDGs has been uneven and why many development gains have been slower than anticipated. It is also critical for identifying the structural barriers that continue to constrain transformation despite the existence of ambitious national and international development frameworks. The sections that follow examine some of these underlying constraints and how they continue to shape Malawi's development trajectory in tandem with MIP-1 and SDGs.

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5. Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want [https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/33126-doc-framework\\_document\\_book.pdf](https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/33126-doc-framework_document_book.pdf)

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8. UNDP (2021). Malawi National Human Development Report <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099071125090031718/pdf/P509269-452e5442-6e5c-4190-9ab0-a67b-5ba41161.pdf>

### 3.0. WHY MALAWI REMAINS A PERENNIAL UNDERACHIVER

#### 3.1. Corruption has become a development issue

Corruption in Malawi is no longer simply a governance challenge; it has become one of the greatest obstacles to achieving sustainable development. While corruption is often discussed in terms of stolen money and abuse of office, its real impact is felt in communities where schools lack learning materials, hospitals run out of essential medicines, roads deteriorate, and vulnerable households fail to receive critical services. Every act of corruption diverts resources away from development priorities and undermines progress across virtually all SDGs.

The scale of the problem is reflected in both perception and experience. According to the Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) 2025, Malawi scored 34 out of 100 and ranked 109th out of 180 countries (two steps worse off from 2024), indicating

persistent concerns about public sector corruption. Similarly, surveys by Afrobarometer consistently show that a majority of Malawians believe corruption is increasing and that public officials frequently go unpunished. While anti-corruption institutions such as the Anti-Corruption Bureau (ACB) have made notable efforts to investigate and prosecute cases, citizens often perceive accountability as selective, particularly when allegations involve politically connected individuals or powerful elites.

Corruption manifests itself in many forms, including inflated procurement contracts, ghost workers on public payrolls, abuse of public resources, tax evasion, and the mismanagement of development projects. Over the years, scandals such as Cashgate and subsequent procurement-related controversies have exposed weaknesses in public financial management systems and demonstrated how large-scale theft of public resources can undermine national development. The consequences are far-reaching. Corruption discourages domestic and foreign investment, increases the cost of doing business, weakens public trust in institutions, and diverts scarce resources away from essential public services. It also reinforces inequality, as the poorest citizens often bear the greatest burden when services fail while those with wealth and influence can access alternatives.

Perhaps the most damaging effect of corruption is the gradual normalization of impunity and mediocrity. Citizens perceive public office as a pathway to personal enrichment rather than public service, and have consequently lost confidence in institutions and become less willing to participate in governance processes. Corruption has since evolved from isolated acts of misconduct into a parallel system through which power is maintained, elections are financed, contracts are distributed, and loyalty is rewarded. In this environment, development has become secondary to patronage.

The understanding among citizens is that corruption is not a victimless crime. Every kwacha lost through corruption represents a missed opportunity for development i.e. a classroom not built, a health worker not recruited, a borehole not drilled, a road not repaired, or a young entrepreneur denied support. Unless Malawi decisively tackles corruption through stronger enforcement, greater transparency, open contracting, protection of whistle-blowers, and active citizen oversight, progress toward the SDGs, MW2063, and MIP-1 will remain slower than citizens expect and deserve.

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9 World Bank (2017). World Development Report; Governance and the Law <https://digitalregulation.org/wp-content/uploads/World-Development-Report-Governance-and-the-Law.pdf>

10. UN Malawi Country Analysis Horizon Scan 2026 <https://digitalregulation.org/wp-content/uploads/World-Development-Report-Governance-and-the-Law.pdf>

11. African Development Bank Group (2024): (Malawi) Country Focus Report [https://vcda.afdb.org/en/system/files/report/malawi\\_final\\_2024.pdf](https://vcda.afdb.org/en/system/files/report/malawi_final_2024.pdf)

12. IMF Country Report No. 25/226 (for Malawi, 2025) <https://www.imf.org/-/media/files/publications/cr/2025/english/1mwiea2025001-source-pdf.pdf>

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16. OGP Independent Reporting Mechanism; Results Report 2023-2025 [https://www.opengovpartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Malawi\\_Results-Report\\_2023%E2%80%932025\\_For-Public-Comment\\_EN.pdf](https://www.opengovpartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Malawi_Results-Report_2023%E2%80%932025_For-Public-Comment_EN.pdf)

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### 3.2. Malawi borrows more but develops less

Public debt has emerged as one of the biggest threats to Malawi's long-term development prospects. Borrowing, when used strategically, can finance infrastructure, stimulate economic growth, and create opportunities for future generations. However, many Malawians increasingly question whether the country's growing debt burden is translating into tangible improvements in livelihoods, public services, or productive sectors of the economy. While public debt has continued to rise over the past decade, poverty, hunger, unemployment, and vulnerability have remained stubbornly high, raising concerns about the effectiveness and accountability of public borrowing.

According to the Ministry of Finance, Malawi remains at high risk of debt distress, with public debt estimated at over 90 percent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in the first semester of 2026. At the same time, debt servicing obligations have increased substantially, consuming resources that could otherwise be invested in education, healthcare, agriculture, water and sanitation, and infrastructure development. As debt repayments rise, the Government's fiscal space to respond to development challenges continues to shrink, leaving fewer resources available for programmes that directly benefit citizens.

Several concerns dominate public discourse. First, there is a growing perception that borrowing is increasingly being used to finance recurrent expenditures and budget deficits rather than productive investments capable of generating economic returns. Second, debt servicing now absorbs a substantial portion of Government revenues, reducing the resources available for development spending. Third, heavy domestic borrowing has contributed to high interest rates and limited access to credit for businesses, particularly small and medium enterprises, thereby

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constraining private sector growth and job creation . Finally, persistent fiscal deficits continue to signal structural weaknesses in public financial management and domestic resource mobilisation .

For many citizens, the issue is not borrowing itself, but the apparent disconnect between rising debt and visible development outcomes. Communities continue to struggle with inadequate healthcare facilities, overcrowded classrooms, poor road networks, food insecurity, youth unemployment, and unreliable public services. This has led to growing public concern that future generations may inherit a heavy debt burden without enjoying the corresponding benefits of productive investments . In essence, Malawi is already mortgaging tomorrow to finance today's inefficiencies.

The fact is that debt is not inherently a problem; unproductive debt is. Borrowing that finances transformative investments can drive development, but borrowing without transparency, accountability, and clear economic returns can deepen dependency and delay progress . As Malawi moves toward 2030, fiscal discipline, prudent borrowing, debt transparency, and stronger parliamentary and public oversight of public debt will be critical if the country is to achieve the SDGs and the aspirations of Malawi 2063. Citizens are increasingly asking a simple but powerful

**Question:** *If borrowing is increasing, why are poverty, hunger, unemployment, and poor service delivery also increasing? Answering that question honestly may be one of the most important steps toward restoring public confidence in the country's development path.*

### 3.3. Politics has replaced development

One of the most persistent concerns raised by citizens and contained in the reports is that governance in Malawi is increasingly structured around political survival rather than national transformation. While successive governments have produced ambitious development

frameworks, including Vision 2020, MGDS I, II and III, Malawi 2063, MIP-1, and numerous sector strategies; implementation has often been undermined by short-term political considerations. As a result, development planning frequently struggles to survive electoral cycles, changes in administration, or shifts in political priorities. Citizens observe that while plans change, the underlying development challenges of poverty, unemployment, food insecurity, weak service delivery, and inequality remain largely unchanged.

A recurring censure is that political incentives often outweigh development priorities. Public appointments are frequently perceived as rewarding loyalty, patronage, and political affiliation rather than competence, merit, and performance. At both national and local

levels, public resources are sometimes allocated based on political considerations rather than objective assessments of need, poverty levels, or development impact. Development projects may be prioritised because they offer political visibility rather than because they deliver the greatest social or economic returns. This contributes to uneven development outcomes and weakens public confidence in state institutions.

The consequences are reflected in Malawi's implementation record. Despite the existence of strong policy frameworks, reforms that threaten entrenched interests often progress slowly or remain confined to policy documents and strategic plans . Citizens frequently point to reforms in public finance management, procurement, state-owned enterprises, decentralisation, natural resource governance, and anti-corruption efforts that have generated considerable discussion but limited transformative results. In many cases, implementation gaps emerge not because solutions are unknown, but because reform threatens powerful networks that benefit from the status quo.

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21. Reserve Bank of Malawi (2026). Statement of the Monetary Policy Committee first meeting of 2026. [https://docs.publicnow.com/viewDoc?filename=8175%5CEXT%5C202C01563F3AF5B1550B8F84B-8650D5394472E68\\_50CD02FD57FCC8CBE38CCAD80BA88889C1289FA3.PDF](https://docs.publicnow.com/viewDoc?filename=8175%5CEXT%5C202C01563F3AF5B1550B8F84B-8650D5394472E68_50CD02FD57FCC8CBE38CCAD80BA88889C1289FA3.PDF)

22. CEIC; Malawi Policy Rate <https://www.ceicdata.com/en/indicator/malawi/policy-rate>

23. IMF (2025) Staff Report for the 2025 Article IV Consultation—Debt Sustainability Analysis <file:///C:/Users/PC/Downloads/002-article-A002-en.pdf>

24. World Bank (2026). Malawi Economic Monitor (MEM)- Getting Reforms Right: Reversing Malawi's Export Decline <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2026/02/24/malawi-economic-monitor-stabilizing-the-economy-to-unlock-private-investment-and-create-jobs>

25. Ministry of Finance and Economic Affairs Budget Statement 2026 <https://www.icnl.org/wp-content/uploads/2025-2026-Budget-Statement.pdf>

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transformative results. In many cases, implementation gaps emerge not because solutions are unknown, but because reform threatens powerful networks that benefit from the status quo.

This political economy challenge has critical implications for SDG achievement. Sustainable development requires long-term consistency, institutional discipline, and policy continuity beyond electoral cycles. However, when development priorities are repeatedly reshaped by political considerations, public institutions struggle to sustain momentum and achieve lasting

results. The result is a cycle in which new strategies are launched, new commitments are announced, and new promises are made, yet fundamental development indicators change only slowly.

Consequently, the reality is that Malawi does not suffer from a shortage of plans. The country has no shortage of visions, strategies, policies, roadmaps, or development frameworks. Rather, it suffers from a shortage of implementation, continuity, accountability, and political commitment to reforms that may be difficult but necessary. Development cannot be achieved through policy announcements alone. It requires institutions that consistently prioritise national interests over political expediency and leaders who are willing to invest in long-term transformation rather than short-term political gain. Until governance shifts from managing political interests to delivering development outcomes, Malawi risks continuing a pattern of ambitious planning with limited transformation.

### 3.4. Youth Malawi's greatest asset and greatest missed opportunity

Malawi's youthful population is often described as one of the country's greatest assets and a potential driver of economic transformation. With an annual population growth rate of approximately 2.6 percent and nearly two-thirds of the population below the age of 25, Malawi is among the youngest countries in the world. This demographic structure presents a unique opportunity to accelerate economic growth, expand innovation, and increase productivity. If adequately educated, skilled, healthy, and economically empowered, young people could become the engine that drives Malawi toward the aspirations of the SDGs and Malawi 2063. However, this potential remains largely unrealized.

26. Bridges, Kate; Woolcock, Michael. (2017). How (Not) to Fix Problems that Matter: Assessing and Responding to Malawi's History of Institutional Reform. Policy Research Working Paper; No. 8289. © World Bank. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/876bf3bc-1bb8-512b-80a0-d1edd486f9ec/content>

27. Tostensen, A (2017). Malawi: A Political Economy Analysis. Landanalyserapport. Norsk Utenrikspolitisk Institutt. <https://nva.sikt.no/registration/01992d00960f-00814844-3510-4b22-848b-363e5ac38fc6>

28. BTI (2026) Country Report Malawi [https://bti-project.org/fileadmin/api/content/en/downloads/reports/country\\_report\\_2026\\_MWI.pdf](https://bti-project.org/fileadmin/api/content/en/downloads/reports/country_report_2026_MWI.pdf)

29. CPIA Africa (2025). Policies for better service delivery. <https://elibrary.acbfpact.org/acb/collect/acb/index/assoc/HASHa4ef3ef7430b/7ab14eca/2e.dir/POLICIES%20FOR%20BETTER%20SERVICE%20DELIVERY.pdf>

Despite constituting the majority of the population, many young Malawians face a future marked by uncertainty and limited opportunities. Youth unemployment and underemployment remain widespread, particularly among secondary school and university graduates. The formal economy generates far fewer jobs than the number vulnerable forms of employment. Even for those who find work, earnings are often insufficient to escape poverty or build sustainable livelihoods .

The education system, while successful in expanding access, continues to struggle with issues of quality and relevance. Many young people leave school without the practical, technical, digital, and entrepreneurial skills required in today's economy . Employers frequently report skills mismatches, where graduates possess qualifications but lack competencies demanded by the labour market. Meanwhile, access to vocational training, business development services, affordable finance, technology, and productive assets remains limited. For young entrepreneurs, access to capital remains one of the greatest barriers to starting and growing businesses, particularly in rural areas .

Beyond economic exclusion, young people often feel marginalized from decision-making processes that shape their future. Although youth are frequently mobilized during election campaigns and political activities, their participation in governance, policy formulation, and development planning remains limited. Many young people express frustration that they are viewed primarily as political supporters rather than as partners in national development . This disconnect contributes to growing disillusionment, increasing migration aspirations, and in some cases vulnerability to crime, substance abuse, and social unrest.

The implications for development are profound. A growing population of unemployed and underemployed youth places pressure on public services, social protection systems, and labour markets. It also risks undermining social cohesion and economic stability. The demographic dividend that Malawi hopes to harness can only materialize if investments in education, skills development, health, innovation, entrepreneurship, and job creation are scaled up . Without such investments, rapid population growth may deepen existing development challenges rather than solve them.

The above notwithstanding, it is evident that Malawi's youth are not a burden; they are a wasted opportunity. For decades, young people have been promised empowerment, jobs, and inclusion, yet many continue to struggle for survival in an economy that offers too few opportunities. Political rhetoric frequently celebrates the importance of youth, but investment in their future has not matched the scale of the challenge. If current trends continue, Malawi risks transforming what should be its greatest demographic advantage into a demographic crisis. Conversely, if the country places youth at the centre of its development agenda over the remaining years to 2030, it could unlock one of the most powerful drivers of economic transformation and sustainable development.

### **3.5. Women carry development but receive less power**

Women form the backbone of Malawi's economy and social systems. They constitute the majority of the agricultural labour force and are heavily engaged in informal trade and unpaid care work that sustains households and communities. Estimates from the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) indicate that women represent a significant share of smallholder agricultural producers in Malawi, particularly in subsistence farming systems. Time-use studies and gender analyses in Malawi consistently show that women carry a disproportionate burden of unpaid care and domestic work , which limits their time for formal economic participation.

Despite this central role, women continue to operate within structural constraints that limit their economic and social empowerment. Gender-based violence remains a persistent challenge, with national surveys indicating that a bigger proportion of women experience physical or sexual violence in their lifetime . This undermines not only personal safety but also economic productivity and participation in public life.

30. World Bank (2017). World Development Report: Governance and the Law. <file:///C:/Users/PC/Downloads/9781464809507.pdf>

31. National Statistical Office (2020). 2018 Malawi Population and Housing Census; Population projections 2018-2050 report <file:///C:/Users/PC/Downloads/Population-Projections-2018-2050.pdf>

32. The Malawi Priorities Project (2021). Policy Brief: A Cost-Benefit Analysis: Improving industrialisation and youth employment in Malawi [https://copenhagenconsensus.com/sites/default/files/documents/mp\\_policy\\_brief\\_industrialization\\_and\\_youth\\_employment.pdf](https://copenhagenconsensus.com/sites/default/files/documents/mp_policy_brief_industrialization_and_youth_employment.pdf)

Access to productive assets remains highly unequal. Customary land systems, which govern the majority of rural land, often disadvantage women in land ownership and inheritance rights. Studies by the World Bank highlight that women are less likely than men to own or control

land in Malawi, despite their central role in agriculture. This limits investment incentives and long-term economic security for women farmers.

Financial exclusion further compounds these inequalities. Women-owned enterprises are more likely to be informal, smaller in scale, and less likely to access formal credit due to collateral requirements and limited financial inclusion. As a result, many women remain concentrated in low-return economic activities with limited pathways for expansion.

Women are also underrepresented in leadership and decision-making structures. Although Malawi has made progress in increasing women's representation in Parliament and local governance through policy reforms and affirmative action discussions, women still occupy a minority of leadership positions across political, public sector, and private institutions.

Existence of these inequalities has development implications. Evidence from the UN agencies shows that closing gender gaps in agriculture, labour markets, and education can substantially increase productivity and GDP growth. In Malawi, where agriculture remains the backbone of the economy, gender disparities in access to land, inputs, and finance directly constrain national productivity and food security outcomes.

Addressing these challenges requires moving beyond policy commitments toward sustained implementation and investment. This includes strengthening enforcement of gender equality laws, expanding women's access to land rights, improving access to affordable finance and markets, and scaling up protection systems for survivors of gender-based violence. It also requires deliberate investment in women's leadership pathways across political, economic, and community governance structures.

Generally, gender inequality in Malawi is not only a rights issue but a structural economic constraint. As long as women's economic, political, and social power remains below their actual contribution to development, Malawi will continue to underutilize a critical driver of inclusive growth and sustainable development.

33. Afrobarometer (2025). Toward Malawi 2063: Youth confront high unemployment and economic anxiety. Dispatch No. 1006 | 27 June 2025. <https://www.afrobarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/AD1006-Malawian-youth-confront-high-unemployment-and-economic-anxiety-Afrobarometer-26june25.pdf>

34. International Labour Organisation (2019). In Malawi, bolstering youth and women's employment through sectoral skills strategies. <https://www.ilo.org/resource/article/malawi-bolstering-youth-and-womens-employment-through-sectoral-skills>

35. Chilima, E (2022). Supporting Malawi's small enterprises to spur economic growth and create more job opportunities. World Bank Blogs. <https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/african/supporting-malawis-small-enterprises-spur-economic-growth-and-create-more-job>

36. Afrobarometer (2023). Malawi youth agenda faces priority of 'wisdom of the elders' and limited political participation. Dispatch No. 624 | 30 March 2023. <https://www.afrobarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/AD624-Malawi-youth-agenda-faces-barriers-Afrobarometer-30march23.pdf>

37. UNFPA. Demographic Dividend <https://malawi.unfpa.org/en/topics/demographic-dividend>

### 3.6. Districts are expected to deliver without resources

Development is eventually experienced at the local level. Citizens do not interact with national policy frameworks in abstraction; they experience development through the performance of district-level services such as schools, health facilities, water supply systems, agricultural extension services, and local government administration. As such, district councils are the frontline institutions of service delivery and the primary interface between the state and citizens.

In Malawi, the decentralisation framework assigns responsibilities to local authorities, particularly under the Local Government Act and the broader Decentralisation Policy. However, evidence consistently shows that the transfer of functions has not been matched with adequate fiscal and administrative devolution. Studies and public finance assessments by the National Local Government Finance Committee (NLGFC) and development partners highlight persistent delays in fiscal transfers from the centre, which constrain timely planning and implementation of district-level development plans.

At the same time, district councils continue to operate with limited autonomy in key decision-making areas, particularly in budgeting and human resource management. This results in a mismatch between assigned responsibilities and actual control over resources and staffing decisions. Many councils also face chronic shortages of qualified technical staff, particularly in engineering, planning, procurement, and monitoring and evaluation functions, which weakens implementation capacity at local level.

Infrastructure constraints further compound these challenges. Many district councils operate with

inadequate office facilities, limited ICT systems, and insufficient logistical support, making it difficult to effectively coordinate service delivery and monitor development projects. This affects not only efficiency but also accountability and transparency in local governance processes.

The result is an incomplete decentralisation system in which responsibilities have been devolved faster than resources and authority. While policy commitments to decentralisation remain strong, implementation gaps have created a structural imbalance that places unrealistic expectations on local governments to deliver national development objectives without the necessary fiscal space, institutional capacity, and operational tools.

The implications are noteworthy for development outcomes. Weak local government capacity directly affects service delivery quality in education, health, water, and agriculture; sectors that are essential for achieving Malawi 2063 and the SDGs. It also undermines citizen trust in the state, as communities often associate service delivery failures with district authorities, even when key constraints originate from central-level resource allocation and management decisions.

Strengthening decentralisation therefore requires more than policy affirmation; it demands predictable and timely fiscal transfers, genuine devolution of decision-making authority, targeted investment in district-level human resources, and improved systems for accountability and performance monitoring. Without these reforms, decentralisation risks remaining a policy intention rather than a functional governance system capable of delivering inclusive development.

38. FAO (2011). Gender Inequalities in Rural Employment in Malawi; An Overview. <https://www.fao.org/4/ap092e/ap092e00.pdf>

39. UN Women Malawi. Malawi National Gender Statistics Assessment. <https://data.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/documents/Publications/Assessment%20of%20Malawi%20National%20Gender%20Statistics%20System.pdf>

40. World Bank (2022). Malawi Gender Assessment. <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099315004212212759/pdf/P176395040da430500beb7042a0d5846ee6.pdf>

41. Hasanbasri, A et al (2022). New insights on gender differences in land rights in Sub-Saharan Africa. World Bank Blog. <https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/developmenttalk/new-insights-gender-differences-land-rights-sub-saharan-africa>

### 3.7. Malawi exports wealth and imports poverty

Malawi continues to experience substantial resource leakages that limit its ability to convert natural and economic assets into broad-based development gains. A growing body of evidence on illicit financial flows (IFFs) in Africa shows that countries lose substantial revenues through tax avoidance, aggressive tax planning, and trade mis-invoicing, with Malawi being no exception. These leakages reduce domestic fiscal space that could otherwise be invested in health, education, infrastructure, and social protection.

In addition to illicit financial flows, concerns around transfer pricing and weak enforcement of tax compliance in multinational operations further constrain domestic revenue mobilisation. International assessments on taxation in developing countries highlight that limited technical capacity in tax administration and asymmetric negotiation power with multinational corporations often result in unfavourable fiscal outcomes for resource-dependent economies.

Weak contract negotiation in extractive industries has also been identified as a structural challenge. Where regulatory frameworks and negotiation capacity are limited, host governments may secure less favourable royalty rates, concession terms, and local content provisions. This reduces the developmental return from natural resource extraction, even when economic activity appears massive on paper.

At the local level, communities hosting mining and extractive operations often continue to experience high levels of poverty despite proximity to resource extraction activities. This pattern reflects both limited fiscal redistribution mechanisms and weak enforcement of benefit-sharing arrangements. Evidence from extractive governance studies in Malawi and comparable countries shows that resource-rich districts frequently report inadequate infrastructure, limited social services, and environmental degradation, contributing to perceptions of resource curse dynamics.

These trends have distressing implications for public trust and social cohesion. Increasingly, citizens in resource-endowed areas question why wealth generated from their land does not translate into visible improvements in local living conditions. This perception gap between resource extraction and local development outcomes can fuel social tensions and undermine confidence in both Government institutions and private sector actors.

Addressing these challenges requires strengthening transparency and accountability frameworks across the entire resource value chain. This includes improving beneficial ownership disclosure, strengthening tax administration capacity, enhancing contract negotiation skills within Government institutions, and ensuring enforcement of environmental and social safeguards. It also requires strengthening fiscal decentralisation mechanisms so that a fair share of resource revenues is reinvested in host communities in line with equity and development principles.

In the end, without stronger governance systems, Malawi risks a continued paradox in which natural wealth generates limited domestic benefit, while external actors capture a disproportionate share of value. Transforming this pattern is essential for ensuring that natural resources contribute meaningfully to inclusive growth and sustainable development.

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42. Government of Malawi (2024). National Strategy for Financial Inclusion III: 2024-2028. <https://www.afi-global.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/National-Strategy-for-Financial-Inclusion-III.pdf>

43. Government of Malawi (2023). FinScope Consumer Malawi Survey 2023; Main Findings. [https://finmark.org.za/Publications/2023\\_FinScope\\_Consumer\\_Survey\\_Malawi\\_2023\\_Presentation.pdf](https://finmark.org.za/Publications/2023_FinScope_Consumer_Survey_Malawi_2023_Presentation.pdf)

44. IPU Parline. Malawi National Assembly. <https://data.ipu.org/parliament/MW/MW-LC01/data-on-women/>

45. UN Women Africa (2026). Transforming social norms towards women's leadership in Malawi one road show at a time. <https://africa.unwomen.org/en/stories/news/2026/02/transforming-social-norms-towards-womens-leadership-in-malawi-one-road-show-at-a-time>

46. UNDP (2022). Malawi National Human Development Report 2021; Delivering sustainable human development and accountability at the local level: The experience of decentralisation in Malawi <https://hdr.undp.org/system/files/documents/national-report-document/malawinhdr2022.pdf>

47. Government of Malawi (2015). National Gender Policy <https://faolex.fao.org/docs/pdf/mlw190512.pdf>

### 3.8. The elite consensus against reform

One of the most stubborn structural constraints to transformative development in Malawi lies in the political economy of reform itself. Development outcomes are not shaped only by technical capacity or policy design, but also by the incentives and interests of actors who operate within the system. Political economy literature consistently shows that where governance systems distribute sufficient benefits to influential groups, strong resistance to transformative change can emerge, even when reform is widely acknowledged as necessary .

In Malawi, multiple actors derive varying degrees of benefit from the existing governance and economic arrangements. These include political elites who operate within patronage-based

incentive structures, segments of the business community that benefit from preferential access to contracts and regulatory space, parts of the bureaucracy that maintain discretionary control over processes and resources, and in some cases, segments of civil society that depend on project-based funding ecosystems . While these groups are not uniform, their overlapping interests can contribute to a form of equilibrium that reduces pressure for deep systemic reform.

This dynamic often results in what can be described as “low-accountability equilibrium,” where the system functions sufficiently to avoid collapse but not sufficiently to drive transformative development . In such contexts, poverty reduction efforts tend to focus on management of deprivation rather than structural elimination of its root causes. Similarly, reform processes are frequently characterised by policy formulation and strategy development, but weaker implementation and enforcement phases, particularly where reforms threaten established interests.

Accountability systems in such environments also tend to be unevenly applied. Enforcement of rules may be strong in some areas while remaining weak or selective in others, depending on the interests at stake and the relative influence of affected actors. This selective accountability undermines public trust and weakens the credibility of institutions responsible for ensuring fairness, transparency, and equity in development processes .

The implications for the SDGs are immense. Many SDG targets require not only resource allocation but also redistribution of power, reform of incentive structures, and sustained enforcement of rules that may challenge entrenched interests . Without addressing the underlying political economy constraints, even well-designed policies risk partial implementation or reversal over time.

Addressing this challenge requires strengthening institutional checks and balances, enhancing transparency in public resource management, protecting the independence of oversight institutions, and expanding civic space for sustained accountability. It also requires building

coalitions for reform that include state and non-state actors capable of aligning incentives toward long-term national development goals . Implicitly, the challenge is not only what reforms are needed, but whether the prevailing incentive structure allows those reforms to take root and endure.

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50. O’Neil, T. et al (2014). Fragmented governance and local service delivery in Malawi. <https://odi.cdn.ngo/media/documents/8943.pdf>

51. Kobb, D. (2020). Situation and institutional analysis; Key findings to develop a strategic plan for Lilongwe City Council. [https://lcc.mw/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Situation-Analysis\\_Kobb\\_Strategic-Plan-Lilongwe-1.pdf](https://lcc.mw/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Situation-Analysis_Kobb_Strategic-Plan-Lilongwe-1.pdf)

#### 4.0. PERSPECTIVES ON WHO IS BEING LEFT BEHIND

One of the central promises of the SDGs is to “leave no one behind.” Yet, eleven years into SDG implementation, many Malawians remain excluded from the benefits of development. While national averages may suggest progress, they often conceal deep inequalities affecting specific groups and communities. These groups face multiple and overlapping disadvantages, including poverty, limited access to quality services, exclusion from decision-making, discrimination, and vulnerability to economic and environmental shocks. Unless deliberate efforts are made to address their unique challenges, Malawi risks achieving development gains for some while leaving millions trapped in cycles of deprivation.

The groups highlighted below are not marginal to Malawi’s development story; they are central to it. Together, they constitute a big proportion of the population and represent those most affected by poverty, inequality, weak service delivery, climate shocks, and governance failures. If Malawi is to achieve the SDGs, MIP-1, and the aspirations of Malawi 2063, development efforts must deliberately prioritise those furthest behind. Progress should not be measured solely by national averages, but by the extent to which the lives of the most vulnerable citizens are improved. The true test of development is not how far the privileged advance, but how effectively society lifts those who have historically been left behind.

##### a. Rural women

Rural women are the backbone of Malawi’s economy, contributing massively to agricultural production, food security, household welfare, and community resilience. They perform much of the labour associated with farming, childcare, water collection, firewood gathering, and household management. Despite this contribution, rural women continue to face systemic barriers that limit their economic and social advancement. Access to land remains constrained by discriminatory cultural practices and inheritance systems. Women often have limited control over productive resources, agricultural inputs, technology, credit facilities, and markets.

Furthermore, women bear a disproportionate burden of unpaid care work, leaving them with less time to engage in income-generating activities or participate in leadership and decision-making processes. Gender-based violence, early marriages, and limited access to secondary and tertiary

education further undermine their opportunities. The result is a paradox where those who contribute hugely to household survival and national food production remain among the most economically vulnerable and socially excluded groups.

##### b. Young people

Young people represent Malawi’s greatest demographic asset. With over half of the population below the age of 18 and a rapidly growing labour force, youth have the potential to drive innovation, productivity, and economic transformation. However, many young people face a future characterised by limited opportunities and growing frustration. While enrolment in education has increased, the quality of education and relevance of skills acquired often fail to match labour market demands.

Youth unemployment and underemployment remain widespread, forcing many into low-paying informal activities with limited prospects for growth. Access to finance, business development services, land, technology, and markets remains constrained. Beyond economic exclusion, young people are frequently excluded from meaningful participation in governance and policy processes. They are often mobilised during political campaigns but rarely included in shaping decisions that affect their futures. Unless Malawi invests strategically in youth skills, entrepreneurship, innovation, and leadership, the country’s demographic dividend could become a demographic crisis.

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53. World Bank (2018). Malawi Systematic Country Diagnostic: Breaking the Cycle of Low Growth and Slow Poverty Reduction. <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/723781545072859945/pdf/malawi-scd-final-board-12-7-2018-12122018-636804216425880639.pdf>

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### c. **Persons with disabilities**

Despite constitutional protections and various policy commitments, persons with disabilities continue to experience widespread exclusion across multiple sectors. Many children with disabilities face barriers to accessing inclusive and quality education due to inadequate infrastructure, limited specialised learning materials, and insufficiently trained teachers. Physical barriers in schools, health facilities, public buildings, and transport systems continue to limit participation in public life.

Employment opportunities for persons with disabilities remain scarce, often due to discrimination, negative societal attitudes, and inadequate workplace accommodations. Access to healthcare, information, communication technologies, and social protection programmes is similarly constrained. In many cases, disability is closely linked to poverty, with exclusion from economic opportunities reinforcing vulnerability. Achieving inclusive development requires moving beyond policy commitments toward practical measures that ensure accessibility, participation, and equal opportunities for all.

### d. **Smallholder farmers**

Smallholder farmers produce the majority of Malawi's food and remain central to the country's economy. Yet paradoxically, they are among the poorest segments of the population. Most farmers operate on small plots of land, rely heavily on rain-fed agriculture, and have limited access to irrigation, modern technologies, extension services, affordable finance, and profitable markets. Climate shocks such as droughts, floods, and cyclones repeatedly undermine production and household incomes.

Agricultural policies have often focused on increasing production without adequately addressing value addition, market access, storage, agro-processing, and commercialization. Consequently, many farmers remain trapped in subsistence production systems that generate little or no surplus income. The persistence of poverty among those responsible for feeding the nation highlights a fundamental structural weakness in Malawi's development model. Transforming

agriculture from a survival activity into a profitable business remains critical for reducing poverty and achieving the SDGs.

### e. **Informal sector workers**

The informal economy provides livelihoods for millions of Malawians and serves as a critical source of income for households that cannot access formal employment. Informal traders, market vendors, bicycle taxi operators, artisans, domestic workers, and small-scale entrepreneurs contribute vastly to economic activity. However, they often operate in precarious conditions characterised by low incomes, unstable earnings, and limited legal protections.

Many informal workers lack access to social protection (including pension), health insurance, pensions, affordable credit, and business development services. They are highly vulnerable to economic shocks, market disruptions, inflation, and policy changes. Women and young people are disproportionately represented within the informal sector, making them particularly vulnerable to exploitation and insecurity. Despite their contribution to the economy, informal workers are frequently overlooked in development planning and economic policy discussions.

### f. **Climate-affected communities**

Climate change has become one of the notable threats to development gains in Malawi. Communities across the country are increasingly exposed to floods, droughts, cyclones, erratic rainfall patterns, land degradation, and environmental shocks. Recent disasters, including Cyclones Idai, Ana, Gombe, Freddy, and others, have destroyed homes, schools, health facilities, roads, crops, and livelihoods, pushing already vulnerable households deeper into poverty.

For many communities, climate-related disasters are no longer isolated events but recurring crises that prevent recovery and long-term development. Smallholder farmers, fishing communities, women, children, and poor households bear the greatest burden. The effects of climate change extend beyond environmental concerns; they directly affect food security, health, education, employment, and economic growth.

56. AU/ECA Conference of Ministers of Finance, Planning and Economic Development Illicit Financial Flows: Report of the High Level Panel on Illicit Financial Flows from Africa. [https://archive.uneca.org/sites/default/files/PublicationFiles/iff\\_main\\_report\\_26feb\\_en.pdf](https://archive.uneca.org/sites/default/files/PublicationFiles/iff_main_report_26feb_en.pdf)

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Without substantial investments in climate resilience and adaptation, many of Malawi's development gains will continue to be reversed.

### **g. Older persons (The elderly)**

Older persons are among the most overlooked groups in Malawi's development discourse. Many elderly citizens, particularly in rural areas, live in conditions of extreme poverty and depend on family members, subsistence farming, or limited social support systems for survival. As traditional family support structures weaken due to migration, urbanisation, disease, and economic hardship, many older persons find themselves increasingly isolated and vulnerable.

Access to healthcare remains a major challenge, especially for chronic illnesses associated with ageing. Many older persons struggle to afford transport to health facilities, medication, and specialised care. Social protection programmes often provide inadequate support relative to the rising cost of living. Elderly women are particularly vulnerable due to longer life expectancy, limited asset ownership, and social exclusion. A society that fails to protect its elderly risks undermining the dignity, wellbeing, and contributions of those who helped build the nation.

### **h. Prisoners and correctional facility populations**

Prisoners and detainees are among the most invisible populations in Malawi and are frequently excluded from discussions on development and human rights. Yet the SDGs, particularly Goal 16 on peace, justice, and strong institutions, require that all people, including those deprived of liberty, enjoy access to justice, dignity, and basic services. Many prisons remain overcrowded, with facilities operating far beyond their intended capacity. Limited access to healthcare, sanitation, nutrition, education, vocational training, and rehabilitation services continues to undermine the wellbeing of inmates.

Pre-trial detention remains a major concern, with some individuals spending prolonged periods in custody before their cases are concluded. Women prisoners, juveniles, persons with disabilities, and elderly inmates often face additional vulnerabilities. Effective rehabilitation and reintegration programmes remain limited, increasing the risk of recidivism and social exclusion upon release. A development agenda that truly leaves no one behind must recognise prisoners not only as subjects of justice but also as citizens entitled to dignity, rehabilitation, and opportunities for reintegration into society.

## **5.0 WHAT GOVERNMENT SAYS ABOUT SDG PROGRESS**

Official reports provide an important account of the policies, programmes, investments, and reforms undertaken to advance the SDGs. However, for most citizens, development is measured not by the existence of plans and projects, but by whether their lives are improving in tangible and meaningful ways. This section presents an overview of SDG implementation by contrasting official progress with the lived experiences of ordinary Malawians, particularly those who continue to face poverty, unemployment, inequality, exclusion, and vulnerability. It seeks to answer a fundamental question: after a decade of SDG implementation, is progress being felt where it matters most, in the daily lives of citizens?

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**Table 1: Government SDG status**

| SDG   | Goal                                    | Key progress highlighted   |
|---|---|--|
| <b>a. Likely to be achieved (2 SDGs, 12%)</b>   |   |  |
| SDG 5   | Gender equality                         | Gender policies, GBV interventions and women's empowerment programmes.     |
| SDG 6   | Clean water and sanitation              | Expansion of water supply and sanitation services.                         |
| <b>b. Moderate progress (8 SDGs, 47%)</b>       |   |  |
| SDG 2   | Zero hunger                             | Affordable Inputs Programme, irrigation and climate-smart agriculture.     |
| SDG 3   | Good health and well-being              | Improved health infrastructure, immunization and disease response systems. |
| SDG 4   | Quality education                       | Increased enrolment, teacher recruitment and education infrastructure.     |
| SDG 9   | Industry, innovation and infrastructure | Infrastructure development and industrialization agenda implementation.    |
| SDG 11  | Sustainable cities and communities      | Urban planning, housing and resilient infrastructure investments.          |
| SDG 12  | Responsible consumption and production  | Sustainable production and environmental management initiatives.           |
| SDG 14  | Life below water                        | Fisheries management and aquatic ecosystem protection measures.            |
| SDG 17  | Partnerships for the goals              | Partnerships with development partners, CSOs and private sector.           |
| <b>c. Unlikely to be achieved (7 SDGs, 41%)</b> |   |  |
| SDG 1   | No Poverty                              | Expansion of social protection programmes and livelihood interventions.    |
| SDG 7   | Affordable and Clean Energy             | Rural electrification and renewable energy initiatives.                    |
| SDG 8   | Decent Work and Economic Growth         | Job creation, entrepreneurship and private sector development initiatives. |
| SDG 10  | Reduced Inequalities                    | Inclusion programmes targeting vulnerable populations.                     |
| SDG 13  | Climate Action                          | Climate adaptation and disaster risk management interventions.             |
| SDG 15  | Life on Land                            | Reforestation, biodiversity conservation and land restoration efforts.     |
| SDG 16  | Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions  | ATI implementation, governance reforms and anti-corruption efforts.        |

According to the Government's assessment, only 2 of the 17 SDGs (12%) are likely to be achieved by 2030, while 8 SDGs (47%) show moderate progress and 7 SDGs (41%) are unlikely to be achieved, underscoring the need for accelerated action during the remaining four years to 2030.

76. International Human Rights Clinic (2025). The survivor behind the accused: Gender violence and due process failures in Malawi. [https://cfj.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/The-Survivor-Behind-The-Accused-Report\\_Malawi\\_June-2025.pdf](https://cfj.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/The-Survivor-Behind-The-Accused-Report_Malawi_June-2025.pdf)

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## 5.2. The SDG mirror: Government progress versus citizen experience

The Government often measures progress through policies adopted, projects implemented, budgets allocated, infrastructure constructed, and programmes delivered. CSOs and citizens measure progress differently. They judge development by whether services work, opportunities exist, and living conditions improve.

**Table 1: Government SDG status**

| Government Measures      |   | CSOs and Citizens measure  |
|--------------------------|---|--|
| 1. Policies adopted      |    | 1. Problems solved                |
| 2. Budgets allocated     |    | 2. Value received                 |
| 3. Infrastructure built  |    | 3. Infrastructure functioning     |
| 4. Service coverage      |    | 4. Service quality                |
| 4. Service coverage      |    | 4. Service quality                |
| 5. Economic growth rates |    | 5. Jobs and incomes               |
| 6. Procurement completed |    | 6. Value for money                |
| 7. Investments made      |    | 7. Impact on livelihoods          |
| 8. Commitments announced |    | 8. Results delivered              |
| 9. Access to services    |   | 9. Quality of services           |
| 10. Development projects |  | 10. Improvements in daily life  |

What the mirror reveals is explained below

**Table 2: SDG dialogue: Bridging the gap between policy and reality**

| <b>SDG</b>               | <b>Government reports</b>               | <b>CSOs and citizens ask</b>                             |
|--------------------------|---|--|
| SDG 1: No Poverty        | Social protection expanded              | Why does poverty remain widespread?                      |
| SDG 2: Zero Hunger       | Farmers supported through AIP           | Why do millions still face food insecurity?              |
| SDG 3: Health            | More facilities and programmes          | Are medicines available and services reliable?           |
| SDG 4: Education         | More children enrolled                  | Are children actually learning?                          |
| SDG 5: Gender            | Laws and policies strengthened          | Are women experiencing equal opportunities?              |
| SDG 6: Water             | More water points installed             | Are they functional year-round?                          |
| SDG 7: Energy            | More connections achieved               | Is electricity reliable and affordable?                  |
| SDG 8: Jobs              | Economic growth initiatives implemented | Where are the jobs?                                      |
| SDG 9: Industry          | Industrialisation strategies launched   | What is being produced locally?                          |
| SDG 10: Inequality       | Inclusion policies adopted              | Are inequalities actually narrowing?                     |
| SDG 11: Cities           | Urban investments made                  | Are cities becoming more livable?                        |
| SDG 12: Consumption      | Sustainability initiatives underway     | Are production systems becoming more efficient?          |
| SDG 13: Climate          | Adaptation programmes implemented       | Are communities becoming more resilient?                 |
| SDG 14: Water Ecosystems | Conservation efforts underway           | Are fisheries and livelihoods improving?                 |
| SDG 15: Land             | Reforestation programmes implemented    | Is environmental degradation declining?                  |
| SDG 16: Governance       | Reforms introduced                      | Is corruption decreasing and accountability improving?   |
| SDG 17: Partnerships     | Partnerships strengthened               | Are partnerships producing better outcomes for citizens? |

With the above, Government's assessment provides an important account of policies, programmes, investments and institutional reforms undertaken since 2015. CSOs and citizens do not necessarily dispute these efforts. Rather, they question whether the reported progress is translating into meaningful improvements in their lives. The sections that follow therefore present the realities, concerns, frustrations and aspirations emerging from CSOs and citizens across Malawi, offering a reality check on the country's journey towards achieving the SDGs and the aspirations of Malawi 2063.

## **6.0 CITIZENS' VIEWS BEYOND THE NUMBERS**

Across communities where CSOs are implementing projects, a different narrative emerges; one that acknowledges progress but questions its depth, quality, and sustainability. For many Malawians, the benefits of development remain too distant, too unevenly distributed, or too fragile to withstand the next economic crisis, climate disaster, or governance failure. This section therefore contrasts the Government narrative with the citizen reality, not to dismiss the gains that have been made, but to examine whether those gains are translating into meaningful improvements in people's lives and whether Malawi is genuinely on course to achieve the SDGs and MIP-1 targets by 2030.

The verdict is both sobering and instructive: Malawi does not suffer from a shortage of visions, policies, strategies, or development partners. Rather, it suffers from a persistent deficit of implementation, accountability, productivity, and political will. The brutal truth is that too many reforms remain on paper, too many resources fail to reach intended beneficiaries, and too many citizens continue to experience poverty, unemployment, hunger, inequality, and exclusion despite decades of development planning. As the country enters the final stretch towards 2030, success will depend less on producing new plans and more on delivering tangible results for those who have been left furthest behind; particularly young people, women, persons with disabilities, smallholder farmers, informal workers, and communities facing the frontline impacts of climate change. The next four years must therefore become a period of delivery,

accountability, and bold reform; otherwise, Malawi risks adding the SDGs to a long list of ambitious visions that inspired hope but failed to transform lives.

### **6.1 PEOPLE**

#### **a. SDGs 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5: No poverty, zero hunger, good health, quality education and gender equality**

These goals represent the foundation of human development. If citizens remain poor, hungry, unhealthy, poorly educated, and excluded, progress in other areas becomes difficult to sustain.

**Table 3: Table for SDGs focusing on people**

| <b>Government narrative</b>   | <b>CSO and citizen reality</b>  |
|---|---|
| Poverty reduction programmes have been implemented through social cash transfers, public works programmes and agricultural support initiatives. | Nearly seven out of ten Malawians still live on less than US\$2.15 per day. Many households report that life has become harder in the past five years due to inflation, unemployment and declining purchasing power. Poverty is increasingly becoming urban as well as rural.                     |
| Affordable Inputs Programme (AIP) and food security interventions have reached millions of households.  | Millions continue to experience food insecurity every year. Citizens increasingly question why a country where over 80% depend on agriculture continues to face chronic hunger. The issue is no longer food production alone but affordability, productivity, irrigation, markets and resilience. |
| Malawi has made progress in reducing child mortality and improving access to health services.   | Health centres may exist, but medicines are often unavailable. Patients are frequently told to purchase drugs from private pharmacies. Long distances, staff shortages and inadequate equipment continue to affect service quality, especially in rural areas.                                    |
| School enrolment has improved.  | Children are in school but many are not learning. Classrooms are overcrowded, teachers overstretched, and learning materials inadequate. Completion rates remain low, and many young people leave school without employable skills.   |
| Gender equality laws and policies are in place.   | Women continue to face gender-based violence, limited access to productive assets, unpaid care burdens and exclusion from economic opportunities. Legal protections exist, but implementation remains weak.   |

**b. What CSOs and citizens are saying**

Across Malawi, citizens acknowledge that Government and development partners have invested much in expanding access to essential services over the past decade. More schools have been built, health facilities have increased, social protection programmes have expanded, and millions of farmers have benefited from agricultural support initiatives. These investments have undoubtedly improved access and helped many vulnerable households. However, citizens increasingly argue that the national conversation has focused too much on coverage and too little on quality, effectiveness, and impact. For many communities, the question is no longer whether services exist, but whether those services are delivering meaningful improvements in people’s lives.

Parents report that while school enrolment has increased, many children complete primary education without acquiring adequate literacy, numeracy, and critical thinking skills. Employers and communities similarly observe that many young people leave secondary schools, colleges, and universities with qualifications that do not translate into employment opportunities. In healthcare, citizens appreciate the expansion of facilities but continue to encounter shortages of medicines, inadequate equipment, understaffing, and long waiting times. Farmers receive subsidised inputs and support programmes, yet many remain trapped in subsistence production and continue to suffer from droughts, floods, unstable markets, and low productivity. Women continue to contribute to household incomes and agricultural production, but they remain disadvantaged in accessing land, credit, markets, technology, and leadership opportunities.

The result is a growing perception that Malawi has become relatively successful at expanding access to services, but far less successful at improving outcomes. Citizens increasingly question why poverty remains widespread despite decades of poverty reduction programmes; why hunger persists despite massive agricultural investments; why unemployment remains high despite increasing educational attainment; and why public services continue to struggle despite substantial public expenditure and donor support. These concerns point to a broader challenge of implementation quality, efficiency, accountability, and value for money in public service delivery.

### **The truth behind**

- The challenge facing Malawi today is no longer primarily about access, it is about outcomes, quality, and impact.
- The challenge is no longer getting children into classrooms; it is ensuring that they acquire the knowledge, skills, and competencies needed to succeed in life and contribute to national development.
- The challenge is no longer building health facilities; it is ensuring that those facilities are adequately staffed, equipped, stocked with medicines, and capable of providing quality care when citizens need it most.
- The challenge is no longer distributing agricultural inputs; it is transforming agriculture into a productive, climate-resilient, and profitable sector that enables farmers to move from subsistence to prosperity.
- The challenge is no longer producing policies, strategies, and plans; it is implementing them consistently, transparently, and effectively.

The truth is that Malawi's development challenge is increasingly one of quality rather than quantity, results rather than activities, and accountability rather than ambition. Malawians are not asking for more promises. They are asking for evidence that investments, policies, and programmes are translating into better lives, greater opportunities, and a future that offers genuine hope. Unless Malawi shifts its focus from measuring inputs and outputs to delivering outcomes and impact, progress toward the SDGs and Malawi 2063 will remain slower and more fragile than the country can afford.

## **6.2. PROSPERITY**

### **a. SDGs 7, 8, 9, 10 and 11: Energy, jobs, industry, reduced inequalities and sustainable cities**

Prosperity is about creating wealth, jobs, opportunities and economic transformation. This is arguably Malawi's weakest SDG cluster.

**Table 4: SDGs focusing on prosperity**

| <b>Government narrative</b>   | <b>CSO and citizen reality</b>  |
|---|---|
| Electricity access is expanding through rural electrification programmes.           | Many households remain unconnected, while those connected face frequent outages. Businesses lose productivity and incur high operating costs due to unreliable power supply.  |
| Economic growth has resumed following various shocks.                               | Most citizens do not feel the benefits of economic growth. Real incomes have declined due to inflation, currency depreciation and rising living costs.  |
| Youth empowerment programmes and entrepreneurship initiatives have been introduced. | Youth unemployment and underemployment remain widespread. Many graduates cannot find jobs, while most young people survive through informal activities with low returns.  |
| Industrialization is a key pillar of MW2063.  | Manufacturing remains weak, imports dominate markets, and value addition is limited. Malawi continues to export raw commodities and import finished products.   |
| Policies exist to reduce inequality and promote inclusion.                          | Wealth and opportunities remain concentrated among a small elite. Geographic inequalities persist, with rural areas lagging behind urban centers. Access to finance, technology and productive assets remains highly unequal. |
| Urban development and infrastructure programmes are underway.                       | Rapid urbanisation has outpaced planning. Informal settlements are expanding, housing shortages persist, and urban services struggle to meet growing demand.  |

## **b. What CSOs and citizens are saying**

For many Malawians, particularly young people, the greatest development challenge is not access to services but access to opportunities. Across communities, unemployment and underemployment are consistently identified as some of the country’s most pressing concerns. Young people increasingly express frustration that years spent in education no longer guarantee a pathway to decent work or economic security. Graduates leave colleges and universities with high expectations only to find an economy unable to absorb them. As a result, many are forced into informal and low-paying activities that offer little prospect for growth, asset accumulation, or long-term stability.

Small businesses, which should be the backbone of job creation and economic growth, face multiple constraints that limit their ability to expand and create employment. Entrepreneurs regularly cite unreliable electricity, high interest rates, limited access to finance, shortages of foreign exchange, rising production costs, and declining consumer purchasing power as major obstacles to growth. For many businesses, survival has become the priority rather than expansion. Citizens also question why Malawi continues to depend heavily on imports for products that could be manufactured domestically, from processed foods and agricultural products to basic consumer goods. Despite decades of discussions around industrialisation, value addition, and private sector development, the structure of the economy has changed very little, leaving the country vulnerable to external shocks and persistent trade deficits.

CSOs and citizens increasingly view economic growth figures with scepticism because they rarely see corresponding improvements in jobs, incomes, or living standards. While policies and strategies consistently promote industrialisation and economic transformation, many communities struggle to identify tangible examples of industries that are creating large-scale employment, expanding exports, and generating broad-based prosperity. The result is a growing disconnect between policy aspirations and the everyday realities of households trying to cope with rising costs of living and limited economic opportunities.

79. Afrobarometer (2025). Toward Malawi 2063: Youth confront high unemployment and economic anxiety. <https://www.afrobarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/AD1006-Malawian-youth-confront-high-unemployment-and-economic-anxiety-Afrobarometer-26june25.pdf>

### c. The truth behind

The truth is that Malawi has not yet transformed from a consumption economy into a production economy. The country consumes far more than it produces, imports far more than it exports, and remains heavily dependent on a narrow range of agricultural commodities and external financing. While economic growth occurs periodically, it has often been too slow, too narrow, and too vulnerable to create the number of jobs required by a rapidly growing population.

The economy continues to generate too few decent jobs, particularly for young people entering the labour market each year. Agricultural production remains dominated by low-productivity subsistence farming, with limited processing and value addition. Too much of Malawi's wealth leaves the country through imports, debt servicing, profit repatriation, and illicit financial flows, while too little is reinvested in productive sectors capable of driving long-term growth.

The country cannot sustainably reduce poverty through social programmes alone. Nor can it achieve the aspirations of MW2063 and the SDGs without fundamentally transforming how wealth is created. Real development will require moving beyond consumption and dependency toward production, industrialisation, value addition, innovation, and export-led growth. Until

Malawi creates an economy that generates jobs, rewards enterprise, and retains more of its wealth, poverty reduction efforts will remain fragile, and economic gains will continue to be temporary rather than transformational.

### 6.3. PLANET

#### a. SDGs 13, 14 and 15: Climate action, life below water and life on land

Climate change represents one of the greatest threats to Malawi's future development

**Table 5: SDGs focusing on planet**

| <b>Government narrative</b>   | <b>CSO and citizen reality</b>  |
|---|---|
| Malawi has adopted climate resilience strategies and adaptation plans.      | Communities continue to lose crops, homes and livelihoods to floods, droughts and cyclones. Many citizens experience climate change as an annual crisis rather than a future threat.    |
| Reforestation and environmental protection programmes are underway.         | Deforestation continues at alarming rates due to charcoal production, land pressure and weak enforcement. Forests are disappearing faster than they are being restored.                 |
| Sustainable natural resource management remains a national priority.        | Communities often see natural resources benefiting elites and external actors more than local populations. Resource extraction frequently generates limited local development benefits. |
| Fisheries and biodiversity conservation initiatives have been strengthened. | Fish stocks are declining in some areas due to overfishing, environmental degradation and weak regulation. Livelihoods dependent on natural resources remain vulnerable.                |

## **b. What CSOs and citizens are saying**

For many Malawians, climate change is no longer an environmental issue discussed in policy documents; it is a lived reality that affects livelihoods, food security, health, education, and economic wellbeing. Communities affected by Cyclones and other extreme weather events often describe climate shocks as recurring crises from which they never fully recover before the next disaster strikes. Homes are rebuilt only to be destroyed again. Crops are replanted only to be washed away or wither due to drought. Livelihoods are repeatedly disrupted, trapping vulnerable households in a cycle of recovery and loss.

Farmers across the country report noticeable changes in weather patterns, including shorter growing seasons, erratic rainfall, prolonged dry spells, and increasing temperatures. These changes have reduced agricultural productivity, increased production risks, and undermined household food security. Fishing communities also report declining catches linked to environmental degradation and changing ecosystems. Citizens increasingly recognize that climate change is not only an ecological crisis but also an economic and social crisis that threatens jobs, incomes, nutrition, and human development. At the same time, communities express concern over continued deforestation, unsustainable charcoal production, land degradation, and weak enforcement of environmental regulations, which further increase vulnerability to climate-related disasters.

For many CSOs and citizens, climate change has become one of the clearest examples of the gap between policy commitments and reality on the ground. While national strategies on climate resilience, disaster risk reduction, and environmental management exist, communities continue to face repeated losses with limited resources to adapt and recover. The burden falls disproportionately on smallholder farmers,

women, children, persons with disabilities, and poor households who have the fewest resources to withstand shocks and rebuild their lives.

## **c. The truth behind**

The truth is that climate change is reversing development gains faster than they can be rebuilt. Years of investment in schools, health facilities, roads, water systems, agriculture, and livelihoods can be wiped out within days by floods, cyclones, or droughts. Development efforts that are not climate-resilient are increasingly becoming temporary solutions to permanent challenges.

Malawi cannot achieve the SDGs, Malawi 2063, or MIP-1 without placing climate resilience at the centre of national development. Climate change is no longer a standalone environmental issue, it directly affects poverty reduction, food security, health, education, economic growth, water resources, and social protection. Every flood destroys infrastructure and disrupts learning. Every drought reduces agricultural production and deepens food insecurity. Every cyclone pushes vulnerable households further into poverty and forces government and development partners to divert scarce resources from development to emergency response.

The reality is that Malawi's future development trajectory will depend not only on how much it invests in growth and service delivery, but also on how effectively it protects those investments from climate shocks. Unless the country strengthens climate adaptation, disaster preparedness, environmental protection, irrigation, resilient infrastructure, and community resilience, climate change will continue to undermine progress across almost every SDG. Thus, Malawi cannot build prosperity on a foundation that is repeatedly washed away, blown away, or dried up by climate-related disasters.

## **6.4. PEACE**

### **a. SDG 16: Peace, justice and strong institutions**

Strong institutions are the backbone of development. Without accountability, transparency and justice, progress in all other SDGs becomes difficult to sustain.

**Table 6: SDG focusing on peace**

| <b>Government narrative</b>   | <b>CSO and citizen reality</b>   |
|---|--|
| Access to Information legislation is operational.                                     | Many citizens still struggle to obtain public information. Government data is often unavailable, delayed or difficult to access.   |
| Anti-corruption institutions have been strengthened.                                  | Citizens continue to witness recurring corruption scandals with limited visible consequences for powerful or politically connected individuals. Public confidence in accountability systems remains fragile. |
| Governance reforms and Open Government Partnership commitments are being implemented. | Citizens want evidence of implementation, not commitments. Trust depends on results rather than promises.  |
| Decentralization is strengthening local governance.                                   | Many councils remain underfunded and dependent on central government. Local participation in decision-making remains inconsistent.   |

**b. What CSOS and citizens are saying**

Across Malawi, citizens increasingly identify corruption as one of the obstacles to development and improved living standards. While corruption has long been recognised as a governance challenge, many citizens now view it as a direct cause of poor service delivery, persistent poverty, inequality, and slow economic progress. Public discussions, media reports, and citizen perceptions increasingly suggest that corruption has become deeply embedded within some public institutions and systems, affecting how resources are allocated, contracts are awarded, services are delivered, and public decisions are made.

Many citizens believe that accountability mechanisms often operate unevenly, with some individuals facing consequences while others appear protected by political influence, wealth, or social status. This perception of selective accountability has contributed to declining public trust in institutions responsible for promoting transparency, justice, and oversight. Citizens frequently express frustration that corruption scandals emerge with alarming regularity, yet visible recoveries of stolen resources, successful prosecutions, and systemic reforms often appear insufficient relative to the scale of the problem. As a result, confidence in public institutions continues to erode, particularly when citizens witness deteriorating services despite public expenditure and development assistance. For ordinary Malawians, corruption is not an abstract issue discussed in governance forums; it is experienced

through empty hospital pharmacies, unfinished infrastructure projects, poor-quality public works, delayed services, and lost economic opportunities. Citizens increasingly question why substantial public investments do not consistently translate into visible improvements in their daily lives. This growing frustration reflects a wider concern that corruption is undermining both development effectiveness and the social contract between citizens and the state.

**c. The truth behind**

The truth is that corruption is not merely a governance issue, it is a development issue. It directly undermines the achievement of every SDG by diverting resources away from citizens and reducing the impact of public investments. Corruption weakens healthcare systems, compromises education outcomes, increases the cost of infrastructure, discourages investment, and limits the resources available for poverty reduction and social protection.

Every inflated contract means fewer classrooms, hospitals, roads, and water systems than citizens were promised. Every procurement scandal delays development and diverts scarce public resources from those who need them most. Every stolen resource widens inequality because the wealthy and connected can often shield themselves from failing public services, while poor households bear the full cost. Every act of impunity sends a message that public office can be abused without consequence, further weakening public confidence in government institutions.

82. Anti-Corruption Resource Centre (2012). Overview of corruption and anti-corruption in Malawi. [https://knowledgehub.transparencycdn.org/helpdesk/329\\_Overview-of\\_corruption\\_and\\_anti-corruption\\_in\\_Malawi.pdf](https://knowledgehub.transparencycdn.org/helpdesk/329_Overview-of_corruption_and_anti-corruption_in_Malawi.pdf)

Eventually, corruption imposes a hidden tax on development, one paid disproportionately by the poor, young people, women, and communities already left behind. No country has achieved sustainable development while tolerating systemic corruption, and Malawi will be no exception. Strong institutions, transparent systems, effective oversight, and equal accountability before the law are not optional governance reforms; they are prerequisites for achieving the SDGs, Malawi 2063, and the aspirations of citizens. Without meaningful action against corruption, the SDGs risk remaining aspirations on paper rather than achievements experienced in people's lives.

## 6.5. PARTNERSHIP

### a. SDG 17: Partnerships for the Goals

Partnerships are essential for development, but their effectiveness depends on ownership, accountability and mutual responsibility.

**Table 7: SDG focusing on partnership**

| <b>Government narrative</b>  | <b>CSO and citizen reality</b>  |
|--|---|
| Malawi has strong partnerships with development partners, civil society, the private sector and regional bodies. | Citizens appreciate development support but increasingly question why decades of aid have not produced more transformative outcomes.                |
| Development cooperation continues to support national priorities.  | Many citizens feel development remains donor-driven, with priorities often shaped by funding opportunities rather than local needs.                 |
| Regional and international partnerships have been strengthened.  | Benefits of regional integration are not always visible at community level. Citizens want partnerships that create jobs, markets and opportunities. |
| Civil society participation in development processes has expanded.   | Citizens expect civil society to become more independent, accountable and vocal in holding duty-bearers accountable.                                |

### b. What CSOs and citizens are saying

Malawians acknowledge the critical role that development partners have played in supporting national development over the past decades. Donor assistance has helped save lives, expand access to healthcare and education, respond to humanitarian crises, strengthen social protection programmes, and finance infrastructure and institutional reforms. During periods of economic stress, natural disasters, disease outbreaks, and fiscal constraints, development partners have often provided resources that helped sustain essential public services and protect vulnerable populations. Many of Malawi's development gains would have been difficult to achieve without this support.

At the same time, there is growing concern among citizens that Malawi has become excessively dependent on external financing for functions that should increasingly be sustained through domestic resources and national productivity. Citizens question why, after decades of development assistance, the country continues to struggle with recurring food insecurity, persistent poverty, high youth unemployment, weak industrial growth, and fragile public services. Many observe that development projects often begin and end with donor funding, raising concerns about sustainability once external support is withdrawn. There is also a perception that policy priorities are sometimes influenced more by funding opportunities than by long-term national interests.

Increasingly, citizens are recognising that while aid can provide important support, it cannot be a substitute for effective leadership, strong institutions, domestic resource mobilisation, private sector growth, and accountable governance. Development partners can provide resources and technical assistance, but they cannot create political will, eliminate corruption, build productive industries, or replace citizen ownership of the development agenda. Sustainable development in the long run depends on what Malawi is able to build, finance, govern, and sustain for itself.

### **c. The truth behind**

The truth is that aid can support development, but it cannot replace development. For too long, Malawi has relied heavily on external assistance to finance services, programmes, and investments that should increasingly be driven by domestic resources, economic productivity, and accountable public institutions. While development cooperation remains important, no country has ever achieved lasting prosperity through aid alone.

Development cannot be imported. It cannot be delivered through projects, workshops, consultancies,

or donor-funded programmes in isolation from broader structural transformation. It must be built through productive economies that create jobs, a Government that manages public resources responsibly, institutions that serve citizens effectively, and leaders who place national interests above personal or political gain. Equally important, it requires empowered citizens who actively participate in governance, demand accountability, and contribute to national development.

Malawi's challenge is therefore not simply to attract more aid, but to reduce the need for it over time by strengthening domestic resource mobilisation, expanding productive sectors, combating corruption, investing in human capital, and creating an environment where businesses and communities can thrive. The measure of successful partnerships should not be how much aid enters the country, but how effectively that support helps Malawi become more self-reliant, resilient, and capable of financing its own development aspirations. In the end, sustainable development will not be determined by the generosity of external partners, but by the strength of Malawi's institutions, economy, and social contract with its citizens.

## **7.0. THE LAST FOUR YEARS: WHAT MUST CHANGE?**

Partnerships are essential for development, but their effectiveness depends on ownership, accountability and mutual responsibility.

Malawi has entered the final stretch towards achieving the SDGs and the first implementation phase of Malawi 2063 - MIP-1. The next four years will determine whether the country accelerates progress or falls further behind. Citizens are increasingly clear that incremental reforms and business-as-usual approaches will not be sufficient. The country does not need more plans, strategies, or promises. It needs decisive action, courageous leadership, and measurable results.

The bottom line is that the next four years represent Malawi's final opportunity to accelerate progress toward the SDGs and MIP-1 targets. The reforms required are not unknown. The resources needed are not entirely absent. The evidence is clear. The challenge is whether the country can summon the political will, institutional discipline, and collective courage necessary to implement them. If Malawi chooses accountability over impunity, productivity over patronage, and long-term transformation over short-term politics, the remaining years to 2030 could mark the beginning of a different development story. If not, the country risks adding the SDGs to a long list of ambitious visions that inspired hope but failed to transform lives.

The following priorities represent what communities and civil society actors believe must change if Malawi is to deliver meaningful progress by 2030.

## 7.1 Four years to deliver: What must change?

- > Manage Natural Resources for Citizens
- > Rebuild the Social Contract

### 7.2. Put youth at the centre of development

Malawians acknowledge the critical role that Malawi's greatest opportunity lies in its youthful population. Yet millions of young people continue to face unemployment, underemployment, limited access to finance, and poor economic prospects. Youth empowerment must move beyond political rhetoric and become a national development imperative. Government should expand technical, vocational, entrepreneurial, and digital skills training aligned with labour market demands. Access to affordable financing for youth-led enterprises should be increased, while innovation hubs, incubation centres, and digital infrastructure should be expanded across the country. Education systems must be reoriented to produce job creators, innovators, and skilled workers rather than graduates waiting for scarce formal employment opportunities. If Malawi invests seriously in its youth, it can transform its demographic growth into a demographic dividend.

### 7.3. End procurement secrecy and strengthen accountability

Procurement remains one of the sectors most vulnerable to corruption, waste, and abuse of public resources. Citizens increasingly demand greater transparency in how public funds are spent and who benefits from Government contracts. All major public contracts should be proactively disclosed and published through accessible and open digital platforms. Procurement information should be available in formats that allow citizens, media, Parliament, and oversight institutions to scrutinize spending decisions. Compliance audits should be strengthened, and institutions responsible for public procurement oversight should be adequately resourced and protected from political interference. Public resources must serve citizens, not private interests.

### 7.4. Restore fiscal discipline and debt sustainability

The country's rising debt burden requires urgent corrective action. Government must adopt a more disciplined approach to public finance management by reducing wasteful expenditure, improving revenue collection, and ensuring that borrowing is

directed toward productive investments that generate economic returns. Debt information should be regularly published to enhance transparency and public oversight. Parliament, civil society, and citizens must have greater access to information on borrowing decisions and debt obligations. Every kwacha borrowed should contribute to future growth, productivity, and resilience rather than financing recurrent inefficiencies. Fiscal responsibility is not simply an economic issue; it is a generational responsibility.

### 7.5. Transform agriculture from subsistence to industry

Agriculture remains the backbone of Malawi's economy, yet it continues to generate insufficient wealth for the majority of farmers. The country must move beyond a narrow focus on production towards a broader agenda of agricultural transformation. Investments in irrigation, mechanisation, climate-smart agriculture, agro-processing, storage facilities, and rural infrastructure should be increased. Farmer cooperatives and producer organisations should be strengthened to improve bargaining power and market access. Access to finance, technology, and regional markets must be expanded. Malawi cannot achieve meaningful poverty reduction while the majority of farmers remain trapped in low-productivity subsistence agriculture.

### 7.6. Localise development, empower communities / strengthen decentralisation

Development must become more responsive to local realities and citizen priorities. Decentralisation should be strengthened through increased and predictable financing for local authorities, enhanced local planning capacities, and stronger accountability mechanisms. District councils should have greater autonomy and resources to address local development challenges. Citizens must be meaningfully involved in planning, budgeting, monitoring, and evaluating development initiatives. Communities are more likely to support and sustain development when they participate in shaping it. Localisation is not simply about transferring resources; it is about transferring power, responsibility, and accountability closer to citizens.

### **7.7 Recover stolen resources, end impunity and fight corruption**

The fight against corruption must move beyond investigations and public statements to visible and consistent accountability. Anti-corruption institutions should be strengthened, adequately funded, and protected from political influence. Asset recovery efforts should be intensified to ensure that stolen public resources are returned to the public purse. Transparency should be increased across all sectors, particularly in procurement, public finance, and state-owned enterprises. Accountability must apply equally to all individuals regardless of political affiliation, wealth, or social status. Citizens must see that corruption carries consequences if trust in public institutions is to be restored.

### **7.8. Manage natural resources for citizens, not elites**

Malawi's natural resources should become a source of national prosperity rather than a source of elite enrichment. All mining, forestry, fisheries, and natural resource contracts should be publicly disclosed. Communities affected by resource extraction should be meaningfully consulted and should receive a fair share of the benefits generated from local resources. Benefit-sharing mechanisms should be strengthened,

while environmental safeguards and compliance monitoring should be rigorously enforced. The country must ensure that its natural wealth contributes to jobs, infrastructure, social services, and future generations rather than benefiting a few individuals and foreign interests.

### **7.9. Rebuild the social contract between citizens and the state**

At the heart of Malawi's development challenges lies a weakening relationship between citizens and public institutions. Rebuilding trust requires a new social contract based on transparency, accountability, participation, and mutual responsibility. Government must become more open, responsive, and transparent in its actions. Citizens must become more informed, organised, and engaged in governance processes. Civil society organisations, faith-based institutions, traditional leaders, and the media must continue to play their critical role in demanding accountability and amplifying citizen voices. Development is not something that governments deliver to passive populations. It is a collective endeavour that depends on active citizens, responsive institutions, and leaders committed to serving the public interest.

## 8.0. CONCLUSION: THE CHOICE BEFORE MALAWI

Eleven years after the adoption of the SDGs and 6 years through the implementation MIP-1, the evidence is clear: Malawi's greatest challenge is not a shortage of policies, strategies, institutions, development partners, or technical solutions. The country has produced ambitious visions, comprehensive plans, and numerous reform agendas. It has benefited from various forms of support from development partners and possesses abundant human and natural resources. Yet millions of Malawians continue to face poverty, hunger, unemployment, inequality, poor service delivery, and growing vulnerability to economic and climate shocks.

The fundamental challenge lies elsewhere. It lies in whether Malawi is prepared to confront the governance failures, political incentives, institutional weaknesses, corruption, policy inconsistency, and economic structures that continue to reproduce underdevelopment. Too often, national attention has focused on producing new plans rather than implementing existing ones; on managing crises rather than preventing them; and on short-term political gains rather than long-term national transformation. The result is a widening gap between aspirations and outcomes, between policy commitments and lived realities, and between what citizens are promised and what they experience.

The sentiments captured throughout this report point to a simple but uncomfortable truth: Malawi does not lack solutions. It lacks consistent implementation, accountability, productivity, and political will. Citizens are not demanding miracles. They are demanding honest leadership, prudent management of public resources, quality public services, decent jobs, meaningful opportunities for young people, protection from corruption, and a development model that places citizens rather than elites at its centre.

The next four years represent perhaps the most important development window in a generation. They offer a final opportunity to accelerate progress towards the SDGs, deliver on the aspirations of Malawi 2063 and MIP-1, and restore public confidence that development can improve people's lives. However, achieving this will require far more than technical interventions or donor-funded projects. It will require political courage to implement difficult reforms, institutional discipline to enforce laws and policies, active citizenship to demand accountability, and leadership that places national interests above personal, political, or partisan considerations.

The reality is that poverty is not Malawi's destiny. Underdevelopment is not inevitable. The country possesses the resources, talent, and potential to chart a different future. What has often been missing is the collective determination to address the root causes of underdevelopment rather than its symptoms.

The choice before Malawi is therefore stark and unavoidable

- Continue managing poverty, or finally build prosperity.
- Continue protecting systems that benefit a few, or build institutions that serve the many.
- Continue postponing difficult reforms, or embrace the transformation required for future generations to thrive.

The decisions made between now and 2030 will determine whether the SDGs become another missed opportunity or the foundation for a more prosperous, inclusive, accountable, and resilient Malawi. The time for diagnosis has passed. The time for action is now.

**A Civil Society Assessment of Malawi's Progress  
Towards The SDGs & First Implementation Plan (MIP1)  
Of the Malawi 2063**



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