

Lilongwe: City report

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Abstract

Lilongwe is the capital of Malawi and its largest city, with a population of around 1 million. Three-quarters of all residents live in informal settlements, characterised by poor-quality housing and living conditions. This paper draws together a set of studies completed by a team of researchers in Lilongwe as part of the African Cities Research Consortium (ACRC). The aim of the studies was to understand the political-economic factors that have contributed to Lilongwe's development problem over time. The argument is that, with the introduction of multiparty democracy in 1994, a highly competitive electoral system emerged, with the winners rewarding supporters through patronage and clientelism. While this pattern of politics is found in other democracies, the key difference in Malawi is the effect of its small economy, widespread poverty and low public finances on the relative magnitude of clientelism. Reform coalitions are emerging to support participatory informal settlement upgrading, but they require capacity building. It is concluded that the capability of these coalitions to reach scale hinges largely on whether the small amount of funding pledged by Lilongwe City Council can attract additional resources (probably from external aid agencies), how the invited spaces of participation will be facilitated in neighbourhoods where local government structures have been politicised, and how far communities can participate in local political spaces influenced by democratic reforms, clientelism and limited resources.

Keywords: Political settlements, development domains, city systems, clientelism, reform coalition

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Acronyms

ADL	Airports Development Limited
ACRC	African Cities Research Consortium
CBOs	Community-based organisations
CCJP	Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace
CCODE	Centre for Community Organisation and Development
CEO	Chief executive officer
CSLGs	Community savings and loans groups
CSO	Civil society organisation
DPP	Democratic Progressive Party
ESCOM	Electricity Supply Commission of Malawi
EGENCO	Electricity generation company
FBO	Faith-based organisation
GDP	Gross domestic product
HfH	Habitat for Humanity
HIPC	Heavily indebted poor country
HMEs	Household microenterprises
HWN	Health, wellbeing and nutrition
IMF	International Monetary Fund
KfW	German Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau
LASCOM	Local Government Service Commission
LGA	Local government authority
LGDP	Local Government Development Project
LCC	Lilongwe City Council
LWB	Lilongwe Water Board
MAIIC	Malawi Agriculture and Industrial Investment Corporation
MCP	Malawi Congress Party
MHC	Malawi Housing Corporation
MHPF	Malawi Homeless Peoples Federation

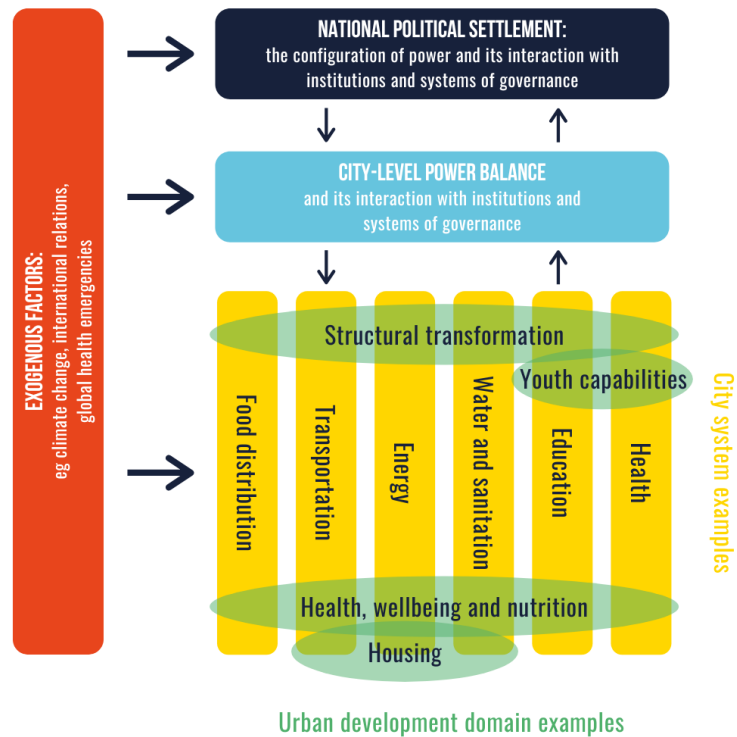
MOLG	Ministry of Local Government
MP	Member of parliament
MSME	Micro, small and medium enterprises
NBS	New Building Society
NEEF	National Economic Empowerment Fund
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
NPDP	National Physical Development Plan
NSO	National Statistical Office
NSUP	National Slum Upgrading Programme
SACCO	Savings and Credit Cooperative Society
SAPs	Structural adjustment programmes
SCDP	Secondary Cities Development Programme
THAs	Traditional housing areas
TA	Traditional authority
ToA	Tonse Alliance
UDF	United Democratic Front
VSLAs	Village savings and loans associations
WASH	Water, sanitation and hygiene
WDC	Ward development committees
WSEP	Ward social economic profiles

1. Introduction

Lilongwe City (hereafter Lilongwe) is the capital and administrative centre of Malawi, a small landlocked country in Southern Africa. Towns and cities account for 16% of Malawi's population, making the country one of the least urbanised in the continent (NSO, 2019). With a population of 989,318 in the 2018 census, Lilongwe is Malawi's largest city, accounting for around 6% of the total population (NSO, 2019). Lilongwe is also one of Malawi's most rapidly growing cities, with a growth rate of approximately 4% per year (UNDESA, 2018). Like many other African cities, Lilongwe's growth has been accompanied by the accumulation of environmental problems in the absence of effective urban planning and management, rendering the population highly vulnerable to epidemics, disasters and climate change. Estimates suggest that three-quarters of Lilongwe's population lives in informal settlements with very poor housing and living conditions (UN-Habitat, 2011).

This report draws together a set of studies completed by a team of researchers in Lilongwe as part of the African Cities Research Consortium (ACRC). The ACRC's holistic framework for analysing urban development in Africa has three integrated components – **politics**, **systems** and **development domains**. The politics component uses "political settlements" theory to model how power is configured at the national and city levels, and then analyses how these configurations of power shape (and are shaped by) urban development processes in the given city. The systems component analyses the functioning of the key systems (composed of physical infrastructure and people organised in various ways) that sustain and/or improve urban life in the city. The domains component looks at some of the distinct fields of discourse, policy and practice that have formed around complex, intersystemic development challenges in the city, and analyses how the actors (political, bureaucratic, professional and popular) engaged in these fields collaborate and/or compete for authority. Figure 1 below gives an indication of how these three components come together, and each component is explained in more detail in the main sections of this report.

Figure 1: ACRC's conceptual framework



The studies on which this report draws sought to understand how Malawi's political settlement influences commitment to improve the allocation of resources in eight urban systems: finance; food; energy; law and order; water; sanitation; waste; and transport. Additional studies analysed how politics and systems impact on four urban development domains: housing; informal settlements; nutrition, health and wellbeing; and micro, small and medium enterprises. The studies reveal the fragmentation and failings within these systems and domains, and the underlying causes thereof. The aim is to identify ways of making Lilongwe City Council (LCC) more capable of delivering processes of state-building in partnership with other actors (formal, informal and hybridised) towards more equitable and sustainable urban development outcomes.

The argument is as follows: with the introduction of multiparty democracy in 1994, Malawi's political settlement became embroiled in a competitive electoral struggle among vying ethno-regional coalitions, with the winners rewarding their supporters through the allocation of patronage and clientelist benefits. While this pattern of politics is found in other democracies, the key difference in Malawi seems to be the effect of its small economy, widespread poverty and low public finances on the relative magnitude of clientelism and corruption. And what is unique about clientelism in Lilongwe is its multi-ethnic composition, which has led to factions in society that undermine the ability of individuals to create organisations capable of benefiting all. The acute lack of funds, combined with high levels of factionalism and political competition, creates a preference for short-term interventions aimed primarily at rewarding supporters and mobilising voters. Vote buying is thus the order of the day.

Meanwhile, the prevalence of clientelist politics undermines economic growth, thereby contributing to the perpetuation of weak formal institutions in a legitimacy-weakening, poverty-trap-inducing vicious cycle. This cycle is driven both in part by the competitive struggle for votes and resources nationally, which deters central government from devolving power and resources locally, and by the electoral significance of Lilongwe, which induces national politicians to interfere in council operations. The central government has so far been unwilling to remit appointed revenues to local authorities, including the LCC, which has also failed to collect city rates. Another driver of urban development problems is an outdated master planning system. Overly influenced by modernist ideology, it biases what public services there are almost entirely towards formal neighbourhoods populated mainly by high-income households, while providing opportunities for ruling politicians to interfere in planning, where politically or personally beneficial.

The re-introduction of multiparty democracy also saw the circumvention of planning restrictions to the extent that residents saw democracy as a freedom to access any piece of land for housing, so long as the newly established residents rewarded politicians with votes. More recently, however, the LCC has become more ruthless with informal settlements in response to Lilongwe's sprawling informal development problem. The so-called "laissez-faire" approach to informal housing construction post-1994 has been superseded with a will to reinstate Lilongwe's initial modernist vision as a capital city, based on the garden city paradigm. Thus, while the initial laissez-faire stance towards informal housing construction provided the low-income urban majority with a degree of tenure security and a foothold in the city, but without securing development gains from the LCC, the current situation is at a critical junction, as the council seems split on whether to support participatory solutions to community-driven informal settlement upgrading or to clear them to make way for formal urban development.

Owing to the few available resources, ruling politicians tend to neglect properly servicing informal settlements, while officials are of the view that only those neighbourhoods that pay city rates should be serviced. The lack of public services has forced informal residents into a reliance on networks controlled by "big men" (for example, those with heightened access to public resources, such as local and political leaders), but these networks have not improved affordability or supply. Affordability has also been hindered by uneven pricing systems, in which low-income households pay higher per unit costs than high-income households as an outcome of hybrid service delivery arrangements (notably in the case of water).

As a result of the factionalism, fragmentation and informality in Lilongwe's under-resourced city governance structure combined with Malawi's innate structural disadvantages (notably the political-economic impacts stemming from the dictatorial rule of Kamuzu Banda (1964-1994), the impoverishment and debt caused by the fuel crisis in the late 1970s, followed by the imposition of structural adjustment programmes [SAPs] in the early 1980s), informal settlements have become the principal sites of

Lilongwe's sprawling development problem. This problem is increasingly being addressed by non-state actors (notably NGOs) within a highly fragmented and informalised urban and peri-urban governance landscape. The leadership roles played by "town chiefs", in particular, raise questions regarding the logic of officialdom and whether local institutions may lead to better development outcomes under the planning law and other relevant legislation.

Promisingly, reform coalitions are emerging to support participatory informal settlement upgrading, but they require capacity building. It is concluded that whether these coalitions are capable of reaching scale hinges largely on whether the small amount of funding pledged by the LCC can attract additional resources (which would likely require contributions made by external aid agencies), how the invited spaces of participation will be facilitated in neighbourhoods where local government structures have been politicised by councillors and MPs to distribute benefits to their supporters and mobilise voters, and how far communities can participate in local political spaces influenced by democratic reforms, clientelism and limited resources.

The report begins by locating Lilongwe within Malawi's political settlement and governance structure, with a focus on the relationship between ruling national and urban elites. The next section examines Lilongwe's city-level power balance and governance configuration, followed by a summary of each urban system and development domain. An overarching analysis based on the key findings is then presented, followed by a discussion of the implications for research and reform in Lilongwe.

The studies that inform this report are based on secondary data collected from desk-based reviews and primary data collected from semi-structured interviews with key informants (including politicians, officials, service providers and community members and leaders) and focus group discussions with key interest groups (including women and elderly residents). This report also draws on additional literature to address emerging issues in the analysis.

2. Lilongwe's political settlement and governance structure

To understand urban development and prospects for developmental reform in Lilongwe, we need to understand who wields power and how they use it. City-level power dynamics do not exist in a vacuum; they are typically influenced by what we call the country's "political settlement". A political settlement is a common understanding among a society's most powerful groups about the basic rules (or institutions) of the political and economic game. Those rules create opportunities or benefits for "insider" groups, often to the exclusion of "outsiders". Political settlements can be analysed in a variety of ways, but we focus on two main dimensions: *power configuration* and *social foundation*.

The power configuration describes the relative strength of groups loyal to the leader (collectively referred to as the "leader's bloc") vis-a-vis groups that oppose the leader or

are only contingently loyal. Crudely, where the leader's bloc is strong, we say that power is "concentrated". Where, by contrast, the leader's bloc is weak, we say that power is "dispersed". Power concentration, interacting with other variables, shapes the ability of the government to make and implement decisive, consistent, urban development policy.

The social foundation describes the breadth and depth of groups that are "insiders" to the settlement.¹ Where a relatively large proportion of the population are insiders, we describe the settlement as "broad". Where, conversely, only a relatively small proportion of the population are "insiders", we describe the settlement as "narrow". The social foundation, interacting with other variables, will shape the degree to which governing elites are committed to "inclusive" urban development policy (for further details see Kelsall et al., 2021).

The current political settlement of Malawi can be characterised as "*broad-dispersed*". Much political analysis to date has had a focus on the national rather than the sub-national scale. In this section, we analyse how this political settlement has historically shaped urban development in Lilongwe, and shapes the city's prospects for reform.

2.1. Characteristics of Malawi's political settlement

Following Malawi's adoption of a multiparty democracy in 1994, a "competitive clientelist" political settlement emerged, wherein elites compete in periodic elections for control of the state and its resources (O'Neil et al., 2014). The group able to command the most support through elite coalitions and clientelist networks wins. Political settlements of this nature are inherently unstable, since, in most instances, power is unevenly distributed amongst elite factions. Ruling elites also find it difficult to provide more public goods because of heavy dependence on clientelism (which depends on partial provision to reward vote banks) and redistribution of state resources to supporters in order to sustain elite coalitions (O'Neil et al., 2014). With a dispersed power configuration post-1994, successive regimes have found it difficult to consistently impose their authority on other branches of the political system, either vertically or horizontally, in anything like a consistent manner. Hastings Banda largely succeeded in doing this over the first two decades of his rule, but by the 1980s his abilities were slipping. However, all leaders post-1994 have struggled to exert control over Malawi's "democracy of chameleons", where politically linked businessowners and politicians compete for fame and favour (Chinsinga, 2002).

The reason for this situation is that Malawi's competing factional blocs have comparatively broad and deep social foundations, as discussed in the next section.

¹ To be an "insider", a group has to satisfy two criteria: 1) it is potentially powerful enough, acting alone or with others, to make significant trouble for the leadership and/or significantly affect struggles between political blocs; and 2) the leadership chooses to manage this potential threat predominantly by "co-opting" the group, and thereby incorporate it into the settlement, by channeling benefits of some description to it. Groups that either lack the power to affect struggles in this way, or that are predominantly repressed by the leadership, are "outsiders" to the settlement.

However, one key implication is that competing parties feel under pressure to distribute benefits fairly broadly, but without sufficient resources. Given the comparative weakness of the political centre vis-a-vis its own, lower-level and opposition factions, cooperation typically requires extensive bargaining and side-payment benefit distribution, placing an emphasis on rent-seeking, corruption and patronage handouts, rather than effective public goods provision (see Kelsall et al., 2022).

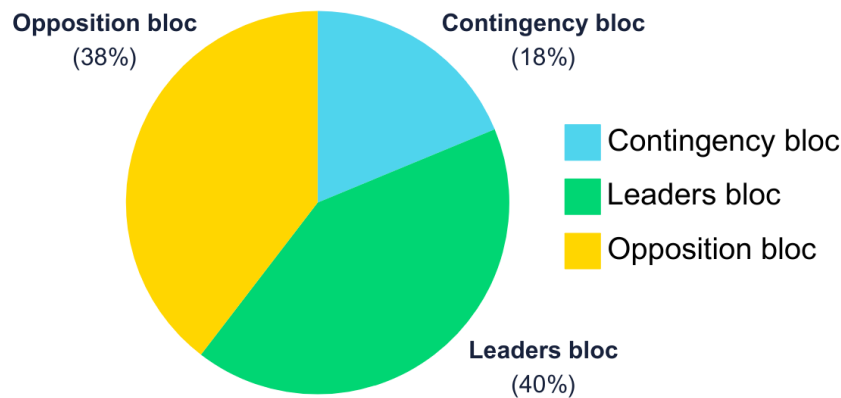
Malawi can also best be described as a hybrid state. The country has a set of written laws and regulations² that have developed over time – from colonial times to the present multiparty dispensation. However, the everyday norms or “rules-in-practice” that Malawians follow – whether in political, economic or social interactions – are frequently contradictory to, and dominate, the “rules-on-paper”. Observance and implementation of the formal rules are frequently subverted by informal norms and practices, including reliance on clientelist relationships to access/appropriate public resources for private use (O’Neil et al., 2014).

2.2. Power configuration

In May 2019, Malawi held a general election, which included a presidential poll. However, following allegations of fraud and vote-counting irregularities in the presidential component – which had seen incumbent President Peter Mutharika come out with 38% of the votes, against opposition leader Lazarus Chakwera (winning just over 35%) and Vice President Saulos Chilima (with about 20%) – there were calls for cancellation of the results. While these challenges and calls for cancellation were ongoing on the part of contestants, President Mutharika was sworn into office. Soon after, the country saw widespread protests and demonstrations. The matter was taken to court, where the High Court later voided the results, ordering fresh presidential polls later in the year. The presidential election re-run finally took place on 23 June 2020. Lazarus Chakwera (of the Malawi Congress Party – MCP) and his running mate, Saulos Chilima (from the United Transformation Movement – UTM) won the election re-run, taking 58% of the vote. Figure 2 shows an estimate of distribution of political settlement blocs soon after the 2020 elections. These results were in line (within 2%) of the Afrobarometer panel study of voting intentions which was done in April, 2020.³

2 These include a liberal democratic constitution and set of civil and political rights, laws and regulations that establish a hierarchical and impersonal bureaucracy and plethora of policies based on “best international practice”.

3 The Afrobarometer study has accurately predicted Malawian presidential election outcomes since it started in 1999 (five electoral cycles), available online [pdf] (accessed 4 March 2024); see also Afrobarometer Briefing Paper 75, November 2009 (available online, accessed 4 March 2024).

Figure 2: Estimate of Malawi's national political settlement bloc, 2020

Source: Mwalyambwile (2022).

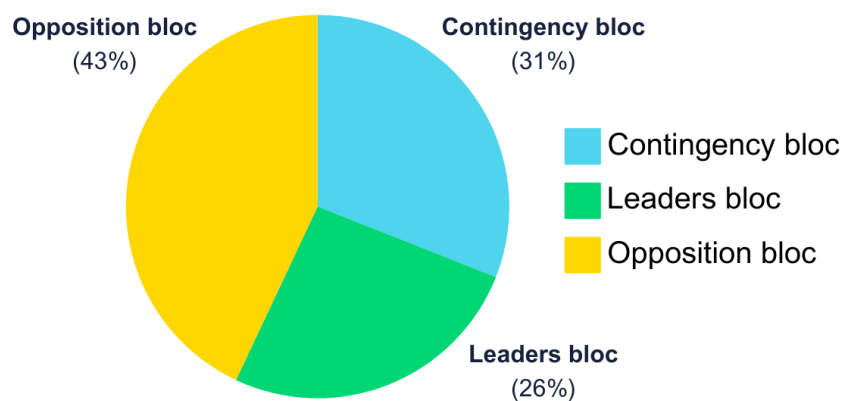
In early March 2020, the Malawi Congress Party (MCP) and United Transformation Movement (UTM) had announced formation of an electoral alliance for the June 2020 election (Masina, 2020). This appeared to have been a direct response to the constitutional court ruling in February 2020 in the elections case where the judges directed that future elections in Malawi must be decided using a 50% plus one majority definition (a 1999 Supreme Court ruling had interpreted the “majority” principle in the constitution to only require a plurality) – a decision later affirmed by the Malawi Supreme Court of Appeal (MSCA). Afterwards, seven other political parties joined the Alliance at various points in the run-up to the June 2020 elections.⁴ These are, however, considered “small” players in the coalition, hence they do not wield much power and influence except for a few individuals heading the entities who do possess disruptive potential, such as Joyce Banda, the former president and leader of the People’s Party.

Over the past two-and-a-half years since this “Tonse Alliance” (ToA) was ushered into government, there have been shifts in the national political settlement blocs. The most recent Afrobarometer panel study results are shown in Figure 3 below. The leader’s bloc has shrunk by over 30%, while the opposition bloc has gained 5%. The contingently loyal bloc has increased by 13%. The leader’s bloc won the last elections on an anti-corruption ticket. However, they have been rocked in a series of corruption scandals comparable to their predecessors’, hence have lost the trust of voters. They also started governing when the Covid-19 pandemic was beginning to affect the

⁴ These are Peoples Party (founded by former President Joyce Banda), Freedom Party, Malawi Forum for Unity and Development (MAFUNDE), Umodzi Party, Alliance for Democracy (AFORD), Peoples Transformation Alliance (PETRA) and Peoples Progressive Movement (PPM).

economy. Coupled with rising cost of living and a poorly performing economy, some voters appear to have gone back to favouring the current opposition, under whose tenure the economy was relatively stable. These dynamics have also seen a growing number of voters shift to the contingently loyal bloc, preferring a “wait and see” approach.

Figure 3: Estimate of Malawi’s national political settlement blocs, 2022



Source: Mwalyambwile (2022).

The complexity of the ToA is premised largely on why it was formed. Even though electoral alliances had previously been formed, the “50 plus one” court ruling made forming an alliance necessary, since it was likely that no single party would manage to amass a majority on its own. This may be the same reason the DPP and UDF made a similar electoral alliance – and are still close in the opposition bloc. Thus, the ToA was largely seen as a necessary coalition to win the 23 June 2020 fresh presidential election.⁵ It is understood that the two agreed on some thorny issues, such as Chilima succeeding Chakwera after the first five-year term, and equal (50/50) distribution between MCP and UTM of rents – in terms of appointments/positions and awarding contracts to party loyalists, among other things. These agreements have not materialised so far, and serious cracks have emerged in the ToA, prompting analysts to predict a divorce in the near future, making UTM become a contingently loyal bloc that might swing.

The Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) constitutes the main opposition bloc, together with their ally in the previous government, the United Democratic Front (UDF). The

⁵ These views and opinions were common among political analysts and were contained in the agreement signed by Lazarus Chakwera and Saulos Chilima. A controversial proposal in the agreement stated that one would rule in the first term and the other in the second, but subject to agreement by national conventions of their sponsoring political parties.

DPP is embroiled in internal conflict principally rooted in power contestation. Having lost power in the June 2020 presidential elections re-run, Party President Peter Mutharika openly said he was going to relinquish party leadership in 2023, when the party will hold its next convention.⁶ The party became divided into two factions. One was loyal to the party president and former country president, Peter Mutharika. The other faction was led by the DPP's regional vice president for the south, Kondwani Nankhumwa, who has been opposition leader in parliament since the June 2020 polls and commands support from the party's secretary general. The two factions are fighting for leadership of the party (Sabola, 2022). Nankhumwa has since lost a long court process and, consequently alongside, his position as regional vice president; and has been appointed as advisor to the party president. Speculations are high that he will form his own party!

It is alleged that MCP is fuelling this instability (to ensure a weak opposition bloc) by supporting Nankhumwa and in the process helping safeguard his position as leader of opposition in parliament. The infighting is inflicting self-damage to the party, as it is shifting focus away from rebuilding the party in readiness for the 2025 tripartite elections.⁷ An interesting possible scenario might arise if the two factions split after the 2023 DPP convention. This would increase permutations for possible opposition coalition blocs, something which could even become more accentuated if the UTM breaks away from the ToA as the 2025 elections approach. Whatever the eventual outcome, one thing is clear: it will further stretch Malawi's already broad-dispersed political settlement, with negative implications for increased public goods and services provision.

Malawian business owners of Asian origin are another powerful grouping in the political settlement and have long been associated with high-level government corruption and rent flows to the past and the current ruling regimes. They have been financing political parties and are key facilitators and conduits of rent extraction for ruling elites. They have been known to switch allegiance and "work" with whichever political party ascends to power. Of late, the Chinese are also making inroads into the rent extraction and distribution facilitation game. For instance, in the lucrative road construction sector, the Chinese have managed to take over the notorious rent extraction conduits of previous regimes.⁸ Some very wealthy indigenous Malawian businesspersons are also involved in political party financing and rent extraction and do wield considerable power through, for example, huge government contracts.

⁶ Nevertheless, there have been allegations that he prefers his nephew and former Reserve Bank Governor Dalitso Kabambe to take over the mantle, although there are possibilities one of the other senior party politicians from his faction might also succeed him.

⁷ In an apparent show of unity recently, all DPP members at the centre of the infighting attended a rally together. However, this was soon followed by more signs of division, as one faction accused the other of making new irregular appointments into the party's governing council.

⁸ Interview, prominent lawyer, February 2022; interview, investigative journalist, May 2022.

Another powerful group is social media influencers, who have become increasingly popular voices against corruption within the national political settlement. Meanwhile, bilateral and multilateral donors remain important actors. But their influence has markedly decreased following the “cashgate” scandal in 2014, when US\$ 32 million was stolen from government coffers (a significant share of which was apparently rents to the ruling party). Donors nevertheless continue to be the primary, if not sole, funders of civil society organisations (CSOs), which have increased significantly in number since 1994. Many of these newer CSOs have emerged from faith-based organisations (FBOs) – an issue that is as polarising as the rents. But their influence has been severely hindered by a lack of funding (national and local), dependence on donors and political interference.

Like other local government authorities (LGAs) in Malawi, the LCC has not been autonomous from national politics. As the capital city, Lilongwe is a key source of various forms of rents for national political elites, as discussed in the next section. But due to minimal fiscal decentralisation, LGAs are delegated relatively small amounts of revenue from central government. Consequently, elites have focused mainly on the national government as the site of large contracts for the entire country that enable access to big sums of money. Lilongwe can thus be seen as the “nerve centre” for national rent-seeking elites because it is the place where decisions are made for the whole country. Nevertheless, national elites have become increasingly involved in city-level politics, notably regarding land, as discussed in the next section.

2.3. Key relationships between the ruling coalition and Lilongwe city

With the national government headquartered in the city, Lilongwe is a key source of rents for politicians, since all major government contracts are decided there. Given Lilongwe’s centrality, a significant portion of the country’s elites live in the city. In the past, their main focus has been on the national political settlement, where they have provided political party financing and acted as conduits of rents for ruling regime elites since 1994. With minimal fiscal decentralisation, a large chunk of government procurements is done centrally. Procurement contracts are large and enable national elites to access great sums, which can then be pocketed for personal gain or redistributed in inequitable ways. The lack of fiscal decentralisation means that national elites are able to maintain a stranglehold on resource control and distribution in Malawi at large.

City-level politics are also important, not only because Lilongwe represents a major source of rents, but also because of the influence of national politicians within both the political and executive arms of the LCC.⁹ National elites have been known to influence city-level politics in various ways, but first and foremost through the mayoral election process. The mayor continues to be selected by elected councillors. The preference for this mayoral selection system is based on the idea that it is easier to influence 30

⁹ Around 8% of all public spending by local councils is made in Lilongwe (based on the 2018-2019 fiscal year) (National Local Government Finance Committee, 2023).

elected councillors than give the choice to the city's entire population. When the city council elections went in favour of opposition parties, mainly the Malawi Congress Party in 2005, the local government law was changed by national government in 2010¹⁰ to reduce the mayor's term from five to two-and-a-half years and also to have MPs doubling as voting members of the LCC and all other local councils in the country. A proposal for direct elections of mayors in 2022 was made, but the new minister, an academic who had supported the proposal, was relieved of his post within six months of appointment. The current mayor has become very powerful within both the political and executive arms of the LCC. He has demonstrated a keen interest in ACRC work from the beginning (as discussed in the last section), which can be leveraged to thwart potential reform blockers.

Working alongside powerful ruling urban regime figures, national elites have been known to influence past mayors, chief executive officers (CEOs), planning staff and members of the town planning council. One of the central reasons for this is that land is a significant resource in this settlement. The former mayor, together with a Malawi Congress Party (MCP) councillor and a former DPP councillor, are currently facing corruption charges for offering land to beneficiaries without following planning procedures.

National political elites have a vested interest in Lilongwe, given its large population size, which is now likely to be above one million, accounting for around 6% of Malawi's total population (NSO, 2019). It seems that the city's demographic importance positions it as a key presidential election vote battleground. Lilongwe has the largest number of registered voters of any city in Malawi. The MCP enjoys majority support emanating from the city's location in the Chewa tribe belt, where the party has its roots. During the 2019 disputed presidential election, Lilongwe voted overwhelmingly for the then opposition MCP party. However, there are sizeable opposition and contingently loyal bloc vote bases – the DPP and the United Transformation Movement (UTM), respectively – within the city. As a result of the court's "50% plus one" ruling discussed above, Lilongwe has become a key battleground for the main ruling and opposition blocs in national politics. Under Malawi's previous "first-past-the-post rule" for deciding presidential elections, ethnic and regional politics were sufficient to win the presidential elections. UDF won the 1994, 1999 and 2004 presidential elections, having lost the Lilongwe vote. Similarly, the DPP won the presidential election in 2014, having lost the Lilongwe vote. This appears to have now changed, with evidence of efforts by current ruling, opposition and contingently loyal blocs attempting to achieve a balance, so as to "please" various powerful groups across the country, which is very much aligned with Malawi's broad-dispersed political settlement.

¹⁰ In fact, for fear of repeat of the opposition dominating, local elections were stopped and could only be held after there was a change of president, following the death in office of Bingu wa Mutharika.

2.4. Lilongwe's place in Malawi's formal governance structure

As the capital and administrative centre, Lilongwe occupies a central place within Malawi's formal governance structure. Malawi held its first local government elections in 2000, following the adoption of the Decentralisation Policy and the Local Government Act in 1998. However, local elections were suspended in 2005 by the then ruling DPP, citing a lack of sufficient funds – although critics attribute the real reason to national politicians, who view local governments as unnecessary and a danger to national authority (Manda, 2014). Another reason is that nearly all councillors countrywide belonged to opposition parties. Malawi had no local councillors for almost a decade, until elections were reinstated in 2014.

During this period, the ruling administration under the late President Bingu wa Mutharika made amendments to the Local Government Act in 2010. Two amendments gave significant powers to the ruling regime to influence LGAs. First, MPs were co-opted into local government councils. Second, the Ministry of Local Government (MOLG) (through the minister) was given powers to appoint CEOs of urban councils. Despite the return of local councillors in 2014, these arrangements have not changed, allowing ruling regimes to continue to influence both the political and executive arms of the LCC.

There are multiple ways through which ruling national elites are able to exert influence over the LCC. First, the MOLG has the sole authority to hire and fire the CEO. Second, through its influence on the Local Government Service Commission (LASCOM) – which is responsible for recruitment to other LGA senior positions – the MOLG is able to influence all other executive appointments, including directors. The current antagonism between the political and executive arms of the LCC largely emanates from a feeling on the part of city-level politicians that executive positions are dominated by opposition appointees, who are bent on frustrating the ruling ToA development agenda for Lilongwe; a similar perception was held by the DPP in 2010. This view arises because although such executive appointments are not time bound, they do not coincide with election years, so incumbents may reflect the preferences of the previously dominant national regime. The MOLG has always been subject to direct political interference from ruling regimes able to appoint CEOs and directors based on patronage (ethnic or otherwise). Inevitably, the LCC's executive decisions are very prone to higher decisions (by the MOLG) that are sometimes driven by the political settlement exigencies. Urban elites and politicians have been known to use the MOLG to influence LCC decisions on resource distribution and "how and to whom". Decisions are thus highly dependent on the specific powers of executives and legislators prevailing at any one point in time, leading to elite conflict and frustration.

For the political arm of the LCC, the patronage element of the national political settlement has always been present in the council configuration. In the past, it has pitted ruling regime councillors against those from the opposition bloc. Council deliberations and decisions have always followed this divide (that is, policy follows patronage). Patronage at this level has resulted in key LCC contracts being awarded to

ruling regime politicians or their affiliates. An example is the security contract for guards at various LCC premises, including markets. During the DPP administrations, various other procurement contracts (for example, sanitary bins and grass-cutting) were awarded to either members of the ruling regime or connected businesspersons who sponsor politicians and political parties that require resources to maintain power. Ruling politicians also rely on personal rent-earning from businesses located in the city, as in the case of mini-bus operators and taxi stations owned by businesspersons linked to big politicians. Other large businesses located in the city are protected by politicians. For example, there is currently a court case on fuel import deals linked to major politicians.

2.5. The role of Lilongwe in Malawi's national development strategy

The national government decided to relocate the capital city from Zomba to Lilongwe in 1965, one year after independence. According to Potts (1985), the decision to relocate the capital was based on three motivations.

First, Zomba's location in the Southern region made it inaccessible to populations in the Central and Northern regions, given the narrow shape of Malawi's national territory. Lilongwe's location in the Central Region offered a number of advantages: it was centrally located and thus supported the government's desire to appear more accessible to the people, in contrast to the former British colonial administration; it was almost the same size as Zomba; and it was argued that the cost of relocation would be offset by the initial provision of services.

Second, Lilongwe's development was explicitly aligned with Malawi's regional planning agenda. The objective was to shift the capital to Lilongwe to provide a new growth centre that would strengthen the agricultural economy in the region and promote industry and commerce (Government of Malawi, 1971). The relocation of the capital was also intended to redistribute the benefits of urban development away from the Southern Region – where most of Malawi's population and infrastructure was (and still is) concentrated (due largely to the legacy of colonial investments in infrastructure and economic development) – towards the Central and Northern Regions.

Third, the newly independent government was (and still is) comprised of representatives from Malawi's three political regions (South, Central, North). At the time, the majority of representatives were from the Northern Region, which had the highest educational attainment levels during the colonial era. Relocating the capital to Lilongwe was seen not only to be in the interests of politicians, but also in the interests of the then president, Kamuzu Banda, who saw Lilongwe as a symbol of personal prestige. While the decision to relocate the capital was made in 1965, it was not relocated until 1975.

In response to urbanisation trends, the Malawi government adopted its first national urban policy in April 2019, with the aim of achieving sustainable urban development in the global context of the United Nations' New Urban Agenda. Among the policy priorities is to develop a national spatial framework to replace the National Physical

Development Plan (NPDP) of 1987, which is now outdated. One of the main objectives of the NPDP was to redistribute the urban population away from the largest cities towards small and intermediate urban centres. However, Malawi's urban hierarchy remains dominated by the four largest cities, led by Lilongwe, followed by Blantyre, Mzuzu and Zomba (Manda, 2013). Lilongwe's population has increased nearly tenfold over the last four decades, with a population of 989,318, based on the 2018 census (NSO, 2019), and an urban growth rate of 4% (UNDESA, 2018), as noted in the introduction.

Lilongwe's rapid growth has been accompanied by rising levels of urban poverty and inequality, manifested by the proliferation of low-income informal settlements, which accommodate around three-quarters of the city's population (UN-Habitat, 2011). Ultimately, Lilongwe's size and status as the capital city means that it is likely to remain a major growth centre. However, the rise of socioeconomic and environmental problems poses a significant threat to the city's current and future development potential.

2.6. Conclusion

The executive and political arms of the LCC have become heavily politicised following the amendments to the Local Government Act in 2010. These amendments were made in response to the domination of the LLC (and other LGAs countrywide) by opposition parties, which led MPs to be incorporated into councils as voting members, as discussed in Section 2.4. Another important amendment gave powers to the MOLG, which is controlled by national politicians, to hire and fire (and sometimes transfer) executive positions. When the LCC is dominated by the opposition bloc, ruling national elites can undermine the opposition's development agenda for Lilongwe by manipulating the executive arm.

Meanwhile, the ruling party can influence LCC decisions on resource distribution through patronage (for example, by funding projects only in the favoured councillors' wards), undermining collective public goods provision involving the preferential allocation of land, granting of planning approvals, delivery of services and awarding of contracts, among other important council functions. As the capital city, Lilongwe offers various opportunities for these and other rents (notably through the preferential allocation of land, awarding contracts to businesses with political connections, and staffing local service delivery committees with party supporters) to local and national political elites, many of whom live in the city. Allegations of corruption are rife within the LCC, which undermines the legitimacy of urban authorities in the eyes of the public. The amendments to the Local Government Act in 2010 have led to the current antagonism between the executive and political arms of the LCC and the fragmentation within the council, which is characterised by political conflict and overlapping mandates. LCC decisions are thus strongly influenced by the political grievances and patronage tendencies of the national political settlement, despite the existence of policies, standards and regulations.

3. City-level power balance and governance

The preceding section provided an examination of Lilongwe's political settlement and urban governance structure in the broader Malawian context. This section examines the power relations and power balance between key actors and blocs in the city's governance configuration, followed by an exploration of everyday politics influencing urban development at the sub-city level. It demonstrates the highly politicised and factionalised nature of the LCC and the consequences for the city's struggling development agenda.

3.1. Key actors and blocs and the distribution of power

Lilongwe's current city-level power configuration is strongly influenced by the lack of an opposition bloc within the LCC. Following the 2020 elections, all 27 councillors are from the ruling ToA. Notwithstanding this configuration, both the mayor and councillors (especially the latter) wield limited power and influence over urban development outcomes. Nevertheless, the mayor wields considerable power to influence certain decisions, as discussed below.

Formally, Malawi's mayoral positions are ceremonial (on paper, mayors do not have executive powers). This might change in the near future, given a recent proposition by the MOLG that Malawi should have directly elected mayors with some executive powers. Informally though, mayors are able to influence decisions of the council's executive branch. Mayoral powers largely emanate from their political party headquarters, which often issue instructions on "what has to be done or not" to both the mayor and top leadership in the MOLG. In such instances, the executive becomes powerless (in the face of the mayor), since executive staff are controlled by MOLG, which in turn is controlled by politicians, as discussed in Section 2.3. Because of the amendments to the Local Government Act in 2010, a mayor can only serve for two-and-a-half years if they do not toe the government line. On the other side of the council, the executive arm is weakened by the attitude of councillors, who consider a majority of executive staff to be opposition sympathisers who have overstayed in their positions. Nevertheless, the administration directorate is also considered very powerful in terms of its ability to "make things happen".

Councillors' limited powers are demonstrated in the various instances when their mandate has been undermined. Non-implementation of council resolutions is one of the main reasons for the current antagonism between the council's political and executive arms. There have also been numerous instances when the executive implemented decisions without the council's knowledge or resolution. Another serious allegation is that the executive arm alters or "waters down" council resolutions *ex post* and uses the changed resolutions as evidence for taking (or not taking) action that deviates from the politicians' intent. But because most employees hold tenured positions, politicians from the ruling party cannot replace the council's executive (except in instances where serious fault warrants dismissal). Politicians must instead wait for contracts to expire (considered to be equivalent to dismissal), including in the

case of the CEO, who is recruited via appointment. Because central government has direct powers over the CEO, the most recent CEO, who was appointed by the DPP, poses a major obstacle to ruling politicians from the opposition party.

Councillors' powers are further hampered by their tenuous relationship with MPs appointed to councils, as discussed in Section 2.4. Specifically, councillors are considered a threat to sitting MPs because they can be pressured to run for MP positions (if they are successful at service delivery) or may simply have the aspiration to do so. Aspiring to be a MP is logical, considering the high remuneration and privileges (such as car loans) attached to the office, while councillors can at best only access motorcycle loans. Therefore, the wards become hot political arenas for the entire five years' term.

Vested political interests further impede the ability of the LCC to fulfil its functions. For example, the council has been unable to collect revenue from institutions that are politically protected, including political party properties and military institutions that owe the LCC billions of Kwacha. The council has also been unable to regulate the development of land owned by national government agencies, including the Ministry of Lands, the Malawi Housing Corporation (MHC) and the Airports Development Limited (ADL), that disregard layout plans, as discussed in Section 3.3. Ideally, all land within the city boundary should be under the city council to ensure the consistent planning of settlements.

Another powerful grouping are civil servants, who comprise the majority of formal working-class employees. Civil servants wield power over (LGAs) through ensuring adherence to standards, regulations and policies. However, many standards, regulations and policies regarding critical urban development issues, including basic service provision, are either inappropriate or non-existent in Lilongwe, especially regarding informal settlements (UN-Habitat, 2011). At the same time, the LCC has become increasingly reliant on central government transfers/grants. While local revenue generation has been increasing since the 2017/18 budget, it fell dramatically between 2020/21 and 2021/22, likely due to the impacts of Covid-19 (Table 1). City councillors have established the ward development fund to support development interventions at the community level. But MPs who are also members of the council, following amendments to the Local Government Act in 2010, have introduced their own constituency development fund, highlighting the clientelism embedded in development processes within the city.

Table 1: Sources of LCC revenue, 2017/18-2023/24

Year funds received (millions of Malawi Kwacha)	2023/24	2021/22	2020/21	2019/20	2018/19	2017/18
Central government transfers	7,378.50	2,802.77	769.67	747.87	507.37	725.64
Other government transfers	-	11.53	111.34	4.10	-	-
Local revenue	9,387.12	4,038.38	7,113.19	3,712.47	2,994.73	2,635.49
Total	16,763.86	6,852.68	7,994.20	4,464.44	3,502.09	3,361.13

Source: Lilongwe City Council, July 2023.

Meanwhile, public utilities (for water and electricity), lack the capacity as well as workable guidelines for supplying services in informal settlements, where multiple service providers have emerged, as discussed in the following section. In the current set-up, the Lilongwe Water Board (LWB) and the Electricity Generation Company (EGENCO) are centrally controlled by national line ministries, although both are responsible for providing services to Lilongwe's residents. LWB is established as a public parastatal organisation, while EGENCO and ESCOM are registered as limited public companies operating at national level.

Local leaders have become another influential actor in the political and development space. Like other Malawian cities, Lilongwe has a dichotomy of traditional versus non-hereditary "town chiefs" (Cammack et al., 2009). The first group inherited chieftaincy from their ancestors and control all customary land. This group tends to be more common in rural areas and sections of the urban areas that have been incorporated by boundary extensions, where traditional norms and customs prevail, but does exist in cities, due to urban sprawl and the tendency for city councils to shift their boundaries. In urban and peri-urban areas, traditional chiefs continue to allocate land to people and private developers, which is permitted under the Land Act and Planning Act as well as under the Chiefs Act, but only after the CEO has provided written consent. Under the Land and Planning Acts, city councils should provide traditional chiefs with simple layout plans to guide new development, but many councils have failed to do so, resulting in unplanned sprawl (Manda, 2013).

The second group comprises non-hereditary "town chiefs" (commonly called "block leaders"). These may be (retired) civil servants, teachers, civil society leaders, heads of churches or businesspeople living in the neighbourhood. This group tends to be more

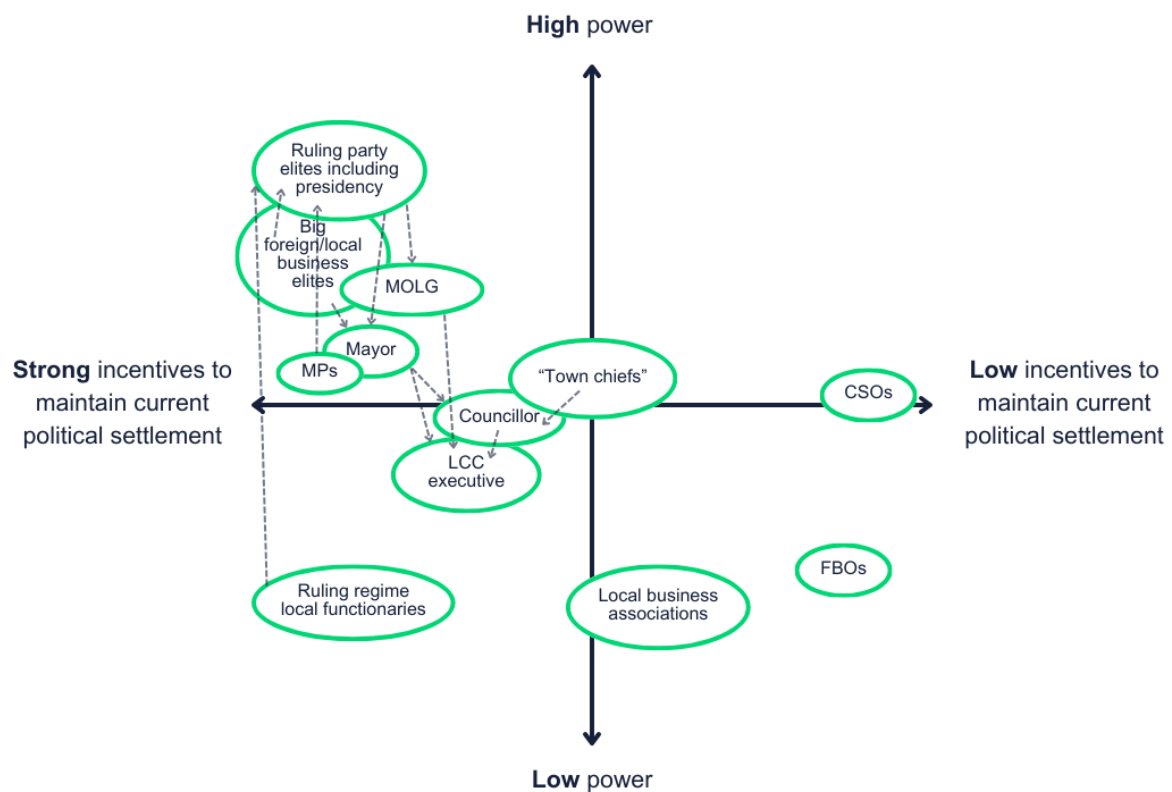
common in more established towns and cities where they have been elected by the community or appointed by the council (the latter is more common, as discussed below). They have been crucial for community mobilisation and other collective action efforts in response to various urban developmental challenges in Lilongwe.

“Block leaders” represent a de facto form of local authority and informally constitute the lowest level of city government. However, unlike traditional chiefs, block leaders do not have authority over customary land. Block leaders are highly politicised and contested, to the extent that each successive government has installed their own block leaders. In Lilongwe, some of the powers of block leaders have stemmed from their ability to mobilise communities to vote councillors in or out in upcoming local government elections. Consequently, incumbent or aspiring political officeholders are often afraid of making decisions that might antagonise block leaders, who are very influential in informal settlements, where an estimated 76% of Lilongwe residents live. While town chiefs represent a hereditary/non-hereditary dichotomy, these two groups are not necessarily unrelated. Many block leaders answer to traditional chiefs, so both forms of authority can coexist at the community level.

Other powerful groups in the city include ruling and opposition bloc party functionaries at the local level and various business groupings. Businesspersons are often closely associated with political elites, with the former often benefiting from favourable government contracts, as discussed in Section 2.4. Some of the informal trader associations, such as the Lilongwe Urban Vendors Association, are highly politicised. Leadership changes with each incoming ruling regime result in endless power struggles and infighting. This is not surprising, because being in a political office, unlike being a traditional chief, attracts competition. One of the clearest examples is the contestation in local water boards, which were introduced to manage water kiosks in informal settlements. When a new political party wins office following local elections, the composition of the local water boards will be changed by neighbourhood politicians to reflect the winning party, often leading to violence. The politics of the local water boards are highly contested, to the extent that politicians at higher levels have no interest in becoming involved.

Figure 4 maps Lilongwe’s main power actors according to their current political settlement standing. Dotted arrows indicate some of the main trajectories of influence used by city elites and other actors. The figure depicts further dispersion of key actors at the city level. This is in addition to Malawi’s broad-dispersed, competitive-clientelist political settlement at national level. One implication is that, in one way or another, all these actor interests have to “be taken care of”, in order to attain city-level development outcomes and remove development bottlenecks and blockages.

Figure 4: Key actors and power relations in Lilongwe



3.2. Everyday politics shaping development at the sub-city level

Malawi's national and Lilongwe's city-level political settlements have always and continue to impact the everyday operations of the LCC and its urban planning and development. The following case study provides insight into the internal dynamics of the LCC executive arm, the relationship between the political and executive arms of the council, and how this intertwines with the national political settlement. As can be seen, these dynamics have a major impact on planned strategies to improve council operations and service delivery.

Box 1: City rates collection – closure of MCP headquarters for non-payment

The biggest challenge facing the LCC is insufficient revenues to finance municipal service delivery. The LCC collects only 26% of potential available revenue each year. Consequently, in early November 2021, the LCC passed a resolution to embark on a city rates debt collection exercise for long overdue accounts. The MCP (main partner in the current ruling ToA) has debts that go as far back as 20 years in relation to their property – the national party headquarters in Lilongwe City centre. In a bold move, on 25 November 2021, officers from the LCC's commercial directorate sealed off the MCP national headquarters offices for non-payment of rates. Several other premises in the city were also closed. Through public media outlets, the MCP protested the closure and allegedly felt that supporters of the previous regime in the LCC had bad intentions.

Behind the scenes, powerful MCP national executive committee members (including the secretary general and director of youth – both members of the presidency inner circle) immediately sprang into action. They called several LCC directors, demanding an explanation. Surprisingly, officers from the commercial directorate refused to budge, insisting “they were simply doing their job – implement passed council resolutions”. All this was happening while the CEO was on leave (he also received calls from powerful figures). In the afternoon, the mayor drove to the MCP premises and gave keys to her driver, who opened the premises. It is alleged that two powerful directors within the LCC’s executive branch (both eyeing the CEO position) orchestrated the whole fiasco. The MCP itself had a long-standing complaint to government, seeking compensation for the damage caused to the building in the early 1990s, when the Malawi Army bombed the building. The MCP has persistently argued that they could not afford rates for a damaged building. The building was only rehabilitated in 2019. Further allegations were that some key people within MCP knew of the whole plot. Their actual targets were the CEO and mayor. They wanted to paint them in a bad light to the ruling regime, as “elements of the opposition who are working against government”, and so justify their removal. The CEO had routinely been described as a disciplined professional by various quarters. In the end, the whole city rates debt collection exercise lost its momentum, with very little improvement in the LCC’s finances, while the mayor and CEO have been replaced.

Everyday politics in Lilongwe have also become increasingly prevalent outside the LCC, with the escalating number of actors operating outside the formal governance arena in response to the widespread failure of top-down urban planning and service delivery, particularly in informal settlements. The prevailing planning system, based on the traditional “master plan”, was inherited from the British during the colonial era, but has changed very little, despite rapidly changing urban conditions (for a critique, see Watson, 2009). Most urban growth is unplanned and hence must be serviced retroactively, which is technically difficult (many services, such as piped water, require straight lines) and are costly. Meanwhile, basic services, notably water and electricity, are only provided to households who can afford a connection, so universal coverage is nearly impossible in the context of high levels of urban poverty and limited resources (Manda, 2009; UN-Habitat, 2011). Estimates indicate that out of Lilongwe’s total population, 10% have access to a piped water connection (either to the home or yard) and 3% have access to a flush toilet. Meanwhile, 22% of solid waste is collected by the LCC and less than 5% of the city is covered by sewers, most of which are concentrated in low-density areas inhabited by high-income groups (Manda and Gondwe, 2022).¹¹

Recent studies reveal the emergence of highly dynamic and hybrid arrangements for accessing basic services (such as water) formed through formal and informal negotiations within the city, often to the benefit of community elites (see Pihljak et al., 2021; Velzeboer et al., 2018). For example, there are numerous cases in informal settlements where kiosks provided by the LLWB or NGOs have led to governance

¹¹ For further details on Lilongwe’s services, see Section 4.3.

challenges associated with elite capture. Experience demonstrates that access to critical urban resources (including not only water, but also land, housing and other basic services) is increasingly the outcome of interrelated structural processes and everyday practices that produce and reproduce inequities in living conditions at the city and neighbourhood levels.

3.3. Conclusion

The political and executive branches of the LCC are locked into an antagonistic relationship that frustrates Lilongwe's urban development agenda. Ruling regimes exert influence over the mayor and senior officials in the MOLG (which has the power to make all executive appointments, including directors), who often receive direct orders from politicians at higher levels. Meanwhile, councillors have minimal power in instances when the executive arm implements decisions without the council's knowledge or alters council resolutions after the fact. Such decisions often reflect patronage and clientelist political priorities, rather than policies, standards and regulations. A key outcome is that informal dwellers have been able to attain a level of de facto tenure security without fear of evictions because local councillors view informal settlements as vote banks. But informal dwellers have been largely unable to attain development gains, due to a lack of political representation, which is bound up in a chronic lack of fiscal capacity. Most politicians tend to prioritise short-term projects – including those financed by the constituency development fund created by MPs and the ward development fund created by councillors – with immediately visible benefits for their ward constituencies, rather than prioritising long-term development processes. This has reinforced a view among politicians that they need not concern themselves with delivering public services, since they are unlikely to be re-elected anyway.

Civil servants are powerful actors in enforcing policies, standards and regulations, but many officials are underpaid and overburdened. In addition, many of the policies, standards and regulations intended to guide urban development are either unsuitable or absent, especially regarding informal settlements. Formal planning regulations have proven far too cumbersome and costly for many low-income households and profit-seeking private developers, leading to haphazard expansion. Complicating matters is the city's land ownership structure. Most land within the city is owned by national government authorities, including the Ministry of Lands, the MHC and ADL. This scenario makes it difficult for the planning authority to regulate urban development because land is not always allocated according to local plans. Further, the LCC has no power to go against national authorities, otherwise local officials risk being fired.

4. City of systems overview

In the previous section, we examined how the distribution of power in Malawi influences development and the prospects for developmental reform in Lilongwe; in this section, we add a more material dimension, analysing the systems by which various actors and agencies attempt to sustain and/or improve urban life. All of these “urban systems” depend on both physical infrastructure and human actors (but in more “social” systems, such as healthcare and education, humans play a more pivotal role in system functioning).

The partial dependence of all urban systems on physical infrastructure creates powerful constraints and path dependencies, and produces unintended (negative) externalities. We analyse how the externalities of systems (compounded by intersystem interaction¹²) and the scale of system failures/fragmentations add to the challenges that residents and enterprises face.

Since systems are governed and resourced by numerous human actors (formal or informal, public or private actors – but usually a combination of these), their functioning is impacted by the political settlement described above, as well as by ideas deriving from developmental paradigms like modernism and neoliberalism. This means that systems tend to allocate goods and services unevenly, and may be used to extract benefits and secure political advantage.

Eight urban systems were studied in Lilongwe: finance; food; energy; law and order; water; sanitation; waste; and transport. In this section, we examine how they function, how they support or hinder urban development, and how they may be improved.

4.1. Governance and contestations

Prior to multiparty democracy in 1994, there were fewer urban dwellers and there was less migration to manage, and stronger state institutions in place to meet development needs in Malawian towns and cities (Cammack, 2012). The urban situation began to change in 1994 with the rise of rural–urban migration and the subsequent population pressures placed on the newly elected local government structures (Manda, 2013). Since then, urban systems in Lilongwe have widely failed to reach the scale of demand in nearly all development domains due to four main factors: institutional factors involving incomplete decentralisation; political factors involving widespread clientelism and patronage; structural factors involving mounting urban poverty and informality; and demographic factors involving rapid urban growth, notably in peri-urban areas as sites of increasing deprivation. Like surrounding countries, Malawi has been slow to recognise the growing importance of urbanisation and its implications for local and national development. The first National Urban Policy was adopted in April 2019, so the national government is beginning to integrate a concern for urban development into its

¹² Complex problems in African cities often involve multiple city systems that interact with each other; we will capture intersystem interaction in our third concept of “urban development domains”.

policies and plans. By 2050, half of Malawi's population is projected to be urban (World Bank, 2016).

The central government claims that urban systems were decentralised to all local government authorities according to the Decentralisation Policy of 1998. But national line ministries have been reluctant to implement full decentralisation, claiming lack of capacity in the local authorities. Malawi went nearly a decade without local councils, which were suspended by national government between 2005 and 2014 (Ministry of Lands, 2015). To date, only waste management and sanitation have been devolved to the LCC, but these are still contested. Other systems have been partially devolved to the LCC, including some healthcare services and food markets, but the LCC lacks the resources to fulfil its mandates, which has led to public protests and conflicts with service providers, as discussed in Section 3.1.

The implementation of the Decentralisation Policy was undermined by the imposition of SAPs by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in 1981. SAPs led to a withdrawal of the state from a range of development functions, at a time when LGAs were meant to take on a stronger role. This sent many urban systems into a vicious cycle of decline, as discussed in Section 4.3. The withdrawal of the state from many aspects of planning and development, combined with the widespread shortcomings of the private sector (as acutely demonstrated by the poor state of Lilongwe's public transport system), has led to the emergence of numerous non-state actors (including CSOs, local leaders and a plethora of NGOs and external support agencies) in increasingly informalised systems of land, housing and service delivery. Since the LCC lacks the capacity to coordinate development actors centrally, Lilongwe's governance landscape has become increasingly fragmented.

Among the most contentious actors are the two groups of "town chiefs" discussed in Section 3.1. The first group are "block leaders" appointed by councils to mobilise voters. "Block leaders" do not have the authority that traditional leaders have over land, but they wield considerable power in communities, even though some government officials do not want to recognise their local authority (Cammack et al., 2009). The second group are traditional chiefs, who exert a major influence over urban and peri-urban land delivery. Many traditional chiefs allocate and sometimes sell customary land (not just to low-income households, but also to higher-income groups seeking to hoard land) without following layout plans, leading to unplanned sprawl. Politicians have also been known to allocate land to low-income groups and the middle class without following official procedures, in an effort to win the favour of voters, as observed in Area 49. While the LCC attributes informality to a lack of resources and to the role of traditional chiefs in land delivery, successive governments have maintained an ability to intervene and interfere (without regard to standards and regulations) in urban planning where politically desirable, as discussed in the next section. The LCC and the Physical Planning Department have not been proactive in attempting to achieve planned urban development, notably by failing to provide basic land use plans to traditional chiefs so they can guide customary land allocation, as provided for in the physical planning laws.

Most of Lilongwe's systems are siloed by sector-specific laws and policies that fall under national line ministries. These laws and policies are typically outdated and out of touch with the prevailing reality of urban poverty and informality. Meanwhile, the LCC remains heavily dependent on central government transfers and payments (which are seldom allocated according to the national budget), while the capacity to collect local revenue is limited, due to the disconnect between the municipal finance system and urban development. The LCC struggles to collect city rates, starving the city of critical resources. The limited finance available to ruling politicians has contributed to the heavy reliance on clientelism and patronage, which have led to interference and contestation in many of Lilongwe's systems, as the following examples demonstrate:

- City councillors have recently established the ward development fund to support development interventions at the community level. This was a response to MPs – who introduced the constituency development fund, and amended the Local Government Act in 2010 to make themselves become members of the council.
- Market committees have become politicised by ruling politicians, who use the committees as vote banks during campaigns, which began during the rule of President Kamuzu Banda (1964-1994). City officials are at the mercy of the market chairperson, who can engineer their removal from the market committee.
- The MDF took charge of law and order and assaulted police officers who were presumed to support the then ruling party during the political demonstrations that followed the announcement of the presidential election results in 2019. When new elections were held and won by the opposition, senior police and army officers were replaced, signifying the close links of the security regime to politics.
- Ward politicians have changed the composition of some water users' associations – responsible for managing water kiosks in low-income settlements – to reflect the winning party following local elections so that ruling party supporters can siphon user fees. Some neighbourhood services can thus be seen as part of the clientelist deal between ruling politicians and party loyalists, though most services are self-provided in the absence of sufficient revenue at the city scale, as discussed above. Where user charges are squandered by members of the water users' associations, kiosks have been closed by the LWB, leaving other actors to provide water through the construction of boreholes and wells, which are often contaminated due to the widespread use of dug out pit latrines.
- WDCs were established as the lowest level of formal local government to foster grassroots participation in urban development activities. But local politicians have politicised WDCs by appointing "block leaders" so they can mobilise votes during elections and address weaknesses in grassroots participation in urban development activities.
- The MHC embarked on the construction of around 250 rental houses in Lilongwe, as well as Blantyre, Mzuzu and Zomba, with financing from National Bank of Malawi. In Lilongwe, the MHC used reclaimed land to construct rental housing. The houses were completed in 2021 and occupied in 2022, but their launch was delayed by the newly elected government (which took office in 2020) so it could take credit for delivering on their promise of housing provision.

4.2. Colonial and apartheid planning legacies

In the colonial era, urban planning (referred to as “physical” planning in Malawi) was used to promote order, amenity, good sanitation and convenience. The role of planning was also broadened to separate blacks from whites on the pretext that blacks had unsanitary habits (non-white, indigenous residents were seen as more likely to spread disease) (UN-Habitat, 2010). To achieve this, colonial planning introduced bylaws that made native presence in urban areas illegal, including banning Africans from building private accommodation, and from decisionmaking and participation in the organisation or running of town councils. Moreover, only permanent buildings (which would be government-built) were to be allowed in the townships (Mwathunga and Donaldson, 2022).

Following independence in 1964, physical planning in Malawi was conceived as a local level activity and a tool for development control, and at the national level as a tool for national development. Early in the post-independence era, local physical development plans, namely urban structure plans and urban layout plans, were used as instruments of zoning and plot-and-road layouts, respectively – a replica of colonial modernist planning, where zoning was used for purposes of segregating classes and land uses, ensuring that no unsightly “native” settlements existed close to city centres, where the British lived. Of importance, Malawi’s first president Banda’s authoritarian rule, and ideas inherited from Lilongwe’s colonial modernist planning model and the apartheid planning model of South Africans planners, who aided in preparing Lilongwe’s first master plan in 1968, shaped the housing planning and development of post-independence urban Lilongwe, beginning in 1969 with the construction of Capital Hill, the site of central government (Potts, 1985).

The city’s first master plan envisaged Lilongwe as a garden city with modernist ambitions of order and functional zoning. In pursuance of this vision and in line with colonial and apartheid planning, neighbourhoods were designated for different income groups, allowing an emerging African middle-class and elite to gain access to serviced land and housing in much the same way white and expat residents would have done in the colonial era (Myers, 2003). Large swathes of the city were designated for monumental buildings, expansive green and open spaces in sprawling automobile-reliant, high-income neighbourhoods (Potts, 1985). New high-density housing was located away from the city centre and screened from the road by tree belts. However, with 75% of the population expected to reside in high-density areas, this reality continued to put pressure on vacant urban land. The garden city vision shaped Lilongwe as a city that excluded low-income residents, even displacing former rural residents from land where the city was built without providing them with housing opportunities, forcing them to settle informally on peripheral land outside the administrative areas and around “old town” (Englund, 2002; Mwathunga and Donaldson, 2022).

In the multiparty era, especially from 1994 to 2004, planning in Malawi was understood by both political leaders and residents to be an instrument used by the powerful to

thwart and obstruct development. The laissez-faire approach to planning that followed in the multiparty era saw planning controls being ignored, such that urban residents perceived multiparty democracy as the freedom to exercise control over any piece of land. Indeed, prior to elections, politicians saw the significance of access to urban land in the rather competitive electoral context of 1994 and pledged urban land in return for votes, as exemplified by the occupation of Area 49 by low-income earners and the middle class. The case of Area 49 is important because it demonstrates that it was not just low-income groups who sought assistance from informal processes of land and housing delivery. Currently in many informal settlements, numerous affluent groups are building housing and paying for building and planning procedures, pushing low-income groups further to the margins of the city (Mwathunga and Donaldson, 2022).

The 2010 Lilongwe master plan, drafted with the aid of Japanese technical consultants, represents the homecoming of master planning. Participatory processes were facilitated to prepare the plan, which involved numerous stakeholders beyond the LCC, including national government ministries and NGOs, traditional and political leaders, and utility companies responsible for water, electricity and telecommunications (Croese et al., 2023). The sheer number of stakeholders does not simply reflect the extent of buy-in and investment in the plan, but also the overlapping roles and responsibilities between national and local government for urban planning and development. Despite the degree of stakeholder involvement, implementation has been limited, not only due to limited resources, but also to the unilateral imposition of large-scale ad hoc investments by national government agencies in partnership with donors. The 2010 master plan has also been hindered by centralised political power dynamics following the 2010 amendments to the Local Government Act, which allowed MPs to become members of the council, as discussed in Section 2.4. LCC CEOs who supported planning innovations were fired by incoming national politicians (Croese et al., 2023).

Efforts to develop master plans in post-independence Lilongwe have been strongly influenced by transnational actors linked strongly to international planning ideas, including those rooted in the colonial and apartheid era (Croese et al., 2023). One of the key components of political settlements that is fundamental to explaining urban problems, including housing, is the embrace of certain ideologies, like modernity, which has continued to shape Lilongwe's development, despite contrasting starkly with the intractable reality of widespread urban poverty and informality.

4.3. Coverage, quality and risks

The implementation of SAPs accelerated the precipitous decline of Malawi's economy and living standards in both urban and rural areas (Chagunda, 2022). Malawi has qualified as a heavily indebted poor country (HIPC) and has participated in a series of National Poverty Reduction Strategies. At face value, Malawi seems to have made significant progress on urban poverty reduction over the last three decades, but the use of unrealistic poverty lines obscures the situation on the ground. According to the National Statistical Office (NSO), around a quarter of Lilongwe's population lives in poverty (Manda, 2013). However, this statistic does not square with the prevalence of

ill-served informal settlements, which are estimated to accommodate around three-quarters of the city's population (UN-Habitat, 2011).

Sanitation is especially poor in Lilongwe. A citywide sanitation assessment conducted in 2017 estimated that only 5% of the city's population was served by piped sewerage systems, while the remainder relied mainly on on-site sanitation systems (69% pit latrines and 25% septic tanks, respectively) (World Bank, 2017). Reading into these figures, it is important to consider that the groundwater on which boreholes and wells rely is likely to be contaminated, due to poor faecal disposal, leading to recurrent cholera outbreaks. Malawi is now facing the worst cholera outbreak in two decades. The current outbreak started in March 2022 and, by February 2023, some 43,000 cases (1,384 deaths) had been reported across the country, the majority from Lilongwe.

Most of Lilongwe's systems are dysfunctional and unreliable. The energy system is hampered by the frequent breakdown of machines at the production sites along the Shire River in the Southern Region, and along the distribution lines supported for the most part by wooden poles. These poles are highly vulnerable to strong winds, which have been exacerbated by the recent disasters linked to cyclone Idai. Long periods of power loss are frequently experienced by the city's population, sometimes for up to a week, but only among households with connections. Those households are mainly high-income, since the cost of metered connections is too expensive for most low-income dwellers, who rely primarily on biofuels for lighting and cooking in the absence of alternatives, such as solar and batteries, which are becoming more available, but not yet at scale. Coverage is especially poor in peri-urban areas where electricity infrastructure has yet to be extended. The high reliance on biofuels is a major underlying cause of indoor air pollution, especially in low-income households. The gendered division of household labour involving the responsibility for cooking means that women and children face heightened risks to health outcomes linked to respiratory disease. The poor state of affairs was exemplified when the electricity utility changed its motto from "power all day everyday" to "towards power all day everyday", in response to widespread public outcry.

Some systems have significant gaps in coverage. The majority of low-income households in informal settlements access water through kiosks (some constructed by the LCC and others by NGOs, churches and politicians), which have in recent years gradually been transferred to water users' associations. The water supplied by kiosks is generally unreliable, unsafe and more costly than piped connections (Manda, 2009). Meanwhile, current estimates indicate that only 22% of the waste generated in Lilongwe is collected by the LCC (LCC, 2021). Most households, especially in informal settlements, dispose of their waste in open spaces, on riverbanks and along roadsides. The burning or open disposal of waste is an environmental concern that exacerbates an already precarious sanitation situation and impedes proper drainage and flood management, leading to cascading infrastructure failures, epidemics and disasters in ill-served areas.

The proliferation of informal settlements with very poor housing and living conditions can be attributed in large part to Malawi's and therefore Lilongwe's reliance on master planning systems that were imposed by the British colonial administration, as discussed in the previous section. Most urban growth (Table 2) has been accommodated with little consideration for the native majority, as planning continues to restrict the distribution of serviced land and housing (notably in the areas of water, sewerage, solid waste management and all-weather roads) to formally planned, low-density residential areas where higher-income groups live.

Table 2: Lilongwe's population, 1966-2018

Year	Population
1966	19,425
1977	98,718
1987	223,318
1998	440,471
2008	669,021
2018	989,318

Source: NSO (2019).

Many informal settlements are being constructed in peri-urban areas, in the absence of affordable land and housing options within the city, as observed in Areas 51 and 56. Consequently, many of Lilongwe's systems have spread beyond the territorial control of the LCC. Meanwhile, the 2010 master plan continues to follow the principles of the garden city, which guided Lilongwe's initial plans discussed in the previous section. These principles have contributed to low-density patterns of formal urban development with potentially harmful socioeconomic and environmental impacts. Due to low density levels, less than 40% of the land within Lilongwe is physically developed, which has created opportunities for urban agriculture and enhanced food security. Low densities combined with mounting traffic congestion have increased commute times, especially for low-income groups in peri-urban areas. This is despite the deregulation of the public transport system in the 1990s, which was intended to increase competition among private transport providers, but has not improved transport services or brought prices down.

4.4. Conclusion

The findings from this section indicate that although policies and laws exist for most of Lilongwe's urban systems, nearly all underperform, due to population pressures, political interference, overlapping mandates, the division of sectors into silos, and

planning and governance inertias. Of particular concern is the continued use of outdated master planning systems that bias the distribution of many public goods to formally planned neighbourhoods at the expense of low-income groups relegated to informal settlements. In the absence of affordable land within the city, Lilongwe's development problem is being pushed to peri-urban areas where urban systems for public goods provision do not yet exist or are poorly established, resulting in environmentally and socially harmful effects, notably in the case of the public transport system.

5. Domain summaries

We have examined the political settlement and city systems; now, we analyse how these shape some of the development domains in Lilongwe. A development domain is a distinct field of discourse, policy and practice that has formed around a complex, inter-systemic development challenge in a city, in which various actors (political, bureaucratic, professional and popular) collaborate and/or compete for authority.

These development challenges usually fall under the remit of specific central and/or local government departments. In most cases, affected residents and civil society groups become involved in addressing them; experts (often constituting an "epistemic community") also get involved; and ruling elites may or may not get involved, depending on the opportunities that these domains offer for asset accumulation, rent extraction and electoral success (through the representation of ideologies, demonstration of state capability or manipulation of voters).

In each development domain, particular ideas, practices and systems interoperate in ways that either sustain or reshape the power configuration in the city and country. If we wish to change the way a domain's problems are framed and addressed, we need to understand its key actors and interoperating ideas, practices and systems. In this section, we generate such an understanding for the following domains: housing; informal settlements; nutrition, health and wellbeing (NHW); and micro, small and medium enterprises (MSME).

5.1. Housing

Over the last six decades, the Malawi government has followed different approaches to housing delivery. These approaches are a combination of direct state delivery and state partnerships with other organisations (through either policymaking or co-implementation).

The first approach involves the creation of traditional housing areas (THAs), which allow migrants in the city to build their own houses according to their own tastes and financial standing. Though initially a racially oriented housing policy, it was adopted by self-governing Malawi and, by 1963, 2,415 residential plots had been demarcated, with some allocated to low-income residents. It must be noted that the building of houses in THAs is based on the minimum building standards and regulations under the Public Health Act of 1948. Plot allocation is based on a "first come, first served" basis. In spite

of its success, the fundamental constraint remains the fact that demand far exceeds supply. For instance, by 1981, there were 35,000 applicants on the waiting list nationwide, with the rate of THA plot delivery being 600 plots per annum. Moreover, most low-income people find it difficult to pay ground rent to the city council – which means they are forced to sell their plots to rich speculators and move to informal settlements.

The second approach to housing development is state-led provision of housing, involving the construction of houses by Malawi Housing Corporation (MHC) targeting middle- to high-income groups, principally for public servants. However, owing to the worsening housing situation in the 1980s occasioned by SAPs, the MHC stopped housing development when the government failed to continue subventions. The “build and sell” policy introduced in the mid-1980s was far from successful, as the houses sold did not successfully finance the development of new ones.

The third mode of housing delivery involves the provision of surveyed plots with title deeds for construction of houses paid for by mortgage loans through the New Building Society (NBS). It is reported that by 2009, this scheme had provided only 1,300 loans, which is a small number compared to the projections at the time of tens of thousands. One critical challenge was that the many would-be clients largely shunned the loans because of high interest rates and experiences of seizure of houses from loan defaulters.

Fourth, and most recently, the current government intends to launch a national programme of informal settlement upgrading – though there has been no commitment in the national budget, as discussed in the next section.

The fifth mode of housing delivery, witnessed in the last decade, is joint ventures involving the state (through MHC), on the one hand, and private companies (largely Chinese construction companies), on the other. In 2012, the MHC went into a joint venture with Chinese-owned Henan Guoji Development Company Limited, to construct houses in Lilongwe’s Area 49 Sector 5, under “build and sell” and rental arrangements through pre-purchase housing development. The two partner companies were expected to construct 7,500 houses in Lilongwe, Blantyre and Mzuzu, with an investment of about \$600 million (K207 billion) in the project. Profits were to be shared 80% and 20% between Henan Guoji and MHC, respectively. However, the joint venture was tainted with contractual misunderstanding and subsequent termination of the initial contract. By the end of the first phase, only 106 houses had been constructed. In the end, the MHC reclaimed around 58 hectares of its land. The project has also faced issues of quality and in February 2023, part of the complex was destroyed by strong winds.

The sixth mode of housing delivery in Lilongwe is state-provided rental housing, largely through the MHC. In view of the unsatisfactory performance of the joint venture model of housing finance and development, between 2017 and 2022, the MHC embarked on the construction of about 250 rental houses across the four cities of Blantyre, Lilongwe,

Mzuzu and Zomba, with financing from National Bank of Malawi. In Lilongwe, the MHC used part of the reclaimed land from Henan Guoji to construct houses purely for rental housing. These houses were completed in 2021 and occupied in 2022. However, the launch of the project was delayed to buy time so that the new government (taking up office in 2020) would be able to take credit for delivering on their housing promise. This is a clear of example of how politics interferes with housing delivery.

In terms of governance, housing includes formal and informal actors and institutions. At the national level, the Ministry of Lands is mandated with housing and urban development, but this is not limited to policy formulation; it includes infrastructure development on public land and direct housing delivery for the staff of government departments, such as health, education, police and the army. The Malawi Housing Corporation (MHC) established in 1964 has been a major institution in housing provision, as well as offering land parcels for housing development. The MHC was the successor (and expanded to national level) of the Soche Housing Authority established in 1954, which was operational in Blantyre city.

Over time, the MHC has faced numerous challenges, including inadequate funds, high building costs and encroachments on land that it owns. The effects of SAPs in the 1980s led to the withdrawal of government financial support, leading to reduced real incomes. The MHC also suffered from increasing costs of building materials and a lack of alternative sources of income, such as loans. With the coming of the Local Government Act in 1998, some functions of the central government were transferred to LGAs under decentralisation: city councils took over responsibility for the administration of THAs from the MHC, and were also charged, through their town planning and housing departments, with responsibilities for estimating housing need and designing programmes and projects for low-income groups. At present, the local authorities seem to be ill-prepared for these tasks and need support, financially and technically.

Besides the public sector, there have been several NGOs involved in housing provision in Malawi, among them Habitat for Humanity (HfH). Since 1986, HfH has been providing low-cost houses using a revolving fund that provides interest-free housing loans. HfH acquires land from the government, while city councils are tasked with demarcating plots and access roads. Beneficiaries are loaned bags of cement and corrugated iron sheets to construct houses. HfH has managed to construct 1,405 houses in the four major cities and several other urban centres, including over 300 homes in Lilongwe.

SAPs had major impacts on the housing sector, especially by creating a role for private finance and private property developers to enter the housing market. Private financial institutions, including banks, have been enabling housing provision through financing. Until 1989 and before financial liberalisation, the NBS was the sole financial institution offering mortgage loans. Now there are more financial institutions offering the same; however, high interest rates and the need for collateral has limited access to loans. Several private property developers have also taken part in housing provision in

Malawi. For instance, Press Properties, as a subsidiary of Press Corporation, were building houses for sale as well as rentals and selling serviced plots.

Meanwhile, international organisations have become critical players in urban governance, especially in housing. Chief among them is the World Bank, whose first project in 1983 was carried out together with the Malawi government, the MHC and the NBS. The MHC allocated plots and guided housing construction, while the NBS provided loans. The project aimed at developing a wide range of housing options in Malawi through improved technology, as well as providing houses for low-income households, in order to phase out subsidies on the existing housing stock of the public sector. Other World Bank projects included the site and service programme in Lilongwe's Gulliver location (opposite the national soccer stadium in Lilongwe) with a loan from the World Bank under the Local Government Development Project (LGDP), aimed at providing serviced high-density plots for low-income residents, some of them politicians. However, low-income communities were displaced by middle- and high-income communities, because the plots became too costly for poor urbanites and the city council wanted to recover their money as well. Experiences of the site and services scheme (THAs) reflect the intersection between politics and housing, whereby middle- and high-income households, supported directly or indirectly by national elites and politicians, capture housing and rents at the expense of poor people. Other global actors include the German Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau (KfW), which contributed to housing provision in Malawi through funding for the Secondary Centres Development Programme (SCDP), where the Malawi government carried out infrastructure and facilities development as well as upgrading informal settlements.

Traditional leaders represent another critical institution of urban governance in Lilongwe. The Chiefs' Act in Malawi bars traditional chiefs from exercising jurisdiction in urban areas like cities, towns and municipalities without written approval from the local authority. Despite this, many traditional leaders are involved in land administration in terms of selling land to developers. Furthermore, no such written authorisation has ever been given to traditional chiefs, in spite of the legal provision, because city councils have instead preferred to work with "block leaders", who have no control over land.

The governance of Lilongwe's housing domain is represented not only by a multiplicity of actors, but also by multiscalar actors: global and local; formal and informal; public and private; state and non-state actors. This leads to variegated governance arrangements that create tensions between central government and city governments over housing mandates and jurisdictions. Also, variegated housing governance creates liminal spaces between the formal and informal governance arrangements; these spaces provide room for national and political elites to manipulate and exert political influence within the housing domain.

It is equally important to note that although the LCC has jurisdiction over urban land, analysis of the housing production chain reveals its dispersion across multiple institutions (such as the MHC, water boards, ESCOM). It is largely the planning and development control functions where the city has potential to exercise authority –

although evidence suggests that it lacks the capacity to do this fully. Consequently, informal mechanisms seem to have taken over, especially in land acquisition. Moreover, the multiplicity of actors and consequent fragmentation of housing delivery on different land parcels have led to confusion and conflicts. Plans are donor-driven, whereby international actors are met with unclear expectations from local actors, such as local authority officials (for example, JICA funded the Lilongwe master plan of 2010; UN-Habitat developed the Housing and Urban Profiles). Finally, although urban plans are found in councils, the lack of any meaningful planning makes decentralised local administration more of a myth than a reality. Decisions are frequently made by central government, through either the Ministry of Lands or the Ministry of Local Government. The situation not only creates confusion in terms of mandates, but also creates an opportunity for politicians to benefit from this lapse in governance.

In summary, the government has adopted a number of approaches to deliver housing to different income groups over time. But none of these approaches have been able to reach scale successfully, due to a combination of factors, notably:

1. The susceptibility of low-income housing schemes to elite capture (including by ruling politicians);
2. The impacts of structural adjustment programmes on local government and poverty;
3. The need for collateral to access loans and high interest rates (thus making mortgages unaffordable to most low-income households);
4. The interference of politicians in housing delivery; and
5. The widespread failure of the formal planning system.

5.2. Informal settlements

The introduction of multiparty democracy in 1994 saw the first national election on 17 May of that year. National elections positioned Lilongwe as an important political battleground, given the size of its population (currently just under one million) and location in the Chewa belt, which is the traditional root of support for the ruling MCP. However, there are also large numbers of supporters for the opposition bloc within the city, as discussed in Section 2.2. The importance of Lilongwe in national elections has motivated politicians to adopt a *laissez-faire* approach to urban planning and development control in relation to informal settlements and areas zoned for high-density housing, where politicians have sought to guarantee the delivery of land and housing to low-income groups and the middle class in return for votes. The occupation of land in Area 51 in the 1990s by low-income residents typifies this form of clientelism (Box 2). Informal settlements have typically avoided the threat of eviction, yet have not received much government support (national and local) for urban development, despite the establishment of grassroots structures for participation in local development activities, as discussed below.

Box 2: Characteristics of Area 51 (Mgona)

Mgona is a typical squatter settlement that emerged in the early 1980s in response to growing demand for affordable land and housing among lower-income groups. Most residents are industrial labourers working in Area 28 and 29. Mgona, which is part of Area 51, is located near the northern edge of Lilongwe on land designated for industrial development. The neighbourhood now has a population of around 15,000 and is characterised by diverse housing conditions (classified as temporary, semi-permanent and permanent) and tenures (including freehold, leasehold and customary). Housing and living conditions are largely informal and of poor quality. Like other neighbourhoods in the city, public services, such as water and electricity, are supplied to only those households that can afford a connection. Consequently, low-income households, which predominate in much of the neighbourhood, must rely on alternative means of accessing services, mainly through self-provisioning. Variations in housing types, tenure systems, service coverage and income levels represent a particularly complex set of needs that the LCC has so far been unable to effectively address through formal planning and development processes.

Informed by: Manda (2009) and Kumbikano (2022).

Four years after the first national election, the Local Government Act of 1998 established city and town councils as the unit of local government. Decentralisation reforms also established structures for community participation in the form of village development committees and later ward development committees (WDCs), which are comprised of neighbourhoods or blocks defined according to physical features, such as roads and rivers, or according to zoning in cities. Their functions include identifying and prioritising community needs so that they can be communicated to the LCC for possible implementation funding amounting to K335 million in the 2023/24 city budget. WDCs are inadequately capacitated and most committee members lack understanding of their roles. The WDCs are chaired by the ward councillor and appear to be politicised, becoming a tool for rewarding party followers. “Block leaders” have also been installed by councils to mobilise communities to vote, even though they are in bitter conflict with traditional leaders, who are being forced out of their *ex officio* roles as members of WDCs within the city. Traditional authorities (TAs) nevertheless continue to play key roles in land allocation under customary law, often leading to conflicts with the LCC. The role of the central government and national leaders in this conflict is ambivalent. On the one hand, the TAs are chastised, yet on the other hand, they are formally recognised through monthly wages and government identification cards.

While low-income inhabitants have individually been able to informally (and sometimes formally) access land and housing within the city, they have found it difficult to develop relationships with the LCC as an institution, since the council tends to prioritise settlements that are better off, while arguing that there are too few resources to address development needs in informal settlements (Refstie and Brun, 2016). In this context, low-income groups have largely been unable to influence the distribution of urban resources through the election system.

Despite democratic reforms, political representation at the community level is still lacking in Lilongwe, especially in informal settlements. In a bid to improve the participation of communities as part of the decentralisation of urban development activities, the government, through the Local Government Act, introduced “block leaders” to replace traditional chiefs in all urban areas, as mentioned above. However, traditional chiefs remain major land holders within Lilongwe, where customary land markets provide more affordable channels for land acquisition than the formal land administration system. As land values continue to climb in and around the city centre, low-income groups are increasingly accessing land (through allocation and buying from initial occupants) in peri-urban areas, where land is held by chiefs under customary law, leading to unplanned housing development and sprawl.

Informal settlements are slowly getting self-organised for their own development. In the settlements under study, there are experiences of community members formulating community development plans, establishing community managed funds and engaging with local authorities (co-production). There are signs that the trend is towards co-production, as noted. Institutions, such as UN-Habitat, the Tilitonse Foundation, Oxfam, Community Organisation and Development (CCODE) and the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace (CCJP), have been instrumental in supporting the LCC to set up participatory structures at the community level. These structures are important, since informal settlements are governed and managed by a multitude of actors, including public sector actors, CSOs (including NGOs and community-based organisations (CBOs)) and the private sector, as mentioned above. Among the most powerful, though least effective, actors is the LCC, which is responsible for housing, land allocation and basic service provision, but largely fails to deliver benefits to low-income groups.

Several change pathways to upgrading informal settlements involving existing initiatives taking place in the city have been identified. Among those with the most potential is the National Slum Upgrading Programme (NSUP), which involves a coalition between the Ministry of Lands (and Department of Urban Development), LCC, CCODE and the Malawi Homeless Peoples Federation (MHPF). This coalition is working together to pilot the NSUP in Lilongwe. The programme seeks to improve the lives of low-income groups through the delivery of new low-cost housing (greenfield), home improvements (in situ upgrading), provision of basic services and infrastructure and livelihood opportunities. Through advocacy, the government of Malawi has already provided a grant of land (12 hectares) and made a cash contribution of K40 million (roughly \$2.4 million USD) to kickstart community engagement activities in the 2022/2023 financial budget. The government has also made an undertaking that the 2023/2024 annual budget will consider infrastructure development for informal settlements. This being an emerging coalition, there are critical issues that partners have to consider in the long run, including financing major infrastructure deficits, ensuring the affordability of housing units and selecting people on the basis of need.

In summary, most urban growth in Lilongwe has been accommodated in informal settlements. This is due not only to a lack of financial and technical capacity (which is

commonly given as the main reason for planning failure), but also due to the political motivations among ruling politicians who have been permissive of informal housing construction in exchange for votes. While many informal dwellers have been able to achieve de facto tenure security, most have so far been unable to get their development needs met through the election system, due to a lack of political representation. Low-income communities are taking action on informal settlement upgrading through an emerging coalition, but whether the political will of the LCC will translate into the required funds remains to be seen.

5.3. Health, wellbeing and nutrition (HWN)

Poor health and low nutrition have long been realities for many of Lilongwe's residents, with Malawi historically suffering from acute shortages of food and a double burden of malnutrition with limited access to primary healthcare services (for physical, mental and social wellbeing), and with the city failing to reframe its political priorities to suit its changing built environment in the wake of rapid urbanisation. This study sought to understand the state of health, nutrition and wellbeing among low-income groups in the city, as well as their and other stakeholder and decisionmaker perspectives on the potential barriers to, and drivers of, improved health and wellbeing, with a focus on the factors limiting and enabling healthy diets.

The concept of *healthy diets* seemed to be of interest to, and relatively well understood by, research participants, but not to be their central priority for discussion. Much of the focus of discussion returned to primary healthcare services and their experiences with these, and the lack of quality water and sanitation services. Key findings are as follows:

- It appears that community members are well conversant with the idea of healthy diets, but have differential means to act on this knowledge, as healthy food groups are either not available at market or unaffordable to them. Among the major food-related problems are lack of affordable processing and packing materials, leading to the loss of fresh fruits and vegetables; and intermittent electricity blackouts and inadequate infrastructures, such as cold rooms, leading to high post-harvest losses of nutritious foods. Problems associated with weak regulatory frameworks on standardisation, testing and low enforcement of bylaws have exacerbated the availability of unhealthy foods and drinks in the supermarkets.
- The cost of water provision infrastructure is prohibitive in many cases. Most of the communities consulted depend on central water "kiosks" in the neighbourhood, built by the LWB, and which tend to be managed by a local community member who charges a fee. The water access is also intermittent at the kiosks, increasing uncertainty about when there will be water. Improvements to water infrastructure by landlords come with rent increases, which can further undermine individuals' choices and agency.
- There is poor sanitation around households – both solid waste and sewage – leading to waterborne diseases and a lot of non-communicable diseases, for which health service provision is limited. Some communities have central sanitation facilities, but lack of facilities means open defecation is still practised.

Additionally, visiting the facilities or finding secluded areas to defecate poses safety risks for many.

- There was consensus among those consulted that the government at all levels has conceived well-framed policies to support healthy diets, but may not effectively implement or enforce them. However:
 - The ideas shared by participants about improvements to healthcare tended to focus on primary health services as the major lever for change. Yet, there was also an emphasis on improving water and sanitation access, which is a secondary determinant of health outcomes. This suggests that the political and community-level connections between health, water and sanitation need to be made clearer, as well as the coordination between government ministries.
 - The ideas shared by participants about food were similarly focused on production and availability of food, with limited reference to the whole food value chain, and potentially stronger drivers of food insecurity, such as affordability. In addition, participants demonstrated minimal understanding that urban form (particularly in dense informal settlements) would limit certain food-related practices, such as agriculture, traditional cooking or storage practices. What this suggests is that the so-called well framed policies may be framed around the wrong political outcome, or may fail to account for urban food system dynamics.
- There is clear fragmentation between the government entities and other actors responsible for, or working to improve, health and nutrition outcomes. The LCC, despite being well placed to coordinate policy and implementation in the city, does not have any control over management of health and nutrition issues. Health and nutrition are absent in the current Lilongwe Strategic Plan (2020-2024), making it difficult for the council to budget for any food and health interventions. Most health and nutrition activities are left in the hands of NGOs. The LCC has no oversight over the entity responsible for water provision, yet is charged with shaping water policy at the local level.
- While reform coalitions exist around health, water and sanitation issues, typically led by NGOs and engaging national government, there remains limited evidence that they are driving political systems change. This could be due to lack of resources in the public sector or political lock-ins that refuse to reallocate responsibilities and resources to meet them.
- Reform coalitions in the food sector are not apparent, particularly at the local level, with much activity around food remaining in the food-aid sector, and firmly focused on production. A broad “food systems” mandate is not evident among national ministries, and more work is needed to advocate and demonstrate that mandates around planning, economic development, public health and more can contribute to food and nutrition outcomes. With affordability of food being the main barrier for uptake of healthy diets, a focus on livelihoods generation and (to a lesser extent) reducing food loss and waste holds the greatest potential to improve diets. Another major issue facing the generation of sufficient food supplies (notably of maize) is the cost of fertiliser and the extent of rainfall, both of which represent existential threats to food security nationwide.

Our key proposal for improving diets towards better health and wellbeing outcomes for communities, is to empower the LCC with a health and nutrition coordination office that

would be responsible for convening the disparate actors working in the space, assessing the available resources and collectively designing policy and implementation approaches. This coordination role would be charged with (i) improvement of institutional coordination for policy implementation, and particularly provision of effective extension services on nutrition; (ii) translation of existing policy instruments and available knowledge on nutrition into practice; and (iii) linking organised city communities to existing financing opportunities in the city such as National Economic Empowerment Fund (NEEF).

In summary, urban nutrition issues in Lilongwe tend to be attributed to food production and primary healthcare failures, with aspects of the built environment, notably the poor state of water and sanitation in densely populated informal settlements, key secondary determinants. More attention needs to be paid to the socioeconomic and political economy factors influencing access to basic environmental services, as discussed in the first two domains of housing and informal settlements. There is a need for an approach to urban health generally, and urban nutrition specifically, that regards urban living conditions as a key aspect of Lilongwe's health system.

5.4. Micro, small and medium enterprises

MSMEs make a significant contribution to the national economy. According to the World Bank, it is estimated that MSMEs contribute 40% of Malawi's gross domestic product (GDP) and 24% of employment, and that 21% of the country's adult population derives their livelihood from the sector. The contribution made towards employment is very substantial in a country that is predominantly agrarian, with low levels of industrialisation and tertiary sector production. Even though 75% of the labour force in Lilongwe is employed, many of these jobs occur in the informal sector wherein household microenterprises (HMEs) are included.

This domain focuses on the urban spaces in which HMEs operate and carry out their activities. These spaces include neighbourhoods – that is, residential areas where low-income households live and work in HMEs – as well as districts – that is, spaces of economic activity where HMEs and other, larger enterprises operate. The main actors in this domain are the HMEs, which are divided into two categories: opportunity entrepreneurs and survivalist entrepreneurs. The focus of this report is the opportunity entrepreneurs, who start their business after they have identified a legitimate business opportunity and plan for growth, unlike the survivalist entrepreneurs, whose goal is to provide basic necessities for their families.

Aside from the HMEs, this domain's key actors are community savings and loans groups (CSLGs), savings and credit cooperative societies (SACCOs), banks, NGOs and the government. The CSGs service both categories of entrepreneur, since they have much more flexible lending terms than the commercial banks and are therefore a better fit for those enterprises that operate informally. Conversely, the SACCOs are more formal than the CSLGs, but still more flexible than the commercial banks. These three are financial institutions to which the HMEs have access. The level of access

they have to these institutions depends on the size and financial capacity of the entrepreneur. NGOs, especially those whose mandate focuses on development of entrepreneurship in Malawi, offer financial opportunities and a capacity building platform for the HMEs, albeit at a smaller scale than government initiatives, such as the NEEF and the Malawi Agriculture and Industrial Investment Corporation (MAIIC).

These HMEs do not exist in a vacuum, as they are constantly interacting with city systems in their day-to-day activities. One of the key systems is the transport system, to move their goods from one place to another, whether from their supplier to their place of business or from their place of business to their customers. Lilongwe's primary mode of transportation is concentrated in the public sector. Prices for a route are typically the same across operators, a result of market conformity; however, operators are free to adjust their own prices in response to fluctuations in fuel prices, which are key cost drivers. This means that transportation costs rise along with the rises in fuel, thereby increasing the cost of production and reducing profit margins for the HMEs. In addition to high financial costs, the increase in vehicle operators in the county has brought with it traffic congestion, which results in high time costs, due to time spent in transit.

HMEs also interact with water and energy as significant systems. These utilities are provided by the government through the water board and a combination of ESCOM and Electricity Generation Company (EGENCO). While there has been progress in the provision of these services, a majority of citizens do not have access. The water board has introduced kiosks, in an attempt to mitigate the access problem for HMEs, and this has presented an opportunity for the HMEs both to have access to clean water for their businesses, but also to generate extra income through the running of the kiosks. However, the water supply to the kiosks may fail, resulting in difficulties for HMEs that depend on supplies of water.

The electrification challenge hinges mainly on limited access and inconsistent supply. The government of Malawi has banned the use of charcoal, mostly used for cooking, and kerosene (which most use in lamps), and the majority of HMEs are living without access to electricity. This largely impacts those who produce food as their business, since without access to refrigeration, they usually have to ensure that they produce only enough for the day. This presents both a challenge and an opportunity for business. The government is also encouraging the use of alternatives to charcoal in its green energy mandate, which is another possible opportunity for HMEs to exploit through, for example, organising into groups and accessing credit from NEEF.

The interactions between HMEs and city systems present both challenges and opportunities for change. However, their ability to take full advantage of the opportunities is hampered by the developmental context. The challenges they face include:

1. Inadequate programme implementation capacity of government agencies, due to their limited capacity to manage and administrate the funds pumped into such initiatives and the politicisation of such initiatives;

2. Lack of bargaining power arising from fragmentation of the HME sector, which precludes collective action/voice to push for policies that support it;
3. An exclusive financial environment that favours larger firms, due to high lending rates and stringent collateral requirements;
4. Weak infrastructural services, which are plagued with inefficiencies arising from the poor administration, political interference, corruption and rent-seeking tendencies of ruling regimes;
5. Lack of integration of financial and business skills in the formal education system; and
6. Efforts to clear the city of informal livelihoods, such as street vending.

To address these challenges, the study proposes strengthening existing alternative sources of finance, specifically VSLAs for entrepreneurs, and using these platforms for collective economic and political action. These VSLAs would then be linked to SACCOs which offer trainings and create a platform that could potentially be used as a springboard for participation in policymaking.

In summary, MSMEs represent a significant source of livelihoods, with HMEs playing particularly important roles in informal neighbourhoods where many low-income earners live and work. The findings highlight the importance of financial institutions (notably savings groups) in providing flexible access to loans to support business activities. The findings also indicate the multiple interconnections between HMEs and urban systems (notably public transport, water and electricity) and the impacts on productivity and associated costs. There is thus a need to understand the built environment (and the institutions that shape its quality and distribution) as central to ensuring that people can lead healthy and productive lives, especially the growing proportion of households on low incomes.

5.5. Conclusion

The main finding from the domain studies is that although the LCC is among the most important development actors, given its mandates in urban planning, land administration and aspects of public service delivery, it is one of the weakest and least accountable, due to a combination of political-economic factors: (a) a chronic lack of resources, owing to the country's small economy combined with inadequate transfer payments and limited local revenue generation capabilities; (b) the reliance of ruling politicians on clientelism and patronage to mobilise voters and thus maintain office; and (c) the continued use of outmoded master planning systems that exclude the low-income majority from accessing public services, which are almost wholly skewed towards formally planned neighbourhoods. What has resulted is a local governance vacuum, in which non-state actors have emerged to address basic development deficits, concentrated mostly in low-income informal settlements, in an increasingly fragmented actor landscape. An emerging coalition seeking to support informal settlement upgrading is a promising space for reform, but it is unclear whether the required resources will materialise, due to chronic fiscal constraints, as elaborated in the following section.

6. Overarching analysis

This report has shown how national and city-level politics, urban systems and particular configurations of actors, agencies, ideas and practices have shaped development in the domains of housing; informal settlements; nutrition, health and wellbeing; and micro, small and medium enterprises in Lilongwe. The holistic analysis presented in this paper enables us to identify the most pressing developmental problems in Lilongwe, and the challenges that will likely be encountered in efforts to solve them in an equitable and (environmentally and fiscally) sustainable way. In these concluding sections, we sum up the main developmental problems, and propose suitable ways of addressing them in light of the described challenges, with a focus on informal settlement upgrading. The final section draws out the implications for research and reform, with the aim of enhancing the capability of the LCC to achieve more equitable and sustainable development outcomes in partnership with non-state actors, notably CBOs and their local support NGOs.

6.1. Political-economic challenges facing urban governance and planning

Following the introduction of multiparty democracy in 1994, Malawi's political settlement became mired in a "competitive clientelist" struggle among relatively matched, though frequently unstable, ethno-regional coalitions vying for electoral victory (O'Neil et al., 2014). The victors typically reward (and try to hang onto) their own supporters through the distribution of patronage and personal clientelist benefits. Common distribution channels include granting planning approvals, allocating land, awarding government contracts, capturing user fees (as in the case of water discussed below), and siting public facilities (such as boreholes, schools and health clinics) in particular neighbourhoods. This form of clientelist politics is evident in other democracies, but the key difference in Malawi seems to be the impact of its small economy, pervasive poverty and acute lack of public finances on the relative significance of corruption and clientelism. In addition, what is distinct about clientelism in Lilongwe is its cosmopolitanism, which creates factionalised divisions within society that weaken the ability of individuals to establish organisations that are capable of benefiting wider groups. What has resulted is a system in which politicians constantly wrangle with one another in a competition over the scarce resources required to maintain power. The lack of resources undermines local state building, which concomitantly limits economic growth and perpetuates the existence of weak formal institutions in a vicious cycle reinforced by Malawi's inherent structural weaknesses, as discussed further below.

Since 1994, ruling politicians have found it difficult to provide enough serviced land and housing to proactively accommodate the city's rapid growth, which has occurred mainly in informal settlements. To date, THAs have only served as a solution to rapid "legal" housing for low-income groups, and have ultimately failed to reach the scale of demand, due to an acute lack of funds combined with limited policy support for affordable housing, not only for low-income groups, but also for the middle class, who

have invaded THAs in the absence of alternatives (Pennant, 1990; UN-Habitat, 2010). Consequently, residents, especially those on low incomes, have been increasingly pushed to new informal settlements in sprawled locations controlled by traditional chiefs, who have become powerful actors in housing and land management, and thus in society and governance, as discussed below.

It is important, however, to appreciate that the growth of informal settlements has a long history that can be traced back as far as 1979, when the British withdrew from the housing sector after low-income housing in Area 47 funded by the UK government was demolished to make way for higher-income residential enclaves deemed by the regime of Kamuzu Banda to be more befitting of Lilongwe's image as a capital city. At the time, there was also a fuel crisis, which led to economic challenges that persisted into the 1980s, especially following the imposition of SAPs, as more people migrated to towns and cities, including Lilongwe, without the funds to construct THAs.

The few public services that have been provided to informal dwellers have tended to reinforce the clientelist deal between ward politicians and party loyalists. One of the most prevalent examples involves the local water boards responsible for managing water kiosks. Whenever there is a change in the political party following a local election, the composition of the water boards will be changed by the prevailing politician to reflect the winning party, creating opportunities for board members to collect rents from the sale of water, as discussed in Section 3.1. The highly localised politics of water kiosk management have not improved water access, where fees have been squandered by ruling party supporters and where water taps have been turned off by the LWB as a result. With the exception of water kiosks, however, most services in informal settlements tend to be either self-provided or delivered with the support of non-state actors. To use the same example, private boreholes have been constructed by community-based organisations, faith-based groups and residents where water kiosks are either non-existent or have been shut down, due to mismanagement.

An example of clientelism embedded within the LCC is the creation of the constituency development fund by MPs – who are also council members following the amendments to the Local Government Act in 2010 – for the purposes of building their political base by responding to local demands, as detailed in Section 3.1. Local councillors recently established their own ward development fund for similar political purposes, but in direct competition with the MPs. Both funds are concerned principally with immediate political imperatives, rather than public goods provision. Ruling politicians argue that there are not enough resources to address development deficits in informal settlements, while officials are of the view that public services should only be provided to neighbourhoods where city rates are paid. The LCC has thus far focused mainly on the needs of the middle and upper classes, leaving donors to address the needs of low-income groups, often with the support of local leaders, as discussed below.

Clientelism has had major impacts on land and housing. Lilongwe's size, which positions the city as a large vote bank during national elections, combined with the large share of the population living in informal settlements, has motivated ruling

politicians to adopt a laissez-faire stance towards informal housing construction post-1994. It could be argued that the share of Malawi's population living in Lilongwe is relatively small, at around 6%, as per the 2018 census (NSO, 2019), but a margin of 6% could hypothetically determine the results of national elections, thus providing an incentive for national politicians to interfere in council matters. An example where the LCC has informally guaranteed land and housing schemes to low-income groups and the middle class in return for votes is Area 49, as discussed in Section 4.2. This guarantee has enabled low-income earners, specifically, to achieve a de facto level of tenure security and hence their right to the city,¹³ but without obtaining development gains from the council, while also being further pushed out of the city, due to the prevalence of affluent groups who are building in informal settlements as well.

Since 2020, it seems a more punitive stance has been taken towards informal settlements in response to Lilongwe's sprawling informal development problem, as the city government seems split on whether to support participatory informal settlement upgrading plans, as discussed in the next section, or to abandon them in favour of "slum" clearance and non-service provision. Some informal settlements have emerged in areas demarcated for roads and have been subsequently cleared by the council when funding for road construction became available. In such cases, it can be argued that the clearance of informal settlements reflects a planning rationale, rather than an overt effort to rid Lilongwe of informality. It seems in most cases though, that informal settlements deemed to be located in areas that the council views as unproblematic from a planning standpoint, continue to be baited with tokenistic ad hoc service delivery (notably in the case of boreholes, schools and clinics) intended to garner votes, as discussed above. Also important to consider are the funds pledged by the LCC for participatory "slum" upgrading, but some observers suspect that these funds, which are far below the scale of need, may be another "gimmick" in the lead-up to the 2025 elections. Observers also point out that, in advance of elections, planners may be reticent to support the clearance of informal settlements, on the one hand, or to service them, on the other hand, where residents support the previous political regime.

What has emerged in Lilongwe is a highly frustrated electorate faced with continual lengthy delays in the materialisation of public services at the neighbourhood level. There have been instances when incoming politicians have delayed the launch of projects, so they can claim responsibility, as exemplified by the affordable housing plots discussed in Section 5.1. The scarcity of serviced land for housing has forced residents to join networks that enhance access, but these networks are often controlled by "big men" with political connections (such as politicians and chiefs) within a chain of mutual rent-seeking, in which access to rents is exchanged for party loyalty.

The ideology of ruling politicians and officials has also had a strong bearing on public goods provision. Public goods are biased almost entirely towards members of the

¹³ It is important to note that tenure security is not equally enjoyed by renters, who comprise most informal dwellers and face the constant threat of eviction by landlords and gentrification following service improvements (as in the case of THAs).

middle and upper classes, due in part to master plans based on colonial and apartheid planning ideas (Croese et al., 2023; Mwathunga and Donaldson, 2022), as discussed in Section 4.2. Even attempts by the formal planning system to house low-income groups through sites and services schemes – called THAs in Malawi – have failed to reach scale, due to a lack of resources in the face of sustained population growth (revisit Table 2). THAs have also been susceptible to gentrification by the middle class where plots are sold by the intended beneficiaries so they can capitalise on service provision and escape paying costly city rates. Meanwhile, the implementation of the current 2010 Lilongwe master plan has been hampered not only by a lack of resources and anti-poor ideology, but also by the imposition of ad hoc investments by national government with the support of external donor agencies, and by the centralisation of political power within the LCC following the amendments to the Local Government Act in 2010, when incoming national politicians fired LCC CEOs who supported urban planning innovations (Croese et al., 2023). Thus, within Lilongwe’s current political system, national and local politics appear to be semi-autonomous and a reflection of wider Malawian politics associated with the struggle over votes in a multi-ethnic and extremely resource-scarce society.

Public service provision has been further hampered by incomplete decentralisation, due to the view among national ministries that local authorities lack capacity. To date, only waste management and sanitation have been devolved to the LLC, but even they remain contested, owing to the vested self-interests and underlying cartels within the government system discussed in Section 4.1. Successive ruling coalitions have so far been unwilling to fund the kind of genuine decentralisation that might conceivably support an effective urban policy and programming response, instead starving the city authorities of resources, while maintaining an ability to intervene and interfere where politically or personally desirable.

Due to partial decentralisation, a plethora of state agencies within the city and beyond wield overlapping, politicised and frequently factionalised authority over the city council, many concerning themselves with the inconsistent enforcement of colonial- and apartheid-legacy master planning frameworks, which, though ill-suited to Lilongwe’s current predicament, certainly create opportunities for rent-seeking. Urban reform potential in Lilongwe – the capital city, and a significant site of rent capture and vote generation for the national elite – largely reflects this challenging state of affairs. Insofar as there has been a social contract in Lilongwe, it has been one of government permitting informal land allocations (with few, if any public services), in exchange for votes or political quiescence, as exemplified by Area 49.

The inherently extractive, conflictive and short-term emphasis of the current approach to governance in Lilongwe, combined with Malawi’s acute fiscal incapacity, has meant that little progress has been made on urban development since 1994 – when mounting population pressures placed the newly elected local councils under increasing stress. What has resulted is unplanned urban sprawl, with potentially harmful socioeconomic and environmental impacts. These impacts are heightened for the growing masses of

low-income informal dwellers relegated to peripheral areas that lack livelihood opportunities (which are mostly concentrated in central areas), affordable public transport, quality housing and adequate services. Declining environmental conditions in peri-urban areas, combined with rising costs of living exacerbated by the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, is continuing to push Lilongwe's development problem beyond the LCC's realm of spatial control.

Importantly though, it would be unfair to place too much of the blame for the absence of strong local institutions on the political-economic changes brought by multiparty democracy. Under the dictatorship of Kamuzu Banda (from 1964 to 1994), local institutions were impoverished in order to consolidate his dictatorial rule and ensure the supremacy of the one-party state (Tambulasi, 2011). There are thus important questions to be raised concerning the outcomes of "democracy", and the continuities and discontinuities between the eras before and after multiparty democratic reform regarding urban planning and development, notably the continued refusal of central government to allocate revenue to local authorities, leaving them with a string of unfunded mandates. Moreover, Malawi's economy has been highly unstable, especially following the fuel crisis in the late 1970s and the imposition of SAPs in the early 1980s, when national debt and poverty soared (especially in urban areas), as discussed in Section 4.1. While there are clear problems stemming from the current heavy reliance on clientelism, there are now democratic elections, so there is at least some interest in voters, however manipulative it may be.

6.2. Emerging spaces for urban reform

The combination of fragmented authority and an imperative for national elites to earn votes in the city affords local actors, in particular "town chiefs" and, to a lesser extent, CSOs, some space for agency and manoeuvre. The WDCs seem like a logical structure to support local actors, since they were established to foster grassroots participation in urban development activities under the Local Government Act. WDCs have enabled "town chiefs" – including traditional chiefs, who have inherited their positions through lineage, and "block leaders", who have been appointed by the city council or elected by communities – to influence local decisionmaking. But WDCs have been politicised by councillors and MPs, in order to reward supporters and mobilise voters, including through the appointment of "block leaders" discussed in Section 4.1. The emergence of hybrid governance structures raises questions about whether leadership grounded in local institutions may result in better development outcomes, and whether the logic of officialdom "keeps local government from considering how to harness 'town chiefs' more systematically and better regulate their behaviour for the public's benefit, or how to depoliticise local councils and make them more technically proficient" (Cammack, 2012: 48).

The highly dispersed nature of power within Lilongwe means that reformers would be well advised to start with pockets of innovation in diverse political constituencies where some energy for reform and a balance of power conducive to reform exists, and to try to build outwards therefrom. A promising space supporting informal settlement

upgrading has been carved out by a coalition supported by MHPF, the Ministry of Lands and Department of Urban Development, CCODE and the LCC. The coalition is working in partnership to pilot the NSUP discussed in Section 4.1. There is evidence that participatory structures at the community level that can take advantage of informal settlement upgrading have been institutionalised.¹⁴ But there is still a need for local capacity building, additional resources and the cooperation of the Ministry of Lands, which holds the land required for projects requiring relocation. Although the LCC's current financial contribution is negligible, it is indicative of at least some political commitment. Additional sources of financial support will be needed, which is likely to come from external aid agencies rather than national government, in the absence of sufficient transfer payments.

The need for further research is urgent, as local councillors and MPs ramp up their efforts to support interventions in their wards ahead of the 2025 elections at all levels. As the economy continues to decline and as the political settlement remains broadly dispersed, additional pressure will be exerted on the minimal funds required by politicians to attain and maintain power. The question of how local councillors and MPs can be incentivised to support urban reform and development, including through external aid targeting informal settlements, is addressed in the directions for future research presented in the next section.

7. Directions for research and reform

Before thinking about future research on the governance of urban development in Lilongwe, it is useful to distinguish between two analytical approaches, as outlined by Smit (2016, 2018). The first approach is normative, which focuses on the application of concepts, such as “good governance” and “urban management” (what could be). The second approach is analytical, which focuses on how urban development is actually governed in the real world (what is). For those of us concerned with the built environment, there exists a large gap between “what could be” and “what is”. Much research and theory on urban planning and development has attempted to understand what the city ought to look like (often based on some modernist vision of urban form) and how the city ought to be planned (often through a set of technical planning tools informed by scientific expertise), rather than on the processes through which cities are actually built and governed (for a critical reflection, see Watson, 2009). As Rakodi (2001: 209) argues, “issues of power, politics, decisionmaking and legitimacy need more attention in analysis”.

The African Cities Research Consortium (ACRC) project has directed those of us who do not come from political science backgrounds to ask a set of questions about urban power and politics at different scales, and to consider what may be appropriate to address decades of systems failure with resultant deficiencies in basic services, especially in informal settlements. Applying the ACRC framework in Lilongwe has

¹⁴ By 2010, the MHPF successfully negotiated land for over 3,000 federation members, “with the first development of 222 plots taking places in Lilongwe in 2003” (Manda et al., 2011: iv).

provided insights with important implications for research and reform. Below are the questions that emerged and the insights they provided.

Reveal the influence of the national political settlement on decisionmaking and development outcomes through institutional ethnography

There is a need to understand the influence of national and urban elites in the executive and political arms of the LCC, as they become increasingly inclined to commit vigorously to initiatives that would demonstrate immediate benefits in their wards in the run-up to the upcoming 2025 presidential, parliamentary and local government elections. With a fluctuating economy and the broad dispersion of the political settlement, even more pressure will be placed on the current lack of resources that the LCC may allocate to urban reform and development. This in itself is an opportunity, as it will incentivise politicians, the MOLG and LCC to be more receptive to externally driven interventions.

Researchers will face inevitable challenges, since many key informants will be members or affiliates of the executive and political arms of the city council (including officials, politicians and related service providers) and may be hesitant or unwilling to divulge politically sensitive information, as the domain report on informal settlements highlighted. An approach that may prove useful is to conduct an institutional ethnography, in order to understand the social relations and practices in the everyday work of the LCC and how these relations and practices have become institutionalised. This would require a researcher, ideally from a political science background, to embed themselves within the LCC for an extended period. Key questions include:

- What is the political composition of both arms of the LCC?
- What are the motivations, vested interests and ideologies underlying council decisions and the policies and plans adopted by the council?

Answers to these questions would offer insight into emerging divisions in the council that could frustrate Lilongwe's development agenda.

Explore emerging urban reform actors and reform blockers

The current mayor has become very powerful within both the political and executive arms of the LCC, having co-opted the majority of his predecessor's sympathisers through opportunity inducements. The unifying influence of the mayor can potentially be leveraged to thwart potential blockers of the city's development agenda.

Conversely, the four MPs who sit and vote in the LCC might pose a political challenge, given the reforms to the Local Government Act in 2010, as discussed in Section 2.4. Some councillors are aspiring to be elected as MPs in the upcoming 2025 election. So, any perception among MPs that local councillors will use interventions to tackle city challenges in order to gain political mileage may push MPs to become reform blockers. Potential mitigating factors include tweaking the research uptake strategy towards capturing the support of MPs early on in the process, as they seek to score political

points to voters through ward-level interventions. Yet, MPs could also be an opportunity to ensure support from government stakeholders who, as explained in the following paragraph, might be reform or change blockers. Due to the power they wield through contacts in the MCP national executive council, cabinet and even, for some, the presidency, MPs could be a useful tool for removing bureaucratic blockages that might hamper development progress.

Public servants have proven key actors in the successful implementation of reform in Malawi. At the same time, as many donors have discovered over the years, government workers can also be key reform blockers.¹⁵ As key implementing partners, public servants can be slow if there are no or insufficient incentives, especially in the form of allowances in relation to their participation in an initiative (Cammack et al., 2018). Key questions include:

- Who are potential reform blockers, what power and influence do they wield, and what if any mitigating factors would negate blockers' influence over any specific blockages?

Answers to these questions would offer insights into recommendations to move forward on reform.

Explore multiple influence routes to potential urban reform

One important implication of the power map illustrated in Figure 4 is the influence routes within the city setup. With multiple influence paths available, domain researchers can explore the possibility of utilising several points and levers of influence to ensure that the LCC executive (and other actors) “play ball” on research progress and any future interventions. The mayor, who holds considerable power, along with the councillors and MPs, could also be motivated to raise domain issues in council meetings (full council or committee meetings), discuss progress or lack thereof, and ensure fixes to identified bottlenecks. The alignment of domain problems and potential interventions with LCCs key strategic documents could also help to get buy-in. Key documents include the 2021-2025 LCC strategic plan, the 2022 Lilongwe ward-level urban profile, and the 2022 ward social economic profiles (WSEPs). Key questions include:

- How does change or reform happen in the Malawi context?
- What has worked in the past and why?
- What has not worked, and why?

Answers to these questions would offer initial insights into problem areas that are potentially amenable to change or reform and into “no-go-areas” or “dead ends”.

¹⁵ Often, these blockers have their own interests and motivations. This could be that they benefit from the status quo. It could also be that they are “bargaining” for incentives through “grease allowances”. In other instances, they could be protecting interests of politicians at higher levels.

Explore hybrid service delivery arrangements and how they can be supported

Studies on water access and pricing have revealed the emergence of hybrid arrangements in basic service delivery formed through formal and informal negotiations in Lilongwe's unplanned settlements (for example, Pihljak et al., 2021; Velzeboer et al., 2018). Research on these and other service arrangements is needed to develop a broader understanding of the potential to reach low-income households and microenterprises, and the implications for international, national and local support. Particular attention should be paid to the affordability requirements of low-income groups in relation to the cost of bulk infrastructure investment, and to the politicisation of local government structures (notably the WDCs) and local committees (including the water users' associations) by councillors and MPs, who remain very interested in currying favours from party supporters and mobilising voters. Key questions include:

- What are the everyday practices used by low-income households and microenterprises to access basic services, and what barriers do they face?
- How do informal and formal actors form partnerships and determine pricing systems, and what are the consequences for affordability and supply in low-income contexts?

Answers to these questions would offer insight into how a holistic approach to hybrid service delivery can balance socioeconomic and political considerations in conditions of poverty and informality.

Identify the conditions that enable and constrain informal settlement upgrading

Informal settlement upgrading is gathering steam under the NSUP discussed in Section 5.2, which presents a timely opportunity to understand how community mobilisation and participatory planning can be supported in the context of democratic reforms, clientelism and inadequate resources (see Refstie and Millstein, 2019). There is also a need to be cognisant of the appetite among planners and politicians who aspire to make Lilongwe into a "world class city", at the expense of informal dwellers and workers seen as barriers to modern development (see Watson, 2013). Key questions include:

- How are the invited spaces for participation within informal settlement upgrading being created and managed in communities where local government structures have been politicised by ruling politicians?
- How far can communities participate in local political spaces influenced by democratic reforms, clientelism and limited resources?
- What are the implications for developing locally grounded approaches to urban planning and development?

Answers to these questions would offer insights into supporting decentralised decisionmaking and participatory planning in informal settlements upgrading.

Ground case study research in real-world events

Supporting the research priorities above will require detailed case study research based on qualitative methods. To generate in-depth qualitative insights into how decisionmaking actually works at different levels, case studies of particular events, such as development projects and planning processes, can be explored through participant observation, informal discussions and semi-structured interviews with stakeholders involved in the planning and implementation of individual events in their situated contexts. This approach is demonstrated by a case study of Karonga, a small town in the Northern Region of Malawi (see Brown, 2020). The findings of the study were used to generate theoretical and practical insights into the complex governance landscapes in which urban planning and development is embedded. Key questions include:

- What is the current and potential role of “town chiefs” (both traditional chiefs and “block leaders”) in the delivery of effective urban planning, development regulation and service delivery?
- Under what conditions could “town chiefs” depoliticise local decisionmaking processes? What type of authority (traditional chiefs or “block leaders”) holds most potential?

Answers to these questions would offer insight into the strong connections that local leaders have with the grassroots and the developmental roles that local leaders (notably traditional chiefs) play under the planning law and other pertinent legislation (see Manda, 2019).

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