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Deliberation, Difference and Democratic Practice in Malawi

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Abstract

Since the introduction of multiparty politics in Malawi in 1994, grassroots communities have been engaged in dialogue on issues affecting democratic and national development processes in the country. This paper employs Martin Heidegger's hermeneutics and James Paul Gee's discourse analysis to examine community views regarding public deliberation as a form of political participation in Malawi. Heideggerian hermeneutics provides a foundation for Hans-Gorg Gadamer's principles of philosophical hermeneutics that are limited to historicism, non-authorial intention, and the fusion of horizons. This study adopted Heideggarian phenomenology of Dasein ("being there") as an interpretive framework to analyze interview text. This paper argues that the main issue for the grassroots communities in Malawi goes beyond democratic participation. Central to the interpretation of the communal dialogue is an understanding of the socio-cultural, economic and political atmosphere within which the Malawian grassroots social actors perform. As a way of understanding how citizens at the grassroots frame democratic participation in a volatile atmosphere, a study was conducted involving 30 citizens ranging from local villagers to government officials in select local councils in Malawi. This paper documents the analysis of citizen sentiments regarding some democratization problems facing local councils and their solutions. The study was guided by three main research questions: 1) What does civic participation mean for the citizens? 2) How do the citizens define social problems? 3) What needed to be done to facilitate effective participation by citizens?

Author Biography

Fletcher Ziwoya is an Assistant Professor of Communication Studies at the University of Nebraska at Kearney. His research interests are in the area of grassroots democratic participation especially in non-Western settings. His work in this area includes a book chapter he co-authored on the Australian Citizens' Parliament featured in "The Australian Citizens' Parliament and the Future of Deliberative Democracy published by Penn State University Press.

Keywords

Deliberation, Democracy, Grassroots, Malawi

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Over the years, deliberative democracy has assumed a prominent position in democratization processes as the expected basis for designing how democratic institutions should operate worldwide (Delli Carpini, Cook, & Jacobs, 2004). However, debate still continues on the merits and demerits of this political approach especially in developing areas of the global south where democratic structures are largely dysfunctional. Several areas still need further exploration especially in areas where democracy as a polity has not taken root. The democratic project in developing areas such as Malawi has been undermined by a number of things including divisions caused by socio-cultural and political factors. Factors that undermine the deliberative project around the world include prevailing power differentials and social inequalities at various levels of the society (Dryzek, 2000; Mansbridge, Bohman, Chambers, Estlund, Føllesdal, Fung, Lafont, Manin, & Martí, 2010). For nascent democracies in the global south such as Malawi, however, ethnic, religious and, partisan polarization compound the problem (Cornwall & Gaventa, 2001). Such challenges have continued to complicate the task of developing a sustainable and contextual framework for planning, implementing and measuring effective deliberative democracy. The lack of a comprehensive and unified approach to deliberative theory and a means to measure deliberative processes complicate matters especially when it comes to studying democratic processes in non-Western, multi-cultural settings and, emerging democracies.

Further investigation of increasing divisions and social inequalities, and the efficacy of democratic processes in emergent modern societies is imperative. Understanding the dynamics would help to produce deliberation that is practical and productive within these societies. This need becomes even more imperative for societies that diverge along religious, ethnic, and cultural affiliations. Diverse societies, unlike their homogenous counterparts, deal with unique challenges in consolidating democratic practices. Malawi is a perfect example of a diverse society struggling to consolidate democratic gains made in the late 1990s (Ziwoya, 2012). The main challenge for divided societies is how to institute an effective and functional deliberative culture against a backdrop of myriad undermining elements. These divisions present a deep-seated challenge for resolving differences, reaching an agreement or, indeed, finding a common understanding on contentious issues during deliberation. The overarching sentiment of contemporary literature on deliberative theory and practice argues for a universalist normative framework (Chambers, 2003; Dryzek, 2000, 2005). However, the universalist approach does not take into consideration various socio-cultural and political nuances that might affect the deliberative process, especially in non-Western settings.

The primary aim of this paper is to document the analysis of grassroots community lived experience and framing of the issues affecting democratic deliberation in Malawi. This study uses the foundation on which Gadamer's (1975) philosophical hermeneutics is built. While Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics focuses on historicity and non-authorial intention in the analysis of meaning from text, Heideggar (1967) emphasizes phenomenology of the social actor's lived experience—'*Dasein*.' To understand how citizens in selected grassroots communities in Malawi frame democratic participation[1] in a volatile atmosphere this study involved 30 citizens whose roles ranged from local villagers to government and party officials. The study was conducted between June and August of 2010 in three selected district councils in Malawi as part of a doctoral dissertation project.

Theoretical Framework and Review of Literature

The underlying assumption of (universalist) deliberative theory is that rules of engagement in deliberation are ensured when basic primary elements of the democratic process are granted. The primary elements include the protection and granting of basic human rights and public goods. The granting of such elements has not only been used as a yardstick for effective democratization in deliberative processes but has also been used to measure democracy for societies at large (Dryzek, 2000). The assumption has been that an established (Western) neo-liberal political culture is a precondition for successful deliberative practice across the globe (Ziwoya, 2012). This caricature of democracy ignores other contextual social nuances that inform the democratic practice, especially in emergent and divided democracies such as Malawi.

Prominent in deliberative theory is the lack of agreement among scholars in the development of a functional deliberative framework, especially for diverse societies in the global south. For example, some scholars view deliberation as a decision-making process while others understand it in terms of knowledge production. Most deliberative scholars look at deliberation as a decision-making procedure with the expectation of a decision as a final product (Benhabib, 1994; Bohman & William, 1996; Christiano, 1996; Dryzek, 1990, 2000; Gutman & Thomson, 1996; Gaus, 1996; Manin, 1987). This approach ignores other critical elements of deliberation: epistemology and understanding the issue at hand and, spaces and positions from which participants engage each other (Cornwall & Shankland, 2013; Gaventa, 2002).

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[1] This paper considers deliberation as a form of democratic participation and will, therefore, use the terms interchangeably.

This paper aims at, *inter alia*, highlighting the significance of recognizing the epistemic role of deliberation especially in diverse non-Western settings. I posit that for democratic governance to mature in diverse societies, especially in the global south, the knowledge production (understanding) aspect of deliberation should be treated as equally important as decision-making in such processes.

It is crucial to identify and provide the conceptual definition of "deliberative democracy" that will be used in this paper. This definition is important as it will serve to highlight some of the important positive and normative (Western) elements of deliberation that could be adapted to local scenarios such as Malawi. Over the past decade or so, there has been a rapid proliferation of deliberative theory and conceptualizations that have made the task of defining the term a challenging one. In fact, for a while, scholars continued to disagree on a common conceptual definition of deliberative democracy. Macedo (1999) noted:

> The phrase "deliberative democracy" does not signify a creed with a simple set of core claims. Those who seek to advance the cause of democratic deliberation do not unanimously agree on what the democratic ideal is or how it should be fostered. (p. 4)

If this lack of a unified definition and approach to deliberative democracy is such a problem in Western democracies, it creates chaos in emergent democracies of the global south. In nascent democracies such as Malawi, politics is still a game of powerful individuals largely implemented by weak institutions (Ziwoya, 2012). The scholastic differences in conceptualizing deliberative democracy present significant challenges for scholarly analysis of deliberation in both Western and non-Western settings. One of the challenges posed is how to design studies that will focus on specific elements of deliberative processes, such as what can be called, "shared learning," as opposed to a decision-making focus, which is the (traditionally) expected product of deliberation.

The definition of deliberative democracy adopted in this paper, therefore, attempts to categorize conceptual definitions of deliberation based on their theoretical restrictiveness and usefulness in social interaction. This classification is critical in shedding more light on the breadth and depth of deliberative theory, as well as translating deliberative theory into praxis. Strict procedural definitions such as those championed by Habermas (1990; 1993; 1995a; 1995b; 1996) and Cohen (1997) lie at one end of the restrictiveness continuum. Procedural conceptualizations of deliberation assume that for "ideal" deliberation to ensue, there must exist a precisely defined or designed set of conditions—ranging from the choice of participants to the agenda for deliberation (Bachtiger, Niemeyer,

Neblo, Stoenbergen & Steiner, 2009).[2] Decision making, as an expected outcome, is a major aspect of a heavily restrictive conceptual "Type I" definition of deliberation. On the other end of the continuum there is what can be regarded as less restrictive conceptual definitions—called "Type II" definitions. This conceptual approach, championed by Habermas and Cohen (Bachtiger *et al.,* 2009), provides some leeway as to how procedures can be adhered to in order to maximize benefits (i.e., exploration and learning outcomes) from the process.

Scholars have defined deliberation in terms of its departure from other conceptualizations of democracy (Bohman, 1998; Gutmann & Thomson, 1996, 2004; Jacobs, Cook & Delli Carpini, 2004, 2009). Fearon (1998) observed that, in the early 1980s, formulations of the deliberative ideal were opposed to aggregation and the strategic behavior promoted by voting and bargaining. He further noted that the supremacy of deliberative over competitive participation was established by advancing arguments concerning the distinctive rationality of the process. Instead of a simple settlement or bargaining balance, deliberation aimed at seeking understanding among all participants in the decision-making process appears to be more productive.

Echoing this understanding of deliberation, Chambers (2003, p. 308) posited that deliberative democratic theory, "claims to be a more just and democratic way of dealing with pluralism than aggregative or realist models of democracy." Deliberation has, therefore, been regarded by some scholars to have morphed from voting-focused to learning-focused democratic theory. If voting-focused conceptualizations of democratic theory privilege strict procedures and interests toward fair devices of aggregation, learning-focused views of deliberative theory should promote the knowledge production of the communicative process that ensues between and among citizens regardless of socio-cultural differences.

As a way of anchoring this study within the context of functional deliberative theory, a brief summary of the most prominent definitions of deliberative democracy being debated within the literature is vital. First, a focus on Gutmann and Thompson's (1996) conceptualization initially presented in *Democracy and Disagreement* and later revised in *Why Deliberative Democracy* (2004) is presented. Second, a recap of Jacobs, et *al.'s* (2004, 2009) account of the five conditions of deliberation—a functional rendition partly derived from Gutmann and Thompson's conceptualization of deliberative democracy also is included. The two definitions provide a set of common concepts that form the basis of the theoretical discussion of this paper.

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[2] For an overview on measuring deliberation see Black et al., 2010

Gutmann and Thompson (1996, 2004) proposed four characteristics of a functional definition of deliberative democracy: room for a reason-giving requirement, the accessibility of the reasons afforded to all participants, the development of an obligatory outcome, and the presence of a dynamic process. In the process, deliberators are expected to substantiate arguments that are acceptable to free and equal citizens in pursuit of fair terms of cooperation—terms that honor the integrity of mutual understanding.

The final characteristic in the conceptualization is that deliberation should be an ongoing process—recognizing that a valid justification to develop a binding outcome at one point can be invalid at some other point. Evident in this approach is a feature that provides for the imperfect nature of deliberation especially when other variables are at play. This is where deliberation develops a binding outcome that proves to be wrong, unpopulist, or less justifiable in the future. A mechanism is needed to modify or discard the result of the deliberation.

Another conceptualization of deliberative theory is offered by Jacobs *et al*. (2009) who drew from Gutmann and Thompson to present an extended operational definition of deliberation. Jacobs *et al.'s* (2009) approach comprises five elements underpinning the legitimacy of deliberation as a tool for decision-making in public policy: universalism, inclusivity, rationality, agreement, and political efficacy. The authors stipulated that deliberation must be universal in order to provide room for all those affected by the issue under discussion. Deliberation must be inclusive in that concerned citizens must be not only physically present, but that a wide range of voices and concerns must be accommodated. Jacobs *et al.* (2009) echoed Gutmann and Thompson (2004) who posit that deliberation must support reasoned argument in support of or opposition to issues. Discussion should generate consensus or provide room for disagreements to be mutually resolved through active reflection on personal or institutional values, assumptions and bases for arguments. The last Jacobs *et al.*'s (2009) stipulation was that deliberation in public endeavors should affect public policy in measurable terms, such as specific outcomes through sophisticated and greater internal efficacy, and wider civic engagement.

The two ways of conceptualizing deliberative democracy as presented by Gutmann and Thompson (1996, 2004) as well as Jacobs *et al.* (2009) have one common element: emphasis on the need for inclusiveness as a characteristic of the deliberative process. Looking at deliberative democracy as the converse of a results-oriented conceptualization of democracy is to appreciate the significance of promoting reasoned argument among equal deliberators whose legitimacy is

grounded in the inclusion of varying voices. The interplay between this deliberative ideal and the everyday realities of political inequality and injustice based on gender, ethnic affiliation, social status, and religion in societies such as Malawi has produced fears that deliberation will simply shift the imbalances of result-oriented democratic conceptions into a new preserve of elitism (Ziwoya, 2012). This worry animates the motivation for the critical and appreciative analysis of Malawi's deliberative democracy in this study.

Various players, both governmental and non-governmental agencies, are engaged in various types of citizen participation including deliberation in Malawi. Because there are different organizing agencies and approaches to deliberation, a comprehensive evaluation of the epistemic functions and the kind of meaning citizens make of the deliberative and democratic processes in the country is needed. At present, few comprehensive studies of deliberative methods in Malawi, and indeed the global south, exist. In order to understand the strengths, weaknesses, and varied impacts of such participatory processes, a systematic examination of the design, process, discourse, and outcome of such endeavors is imperative (Black, Bulkhalter, Gastil & Stromer-Galley, 2009; Black, 2012; Gastil & Black, 2008).

In order to comprehensively understand deliberative processes and their outcomes, Black and others (2010) suggested two ways of approaching evaluation: measuring aspects of the conceptual definition (direct measures), and measuring various indicators of the deliberative process (indirect measures). The purpose of this study was to undertake both direct and indirect measures although the focus of discussion will be on the direct measures of deliberation and their consequence on deliberation in settings such as Malawi.

Deliberation as a form of democratic participation is not a panacea to all governance ills. Scholars who study deliberative and democratic processes in developing areas have noted the limits of deliberative processes in contexts marked by deep inequalities.[3] In places, such as most of the global south, where democratic institutions are not well-developed, wholesale adoption of Western-styles of democratic practices such as deliberation create continued reproduction of undemocratic forms of state power. These forms of state power in turn produce new layers of marginalization and elitist compacts that undermine democratic participation. Issues of power and access to resources, among other things, become a hindrance to equal participation in deliberative processes.

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[3] For similar studied in developing areas and the global south see: Cornwall, A., & Brock, K. (20050. What do buzzwords do for development policy? A critical look at 'participation', 'employment' and 'poverty reduction.' *Third World Quarterly, 26, 1043-1063*.

While most governments in the developing world including the global south are creating opportunities for public participation, these 'invited spaces' become imbued with such dynamics as power and social-cultural or political differences. Participants to these invited sites bring a wide range of background experiences and motives creating tensions that undermine the deliberative process (Cornwall, 2002).

Brief Background to the Decentralization Process in Malawi

Decentralization in Malawi has varied over time in the country. The concept of decentralization has been central to the different administrations that have governed the country. Different types of government existing at different times have adopted either devolution or decentralization. The decentralization process has undergone three phases: devolution during the colonial era[4], deconcentration during the single party era[5] and currently devolution during the multiparty dispensation.

After 30 years of centralized and autocratic rule, Malawians voted for political pluralism in 1993. The first democratically elected government took over power in May 1994. A new constitution that enshrined principles of participatory democracy and the rule of law was approved in 1995.

The current decentralization process dates back to 1994 when the Malawi Government initiated the process of decentralizing power and responsibilities to local authorities. The move by government was aimed at reducing poverty and strengthening democratic institutions through localized provision of services (Chiweza, 2010).

A new National Decentralization Policy creating local governments was approved by the Malawi cabinet in January, 1996 and came into effect in 1998. The local government units called Local Assemblies are composed of the following representatives:
- Elected members-councilors (voting members)
- Traditional Authorities (ex-officio, non-voting members)
- Members of Parliament (ex-officio, non-voting members)

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[4] In 1891 Malawi, then Nyasaland, became part of the British Central Africa Protectorate. Malawi attained independence from the British on July 6, 1964.
[5] From independence from the British in 1964, Malawi was governed under a single-party authoritarian rule of Hastings Kamuzu Banda until 1994.

- Five (5) representatives of special interest groups.

Currently, there are 28 District Councils, 2 Municipal Councils and 1 Town Council in Malawi. The Local Assemblies are required to meet at least quarterly or as need arises. Although the local assemblies were designated as public spaces for grassroots participation, elements of elitism creep in when the members bring in their various political affiliations and interests.

Methodology

A large number of experimental studies of small-group political discussion have been conducted worldwide with rather disappointing results due to the artificial nature of the conditions under which those studies were conducted (Levine, Fung & Gastil, 2005). Chambers (2003) observed that most empirical studies have turned to "real world" test cases for theoretical claims about deliberative democracy. In such cases, Chambers (2003) reported the following methods as being predominant: participant-observer, surveys and questionnaires for participants, and various forms of detailed discourse analysis. Levine *et al.* (2005, p. 281) recommended a rigorous case study method examining the 'lived experience' of the participants:

> If we want to observe how interest groups, politicians, and citizens deal with one another in public deliberation, then we need to study practices embedded in politics, not experiments with predetermined topics and controlled structures.

Consequently, to better understand the deliberation process in select communities in Malawi, the study at hand used a case study approach involving three local government democratic participation procedures in the country.

Babbie (2004, p. 293) defined case study as "an in-depth examination of a single instance of some social phenomenon, such as a village, a family, or a juvenile gang." Babbie (2004) noted that focusing attention on a specific instance of something is the main characteristic of a case study. Other scholars suggest that a case study is less of a methodological choice than "a choice of what is to be studied" (Stake, 1995, p. 435). Smith (1978) stated that the "what" in a case study is a "bounded system," a single entity, a unit around which there are given boundaries. The case, then, has a finite quality about it in terms of time, space, and/or components comprising the case. This study sought a thick Heideggerian (1967) description of the phenomenon and an idiographic understanding of 'being there' in the deliberative processes as experienced in the select local councils in Malawi.

Because a case study focuses on a specific unit or instance, issues of generalizability emerge larger than with other types of qualitative research. However, a number of scholars have pointed out that much can be learned from a particular case (see: Baxter, 2008; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Merriam, 1998). Readers can learn vicariously from an encounter with the case through the researcher's narrative description (Stake, 1995). Erickson (1986) argued that because the general rests in the particular, what we learn in a particular case can be transferred to similar situations. It is the reader, not the researcher, who determines what can apply to his or her context.

Black *et al.* (2010) posited that the challenge for scholars when measuring deliberation is translating normative concepts including analytic rigor, equality, respect, and consideration, into variables that can be measured. In line with Black *et al.'s* (2010) position, this study sought to analyze expressed citizen perspectives on what a functional and effective deliberation process entailed. The study was guided by three main research questions: 1) What did civic participation mean for the citizens? 2) How did the citizens define social problems? 3) What needed to be done for the citizens to effectively participate in social change? Views were captured through interviews, participant observations and official correspondence to produce text that could be examined.

In this study, text refers to recorded views of participating stakeholders on the efficacy of the deliberative process in the select local councils. The stakeholders' views are critical to the continuation of community dialogue on issues affecting local communities in the country. The hermeneutical analysis was used to examine meaning in the text produced from the dialogue.

In a study of how citizens framed fundamental problems facing society in the United States, Hess and Todd (2009) used a philosophical hermeneutics approach to analyze participants' views. The study found that framing played a central role in contributing to a more effective deliberation across partisan divides. Hermeneutics as a theory of interpretation is concerned with uncovering meaning from discourse including social actions by individuals or groups of people (Akkela & Leca, 2015; Crotty, 1998; Dilthey, 1976; Llewllyn, 1993; Palmer, 1969; Ricoeur, 1981; Weber, 1962).

The paradigm underlying this study is a qualitative approach. Because the principle interest was to seek understanding of the dynamics of power differentials, socio-economic, religious and political differences, the epistemology guiding this study was the hermeneutics of 'being there' (Heidegger, 1967) and

cultural discourse analysis (Gee, 2005; Rogers, 2004). Cultural discourse analysis can be used to examine social interactions among deliberating participants and shed light on how social actors establish social places and enact social and group identities. By aligning themselves to various social identities and by deliberating from such identity corners, the participants engage in "membering" (Philipsen, 1992).

Heideggerian (1967) phenomenology stipulates that, a selected sample of participants should include individuals who have experienced the phenomena under study so they can articulate their personal experiences. Data for this study were, therefore, collected from individuals who had been active in their district councils for at least a year. Participants were elected, appointed, and hired representatives who met several times a year to discuss implementation of development projects in the district. The data were collected from three levels of policymakers from three selected local district councils in Malawi. The first level comprised ten village committee representatives to the councils. The ten selected representatives were currently serving on the District Development Committee in their respective districts. Village representatives were local people to the area, and the selected participants included one primary teacher, a businesswoman, and three religious leaders.[6]

The second level of representatives interviewed was that of traditional chiefs. Ten local chiefs from the selected areas were interviewed for their views and experience on the efficacy of the deliberative process of the District Council. The third group of participants included five members of parliament and five District Council officials who mostly held an advisory role (ex-officio) in various areas of district development project implementation.

Participants were selected from these three levels and three district councils to triangulate information sources. The study employed semi-structured interviews (Campbell, Quincy, Osserman & Pedersen, 2013) to obtain data. Respondents were purposefully selected for ease of access and availability rather than particularity. A total of 30 respondents were interviewed over a period of two months. The length of interviews ranged from 30 minutes to an hour.

Using Heidegger's (1967) hermeneutics of 'being there' as a sensitizing analytical framework, the study conducted a discourse analysis of the text from the interviews based on Gee's (2005) seven elements of language analysis. These

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[6] It must be noted that this study was conducted in 2011 when District Councils were operating without elected councilors. A district consultative committee was used instead of the normal full local assembly with elected representatives.

elements are: (1) significance, (2) activities, (3) identities, (4) relationships, (5) politics, (6) connections, (7) sign systems and knowledge. Gee's (2005) seven building tasks of language provided a conceptual framework to understand the participants' 'being there' moment and experience as the people's representatives and officials at the local government level in Malawi. This underpinning framework shed light on the representatives' use of language when describing their experience working with the council. Three main research questions guided the inquiry: 1) What did civic participation mean for the citizens? 2) How did the citizens define social problems? 3) What needed to be done for the citizens to effectively participate in social change? Using Heidegger's (1967) hermeneutics approach of lived experience and Gee's (2005) seven building tasks of language, the study developed themes that were in dialogue with one another. Against this comparative background, the study examined the role of the representatives' cultural models, relationships, and identities *vis-à-vis* the effectiveness of deliberative processes as used by the local councils in delivering social goods to the citizenry.

Results: Dialogue of Differences

The analysis of the text from participant interviews revealed a manifestation of various identities and attitudes at play based on the subjects' backgrounds. The participants' discourse portrayed idiosyncratic tendencies that can be categorized in three distinct themes: (1) dehumanized politics, (2) deeply rooted differences in approach to issues, and (3) feelings of frustration with institutional processes.

Evident in the interview text was the Heideggerian desire for active participation in their councils' day-to-day activities. The interest in affairs that concern the people's well being as evident from the participants' dialogue demonstrates Gee's (2005) first element of significance in language analysis. The participants' language demonstrated that they attached a great deal of value to the council proceedings regardless of the outcomes. As one traditional chief said in an interview, "This is the only opportunity that we have to decide our future. We cannot go to the national assembly to express our views….so we decide our area's development here."

Also noteworthy in the discourse was a variety of 'membering' (Philipsen, 1992) where participants spoke from aligned cultural, professional, political or elitist corners and identities (Pedrini, 2015). Through the language of 'us' versus 'them' one can see Gee's (2005) third element of 'identities' at play. Through the use of specific pronouns such as 'we' or 'you' participants created identities, differences and political spaces (Cornwall & Shankland, 2013).

Dehumanized politics
One of the principle research questions for the study touched on the kind of meaning or significance participants attached to their role in facilitating development projects in the district. Analysis of discourse from the representatives indicates that, as much as the participants desired to be involved actively in council proceedings, they felt removed from the political processes. Although the representatives were willing to be actively involved in a 'being there' state, they felt that the system regarded deliberative processes and efforts to discuss solutions to problems as a necessary evil. At least 20 of the 30 participants involved noted their concerns with council processes, politicking, and partisanship as opposed to focusing on what their constituents needed to improve their lives. The 20 participants indicated that deliberative sessions were turning into battle zones where political interests mattered more than the social needs of both the representatives and the constituents that they represented. They called for more "people-focused" approached than "interest-focused" approach to the deliberation. The result of this attitude toward social problems, dehumanizes the political system and inverts the priorities.

An example of the feeling of dehumanized politics was a verbal tirade by one traditional chief who was frustrated by his council's lack of progress on the construction of six teachers' houses in the area. The village head was of the opinion that what his people needed urgently was staffing and medical supplies for a health clinic that had been constructed under MASAF[7] some five years previously. According to the chief, the clinic had never been fully operational although people in the area continued to die from simple ailments such as diarrhea. The chief observed that:

> "No one ever came to ask us as to what we really needed in our area in terms of development. They (government) think they know our problems and how to resolve them…they are wrong..."

District Council officials, on the other hand, indicated in their interviews that they were usually under pressure to spend funds from a development partner within the allocated time frame. According to the officials, funding for projects was usually provided with an implementation time requirement and specific sector target:

> "What these *villagers*[8] do not understand….(laughs)…you know, is
> that in the said school project the donor's focus was construction of

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[7] Malawi Social Action Fund (MASAF)—a World Bank program aimed at providing infrastructure in rural areas through active local participation.
[8] The use of the word is another good example of the 'us' versus 'them' language. The official was differentiating himself from the 'uneducated' locals.

teachers' houses and not medical supplies for a health clinic…..that donor does not do education…they are in health."

The above statement also indicates the lack of recognition and appreciation of diverse approaches to issues and the peoples' feelings and their needs. The council official in this particular case failed to appreciate the need for collaborating with the local people and respect their needs. What the council was most interested in was expediency rather than serving people's needs. Most of the statements from the District Council officials demonstrated an attitude considering development projects in terms of donor demands and interests and the donor's requirements regardless of the need on the part of the people.

Deep Differences

A number of specific terms and phrases were frequently used to denote differences between the representatives and the officials. These terms created tension between people indigenous to the area and public officials posted to head various sectors in the district. For example:

> 30:03   Man: You (*obwera*),[9] do not understand, do you?
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> 30:15   Man: Ok, I wanted to show who the rightful owners of this place are…(motioning with hands indicating possession).[10]

A close look at the language used demonstrates that participants created or maintained divisions that they believed existed among them. One of the perceived divisions was the fact that some of the attendees of the council meetings were not original to the district. Most of the officials were there to execute official duties and, therefore, not seen as having the area's best interest at heart. Other connotations of 'otherness" reflected in the participants' language referred to differences in political affiliation. By employing the grammatical features 'you' and 'us' speakers indicated the distinction between the in-group and the out-group. This discourse is used not only as an informational semantic, but also identifies how the utterances get relational work accomplished throughout the course of the conversation (Gee, 2005). What was clear from the text was that the use of the pronoun 'you' was a powerful denotation of difference, separation, and a sense of belonging to one group as opposed to another.

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[9] Meaning stranger or new comer to an area as opposed to those indigenous to the area
[10] The speaker on 30:15 is the same one speaking at 30:03

Language features as demonstrated in the text are not separated from the specific context but are used as in-moment occurrences. In the excerpt above, the man is also using his hands to indicate that (according to him) council gatherings had two groups of people: those that belonged to 'his' group and 'others' who did not. In addition to voicing his sentiments, the man embodied his action to delineate the sub-groups present by motioning with his hands. Other local communicative resources apart from the use of pronouns and gestures included such things as gaze, facial gestures, and speaking tones used by the participants to distinguish themselves and to create new alignments.

"*Obwera*" was the most frequently used term by some participants as an argument against ideas or proposed projects that the indigenous participants felt were not priorities and were being imposed on the local people. At least four of the participants who used the term elaborated on what it meant— *obwera* were individuals hired by government to work in the area without the local people's best interests at heart. One participant observed:

> "I strongly believe that most of the officers here are only trying to do their job without actually caring about how we feel as owners of the projects."

At least three participants in two sessions used the term without elaboration while at least one participant insinuated the meaning in his statements. For example, one of the traditional leaders declared in an interview that he:

> "Will do everything in my power to ensure that (the local) people have the kind of development assistance that they need and not an imposed project by the government."

Although "*obwera*" is not a derogatory term in Chichewa[11] in itself, and while, on the surface, it is a legitimate and common word, the term as used by these subjects, was loaded with discriminatory meaning often lacking the content of relevant facts. Noteworthy is that most of the administrative work in public and private entities in the districts was done by "*obwera*" and not the locals due to a variety of socio-historical reasons.[12] A total of ten participants expressed the view that "*obwera*" had no business telling them the kind of development they needed. One traditional leader spoke at length (more than five minutes) using the term more than seven times while challenging public officials to take more interest in the affairs of the people they claimed they served.

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[11] One of Malawi's local languages

[12] In one of the Districts, the dominant group of people in the area had been resistant to education for some time before and after Malawi's independence because most schools were established by Christian missionaries. Parents did not send their children to school for fear of losing them over to the new religion.

Another term "*otsutsa,*" [13] also frequently used especially by governing party politicians, followers, and sympathizers. This word suggests that anyone with differing views on government's proposed projects is sympathetic to the opposition. The "*otsutsa*" and "*obwera*" terms, divided the representatives and officials into separate camps with the participants functioning and identifying with the perspective of their own particular group. A hermeneutical approach to analyzing discourse helps to trace language used by participants by examining the indexicality of language to build arguments and create identity (Black, 2009; Firth & Wagner, 1997; Jacobs, 1986; Silverstein, Blommaert, Caton, Koyama & Tsitsipis, 2004; Stivers, 2001). Specific utterances and sequences display sequential references to something that appears to be a problem. Evident in this use of language is Gee's (2005) fifth element—politics where participants express their views on the distribution of goods in terms of the political economy that went with council business in their areas.

Frustration
The third theme that emerged from the participants' discourse and addressed the study's third research question bordered around the definition of social problems and the role of citizens in social change. In line with Gee's (2005) seventh element of language analysis—sign systems, the participants' language demonstrated feelings of frustration with the council's functions. Part of this study sought to probe the characteristics and policies of the selected democratic institution and how knowledge was created. Most of the council officials interviewed acknowledged that council activities and processes in Malawi were hampered by undue influence from political circles. The participants indicated that more attention and prominence is given to contributions and suggestions from political and council officers than from village representatives. One of the officials remarked that:

> "The unstated expectation is that councils, as government agencies, should always do the bidding of the political party and government in power." [14]

The official further admitted that the lack of separation between partisan and government business not only compromised council activities but also created divisions and frustration among civil servants and between civil servants and people at the grassroots. The District Commissioner (DC) in the area provided an example of unnecessary tension created by a Member of Parliament that almost grinded a multi-million kwacha [15] project to a halt. According to the DC, the

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[13] Translated as "those in the opposition" to the governing political party
[14] There is a thin line between ruling political party and government in Malawi at any given time.
[15] Malawi's currency

parliamentarian, who was also a cabinet minister, did not like the contractor who had been offered a tender to undertake a project in the area. The legislator had dubbed the contractor an opposition sympathizer and, therefore, not worthy of a government contract. Demanding that the contract be cancelled and that a new contractor, suggested by the parliamentarian, be brought in, the project was delayed by more than half a year.

Another policy area that the DC emphasized was the need to institute language regulations to ensure that participants understand the proceedings. The official suggested adopting local languages, specific to districts, as official languages of communication in all council undertakings to accommodate those who did not speak or understand English. An observation of council meetings in session confirmed lack or minimal participation when the subject matter was being presented in English. Some participants were seen dozing off and indeed others struck mini conversations with their neighbors seeming to indicate that they were not paying much attention to what was going on. Regarding partnerships between councils and development agencies, one official suggested that non-governmental and international development agencies should consider dealing with District Councils directly on development projects rather than going through the central government.[16]

At least 13 of the 15 officials who were interviewed agreed that there was a need to revise participatory approaches adopted by the councils to ensure broad inclusion and genuine input from all stakeholders. The officials observed that although councils are mandated to make independent decisions on some developmental issues under the decentralization program, continued interference from the central government and ruling political parties affected local government operations. Of interest from the officials' observations was the fact that the way the council deliberative meetings were designed (constant war-like setting between government and the opposition), participants are forced to choose sides regardless of consequences to the common good.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal a lack of a unified cultural model as a foundation for the participation of district councils in democratic and development processes. Analyzed discourse by participants who were active members of three select

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[16] The District Commissioner was referring to a current situation where some international agencies such as USAID and the British DFID had withdrawn their budgetary support to the Malawi government due to some diplomatic disagreements and human rights issues. The official argued that sanctions such as those only tend to affect the poor and not those in power.

councils indicated that participants put more emphasis on difference than focusing on how to find ways to resolve problems. The representatives and officials that were interviewed all rationalized their attitude and perception to their role in relation to the functioning of the district council. Evident in the findings is a disparate and fragmented approach to development processes.

The views and attitude as expressed by the participants are indicative of significant patterns across the political and social landscape in Malawi. The study shows deeply rooted differences among representatives and officials along several lines: ethnic, political and socio-economic differences. Also evident from the study are feelings of frustration and helplessness by representatives to change the status quo. The findings support the general literature in the area of public deliberation in that participants in the selected councils approached issues depending on their background, socio-cultural and political affiliation (Pedrini, 2015).

The results, however, could facilitate mapping out possible ways of reaching a common understanding between the various opposing factions to deliberations. Parties perceived as fighting include: the state (sponsored by the governing political party) against the "opposition," local residents against public officials (usually coming from a different part of the country to work at district councils), and grassroots people versus technocrats. A mutual understanding could be reached by identifying the various areas in which participants share points of convergence. This study identifies areas of convergence across all three fronts as evident in the discourses regardless of the group or ideology they represent. The overarching point of agreement is the desire to implement projects that would bring development to their local community given a level playing field. Emergent democracies such as Malawi, should, therefore, strive to design their deliberative platforms by taking into consideration the various socio-cultural and political dynamics at play at the grassroots. By adopting Western-styled parliamentary procedures and policies, the Malawi local government system may be losing out on giving room to local knowledge, input, and the inclusion needed to facilitate deliberation toward development at the grassroots.

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