

Policy Briefing

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Malawi: Youth-Centric Policies for Future Prosperity

JUDITH KUMWENDA

Recommendations

- The National Planning Commission and the National Youth Council should advocate for youth voices in decision-making and planning processes, ensuring youth representation in key bodies.
- The Ministry of Education, Science and Technology needs to develop frameworks of issue constellations to provide direction to management to create transformational possibilities for an effective investment plan in the education sector.
- The government should develop and implement guidelines on integrating mental health screening, diagnosis and treatment into primary healthcare services. It should train primary healthcare personnel to identify common mental health disorders and offer basic psychosocial assistance while making referrals as needed.
- The government should form strategic partnerships with organisations experienced in disaster management to leverage their expertise, resources and community networks to strengthen disaster risk reduction and community preparedness.

Executive summary

Malawi youth engaged in a transformative initiative – the ‘Youth and Social Justice Futures: Identifying Future Skills and Training in Africa’ project – aimed at youth-led, futures-informed participatory action research as part of an East and Southern African youth cohort. This collaborative effort sought to envision innovative pathways for youth futures in the region by exploring anticipatory systems, skills, needs and orientations and culminated in the creation of this policy briefing. The briefing underscores the importance of policy interventions that elevate youth participation, prioritise inclusive education, emphasise the value of comprehensive healthcare and advocate for strategic investment in disaster risk management. With a focus on youth empowerment and wellbeing, the policy recommendations offer a strategic roadmap towards a more inclusive, resilient and prosperous future for Malawi’s youth and the broader East and Southern African community.

Introduction

Malawi had a per capita gross national income of \$1,700 in 2022, ranking it among the lowest globally.¹ Between 1995 and 2014, per capita income showed modest growth, averaging just over 1.5%, which is below the 2.8% average for non-resource-rich African economies. Malawi’s economic performance sets it apart even from its geographical and demographical peers that were at a similar developmental stage in 1995.² Although not strictly categorised as a fragile state, Malawi shares numerous characteristics with fragile and conflict-affected nations, particularly in terms of governance institutions’ functionality. The country’s economy is primarily agrarian, contributing approximately one-third of its gross domestic product and providing livelihoods for about two-thirds of the population. Over the past few decades, Malawi’s development progress has been hampered by various shocks, resulting in a cycle of vulnerability.³ A combination of severe climate-related changes and governance issues has hobbled economic growth and attempts to reduce poverty.

Malawian youth were part of the East and Southern African cohort that participated in the youth-led project to re-imagine youth futures in East and Southern Africa. This involved exploring anticipatory systems in terms of skills, needs and orientations with policy actors and other stakeholders. The aim was to re-frame social justice while co-creating collaborators who are futures literate. The study employed two methods: Youth Futures Literacy Labs and the Three Horizons Framework. Youth Futures Literacy Labs, endorsed

1 World Bank, “GNI, Per Capita, PPP (Current International): Malawi”, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GNP.PCAP.PP.CD?locations=MW>.

2 International Monetary Fund, African Department, “Malawi: Economic Development Document”, Policy Commons, September 18, 2017.

3 IMF, African Department, ‘Malawi Economic Development’.

by UNESCO, enhance understanding of the future's role, improve anticipatory skills, challenge expectations, increase future literacy and reduce fears of uncertainty. The Three Horizons Framework aids in addressing complex issues and uncertain futures, guiding researchers to rethink current practices, envision an ideal future, plan visionary actions, manage disruptions and find ways to manage these transitions.

Malawi has considerable development potential. It is endowed with diverse natural resources, including fertile soil, water and mineral deposits. Most of the population engages in agriculture, providing a solid base for food security and economic growth. Its youthful population presents a demographic advantage. Properly educated and skilled, youth can contribute to innovation, entrepreneurship and economic diversification. The country's scenic landscapes, wildlife and cultural heritage offer significant tourism potential, while its abundant sunlight and water resources create the potential for renewable energy generation, such as solar and hydroelectric power. Malawi's membership in regional organisations such as SADC and the African Continental Free Trade Area provides opportunities for trade, investment and cross-border cooperation. Despite these capacities, it also faces constraints, such as limited infrastructure, economic vulnerability and environmental challenges. Harnessing its capacities requires a comprehensive approach that includes investment in education, healthcare, infrastructure, technology and sustainable practices. By leveraging its strengths and addressing its weaknesses, Malawi can pave the way for inclusive and sustainable development that improves the well-being of all its citizens.

This policy briefing outlines alternate futures framings for Malawi, youth researchers' perspectives and the policy recommendations emanating from the workshops.

Reflections on the project

Malawian participants in the project found it to be a profound and transformative experience.

Firstly, they emerged as active contributors, not passive observers, in this journey. Their vision for the future is undeniably distinct from the aspirations of youth in other participating countries. It is a vision moulded by their Malawian identity, rooted in the context of the nation's history and present circumstances.

A significant moment in this journey was the stark realisation of the critical importance of disaster preparedness. This revelation was catalysed by a first-hand encounter with the devastating Cyclone Freddy. The aftermath of the cyclone forced youth to confront the harsh reality of Malawi's vulnerability to natural disasters. This experience emphasised the urgent need for comprehensive disaster readiness and mitigation strategies. It became evident that the future hinges on the ability to adapt to and mitigate the impacts of such

catastrophes. This policy briefing is a call to action to safeguard Malawian communities and ensure their resilience in the face of adversity.

Participants felt the introduction of the foresight methodology through this project was a game changer. The incorporation of this methodology, encompassing Futures Literacy Labs and the Three Horizons Framework, played a pivotal role in shaping their journey and understanding of the future. Futures Literacy Labs were instrumental in expanding this comprehension. These served as dynamic spaces where participants could explore and dissect various facets of the future with an open and curious mindset. The Three Horizons Framework allowed them to categorise and explore systematically different aspects of the future. They could analyse immediate challenges, envision possible solutions and innovations and dare to dream of groundbreaking transformations. This framework provided youth with a structured approach to navigate the complexities of the future, allowing them to identify opportunities, mitigate risks and plan more effectively. With this powerful tool, they could delve deeper into understanding the future, armed with a robust background for informed planning. Participants no longer felt daunted by the complexities and uncertainties that lie ahead – instead, they could confront these with greater confidence and insight.

This journey has also shed light on the critical challenges facing Malawi today. These issues demand collective attention, action and innovation.

Youth unemployment, standing at 7.2%,⁴ is a stark reminder of the need for structural transformation in Malawi's economy. Skills development, while essential, is not a standalone solution. It is necessary to create jobs; a responsibility that should be shared by both the government and youth themselves. Youth should harness the innovative spirit of their generation and channel it into opportunities that drive economic growth and social progress.

Community vulnerability, exemplified by the displacement of over 500 000 people within Malawi in the aftermath of Cyclone Freddy, underscores the imperative of disaster preparedness.⁵ Vulnerabilities in the country's southern region and lakeshore districts necessitate comprehensive solutions that not only address the immediate consequences of floods and droughts but also explore the complex relationship between environmental degradation and flood patterns. It is crucial to transition from memory-based risk assessments to evidence-based ones, accounting for infrequent yet high-impact hazards such as earthquakes.

Malawi's weak education system calls for a paradigm shift. The government should prioritise inclusivity for people with disabilities and create a community-driven education system that empowers all individuals, regardless of their abilities.

4 Bob Baulch, et al, "Malawi's Challenging Employment Landscape" (Working Paper 27, IFPRI Malawi, 2019). https://massp.ifpri.info/files/2019/01/MaSSP_WP27_EmploymentLandscape-_final.pdf.

5 China Dialogue, "After Cyclone Freddy, How to Strengthen Malawi's Disaster Preparedness?", PreventionWeb. March 22, 2023.

Inadequate access to mental health facilities and clean water is another glaring concern. There should be immediate government action to prioritise the well-being of its citizens. Mental health is integral to overall health, and access to clean water is a fundamental human right.

The lack of digitalisation in government departments hinders progress. This is an obstacle that, when overcome, can streamline services, improve efficiency and enhance transparency. Addressing discriminatory structures in politics, law and society is a complex but necessary endeavour to ensure equitable policy influence.

These recommendations provide a roadmap for progress through coordinated efforts. It calls for government commitment to youth ideas, prioritisation of education and healthcare and active youth involvement in decision-making and planning. The media and artists can amplify youth voices and advocate for change. Public-private partnerships can drive sustainable initiatives, and the National Youth Council should champion youth representation and empowerment. Community leaders have a role in disaster preparation and community-driven initiatives, while youth advocates and organisations should engage in advocacy, community strategies and media engagement. Establishing platforms for youth to showcase their innovative ideas and projects is a step towards recognising their potential as agents of positive change.

This journey has been a profound exploration of the potential of Malawian youth. Participants envisioned a future that is uniquely their own, shaped by their aspirations and experiences and the challenges they face. This journey has illuminated not only the path forward but also youth's collective potential to create a brighter, more inclusive and resilient future for Malawi.

Policy recommendations

Strategic priority 1

Enhancing youth participation and empowerment in national planning and decision-making

Recognising the significant potential of the youth demographic and their crucial role in shaping the nation's future, it is imperative to establish a comprehensive policy framework that promotes their active involvement in decision-making, planning and addressing critical challenges.

The National Planning Commission should proactively advocate for the integration of youth voices at all levels of decision-making and planning processes. This includes ensuring that youth representatives participate in national consultations, policy dialogues and development planning discussions. The National Planning Commission

should collaborate with relevant stakeholders to create mechanisms that facilitate the incorporation of youth perspectives into policy formulation and implementation.

The National Youth Council should take the lead in promoting youth representation and empowerment. This can be done by:

- establishing platforms for young individuals to voice their concerns, ideas and solutions at local, regional and national levels;
- collaborating with educational institutions, civil society organisations and private sector entities to provide training and capacity-building opportunities for youth in leadership, governance and advocacy; and
- ensuring that youth are actively engaged in designing and implementing programmes that address their needs and aspirations.

The government, in partnership with the Public Private Partnership Commission, should prioritise addressing the unique needs and challenges faced by young people, particularly related to unemployment. This collaboration can be achieved by designing and implementing targeted youth employment programmes that offer skills training, entrepreneurship support and job placement opportunities. It is also crucial to allocate resources to initiatives that promote youth-led innovation, technology and creative industries.

Strategic priority 2

Designing an effective education sector investment plan

The success of the education sector's investment plan for the next decade hinges on how well it leverages achievements and creatively tackles challenges. Achieving this necessitates the establishment of transformative ecosystems capable of addressing persistent capacity issues and yielding sustainable results.⁶ Therefore, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology should establish frameworks that define key challenges and guide management in fostering these transformative opportunities. Information dissemination and communication networks are vital for this purpose, despite the fact that they are currently insufficient or non-existent.⁷ The ministry should offer a strategic plan for addressing challenges and limitations within the education system. These solutions should be oriented toward reform rather than merely addressing specific issues. Such solutions should encompass expanded access to education and

6 Carolee Buckler and Heather Creech, *Shaping the Future We Want: The Final Report of the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development 2005–2014* (Paris: UNESCO, January 1, 2014).

7 Malawi, Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, *Malawi Education Sector Analysis* (Blantyre: Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, December 1, 2019).

equity through the development of a constellation framework.⁸ Constellation frameworks helps in optimising resources by identifying priority areas, avoiding duplication of efforts and maximising the impact of available resources.

This can be achieved by continuously enhancing teaching and learning, and by expanding accommodation infrastructure across the country to house the growing student population. Additionally, it is essential to ensure that no learner faces disadvantages in accessing any form of education based on factors such as gender, socioeconomic status or special needs.

Strategic priority 3

Strengthening mental health care

To ensure access to mental health care, it is imperative to integrate mental health services into primary healthcare systems in the community. The government should:

- develop and implement guidelines to integrate mental health screening, diagnosis and treatment into current primary healthcare services;
- train primary healthcare workers to recognise common mental health conditions and provide basic psychosocial support and referrals when necessary; and
- establish mechanisms for regular follow-up and coordination between primary healthcare providers and mental health specialists.⁹

If Malawi takes this path, it implies that individuals should possess knowledge about the origins of mental health issues, methods for prevention and sources for seeking assistance. This suggestion aligns with research findings indicating that the implementation of suitable awareness approaches contributes to greater awareness and a higher demand for services. In Malawi, there is an opportunity to enhance mental health literacy through the involvement of health surveillance assistants (community-based health workers), educators and peer educators.

8 The constellation is an idea originally developed by Walter Benjamin and more fully elaborated by Adorno. Benjamin's materialist philosophical approach suggests that concrete phenomena can form the basis for developing philosophical 'truth'. Rather than focusing solely on empirical methods, or full immersion in the idealist realm, Benjamin suggests that everyday experience can bridge the gap, and form the basis for philosophical reflection. Intrigued by this idea of the 'particularity' of concrete phenomena, Adorno developed a meticulous philosophical approach that focuses on drawing theoretical significance from specific details of 'objects', such as a piece of music or a passage in a piece of literature. Joana Bletcher, "[The Constellation: A Framework for Conceptualising Design as a Process of Innovation](#)", *The Design Journal* 20, no. 1 (2017).

9 Michael Udedi, "Improving Access to Mental Health Services in Malawi" (Paper, Conference: Evidence to Policy Pathways in Malawi: Deliberating Lessons and Sharing Our Practical Work and Results from the Implementation of the Secure Health Programme, Lilongwe, February 27, 2017).

Strategic priority 4

Strengthening disaster risk reduction and community preparedness

To strengthen governmental efforts, partnerships with donors, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and faith-based organisations are crucial. This involves forming planned partnerships with organisations experienced in disaster management to leverage their expertise, resources and community networks. It is also necessary to coordinate efforts to ensure alignment, avoid duplication and maximise the impact of initiatives on the ground.

It is advisable that strategies and policies prioritise greater investment in enhancing disaster risk¹⁰ at the community, village and household level and improving preparedness or community disaster management, in comparison to the resources allocated to relief aid. Achieving this necessitates an approach that starts at the grassroots level, executed by existing government ministries in collaboration with donors and NGOs, and complementing ongoing initiatives.¹¹ To protect the progress made so far, it is vital to guarantee efficient leadership, supervision and organisation of disaster or emergency management. Without these elements, any advances made may be at risk of regression.¹² Community preparedness is the most effective method for reducing the consequences of disasters. Any delays in relief and recovery actions worsen a disaster's effects. Therefore, it is essential to prioritise investing in and assigning disaster management responsibilities to the district level, along with the necessary resources and capabilities.

By shifting the focus towards disaster risk reduction and community preparedness, the government can proactively minimise the impact of disasters and enhance the resilience of communities. Increased investment, partnerships with external stakeholders, effective leadership and localised decision-making will collectively lead to a more robust disaster management framework. Such a framework should prioritise prevention, mitigation and community empowerment, ensuring a safer and more secure future for all citizens.

Conclusion

This policy briefing presents a comprehensive overview of alternate futures framings for Malawi, drawing insights from the innovative approaches of the Youth Futures Literacy Labs and the Three Horizons Framework. The perspectives of youth researchers were invaluable in shaping this document, providing a unique lens through which to envision and address key developmental challenges.

¹⁰ Alexander Phiri and Rowena Hay, "World Bank Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery Track II: Malawi Situation Analysis of Disaster Risk Management," UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, 2008, 4.

¹¹ Phiri and Hay, "World Bank Global Facility", 4.

¹² Phiri and Hay, "World Bank Global Facility", 4.

The policy recommendations outlined in this briefing underscore the urgent need for action in various strategic priorities. Enhancing youth participation and empowerment in national planning and decision-making is essential for cultivating a future that reflects the aspirations and contributions of the youth demographic. The imperative to design an effective education sector investment plan recognises the transformative power of education in building capacity and driving lasting accomplishments.

In addition, the critical need to strengthen mental health care in Malawi calls for comprehensive integration within primary healthcare systems, ensuring universal access and destigmatising mental health issues. The call to action for disaster risk reduction and community preparedness emphasises the importance of bottom-up approaches, strategic partnerships and effective leadership to safeguard lives and enhance resilience.

By embracing these insights and guiding principles, Malawi can pave the way for a brighter, more equitable and sustainable future for all its citizens.

This policy briefing is part of a series. The policy recommendations herein are the output of 36 foresight workshops across East and Southern Africa, forming part of the 'Youth and Social Justice Futures: Identifying Future Skills and Training in Africa' project. The aim of the project was to identify and address youth skills needs in the region by employing futures thinking. This research was co-created with youth participants from Tanzania, Uganda, Malawi, Zambia and South Africa in workshops that engaged decision makers in government, civil society, industry associations and the private sector. The research employed both a decolonial-informed method (Futures Literacy Labs) and a policy action-oriented method (Three Horizons Framework).

Author

Judith Kumwenda

is a dedicated development practitioner with a Bachelor's Degree in Development Studies and Social Work, serves as Research and Communications Officer at Ntha Foundation and consults as Youth Researcher for MIET Africa.

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Cover image

A boy stands atop a tree in a field in the outskirts of Lilongwe, Malawi, 2016 (Aris Messinis/AFP via Getty Image)

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Jan Smuts House, East Campus, University of the Witwatersrand
PO Box 31596, Braamfontein 2017, Johannesburg, South Africa
Tel +27 (0)11 339-2021 · Fax +27 (0)11 339-2154
www.saiia.org.za · info@saiia.org.za