

Malawi: The Politics of Hunger



Diana Cammack

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For the second time in three years a significant number, this time nearly five million people – more than a third of Malawi’s population – are facing famine. This latest emergency is another blow to a country where nearly two-thirds of the population already live with long-term hunger. A basic lack of food contributes to an under-five mortality rate of 178 per 1000 and a stunting figure of more than 50%. Such dismal statistics exist in spite of the World Food Programme-led aid programme, which has been in operation for nearly two decades and which in normal years distributes food to perhaps a half-million people each month in the ‘hungry season’ before the harvest. This year the UN, bilateral agencies and the Malawi government have scaled up the aid programme though recent reports suggest that this effort will not be enough and that still more food aid is needed.

Food policy specialists point to a number of factors that undermine food security on an annual basis and that easily push Malawians over the edge into famine when the maize crop fails. Some of the reasons are immediate – such as drought and floods – while others are longer term, and are found in soil infertility and small plot sizes.

Yet one explanation for Malawi’s continuing hunger and recurrent emergencies is often ignored. This in part is because large parts of the media, donors and relief agencies seemingly feel the need to concentrate on the less contentious causes of hunger to raise funds from the public rather than to mention ‘poor governance’.

This failure to provide a political explanation leaves the public with the dangerously misleading impression that the solution to Malawi’s problems, including its food insecurity, is simply a technical or financial one. It also ignores the question of why improvements that were long ago identified by agriculturalists are not being implemented. The answer is that Malawi hasn’t ‘got the politics right,’ and this keeps it

from becoming a ‘developmental’ state.

A developmental state is one whose qualities place it at the upper end of a continuum of states whose institutional stability, organisational capacity, degree of legitimacy and policy-making decline as you move down along the continuum through poorly performing, weak, quasi, and fragile states to those that have collapsed and failed. A developmental state’s characteristics are therefore relative, not absolute.

A developmental state is one ‘whose political and bureaucratic elites have generally achieved relative autonomy from socio-political forces in the society and have used this in order to promote a programme of rapid economic growth with more or less rigour and ruthlessness. [It] is typically driven by an urgent need to promote economic growth or to industrialise, in order to “catch up” or to protect or promote itself... in a world or regional context of threat or competition, or to win legitimacy by delivering steady improvements in the material and social well-being of its citizens. ... [A developmental state is] generally able to generate an average annual rate of growth in the GNP per capita of 4 per cent.... One of the key characteristics of this state type is its determination and ability to stimulate, direct, shape and co-operate with the domestic private sector and arrange or supervise mutually acceptable deals with foreign interests.’*

Developmental states share a set of attributes that are essential to their success, whether in 18th century Europe, 19th century America, or 20th century Asia. These include strong state authority and systems, a competent economic bureaucracy insulated from politics, a legitimate government that is not required to redistribute public goods to retain support, a state that is independent from but linked to state and non-state actors who share developmental goals, an economic policy that is consistent and has been transformed into ‘rules of the game’ that promote ‘productive

entrepreneurship,' attitudes that support the adoption of new approaches, and relatively uncorrupt leaders who have a vested interest in promoting national economic growth.

Few recent events demonstrate the presence of these attributes in Malawi. For instance, decisions about specific development-related activities, such as public spending or agricultural policy, were made by Bakili Muluzi's United Democratic Front government (1994-2004) in light of how they would affect party-politics and the interests of elite factions rather than how they would promote national development. In fact nothing more convincing than 'poverty alleviation' emerged as development policy during the decade, and that was in large part a reflection of donor concern rather than the party's.

Under Mr Muluzi the public service was not characterised as effective, autonomous from political pressure or patronage, uncorrupt, meritocratic, or professional. Furthermore, the UDF government egregiously used public resources to secure support as the regime's legitimacy was undermined by electoral fraud, regionalism, a failure of party-political leadership, the deterioration of basic services, and high-level corruption with impunity. Attitudes and behaviours that support reform, such as meritocratic advancement, gender equality, and an openness to innovations, were eschewed.

Ironically, considering Dr H Kamuzu Banda's abysmal human rights record and the autocratic nature of his regime (1964-1994), his state appeared more developmental than Muluzi's more recent one. The civil service was more professional and effective at policy design, while he had a development vision that included state-owned organisations and the Press Corporation. He encouraged import substituting industrialisation, fostering an agricultural elite with secure land tenure that produced for the international market. A banking and credit system promoted the elite's agricultural and business interests, while other plans included control of domestic labour, a meritorious provision of higher education, national food security, and more. Unfortunately he failed at nation-building in this ethnically divided country; he eliminated those who opposed him and stifled civil society initiative, both of which had serious long-term, negative consequences for economic growth and political stability.

When Muluzi reluctantly stepped down in 2004 President Bingu wa Mutharika came to power under circumstances that have caused near continuous political turmoil ever since. Specifically, he lost

the backing of the leadership of the UDF when he announced a 'zero tolerance' policy on corruption and permitted the arrest of UDF politicians. Dr Mutharika's development vision appears to be rooted in personal experience and conforms to current donor thinking. For instance, he is trying with some success to establish macroeconomic stability, build-up infrastructure and manage donor aid centrally.

It is common practice during elections for parties to provide or promise cash or goods to constituents to attract votes. When during the 2004 campaign farmers were told that fertiliser was to be subsidised, many stopped buying it and waited for the Mutharika government to deliver on the UDF's promise, which it was subsequently unable to do. Those who eventually bought fertiliser did so too late in the growing season, which reduced yields. Making matters worse, Dr Mutharika's programme of subsidised farm inputs was delayed in 2005, thus reducing outputs further. The short-lived political appointment of the ineffectual Chakufwa Chihana as Minister of Agriculture further undermined the capacity of the already weak ministry to respond to general food insecurity, along with what was widely seen as an up-coming emergency. Meanwhile food policy became a political football in the UDF's effort to impeach Dr Mutharika, an initiative that recently ended due to weak public support for it.

In the short term, food aid is needed, and this requires more funding from the international community. But while giving money people should understand that relief is a temporary palliative. To deal with long term hunger Malawi must become a developmental state. That this has been only a partial success previously indicates that there are systemic and structural factors that make it difficult to do. And now, with democratic consolidation on the agenda, it is even more complicated than when Dr Banda tried to do it. But with the administration's expertise and the right advisors, and if not too distracted by party politics and scheming politicians, Dr Mutharika is well-placed to make a start.

Note

* Adrian Leftwich, *States of Development: On the Primacy of Politics in Development* (Polity Press, 2000), pp. 167-68.

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