Future Agricultures

Discussion Paper

The Social Protection Policy in Malawi: Processes, Politics and Challenges

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Table of Contents

List of Tables

1. Introduction

This paper is based on a study undertaken to critically understand the dynamics of policy-making and processes under the auspices of the Future Agricultures Consortium's (FAC) sub-theme on politics and policy processes hosted by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) in the United Kingdom. FAC's operative philosophy is that contrary to the traditional and highly stylized perspective, policy-making does not happen in neat distinct stages except perhaps in the minimal sense that policies are proposed, legislated and implemented. Policy processes are thus a complex mesh of interactions and ramifications between a wide range of stakeholders driven, and constrained by the contexts in which they operate (cf. IDS, 2006; Oya, 2006). Understanding the policy processes therefore requires: 1) grasping the narratives that tell the policy stories; 2) the way positions become embedded in networks of various actors; and 3) the enabling or constraining power dynamics (politics and interests).

The decision to study the social protection policy processes was inspired by the guarded optimism among stakeholders about the prospects of formulating a viable social protection policy as compared to the fertilizer subsidy policy programme which is generally orchestrated as a success story. It appears, however, that the differences between these two policy processes are largely due to the fact that the social protection policy deals with issues that are not as visible to the public eye and as politically sensitive as the issue of fertilizer popularly perceived as the magic wand to the enduring problem food insecurity. Moreover, the fertilizer subsidy programme is/was a political podium policy while social protection is a technocratically driven policy. This is to say that fertilizer subsidy issues featured prominently in the 2004 electoral campaign whereas issues of social protection merely lurked at the background except, of course, with occasional vague references to the poverty reduction agenda. References to the poverty reduction agenda were made but often without articulating concrete plans of action to deal with the acute depth and breadth of poverty and vulnerability in the country.

It comes therefore not as a surprise that unlike the fertilizer subsidy policy processes, the social protection policy processes are almost entirely divorced from the locus of real decision making. The key building blocks of the fertilizer subsidy programme were debated and decided on in parliament. In a plural political dispensation parliament is designated as a functionally more appropriate arena for policy debates and dialogue since it brings together political parties representing various shades of opinion from different segments of society. Consequently, by occupying centre in the national legislature, the events leading to the conclusion and adoption of the fertilizer subsidy programme generated a national wide debate and dialogue. In sharp contrast, the social protection policy is nearing completion but a national wide debate and dialogue is virtually non-existent. The fertilizer subsidy programme was a regular feature in the major media outlets but there is almost a complete black out on media coverage about social protection[2].

Social protection has gained currency both on the international and national development agendas since the turn of the millennium. Broadly understood as policies that assist people, households and communities to protect themselves against shocks and risks, social protection is seen as one of the key ways and means of ensuring the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (cf. Barrientos et al., 2006). This is the case because by committing itself to the MDGs the global community is advocating for a much more focused attention on the extent and persistence of poverty. This commitment is a declaration that more attention needs to be paid to the plight of the 300-420 million chronically poor people in the world, and to developing comprehensive, coherent and sustained interventions that support their efforts to improve their situation. It is against this backdrop that Malawi has joined the rest of the world in pinning their hopes on social protection as key strategy in combating pervasive and chronic poverty and vulnerability but also as a platform for the attainment of the MDGs. A process led by the Department of Poverty and Disaster Management Affairs (DoPDA) in the Office of the President and Cabinet (OPC) to develop a social protection policy framework was launched in December 2005 culminating in a draft in November 2006. A revised draft version of the policy was produced and circulated to stakeholders for feedback. The drafting team is currently incorporating stakeholders' observations and a final draft version of the policy was expected by June 2007. The June 2007 deadline was projected to coincide with the 2007/2008 budget session of parliament so as to ensure that expenditure portfolios for the recommended social protection programmes in the policy would be provided for in the national budget. The final version of the draft social protection policy is, however, yet to be concluded.

This study reveals three main things, namely: 1) that the social protection policy process is being treated entirely as a technical process; 2) the lack of capacity among leading government agencies to provide the necessary leadership and technical guidance and direction to the policy process; and 3) the fact that policy design has so far been totally driven and determined by donor agencies, particularly DFID and the World Bank. Politicians are yet to be engaged in the process. Neither have the lower level government structures, widely touted as the locus of implementation of the social protection programmes within the framework of decentralization, nor the grassroots been consulted or meaningfully involved in the process as yet. Consultations with local government structures and the grassroots are planned for after the policy is finalized. Thus the impression created so far is that national politics in the social protection process is purely contextual to be examined for the sake of completeness rather than to be accorded an explanatory role (cf. Hickey, 2005). But this overlooks the fact that different forms of politics shape different dimensions of social protection particularly their size, type, implementation and sustainability. The involvement of the stakeholders should be an integral part of

the policy process in order to stimulate public debate at political, technocratic and community levels, which is currently virtually non-existent. In other words, all aspects of the social protection policy need to be designed with an eye to the political context.

The government is apparently failing to provide leadership and technical guidance and direction to the policy process. These are critical to ensuring ownership of the policy process considered extremely vital for the success of the policy with particular regard to better coordination and alignment of development partners' long-term support. The apparent government's failure to steer the policy process gives at times the impression that it is being driven almost entirely by development partners. This is as a result of lack of capacity among government agencies about social protection issues in particular and handling policy processes in general. Most of the representatives from the leading government agencies in the social protection policy process are not very familiar with the nuances of the social protection discourse. Deficiencies in expertise among government officials have invariably created a favourable atmosphere for donors involved to dominate the policy process in various ways. They are thus pushing for their own ideologically driven conceptions of social protection including specific programmes to be an integral part of the policy. This was perhaps inevitable because the country is still recovering from a period in which the quality of policies, and the policy-making capacity is at its lowest ebb attributed to the leadership style of Muluzi who ruled Malawi between 1994 and 2004. It is argued that Muluzi's leadership style almost completely decimated the technocratic capacity within the civil service to the extent that donors had little choice but to step into the shoes of government substituting for it in the policy function (cf. Sahely, et al., 2005; Booth, et al., 2006). This, in turn, provided an incentive for donors to advocate their positions any how including even in an adversarial ways to each other since government policy visions and positions were not clearly articulated, if they existed at all.

This study drew essentially on the review of secondary sources (academic papers, government and donor documents) and on key informant interviews with officials from government, donor agencies and civil society. The analysis is structured along four sections. After this introduction, Section 2 explains the international and national contexts leading to the prominence of the social protection agenda. Section 3 provides a brief historical perspective about the origins and the evolution of social protection in Malawi. Section 4 critically examines the social protection policy processes to date focusing mainly on outstanding issues and constraints. Section 5 provides some concluding reflections.

2. The International and National Context for the Social Protection Agenda

2.1. The International Context

The origins of social protection are intensely debated (Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler, 2004). In most accounts, however, the origins of social protection are linked to the 1990 inaugural World Development Report which highlighted the need for governments to put in place some kind of mechanisms to help people through short term stress and calamities. These mechanisms became to be widely known as social safety nets (Devereux, 2002; Chinsinga, 2005). Generally, the rise of social protection in form of social safety nets is attributed to the forceful return of poverty onto the international development agenda credited to many years of work of the World Bank and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), which on the part of the latter, culminated in the inauguration of the Human Development Report (HDR) in 1990.

Since then the conception of social protection has progressively evolved. Instead of just a narrow focus on social safety nets, social protection is viewed as a range of protective actions carried out by the state and others in response to unacceptable levels of vulnerability and poverty which seeks to guarantee relief from destitution for those sections of the population who, for reasons beyond their control, are not able to provide for themselves. Dorward et al., (2007) distinguishes the following types of social protection instruments on the basis of their primary function in impacting on people's livelihoods. These are: 1) welfare instruments which provide relief and sometimes recovery from deprivation; 2) risk-insurance instruments which seek to avert deprivation by establishing robust and accessible recovery mechanisms; and 3) resilience building instruments which aim to enhance real incomes and capabilities enhancing programmes that build assets and promote resistance.

In many ways, DFID UK has been a leading donor agency advocating for the social protection agenda especially against the backdrop of the catalyst role played by the former British Prime Minister Tony Blair in the Commission of Africa Report (Government of Zambia and African Union, 2006). The key thrust of the recommendations of the African Commission is that there is an urgent need to invest in the people if the fight against poverty in Africa is to be meaningful. For this reason, social protection is rapidly rising on the agenda of the European development policy, prioritizing the need to tackle poverty and social exclusion not only in its member states but also in development partner countries. DFID is much more explicit. Its White Paper on development cooperation commits the UK government to significant increase in spending on social protection in Africa and Asia by 2009, and to work with European partners and national governments in Africa to double to 16 million the number of people moved from emergency relief to long-term social protection programmes by 2009.

In the continental context, the Zambia Livingstone Conference in March 2006 stands out as a major push to prominence of the social protection agenda. Malawi participated in this conference which urged governments to adopt social protection as an effective mechanism for reducing poverty, particularly extreme poverty as well as to address the rights of its vulnerable citizens. The outcome of the conference was the Livingstone Call of Action in which African governments were called upon to prepare costed cash transfer plans within three years integrated into national development plans and national budgets.

2.2. The National Context

2.2.1. General Economic Context

For nearly a period of 20 years, Malawi's economy has been characteristically unstable. Since 1981, the country's economy has experienced boom and burst type of growth patterns underpinned by rising levels of inflation, declining agricultural activity, rising interest rates and spirals in both domestic and external debt (cf. Jenkins and Tsoka, 2003). The country's staggering debt has since been written off under the HIPC scheme, however.

Malawi is heavily donor dependent. It is estimated that donors provide up to 80 per cent of the country's development budget and about 50 per cent of its recurrent expenditure. For instance, donors financed up to 83 per cent of the development budget during the 2004/2005 fiscal year (cf. Sahely, et al., 2005). Official development assistance in Malawi is projected at US $ 35 per capita and development assistance accounts for about 27 per cent of the GNP. Thus without donor support, the magnitude of government's deficit is quite overwhelming. Donors have thus been dominant in the policy processes and often their advice impacting upon growth, agriculture and poverty reduction has been characterized by shifts and turns depending on development models currently in fashion in Brussels, London or Washington.

Besides being highly donor dependent, Malawi's economy is predominantly agro-based. According to Chirwa et al., (2006), agriculture accounts for about 39 per cent of GDP, 85 per cent of the labour force and 83 per cent of foreign exchange earnings. While agriculture performed very well in the first two decades of independence, its performance has been quite erratic since early 1980s even though there are some signs of recovery in the last two growing seasons. The situation has turned around since the introduction of the fertilizer subsidy scheme in the 2005/2006 growing season. The programme ensured that in 2006 Malawi enjoyed its biggest ever harvest of 2.6 million metric tones, at least half a million tones more than its annual food requirements of two million tones. The surplus for the 2006/2007 growing season has more than doubled (cf. Chinsinga, 2007a).

2.2.2. Poverty and Vulnerability

Malawi's economic problems took the turn for the worse when it started implementing structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) championed as a panacea to the chronic structural imbalances that disabled the economy (Chipeta, 1993; Chirwa, 1997). In fact, Malawi was the first country to adopt the World Bank and IMF sponsored SAPs in southern Africa. But despite being the pioneering country within the sub-region, Malawi is yet to show off the benefits for taking the lead in adopting SAPs. The implementation of SAPs has failed to alter the structure of production of the economy but instead greatly contributed to the exacerbation in the levels of vulnerability and poverty, which have been compounded by frequent incidences of drought and flash floods in recent years (cf. Owusu and N'gambi, 2002).

Recent studies indicate that Malawi remains one of the poorest countries in the world despite undergoing significant economic and political reforms. There is as yet no tangible progress the proliferation of poverty reduction initiations since the turn of the 1990s notwithstanding. These have included the Poverty Alleviation Programme (PAP) in 1994; the Vision 2020 (1998); the Malawi Poverty Reduction Strategy (MPRS) (2001); the One Village One Product (OVOP) (2003); and the Malawi Growth ad Development Strategy (MGDS) (2006). Malawi is one of the poorest countries in the world whether judged by GNP per capita, the UNDP's Human Development Index or its Human Poverty Index (cf. Jenkins and Tsoka, 2003). The country's track record with regard to the Human Development Index is quite damming. Malawi has dropped from position 138 out 178 countries in 1990 to position 166 out of 178 countries in 2006. This underlies a steady decline in health care delivery, education, economic growth and general living standards.

The 2005 Integrated Household Survey (HIS) data clearly illustrate how poverty and vulnerability are deeply entrenched in the Malawian context. Table I shows the magnitude of the population that is likely to be affected if a shock redefines the position of a total poverty line. This table shows that about 12.9 per cent (one-eighth of the population) lives in the +/- band while about 25.2 per cent (one-quarter) lives in the +/-20 per cent band of the poverty line. This means that small increases in the average per capita expenditures would liberate large numbers of households from the grips of poverty and usher them above the poverty line. Conversely, it also means that relatively small reductions in expenditures for those just above the poverty line would push them into poverty again. This underlies the fact that vulnerability to monetary poverty is very high with 25.2 per cent of the population within the +/-20 band of the poverty line and that covariant shocks are widespread with more than 75 per cent of IHS II households being negatively

Table 1. Relationship between Poverty and Vulnerability

Poverty line (Z)	Estimate	Std. dev.	Design Effect
Z-20	37.6%	1.0%	4.45%
Z-10	45.5%	1.0%	4.46%
Z	52.4%	1.0%	4.48%
Z+10	58.4%	1.0%	4.37%
Z+20	63.8%	0.9%	4.34%

Source: Devereux (2006:22)

affected by the rising price of food. The high levels of poverty and vulnerability have forced the poor to seek numerous survival and adaptive strategies to alleviate their poverty. Poor households have resorted to traditional medicine and treatment; unsafe and unclean water sources; and squatter settlements in which sub-standard houses and congestion are the norm (Chilowa, et al., 2000; Chirwa, et al., 2006).

2.2.3. The Policy Context

The capacity of government to formulate, articulate and implement concrete policy interventions has been an issue of tremendous concern in recent years. The transition from authoritarian one-party rule to multiparty democracy is oddly considered as the tipping point in the versatility of the country's policy-making processes (cf. Rakner, et al., 2004; Booth et al., 2005). The quality of policy and policy-making capacity of the Malawi state rapidly deteriorated. In other words, the government's capacity for policy formulation and implementation became thin, and in some cases, virtually non-existent resulting in a complete loss of direction for state business. This was, of course, quite surprising because the advent of a democratic political dispensation was expected to strengthen the quality of, and the capacity of the government machinery in the policy-making processes. Unlike in the one party regime, the policy-making processes would be subjected to the influence of a multitude of actors at various levels of society and would be a substantially democratic process. It would further be procedurally more open and inclusive with potentially qualitatively different policy outcomes (cf. Chinsinga, 2007b). In the one party regime, policy-making was highly centralized in the presidency. The president provided the vision, direction, and the pace of policy outcomes especially in terms of defining the core ideas, framing issues, and defining measures of success for policy initiatives.

The decline in the government's capacity in policy formulation and implementation is underscored by the apparent multiplicity of grand policy documents since the turn of the 1990s. Booth et al., (2006) observe that a notable feature of Malawi's situation is the multiplication of policy documents and an absence of real implemented and implementable policies beyond the short-term. At least five grand policy documents have been produced since 1994 but compared to the policies of the 1960s and 1970s which lived their planning horizon, the recent policy documents have all overlapped. This in turn creates considerable policy uncertainties making policy coherence extremely difficult to achieve (Chirwa, et al., 2006). The challenges of the fluid and shifting policy strategies and directions were duly recognized in the 2002-2006 Public Sector Management Reform Programme (PSMRP). The observation in the PSMRP was that the policy-making processes in Malawi are seemingly chaotic because of the absence of a central agency charged with the responsibility of providing leadership and creating public constituency for policy reforms and initiatives.

Policy-making in Malawi has therefore largely been on an ad hoc basis. In many ways, donors have greatly contributed to the crisis situation in the policy-making realm in the country. An increasing number of donors have taken advantage of the weakened or virtually non-existent technical capacity to coordinate policy formulation in government to step into the vacuum to the extent that oftentimes decisions taken by donors have effectively settled policy. The main problem has been that the donor approaches to the policy-making function have equally not been immune to short-termism, competitiveness and personality politics characteristic of state policy (cf. Harrigan, 2005; Sahely, et al., 2005). Consequently competing views, interests and demands among donors have substantially compromised policy coherence, and subjected policy-making and implementation to often polarized ideological leanings and orientations. In some cases, projects or policy initiatives were identified with specific individuals within the donor agencies which posed serious problems of consistency and continuity when their tenure of office expired (cf. Booth, et al., 2006). In short, donors made matters worse by their fragmented, ad hoc and sometimes confrontational stance in discharging policy functions.

There are, however, some signs of recovery regarding the government's capacity to formulate, articulate and implement credible policy interventions. President Mutharika who succeeded Muluzi in 2004 is restoring and championing a fairly technocratic approach to policy-making patterned on an elaborate development vision for the country[3]. This vision is underpinned by the MGDS touted as an overarching policy framework for wealth creation and economic growth as a means for reducing poverty on a sustainable basis. The MGDS distinguishes five thematic areas, namely: sustainable economic growth, social protection, social development, infrastructure development and improved governance.

It is striking to note that social protection is designated as the second pillar in the MGDS. The decision to designate social protection as such is surely a culmination of the apparent failure of safety nets to have a significant dent on poverty and vulnerability coupled with various international forces ranging from the prominence of social protection on the international development agenda to the AU's Livingstone Call for Action. Framed as social protection and disaster management, the overall goal and objective of the social protection pillar are respectively to:

- To improve the socio-economic indicators for the most vulnerable [people in society]. This is designed to ensure that the most vulnerable people with limited factors of production are sufficiently cushioned. This encompasses the expectation for improved health and nutritional status of under five children, school age children, orphans, pregnant and lactating mothers as well as destitute families (Government of Malawi, 2006: 28).
- Efficient and effective support to most vulnerable people with very limited factors of production; improved planning and integration of knowledge on the needs of the chronically poor; provision of opportunities for the poor farmers and rural communities to graduate from poverty by facilitating their integration in the mainstream agricultural productivity and enabling them to accumulate wealth (Government of Malawi, 2006: 27).

3. Social Protection in Malawi: A Quick Review

The social protection discourse in Malawi is not entirely new. It has existed since independence in July 1964 in various forms and guises but the shift of terminology to social protection is however a recent one. The notion of social protection generally underlies government's commitment to move toward long-term and developmental activities to both alleviate and reduce poverty.

Slater & Tsoka (2007) distinguish four distinct stages in the evolution of social protection initiatives leading to the current efforts to develop a social protection policy framework (summarized in Table 2 below). In early decades of independence up until the early 1980s, Slater & Tsoka (2007) observe that social protection strategies took exclusively the form of price controls and subsidies. However, these measures had by the early 1980s not achieved much, but perhaps more critically, were diagnosed as fiscally unsustainable. These were abandoned in the wake of structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) that were principally adopted to deal with the acute external and internal fiscal imbalances that the country was experiencing at that time (cf. Harrigan, 2001; Chinsinga, 2002). These imbalances were as a result of: 1) slow growth of smallholder exports; 2) the narrowness of the export base and increased reliance on tobacco; 3) dependence on imported fuel and on a declining stock of domestic fuel wood; 4) the rapid deterioration of parastatal finances; and 5) inflexible system of government administered prices and wages.

SAPs did not, however, achieve the intended objectives despite the country's faithful implementation of the recommended policy prescriptions for a considerably long period of time. Several reviews point out that SAPs have laid heavy social burdens on the vulnerable segments of society, particularly women and children (cf. Chilowa, et al., 2000). The main objective of SAPs was to do away with input and output price controls as well as phasing out universal subsidies. According to Tsoka and Slater (2007), targeted nutrition programmes (therapeutic and supplementary feeding) for children and pregnant or lactating mothers became the sole intervention geared at protecting the vulnerable segments of society during this period.

The worsening impact of SAPs eventually led to the advent of the social dimension of adjustment (SDA) initiatives at the beginning of the 1990s. This was essentially an acknowledgement that there was an urgent need for 'adjustment with a human face' in order to ameliorate the adverse impacts of SAPs on the vulnerable segments of society. This was, in part, influenced by the World Bank's realization that the wellbeing of an individual is an outcome of complex economic and social processes, which involve physical performance, labour input, income generation and consumption investment. The main aim of the programme was to develop the institutional capacity of the government in partnership with civil society in order to meaningfully integrate social and poverty concerns in the development process. This ultimately led to the conception of the Malawi Social Action Fund (MASAF) under the auspices of the 1994 Poverty Alleviation Programme (PAP) following the United Democratic Front's (UDF) adoption of poverty reduction as an overall operative development philosophy for the government. This not only opened up space but also provided an institutional framework for projectized safety net programmes among non-governmental organizations (NGOs), community based organizations (CBOs) and even faith based organizations (FBOs).

The adjustment with a human face initiative failed to deliver the envisaged strategic impact for a number of reasons. The main reason, however, was that these programmes were viewed by governments as merely designed to address the social costs of adjustment (cf. Hickey, 2005; Gentilini, 2005). They thus functioned much more as 'sweeteners to maintain the support of key public sector interest groups rather than as genuine attempts to protect the poor and vulnerable who had little stake in the existing system and correspondingly weak political voice' (Hickey, 2005: 4). In the greater part of the 1980s and 1990s social protection measures were therefore not only motivated by instrumental political concerns but were also championed without being articulated into a coherent policy framework and embedded within local governance.

The fourth and final stage in the evolution of social protection came about towards the end of the 1990s. It was very much inspired by the proliferation of various safety net programmes and interventions following the adoption of poverty reduction as an overall flagship of government policy. An assessment by government in collaboration with some of its leading development partners (World Bank, DFID and EU) revealed that safety nets were having limited impact on the scale and magnitude of poverty and vulnerability despite the unprecedented increase in the range and scope of these initiatives. The conclusion was that these safety net interventions had limited impact because they were short-term, ad hoc, patchy and uncoordinated (cf. Chinsinga, 2005; Slater & Tsoka, 2007). This became the basis for the development of a National Safety Nets Strategy (NSNS) in 2000. The NSNS found its concrete expression in the Malawi Poverty Reduction Strategy (MPRS) (2001). Pillar three of the MPRS: Improving the quality of life of the most vulnerable, provided for four main safety nets interventions. These included: 1) public works programmes; 2) targeted nutrition programmes; 3) targeted input subsidies; and 4) direct welfare transfers including food aid support to secondary school going OVCs (cf. Rook & Maleta, 2001; Slater & Tsoka, 2007).

The NSNS was championed by a Safety Nets Unit (SNU) housed in the Ministry of Economic Planning and Development (EP&D) then the National Economic Council (NEC). The Safety Nets Unit evolved from the PAP Coordinating Unit housed in the same ministry but which operated under the superintendence of a presidential council on poverty alleviation (cf. Chinsinga, 2002). The activities of the Safety Nets Unit were overseen by a Steering Committee chaired by the Malawi Social Action Fund (MASAF).

The NSNS did not chieve its underlying goals and objectives. It is argued that the main reason for its failure to deliver was that its institutional framework was extremely weak and fragile. The Safety Nets Unit in ED&D did not have the capacity or mandate to bring together

Table 2. A Summary of Social Protection Programmes in Malawi

Period	Types	Comments
1964-1981	• Input and output price controls • Universal inputs subsidy • Farmer clubs and credit facilities	• These were formal interventions but market based
1981-1990	• Input and out price decontrols • Phasing universal subsides • Targeted nutrition programmes • Food transfers (relief)	• SAPs under stabilization forced government to dismantle the social protection system without replacements
1990-1994	• Interventions under SDA • Targeted nutrition programmes • Food transfers (relief) • Credit schemes	• Inspired by adjustment with a human face calls
1994-2006	• MSMEs credit schemes • Public works programmes • Input transfers (SP/TIP) • Food transfers • School feeding • Cash transfers (pilot) • Targeted input subsidies • Targeted nutrition programmes • Integrated livelihoods support	• Dominated by government initiatives despite the mushroomingof NGOs offering social protection interventions • Most interventions were in the spirit of safety nets focusing on vulnerability and transient poverty

Source: adapted from Slater & Tsoka (2007: 22)

sector ministries and donors. Most donors seemed unwilling or unable to align their programmes to the strategy making the large number of donor driven interventions difficult to manage. Government did not therefore provide the necessary leadership to manage donor-initiated programmes (cf. Chinsinga, 2005 and Slater & Tsoka, 2007).

Attempts have been made to document the range of safety net programmes at different points in time in the country, and the most recent attempt is by Slater & Tsoka (2007). They carried out an inventory of existing social protection programmes in the country stipulating the type of the project and the number of beneficiaries. The statistics are captured in Table 3 below:

The most significant development in the social protection discourse in Malawi since 2006 therefore are the efforts currently underway to develop a social protection policy framework anchored in the MGDS. The policy is intended to translate the ideals stipulated in the MGDS as stated above into actionable programmes and interventions that would address the enduring problems of widespread poverty and vulnerability in the country. This would be achieved if the country 'moves away from safety nets programming to help poor households deal with crises towards long-term predictable programming' (Slater & Tsoka, 2007: viii). In the interviews with stakeholders, the following justifications for a social protection policy framework were distinguished:

- Lessons from the implementation of the NSNS under the auspices of pillar III of the MPRS revealed that there were too many actors implementing different types of safety net programmes. This created excessive

Table 3. Types and Number of Beneficiaries

Type	Number	Beneficiaries (total)	Beneficiaries (average)
Inputs subsidy	1	2,000,000	2,000,00
Inputs transfers	3	3,707,700	1,234,900
School feeding	2	623,00	207,667
Cash-for-work	8	870,237	108,780
Food-for-work	2	147,075	73,538
Integrated	1	59,000	59,00
Food transfers	5	210,225	42,045
Bursaries	1	38,855	38,855
Inputs-for-work	4	138,902	34,726
Targeted nutrition	6	65,274	10,879
Food cash	1	5,050	3,050
Cash transfers	3	4,215	4,738
Relief items	1	1,225	1,225

Source: Slater & Tsoka (2007: 26)

problems in coordination, targeting and provision of services to intended individuals and households. The formulation of a social protection policy framework would therefore provide a platform for dealing with these problems by, among other things, offering a coherent monitoring and evaluation framework.

- The policy would provide guidelines for tackling poverty in order to bring about meaningful changes in the levels of poverty and vulnerability. This was prompted by the realization that current statistics show that the levels of poverty and vulnerability remain acute despite the continued increase of stakeholders and programmes in the realm of social protection.
- The ultra poor are currently not the major beneficiaries of social protection interventions. This group could only be realistically targeted on the basis of an elaborate social protection policy.
- It is almost impossible to achieve sustainable economic growth in the country because the proportion of the population which is ultra poor is quite significant. Without a social protection policy framework, any growth agenda is unattainable due to the pull down effect exerted by the ultra-poor. Economic growth cannot therefore be sustained.

These justifications very much border on the realization that Malawi is trapped and locked up in a vicious circle of poverty and vulnerability. Recent research shows that Malawians are more vulnerable today than they were two decades ago because they are less able to deal with changes than they were in the past (cf. Schubert, 2006; Government of Malawi/ World Bank, 2006; Devereux, et al., 2006). Recurrent bouts of shocks of different forms (flash floods, droughts, inflation etc) have meant a dramatic decline in people's assets, erosion of savings and near collapse of traditional support mechanisms. Therefore, to break out of this cycle, requires the country to mobilize predictable resources for predictable problems and challenges.

4. The Social Protection Policy-making Process in Perspective

4.1. Setting the Context

Accounts about the rise of social protection onto the government's agenda differ widely in terms of details. In the interviews, most government stakeholders stressed that the social protection policy initiative was an exclusively homegrown agenda. This, however, sharply contrasted with the views of non-state actors including donor agencies. The majority contended that DFID and the World Bank have been quite instrumental in pushing social protection onto government's agenda. Nevertheless, all stakeholders agree that the current prominence of the social protection discourse is a direct consequence of the rather disappointing track record of safety net programmes and interventions on poverty and vulnerability.

The developments leading to the current social protection policy process can generally be traced back to 1998. According to most interviewees in the public sector, an inventory of social protection programmes at that time clearly indicated the failure of these programmes to bring about positive impact on the livelihoods of the poor. The World Bank and the government attempted a safety net strategy in 1998 but was never translated into actionable programmes. A similar initiative was undertaken by DFID and the government in 1999. The resultant strategy was endorsed by Cabinet in 2000 and formed the basis for the MPRS pillar III. The safety nets programme and a safety nets unit were launched in 2002. These were housed in the Ministry of Economic Planning and Development (EP&D) building on the Poverty Alleviation Programme launched in August 1994 besides the fact that the EP&D in close collaboration with the Ministry of Finance were driving the PRSP process of which the safety nets agenda was a key component.

Most stakeholders (government, donors and NGOs) pointed out that the idea of the safety nets programme was to coordinate the isolated efforts in order to ensure impact through a basket funding mechanism but this was, however, rejected by most development partners. DFID pledged to support the initiative for the 2002-2004 period but this never materialized. Chaired by the Malawi Social Action Fund (MASAF), many stakeholders felt that the safety nets initiative lacked strong government leadership. DFID did not honour its pledge because it felt government failed to demonstrate commitment to the implementation of the safety nets initiative. A safety nets levy was agreed but the funds mobilized thereafter were reportedly channelled to other less important but politically rewarding activities.

4.2. Social Protection getting onto the Government's Agenda

Most stakeholders (donors and NGOs) widely accredit DIFD to have kick-started the events that eventually culminated in the current social protection policy process towards the end of 2005. A DIFD official pointed out that they convened a workshop in December 2005 bringing together government, civil society and donor agency officials to examine the evidence about the extent of poverty and vulnerability marshaled in two studies which DFID had commissioned; a study on vulnerability and malnutrition (Devereux et al., 2006) and a review of social protection instruments used in Malawi (Devereux and Macauslan, 2006).

The main observation of this workshop was that poverty and vulnerability remained deep, severe and widespread and that the practice with respect to safety nets was ad hoc, short-term and uncoordinated. The workshop made two recommendations, namely: 1) an immediate shift from safety nets to social protection with strong government leadership; and 2) the development of a vision, objectives and a definition of social protection within the Malawian context. The shift from safety nets to social protection with an appropriate institutional framework was meant to address the ills that had characterized the safety nets programme. This workshop was therefore essentially an agenda setting forum.

The World Bank working closely with the government also came up with another evidence based study on the extent and dynamics of poverty in the country. Titled Poverty and Vulnerability Assessment: Investing in Our Future (2006), the World Bank argued that the business as usual mode would not make any noticeable difference

on the country's poverty and vulnerability. In the Bank's view, successful reduction in the current levels of vulnerability and poverty would only happen with systematic policy planning and programmes. While most stakeholders generally perceive DFID and the World Bank as being on the forefront of the policy process the latter claims not to have significant influence over the process arguing they joined in after the social protection policy initiative had already taken off the ground. In short, the Bank's veiled message was that much of the donor support would be readily available only after there is a firm government commitment to social protection. Donors would thus not invest in social protection unless government develops a social protection policy framework.

4.3. Institutional Framework for the Social Protection Policy

A follow up to the December 2005 workshop was held in June 2006 with DFID clearly playing a leading role. The purpose of this workshop was to chart out the road map for the development of a social protection as quickly as possible. Two committees were developed tasked to guide the processes leading to the formulation and adoption of a social protection policy. These were: 1) the National Social Protection Steering Committee (NSPSC); and 2) the National Social Protection Technical Committee (NSPTC). The NSPSC comprise principal secretaries from relevant line ministries (Secretary for Poverty and Disaster Management Affairs (Chair); Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security; Ministry of Economic Planning and Development; Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development; Ministry of Finance; Ministry of Health; Ministry of Transport and Public Works; Ministry of Women and Development; Ministry of Persons with Disabilities and the Elderly; Department of Nutrition and HIV/AIDS; Ministry of Irrigation and Water Development; Ministry of Education; Ministry of labour and Social Development) and representatives of key development partners such as the DFID, the World Bank and UNICEF. It is chaired by the Chief Secretary to the Office President and Cabinet (OPC). The main function of the NSPSC is to provide oversight and guidance to the development, implementation, coordination and monitoring of social protection interventions. It is surprising, however, that donors are even members of the Steering Committee. Perhaps their motive is to ensure that they are able to keep track of, and influence every aspect of the social protection policy so as it is in tune with their priorities.

The NSPTC comprise technical staff from the relevant government ministries, representatives from key development partners, civil society and private sector representatives. The primary task for the NSPTC is to develop the social protection policy, coordinate and monitor the implementation of social protection interventions. Both committees are supported by the Department of Poverty and Disaster Management Affairs (DoPDMA housed in the OPC in performing their day to day duties. A Social Protection Unit (SPU) has been created within DoPDMA to specifically facilitate and coordinate the social protection policy processes. The workshop further mandated these committees to produce at least a draft social protection policy by the end of 2006.

The setting up of the NSPSC and NSPTC implied significant institutional change for programmes and interventions targeted at the vulnerable segments of society. The Safety Nets Unit (SNU) was housed in the Ministry of Economic Planning and Development (EP&D) chaired by MASAF. The SNU was an improvement on the Poverty Alleviation Unit (PAU) in then the National Economic Council now EP&D. The shift from the language of safety nets to the language of social protection has thus seen the SNU move to DoPDMA and being renamed the SPU. Stakeholders argued that the changes in the institutional structures were meant to illustrate the commitment on the part of government to the social protection agenda.

By housing social protection in a department that is directly under the OPC, and the Chief Secretary in his capacity as the head of the civil service chairing the NSPSC, would give the process the visibility and the political muscle that would enable things to get done. This was perhaps aptly captured by one of the interviewees who observed that the NPSPC is chaired by the Chief Secretary 'to take advantage of compulsive powers and high profile of [his] office'. According to Slater & Tsoka (2007), coordinating activities of this nature requires a strong government lead that can manage and prioritize between different competing sectors. They argue that the move of SNU to DoPDMA in the OPC is a critical way forward in ensuring clear government leadership of social protection policy process.

4.4. Stakeholder Engagement with the Social Protection Policy Design Process

A preliminary draft social protection policy was in circulation by November 2006. The draft policy focused on programmes developed on the basis of four categories of labour attributes of poor households in the country. These were moderately poor with labour, moderately poor without labour, ultra poor with labour, and ultra poor without labour. The scope of the policy and therefore its proposed programme interventions were considered quite narrow. This draft policy was almost entirely a product of collaboration between the government and the donor agencies. There was marginal participation of civil society through the Council of Non-Governmental Organizations (CONGOMA) and the Civil Society Agricultural Network (CISANET). Politicians, academics, the private sector, local government structures and the citizens at large were not involved at all.

The release of the November 2006 preliminary social protection policy draft version was preceded by a consultation exercise with civil society held at the Malawi Institute of Management (MIM). According to civil society stakeholders interviewed, participants at this workshop were simply briefed on the social protection programme and the draft social protection policy so that they could provide input into the policy. The perception of most of the civil society actors was that the MIM workshop was largely a briefing rather than a consultative session. They argued that there was hardly time for them to assimilate let alone critically think through the issues in order to make meaningful contributions to the policy process. The release of the draft policy agitated civil society to get involved fully in the social protection policy processes. However, the claims of limited civil society involvement

in the policy processes revealed the institutional challenges that exist regarding coordination and operations of civil society organizations. By involving CONGOMA as an overall umbrella body for civil society, the impression of government departments and other stakeholders was that they had effectively opened up the policy process to the wider civil society. This was, however, not the case exposing constraints that CONGOMA faces as an overall coordinating body for civil society particularly NGOs.

Action Aid and Plan International mobilized the rest of the civil society to come up with a platform as the basis for engaging with government on the social protection policy processes. A workshop was convened toward the end of November 2006 where a civil society position was unveiled. The workshop brought together government officials, donor agencies, CBOs, FBOs and a cross section of NGOs active in social protection interventions. Members of Parliament from relevant parliamentary committees were also invited to attend this workshop. The workshop critically reviewed the draft policy, offering inputs wherever necessary. The following observations were made on the policy:

- It lacked a contextual definition of social protection. It was argued that this was critical because there are different conceptual frameworks or rival understandings of social protection. The concern was that social protection as conceptualized in the draft policy was not any different from safety nets.
- The policy did not address key and often controversial issues in social protection. These include such issues as affordability, conditionality, universality, integration of social protection into social policy, delivery and institutional constraints, types of social transfers etc.
- No indications of poverty profiling and targeted interventions for different categories of the poor and vulnerable including guidelines for shifting beneficiaries between different components of social protection programmes.
- Inability to articulate the social protection policy within the human rights based approach. The concern here was that the draft policy was motivated largely by the results of evaluations studies of safety nets hence the focus of the policy was primarily to deal the shortfalls of the safety nets programme.

The conclusion of the civil society coalition was therefore that the draft policy did not promise to be a new vision at all. They argued that the policy was very much driven by the safety nets perspective but with expected better management and financing to the extent that social protection risked being merely a passing fad. The civil society proposed three options on how they could engage with government on the social protection policy process. These were: 1) lobby government to restart the policy process altogether; 2) lobby for representation in the current policy process; 3) engage in an entirely parallel policy process.

The second option turned out as the most acceptable one to government. Thus the most important outcome of the workshop convened to showcase the civil society position on the policy process was to create greater space for stakeholder representation and participation both on the NSPSC and NSPTC[4]. A number of civil society representatives were taken on board while both academics and politicians were excluded altogether. They are simply invited to workshops convened to get feedback on various aspects of initiatives relating to the formulation of the social protection policy. The policy had to be reviewed and re-examined under the auspices of expanded NSPSC and NSPTC in order to take into account the observations made by civil society and other stakeholders.

The November 2006 social protection policy draft version was completed without taking into account a number of initiatives that should have fed into the drafting exercise. UNICEF in collaboration with the government is pioneering a cash transfer scheme in Mchinji district. The expectation was that the draft policy would benefit from insights from this initiative (cf. Schubert, 2006). DFID was mandated at the June 2006 workshop to develop a framework for the social protection policy that would provide guiding principles, rules of engagement and institutional arrangements for the delivery of social protection programmes. Meanwhile the World Bank sponsored a stock take study to systematically document the scope of the social protection related initiatives. A second draft version of the social protection policy was developed in March 2007 and circulated to stakeholders for feedback targeting completion by June 2007. The final draft version is yet to be produced, however. The feedback on the policy indicated that most of the observations made on the November 2006 draft version were not thoroughly addressed. The drafting team was reportedly under enormous pressure to meet the June 2007 deadline for the social protection expenditure portfolio to be provided for in the 2007/2008 budget. This would, among other things, demonstrate government's commitment to social protection or risk limited donor support in this area until such a time the social protection framework is concluded. Consequently a decision was made to hire a consultant to rework, fine-tune and finalize the draft social protection policy.

4.5. Issues in the Social Protection Policy Process

There are a number of critical issues that can be isolated from the social protection policy process to date that present potential challenges to success of the social protection policy initiative. To a very great extent, these challenges, as demonstrated below, underlie the complexity and inherently political nature of policy processes. This is to say that policy-making entails processes of negotiating and bargaining among stakeholders with different forms and styles of expertise. In this sense, policy-making can be epitomized as a struggle among sundry stakeholders about whose interests should be included, dominate or excluded altogether from the final policy outcomes (cf. UNRISD, 2004 and UNDP, 2004). These processes are thus played out in uneven struggles between differently positioned and capacitated actors. Viewed in this way, the main feature of policy-making is the stratified interaction of institutions and processes which, in turn, affect the kinds of policies that are ultimately made. The issues discerned in the social protection policy process include the following: 1) non-inclusiveness of the policy process; 2) weak capacity of the government in driving the policy

process; and 3) a number of unresolved conceptual issues for which there is lack of consensus among the stakeholders.

4.5.1. Non-inclusiveness of the Policy Process

The social protection policy-making process has not been an inclusive one regardless of the fact that efforts have been made to progressively open it up to stakeholders. The major stakeholder that has successfully lobbied for inclusion into the policy process is the civil society other than the donor community which has been driving it. Politicians, especially MPs, the grassroots and the local government structures remain stuck at the periphery of the policy process. The exclusion of these actors could have significant implications on the potential success of the policy process.

The exclusion of MPs is a huge risk because as pointed out above policy-making processes are inherently political since they ultimately deal with the question of resource allocation and distribution, however, invisible they may be. It is, in fact, already being rapidly recognized that political will both at the international and national levels is key for the adoption let alone implementation of social protection programmes which require long-term investment. Political will is actually characterized as 'the fundamental driving force for long-term investment in social protection programmes' (Government of Zambia and African Union, 2006: 4). This therefore means that for the champions of social protection policy and programmes to generate the requisite political will, governments require a clear case that explains why social protection should be given priority including the resultant range of benefits.

Failure to closely involve MPs in the social protection policy process means that an auspicious opportunity has been missed out to progressively build a constituency of support for the final product. The target in this case should have been the relevant parliamentary committees to issues of social protection. Since the parliamentary committees draw membership from all parties represented in the legislature, their involvement would have ensured cultivating cross party support for social protection right at an early stage. This would have further ensured that social protection is not threatened by any future changes in government or electoral processes (cf. Tsoka & Slater, 2007). Already, a potential threat discerned in the consultations carried out for this study is that the majority of the opposition politicians perceive the Mchinji-UNICEF cash transfer pilot scheme as a campaign tool for the governing party. The fears among this group of politicians are that once the social protection policy is formally adopted, the programmes would be redirected on the basis of political support rather than on the basis of the needs of the recipients. This, among other things, illustrates that ignoring politics out of the social protection dialogue might mean ignoring a critical determinant for the success of the programme.

The periphery role of the legislators in the policy process is apparently an enduring historical legacy of the one-party era. The main task of parliament was to establish the legitimacy and the legal standards for policy implementation. It thus simply served a legitimizing function of tightly controlled public policy agendas. This has been carried over into the multiparty political dispensation. For instance, parliament played absolutely no role in the development of the Malawi Poverty Reduction Strategy (MPRS) yet it was the overriding framework for the country's development policy and planning (Jenkins and Tsoka, 2003). Parliament is marginalized in legislative functions on the pretext of its lack of skills and expertise to be involved in the demanding and challenging policy processes. The huge affinity for technocratic policy-making is justified on the account of the fact that more than 60 per cent of the MPs have qualifications below a college diploma, and only 15 per cent have a first degree or more. The paradox, however, is that while donor interventions are consistently undertaken to strengthen the technical knowledge of the executive, similar initiatives targeted at the legislature are rarely championed. This amounts to a technocratic style of policy-making which poses a considerable threat to democracy because the public cannot scrutinize decisions when parliament is yet to be fully engaged in the policy processes-a scrutiny that is at the heart of democratic politics (cf. UNRISD, 2004; Chinsinga, 2007b).

The ordinary people have been entirely left out of the policy process. The question, of course, is who can best represent the ordinary Malawians in the social protection policy process? NGOs or other civil society organizations? Representatives from District Assemblies or Traditional Leaders? Whatever the case may be, it is very important that the voice of the people is heard in the social protection policy dialogue. The involvement of the would be beneficiaries of social protection programmes is very crucial mainly because they are not a homogeneous group. It is, of course, practically impossible to directly involve people in matters of policy but what this implies is that there should be a solid analytical basis on poverty, risk and vulnerability informing the policy process. The point is that as policy dialogue and programming initiatives are developed, care should be taken not to lump the poor and marginalized into one group and not to predetermine and prioritize their specific problems and interests before engaging in a dialogue with them. The poor are quite diverse facing different risks and needs and sometimes with hugely conflicting interests.

The involvement of the people in the policy process is moreover their basic democratic right. It is, in fact, a basic democratic requirement that citizens have to take an active part in decision making processes which have a direct bearing on their own lives. The ultimate goal is that the people must become actors in relation to their own affairs and the affairs of wider society (Cornwall and Gaventa, 2001; Jones and Gaventa, 2002). The involvement of the would be beneficiaries would transform them from being passive recipients to active beneficiaries of the social protection programmes. Ad hoc attempts have been made by such stakeholders as Plan International and Action Aid to consult and popularize the social protection policy process among stakeholders. However, it is not very clear on what exactly they have been consulting the people on and whether these consultations have fed back into the policy-making process.

The official position is that the people will be consulted once the social protection policy has been finalized. It is, however, doubtful whether the retrospective

consultations are going to register the same effects compared to if the consultations were either done prior to or in the course of the drafting exercise. The hangover effects of top down and technocratic policy-making processes are surely quite strong. Nevertheless, it has to be noted that the consultations are instrumental in raising citizen's awareness of their rights but perhaps more importantly that they are able to demand accountability and advocate for their entitlements accordingly. The irony is that if people don't know about programmes they will not appreciate even when they are designated as beneficiaries. In fact, more democratic processes could actually enhance the trust in the legitimacy and responsibility of political decisions.

It is quite surprising that local government structures have been not be given as much space in the social protection policy process as discerned in the consultations carried out for this study. The on going decentralization policy reforms designate District Assemblies (DAs) as the locus of implementation of development projects and poverty reduction initiatives. This means that whatever social protection programmes will be outlined in the policy to have the desired strategic purchase, they will have to be implemented at the DA level. This makes it imperative to massively involve local governments in the social protection policy process not only because they will shoulder the disproportionate burden of implementing the social protection programmes but also because they have a lot to offer toward injecting a doze of realism in the policy process. The central government officials are often preoccupied with other priorities and know very little about the dynamics of programme implementation at the local level. The point is that local institutions greatly shape the final nature of programme interventions. The input of local government officials would also be critical for purposes of developing a clear and viable structure of implementation and administration of social protection programmes. The social safety nets programme failed because of its ad hoc implementation structures at the local level which ultimately constrained its impact on the poverty and vulnerability situation in the country.

4.5.2. Weak Government Leadership

Stakeholders have consistently emphasized that the social protection policy process should be government driven in order to demonstrate its commitment and ensure ownership. This is, in part, in recognition of the fact that previous efforts did not achieve the desired impact because they lacked government ownership (cf. Government of Zambia and African Union, 2006). They were almost entirely driven by development partners. Government commitment, ownership and leadership is rationalized further as a starting point for operationalizing the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness. This would provide a rallying point for donors' interventions since without government's leadership, it would be difficult for them to make long-term commitments in the absence of a clearly defined and articulated position of a host government. Moreover a nationally scaled up social protection policy is a permanent commitment requiring predictable public funding. Placing the Department of Poverty and Disaster Management Affairs (DoPDMA) under the Office of the President and Cabinet (OPC) in charge of the social protection policy process was therefore meant to bolster government's leadership of, and demonstrate its commitment to the development of a social protection policy.

The critical examination of the social protection policy process, however, shows that government's leadership of the process has essentially remained at the level of rhetoric. This has been the case because of the invisibility of social protection politically and more critically due to limited government's capacity to provide the necessary strategic guidance and technical direction to the policy process. It is quite clear from this study that while the committees entrusted with the task of developing the social protection policy are dominated by government officials, they lack the technical understanding of the nuances of social protection. Consequently the key building blocks of the policy have not been developed by the working committees on social protection policy; they have been outsourced to consultants contracted on behalf of government by development partners. The World Bank hired consultants to undertake the stock take study; DFID procured consultancy services for the development of the framework for social protection policy; and the technical expertise for the Mchinji cash transfer pilot project is almost entirely provided by UNICEF. The problem of lack of capacity is clearly underpinned by the staffing situation of the Social Protection Unit (SPU) in the DoPDMA. Many stakeholders observed that the SPU has been weakly staffed at different points during the social protection policy process as illustrated in the following sentiments:

> [SPU] lacks policy formulation capacity. There is currently only one person as one has retired, and the other has been relocated. There is need for technical assistance if the [social protection] policy is to be properly developed.

> There is need to engage with donors especially to tap on their experiences in order to inform GoM's policy and practices but without the requisite depth of technical expertise in the key government agencies, there is a huge risk that they [donors] would simply take over the policy process. I mean what we need is to come up with a Malawi policy and not a donor policy.

The opening up of the policy process to both international and local civil society did not substantially shore up the policy-making technical capacity either. Just like their government counterparts, most of the civil society representatives lack technical understanding of central issues related to social protection. Most donor agencies interviewed argued that most of the civil society organizations do not technically understand social protection as they still think predominantly in a safety nets mode. It is therefore not surprising that after getting feedback on the second draft version of the social protection policy, a consultant funded by DFID has been hired to rework and finalize the draft policy before it can be taken out into the public domain for consultations with relevant stakeholders including the general public.

Deficiencies in the expected government's leadership of the social protection policy process have created a favourable environment for donor policy politics to flourish. Several donors are in the context of apparent of leadership vacuum advancing and promoting their own programmes to feature as key components of the social protection policy. The concern is that the programmes that these donors are vigorously pushing for have not been extensively piloted to say for sure that they would function as viable social protection interventions. USAID is reportedly pushing for Improving Livelihoods Through Increasing Food Security (I-LIFE); World Bank is particularly interested in inputs for work programmes; EU is keen on public works programmes; and UNICEF is intent on pushing for the adoption of the Mchinji Cash Transfer scheme as the main thrust of the social protection policy. The first two draft policy versions have clearly been influenced by the Mchinji cash transfer pilot project. The following sentiments point to the donor politics that has characterized the social protection policy-making process:

> As far as we can see, some donor agencies and international NGOs are not keen on the [social protection] policy. They just want to use Malawi as an experimental ground. This is the price you pay for excessive deficits in policy-making skills and expertise. Social protection may end up being supply driven as it is a DFID's agenda promoted by Tony Blair's exit gestures. DFID is pumping in a lot of money which has the potential to bring a good concept into disrepute.

Slater & Tsoka (2007) equally discerned the influential role of donor politics in the social protection policy process. They argued that the role of donors in the policy process is quite unclear and of particular concern was the fact that they have different approaches to, and activities within social protection, that may potentially be holding back steps towards a long-term social protection programme in Malawi. They summed up the dynamics of donor interface in the social protection policy process as follows:

- Some donors see social protection as simply another term for poverty reduction or development and therefore work through different institutional arrangements to those associated with SPU/NSPSC/NSPTC
- Some donors see WFP's school feeding programme as part of the social protection agenda whilst others regard it as an education programme.
- UNICEF focuses on the very poorest households and ensuring their consumption whilst DFID and the World Bank focus their recent investments on enhancing productive activity and ex-ante risk management.
- Donor policy positions are sometimes out of sync with one another and those of government. The EU public works programme pays more than the Malawi Social Action Fund (MASAF) creating confusion at the local level. The general World Bank's orthodoxy on public works is to pay below the prevailing agricultural wage rate.

It is very clear from these observations that government's firm and technically sound leadership in the policy process is indispensable. Without it, it is very difficult to develop a genuinely Malawian social protection policy. It is apparent that the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness notwithstanding, donors focus on different elements or dimensions of a policy agenda at stake. They thus try to push forward their own priorities rather than attempting earnestly to work in unison with the government.

4.5.3. Unresolved Conceptual Issues

There are two related issues that the two draft versions of the policy produced to date have not addressed and resolved, yet they feature prominently in the contemporary social protection discourse. These are: 1) whether social protection should be a right or not; and 2) whether the delivery of social protection programmes should be targeted or universal. The consultations carried out for this study revealed that these are very contentious issues which have to be addressed by the policy in one way or another. The policy should thus at least provide guidelines on these issues.

There were varied responses as to whether social protection is a right or not. Some stakeholders saw it as a right; others did not; and yet others contended that it lies some where in between these two extremes. It is, however, striking to note that none of the stakeholders subscribing to social protection as a right situated their understanding of social protection within the human rights framework. The caveats by some stakeholders who subscribed to social protection as a human rights issue makes it imperative that the policy addresses it in a definitive manner. This conceptual confusion has made it extremely difficult to develop a contextually relevant definition of social protection in Malawi. Some of the observations made included the following:

> Social protection is a right but need not be publicized as such because of resource constraints. People should see it as a privilege but government should act on it as a right for the people and its obligation.

> Social protection is a right but it should not be popularized as a human rights issue because linking the two can make social protection an emotive issue. It can cause chaos as people will be making excessive demands against limited government capacity.

> I don't doubt social protection as a right but an open declaration would create too much pressure for government leading to the collapse of the economy. In the mean time, social protection should target only 10 per cent of the population.

The discussion whether social protection is a right or not is closely related to the question whether the delivery of social protection programmes should be targeted or universal. Strikingly, the preference for the majority of the stakeholders consulted was that the delivery of social protection programmes should be targeted. The primacy of targeting in the provision of social protection is an obvious reaction against the assertion of the advocates of minimum universal social protection packages within the rights based framework. Under universalism, the

entire population is the beneficiary of social benefits as a basic right, while under targeting, eligibility to social benefits involves some kind of means testing to determine truly deserving beneficiaries (cf. Hoddinot, 1999; Mkandawire, 2005). The conceptual questions that targeting grapples with pertain to the identification of categories of people who should benefit from an intervention and how to reach these people in order to achieve the greatest possible impact on poverty, vulnerability and vulnerability or, indeed, any other indicator of choice.

The policy need to address this question especially in the context of previous experiences with targeting of national wide programmes (cf. Chinsinga, et al., 2002). Targeting at community level is apparently a very contentious issue as demonstrated in a study carried out to estimate the appropriate levels of targeting under the auspices of the targeted input programmes (TIP) as illustrated in Table 4 below:

This study analyzed the data on eligibility criteria from household cards to find out what proportion of households should-in view of themselves-be included in the TIP and what proportion could be excluded. The stakeholder focus groups (village task forces, beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries) agreed that around two third (64-68%) of the households in rural Malawi should be targeted. However, this estimate had to be adjusted to allow for inclusion errors in the range of 4-6 per cent arising from inevitable cases of self-selection. This brought the total to around three quarters of all households. Further analysis showed that stakeholders disagreed on 30 per cent of specific cases, but there was agreement on about 20 per cent households, which could be excluded because they did not meet criteria for selection as beneficiaries. Thus, the study concluded that targeting would be considered fair by all stakeholders at a targeting level of 80 per cent of rural households. While universalism might be justified on the basis of the findings of this study as the possible main thrust of the social protection policy, it is worth noting that targeting is highly complex and politically sensitive particularly in a country like Malawi where the state is heavily resource constrained and highly donor dependent.

5. Concluding Reflections

Poverty and vulnerability are quite pervasive affecting a large majority of the population both in rural and urban areas. The magnitude and scale of poverty and vulnerability has tremendously worsened since the turn of the 1990s largely due to swift implementation of SAPs, recurrent bouts of drought, flash floods and rising levels of inflation. These in turn substantially eroded and weakened the bases and foundations of livelihoods of the vast majority of Malawians against the backdrop of rapidly crumbling traditional support mechanisms. The livelihoods of Malawians are much more precarious today than there were probably two decades ago. Repeated shocks over the years have forced most households to dispose of key productive assets to meet immediate consumption needs, leaving them incapable of maintaining sustainable livelihoods (cf. Devereux, et al., 2006;

Table 4. Variability in the Proportion of Deserving Beneficiaries across Sites

Village	Region	% should receive according to VTF	% should receive according to beneficiaries	% should receive according to non-beneficiaries
Chilarika II	North	32.4	36.8	33.8
Kafwala	North	51.2	78.0	82.9
M.Chivunga	North	63.3	45.6	55.0
Mdambazuka	North	43.2	40.5	40.5
S. Chipeta	North	51.4	59.5	51.4
Chatowa	Centre	100.0	90.0	85.0
Daudi	Centre	100.0	100.0	93.3
Matapa	Centre	53.5	55.6	69.7
Mdala	Centre	81.0	77.6	67.2
Mkanile	Centre	77.9	83.8	82.4
Mkhomo	Centre	96.0	100.0	-
Nkhafi	Centre	87.1	93.5	95.2
Chimwaza	South	-	51.8	46.4
Chintengo	South	84.5	50.0	43.1
Chisalanga	South	-	89.8	95.9
Makuta	South	78.4	40.5	100.0
Mbepula	South	78.8	88.2	82.4
Mwambeni	South	74.5	60.1	57.5
Njuzi	South	62.7	41.8	83.6
Sitima	South	54.5	72.7	-

Source: Chinsinga, et al., (2002).

Government of Malawi/World Bank, 2006). The continued crisis of livelihoods despite various concerted efforts including the National Safety Net Strategy has led to the prominence of social protection on the government's, donors' and civil society's agenda as an integral part of the renewed efforts to protect, promote and improve livelihoods of the vast majority of Malawians. It has thus been for some time part of the government's rhetoric policy agenda although not necessarily part of the political one (Slater and Tsoka, 2007).

This study was therefore undertaken to critically examine the social protection policy processes with a view to understanding how policies are actually made. The findings of the study clearly illustrates that policy-making is an inherently political process even though, in this particular case, there are tendencies to treat it entirely as a technocratic process. It is further evident from this study that policy-making entails processes of negotiation and bargaining among actors with different forms and styles of expertise, power and influence. This has perhaps been aptly exemplified by donors who, in the context of capacity deficits on the part of government agencies and officials, are jostling to push forward their priorities as main thrusts of the social protection policy. In other words, contestation of self interest occupies a central position in the policy process in a stratified interaction of actors and institutions.

Donor politics has been rife because of the failure of the government to provide firm leadership and technical guidance to the policy-making process. The desire for the government to play a leadership role in the policy process as the basis for commitment and ownership has remained essentially at the level of rhetoric. The agencies entrusted with the leadership role are not only understaffed but are also not very well versed with the nuances of social protection. Most of the key building blocks of the policy have been designed by consultants sourced and paid for development partners such as DFID, World Bank and UNICEF despite calls for supporting the development of domestic ownership.

The final version of the policy is not yet out. It is hoped that the comments and the observations of stakeholders on the key building blocks of the policy shall be dully taken into account. If, for instance, some of the issues highlighted in this paper (social protection as a right and targeting in the delivery of social protection programmes) are not clearly addressed, the implementation of the policy is bound to be saddled with challenges. In particular, it is doubtful whether the policy shall be in a position to garner the requisite political support that can be sustained beyond the pomp and fun of the launch of the policy. The main reason is that key stakeholders in the policy process, namely: politicians, local government structures, the beneficiaries and the central government itself to some extent have been relegated to the periphery of the policy process.

By bypassing political parties, local government structures, parliament and beneficiaries, the social protection policy dialogue lie distant not only from the formal policy-making processes but also from the budget. Political parties and parliament are particularly crucial in the formal policy processes as they are arenas for policy dialogue and debates. The 'dominance' of the central bureaucracy under the tutelage of donors in making and shaping policies means that key stakeholders in the policy process are quite distant from the true locus of decision making. Several conclusions can be drawn from this case study. These include:

- The democratization of the political system potentially provides more opportunities for the participation of a wide range of stakeholders in the policy-making processes but these opportunities are hardly utilized because of the enduring legacy of the technocratic policy-making and dictatorship which has left citizens without the habit or means of voicing their views through on government policy. The challenge, however, is to increase opportunities for engagement without fuelling unrealistic demands on the government that are well beyond its capacity.
- While the policy-making is essentially technocratic in nature, it is very clear that the capacity of the executive organs to firmly steer the policy process is quite limited invariably paving way for donor dominance. There is therefore urgent need to build up technocratic capacity of the policy-making agencies within government. There is need for investment to develop the capacity of both people and systems in planning and implementation. The goal should be to empower these agencies in order to provide firm leadership and technical direction over the policy process taking into account the priorities of the government and the prevailing realities on the ground. The imbalance between donors and government agencies in steering the policy process is a cause of great concern especially when one considers that donors are accountable externally to their home governments or board of directors while the government must ultimately be held accountable to its citizens. The roles of donors in the policy process need to be properly defined, clarified and coordinated.
- There is need to institutionalize and widen the participatory policy processes in order to address issues of poverty, deprivation, exclusion and the promotion of human rights and good governance. Policies should be products of fair joint efforts of the citizens, parliament, political parties, civil society, government and the donor community. Citizens should in this process be duly recognized as the principal actors of development and strategic partners rather than passive recipients and target groups. This would, however, require the establishment of a wider and stronger network of structures for interest articulation at local levels since currently the grassroots have very limited options of voice. It is therefore not surprising that a national debate and dialogue on the social protection policy outside the formal policy-making circles is virtually non-existent.

While it is quite clear from this case study that policies should be conceptualized as courses of action, part of ongoing processes of negotiation and bargaining between multiple actors over time, it, in a very unique way, highlights that policy processes are inherently political in nature. By examining the social protection policy process, we have been able to single out actors who are involved and those who are not and on what terms including their relative influence and leverage in

the process. This emphasizes the need to understand how policies are actually made and this makes it imperative that policies should be designed with a prying eye to the political context. Thus the political milieu needs to be fully understood for purposes of exploring how policies are made and not just what policies to follow. The cause of concern, however, in this case study is that the policy processes have been dominated by the government bureaucracy and international donors especially in terms of setting the tone and the overall social protection agenda almost entirely insulating it from the political processes. The challenge for Malawi therefore is to ensure that citizens do not lose confidence in the democratic process by according them the opportunity to influence and shape the momentous decisions that affect their lives. National politics need to be accorded an explanatory role in the policy processes for these processes to be fully understood with a view of promoting policy-making that is inclusive and serves the interest of the citizens in a transparent and accountable manner.

End Notes

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[2] There has hardly been any media coverage on social protection since the social protection policy process was officially launched about a year ago. The media has on its own accord featured the issue of social protection only once in one of the Sunday Times edition of May 2007. Attempts were made by the Institute for Policy Research and Social Empowerment (IPRSE)-a local think tank-to run a series of debates on key building blocks of the social protection policy in order to instigate national dialogue and debate. There were published at fortnightly intervals. While the features made at least an impact at the national level, IPRSE discontinued the series at a critical point when national debate and dialogue was just beginning to take shape. None of the stakeholders have taken a similar initiative except for ad hoc radio programmes sponsored by Plan International on one of the FM radios which unfortunately does not have national wide coverage.

[3] Doubts have, however, been expressed as to whether Mutharika's politics of policy-making shall be significantly different from predecessor regimes. The argument is that he might have a genuine desire to transform the way government works but his efforts are more likely to be undermined by the stark realities of Malawi's politics. This is the case patronage is deeply entrenched and embedded as an organizing framework for politics in the country and any kind of radical reforms will have contend with its enduring logic (cf. Sahely, et al., 2005; Booth, et al., 2006).

[4] An expanded NSPTC includes the following: Secretary for Poverty and Disaster Management Affairs (Chair); Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security; Ministry of Economic Planning and Development; Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development; Ministry of Finance; Ministry of Health; Ministry of Transport and Public Works; Ministry of Women and Development; Ministry of Persons with Disabilities and the Elderly; Department of Nutrition and HIV/AIDS; Ministry of Irrigation and Water Development; Ministry of Education; Ministry of Labour and Social Development, Malawi Social Action Fund (MASAF); Council for Non-Governmental Organizations (CONGOMA);Malawi Confederation of Chambers of Industry (MCCI); The World Bank; The Department for International Development, The Executive Director, Network of Organizations Working with Vulnerable and Orphaned Children; The Chairperson, NGO Gender Network; The Executive Director, The Elderly People Association; and Social Protection Unit, Department of Poverty and Disaster Management Affairs (Secretariat).

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