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# **An Analysis of the Political Economy of Schooling in Rural Malawi: Interactions among Parents, Teachers, Students, Chiefs and Primary Education Advisors**

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**An Analysis of the Political Economy of Schooling in Rural  
Malawi: Interactions among Parents, Teachers, Students, Chiefs and  
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**Abstract**

This study provides a rare ground-level picture of the interactions around schooling among parents, teachers, district-level brokers, as well as village chiefs in rural Malawi. Our primary objective is to provide insight into the everyday dynamics of village life surrounding issues of public primary schools and schooling in rural Malawi. Without understanding these dynamics, planning for systemic reform would be futile.

In the office of the head teacher in one of the schools we visited, a chart on the wall displayed the Pass/Fail data for the school for the previous year. Of 112 students in Standard 2 who took the end of term test, 86 passed and 26 failed, needing to repeat the grade. For Standard 1, 108 passed and 61 failed. In Standard 3, 135 passed, while 51 failed. For Standard 7, only 65 students took the test, of whom 15 failed. Of the 37 students who sat for the School Leaving Certificate Examination at the end of their eighth year at school, which determines

entry to secondary school, only 9 passed. Of these, none qualified for the elite National or Boarding secondary schools.

We know of no effective formal channels of accountability for such a massive failure- to-learn within the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology MoEST. At the local level, however, there are two gradations of accountability. First, although parents are rarely willing to make demands on behalf of their children's education, for fear of reprisal from the teachers; when they do protest, it is around issues of improper use of school funds. Second, collaborations among the Head Teacher, members of the School Management Committee, the chiefs in the school's area and the Ministry's Primary Education Advisor, have led to the development of a set of emergent accountability practices at local levels that have the potential to improve the quality of children's schooling. These relations are the primary focus of this research.

### **Acknowledgements**

This study of primary education in public schools in rural Malawi was produced by a team comprising Professor Susan Watkins (Team Leader), of University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) and University of Pennsylvania; Professor Adam Ashforth (co-Team Leader) of the University of Michigan; and Dr. Steve Sharra, a Senior Lecturer & Director of Research at the Catholic University of Malawi. We thank Professor Nancy Kendall, who has studied education in Malawi for many years and generously shared her knowledge with us. In developing this study, we had many questions for her, which she answered fully, despite her teaching responsibilities at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and the demands of her position as the Special Assistant to the Dean for Global Education and Professor of Educational Policy Studies, University of Wisconsin-Madison. Our principal acknowledgements are to our outstanding interviewers, Violet Boilo and Gertrude Finyiza, who conducted interviews at four schools per day for four weeks, while remaining constantly cheerful and energetic, and Wyson Chimesya, our sturdy driver who steered us all

safely along bumpy roads while sharing his own insights along the way. We also thank those whose comments improved our study: Diana Cammack, Monica Grant, Lant Pritchett, Barbara Mensch, Ann Swidler and Asma Zubairi, who contributed a graph to this study. And to the many parents and teachers in rural Malawian communities who welcomed conversations about their children and schools, we say “Thank you.”

## **Introduction**

In recent years, surveys of students in public primary schools in poor countries showed that the quality of education is abysmal. Dropouts and repeated grades are frequent: the World Bank estimates that in Malawi “less than one in eight students enrolled in standard 1 in 2012 will reach standard 8 in 2019” (Vaikalathur, El-Kogali et al. 2016). In Malawi as well as southern and eastern Africa, the scores of students taking international standardized tests show that many in the higher grades of primary school are both illiterate and innumerate (<http://www.sacmeq.org/ReadingMathScores>), see also (UNESCO 2017).

This study of schooling in rural Malawi was conducted in the context of global efforts to improve the quality of education in poor countries. The study is unusual in that it focuses on the interactions of rural parents, teachers, chiefs, and local actors in the civil service, asking: what do they have to say about schooling? We aimed to identify the norms and practices shaping interactions among actors at the grassroots of the educational system.

While the statistics on educational quality in Malawi are generally dire, we also want to emphasize that through the efforts of countless parents, teachers, and administrators, some students do in fact succeed in passing the critical exams in Standard 8, which permits them to enter secondary school. And some schools succeed, as measured by the number passing the exams. Our research in this study was not aimed at a comprehensive analysis of the factors leading to success. However, in order to illustrate some of the qualities it takes to succeed, and to celebrate those who make it happen, we have appended a *coda* to this report with portraits of people at each of the lowest levels of the system who are determined to create success, and are succeeding. We have also appended a series of extended narratives, drawn from the Malawi Journals Project<sup>1</sup> and interviews for this study,

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<sup>1</sup> The Malawi Journals Project (MJP), founded by Watkins and now directed by Ashforth, is an archive of texts written by rural Malawians, beginning in 1999 and funded through 2020, reporting conversations pertaining to HIV/AIDS that were witnessed by participant observers in everyday settings—at the maize mill, waiting for water at a borehole, at a bar, on a minibus. Young rural Malawians with a high school education were commissioned to act as participant observers. They were asked to keep diaries of conversations among rural

as well as excerpts from our researchers' fieldnotes, which reveal in detail some of the ways issues of accountability are resolved in everyday practice.

This study is based on stories that rural respondents told our interviewers and an analysis of conversations about schooling in the extensive archive of narratives found in the Malawi Journals Project (MJP). The stories are often vivid and compelling, but they are also long. Because the only way to understand the pattern of relations is through the details of interactions, while we summarize many of these stories in the body of this report, we tell some of these stories at length in the appendices to the report. Although we conducted a desk review of official documents and research publications on schooling in Malawi and other African countries, our study did not include interviews with high-level functionaries in the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST), because they do not appear in our stories of primary schooling in rural Malawi.

The standard explanation for poor education in primary schools given by educated Malawian elites (those who have at least a university degree) is a story of failure that starts from the top: students fail to learn because the government does not provide sufficient money for resources such as teaching materials and classrooms with a roof and chairs; there are not enough teachers, such that the student-teacher ratio may be 1 to a 100, or even more, and classes may be taught by unqualified teachers or teachers who lack motivation. Teaching in a rural school is seen as the occupation of last resort for those who cannot get a job elsewhere. Teachers' pay levels are unattractive—and, worse, their salaries may not be sent on time. Our perspective is different: we write about the failures in learning, but we also write about the successes achieved by the collaboration of parents, teachers, chiefs, and low-level civil servants. Together, they aim to improve their school, and they sometimes succeed. Previous research has shown that parents in Africa are

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residents pertaining to AIDS, love, sex, illness, life, death, and more – much more. This observational field journal project constitutes a unique archive not only of the epidemic in Africa but also of everyday life in rural villages at the turn of the millennium. The archive of anonymized texts can be found at <https://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/handle/2027.42/113269>.

desperate for their children to learn enough to get a job that will permit them to support their parents in old age (Watkins and Kaler 2015). These yearnings, however, are routinely thwarted—sometimes through the misbehaviour of a teacher, sometimes through the corruption of those higher on the occupational ladder – but mostly thoroughly the failings of the system itself. Sometimes, however, miracles occur: a donor organization or an individual donor provides money for school fees, or for building classrooms, toilets or teachers’ housing. But generally, the local actors are on their own, invisible to the education officials and donors in Lilongwe, the capital, who make policy and develop programs.

Our interviews with parents showed that most parents are deeply committed to their children’s success at school: when asked why, the answer was always that they depend on their children to support them in old age. “Success” in this context means passing the government exams at the end of primary school (Standard 8), getting selected to a secondary school and passing the school certificate examination, which would provide them with a credential that they can show to potential employers. It is hard to overestimate the importance of credentials: they not only determine access to economic opportunity but also define social status and personal honor (Frye 2012). In Malawi, social status is largely based on degrees. Those at the top have a PhD, ideally from a western university; at the bottom are teachers who have had at least a few years of secondary school. From the perspective of those with a university degree, to be uneducated is to be “lazy”. When we asked a friend what that meant, he responded with a moral criticism. “They don’t work hard to liberate oneself from pangs of poverty. Don’t work hard to complete given tasks on time. Don’t work hard to go extra mile or do additional task or free overtime work. Don’t work hard to make a change in own welfare. Running away from difficult tasks like farming and leaving women to do it instead. Staying at a market and drink tea or play *bawo* and not do any work but wait for piece jobs” (personal communication to Watkins, 2016). On this hierarchy, parents have no status at all, and, unless money is involved, typically defer to the teacher.

Although all children begin primary school, attrition starts in the early grades and is steep. Parents rarely claim poverty as reason for their child’s not attending school;

contributions to their church are a higher priority. Our interviewers, who go to church regularly, say that parents contribute 5 to 10 times more money to their church than to the school). Decisions to drop out of school are often, if not always, rational; parents who come to see that their child has no chance of passing the Standard 8 exams permit the child to drop out. Older students have a good deal of agency in making dropout decisions; they may simply leave school without parents' agreement. In the interviews conducted for this study, the main reason given for students dropping out was persistent repetition of classes: a student may have to repeat a class three or four times. This is costly for parents and embarrassing to overage students in classes with much younger children. Moreover, children who drop out are likely to lose some of the skills they had achieved (Soler-Hampejsek et al 2018). Despite the commitment of parents to their child's schooling, few pass the Standard 8 exams; those who do can go on to secondary school (if they qualify for a bursary or their parents or another relative can pay for the school fees) and, hopefully, better job prospects. We found no evidence of a demand for a higher quality of schooling other than pass/fail – e.g. that learning to read and to add and subtract well might be valuable skills, regardless of success in exams.

Since the passage of the Free Primary Education policy in the 1990's, there are no government-mandated school fees. Yet because the government does not provide enough funding, parents must pay a fee to the school at the beginning of each term, and they also have to contribute to school "development", which means making bricks to build classrooms and housing for teachers. In addition, when there is a need for other resources, such as a salary for a security guard, the Head Teacher calls for a meeting of the elected School Management Committee and the PTA: the PTA is not a venue for deliberation, but rather a way to "extract" contributions (Rose 2003). Correspondingly, parents have a sense of ownership. They are suspicious of the misuse of the funds by the Head Teacher or the School Committee, and may exercise voice if they learn that their suspicions are correct.

Chiefs (sometimes called Village Headmen) are central to schools and schooling in local communities. Chiefs are in a hierarchy of traditional leaders that is distinct,



and largely independent, from the hierarchy of government officials. This provides the chief, who is considered to have “ownership” of his or her village, with considerable autonomy. Most chiefs are considered by their village members to be “good”, but some are “bad” --they do not fulfill their responsibilities. Good chiefs are often highly involved with the school: they resolve conflicts, visit frequently, participate with the Head Teacher and the elected School Management Committee in determining the school needs, and mobilize and monitor labor for development activities. In order to be effective, School Committees need to be transparent and devote time to holding meetings with community members, none of which can be done without the support of the chief.

Teaching is widely said to be the profession of last resort, especially in rural areas where housing for teachers may not be available close to the school. In rural villages, however, teachers are considered as elites. They face many difficulties: only a few have housing near the school, the others walk, bicycle or take a bus. To make things worse, their salaries are often late (as are the salaries in urban areas). To be a successful teacher requires extraordinary dedication, energy, and imagination, in addition to ordinary expertise in subject matter. Some go out of their way to follow up with parents about a student’s schoolwork and behavior. The Head Teacher of the school is a pivotal figure in the success of a school.

The successful Head Teacher is a leader and a diplomat; in addition, a “good” Head Teacher acts as a broker who attracts additional resources to the school, thus contributing to the school’s success. Support for Head Teachers is also provided by civil service brokers--Primary Education Advisors, Inspectors, and District Education Managers. The function of these brokers is to provide support and oversight to the schools; however, they are unable to fulfill their responsibilities because the government provides too little petrol to make regular visits to the schools in their geographic areas of responsibility. Thus, support for these, PEAs, Inspectors and District Education Managers have little interaction with school staff—and parents have none.

Teachers do not appear to consider themselves accountable for the failures of their students. Rather, accountability is all about the use of school funds. Parents exercise ownership of development funds—they pay school fees and they do development by moulding bricks for classrooms, teachers' houses, and latrines. The elected School Committees can be effective in providing accountability for school funds. In some circumstances, the parents exercise voice rather than deference: when teachers punish their children excessively or sexually abuse them, when teachers are absent too often, or when they are drunk. The most spectacular example of parents exercising voice was when parents, in conjunction with the chief, organized a public march to protest the frequent absences of the Head Teacher. The teachers protested by refusing to teach; the parents and the chief then organized a public march to protest the teachers' behavior.

## **SETTING**

Malawi is a small and exceptionally poor country, with a GNI per capita of \$320 in 2016, according to the World Bank (<https://data.worldbank.org/country/malawi>). About 85% of the population survive through subsistence agriculture, which for a substantial proportion of the rural population does not provide sufficient food for the last months before the next harvest, creating a several-month "hunger season". Most of Malawi's rural poor live in mud brick houses with thatched roofs clustered together in villages governed by "village headmen", colloquially known as "chiefs".<sup>2</sup> Women may have to walk miles to get water and firewood, paraffin lamps provide light, health is poor. Life is chronically insecure. Villagers face uncertainty over whether their harvests will be sufficient, whether they and their children will survive famines. The AIDS epidemic has been one of the worst in the world (UNAIDS 2017).

Malawi has historically been divided into three administrative regions: North, Center and South, each of which are divided into districts (in recent years a fourth region

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout this report we shall refer to these authorities primarily as "chiefs".

has emerged, splitting the South to create a Southeastern region). We chose to conduct the study in one district in each region, Rumphi in the North, Mchinji in the Center, and Balaka in the South. We chose these districts both because they differ in predominant ethnicities and because a study by Nancy Kendall in 2000, six years after the Free Primary Education policy was adopted, found that there were striking differences by ethnicity across the regions (Kendall 2007). By 2017, when our interviews were conducted, there appeared to be fewer differences across ethnicity. In addition, Watkins has more than twenty years of experience working in these regions, having conducted several survey rounds of the Malawi Longitudinal Survey of Families and Health in these districts, and was familiar with places where the team could stay; Ashforth has worked for more than a decade in Balaka District.

Many Malawians aspire for their children to get a job in the formal economy promising a regular income. For even the most menial jobs with a regular pay check, such as a cleaner, a credential testifying to the applicant's level of education is needed. The most basic of these is the national Malawi Primary School Leaving Exam (MPSLE), taken at the end of Standard 8. Next is the Malawi Secondary Certificate of Education (MSCE), certifying successful completion of secondary school. A tiny minority manage to get tertiary qualifications. For most parents, the *quality* of learning is largely irrelevant (Watkins and Kaler 2015). They see no practical benefits to literacy or numeracy for their own sakes—reading about new agricultural techniques, or calculating the prices of crops, for example. What matters is the credential. But jobs are few. Even those with a MSCE find it difficult to get a job: they stay in the village, “just sitting”, awaiting the chance of a job.

The statistics are appalling—and even more so, given that many students repeat grades. Of grade 2 students, more than 89% could not read a single word of a short text; only 2% could correctly perform a 2-digit subtraction (WDR 2017, p.71). Of grade 6 students, 75% are innumerate and 64% are illiterate (Spaull & Taylor 2014). If parents with a child in Standard 1 were fully aware of just how unlikely it

is that their child will complete eight years and pass the Standard 8 exams, it is likely that fewer would send their children to school.

Although parents do know neighbors whose children failed the crucial Standard 8 exams, they remain optimistic about their own children. When we asked why they were sending their child to school, almost all said "to get a job so that he/she can take care of me later." We asked what job they would like their child to have. The list is varied: a nurse, a driver, a policeman, a Catholic sister at a mission - though rarely a teacher. As one father put it, when we asked him why he would not want his child to become a teacher, he replied: "teachers are like the slaves of a country". Few children, however, achieve their parents' dreams.

Parents recognize that there is an opportunity cost to sending their child to school: their children have less time to work on the family's land and other chores, and more of the family's limited income could be spent on necessities such as soap, salt, and relish to accompany *nsima*. Schooling has other costs as well. Though primary schooling is formally free, schools levy a variety of informal fees and village parents are expected to spend time in unpaid labor, such as making bricks to build classrooms. Students are also expected to wear uniforms, the cost of which for the very poor can be prohibitive. But, while they aspire for their children to escape the poverty of village life, parents are also realistic. When they see that their children are failing, and repeating classes year after year, they are eventually willing to let their children drop out; similarly, a student who has repeated the lower grades so often that she finds herself by far the oldest person in the classroom, will take the initiative and drop out. In recent years, international organizations and NGOs have mounted "Keep girls in school" campaigns. But when a child is sitting in the back rows of a classroom with 100 students, while the teacher focuses on ones she thinks will pass the exam, it doesn't make sense to the parents to continue paying for schooling. They do, however, regret the sunk costs, the waste of money.

## APPROACH AND METHODS

Our approach is to retell the stories that our interviewers, and sometimes ourselves, heard from parents, teachers, school officials, and chiefs, about issues pertaining to schools and schooling. These are supplemented with stories found in the archive of the Malawi Journals Project.

During a month of fieldwork in October and November, 2017, the *modus operandi* of our interviewers, Violet and Gertrude, was to go to a school and start conversations. The driver would pick up Violet and Gertrude early in the morning, and drive them to the catchment area of a school. Gertrude would focus on teachers, seeking someone who was not teaching at the time, explain what the study was about, and ask for consent, which was always given. Violet's interviews focused on parents who had children in the school. Typically, she would walk to village. When she met someone on the way there they would exchange greetings, she would explain why she was there, and ask if she could talk with them. Without exception, when she told the parent that she was interested in education, the parent would welcome the opportunity to talk, inviting her to squeeze together on a bench on the veranda, often beckoning neighbors to join them. The interviews were conducted in three districts, one in the North, where the Tumbuka are predominant, one in the Center, where the Chewa are predominant, and one in the South, where the Yao are dominant.

At the end of the day, the interviewers would write the stories that the teachers or the parents told. We read these immediately, providing suggestions for future conversations. Ashforth and Watkins also conducted more formal interviews with teachers, Primary Education Advisors (PEAs), District Education Managers (DEMs), and others involved in primary education during preliminary fieldwork in July/August of 2017. In total, we conducted 83 interviews, as well as some *ad hoc* conversations with people we happened to meet, for example at a lodge where we were staying.

When our interviewers told those whom they met about our interest in education, everyone had a story to tell. The stories are about such things as parents struggling to pay school fees, about good teachers and bad teachers, the behavior of students, or the Primary Education Advisor who was suspected of stealing a great deal of money, or about the chief who organized a vegetable garden so that the learners would have something in their stomachs when they begin the school day. Teachers and others employed in the school system would invariably tell of the “challenges” they face and their struggles to make the system work.

We organize these stories under four interlocking and overlapping themes:

*1. The Logic of the Dream: Parents Assess Their Children’s Futures*

*2. Money and the Making of Trust: Local Accountability for the Raising and Disbursement of Funds*

*3. The Centrality of Chiefs*

*4. The Dynamics of Deliberation and Disputation*

## **PRIMARY EDUCATION IN MALAWI**

When Malawi gained independence in 1964, under President Hastings Kamuzu Banda (1964-1994), educating the children of the poor was not a priority. The number of students in primary school totalled about 360,000 (of a population of about 4 million at the time) (Kendall 2004). In 1981, Banda established and subsidized the Kamuzu Academy – nicknamed the “Eton in the bush” - for a small number of students who were to become the cadres of the civil service. During the Banda era, particularly in the 1980s, enrolment in primary schools increased, from

a total of about 850,000 in 1980 to 1.9 million in 1994, when the first multi-party elections were held. Setting what would become a pattern, Banda prioritized secondary and tertiary education, not universal primary education.

In 1994, following promises made during the election campaign, President Bakili Muluzi introduced a policy of Free Primary Education (FPE). The FPE policy was adopted abruptly, with virtually no planning. Enrollments of children of primary school age surged from 1.9 million to 2.9 million almost overnight (Malawi 1995). Ministry staff and donors had advised against such haste on the grounds that Malawi was not yet prepared to vastly increase schooling. They were quite correct. The government had to hire hundreds of teachers without qualifications, build classrooms, and provide housing for the teachers (especially in rural areas). Latrines also had to be constructed. The primary school system is still grappling with this expansion, even as the population has continued rapid growth. Primary school enrollment now stands at about 4.6 million, of a population of 18 million (MoEST 2016). While most teachers now have a qualification, there are still not enough classrooms, teacher housing is inadequate, and shortages of supplies are the norm. Despite intense donor activity and support, funding has never been adequate.

The government of Malawi has always emphasized an active role for the community in primary schools. Under Banda, community participation primarily consisted of the School Board levying school fees to maintain the school and requiring parents to contribute *thangata*, mandatory free labor, to the school. Currently, community participation consists of attending Parent-teacher meetings (PTA), voting for members of the School Management Committee (or participating on the committee), and contributing “development funds” (e.g. money for construction, hiring a watchman, or a volunteer teacher) and labor to the school. PTA meetings are convened periodically, with great variations among schools, when the School Management Committee decides to raise funds from the community. The labor contributed by parents is primarily for the construction of classrooms and teacher housing. It typically consists of moulding bricks from locally available clay, which

are then fired (“burned”, in the local parlance) with locally gathered firewood, as well as gathering sand and fetching water for mixing concrete.

As the education system expanded under FPE, donors stepped in to provide funds to promote system-wide reforms intended to address textbook procurement, curriculum reform, repetition rates, teacher training, resource allocation, and cost-recovery schemes, as well as reform of the central ministry which they considered to be an untenable organizational structure through which to foster reform.<sup>3</sup> Banda had largely kept the donors at arm's length. Muluzi and subsequent presidents did not. Because of the status of the country's economy and the new government's approach to donor funding, however, the government lost some control. Donors have influenced education plans and policies for decades (Mundy 2002). Donors also provide the bulk, over 80%, of funding for infrastructure development in schools: 60% of donor support goes for construction in primary schools (Milner, Mulera et al. 2011).

The vast bulk, 84%, of Malawi's primary education budget is expended on salaries, mostly for teachers. Of the remainder, a substantial part goes to teachers' and officials' “allowances”, which are widely considered salary supplements by those receiving them, bringing salary expenditure closer to 92% of the total primary education budget, according to a World Bank estimate. Little remains for financing other inputs necessary for delivering quality education (Vaikalathur, El-Kogali et al. 2016).

Public funds for individual school budgets are now decentralized through Districts in the form of School Improvement Grants. In principle, these grants were meant to encourage community members to participate in the planning and implementation of community priorities. As with other policies, practices may be different (Rakner, Mukubvu et al. 2004, Pritchett 2013). In practice, the grants are paltry, averaging

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<sup>3</sup> For an excellent analysis of the politics of donor activity in the education sector during the period 2008-2010, see Savage, L. (2012). Understanding ownership in the Malawi education sector: “Should we tell them what to do or let them make the wrong decision?”. PhD, Cambridge University.



between MK600-700 thousand per school (less than US\$1,000 in 2017). According to the World Bank, this works out to \$4.20 per student per year. Most of the schools we visited were receiving the equivalent of US\$1 per student per year, or less. In line with the rubrics of the National Education Sector Plan, primary schools are required to allocate 40% of this grant to activities relating to “access & equity” (in practice, buildings and maintenance), 50% to “quality and relevance” (textbooks and teaching materials) and 10% to “governance and management” (e.g. for teachers’ transport to trainings) (MoEST 2008). It is unlikely that this mandate is scrupulously followed. In any event, the sums are so small that schools are forced to perpetually seek alternative sources of funding.

Some lucky schools do receive resources from Non-Governmental Organizations. A primary school had 22 NGOs with projects at the school, most of them focused on girls’ education. While the resources were very welcome, they were minor: some teaching materials, pencils and notebooks, paying for the construction of a toilet for girls. In return, however, the Head Teacher and some selected teachers were enlisted to assist in managing multiple projects, thus taking them away from their assigned duties (Pot, H. 2018).

Malawi’s public education expenditure is one of the most inequitable in the world; resources to children from the poorest households make up less than 10% of the share going to the richest, which is largely attributed to the public subsidization of tertiary education (Gruber and Kosack 2014, Ilie and Rose 2016). Despite the promise of Free Primary Education, primary education is not free. Head teachers, in conjunction with the elected School Management Committee (SMC), make up a budget by assessing school needs and calculating a per parent “contribution”. Parents then must pay this amount to the school; if they do not, the student may be “chased” from the school, or have their exam results withheld, until the parent pays. Parents must also participate in “development work”. Like the Banda’s *thangata*, parents are charged with constructing classrooms and houses for the teachers.<sup>i</sup> If further needs arise, such as hiring a security guard or a volunteer teacher, the head teacher, the members of the School Management Committee, the

PTA and the Village Head meet to select a date for a meeting with the parents, the purpose of which is to raise funds from the parents. Parents grumble to each other about these impositions, but only rarely to school authorities, for fear of reprisal.

The MoEST has overall responsibility for the education sector, and, technically, accountability, for supervision and quality assurance. The MoEST is largely invisible to the parents and teachers, however, and vice versa. The inspectors from the Inspection Directorate and the District Education Manager (DEMs) visit a school now and then; the PEA is supposed to visit each school once per term: both of these, however, are constrained by a lack of transportation to the schools, as there are insufficient funds for petrol. Within these guidelines, there is scope for participation and the local shaping of school priorities.

The major local actors in the Malawian primary school system are Head Teachers, Deputy Head Teachers, members of the School Management Committee and the PTA, and the Primary Education Advisor (PEA). All of these are far from the offices of the Ministry for Education, Science and Technology. The hierarchy of delegation begins with the Minister and descends through the delegation chain to the Principal Secretary to the Inspector Directorate (inspectors for primary, secondary and tertiary education) and from there to the District Education Manager (DEM), from the DEM to a PEA whose task is to visit and support schools in his/her area. All these are responsible, and technically, accountable for the quality of education in primary schools. Mandates, money and resources for the school go down the chain, paperwork (reports, audits) go up the chain. The political economy, however, is such that money and resources may move sideways—and disappear. In Malawi's neo-patrimonial environment, in which political parties consume massive amounts of money, government funds that could improve schools flow through Big Men whose corrupt deals pad the pockets of their clients, and civil service appointments are nepotistic. As Cammack argues, Malawi's political settlement of competitive clientelism has meant that the elite benefit individually and have "established a social contract with the population that mostly maintains just enough services to sustain social conciliation" (Cammack 2017).

Outside the formal ladder of delegation are the village chiefs (the lowest level of the hierarchy of traditional leaders), who are responsible for peace and harmony in their communities. Chiefs are the “owners” of their village, and thus have a great deal of power--presiding over communal deliberations, allocating resources, and resolving conflicts, and often imposing fines for infractions of community norms. In extreme cases, he, or sometimes she, can deny access to burial grounds, a most serious sanction, or even expel a person from the village. Chiefs, as we argue below, are central figures in the organization of schooling in Malawian villages, yet are largely ignored in the policy literature on education.

Several studies have suggested that the village chief’s role in improving school effectiveness is far more influential than the voice of parents or the School Management Committee or the Parent-Teacher Association (Rose 2003, Eggen 2011, O’Neil and Cammack 2014). Chiefs are also important brokers, bringing foreign aid to their villages by approving NGO interventions, many of which are for constructing classrooms. The chiefs whose villages are close to the road often display heaps of moulded bricks to tempt the outsiders to provide resources. Our research, similarly, would suggest that if there is ever to be “voice” in the local communities, it would be organized and led by chiefs.

### **ACCOUNTABILITY: National and Local**

Questions of finance are by far the greatest concern of all involved in primary education in Malawi. Everyone, from policy-makers at the highest levels to parents, teachers, and students in villages, agrees that the system is under-resourced. Funding levels are inadequate in the extreme. Decentralization policies have devolved what little funds are available – probably about 8% of the education budget (Vaikalathur, El-Kogali et al. 2016)- to District level authorities, and thence to schools directly, through the ministry’s School Improvement Grant. Public funds are frequently skimmed, or completely diverted to private ends, before reaching schools. This leaves schools dependent upon raising resources from impoverished communities in ways that belie the promise of “free” primary education. As we

discuss below, the widely, if not universally, levied “development” funds constitute a significant but largely invisible pillar of support for primary education in Malawi.

Despite well-crafted policies designed to improve the quality of education, in our research in rural Malawi we found no evidence of efforts to hold the MoEST or anyone else on the delegation chain, accountable for children failing to learn. As a civil servant, a teacher cannot be easily fired. Teachers are occasionally dismissed for egregious misbehavior, such as excessive physical punishment or impregnating a student or extended absenteeism. Typically, however, problematic teachers are simply transferred from one school to another. As we shall see, however, there is a strong demand for accountability at the local level in relation to the raising and disbursement of “development” funds for schools.

Applying Pritchett’s “four by four” diagnostic tool for assessing the accountability of basic education systems to Malawi’s primary school system paints an unpropitious picture of an incoherent system for promoting quality educational outcomes (Pritchett 2015). To our knowledge:

- The MoEST has not made available information to reward/punish those who deliver, or fail to deliver, services. The average teacher spends less than four hours per day in the classroom; of these hours, the teachers are off-task for 20 percent in an average period (Vaikalathur, El-Kogali et al. 2016). Material inputs—textbooks for the children, chairs for the classroom, chalk for the teachers--are often delayed or skimpier than promised.
- Frontline providers (teachers in primary schools) are neither autonomous nor effective in their main goal: getting the majority of students to pass the crucial exams at end of primary school.
- There is a modicum of client voice and power at the primary schools: parents do sometimes complain to the Head Teacher or the School Management Committee (usually about someone “eating” money, a term for theft). But client voice stops there: at the local level, few are prepared to challenge those of higher status.

- The Civil Society Education Coalition, an umbrella body of NGOs working in education, lobbies politicians and policy-makers, and puts pressure on the government through advocacy and media activism. More potent would be lobbying by the teachers' union, since teachers account about 40% of the civil service (the vast majority are primary school teachers), which gives them political clout. However, when the union protests, it is about both the amount and the delays in payment.

We did not find evidence that either teachers or the MoEST brokers consider themselves to be accountable for the quality of learning. While there have been numerous education plans and policies developed in Malawi since 1994, with periodic revisions of curricula, there have been no credible attempts to hold schools accountable for the quality of education provided. More generally, the MoEST appears to have no formal channels through which citizens could complain or make demands to the ministry about anything related to education—even if they wanted to.

An incisive report by O'Neil et al on governance and local systems in Malawi points to the culprits of policy incoherence and governance failures:

We identify policy incoherence as the principal cause of the functional fragmentation found in local government and in sectors at local levels, and of the unclear mandates and overlapping jurisdictions that characterize local government. While variations do exist across the country, services and time, these are caused in large part by the informality of local governance, which gives rise to ad hoc systems adopted by a succession of district and city executives, and by the characteristics of particular goods and services. Policy incoherence is a reflection of collective action failures at the level of central government. To a much lesser degree and more locally, it reflects the way information asymmetries undermine the functioning of principal-agent relationships. Policy incoherence also shapes incentives that drive the choices and behaviours of local officials and frontline providers, which undermine their ability to work together to improve services.

Further, we argue that these governance failures arise directly out of the deeply entrenched political settlement that has been crafted since the democratic transition. It is characterised by competitive clientelism, which shapes the social contract between state and society. Patronage relationships reach from the executive through intermediaries to villagers and urbanites. Some forms of donor aid may have unintentionally helped entrench the political settlement. (O'Neil and Cammack 2014).

The state's charge to schools can be summarized thus: enroll all who apply, regardless. The MoEST has mostly focused on provision of resources, primarily teachers' salaries, seeking in return accounts of the numbers of teachers employed and learners enrolled, pass rates, and dropout rates. Several efforts to gauge standards through the administration of tests such as the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) and the Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Measuring Education Quality (SACMEQ) have revealed the dismal performance of Malawian primary schools, finding that Malawian primary schools rank at or near the bottom in most measures of literacy and numeracy (Milner, Mulera et al. 2011). However, despite efforts by national policy makers and donors to improve education, in our research we found no evidence at the local level of meaningful accountability for the quality of education.

State funds, other than salaries, are supposed to be distributed to schools via District Commissioners' offices, through the mechanism of the School Improvement Grant. In practice, however, many schools we visited find that they do not receive these funds in a timely way or in the full promised amount. It seems that in at least some districts officials are siphoning off funds before they reach the schools. In the office of one Primary Education Advisor (PEA), for example, our researcher found the PEA counting out large piles of cash in preparation for deposit into schools' bank accounts. In principle, the PEA has no business being involved in the financing of the schools. Perhaps coincidentally, this enterprising PEA had managed to build a large well-furnished house and establish a thriving business by building and renting shops in the District capital.

Those on the Ministry's delegation chain are primarily accountable for auditing through formal structures such as the Directorate of Inspection and Advisory Services, which has inadequate funding to regularly inspect all the schools. Thus, the MoEST relies on paperwork. In the most recent national education statistics report, for example, there are 32 tables of data for primary education. Most of them concern matters such as the number of primary schools by location and geographic division, age and gender of students, numbers of teachers, and so on. There are also tables of the number dropouts by age, by gender, by reason for dropping, by orphan status, by grade at drop out, etc. (MoEST 2015). None of these are relevant for assessing the *quality* of the education provided—e.g. the percent of students in Standard 6 can read and write at grade level.

In terms of the management of teachers, the front-line providers of education, the primary responsibility delegated is to be in class and teach to the curriculum. Head Teachers, when functioning effectively, make efforts to reduce teacher absenteeism, though they can pay little attention to time-on-task monitoring of teachers or assessment of their ability to impart knowledge and skills other than those measured in examinations. PEA's are supposed to support and advise teachers on pedagogy, though they typically only visit each school in their zone one day per term, provided they have fuel for transport, so have limited ability to improve quality. The Ministry provides in-service training for teachers, which is popular when allowances are paid for attendance, though few are able to access these services and there is scant effort to follow-up on the effectiveness and support the impact of training. (For insights into the role of Head Teachers and PEAs, see the relevant sections of the "Portraits of Success" in the CODA to this report.)

Motivation, across the board, for administrators, teachers, community leaders, and parents alike, is limited. The system provides few incentives for teachers or schools to succeed, either in raising their pass rates or by any other metric. Facing often impossible challenges, teachers are motivated solely by their intrinsic desire to see their students succeed. When speaking of teacher quality, parents and teachers alike make a distinction between the "born teacher", devoted to students through

an innate love of teaching, and the “made teacher” going through the motions simply to do a job.

Most parents are highly motivated to see their children succeed. For all the parents with whom we spoke, however, success is measured by a single metric: Passing the Standard 8 exam at the end of primary school. Parents with the wherewithal to contemplate sending their children to private school wrestle with the calculus of finance, often to an excruciating extent. Everyone we interviewed saw private primary schools as better than the local public primary school. The only issue holding parents back from transferring their child to the private sector is: *how to pay?*

We found no indication that mastery of basic skills, such as reading, writing, or arithmetic, were valued for their own sake. Life in Malawian villages offers few opportunities to read. Few homes have books. Because of shortages, most children do not get the opportunity to bring their schoolbooks home. Bibles are the most commonly found book in Christian households. Newspapers are rarely seen. The demand for literacy, understandably, is low. Our interviewer Gertrude spent some time talking with primary school students about cellphones, to see whether they identified the device with a need to be able to read. At this time, while most children know about phones, they do not seem to think of them as texting devices which require literacy. This might change as smartphones become more common.

When Head Teachers are successful as brokers in mobilizing additional outside resources for their schools, there is some evidence that teacher motivation improves (see the portrait of the successful Head Teacher in the *CODA*). Apart from the threat of dismissal for teachers who are chronically absent without permission and possible criminal conviction for teachers who “defile” or impregnate female students, there are few effective sanctions for poor performance.

There is no formal performance appraisal system where teachers are evaluated. However, a DEM can act on a teacher reported for poor performance or breaking the law, if a head teacher reports the issue. A head teacher can also caution a teacher if the offence warrants it. In extreme cases, when a head teacher has



refused to take action, communities have been known to directly confront the teacher. There have been cases where a community has intervened and banned a teacher from teaching at a school until a DEM takes action.

## **THEME 1: THE LOGIC OF THE DREAM: PARENTS ASSESSING THEIR CHILDREN'S FUTURES**

Without understanding what drives parents to send their children to school, and why they permit their children to give up on schooling, proposals for changing the education system will fail. For a chance of success, the architecture of plans for systemic change must mesh with understandings of the meanings of education as perceived by civil servants in the MoEST, by teachers in classrooms, by parents of students and potential students, and by the students themselves.

Formal education is an identity project as well as an instrumental tool. An important shared understanding of education is that to be educated through formal schooling is a symbol of *being*, not doing. Credentials and evidence of schooling are ways of marking a social distinction between those who have the right to speak first or to speak authoritatively, and those who do not (Watkins and Kaler 2015). What this means is that parents are unlikely to challenge a teacher. Moreover, simply being someone who *seeks* more education confers status. When Watkins and a colleague were chatting with two young (late teens, early twenties) cooks at the dilapidated rural guest house where we were staying, we asked whether they were in school. One said “No”, the other said “Yes.” When we asked how he could both work and go to school, he said that he had not actually been attending classes recently, because “I don’t have money for the fees.”<sup>4</sup>

Schooling also generates *social capital*, by granting the possessor access to networks of potentially useful patrons or colleagues. Having a university degree

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<sup>4</sup> Much of this section is drawn from “A Puzzle With Many Pieces”, 2015, S. Watkins and A. Kaler, RISE website.

means that the graduate has met and mingled with the most important and influential members of his or her generation, connections that may be drawn upon on in later life. These connections are particularly important in countries like Malawi where there are many more seekers of jobs in the formal economy than there are positions. Schooling also serves as a marker of existing social capital. Educational attainment in many African contexts is rarely an individual achievement – each successful student relies on a network of friends and family to help him or her meet the demands of education, not least the payment of school fees. We have even been approached by strangers asking us to pay school fees. Educated Malawians with a good job in the formal economy are constantly besieged by poor relatives who do not have enough money for school fees. They grumble, but the widespread ethic in Malawi, as well as Africa generally, is one of redistribution and reciprocity: Thus, the wealthier Malawians find it difficult to refuse their relatives and clients (Chabal 2009, Swidler and Watkins 2017).

After African countries became independent, job opportunities for the educated grew rapidly with the expansion of civil service bureaucracies, which political leaders saw as new opportunities for patronage. Following the era of austerity and structural adjustment in the 1980s and 1990s, the dream of employment and a regular salary for many Africans has been projected onto NGOs rather than the state or the private sector. But in Malawi, as in many other countries, educational opportunities have grown faster than the number of available jobs (Ferguson 2015) (Filmer and Fox 2014). Such is the desperation in Malawi that even short-term work as a survey interviewer is in great demand, with three to four times as many applicants as positions. Unemployed secondary school graduates often resort to volunteering for an NGO, in the hopes that working for free may lead to a paid job with the NGO (Swidler and Watkins 2017).

In our interviews, we found that Malawian parents want their children to be educated, as demonstrated by a credential, which is perceived as the only, or at least the best, route to a job that will allow the child, eventually, to support his or her parents. The only credential that matters at the primary level, both for employment as well as progression to secondary school, is passing the Standard 8

exams. A primary certificate qualifies one for a job as a cleaner. Although a cleaner does not need to read, write, or do math, the certificate signals to an employer that one is educated and thus morally worthy (Frye 2012). A secondary certificate qualifies one for an unsteady job, such as an interviewer for a survey.

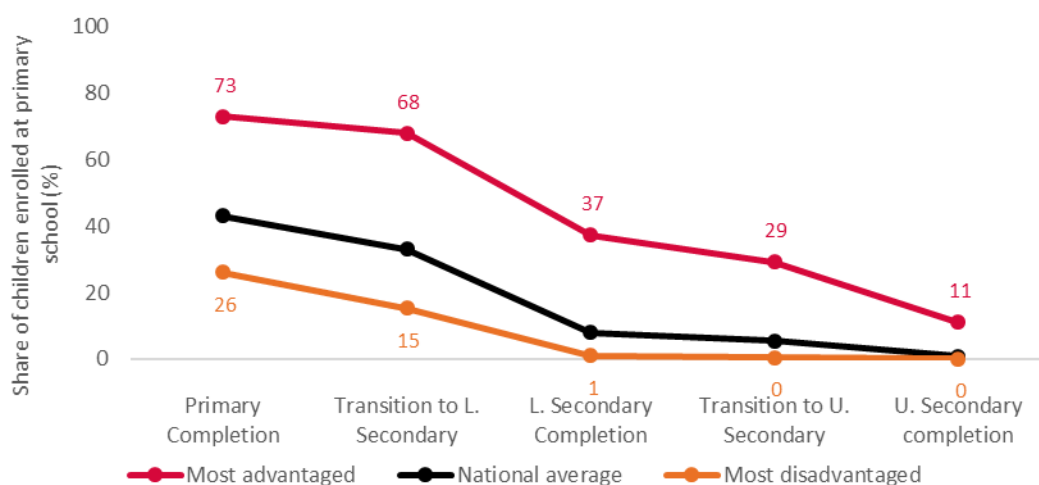


Figure 1 is based on data from the 2015 Malawi Demographic and Health Survey; it was produced by Asma Zubairi. Although all children begin school, attrition is steep. Only 26% of the most disadvantaged children—those living in rural areas—complete primary education, and students perform very poorly when tested: Malawi’s sixth graders placed last in a 2013 regional assessment, and most fourth graders are unable to pluralize the word “mango” or carry out simple additions such as “100 + 20” (<http://blogs.worldbank.org/education/smarter-way-keep-teachers-malawi-s-remote-schools> 23 January 2018). Few are admitted to the University of Malawi, the premier public university, let alone the other three newer public universities.

From the perspective of policymakers, dropping out of school is almost universally considered a failure. At a systemic level, this is a reasonable assumption. However, in a context such as Malawi, where the system is, at best, struggling, dropping out

of school, even in early grades, can be a rational strategy for parents and students alike. Moreover, in our research we found that children themselves exercise a great deal more agency in decisions about dropping out than is generally acknowledged. The reasons for dropping out change as the children proceed from one grade to another. Bright-eyed children, perhaps wearing new clothes and walking to school with an older friend, enter Standard 1 ready to learn. But the cohort is quickly culled. Class size in Standard 1 is huge—as many as 100, and often many more. How can teachers possibly teach so many five- and six-year-olds? The teacher acts strategically: she identifies kids whom she thinks might possibly do well, the others are left to their own devices, or sent out to play. Some parents are o.k. with this. If the school has a feeding program, their child will eat, and for some mothers, school is welcome day care. She can go about her business.

When the report cards come out at the end of the school year, parents whose child has failed have a decision to make: should they allow, or even encourage, their child to drop out?

In Standard 1, the primary reason for dropping out is “family responsibilities”. Presumably, the parents of kids who were sent out to play while the teacher focused on those she thought could learn, were not optimistic that the child would do well, and perhaps even relieved that the child could help with younger siblings at home—and that they don’t have to pay school fees. This is followed by long distances—homes may be far from the school-- students complain of being tired even before the class starts. After Standard 4, when girls had reached puberty, there is a large jump in marriage for girls as a reason for dropping out (Education, Management and Information System, MoEST, 2014, Table 2.11).

What the MoEST’s survey misses is that many children take the initiative: they, sometimes without the permission of their parents, just drop out due to lack of interest and, probably more important, repeatedly failing courses, such that they know that they will never be able to pass the crucial Standard 8 exams--so what’s the point in staying in school? In several interviews, the parent was eager for her daughter to stay in school, but the daughter said no, “I know I am dallow [dull].” For girls, and sometimes boys, dropping out is quickly followed by marriage,

especially for girls who cannot support themselves with the piece-work jobs available to boys. For boys, the motive for leaving school was more likely to be “loss of interest”—shorthand for the many factors that make continuing with schooling perceived as a waste of time)

Recently, many non-governmental organizations have mounted projects to address what they call an “Epidemic of Child Marriage” by advocating that girls should remain in school until they are 18 (nothing is said about boys). Yet the conditions in rural Malawi are not propitious for delaying girls’ marriage. For a girl who drops out of school, her opportunities to earn are largely confined to subsistence agriculture and small-scale retail, such as selling vegetables in a market. The alternative is to marry. Since girls see pregnancy as a way to secure a husband who would support her (Poulin 2007), delaying marriage may increase the proportion of births that are out of wedlock, potentially leading to an epidemic of unmarried mothers (Watkins, Zulu E. et al. 2015).

## **THEME 2: MONEY AND THE MAKING OF TRUST: LOCAL ACCOUNTABILITY FOR THE RAISING AND DISPERSMENT OF FUNDS**

### *The Invisible Micro-Politics of School Funding*

In its 2016 report on primary education in Malawi, the World Bank describes two channels through which money reaches a school: the Primary School Improvement Programme (PSIP), with its School Improvement Plans (SIP) and School Improvement Grants (SIG): “the SIP can be considered the school’s budget, with the SIG constituting the total amount of eligible funds that the primary school can spend” (Vaikalathur, El-Kogali et al. 2016). The report nowhere mentions, however, the money raised directly from communities, under the rubric *chitukuko*, or “development funds.”

In our discussions with parents, teachers, Head Teachers, Primary Education Advisors, and District Education Managers, the demands on communities for money to fund school “development” occupied center stage. Virtually no-one at the village

level can talk for very long about schools and schooling without referring to the incessant demand for contributions to “development funds”, which most parents find indistinguishable from the “fees” charged by secondary schools and which used to be imposed at primary school level before “Free Primary Education” was introduced in 1994. As one parent in a rural village put it, when asked about these funds:

*Yes, we pay MK1,500 per year as school fees. We know it is school fees, although they are saying that it is a 'school fund'. They were saying that it is free primary school, but they are lying. Why are they asking us to pay the money?" (Interview, Violet Boillo, Rumphu, October 30, 2017.)*

The politics surrounding the extraction, expenditure, and accountability for these fees in local communities surrounding primary schools can be extraordinarily complex in their particular details. In broad outline, however, while many parents say they have no alternative than to just feel the “pain” of paying these fees, the demand for accountability in relation to the raising and disbursement of these funds is strong. These local politics are likely to be invisible to policy makers at the national level, as evidenced by the otherwise excellent and authoritative Word Bank study– hence our term “micro-politics”. In her 2003 study of “participation” in Malawi primary education, Rose argues that “in practice, community participation is often linked with the ability to mobilise, and make more efficient use of, resources” (Rose 2003). We have been unable to find any definitive accounting of the extent of these fund-raising efforts at either the District or national level in Malawi. Yet, we argue, these politics of funding reveal indigenous processes of accountability that policy-makers, and policy-implementers, at all levels ignore at their peril.

It is clear that no matter how impoverished the community, their usual financial contribution to local schools exceeds that supplied by the state in the form of School Improvement Grants. Communities also are predisposed to distrust anyone collecting and managing these moneys. Thus, the micro-politics surrounding the raising and disbursement of these funds are a major factor in both village life and school success, such as it is. Parents invest considerable time in establishing

procedures for communicating with school authorities and local “chiefs” (village headmen and group village headmen) while monitoring expenditures and related works, as well as seeking restitution of misused funds. Over time, these procedures have become normative: community members have established what became clear norms governing the legitimate size, purpose, and procedures for raising and spending community contributions.

*Community Norms and the Leakage of Funds: Theft, Borrowing, and Brokerage*

Matters relating to money in Malawian families and communities are marked by a pervasive distrust. The default assumption is that those entrusted with money will succumb to “temptation” and misuse the funds unless closely monitored. However, in financial relations, trust is rarely granted freely or permanently. People entrusted with raising and spending money, therefore, need to spend much time demonstrating their bona fides, particularly when dealing with those who have a claim to ownership of the money – such as the communities from whom development funds are raised. On the other hand, when parents suspect that the head teacher or the School Management Committee are misusing the money, they complain, pointing out that the schooling and development fees are paid by community members, “by us.” They are claiming their ownership of the school.

People in positions of authority are generally presumed to be predisposed to “eat” part or all of moneys they control. Parents assume that Head Teachers will steal the development funds if given a chance; Head Teachers assume that PEAs and DEMs skim moneys meant for schools; PEAs assume that DEMS and Ministry officials are corrupt, diverting funds that should go to schools for their own purposes.

Nonetheless there are clear norms governing judgments about behavior relating to money.

A certain amount of skimming of funds is accepted, for the most part, particularly if those responsible are at the same time providing desired services. In general, we find that in connection with the disbursement of funds, whether raised from communities or sourced from outside through the state or donors, people

distinguish between outright theft and a more or less legitimate skimming of public funds for personal use that can be usefully conceptualized as a brokerage fee. As one PEA in Rumphu district told our interviewer, when asked whether donor funds for developing infrastructure should be channeled directly to schools or presented in the form of building materials:

*it should be in the form of materials, because giving money is tempting the local community as they can misuse it. When you give money, we can buy materials that are not durable because we want to have small money for ourselves while when you give materials you know that you can give something that will last long.*

In other words, unfettered access to money leads to the temptation of outright theft, the “misuse” of money. The skimming of “small money for ourselves”, however, is more in the nature of a brokerage fee, which, while not completely illegitimate so long as the job is done, does come at the expense of a project’s aims, compromising the quality of the project.

In general, the normative distinction between theft and brokerage hinges on the understanding of “small” and, as the ubiquitous metaphor of “eating” implies, much depends upon the assessment of the greed of those doing the eating, which varies greatly according to context. The legitimacy of the extraction of brokerage fees is judged on the uses to which the money is put. In the above example, materials needed would be bought with the funds, but would be of inferior quality. The fact that the money was from an outside source, and not owned by the community also contributes to an acceptance of skimming.

Another set of norms governing the unauthorized use of funds could be called “informal borrowing”, where a person responsible for funds temporarily reassigns them, usually for private purposes, with an intention to repay. If the repayment takes place, this borrowing can go unnoticed and, probably does, most of the time. If repayment does not take place, such borrowing becomes theft. When informal borrowing is discovered, however, people responsible for monitoring expenditures typically apply community norms to decide whether the infraction is justifiable and



impose repayment plans. Again, attitudes to the morality of the borrowing depend upon the relations between the “borrower” and the “owner” of the funds.

Consider the example we are calling the *Saga of the Solar Panels*, drawn from a journal entry in the Malawi Journals Project (see Appendix 3 for a full account).

*In December, 2009, Concern Universal donated solar arrays and lighting systems to 11 schools in the Balaka district, including one where one of our journal writers happened to be on the School Committee, and thus able to report in detail what transpired. When the new electrical system was installed, the Head Teacher, local chiefs, and the School Committee were worried that it would be stolen, so resolved to raise money from the community to employ a night watchman.*

*Sure enough, before long thieves raided the school and stole the equipment, valued at about three million Kwacha. At the same time, the money raised to pay the watchman disappeared from the Head Teacher’s office. The Head Teacher was suspected of using the solar panel theft as a pretext for purloining the funds. The fact that he was about to be transferred only heightened suspicion.*

*Previously, this same Head Teacher had been confronted by the Committee about the disappearance of development funds. At that time, he confessed to having borrowed the money to pay for transport to take his sick wife to the hospital and promised to repay it at the end of the month when he received his salary. The Committee commiserated and resolved to forgive him.*

*After the disappearance of the watchman funds on the night of the solar panel theft, however, the Committee was in no mood to forgive him. Parents on the Committee wanted to report the teacher to the police, but the Chief prevented the Committee from taking action. He blamed the theft not so much on the Head Teacher but the Committee,*

*telling them they were wrong to trust the teacher and should have deposited the funds in a bank account.*

In practice, the distinctions between theft, borrowing, and brokerage are fluid, open to debate, and much debated in particular instances. The intensity of concern and debate on such issues in practice hinges on ownership. In the above example, for instance, despite the fact that the community funds were only a fraction of the value of the donated electrical system, the Committee was far more upset by the theft of the money than the equipment.

### **THEME 3: THE DYNAMICS OF DELIBERATION: DEFERENCE AND DISPUTATION**

In their study of deliberation and development in rural Malawi, Swidler and Watkins identify two central principles that structure discussions involving collective decision making. The first is that matters should ideally be first discussed by an inner circle of knowledgeable or important people, such as the board or executive committee of an organization or elders of a community, before being announced to the general membership. The second, and probably related, principle is that priority should be given to preserving harmony and preventing disruptive conflicts (Swidler and Watkins 2015). We find these principles very much in evidence in deliberations concerning schools and schooling described in this study.

Each primary school in Malawi is expected to have a Parent-Teacher Association and a School Management Committee, also known as the School Committee, that includes the Head Teacher, the Deputy Head Teacher, and the Treasurer. Parents vote for the members of the School Committee, though the precise procedures vary considerably from school to school. The typical qualifications are that the person had been active in the community and that they are reputed to be honest. Respondents (usually the Head Teacher) in the schools we visited claimed that they did have active committees. This claim, however, may be based on the fact that all

schools *should* have active committees. In another study, the researcher learned that many of the School Committees and PTAs are dormant (Barnett 2013). When there are school meetings, these are not occasions for democratic deliberation on general questions of education. Rather, they are generally called by the Head Teacher when he or she needs to extract funds from the school community, for example to hire a security guard or a volunteer (unqualified) teacher or to do “development”, which means moulding bricks to build classrooms or houses for teachers. Typically, once the School Committee approves a project proposed by the Head Teacher, he or she informs the chief, who in turn calls a meeting of members of the villages in the school catchment area; the chief also mobilizes the labor (Rose 2003).

The ability of parents to voice complaints regarding the management of schools is often limited. While people will speak freely amongst themselves about their concerns, they are often more circumspect when confronting authorities such as teachers and chiefs directly, particularly in public. The dynamics of deliberation and expectations of transparency are well revealed in this story regarding a case of their absence (for the full narrative, see *Confronting the Chairman* in Appendix 1):

*One morning in October, our interviewer, Violet, met a woman in a village in Mchinji District coming from the nearby school. As they chatted, the woman revealed she was angry with the Head Teacher of the local school and the Chairperson of the School Committee, believing they had stolen money that parents had paid as their contribution to the school development fund.*

*“What did you do when you discovered that they are using the money that way?” Violet asked.*

*“We didn’t go anywhere,” the woman replied. “We just felt pain.”*

*“So why do the parents contribute the money while they know that the Head Teacher and the School Committee Chairperson are eating the money?”*

*The woman explained that some parents suggested that everyone should stop paying the contributions, but the village head threatened to chase their children from the school, which would have forced them to send them to another, far away.*

*Fortuitously, the Chair of the School Management Committee happened to pass by and joined the conversation. Emboldened by our interviewer's presence, the woman asked: "So, I want you to tell her what is happening at school. Because the people are telling us to contribute money, but we don't know the use of that money. Tell us the truth about that money."*

*After the Chairman explained the sundry purposes the money had been spent on, the woman proclaimed: "What I am complaining about is that these people are not making meetings to tell us why they want the money. They just tell us to pay the money, but they don't tell us what for? That is not fair. You must change this."*

*"Point taken," the Chairman replied. "We won't do it again."*

In deliberations regarding money, transparency is strongly desired and in the interests of all.

#### **THEME 4: Whose Rules? THE CENTRALITY OF CHIEFS**

The role of the chief is essential in a context where the state is weak and formal local government is poorly resourced, under-staffed and largely absent at the grassroots (Rose 2003, O'Neil and Cammack 2014). Chiefs, however, are typically ignored in the policies and programs of the MoEST (as with most other Ministries). They are frequently seen as "backward" by the educated elites in the district and

national capitals, since many are illiterate and their roles are deemed “traditional”. To overlook them is a mistake.

We found that chiefs play an active and multi-faceted role in school affairs. Their two most important roles are to resolve conflicts in the school, and to mobilize money and labor in support of the school. They also may encourage children to go to school, and they may send a messenger to the home if the child is absent (although if parents don’t pay the school fees, they threaten to “chase” the child from school). An example of chiefs resolving conflicts can be seen in the following account from a school in the northern district of Rumphu at the end of the 2016 school year:

*A group of Standard 8 students had been boarding at the school for a period before their final exams. When the exams were over, some of the male students got drunk and smashed windows in a classroom and trashed the kitchen, shouting obscenities at the teachers and the Head Teacher as they did so.*

*The head teacher, understandably, was not pleased. He called the school committee and the village heads to discuss what should be done. They agreed to wait until the results were out. The village heads then called for a meeting of the school committee, the head teachers, and the parents of the boys, so the parents could see what the students have done. They then told the parents of the students who had written the exams to each pay K2000, plus K500 to apologize to the village heads, K500 for the teachers and the head teacher, and K1000 to fix the kitchen and to buy new glass for the windows.*

*These are substantial sums in this context. Further, the chiefs and teachers resolved that if the money was not paid they would not release the student’s results. Moreover, those who failed the exams would not be permitted to re-enroll the following year to try again.*

*The parents were not happy with this decision and threatened to beat the Head Teacher and the other teachers. But the chiefs intervened. Siding with the teachers, they threatened the parents that if they did not comply, the issue would be referred to the District Education Manager and the school would be closed. At this point, the parents backed down.*

*The woman telling us this story commented that the parents were surprised the chiefs sided with the teachers in this dispute. Nonetheless, under the stewardship of the chiefs, the matter was resolved.*

Sometimes the Chief sides with the parents and disciplines the teachers. For example, in a village in Rumphi, in November 2017, our interviewer engaged in a conversation with the two wives of the local chief about the village school. They told her a story about how the parents, led by the Chief, disciplined the Head Teacher of the village school by mounting a public protest:

*"The Head Teacher was not doing well," the first wife said. "He was staying at home busy working at his garden. So, because of what he was doing, this discouraged the other teachers. They were turning their backs on hard working, saying that the Head Teacher is busy doing his farm work and yet he is receiving his salary as a teacher. They said: 'So why should we bother?' Then they started to just stay at the trading centre, chatting with the vendors there."*

*"So what did you do?" Violet asked.*

*"What happened is that the Chief of this village called a meeting. He told us that we should make a day to march and go to shout at the Head Teacher's house and then at the teachers at the school."*

*"Did you do it?"*

*"Yes. We agreed that we should march without delay. We agreed that the next day we should march to the school first, to see if there is no Head Teacher there, then we would go to his house."*

*"Why did the Chief think of making a march instead of just going to school and discussing with them?"*

*"We were tired with talking to the Head Teacher," the second wife replied, "so we marched. We found that the teachers were at the trading centre. When they realized that we are going to the school, they ran to the school and locked themselves inside the Head Teacher's office. Then the Chief told them to come out. With fear, they all came out. Then the Chief told us all to sit down. He started to ask the teachers why they are just staying without teaching our children."*

*"What did they say?"*

*"People were angry," the first wife said. "The teachers were afraid to answer. Then, after a few minutes the Deputy Head Teacher stood up and said that we should blame the Head Teacher, because he is the one who has made the teachers not to teach the students. 'Even me,' he said, 'I am tired of him because he is making me to do his job. I would also like to get money from farming like him.' All the teachers clapped hands on his speech. Luckily, the head teacher was there that day and heard."*

*"What did the head teacher say?"*

*"He saw that nobody was on his side," the second wife answered. "Everyone was tired with his behavior. He just looked down and asked the Chief to apologize to us. He promised he will never do it again. We knew he was behaving like that because he doesn't have a child who was learning at that school. [But he was teaching at his home village]. So, he knew that at any time the Chief could tell him to leave. We told*

*him that if he continues doing that to our children we will give a report to his PEA. Because this is our school, not his school."*

*"Were you among the people who marched?"*

*"Yes," she replied. "Because I felt pain in my heart. We ended by accepting his apology and he started teaching like before, the learners have gone back to normal lessons. But I am still complaining that the government is not sending more teachers at these this school."*

The most common issue of contention between schools and communities, we learned, concerns the consequences of parents not paying their share of the "development funds" when required. Although the official policy is quite clear that no child should be excluded from school for failure of a parent to make their allotted contribution, as determined by the School Committee, in practice, all of the schools we visited use the threat of exclusion as a means of enforcing payment. The fact that it is not lawful to expel or suspend students for their parents' nonpayment of "development funds" is almost completely ignored in practice. As one School Committee member exclaimed in a meeting called to raise funds for an additional watchman when the Head Teacher pointed out the rule preventing such suspensions:

*"That was the rule for the government. But now we must make a rule as a school committee of this school. This is our development. It has come from a nongovernmental organization. If we will not take care of our properties, the government will not refund them. So let us make our own rules. And the children and their parents must follow the rules."*

Parents regularly grumble among themselves about paying development fund fees, but rarely complain openly. In the archive of the Malawi Journals Project, however, we found a good example of a case where a parent did complain, with somewhat



unfortunate consequences (for an extended narrative of this case, see *The Case of the Threatening Letter*, Appendix 2).

*In February of 2012, a parent wrote a letter to the Head Teacher of a school in Balaka District, complaining about his child being "chased" from school for non-payment of a development fund fee.*

*This letter angered the Head Teacher, prompting him to go to the Group Village Headman of the surrounding villages and summon a meeting of the School Committee. The parent was summoned to appear. In the letter, the parent had told the Head Teacher that if he is going to chase the students for non-payment, then he should "go". The Head Teacher interpreted this as a death threat and threatened to seek a transfer from the school.*

*When confronted, the parent denied the letter was a threat. But the parent was illiterate and it turned out that he had solicited help from other parents in writing the letter. Another meeting was called, to which all the putative conspirators were called. Exhibiting the utmost deference, all the participants in the letter writing denied making a threat.*

*Anxious that the Head Teacher not follow through on his threat to seek a transfer, the chiefs insisted on the parents apologizing and threatened to take them to the police.*

We also find cases where chiefs take the lead in demanding accountability from schools. For example, in Mchinji District, in October 2017, our interviewers found a chief at his wits end worrying over how to rescue a dysfunctional school in his village (see the extended account in Appendix 4):

*A new Head Teacher had been transferred to the school, replacing one who had instilled discipline in the teachers and students alike. The new Head Teacher, however, was allowing teachers to arrive late and play the traditional African game of bawo all day long. Moreover, one of the*

*teachers had impregnated a Standard 7 student; another had impregnated a girl at another primary school, and been taken to court by her parents. The first teacher happened to be married to the Standard 7 teacher. The Standard 7 teacher, angry at all and sundry, including the Chief, failed all the students in her class, allowing none to progress into Standard 8. The School Committee, not wanting to be associated with the teachers, resigned en masse. The chief complained to the PEA, demanding that all the teachers be reassigned, but his complaints fell on deaf ears. Despairing of any other recourse, the chief told our interviewers he had resolved to organize a march on the District Education Manager's office in the District capital. First, however, he needed to reconstitute the School Committee. The struggle continues...*

In most of the stories we encountered about chiefs, the chief is a good chief—resolving disputes, organizing development, providing advice to the school committees. But we have also heard stories of bad chiefs—for example, a chief who ordered his people to mould bricks for the school, and then sold them:

*He then called on his people to mould more bricks for the school blocks. At the meeting called to announce this, a man in the group raised his hand and said that the people in his village will never mould more bricks, they have already done it. Others agreed with him and clapped. A woman said "We don't know how he is going to tell his people to mould the bricks, because we cannot mould other bricks while we know that someone has sold our bricks. We are saying they are our bricks because it was us who were asked to mould the bricks. And we were moulding them because we wanted our children to learn. But that chief doesn't want this school to be developed, as if he doesn't have children who are learning here." To which the Chief replied that it was his village, and his people who moulded the bricks, so if anyone doesn't like it he can leave. Of course, the narrator told our interviewer, nobody left because they had nowhere else to go.*

In sum, chiefs are the central figures in village life. Their powers may be limited, but little happens in the village without the chief's involvement.

## **SUMMARY OF WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED**

### **Parents and Students**

- Most parents are deeply committed to their child's success at school: they depend on them for support in old age;
- Many assist their children with homework (but only parents with some education; which probably determines their child's success);
- We found no evidence of a demand for quality in terms other than pass/fail – e.g. that learning to read well might be a valuable skill, regardless of success in exams or need to drop out (e.g. a child bride might be better off if she can read and do arithmetic);
- Parents' judgments of the quality of schools and teachers hinge on the question of whether their child passes or fails;
- Parents rarely claim poverty as reason for their child's not attending school; contributions to their church are a higher priority (parents contribute 5 to 10 times more money to their church than to the school);
- Decisions to drop out of school are often, if not always, rational;
- Older students have a good deal of agency in making dropout decisions;
- Older students may leave school without parental agreement;
- The main reason cited for students dropping out was persistent repetition of classes (costly for parents—who then express voice about having paid school fees-- and embarrassing to overage students in classes with much younger children);
- Parents generally defer to teachers, but may exercise voice over mistreatment and excessive punishment of their children;
- Parents may exercise voice about the use of school funds; this is usually directed at the Head Teacher or a member of the School Committee.
- Parents may exercise voice about a "bad" Head Teacher by organizing a protest march in conjunction with the chief.
- Parents complain, mostly privately, about absent teachers, drunken teachers, violent and sexually abusive teachers – but not much about the quality of learning;

### **Chiefs and Communities**

- Chiefs are central to schools and schooling in local communities;
- Chiefs are in a hierarchy of traditional leaders that is distinct, and largely independent, from the hierarchy of government officials: this provides chiefs with considerable autonomy;
- Schools are surrounded by several communities with their own chiefs; Issues of greater significance are handled by senior chiefs;
- Most chiefs are considered by their village members to be "good", but some are "bad" ;

- The elected School Committees can be effective in providing accountability for school funds;
- In order to be effective, School Committees need to be transparent and devote time to holding meetings with community members, none of which can be done without the support of the chief;
- PTAs are not forums for deliberation, but rather about extracting contributions to the school;
- Parents exercise ownership of development funds--they pay school fees and they do labor. They are suspicious of the misuse of the funds by the Head Teacher or the School Committee, and may exercise voice if they learn that their suspicions are correct;
- The amount that the Head Teacher determines parents must contribute to development funds is decided by the Head Teacher and the School Committee in consultation with the chief; the amount varies considerably, and seem to be calibrated to what the community will tolerate.

### **Head Teachers, Teachers, PEAs & Inspectors**

- Teachers in rural villages are respected as elites, in urban areas and in relation to other elites, they are looked down upon as the teaching profession is considered a last resort for educated people;
- Head Teachers (HT) are the pivotal figures in the success of schools;
- The successful HT is a leader and diplomat; in addition, the HT's role as a broker who attracts additional resources to the school accounts for much of the HT's success;
- Frequent interactions between HTs and chiefs is essential for the success of schools;
- PEAs (Primary Education Advisors) and Inspectors are brokers connecting the Ministry with the schools; however, they are unable to perform their functions of providing support and oversight, respectively, to the school: they have too little petrol to visit all the schools in their geographic areas of responsibility to be effective;
- PEAs are sometimes called on by the school committee to resolve conflicts between head teachers and communities;
- PEAs, Inspectors, and District Education Managers have little interaction with school staff; parents have none;
- To be a successful teacher requires extraordinary dedication, energy, and imagination in addition to ordinary expertise in subject matter;
- Some teachers follow up with parents re: behavior, schoolwork etc.
- Teachers are considered to be either made or born: there is great variation in the quality of teaching staff;
- Teachers consider themselves underpaid;
- Remote rural teachers face difficulties re: housing, transport from home to school, payment of salaries (in rural areas getting access to banks in order to

access their pay, especially during rainy season); teachers' salaries are often delayed by the failure of the Ministry of Finance.

- Some teachers consider parents to be uneducated and thus beneath them; tend to pull rank in times of conflict with parents;
- No evidence that teachers feel accountable for the failures of their students;

## **CONCLUSIONS: On Reform of Public Primary Schooling in Malawi**

- Reforming primary education in Malawi would be a tough task. There is little, if any, demand for high, or even good, quality of schooling, either from the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology at the national or the parents at the local level.
- At the national level, some donors, such as DfiD and USAID, have been advocating for an improvement in education quality. It appears, however, that the advocacy so far has not been effective. This suggests that resistance and particularly the absence of accountability for outcomes by those in the highest levels of the education sector, will be difficult to overcome. In particular, per capita, substantially more of the government's subsidy for education is spent on tertiary students than primary students, suggesting that tertiary schooling is a higher priority for the MoEST (see also Savage 2012).
- At the local level, conditions are so dire that no systematic reform intent on improving quality can begin before addressing pressing needs for more, and better, teacher training, as well as for basic infrastructure and supplies. Given that the vast bulk of the education budget goes to teacher salaries, there is little scope for improvement without additional expenditures on primary schools by the government or a substantial reduction in the subsidies for tertiary education. The portion of expenditure earmarked for non-salary purposes is the most exposed to theft. Given the widespread corruption evident in the Malawian political system, it is inevitable that funds destined for schools will be purloined.

The question then is: a) how to minimize the amount of leakage of funds destined for schools; and b) how to maximize the amount of the leakage that is directed to ends functional for the improvement of educational quality. E.g. a politician who steals school funds to finance an election campaign contributes nothing towards quality education; a school committee chair who rewards his tireless efforts to improve the school with a small self-dealt grant of iron sheets to improve his house is still contributing to the school.

Locals know the difference between outright theft and legitimate leakage; so funds should go directly to schools (more research is needed to establish the best ways of transferring money to school-controlled accounts);

Funding interventions should recognize the power of local indigenous accountability practices, and work with communities by: making public, and completely transparent, the amounts of funds in play; making clear *who* is accountable for which expenditures.

Good chiefs are key. At the local level, they have the power to organize a protest and promote accountability.

### **What could be done relatively easily?**

Take advantage of the practices that rural Malawians have developed to ensure accountability about the use of school funds. These practices feature collaborations among the Head Teacher, members of the School Management Committee, the chiefs in the school's area and the Ministry's Primary Education Advisor. The same approach to solving collective action problems could be tried with regard to learning.

Incentivize the two most important actors at the local level--Head Teachers and Chiefs-- to promote and support reform. We do not suggest incentivizing

teachers, as this might lead the teachers to pass students rather than give them a failing grade. There have been rigorous studies of the effects of incentivizing teachers, but the results have been context-specific. There are, however, other types of incentives for the Head Teachers and Chiefs that are non-monetary, and accrue to the school and the community, rather than to individual teachers.

The Malawi Institute of Education could train the head teachers and deputy head teachers in practices that would improve education quality; they could then transmit what they learned to the other teachers for a period of a month during school holidays, followed by a rigorous exam.

Donors and the NGOs they support could take advantage of the media to publicize the poor quality of education, just as they have energetically publicized the importance of keeping girls in school to avoid what has been called “an epidemic of child marriages”.

The MoEST and the Ministry of Finance could provide more funds for the Inspectors and the Primary Education Advisors. They are meant to support the schools by making regular visits to the schools, but there are insufficient funds for petrol.

Our most general recommendation is that successful education reform to improve the quality of learning would require “going with the grain”, i.e. understanding—and conforming to—embedded local norms and practices.

### **What would be more difficult?**

Implementing “Going with the grain”. Donors [and even university-educated Malawians have little contact with villagers], and are thus not familiar with many of the local norms and practices described in this study. In interviews with elites conducted for another study, researchers found that many were

children of earlier cohorts of civil servants who lived in the two large cities, Lilongwe and Blantyre. Their children went to school in the city. These children, and their parents, rarely go to a village, except for funerals of relatives, which are customary (Swidler and Watkins 2017).

For reform to happen, the Teachers' Union needs to take the lead, with support from the MoEST, civil society organizations focusing on education, and our consultant, Steve Sharra.

The politics of public service delivery are complex, even in democracies where citizens can ostensibly hold politicians accountable through the ballot box (Keefer and Khemani 2005). Currently, the Teacher's Union of Malawi's Teachers' Union (TUM) focuses on pressuring the government to increase teachers' pay and reduce delays in their receiving their pay: at times, they have protested by marching in urban areas. Since teachers represent 40% of civil servants, they are powerful stakeholders and can have political influence. They might be persuaded that they are accountable for the quality of education in Malawi. It is not clear to whom the TUM is accountable, if anyone, but emphasizing their accountability to the children might help persuade them to support, or even instigate, a reform.

## **Appendices**

App 1: Confronting the Chairman

App 2: The Saga of the Solar Panels

App 3: Confronting the Chairman

App 4: A Dysfunctional School in a Dysfunctional Village

App 5: On Head Teachers as Brokers

App 6: Selected Fieldnotes Related to Issues of Voice

App 7: A Hypothetical Scenario on Accountability for Funds from Donors: Analysis of Interviews with Head Teachers, PEAs, and Classroom Teachers



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## APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1: Confronting the Chairman

APPENDIX 2: The Case of the Threatening Letter

APPENDIX 3: The Saga of the Solar Panels

APPENDIX 4: A Dysfunctional School in a Disgruntled Village

APPENDIX 5: Selected Field Notes Relating to Issues of "Voice"

APPENDIX 6: Local Accountability for School Funds

### **APPENDIX 1: Confronting the Chairman**

*One morning in October 2017, our interviewer, Violet, met a woman in an Mchinji District village coming from the nearby school, where she had gone to collect her identity card (in advance of forthcoming elections). As they chatted about schools and schooling, the woman revealed she was angry with the Head Teacher of the local school and the Chairperson of the School Committee, believing they had stolen money that parents had paid as their contribution to the school development fund. Fortuitously, the Chair of the School Management Committee happened to pass by and joined the conversation, which became an impromptu deliberation on corruption and transparency.*

"The School Committee Chairperson and the Head Teacher are the ones who are making things to be awkward," the woman said. "They have taken their responsibility as a business. They steal money from us and use it on their individual purposes."

"What did you do when you discovered that they are using the money that way?" Violet asked.

"We didn't go anywhere," the woman replied. "We just felt pain."

"So why do the parents contribute the money while they know that the Head Teacher and the School Committee Chairperson are eating the money?"

The woman explained that some parents suggested that everyone should stop paying the contributions, but the village head threatened to chase their children from the school, which would have forced them to send them to another, far away.

"So we just pay," she said, "although we are feeling great pain in our hearts." She would like to be able to send her children to a private school, "because the teachers there teach like a competition, those who aren't teaching well are dismissed, because it is a business." But she lacks the money to pay school fees.

At this point, the Chair of the school committee happened to be passing by and was called to join the conversation, which at that point had grown to three mothers with Violet. "These stupid people are stealing our money," the first woman whispered to Violet, as the Chairman greeted them, "I want you to hear what they do at school when stealing our money."

"This woman is doing a research on schools," she said to the Chairman, gesturing towards Violet and taking advantage her Violet's presence to broach a discussion on

a sensitive issue. "So, I want you to tell her what is happening at school. Because the people are telling us to contribute money, but we don't know the use of that money. Tell us the truth about that money."

"You are welcome," the Chairman replied, greeting Violet. "I will tell you. It is simple. We have a volunteer teacher, so we give her a salary through the money we are collecting from your children."

"But you didn't tell us the reason for contributing the money," pressed the second woman. "And now the volunteer has left, but we are still contributing money. What for?"

The Chairman replied: "We are using the money for other purposes, like paying the salary of the security guard, and for paying the builders. We didn't see the need to tell the parents."

"Ah, but because you didn't tell us," the second woman interjected, "it means that you do eat our money. What we are crying about is true. You didn't tell us that you were using the money for this."

Then Violet asked the Chairman: "Did you call a meeting for the parents to notify them that you are using the money for these things?"

"You know what..." the Chairman began.

"Don't say 'you know what!'" the woman interjected. "Just tell us the truth. We just pay the money because we are afraid that you will send back our children from school. When you tell us to mold bricks, we mold bricks. Remove the bricks from the oven, we remove. Collect sand, we collect it. So, I don't know what is the use of the money because we do all the work ourselves."

"We have a watchman there," the Chairman replied, "and we need to hire some people to do some work there. Do we need to tell you every time we decide to spend some money?"

"Yes," his interlocutor replied. "We are struggling to get that money, so we want to know the work of the money." She then went on to tell a story about how the Head Teacher had neglected to provide change when she sent her child to school with the contribution. "I saw him today and asked him. He said he had forgotten that he owed me change. He asked that I must forgive him because he has eaten it. Why should I forgive him? He doesn't forgive the children when they don't bring the money."

The third woman chimed in with a similar story about the Head Teacher not giving change when money was contributed. "You should ask him about that," she told the Chairman. "But just know what your Head Teacher is doing at the school. We have never complained to anyone. But you should know that if in the future we refuse to pay more money to the school, it is because we are angry about that."

The conversation then moved on to other topics, such as why the volunteer teacher left the school. The Chairman told them that she had complained that her stipend of MK12,000 was not enough.

Then the second woman returned to her original complaint: "What I am complaining about," she said, addressing the impromptu gathering, "is that these people are not making meetings to tell us why they want the money. They just tell us to pay the money, but they don't tell us what for? That is not fair. You must change this."

"Point taken," the Chairman replied. "We won't do it again."

"And you will take this story to the government," the first woman said, addressing Violet.

After exchanging the usual farewell pleasantries, the group dispersed.

## ***APPENDIX 2: The Case of the Threatening Letter<sup>5</sup>***

On the 14<sup>th</sup> of February, 2012, the School Committee was summoned to an urgent meeting at Mikolongwe Primary School in Balaka District. A parent by the name of Mr Mchunju was summoned to appear before them. Four Village Headmen were also in attendance.

Mrs. Stifano, the Committee Chairperson, opened proceedings: "On Tuesday, the Head Teacher called me to come to the school. I came with Mr. Biliwita [another member of the Committee]. When we reached here, the Head Teacher gave us a letter to read. The letter was signed by Mr. Mchunju. It was a threatening letter, about sending back the children who did not pay the development fees. In the letter, he said that if the Head Teacher doesn't want to go, he must not send the children home for not paying the development fee. But because of sending the children back, he will 'go'. So, this word of 'go' has made the Head Teacher to be afraid. That was why he has decided to call the school committee members to read that letter."

Then Village Headman Thindwa asked Mr. Mchunju: "Is that true that you wrote a letter for the Head teacher?"

Mr. Mchunju replied "yes. It is true."

Village Headman Chitenje then said: "Give him the letter to read for us."

"But I don't know how to read," Mr. Mchunju replied. Give it to another person to read for us."

The letter was given to Mr. Chambowo, who is a teacher, to read. He read it.

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<sup>5</sup> The following is drawn from Boillo\_120205. The dialogue has been lightly edited to remove infelicities of grammar and punctuation and make the meaning clearer, since the journal writer is not a native English speaker. **The original text is available on Deep Blue.**

Then Village Headman Chilapondwa asked: "Mr. Mchunju. Is that so, what you wrote in that letter?"

"Yes," he replied. "But there are other words there which I did not write. They have added other words. What I wrote is only for the sending back of the students because of the one hundred Kwacha. I don't know the work which this one hundred Kwacha is going to be used for here at school. Had it been that they have called a meeting for the parents, I could have known the work of this one hundred Kwacha."

Village Headman Thindwa then said: "Had it been that you wrote a letter for asking the use of one hundred Kwacha it would have been better. I think that the Head Teacher would then explain to you. But you have threatened him. What do you think that the Head teacher will think about this letter. We are struggling day and night, telling the teachers to return to this school. But they are refusing to live here. There is no teacher who is living here. Do you think that our children will learn well if the teachers are living at faraway places? You should not write this type of letter."

Then Village Headman Liselo asked: "Do you mean to tell us that you don't know that the parents are contributing money here at school?"

"No," said Mr. Mchunju. "But a long time ago, we were contributing twenty Kwacha. But it was in the past years. I have never paid one hundred Kwacha here at the school before."

Then Village Headman Liselo said "Which means that last school session, you did not pay the development fees for your children?"

"My children did not tell me about this," Mr. Mchunju replied." So I did not pay it."

Village Headmen Thindwa and Chitenje just shook their heads.

Mr. Biliwita, a committee member, then said "these are the people who don't want a development at school. They don't know that the school is theirs, not for the teachers."

"Mr. Mchunju," Village Headman Chitenje demanded. "Tell us the names of people who were writing this letter with you. We don't want to waste our time with this case. You are not a wrong person, you just wanted to know the use of these one hundred Kwachas."

"There was Mr. Chakuta and Mr. Devison the time we were writing this letter," replied Mr. Mchunju.

Mrs. Stifano, the Chair, then asked: "Who else was involved?"

Mr. Mchunju shook his head and said "I will not mention the names of other people here. But I will just go and tell them to come here tomorrow."

"Make sure that you bring all the people who were making contributions on this letter," the Head Teacher demanded.

Mr. Mchunju said "Don't worry, I will bring them. There are many people. I know them, but this time you must just write the names of those two people I have told you."

Then we all agreed that we must wait for him to bring the people who were there when they were writing the letter and we released Mr. Mchunju to go. Then Village headman Chitenje spoke. "Have you seen where this story of letter is going," he said. "We were thinking that he was alone. But now have you heard what he has said. He is saying that they were writing it in a group. Which means that there were different types of suggestions. Then they came with a point or writing a letter to the Head teacher, which is a stupid suggestion. So, are we going to judge this case on our own?"

Mr. Biliwita spoke. "We have been called to Mmanga Teachers Development Centre," he said, "to meet with Group Village Headman Mmanga to discuss issues of Mikolongwe School. So we should tell him to come here tomorrow instead, to hear with us what will be brought to us."

The four village headmen agreed.

"There is no need for us to judge this case ourselves," the Head Teacher said. "But don't take this case as a simple one. It is tough. It might not be Mr. Mchunju who will attack me. But there might be someone who is thinking about it, while that person is quiet thinking that if he does that thing to me, I will think that it is Mr. Mchunju who has done it. Mr. Mchunju will not be able to deny it then, because he has signed this letter."

Then Village Headman Chilapondwa added: "maybe this is our chance for us to know who are the people who were stealing here at school." In the months since the solar power system donated by Concern Universal was stolen, a spate of thefts had plagued the institution, including iron sheets ripped from the roof of the Head Teacher's office and the staff toilets.

Village Headman Liselo agreed. "Yes," he said. "They will mention the names of the people who were stealing here. Surely these people were among those thieves. Little by little, we will know them."

"God is tired with them," I said. "Now he wants to show them out in an open place."

"Yes," the Head Teacher said. "We teachers have left this place because of these people. Okay we will hear tomorrow."

Then Village Headman Thindwa said "Tomorrow we will put this case in the hands of the Group Village Headman Mmanga."

Village Headman Liselo agreed. "Yes. Because we rely on him."

Then the village Headman Chitenje closed the meeting, saying "This is only the issue which I have called you to discuss. But please, we must try our best to come again tomorrow as we have done today. Now we can be free to go."

We all said "Thank you." Then we left.

The next day I went to Mikolongwe primary, for the continuation of the case of Mr. Mchunju. I was a latecomer, but I found that they had not started discussions yet. I first met Mrs. Stifano, our Chairperson. She was with Mrs. Mangwera, another committee member.

"We were talking about you," Mrs. Mangwera said.

"What about?" I asked, while shaking hands with them.

"You always come late," said Mrs. Stifano. "Group Village Headman Mmanga has come earlier than us. We were doubting about you."

"I have come," I replied, "Just forgive me. I was preparing lunch for my children. I don't know the time I will leave here, so I don't want my children to suffer with hunger."

"But next time," Mrs. Stifano said, "you must try to come in a good time."

"Okay," I replied.

Then our fellow committee member, Mr. Biliwita, joined us. "Boillo!" he said. "Why are you late today? We were waiting for you. I was thinking of following you at home." We all laughed.

"Why are you laughing?" he continued. "This is a reality. I was talking with the Head teacher in the office about you."

"I'm sorry," I replied. "But you know, all of you, my problem. I have to do all the house work at home before I leave. I don't want my children to suffer because of this. There is no salary which I am getting from this."

"Yes," agreed Mrs. Stifano. "We are just struggling as if the school is ours only. But the elections will come very soon. We want to leave this committee. Other people must take these chairs."

"I will be happy if the elections come," I replied. "I don't want to be on this committee again. I am tired."

"But what are you going to do if you will be chosen again?" Mrs. Mangwera asked.

"I will refuse," I replied. "We want new people to look after this school, not us. We are tired. This is a handover job. Other people must enter here." Then I went in the Head Teacher's office. "Head," I said, "can you give us a place to sit. We want to put the chairs there. The meeting should start now."



"Have you seen Mr. Mchunju, and other people he said he would bring?" he asked.

"Yes," I replied. "The new faces, which he didn't mention yesterday, are two."

"That's fine," the Head Teacher said. "Those people will tell us the truth."

"Yes," I replied.

"Take the chairs and put them in Standard Five. We will sit there. How many chairs will be needed there?"

"For us on the committee," I replied, "we will need thirteen chairs."

"Plus three for teachers," the Head added. "It will be sixteen chairs. So, take the chairs."

"Thank you," I replied, and went with Mr. Biliwita to put the chairs in the standard five class room. We asked the Village Headmen to join us.

The meeting started with the Chair, Mrs. Stifano, explaining the complaint again. After hearing the complaint, Village Headman Chitenje said "Yesterday, we were discussing about this letter which Mr. Mchunju has written to the Head teacher. He said that he was not alone that time he was writing it. So, he told us that we must give him a chance to bring those people who were sharing ideas with him that time when he was writing this letter. On top of that, he said that he was not the one who wrote this letter. There is a person who was writing. He said he would bring that person today. So, if he has brought them he will tell us today."

Village Headman Thindwa then asked: "Mr. Mchunju was it like that, how Village Headman Chilebwe has explained?"

Mr. Mchunju said. "Yes. It was so."

"Have you brought the people you told us about yesterday?" Village Headman Thindwa asked.

"Yes," replied Mr. Mchunju. "Here they are."

Then Village Headman Chitenje asked Mr. Chakuta, one of the people Mr. Mchunju had brought: "Mr. Chakuta. Mr. Mchunju gave the Head teacher a letter last week, on Tuesday last week. So, yesterday he said that you were there when he was writing this letter. What do you know about this letter?"

"Let me explain like this," Mr. Chakuta replied. "I was there. I was looking with my eyes that time when they were writing this letter. I asked them to tell me the reason why they were writing that letter. They said that their children have been sent back from school because of one hundred Kwachas. So, they want to know the use of those one hundred Kwachas."

"But you told them to write a letter," Village Headman Chitenje said.

"No." Mr. Chakuta replied, "I told them If they wanted to know about that money they should go to the chairperson of the school committee. The chairperson would explain to them clearly. But they did not listen to me. Secondly, I told them that if they find that they cannot manage to go to the chairperson, they can go to the Village Head. If he doesn't know about these one hundred Kwachas, he will tell you. But they said that they will not go there also. They said they will give the letter to the Head teacher. He is the one who is chasing the children from school."

Then the Group Village Headman Mmamba spoke. "Those were your suggestions about this letter?" he asked. "Next!"

After Mr. Chakuta, it was Mr. Mchunju's turn. Village Headman Chitenje asked the questions. "Yesterday we heard from Mr. Mchunju," he said. "But today we must hear from another person. Now it is you. Tell us. It is your turn, Mr. Mapepa."

Mr. Mapepa stood up and answered: "At the time when they were writing this letter, I was there. But I did not contribute to this letter. If I am lying, they are free to say so. Mr. Chakuta was telling me that I must come here, but he did not say that you are calling me because of this letter. He said that there is a meeting at school. So, I was coming here with the idea of a meeting. Not this. I am surprised that the meeting is for us only and not for other people."

The Group Village Headman then asked Mr. Mchunju: "Do you have a question for Mr. Mapepa?"

"No," he replied.

Then Village Headman Thindwa said to Mr. Mchunju: "You have told us that you will bring the people who were writing this letter with you. Now these people are denying that they were there when you were writing the letter. Let us hear from another person. This is our turn now." He pointed to Mr. Devison.

"It was me who was writing this letter," Mr. Devison confessed.

"We hope that we will hear the truth from you," Headman Thindwa said. "Mr. Mchunju has told us that there are other words which you wrote in the letter, which he did not tell you to write. When we read the letter yesterday, he was surprised to hear other words which he did not tell you to write."

"I just wrote the words of complaining about the sending back of children," replied Mr. Devison.

"But what about the other words of threatening the Head teacher?" Headman Thindwa asked.

"I did not decide to write those words," Mr. Devison said. "I just wrote them. but I did not think that it would threaten the Head teacher."

Then the Group Village Headman asked: "Do you have children who are learning at this school?"

"I have got two children," Mr. Devison replied.

"Have you paid this development fee for even one child?" the Group Village Head asked again.

"I don't have money to pay," replied Mr. Devison.

"You are the people who hate the development of this school," the Group Village Headman said. "I think that it is you who come to steal here at school. You made the teachers to leave the school houses, so that you will be coming to steal here freely. So why have you written this letter to the teacher who has already left the school houses? What did you mean when you said 'going'? Do you know that this word 'going' has three meanings: going for a transfer; dismissed from his work; and Death? Tell us the meaning of this 'going'. Because it is you who was writing this letter."

Mr. Devison replied: "I have already said that it was not in my mind to threaten. So, I'm sorry for that."

"You will tell others those words," the Group Village Headman said. "I want to give some people who have got the suggestions like yours a lesson so that they should not do what you have done. But before I do it, let me ask the Head teacher, who is the owner of the letter, about his suggestions."

"I am thinking of taking a transfer," the Head Teacher said. "Because the people of this community do not want me to teach their children."

"There is no need for you to take a transfer because of these people," the Group Village Head said. "I am telling you, the Head teacher, to take that letter and go to the police station. If the police officers will need me to witness on that, I will go. That is all. There is no need for anyone to ask me a question."

That was the end of the discussion.

### **APPENDIX 3: The Saga of the Solar Panels**

*In December, 2009, an international NGO donated and installed equipment for solar electricity at Mikolongwe Primary School in Balaka District.<sup>6</sup> The school was one of 11 schools, of 86 in the District, chosen for this gift. The system consisted of a solar array, an inverter, plus three batteries – one in the Standard Six classroom, hidden in a cabinet, one in the Head Teacher's office, and one in the Head Teacher's house on the school grounds. The system was wired to light the four senior classrooms, the office, and the two teachers' houses.*

*On the day after the system was installed, the Head Teacher convened a meeting of the School Committee, including the Chief, to discuss the security of the new equipment. After telling the Committee the equipment was worth 3 million Kwacha,*

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<sup>6</sup> The following is an edited version of the journal Violet\_091204.

*a vast sum in this community (roughly the equivalent of six years' salary for a regular teacher at the time), the Head Teacher explained: "I have called you to discuss on how we can keep safe the properties. Because the organization have said that they will not give us spare parts for it. They will just connect them and go. So I want you the leaders to share your opinions on these properties."*

Chief Chitenje opened the discussion: "we must be happy, because we have just received without paying anything. Now let us talk how we can keep the properties safe. We must think of thieves. Because as they have heard that there are these properties, I think that they will come and steal them."

Mr. Kabwabwa, a committee member, replied: "To me, I think that we must employ another guard. So that we can have two guards here. Then the properties will be safe."

The chief Chitenje said "That is the opinions of Mr. Kabwabwa. What about others?"

Anna then added that "We must also find the way of getting the spare parts for the electricity. At the same time we are thinking of the guard, we should also think of about how to maintain it."

The chief called on Mrs. Mwisho [committee member], who asked: "How can we make the students to take care of it? They can break the bulbs and also the battery by throwing stones on them."

To this, Mrs. Onayi replied: "To the children, parents will be told to advise their children. They will be threatened. And here, the Head teacher will threaten them also."

The Head teacher agreed, saying "I will talk to them. We want to keep them safe."

Then chief Chitenje asked: "So how can we employ another guard? And how we can get the spare parts for it?"

"We need to have money," Mr Larry said. "We must discuss on how we can get money to hire another guard. And the money to buy the spare parts."

The Head teacher said "Yes. But we must think fast. We cannot spend more time." The equipment was already installed and the thieves would be coming soon.

Mrs. Kathako asked: "How much does a guard receive per month?"

Mr. Kabwabwa replied that "he receives 2,500 Kwacha per month."

Mr. Baraka then asked "Where do you get the money for that guard?"

The problem was, the committee realized, that when they had previously announced that the 30 Kwacha "registration fee" parents were being asked to pay for each learner was for hiring a guard, many parents had refused to pay. So the committee changed the policy and announced the fee was for buying exercise books for the learners. This led to an increase in the numbers paying, but some parents still refused to pay, preferring instead to buy the books themselves in the

market. As the chief pointed out, this left the committee to “just look at them,” as there was nothing they could do to force the issue.

“Why can’t you send them home?” Mrs. Sanudi asked.

The Head teacher replied: “We are following the new rules. Even if a student is not following the rules [by not paying the fee], the teachers are not allowed to send them home. The student should still be learning. They have got an authority of learning.”

“That was the rule for the government,” Mr. Kabwabwa said. “But now we must make a rule as a school committee of this school. This is our development. It has come from a nongovernmental organization. If we will not take care of our properties, the government will not refund them. So let us make our own rules. And the children and their parents must follow the rules.”

Everyone agreed with his decision.

Then Anna proposed “if we can tell each student to pay one hundred kwacha, it will be better.”

Mr. Kabwabwa added: “We should decide how much the new guard will be receiving. Then, if we charge one hundred kwacha, how much are we remaining for the spare parts.”

After some discussion, the committee decided that the new guard should be paid the same as the old: MK2,500 per month.

The Head teacher then asked “Which ways are we going to follow when collecting the money?”

To this, Chief Chitenje replied: “I will answer that question on behalf of these members. This development is for every student, whether in standard one or eight. If we can take care of it, even the babies, who are now at home, will use it. So each student must pay one hundred kwacha. I am talking about the students only. We cannot go in the village and go door to door, asking for money. Because there are some families who don’t have children who are learning here. It will mean that we are breaking their freedom.”

Mr. Baraka disagreed. “But they will also benefit in other ways. If they have activities to do here at the school, they should also pay something. We want to save money at a bank.”

Mr. Chilungoni agreed. “I wanted to say that also. Everyone who wants to use this electricity, except the students, must pay for it.”

Chief Chitenje then asked: “What about a chief. If he will have a meeting at night, does he have to pay?”

“The chief should not pay,” Mr. Chilungoi replied. “But what are we going to do with the children whose parents will not pay this one hundred Kwacha?”

Then Chief Chitenje said: “The head teacher must give a letter to call their parents. Then the head teacher will ask the parents about the money. Also, when the

children write exams, if they have not paid their results will be hidden. Their parents will not know if their children have passed or not." He then pronounced that they were finished with that decision.

The head teacher then raised another issue: "The second point is, what are we going to do with a person who will break any property of this solar electricity?"

"There are two types of breaking," Mrs Kathako said. "Those who Just decide to break deliberately, and those who break it in an accident. We will take the money from the bank and maintain it. But if a person will decide to break it that person will refund it on his or her own. If they will fail to refund, we will send them to police."

"Don't say we will send them to police," Mr. Onayi said. "But we will take the properties of that person and sell them. If the person does not have enough properties to refund, the relatives of that person will help them to refund it. If we can tell people that rule. I think that people will keep it safe."

"Do you agree with this decision?" Chief Chitenje asked.

We all said "Yes." Mr. Baraka said "That is a good idea.'

*The meeting then ended with a prayer.*

*For the next few months, the solar electricity system worked well, providing electricity for the school.<sup>7</sup> Then, as anticipated, the thieves came. In May, 2010, thieves broke into the school. On their first visit, they stole the battery from the Standard 6 classroom, three bulbs, the solar charger, and the inverter. They also broke into the Head Teacher's office and stole 10 sheets of corrugated iron he was storing there. They also broke the windows on a teacher's house while trying to break in, terrifying the occupants.*

*The thieves had learned of the location of the battery hidden in the classroom closet, it was subsequently discovered, from a learner who, joining her friends in pushing a broken-down car with a dead battery, helpfully informed the motorists, who were seeking a replacement battery, of its location. They came armed with pangas, bush knives. The guards ran away. One of the teachers injured herself running into a tree in the dark in her haste to escape. Several nights later, the thieves returned and removed the solar arrays from the roof of the school.*

*The fact that the thieves did not try to break into the Head Teacher's house made people suspicious. Their doubts were increased by the fact that some hours after calling the Community Policing members to report the break in, the Head Teacher summoned them to his office to show them that the money that had been collected from the community for the maintenance of the solar system had also been stolen. But the lock on the cabinet in which the money was stored was still intact. The community policing members were convinced that the Head Teacher had used the*

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<sup>7</sup> The following is drawn from Boilo\_100504, with detail added in an interview with the journal writer, Violet Boillo, on October 22, 2017.

*break-in as a pretext for covering up his own theft of the money. People were angry, wanting to report the Head Teacher to the police and demanding that he repay the money. The fact that the Head Teacher had been notified he was to be transferred soon to another school only heightened their suspicions.*

*The chief convened a meeting of the School Committee to discuss the issue. He refused to press charges against the Head Teacher. Instead, he told the committee that the loss of the money was their mistake. In the future, he told them, they must open a bank account and nominate two members of the committee to sign for it, and not to entrust the money to the Head Teacher. This Head Teacher had previously "borrowed" money from the funds collected to maintain the solar electrical system. On that occasion, when confronted by the committee about missing cash, he confessed that he had dipped into the money to pay for transport to take his sick wife to the hospital. He promised to reimburse the fund from his salary at the end of the month, which he did, and was forgiven.*

*Some months later, one of the stolen batteries was discovered powering a music system in a local drinking place where the illicit liquor kachasu was brewed. Under questioning, the owner of the drinking place implicated his son-in-law, who lived in a village some five or six kilometers away. The thief was subsequently arrested, along with his accomplices, and sentenced to a long prison term.*

*Although the stolen solar equipment was recovered by the police it was never returned to the school. When our journal writer, and school committee member, was asked why, she shrugged and said that they assumed the police had sold it or were using it for their own purposes.*

*After a time, the electrical contractor who installed the system and a representative of Concern Universal came to the school and retrieved the wires, which the thieves had left behind.*

*As of 2017, the school remains without electricity.*

#### **APPENDIX 4: A Dysfunctional School in a Disgruntled Village**

*Interview with a Village Headman, Mchinji District, October 25, 2017.*

I went to the village to conduct the interview with the Village Head. When I reached at the school, we asked for the house of the Village Head. A certain teacher gave us a map. Wyson drove me to the house. We found many houses. So we stopped at another house. A woman welcomed me. We shook hands and greeted on another.

VB: "I am looking for the house of a Village Head.

She said: "Okay, this is the house for a Village Head," pointing. "And you have found him. He is that one who is sitting on a verandah."

The Village Head heard that I was in need of him. So he looked up and said: "I am here. Come here!"

VB: "Thank you madam. Now I am going to meet with the Village Head. I will get you again when I will be going."

"You are welcome," she said.

"Thanks." Then I went to the house of the Village Head and he gave me a space to sit beside him.

"How are you, my daughter?" he asked.

"I am fine, how are you?"

"I am fine, too. Just receiving fresh air here."

"I see. This is a nice place. You are just receiving the fresh air from these trees that have surrounded you here. You will give me also a place like yours for me to stay."

"I will. And there is already a place somewhere."

"Thank you very much." We all laughed.

"We have started with chatting," he said, "so can I help you?"

"Yes, I am doing a research of how the community is improving the pass rates in primary schools. If the students are not performing well, what do the community do?"

"Don't continue," the Village Head said. "I get your point. And I am lucky that you have come here. But first of all, write my name. Because I have got many things to tell you. During my leadership I have met with many challenges about school. But it seems like I am not doing anything. The teachers here are not doing well. We talk to the PEA that he must change the staff here. It seems like the teachers who are transferred to come here had problems at the schools they left. For example, this headteacher who is living here, he is a troublesome head teacher. There were two teachers who had come for transfer. Those teachers were doing well at school. They were coming at half past six. And they made the students to be on assembly at 7:15am. But the headteacher shouted at them in the office. He said to them that how do they want to be like? Do they want to take his position? They must change and follow what their friends are doing. Then those teachers were complaining to us as village heads. We told the PEA, but it seems like the PEA also is on his side. There is nothing changing."

VB: "Did you just go to complain at the PEA only? Where else did you go to complain?"

"The place we know is the PEA. We don't know about other places."

VB: "At what time do the teachers come at school?"



"To say the truth, teachers come here at eight, or even nine. But they just play *bawo* there. Have you ever seen a school having *bawo* to play at school? I have never seen it. But the teachers here are playing *bawo*. They just put the students in the classrooms, maybe teaching them one subject, even leaving them to play outside the classrooms. They don't care about it. What they say is that although they work hard or not, they are going to receive their salaries."

VB: "How do you know that the head teacher has been chased from another school?"

"What happened is that we do meet with the people who live around the school where he was teaching. So the School Committee and the parents there complained to the PEA that he was not doing well at school. The head teacher before him had been working hand in hand with the Committee to bring development at the school. But his leadership has made the school to go down. If the School Committee needed assistance from him, he always said that he doesn't have an idea to that. He was just following what the committee has done. And he was saying that the school is in their community so they must find ways to find things at school. And it was true. They told us that we will chase him like they have chased him. He is not a good head teacher. So we knew we were in trouble. And it was true."

"yes."

"We have moulded bricks and build std.7 and 8 blocks. But it is not yet finished."

"What did you do at school on development?"

"Moulding the bricks for other school blocks and toilets."

"You have only managed to mould the bricks. How did you manage to build the blocks and the toilets?"

"There is a certain person who came from here but he is working with a certain organization. That one is B. He has helped us by hiring labor for the toilets and school blocks. But for the Std.7&8 blocks it was the person who was making a campaign for the election that has just happened, Mr. F, the advisor of the President. He has hired people to build it, but it is not yet finished."

"What do you do with the people who don't work on developments?"

"We do list down their names and give them to the Group Village Headman and he called them to go there. We don't know what he told them, but we just saw that they have started to help their friends on development duties."

"Have you ever had these people in your village?"

"No. Because before we start doing a development I make a meeting with my people and tell them that they must be examples on doing the development at school because the school is in our village. If we will not work hard, our friends

from other villages can move this school to their village. So they always work hard on development."

"Do pupils help on development?"

"No. Their parents only. They are the children. We must do the job for them."

"What do you do to the children who are staying at home but are of the age to be going to school?"

"Although the teachers are not doing well at the school, but still the children are going to school. But there was a certain girl who made a partnership with a teacher. Then he gave her a pregnant. But we were surprised to see that her mother did not react. We were expecting that she would be the first person to react. Then we would follow her. But she did not do anything. What she did, she the mother, was tell the girl that she must go to school again after delivering a child. So it happened. She started school again in Std. 6. But then she got another pregnant again."

"Who gave her another pregnant?"

It was another person who have given her a pregnant. That is a mistake, to grab a baby from a girl and send her back to school. Because it is encouraging more girls to get other babies. Because they don't know how to take care of the baby. Had it been that the parents are leaving a girl to take care of a baby by herself so that she should learn the pain a baby makes it mother to take care of it. In addition to that, the parents should isolate her from their house so that she must search things on her own Others could have learned a lesson from those girls and do those things."

"Why did you never act for the first scene that was done to the girl?"

"Where should I start? I did not do anything because I was getting afraid that the mother will shout at me. Because we were only hearing it as rumors. The owner did not say anything. Now you can see that although she did not reveal that the teacher has given her a pregnant, the teacher did not marry her. He was already married. But his wife has left him because of his behavior. So, instead of marrying that girl, he married her cousin."

"Have you seen that?"

"Yes. He married her cousin, a daughter of her aunt. They were living together at the same compound. And the cousin is living with her husband in the school houses."

"How does that girl feel to see her cousin living with her former partner at the school's houses?"

"There is nothing she is doing. She is living at home, doing piece works there. She is not married to anyone. I believe that he did not marry her because maybe there was something wrong he has seen to her. But he did not tell her, or her mother."

And the other person who has given her a pregnant did not marry her either. Now she has two children. That is not good. Had it been that she had reacted on the first time, we could have shown our actions by suing him to the police. I think that he could have been arrested. But she did not show any attention. So there is nothing we did for her."

"Did you search to see if he was giving something to the parent so that she must not reveal it?"

"Maybe. But that is stupid. There is also another teacher who has given a pregnant to a student who was learning at L Girls Primary. I don't know what class she was in. The teacher is teaching here at [K school. The parents of that girl were angry with him. They sued and the case was solved at Mchinji Magistrate's Court. And he was charged to pay MK200,000."

"To who?"

"I have just heard that he was charged to pay that amount of money, because the parents have shown their action. Teachers are not allowed to make partnerships with students. They could have searched for other women. The head teacher used to tell the female students that he can just put his hand inside their dresses. Is that a language to talk to students? So more teachers are fond of socializing. The two teachers who were working hard have gone on transfers to other schools. One is now a head teacher and the other is just a teacher. But the fools are remaining here. I think the problem is that they have stayed here for a long time."

"Yes, had it been that they were changing the venue, they might have changed their behavior at other places."

"That is true, because they might meet a PEA who doesn't want those rubbishes to be done there. I remember the time when I was a student at a certain primary school there was a teacher who was using to drink beer. Then he was transferred to go to a far-away school which was at the bush. People there didn't brew beer. He tried to ask for a transfer, but the government did not allow to give him a transfer. Do you know what happened? He stopped drinking beer. Since that year, he was using his money reasonably. Then after some years he was transferred to go to another school where people did brew beer. But he did not start drinking again."

"Is that true?"

"Yes. His family was very happy, because he working to get better at home. And his wife knew how he was using his money. He has started to help his relatives. Had it been that they have done this punishment to these teachers also, it could be better, because others could change."

"Send them where?"

"To far places, to starve there as a punishment. I believe that they could change this behavior. Or send them to a PEA who is harsh on the teachers."

"Are there other PEAs who are harsh to teachers?"

"I have never heard, but these teachers know. Because we have sent our complaints to him, and there are many complaints, but he doesn't respond. To respond is to see some change, not so?"

"Yes. People need to see if their complaint has been received and solved."

"You are right. But there is nothing changing. Have you ever heard that there is a certain school where the whole class has failed?"

"Ah, which school is that?"

"Here. It has happened. Last school session, during the third term, the students of Std.7 have failed. We had no Std.8 here. And it could have started this year with Std.7 students who had passed. But I am telling you that nobody has passed the Std.7 exams. The students who are learning in Std.8 have come on transfer from other schools. That is what has happened here. I have got my child there. She was in Std.7. She has failed the exams."

"How did she perform?"

"She was not performing well. I tried to meet with her teacher and discuss with her. She told me she just teaches according to how she needs to. Because there are other students who are fond of making partnerships with teachers, including her husband. So being as a class teacher, she will be doing whatever she wants to do. If I see that she is not doing well, I can take a transfer letter and send her to another school, or a private school. Or I can go anywhere to sue. She is ready to follow me."

"Why did you not take a transfer letter and send your daughter to another school?"

"Other schools are too far from here. That is why we are fighting for the transfers of these people to move here. If we can have a new staff it could be better. Playing bawo at school! I am not happy with this. I am saying that we are trying our best to make a development at school, but teachers are not giving us courage. Next time you come here you will find that we have made a march up to the DEM's office. Because we know that the DEM doesn't know about this. So he will know on that day. And we will tell him that by that time we will be returning. He will give us other teachers."

"It could be better if you could go to the DEM, because you will see the truth if your complaints have reached him or not."

"Yes, I think so. And we will do it on another day."

"Did you make a meeting with the parents and teachers to tell them that they are not doing well, so that they can change?"

"We did. And the parents were raising up their views. All the views were complaining about the teachers. And the teachers said they will change their behavior. But still they don't change. So because of this, the other villages have stopped to do developments at school, because there is nothing that is happening at school. But my village is still doing it because we think that maybe our complaints will be solved. I am crying for the other head teacher who was here, who was exchanged for this one. That teacher was good, and the students were loving him. But now, mmmm."

"Do you receive the School Improvement Grant?"

"Yes. We use the money to buy text books, exercise books, chalk boards. And we use it also for hiring labor to build school blocks and the teachers' houses, in addition to other people's money, who have helped us. B and F."

"What about the School Development Fund?"

"Yes, but it is not enough, because we have few total number of students. Each student pays MK200 per term, and the Treasurer of the School Committee collects it and keeps it, with other members. We don't want our money to be in the hands of the head teacher. We have negative attitude to him."

"Apart from development, what does the School Committee do at the school?"

"Other committee members have left it. There are only five people now running the school. They are making sure to see that the school fund is not eaten by anyone at the school. So we want to make another election for the committee before marching to the DEM. We want to march with the new committee members."

"Why did the other committee members stop?"

"They became angry with the behavior of the teachers. Because people were saying that the School Committee members were in the part of the teachers, which is not good."

"Okay. That was what I brought to you. Thank you for giving me your time to chat with me. Have a good day."

"You are welcome. But make sure that you send these reports to the government."

"Yes."

"Thank you very much."

"Thanks."

## **APPENDIX 5: Selected Field Notes Relating to Issues of "Voice"**

*The following are excerpts from field notes written by our interviewer Violet Boillo following her conversations with villagers in Balaka, Mchinji, and Rumphi Districts about schools and schooling. They have been selected to give a sense of what parents in the villages were saying. Presented here in raw form, the passages in quotations are direct transcripts of her notes, others are Watkins' summaries of Violet's material. VB is Violet Boillo; R refers to her respondents.*

### **Re: Local Norms**

All children should go to school as long as possible (e.g. not failing, parents have the money, child wants to stay in school).

All parents have a responsibility to pay school fees and do development labor.

Children can drop out if persistently failing.

Some children fail because the teachers don't teach well, there are few qualified teachers in the school.

Some children fail because they are "not intelligent"

Parents should review the children's work. Some teachers give homework so the parents can assist them.

If parents see that their children are just playing, you can chase them with a stick, because "I pay money for them at school".

Parents beating a child who misbehaves is normative.

Teachers beating a child is acceptable if it is not too violent.

"Some children keep on failing in the same class for several times. Just wait for them to get married."

Students can be punished if they make sexual partnerships.

### **Re: Dropping out: Children taking the initiative**

Son finished St 4, [repeating a lot] doesn't want to go to St 5: "it is better to search for a woman to marry."

Her sister's daughter dropped out at age 15, because she had made a partnership.

Talked of a child who had been absent a lot for no good reason –“nonsense things” - so child knew if she returned the teacher would beat her.

Her son kept failing and dropping out, he failed the junior certificate exams. “He said to me that he doesn’t want to repeat again because I have got other children who need my assistance. So she must drop and help me to work in the garden and do the piece works so that we should help each other taking care of the children.”

His daughter had decided to drop out. “R: I asked her, but she said that she has just decided to drop out. At first I was thinking that she was joking. She has repeated in standard 7 four times. Then she said she is tired of keeping on repeating in St 7. And I agreed with her. I did not blame her. That is reasonable to me.” R also says “If there will be someone who will need a marriage to her, he can do so, she is free.”

“But he was saying that he cannot go to school because there are no chairs. They were sitting down on the floor. He had so many complaints that my sister got tired of him. Then he left school. When I heard it, I just took him back. He said they were learning under a tree. And he also said that he was feeling very hungry at school. So he has so many queries [complaints] My sister left school when she was in standard six. She doesn’t know how to write sentences and read. V: How did she pass the exams to be in standard six? R: what was happening is that she was repeating each class. And the teacher was just pushing her to go into another class by trial. Now she has said that she is *dallow* (dull) so there is no need for her to be in standard six. There are young children who are able to read and write. But she doesn’t know anything. The children will be laughing at her. We have tried to force her to go to school but she is still refusing. So we have left her.”

“She is saying that she is *dallow* (dull) in class, her friends are laughing at her that she is the oldest person in the class, the others are young. I tried my best to send her to school. But there was a day she said to me that she uses her hands to write, her ears to listen to the teachers and her legs to walk, So I must leave her. I told her that I will not give her nsima. She said she doesn’t care about nsima, she can manage to stay without having food. I sent her to boarding school, but she wasn’t doing well. I have just wasted my money., it was just the same as when she was learning here. So I sent her back to school. The volunteer has left, but they are using money for other things, we saw there was no need to tell the parents. A woman said Because you did not tell us, it means that you do eat our money. What are we crying for, is true. You don’t tell us that now you are using this money for this”.

“There are some people who are fond of playing at school, but during exams, they pass. They were born wise.”

Father wants his child to be a female president of Malawi. “But our child is not performing well. We try to give her breakfast every morning, but still she is not performing well. V: Did you tell her about your ambitions? R: No, because maybe

she has her own ambitions, we will disturb her. So we will see in the future. Here in the northern region, many people become rich because of their wives. If they have two or more girls, they know that they are rich. The man pays a cow to marry. So we don't care if they drop school on the way." Also talks about wasting his money.

"My child is discouraging me. I could have sent her to a teacher who teaches at Tubi primary, he could have taught her at home. But I have seen that I will just waste my money. She is not intelligent. That is why I have thought of sending her to another school. She must change." He went on to say that because the teachers are not teaching, he borrows books from her class teacher to teach her at home. But she is not performing well. He blames the head teacher, and goes on to say that they need another school committee which will be accusing the head teacher. We the parents don't have power to talk to the people above us. So we just see it. And we know ourselves what we can do for our children, because it is us who needs our children to learn. The teachers also don't tell us when the money from the govt has come. ...I don't want to waste any more of my time asking about school, because I have got a negative attitude to that school."

Mother group convinced her mother to tell their daughter to return to school so she did. But now her mother has said she has left school because of poverty. The mother said that even though her daughter would pass the Standard 8 exams there isn't anyone to pay for her to go to secondary school. That is why she stopped. If she would get married that would be better. [a lot say this]

Respondent had a 15-year-old nephew, who was the oldest student in the class. "When a teacher told him to stand up and read, he was failing to read. The young ones were laughing at him. During break time, he was beating the young students who were laughing at him. Then later he left school." VB: "What did his parents do when they saw that their son has dropped out" R: "Nothing, they just left him. Now he is doing piece work at Rumphu Boma with his friends."

Dropped out because of school fees, his father was injured.

VB : "What do you do when you see that a child keeps on failing and then later thinks of dropping out?" R: "Don't force matters. There are some people who were born intelligent, others not. If you see that a child is doing so [failing] just leave it. God has given something. It will appear in the future. Just leave the child to work in a garden."

## **Re: Accountability & Voice**

"But there was a chairperson who had eaten the money. At first, we were suspecting that they were 3 SMC members who did it but then they discovered that the chairperson has eaten the money—he had collected the money himself without any member of the school committee. The parents fired him on being a member of a school committee. How did the parents know? R: they wanted to withdraw the



money to pay the labor who was moulding bricks, then they found there was no money in the treasury. When he was caught, he said at a meeting that he will refund the money, but in 3 phases—he will get money from selling used clothes, and he would sell his cow.”

R: “The head teacher is bad because he is just collecting K3000 that we pay while he knows that the students are failing exams. My son will not learn here in St 8.”

Some people don’t pay their school fees. “I do feel more painful in my heart. Because we do struggle to get this money. Some do go to the chief and complain that those parents must pay the money. V: how do the parents know this? R: there are parents who talk to their friends that they did not pay, so information is shared. Then the chief tells them to pay. V: What happened if again they don’t pay? R: They pay.”

“What happens if parents see that there are some people who did not pay the money at school but their students are still going to school? R: What the teachers agree with those parents is to just leave them. During the time to write exams, they are chased. They don’t write exams.”

### **School Committees & PEAs**

“Teacher is showing bad behavior. He learned in primary school here, then went to secondary and university. Now he is teaching here. But people don’t admire him because he is boasting himself. He is thinking that it is him alone who is educated in this villages. But there are some people from here who are working somewhere else, and he was fond of making partnerships with the young girls at the school. So we have asked the PEA to send him to another school. I have been given the power to write a letter to our PEA informing him/her about the teacher’s behavior. But I am getting afraid that he will think that I am jealous. But I have just asked for a letter of transfer. I had been advising him that he has to change his behavior or he will be dismissed, I am doing this because I am loving him. Then he started to tell people that I am jealous of him because he is teaching at his home school. He goes on to talk about an organization that was giving people money. But he said “I know that there are some beneficiaries who are not fit to become beneficiaries, because the organization goes to the chiefs only, they don’t come to us. We could have done it better because we know through the children. I wish that the time they think to choose people, there must be some other people to share their suggestions. So that other children could go to school.”

Those who don’t pay fees: “SMC talks to the Head Teacher that students should not write the exams until they pay the money.”

“The School Committee is so clever. They can steal money, we as poor parents cannot complain, because they say they have used the money for someone else. But I think they steal. There was a time when the school hired a car to bring

cement and other things that are needed at the school on that day. I was surprised that there were many things in the car, because I did not know where they have taken the money. VB: Did you think it was from the School Improvement Grant? R: I heard that the school receives this money is when I realized it. Still more, I don't believe them They eat the money."

"When they choose the school committee, they just look for activeness. But for the treasurer, they look for a person they think can keep the money safe. Most times, they look for a person who has kept money for a church."

Parent said he won't mould bricks. VH says "he can go somewhere he thinks that he can stay without doing any development

A school committee member stole the money for a school: "How did you know? We moulded one school block and the Head Teachers' house. Then we needed the money to buy materials for the roof. It was when we realized that there was no money in the treasury. He has used the money for his own purposes. I called a meeting and he said he would refund it, which he did."

"At the last school meeting they told us that we are keeping the children who are eligible to go to school. So the village heads must arrange people to chase all who are eligible to go to the school. If they see that the student is still staying at home, they will go to the police to come in the village and arrest the parents. VB: Did anyone arrested? R: No, people started to send the children to school, because they were getting afraid to be arrested because of keeping children home."

"There are parents who talk to their friends that they did not pay, so information is shared. Then the chief tells them to pay. VB: What happened if again they don't pay? R: they pay."

"The school Committee is doing well. Because the money we are contributing, we see the work they have done. If they are eating, maybe they eat, but we don't know."

### **Re: Head teachers**

"The previous HT (he was transferred) was a good person. Everyone here liked him, when we heard that he is going somewhere we felt very sad in our mind because we liked him a lot. VB: Why? R: He was never harsh to students, he was a hardworking person. He has taught the teachers the skills which they can use to teach their children."

"We have just received this head teacher three weeks ago. But I can say that he is a good head teacher. I asked "Why"? He said because I have seen some new things happening at the school. When the money for the school improvement plan came, he called a school committee meeting to make a budget together with the village heads. Then he made a meeting with the parents to inform them that the money

from the School Improvement plan has come. He also tells people about the plan he has made with the village head and the SMC. But the old HT was making a budget alone, he just called a school committee members to tell them that he has made a budget because the school committee doesn't know how to make a budget for the school. We were not happy with that because he was making a budget alone. If the school committee members try to blame him he was shouting at them that they are not well educated so they cannot manage to make a budget. But the parents and the SMC went to complain to the PEA that he must tell the DEM that this HT must move from school because he doesn't have good communication at school. The DEM told a PEA to come and make a meeting with the SMC. So they agreed to transfer him. My child was late and she was punished, she had to collect stones and put them in one place. VB: How did you react? He said "I was happy because they were giving her a lesson. Now she departs in a good time."

"The head teacher collects the money from the parents. And then he has his secretary to write the names of the students who had paid the money. VB: How did you decide to make the Head Teacher collect the money? R: We trust him, because he has never stolen the money since we started to make our contributions. VB: Do you think he is using the money reasonably? Yes, because he works hand in hand with the school committee, so we trust them."

"The Head Teacher is good, he loves children, he is a kind person. He has never slapped or pinched my daughter. But some other teachers, she hates them. The previous Head Teacher was bad, he was shouting at the students for nonsense. They called the school committee to come and solve the matter. Then that [previous] head teacher was transferred."

"No one has come to complain that the Head Teacher has done wrong. But now he has a problem about the money from the school improvement grant. The HT made the budget on his own, and just tell us that the govt has sent this amount, and I have made this budget from that amount of money, and he is going to buy these things. What about the school committee, does he involve them? R says he doesn't know, but all the village heads complain. Sometimes we just see that school blocks are going being built, but we don't know where he gets the money. Maybe it's from that School Improvement Grant. But He doesn't tell us. VB: Did he tell you the account? R: Yes, he did, but we already had a negative attitude, we just listen to him and ignore him. .... VB: Did the Head Teacher show you the things he bought? R: He doesn't show us. Had it been that he shows us I could never have complained. Last year we told him that he must use the money for building toilets, roofing them, putting cement on. But he didn't do it." Goes on to say that teachers are working hard here, and many have passed the primary exam, many have been selected for secondary school. "But there was a time when the teachers chased a certain student because of coming late. The parents then shouted at the teachers. Then the teachers became angry also they said that they will never teach the children because the parents are blaming them. Then one of the parents went to the trading center and found me. When the parents saw me, they were

ashamed. I called them into the office, and they apologized to the teachers, that they must forgive them they did not know that the students were being punished for being late.”

“The Head Teacher calls the PEA to his office at the TDC, and tells the him what he/she wants to be communicated to the teachers. But he also sometimes comes to the school when we meet a challenge. In this case, the parents told the PEA that there was a lack of teachers, they complained. Three boys who had been trained as teachers in their school, they were expecting that the boys would become qualified teachers and stay in this school but they were sent someone else. Says when we have problems, they solve them here with the SMC. One problem was that students wrote obscene languages at a toilet, they wrote the teacher’s name. But the teachers looked at the handwriting of all the students and they found the students. They told the SMC, the parents and the VHs. And it was agreed that the boys should be expelled. However, the law says he can’t be expelled, so they boys were transferred.”

Rumphi (Bolero): “R: HT has taught the teachers the skills they can use to teach their children. And the students have got their own garden where they grow maize and soya, then tell them and keep the money for buying football jerseys and netballs and sports medicine. And food for the visitors who come to play football.”

“I am not satisfied with how the teachers are teaching at school. They don’t work hard. The head teacher is not good. He is worse. Many people don’t like him because of his behavior. I think that it is why the teachers are not performing well. People in the community hate the HT, they want him to leave. He has four wives and many sexual partners. He doesn’t stay at the school, he goes to visit his wives who are living far away.... think they know but they are happy with his behavior. But I wonder because they have children learning at this school. But they don’t show any action. I don’t know what the School Committee is doing at school, because they themselves see what the head teacher is doing. But they don’t show any action. And the teachers give passes to children who have failed, what they do is to mark correct to wrong answers. It goes like that. But to a parent who knows that the children are failing, they make the child repeat or ask for a transfer. VB: how do you feel about that? R: angry in my heart. They also shouted at the teacher using obscene language, so everyone was hearing it. They solved the problem without calling a PEA. The head teacher said those students were troublesome, they couldn’t assign another teacher to teach them, no one wanted to. So they called the parents. Some parents did not understand, so they called Y, lying that their children have done this, saying I wanted to demolish their future. Y told them to discuss it with the SMC. They said they already did that. Finally the students were transferred.”

## **Re: Chiefs**

The chief makes a day to visit the school every week to chat with the teachers. Promoted girls coming to school, said parents giving girls too many jobs, more than boys. Also seeks out those who are absent, goes to the homes, and tells the parents to give me one goat, and then the child must go to school. (Not actually a goat, but K10,000. When children drop out, it's usually because they don't have money to pay school fees., "To them I don't blame because it is reasonable."

VB goes to interview the VH: "We found him working at his carpentry shop. It's a big school. He says everything which is needed at this school I am responsible as the owner of the school. The school came with the Catholic missionaries. The father who was there told us that we must have brick ovens to be ready so that any organization should find us that we already have bricks. The organisations always help people who have bricks already."

When the parents refused to work on development at the school, the Chief said: "So what I did is to ban them at the hospital that they should not receive any medicine at the hospital. We are working hand and hand with the health workers Even the parents who are going to the under-five clinics, they are also chased. Because we give them a list of names so that they look at them and if they come across that name, they tell them that they must go and do development at the school. The School Committee members should give you a letter showing that you have done it. Then you will be treated at the hospital. Because this hospital has been built through development also. Now we are having many people doing the development because they are getting afraid that they will never be treated."

"The PEA came to teach the school committee how they should work with the teachers and parents and the students also. That they must make sure that there are enough facilities at school. Make sure that the teachers are not coming very late. Just work together with the teachers and the parents. They have taken their responsibility as a business. They stole money from us and used it on their individual purposes. VB: What did you do when you discovered this? R: We didn't go anywhere. It is just pain and they stopped on their own. The Head teacher, and school committee are making things awkward."

## ***APPENDIX 6: Accountability for School Funds: A Hypothetical Scenario***

We interviewed 46 respondents working at the lowest levels of the primary schooling system, including 18 Head Teachers, 5 Deputy Head Teachers, 12 regular classroom teachers, 6 Primary Education Advisors, 3 District Education Managers (DEM), and 2 Inspectors. During the interviews, our interviewer, Gertrude Finyiza, a college educated young Malawian woman, presented respondents with a hypothetical scenario in which foreign donors were exploring possibilities for a project to improve education in Malawi and seeking advice on how best to proceed. But, she added, these donors were “troublesome” and very concerned with monitoring the project.

The following is a summary of her findings:

- When asked who the donors should deal with in relation to a project, Head Teachers were unanimous that they should work directly with schools, through Head Teachers, not zonal or district level officials such as PEAs and DEMs. They claimed that working with higher level officials would lead to money being misappropriated or projects being directed to favored schools at the expense of more needy cases. PEAs were divided, with some suggesting projects should go directly to schools while others arguing for direct control through the PEAs office.
- Head Teachers argued that accountability for funds and the progress of the project would be best secured through consultation with parents and communities, engaging existing committee structures and local village headmen. All mentioned chiefs as central to the process of monitoring and accountability. HTs were unanimous in describing the necessity of extensive consultation with communities regarding new projects. They were also optimistic that such consultations would protect against misuse of funds. PEAs tended to emphasize more bureaucratic procedures, such as requiring the Assistant PEA to keep financial records.
- Head Teachers were divided over whether resources should be provided in the form of money or materials. Many argued that money was the most efficient means for mobilizing resources on behalf of a project. Others, however, argued that the gift of money would lead to “temptation” and misuse of funds, whereas when people saw physical things, in this case building materials, they would better understand their extent and purpose. One HT also argued that many people do not understand the fluctuations in prices of building materials so would not believe claims that a certain amount of money did not buy all that was required.
- PEAs, on the other hand, tended to argue that they were best positioned to understand the needs of the many schools in their zones and should be entrusted to handle project funds. Again, they were unanimous in arguing for support of construction projects.

- Some PEAs argued against involving DEMs for fear of funds being misappropriated. When asked whether it was better to spend a lot of money on one school, to make it “perfect”, as opposed to small amounts on many schools to effect marginal improvements, respondents were unanimous in asserting the necessity of equal distribution of funds. PEAs were particularly emphatic that the jealousy aroused by such favoritism would make the effort counterproductive. The one exception was a PEA who suggested that if the funds were used to establish a boarding school, open to all throughout the zone, then such concentrated spending could be accepted.
  - A striking finding of the research is that when asked how donors might best assist in improving quality of education, not a single respondent mentioned anything relating to improving the quality of teaching, better training for new teachers, or more in-service training for existing teachers.
  - Another striking feature is that while Head Teachers regularly invoked the School Improvement Grant in our discussions, usually to bemoan its paucity in relation to its prescribed 40/50/10 division of expenditure, no-one made mention of the related School Improvement Plans or planning processes. Discussions in school committees seem to focus on establishing and communicating spending priorities relating to locally-sourced “development” funds.
  - We asked: “if your school could be made ‘perfect’ - with enough classrooms, teachers, and resources for all the learners – what would you then do to improve quality?” It is possible that such an hypothetical was beyond the immediate concerns of our respondents, accustomed as they are to far more pressing burdens. The nearest we got to an answer was the suggestion that maintenance and fresh paint would still be needed.
-