



Bridging the Gap between Citizen Expectations and Lawmakers' Performance

Policy Issue

Citizens worldwide are dissatisfied with their lawmakers' performance, often eroding trust in government institutions and fostering democratic backsliding. However, citizens often misunderstand parliamentarians' roles and capacity, making demands that parliamentarians are neither tasked with nor capable of fulfilling. Democracy promotion initiatives need to focus more on the disconnect between citizen expectations and the lawmakers' capacity, going beyond conventional civic education campaigns to boost voter turnout or [parliamentary strengthening](#).

The Context

Malawi has had free and contested elections since 1993. Malawians go to the polls in large numbers but are largely disappointed in the result. According to the recent [Afrobarometer survey](#), 61% of Malawians disapprove of the performance of their lawmakers; 36% think that most of them are involved in corruption. More than half of respondents indicate that parliamentarians never listen to their demands, while 80% think they need to do more to listen to the people and fulfill their expectations.

Missing in this analysis is the view of parliamentarians, particularly regarding the constraints they face as they navigate their work. In 2022, GLD surveyed 137 Malawian Members of Parliament (MPs) to gain insight into how they experience the electoral and policymaking process. The survey asked about the importance of different types of support, regional and party alliances,

the decision to run for office, and their campaign and policymaking challenges. In contrast to most surveys, which feature the voters' perspectives, this survey highlights the lawmakers' experiences.

The Expectation-Capacity Disconnect: The Parliamentarians' Perspective

MPs, like citizens, indicate a disconnect with their constituents. While citizens complain that their MPs fail to listen to them, MPs argue their constituents do not understand MPs' roles and responsibilities. They believe constituents have unrealistic expectations and make demands beyond the MPs' purview. In addition, MPs do not have sufficient funds and resources to meet demands, even those within their mandates. When asked, "What are the biggest obstacles you face doing the work of a Parliamentarian?" 56% of those surveyed answered "too many public demands," while 62% answered "inadequate funds for constituency projects."

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When invited to express their concerns, many MPs highlighted citizens' misconceptions about their role, as well as their salaries and access to funds. For example, one respondent explained that "people do not understand the role of the Parliamentarians. They expect MPs to buy coffins during funerals and use their personal money for other developments in the constituency." As another MP put it, the "people consider MPs to be a solution to their personal problems; yet, they are not given money for that purpose, i.e., asking for a personal car when a member of the family is sick. They also sometimes ask for money."¹

These situations put undue pressure on the MPs, which can require them to use their personal money to help constituents or set them up for failure. It can even get in the way of MPs fulfilling their mandates, like making laws. One MP explained the tradeoff, "staying out of the constituency helps in lessening public demands," but it can also undermine popularity.

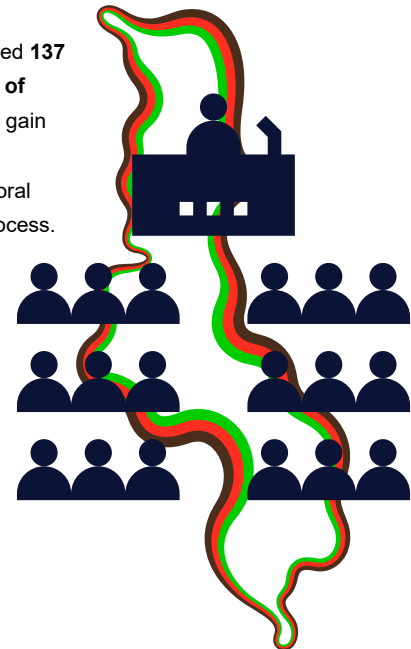
MPs face institutional hurdles as well. For example, several MPs reported frustrations with the Constituency Development Funds (CDFs). One explained that the CDF amounts are the same for every constituency, regardless of size, need, or regional difference. Furthermore, respondents noted that the constituents did not understand how the funds could be used. Another MP stated: "The CDF is controlled by the council and not the MPs; as such, the funds are managed. Yet, it's the MPs that take the blame for the lack of development in the constituencies."

There is "a lot of pressure on MPs who do not have adequate funds to solve problems in their constituencies." More resources are needed for MPs "to have well-established offices with adequate staffing to ensure that they can utilize the resources for constituency developments." Additionally, MPs called for government and election reform to root out corruption and make the election process fairer. Some respondents

¹ Survey question: "What are the biggest obstacles you face doing the work of a Parliamentarian?"

called for better regulation of government contracts and projects, while others expressed the need for "new laws that ban handouts during campaigns [which] should be implemented to boost authentic voting."

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Toward a Solution

MPs have proposed support in the form of civic education, institutional reforms, and participation to overcome the obstacles they face. They stressed the need to "educate citizens on the role of Members of Parliament" in order to shape their expectations. One suggestion is to offer citizenship training to educate the populace on government functions and roles, as well as how and where to advocate for themselves and participate politically. New avenues of participation and accountability between representatives and constituents are also needed, along with institutional changes. MPs advocate for a new CDF structure, access to more resources, government oversight, and electoral reforms. Taken together, these reforms may help close the gap between citizens' expectations and MPs' abilities, strengthening confidence in democratic institutions.

About GLD

The Governance and Local Development Institute (GLD) is a research institute based at the University of Gothenburg, originally founded in 2013 at Yale University by Professor Ellen Lust. GLD focuses on the local factors driving governance and development. The institute is dedicated to international collaboration and scientifically rigorous, policy-relevant research in an effort to promote human welfare globally. Findings are made available to the international and domestic communities through academic publications, policy briefs, public presentations, and social media, as well as on-the-ground workshops in cooperation with local partners.



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Contact

Department of Political Science,
University of Gothenburg
Box 711, 405 30 Gothenburg, Sweden
Visiting address: Sprängkullsgatan 19,
Gothenburg
contact@gld.gu.se

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