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"NANGA AMATI NDINE MLIMI KUMUNDA OSAPITAKO?"

"Can You Call Yourself A Farmer If You Don't Go To The Garden?"

A Report on a Series of Fourteen Focus Groups
Conducted in Malawi from August 27 to September 3, 1996

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National Democratic Institute For International Affairs

conducting nonpartisan international programs to help promote, maintain and strengthen democratic institutions



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NDI has supported the development of democratic institutions in more than 120 countries. Programs focus on six major areas:

Political Party Training: NDI conducts multipartisan training seminars in political development with a board spectrum of democratic parties. NDI draws international experts to forums where members of fledgling parties learn first-hand the techniques or organization, communication and constituent contact.

Election Processes: NDI provides technical assistance for political parties and nonpartisan associations to conduct voter and civic education campaigns and to organize election monitoring programs. The Institute has also organized more than 25 major international observer delegations.

Strengthen Legislatures: NDI organizes seminars focusing on legislative procedures, staffing, research information, constituent services, committee structures and the function and role of party caucuses. NDI programs also seek to promote access to the legislative process by citizen groups and the public at large.

Local Government: NDI provides technical assistance on a range of topics related to the process of local governance, including division of responsibility between mayors and municipal councils, and between local and national authorities. NDI programs also promote enhanced communication between local officials and their constituents.

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Focus Group Discussion Outline

1994 NDI Focus Group Survey - Executive Summary

1995 NDI Focus Group Survey - Executive Summary

INTRODUCTION

The National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) conducted a qualitative research project composed of 14 focus groups with a total of 162 Malawian participants. The sessions were held in eight locations throughout Malawi between August 27 and September 3, 1996. The purpose of the survey was to assess the attitudes of Malawians towards the political transformation taking place under the country's new multi-party constitution. This report will be widely disseminated within Malawi so that the opinions of the Malawian people can be considered during discussions of political and economic change.

NDI is currently conducting a post-election programme in Malawi, working with political parties, civic organizations, parliament and the media. Since the 1994 elections, three research projects of this nature have been conducted. Over the next two years, NDI will concentrate on assistance to parliament and civic organizations that have a specific interest in influencing the parliamentary process. Therefore, NDI conducted this survey to explore the following specific questions:

- o What expectations do people have of their Member of Parliament, and what roles do they think their MP should play in their community and in the national political process?
- o What are the common perceptions of parliament, and what role do people think parliament should play in the governance of Malawi?
- o How do people obtain information about parliament and how would they like to receive information in the future?
- o What civic organizations are important in Malawian communities and how can civil society be strengthened at the grassroots level?
- o What are the common perceptions of national civic organizations, and how do people think these organizations should interact with parliament?
- o How has the role of women changed in recent years, and how do people think the political and social influence of women could be increased?

This report outlines the findings of NDI's third post-election focus group survey, and offers a comparative analysis of the ways in which people's perceptions of their democratic system of governance have changed since the elections. NDI's previous post-election focus group surveys were conducted in September 1994 and September 1995. Reports of the findings of those surveys were widely circulated to Members of Parliament, government officials, political party leaders, civic organizations and members of the judiciary. Copies of the executive summaries of the previous reports are appended to this report.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Beginning August 27, 1996, the National Democratic Institute, in collaboration with a research team from the University of Malawi, organized and conducted a series of fourteen focus group discussions throughout Malawi. The focus groups were conducted in villages in Nkhata Bay, Nkhotakota, Dedza, Mangochi, Mulanje and Mwanza districts, and in urban townships in Lilongwe and Blantyre. A total of 162 adult men and women participated in the discussions, including 36 people who participated in previous NDI surveys. Five all-male and five all-female discussion groups were held in rural villages. Both urban groups had an equal number of women and men. One discussion was held with a group of village headmen and one with a group of local political party leaders. A detailed list of the focus group sites and composition can be found at the end of this report. Every effort was made to include a representative mix of people in the discussion groups in an atmosphere conducive to open and honest exchange.

Participants throughout the country continue to view Malawi's political transition positively and are still enthusiastic about democracy. Participants cite benefits such as freedom of expression, freedom of association and free primary education, and the abolition of MCP party cards and the poll tax. The fear and intimidation of the single party era have almost completely evaporated, and participants now feel free to speak openly and sometimes critically about their government and elected representatives. However, economic concerns are still paramount. Participants continue to view the post-election period as a time of deteriorating economic and social conditions, and most feel that they are materially worse off now than they were three years ago. Concern about violent crime and insecurity has increased dramatically, and participants point to increasing corruption as a symptom of the breakdown of law and order in Malawi.

With each survey, the variation of opinion between individuals and between different parts of the country increases as participants learn about democracy and form their own ideas about how the democratic transition should proceed. However, even with an increasing range of opinion, a number of ideas are widely held and transcend regional, ethnic and political divisions. The following are the dominant themes of the focus group survey:

Access to Information Most participants have little or no understanding of major political institutions or current political events. Participants say that economic hardships have inhibited their access to sources of information, especially the MBC radio.

Members of Parliament Virtually every participant could name their MP and the party to which he or she belongs. A growing number of participants see Members of Parliament as important local leaders and feel that MPs should be the most important actors in Malawi's democratic system of government. However, participants are increasingly dissatisfied with the performance of their MP and still do not feel that they have adequate access to their elected representative.

Parliament Participants see parliament as an extremely important institution and feel that the legislature should be the dominant branch of government, exercising strong oversight of the executive branch. Few participants have more than a rudimentary knowledge of the powers and functions of parliament. Many participants are critical of recent conflicts in parliament and the often hostile tone of parliamentary debate.

Civic Organizations Participants feel that civic organizations should play an active role in their communities and influence the democratic process at the national level. However, the number and importance of grass roots civic organizations has declined since the elections and national organizations are seen as urban-based with little relevance to or contact with rural Malawians.

The Role of Women Both male and female participants continue to see economic empowerment as the vehicle to greater equality and personal freedom for women. Credit schemes for women have had a significant impact in some areas. Some men are still very hostile to any suggestion of increased rights for women.

These findings suggest the following recommendations:

- o The ability of rural Malawians to receive information on the country's democratic institutions and current political debates must be improved. Efforts should be made to increase access to the radio, and the dissemination of balanced and comprehensive information to Malawian citizens should be made a priority.
- o Members of Parliament must continue to improve their constituency relations skills and increase the amount of time they spend in their constituencies. MPs must also ensure that they consult constituents before going to parliament and disseminate information on parliamentary debate and new legislation in their constituencies.
- o Parliament must improve its public information capacity and make efforts to increase public understanding of the role and function of the National Assembly. Radio coverage of parliamentary debate should be increased. Malawians expect parliament to play the leading role in the governance of Malawi. Steps should be taken to ensure that the legislature can fulfill this expectation.
- o The growth of local civic organizations and self-help projects and the penetration of lending institutions into rural areas should be continued and encouraged. National civic organizations and NGOs interested in influencing the parliamentary process in particular, must increase their interaction with rural people if they are to gain credibility and relevance to Malawian citizens.
- o Efforts to improve the status of Malawian women must be increased. In particular, projects that aim to increase the economic independence and well-being of women through the provision of credit must be supported and should be undertaken in all parts of the country.

DETAILED FINDINGS

The increasing variation in opinion and level of knowledge noted during last year's survey has continued this year. In the two years since the elections, participants seem to have become more willing to disagree with each other, and the range of political opinion throughout the country has increased. In some areas of the country participants were much more aware of political debates and issues than those in other areas. The knowledge gap between men and women observed in previous surveys has increased, and men were much more open and willing to talk about political issues than were women. Urban residents were better informed of political issues than their rural counterparts, but otherwise expressed similar concerns and opinions. Local political party leaders and village headmen were more aware of prominent political issues than most other participants and took part enthusiastically in the discussions. The level of political partisanship seems to have declined, and participants assessed the performance of the political parties, their Member of Parliament, the government and the President separately. As in the past, the vast majority of participants were friendly, enthusiastic, open and helpful, and showed a great deal of respect to both the discussion facilitators and their fellow participants.

MOOD AND OUTLOOK

Participants remain enthusiastic about democracy and continue to cite positive changes that have occurred during the multiparty era in Malawi. As was the case in previous surveys, participants mentioned freedom of speech and expression and freedom of movement as important positive changes, as well as the abolition of the poll tax and forced purchase of Malawi Congress Party (MCP) membership cards. Participants are now confident that they can express their opinions freely, without fear or intimidation, and did so during the focus group discussions.

"Now we are living freely without buying party cars, no poll tax, and free primary education. We can even walk to Phalombe without anyone stopping us. These days we are really enjoying our freedom as we walk boastfully without anybody intimidating us."

Village Headman, Mulanje

"Today we can discuss any way we want, we can even criticize the government, no problem. In the past you couldn't discuss anything concerning the government. They would throw you in the car. The car with the flag."

Mwanza

The appreciation of new freedoms and the end of oppression transcends political affiliation, gender and ethnic background. As an MCP area chairman in Mwanza said, *"We are happy to have democracy in Malawi, that is why we wanted to have a change in government, so that those things that were oppressing us should stop."* Participants are also very positive about government social programmes, especially free primary school education and small business credit schemes.

Economic and Social Concerns

Despite positive views of democratic governance, participants are still primarily concerned with their economic well being. In fact, many participants described terms such as freedom and democracy in economic, rather than political terms.

"Democracy is when a person finds the things he or she needs - finding food and money without difficulty."

Nkhotakota

"Freedom means eating good food, wearing good cloths, sleeping in good houses."

Mangochi

Economic and social concerns noted during previous surveys were echoed by this year's participants. Inflation, hunger, lack of access to fertilizer, poor roads and shortages of drugs in hospitals remain universal concerns, and most participants feel that their economic status continues to decline.

"We voted with the aim of making things change for the better, but as far as I am concerned, only three things have changed: no more forced contributions, no more party cards, no more poll tax. These disappeared, but the problems we face in our day-to-day life concerning our welfare, nothing has changed."

Mangochi

For most, the economic hardships of the post-election period overshadow the benefits brought by the new government.

Insecurity, Crime and Corruption

While complaints over inflation and hunger have remained fairly consistent over the past two years, the problems of security and corruption have gained added prominence. In previous surveys complaints of crime and insecurity were confined largely to urban areas, but this year violent crime is a universal concern. A woman in a remote area of Deaza explained, *"Me I am old. I had never heard the sound of a gun before in my life. But since democracy came we have had to run away from guns three times, sleeping in the bush with the children."* Many participants are harshly critical of the police and feel that recent changes in the way suspects are treated have undermined their security.

"What happens is that when you take a thief to the police, you tell the police everything and leave the thief there, but when you arrive home you turn around to see the thief following behind you, coming home as well. Here the police are not effective."

Mwanza

Others see a strong link between economic problems and crime. Another participant in Mwanza said *"Many boys are staying with no work so they are just stealing to help themselves."*

Participants tend to see corruption as another aspect of what they perceive to be a growing crime problem in Malawi. Corruption was seldom mentioned during last year's survey, but participants now talk about corrupt practices penetrating from the top of the political and economic systems all the way down to their villages. Examples of corruption involving private businesses, chiefs, MPs, magistrates, cabinet ministers and other government officials were often cited. Suspicion of corruption involving police officers underscores the connection participants see between crime and corruption.

"The most pressing problem here in ... is theft. When these thieves are caught they are released in a short time because the police are being bribed by the criminals."

Lilongwe

Many place the blame for the perceived upsurge in corruption on the government. A village headman in Mulanje explained, *"Most people who practice corruption are the ones in government."* Another participant in Mwanza blamed corruption for the lack of development projects in his area: *"Corruption is what is troubling us here in the villages because those things that were supposed to be given to us are first being stolen by officials."*

ACCESS TO INFORMATION

During NDI's first post-election focus group survey in 1994, the large majority of participants had little understanding of the major concepts and institutions that form the basis of Malawi's democratic system of government. Unfortunately, little has changed since that time. Participants this year had a rudimentary understanding of institutions such as parliament or the structure of government at best, and in some areas participants claimed to be completely ignorant of the common translations of terms such as "constitution" or even "democracy". Many participants feel that the physical isolation of their villages and their lack of contact with Malawi's urban areas prevent them from learning about democratic institutions and concepts.

"We can't answer most of these questions because we are living in the bush. We don't know anything, it is like we are in the bottom of a big pot, so we can't say anything."

Female Participant, Mulanje

Such complaints were more common among female than male participants, but many male participants also had difficulty discussing many of the topics introduced by the moderators. The term "constitution" in the word association section of the discussion was particularly difficult for many participants. A male participant in Nkhotakota asked *"Constitution? We are really confused by this word."* while another in Mangochi said *"Can you please stop asking us questions about the constitution, we don't have any idea, we just hear the word on the radio."* More than two years after the adoption of a new multiparty constitution, few participants have any idea what a constitution is.

MBC Radio

Participants all over the country say that the national MBC radio is their primary source of information on political developments, government programmes and parliamentary proceedings. However, many complain about the quality of political reporting on the MBC.

"We get most of the local news from other radio stations outside Malawi like Channel Africa. What stops the news men at MBC from saying these things?"

Nkhata Bay

"It is very bad that we get most of our news from Channel Africa. We want to know everything, nothing should be hidden on the local radio."

Dedza

This year's survey saw a far greater number of participants claiming that they never or seldom have access to a radio than in previous surveys. As a participant in Nkhotakota said, *"We do not hear about parliament since we do not have radios. Those who have radios listen, but if we do not have radios we do not know anything."* The primary reasons given for this change were economic. Participants increasingly complain that the price of batteries and radios has increased beyond their reach. A woman in Nkhata Bay echoed participants all over the country when she said *"For me I have a radio, but most of the time I do not have any batteries, so I do not hear what is happening."* Many participants feel that without access to a radio, they are unable to keep up with domestic political events.

Despite the fact that participants see the radio as the most important means of obtaining political information, the general lack of understanding of certain well-publicized government programs illustrates the limitations of political education through the radio. The government's privatization scheme is an example. For the past several months, daily radio programmes have been aired explaining the process of privatization and urging the public to invest in shares of government and parastatal corporations that are being privatized. Most participants recognized the Chichewa translation of the term "privatization", but few have any understanding of the programme or what shares really are. A participant in Mangochi said *"Timangoganiza kuti akugulitsa malonda si masheya ndi mipando"* or *"We think that they are selling chairs instead of shares."* Such confusion was common all over the country. Advertisements for the shares of the parastatal Agricultural Development and Marketing Corporation prompted a participant in Lilongwe to say *"We don't really know what they are selling. Do they sell it at ADMARC? We just hear that ADMARC is selling shares."* Radio communication can be a powerful educational tool when messages are carefully researched and designed, but the privatization programme seems to show that simply putting a message on the radio does not guarantee real understanding.

MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT

Virtually every participant in the survey could name their MP and the party he or she represents. Participants continue to have a strong desire for personal contact with their MP and have a well developed understanding of their MP as their personal political representative. Unlike previous years, many participants now see their MP as someone who is, or should be, an important local leader, and feel that Members of Parliament should play a leading role at the national level. Participants all over the country echoed the sentiments of a participant in Nkhotakota who said *"An MP is more important than a cabinet minister because the MP is the one who lives with us and knows our problems and can take our problems to the parliament."* However, despite the desire for personal contact and the perceived increase in the importance of MPs, most participants are still profoundly disappointed with the performance of their MP. As in the past two surveys, the failure of many MPs to meet with their constituents and hear their problems lies at the root of this widespread dissatisfaction. As a participant in Nkhotakota said, *"We would have considered our MP to be the most important local leader, but he does not come to meet us."*

The Role of the MP

In previous surveys, participants had a very simple job description for their MP: take the problems of the people to parliament. The discussions this year revealed an expanded job description that was remarkably consistent throughout the country.

"MPs should meet the people in their constituencies before they go to parliament and those MPs should in turn come to the people to tell them how things have gone in parliament."

Nkhata Bay

"The MP should hold meetings with the local people so that he/she understands the problems they face and then he/she should take these problems to parliament. He should also report back on what the parliament has said on our problems."

Mulanje

Many participants also feel that their MP should promote and supervise development projects in their villages. As a participant in Mangochi said, *"The role of the MP should be to spread development in the area he or she represents."* Again, however, few feel that their MP is fulfilling these responsibilities. A village headman in Mulanje complained that *"What we wanted was that our MP should be visiting our areas to hear our ideas and opinions on the problems we face here in the villages, and these opinions should be reported to parliament. After delivering our problems our MP should also come back to the people to report on what he has done, but this type of system is lacking here as our MP never visits us."*

Participants were also harshly critical of MPs who show bias to members of their political party or to people who live in the MP's home village. A participant in Dedza complained that *"Our MP is favoring those who belong to his party. He prefers only the supporters of his party to attend his meetings, not us, so we are really disappointed. The MPs should not be favoring one party."* while a woman in Mangochi claimed that *"Our MP gets money for loans and just gives*

it to people at the trading centre where he lives, but those people are already rich." There is a widespread understanding among participants that an MP should represent all the people in his or her constituency, regardless of political affiliation or place of residence.

Despite the many criticisms participants have of their MP, there are some MPs who seem to be satisfying the demands of their constituents and making themselves accessible to the people they represent. Male and female participants in discussion groups in one constituency expressed satisfaction with their MP, who is a member of an opposition party, saying he visits often and helps promote self-help development projects. In another constituency, participants said that the performance of their MP, who is a member of the governing party, was improving, despite being very critical during discussions in 1994 and 1995. These cases show that MPs do not face an impossible task. The expectations of many participants can be met.

Citizens and Their MP

In the two years since the elections, participants seem to have gained greater confidence in their ability to interact with and be openly critical of their elected representatives. The fear and deference of the single party era has largely abated. A political leader in Mwanza said *"I have the right to tell my MP that he is failing in his job because of this or that, because I chose him."* Such confidence has led participants to see themselves as more politically savvy and better prepared for future elections. A participant in Blantyre summed up the feelings of many participants by saying *"Now I think it is good to vote for a person for who he/she is, rather than for the party he/she represents, because now we have seen what these people are doing and we have seen our mistake."* But perhaps the most refreshing example of this new-found confidence came from a participant in Mwanza who said *"Now if I see my MP I can say 'Isn't this my Mr. ...? Sir, give us a cigarette.' But in the past you couldn't say that."*

PARLIAMENT

Previous NDI focus group surveys have not included extensive questions on the institution of parliament, so comparisons of the attitudes of participants this year with previous surveys are not possible. Participants seem to have a fairly well defined and consistent, if rudimentary understanding of the basic functions of parliament.

"Parliament is concerned with MPs passing laws and discussing issues of national interest while the government ensures that what is passed in parliament is implemented."

Nkhata Bay

"How is the government being run, what are the needs of the people, how will we solve the problems facing the country? These are the issues discussed in parliament."

Mangochi

Participants see parliament as an extremely important institution that is responsible for making laws, setting government policy, solving national disputes and ensuring that the problems faced by Malawians in the villages are solved. Many participants also feel that the parliament should

exercise a high degree of oversight over the executive branch. A political leader in Mwanza said *"Parliament is there to see if the government is being run well"* while a woman in Nkhotakota said *"The government cannot do anything without the house of laws knowing."*

The notion of parliament controlling and directing government was widespread and was summed up by a participant in Blantyre who said *"Parliament is the one that makes laws for the government. The government is behind and the parliament is on top."* Few participants understood the role of the cabinet in formulating government policy or the relationship between the parliament and cabinet. There was a consensus among participants in almost every group that solutions to the nation's problems should be found by directly-elected MPs working in parliament, rather than by distant and aloof ministers working in a poorly-understood and unaccountable cabinet.

Despite widespread understanding of the role of parliament, few participants were comfortable speaking about how parliament works, and few could remember any specific issues that had been discussed in parliament recently, other than high profile walkouts and other disputes. There were also a substantial number of participants, especially women, who claimed to know nothing about parliament.

Sources of Information on Parliament

Participants claim to receive most of their information about parliament through the radio. Evening programmes of highlights from the legislature that are broadcast daily when parliament is in session are very popular. However, most feel that coverage of parliamentary procedures on the radio is inadequate. A participant in Lilongwe complained that *"Sometimes the MPs discuss issues for the whole day but when it comes to the radio it only takes 30 minutes, so there is evidence that some of the information is cut."* While many participants want increased coverage of parliament on the radio, many still think that personal contact is a better way to spread information.

"We usually hear about what is going on in parliament through the radio. Whatever happens in parliament, everyday we stay tuned to the radio to hear what they have discussed that day."

"But the best way to receive information about parliament is that the MPs who we chose should come and tell us whatever they have discussed in parliament, because the majority of us do not have radios."

Political Leaders, Mwanza

Conflict and Behavior in Parliament

In every discussion held during the survey, participants had heard about the recent conflicts in parliament involving the breakup of the UDF-AFORD coalition, the retention and recruiting of AFORD cabinet ministers and the walkout of opposition MPs. For many these events are a source of concern and confusion. A participant in Mangochi said *"We hear from the radio that the MCP and AFORD have walked out, and also about some MPs of AFORD joining UDF, so we the villagers are just surprised. Why walk out? We do not know the reasons."* While some participants sympathize with one side or the other in the conflict, most fail to understand why

a group of mature, respected Members of Parliament cannot solve their differences quickly and calmly. Most feel that both sides in the conflict are to blame for the current impasse.

"Walking out of parliament is not good because development will go down. If the MPs walk out of the house of laws how is development going to take place?"

Nkhotakota

"I feel it was not good for the UDF MPs to continue discussions when their friends were not in parliament. If there is no opposition, who is going to oppose whatever motion is put in parliament? I do not think the UDF MPs can oppose themselves."

Political Leader, Mwanza

Participant's views of the recent conflicts in parliament underscore a basic question asked by many participants. Why are MPs concentrating on trivial bickering when Malawians face such immediate and serious problems? A participant in Dedza summed up this sentiment by saying *"These MPs behave like children. Instead of discussing the issues concerning the people they are busy insulting and booing each other."* Participants are very critical of the general lack of respect and seriousness they perceive during parliamentary debate.

"MPs should respect each other in parliament. They should not be booing or whispering like kids when another Member of Parliament is speaking. Sometimes when we are listening to parliament on the radio we wonder if it is a live broadcast of a football match, or if mad people are speaking on the radio."

Mwanza

CIVIL SOCIETY

The post-election period is seen by participants as a time of deterioration of formal, village-based civic organizations. Local clubs and organizations, many of which were set up and controlled by the former government, have disbanded or ceased to function. Many participants blame the political upheaval associated with the transition to democracy and subsequent economic hardships for the death of many local civic organizations.

"We don't have any organizations here. Health clubs used to be here. Farmer's clubs, homecraft clubs, but not now. Everything is finished."

Female Participant, Dedza

"We had many clubs during the MCP government but now it can not happen with this rising up of prices. How can one go to attend a meeting on an empty stomach? Everyone is just staying without attending meetings or belonging to any club. We just stay like wild beasts."

Nkhotakota

In many areas, farmer's clubs were the most important local civic organizations before the transition to democracy, giving members access to subsidized credit for agricultural inputs. Participants all over the country see the loss of farmer's clubs as the most serious blow to their local civil society, and blame the loss on a combination of environmental and political problems.

"Most of the civic groups in this area are farmers clubs, but these farmers clubs died because of not paying back loans after the drought."

"The time the present government was campaigning it used to say that we shouldn't settle these loans because they were not meant to be loans but gifts. That is why most people have not paid back their loans."

Political Leaders, Mwanza

Alternative agricultural credit structures put in place since the elections are not seen as a viable alternative to traditional farmer's clubs. A political leader in Mwanza went on to say *"There is now another group called MRFC (Malawi Rural Finance Company) but this group is not helping us. It is there to steal from farmers."*

Self-Help Projects and Local Committees

Participants are most enthusiastic about civic organizations that can have a direct impact on their economic well being or that provide a clear benefit to those who participate. Therefore, organizations that enable members to obtain credit, teach practical skills or benefit the children of members are universally popular. While participants say that many of the organizations that served such purposes in the past have disbanded, school committees, water and hygiene committees and committees set up to supervise self-help development projects have become prominent in many areas. Participants are particularly enthusiastic about self-help projects.

"Self-help is good. When we see that things are not alright we can mobilize ourselves to solve our problems through self-help."

Lilongwe

"When doing self-help projects we do everything happily, like molding bricks. We don't complain because we know that this school will be used by our own children to prepare for their future."

Dedza

Participants are eager to work as a community when they see that communal effort will bring tangible benefits to themselves and their families.

National Civic Organizations

As with local organizations, participants are most enthusiastic about and familiar with national civic organizations that can provide direct economic benefit to members. Lending organizations such as the National Association of Business Women (NABW), Development of Malawian Trader's Trust (DEMATT) and Women's World Banking (WWB) are the most widely

recognized national civic organizations. Political and human rights organizations are less widely recognized. The Public Affairs Committee (PAC) was the only such organization that was named as an important national civic organization by more than a handful of participants, and when prompted few recognized the names of organizations or individuals such as Vera Chirwa, MIDEA (Malawi Institute of Democratic and Economic Affairs) or CHRR (Centre for Human Rights and Rehabilitation). Those that did recognize the names of these organizations almost invariably said *"We just hear the name on the radio, we don't know what they do."*

The most consistent criticism of national civic organizations was that they work only in urban areas and have no contact with or relevance to rural Malawians.

"Most of the times these big organizations are only concentrated in towns. It would be better if they spread their activities in the villages."

Nkhata Bay

"We have probably heard of them (national civic organizations) but we don't pay much attention to them, because we have no use for them."

Mulanje

Although participants recognize few national civic organizations and feel that they are largely irrelevant to their daily lives, it was agreed in virtually every discussion group that civic organizations should play a role in parliament and other national political fora. As a participant in Blantyre said *"They (national civic organizations) should make sure members of parliament do not make mistakes. They should also look into our economic problems because we can't speak on our own."*

THE ROLE OF WOMEN

Many of the attitudes towards women and women's rights recorded during previous surveys were repeated this year. Participants feel that the status of women in society is reflected in the status of women within their households. A female participant in Nkhata Bay said *"For me to say I am free or I have freedom, I agree with my husband. If my husband refuses then I cannot do it. If he allows me, then I will do it."* Many male participants think that women are already enjoying too much freedom, and want a return to traditional gender relationships in which women were clearly inferior to men. As a male participant in Mwanza said *"The role of women should change. She should be doing what her husband says."* Most importantly, however, women continue to see economic advancement as their best opportunity for improving their overall position in society. A woman in Mulanje summed up this sentiment by saying *"Women do not have the same rights as men because men are out of the homes doing ganyu (casual labor) while the women are just sitting phwii (idle) in our homes because we don't have money."*

There was a notable increase this year in the number of male participants who openly expressed their support for an increase in the rights of and opportunities for women. While many men are still hostile to changing roles for women, a growing number expressed sentiments such as these from a male participant in Nkhata Bay: *"Two things should happen. First, women who are*

employed should be given a chance to lead. Second, women should be given a chance to go to school."

Credit and Loans

For most participants, the best route to social equality and freedom is economic freedom, and economic freedom can best be achieved by providing access to credit and loans. When asked what the best way to improve the status of women would be, participants all over the country said *"They should be given loans."* In many rural discussion groups, the demise of farmers clubs and subsidized fertilizer loans was seen as a major blow to the status and economic well-being of women.

"The way we used to be in the past, we women were very developed. We used to get fertilizer on loan from the government. But now things are not the same. We are in big poverty."

Female Participant, Dedza

"In the past women could join various clubs whereby they could get fertilizer loans, but this is not happening now. This really helped us men because when the women received the fertilizer we used it together as a family and got high yields to improve our living standards."

Male Participant, Nkhotakota

In other areas, where new credit schemes have started operating, participants claim that access to loans had already improved the status of women. A female participant in Blantyre enthused *"Women in this area are as free as men. Women are now free to do business because they are getting loans."* The only criticism of credit programmes for women came from participants in areas where lending organizations have not begun operations. The publicity and excitement surrounding national credit schemes have raised expectations, and many are eager to participate.

While most male participants agree that women should have increased access to credit, some still find it hard to accept the advance of women into the world of small business. One participant in Mwanza expressed his surprise at the shocking new developments in his area by exclaiming *"Women are doing business. Right now at the market, doing business. Married women!"*

RESEARCH METHODS

This project consisted of 14 focus groups in a total of eight locations throughout Malawi. A focus group is a semi-structured discussion on specified topics, with 5 to 15 participants. A professional moderator guides the discussion, which normally lasts approximately two hours, and carefully notes the responses so that they can be subsequently analyzed.

Focus group research is internationally recognized as a reliable method of producing qualitative data. While it does not have the statistical validity of a quantitative baseline survey, it does provide an understanding of public attitudes at a particular point in time. Focus group research is used widely in Africa because of the cultural adaptability of the methodology, and the general lack of reliable sampling for quantitative surveys. This survey is the fourth undertaken by NDI

since it established a field office in Malawi in 1993. NDI has undertaken similar projects in Mozambique, South Africa, Namibia and Ethiopia in the recent past.

The questions posed in a focus group discussion are more open-ended than in a typical polling questionnaire. Rather than eliciting simple "yes" or "no" answers, they are designed to allow participants to respond in their own words and manner. As a result, focus groups do not generate quantitative results like a poll. Instead, focus groups allow detailed discussions of complex issues, and reveal the ways in which participants express their views.

The Focus Group Team

The project was managed by NDI Malawi staff member Brent Preston. Mr. Preston has worked on three previous NDI focus group surveys in Malawi and on a similar NDI survey in Namibia. Kondwani Mwangulube acted as a consultant and advisor to the project. Mr. Mwangulube has worked as a discussion moderator on previous NDI surveys, has extensive research experience in Malawi and now heads the research unit at the European Community AIDS Control Project in Lilongwe.

Mr. Mwangulube and Mr. Preston worked together to design the question outline for the discussions, and to select the sites for each group. Mr. Preston also conducted numerous meetings with representatives of political parties, NGOs, Parliament and donor organizations to gather input and suggestions on the discussion outline before initiating the survey. NDI Malawi staff member Adrian Muunga, who worked on NDI Malawi's pre-election focus group survey, helped supervise the conducting of the discussion groups. Mr. Muunga and Mr. Preston directed the work of the four Chancellor College students who moderated the groups. Timothy Chikoti, Mary Msusa, and Grey Kalindekafe have all worked on previous NDI focus group projects, while Linda Mtegha was a new addition to the team. In each discussion, one moderator would lead the discussion in the local vernacular language, while a second would take detailed notes in English. The discussions were also tape recorded. Following each focus group, the moderating team prepared a brief report in English based upon their notes and the tape recording. After the completion of all the discussions, the moderators translated and wrote verbatim transcripts of each discussion. These transcripts were then analyzed for the writing of this report.

Method of Selecting Sites and Forming Groups

Participant recruiting was supervised by NDI Malawi staff member Foster Mijiga. Mr. Mijiga traveled one day ahead of the rest of the focus group team to recruit participants and select the locations and times for each discussion. In keeping with Malawian custom, Mr. Mijiga would seek out the chief or village headman, greet him or her, and explain the purpose of the visit. Mr. Mijiga would request the chief's permission and assistance in assembling groups of participants. In every instance the traditional leader was gracious and willing to assist. The discussions were usually held in the open, in the shade of a tree or on the porch of a house.

In order to gauge differences between various segments of Malawian society, various demographic criteria were used to assemble the discussion groups. In rural areas, six groups consisting entirely of voting-age men and six of voting-aged women were assembled. In rural Malawi, single-sex groups have been found to increase the level of participation of women and

to promote more honest answers to questions of women's rights. In Lilongwe city a mixed gender group of young people was assembled, while the Blantyre urban group consisted of men and women over the age of thirty. Chiefs and other local authority figures, such as political party chairmen or police officers, were not included in any of these groups. In Mulanje a discussion was held with a group of village headmen, and in Mwanza a group of local political party leaders, including branch, area and constituency committee officials of the UDF, AFORD and MCP, participated in a discussion.

The locations of most of the focus group discussions were the same as those used in last year's survey. In order to ensure a representative mix of political affiliation, discussions were not held in Nsanje this year. Instead, discussions were held with a group of women and a group of village headmen in Mulanje. The discussions in Mwanza were also moved to a different area of the district this year, as previous discussions had been held in a constituency that has been without an MP for more than a year. In each location as many participants from last year's discussion as possible were located and included in the group. The inclusion of repeat participants helped to identify changes in perceptions and opinions over the last year of individual participants and the public in general. A total of 36 previous participants participated in this survey.

In keeping with the regional distribution of the country's population, two of the 14 groups were held in the Northern Region, (which has 14% of the national population), five groups were held in the Central Region (39% of national population), and seven were held in the Southern Region (46% of national population).

Similarly, two of the 14 groups were held in urban areas; one group in a township in Lilongwe, and one in a township in Blantyre. The other twelve groups were held in rural areas, where approximately 85% of Malawians live. Some of the rural sites were very remote and isolated. Others sites were near local trading centers that frequently receive visitors and news from other parts of the country.

The focus groups in the Northern Region were conducted in Chitumbuka while those in the Central and Southern Regions were conducted in Chichewa. An English-language translation of the question outline is attached at the end of this report.

APPENDICES

Table 1: Location, Composition and Date of Focus Group Sessions

<u>REGION</u>	<u>DISTRICT</u>	<u>DATE OF FOCUS GROUP</u>	<u>NUMBER IN SESSION</u>
NORTH (14% of electorate; 2/14 of focus groups)	Nkhata Bay	27/08/96	10 men
		27/08/96	7 women
CENTER (39% of electorate; 5/14 of focus groups)	Nkhotakota	28/08/96	9 men
		28/08/96	15 women
	Dedza	03/09/96	9 men
	Lilongwe Urban	03/09/96	13 women
		02/09/96	4 women, 5 men (under 25 years of age)
SOUTH (47% of electorate; 7/14 of focus groups)	Mangochi	30/08/96	12 men
		30/08/96	11 women
	Mwanza	01/09/96	14 political leaders
		01/09/96	14 men
Mulanje	31/08/96	15 Chiefs (10 men, 5 women)	
	31/08/96	11 women	
	Blantyre Urban	02/09/96	8 women, 8 men (over 30 years of age)

Table 2: Demographics of the Focus Group Participants

	<u>% of Participants</u>		<u>% of Participants</u>
<u>Gender</u>		<u>Occupation</u>	
Men	55	Farmer	61
Women	45	Student	5
		Business Person	10
		Wage Occupation	7
<u>Age</u>		Casual Labor	7
Under 25	30	Housewife	6
26 to 35	28	Unemployed/Other	4
36 to 45	14		
46 to 55	13		
55 and over	15		

FOCUS GROUP OUTLINE
Political Party Building and Civic Organization Support in Malawi
Third Survey, September 1996

1. INTRODUCTION

- A. Introduce yourself
- B. Explain what a focus group is
 - 1. A discussion.
 - 2. No right or wrong answers, just your ideas and opinions.
 - 3. Be honest and say what you think.
 - 4. Feel free to disagree with people; I want you to tell me your own opinions, even if they are different from other people in the group.
 - 5. Everyone should participate in the discussion because everyone's opinions and ideas are important.
- C. Explain the purpose of the group.
- D. Explain that the tape recorder is there so I can listen to it later and take notes.
- E. Have participants introduce themselves and record answers.
 - 1. Name
 - 2. Home Village
 - 3. Age
 - 4. Marital Status
 - 5. Number of Children
 - 6. Occupation

2. MOOD/BACKGROUND

In 1994 Malawians voted for a new government. I would like to ask you about the changes that have taken place since the elections.

- A. Did you vote in the last election? Do you think your vote made a difference?
- B. How have things changed in your village?
- C. What is the best thing that has happened in your village since the elections?

- D. What are the biggest problems facing your village?
- E. Who are the most important leaders in your area?
- F. What do you think are the government's greatest responsibilities?
- G. If elections were held tomorrow, what would you do?

3. WORD ASSOCIATION

I would like to play a game of words with you. I will give you a word, and you say the word or phrase that comes to mind. For example, if I said "children" you might think of families, or that children make you happy, or that children are the future. Do not worry if you do not know a word that I use.

Self Help Projects

MBC Radio

MASAF (Malawi Social Action Fund)

Democracy

Coalition Government

Privatization

Corruption

Local Government

Constitution

4. PARLIAMENT AND THE ROLE OF THE MP

- A. What do you know about parliament?
- B. What are the most important functions of parliament?
- C. How do you hear about what is going on in parliament? Can you remember any specific issue that has been discussed in parliament recently? (probe for walkout/conflict)
- D. Do you receive enough information about parliament? What information would you like to hear?
- E. What do you think is the best way to spread information about parliament to people in the villages?
- F. What is the difference between parliament and the government? Which is more important?
- G. Who is the MP for this area? What party is he or she a member of?

- H. What are the most important responsibilities of your MP?
- I. Has your MP come to your area since the election? How often?
- J. Do you think your MP is doing a good job? Why or why not?
- K. If your MP was here today, what would you say to him/her?
- L. Pretend you could have anyone in the world to be your MP. Please describe what your perfect MP would be like.
- M. What is the difference between an MP and a cabinet minister? Which is more important?
- N. Do you think you can influence parliament or the government in ways other than voting? How?
- O. If you could stand in the parliament building in front of all the MPs, what would you say to them?

5. CIVIL SOCIETY

- A. What civic groups/NGOs are active in your area? What do they do?
- B. Are you a member of/participate in any civic group or organization in your area? Can you name some? (probe for farmer's clubs, church groups, homecraft groups, self help projects, youth groups etc.) How often do you participate?
- C. What do you think about participating in civic organizations?
- D. Have you heard of any national civic organizations? Can you name some? (probe)
- E. In a democracy, there are organizations that are not political parties but which try to influence the government and give advice to parliament. Have you heard of any groups like this in Malawi? Can you name some of them? (probe for MIDEA, PAC, SAW, Shyley Kondowe, Catherine Munthali, Vera Chirwa etc.)
- F. Earlier, we talked about parliament and your MP. Do you think civic organizations should play a role in parliament? What role should they play?

- G. The constitution says that parliament must talk to Malawians and ask their opinions before passing laws or making decisions. What kind of people or organizations should parliament listen to?

6. ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES IN DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY

- A. We talked at the beginning of this discussion about the issues affecting your village. What do you think are the most important national issues?
- B. Do you discuss these issues in your village? How do you learn about them?
- C. Do you think the government is doing a good job in addressing these issues?
- D. What constitutional rights do you have? Do you think that your rights are protected in Malawi?
- E. Malawi is now a democratic country. Democracy brings rights and responsibilities. What do you think your responsibilities as a citizen of a democratic country are?
- F. *Ufulu Weni Weni* means that everyone should be free. Do you think women in your village are as free as men? Why or why not?
- G. Has the position of women in your village changed since the elections? How has the position of women changed?
- H. What changes in the role of women would you like to see?
- I. Who do you think will help you bring about these changes?
- J. Have you heard about any female leaders in Malawi? Can you name some? (probe for MPs/Ministers)
- K. What can female leaders do to help improve the lives of women in Malawi?
- L. We have talked about many things today - democracy, parliament, civic organizations. Have you talked about these issues before in your village? When and where do you talk about these issues?

NDI ANTHU AMENE AMAPANGA ATSOGOLERI KUKHALA ATSOGOLERI
1995 NDI Focus Group Survey

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Beginning September 18, 1995, the National Democratic Institute, in collaboration with a research team from the University of Malawi, organized and conducted a series of fourteen focus groups throughout Malawi. The focus groups were conducted in villages in Nkhata Bay, Nkhotakota, Dedza, Mangochi, Nsanje and Mwanza districts, and in urban townships in Lilongwe and Blantyre. A total of 119 adult men and women participated in the discussions, including 25 people who also participated in last year's survey. Four all male and four all female discussion groups, as well as two mixed gender groups, were held in rural villages. Both urban groups had an equal number of women and men. One discussion was held with a group of Village Headmen and one with a group of local political party leaders. A detailed list of the focus group sites and composition can be found at the end of this report. Every effort was made to include a representative mix of people in the discussion groups in an atmosphere conducive to open and honest exchange.

The participants continue to view Malawi's political transition positively, and feel the advent of multiparty democracy has brought tangible rights and freedoms never before enjoyed in the country. Despite recent economic hardships, virtually all participants feel that a democratic system of government offers the greatest hope for improvement in the quality of life of ordinary Malawians. Participants remain eager to participate in the political process and see voting as a civic duty that they look forward enthusiastically to performing again. The notion that recent democratic gains are permanent and irreversible seems to be growing in the minds of most participants, and given the entrenchment of democratic ideals among Malawians few feel that a return to dictatorial rule would be possible.

The research indicates a greater variation in opinion between individuals and between people in different parts of Malawi than was the case in last year's survey. However, a number of ideas are widely held and transcend regional, ethnic and political divisions. The following are the dominant themes of the focus group survey.

Confusion Over Local Government Although there is considerable variation in the level of knowledge of participants, the majority know very little about the current system of local government in Malawi and do not know what their District Councils or councilors do.

Enthusiasm for Local Government Elections When informed of the upcoming local government elections, virtually all participants were enthusiastic and stated their intention to vote. For most the ability to vote for someone from their area, who they know personally, will be the greatest motivation to vote.

Clear Preferences for Local Government Representatives Participants have a remarkably consistent description of their ideal candidate for local government elections. The candidate should be from the area he or she wishes to represent, polite, respectful of the electorate, educated and willing to interact closely with ordinary villagers. Most participants feel that women could make good district councilors, provided they are educated and qualified for the position.

Disillusionment With Members of Parliament There is widespread dissatisfaction with the performance of Members of Parliament. Participants continue to complain that their MPs

seldom visit their constituencies, and the vast majority of participants feel that their MP is not interested in their problems or concerns.

Evolving Local Leadership As Malawi's political structures develop, participants are increasingly turning to village headmen and chiefs to assist with their day-to-day problems and disputes, as local political party leaders become less influential and important. The number of women in local leadership positions, and the status of women in general, seems to be decreasing in many areas.

Declining Quality of Life Many participants see the last several years as a period of drought, hunger and economic decline and feel that their basic quality of life has deteriorated since the 1994 elections. While few participants blame this decline on the introduction of multiparty democracy, most feel that the government is failing to address their problems adequately.

These findings suggest several recommendations:

- o The government needs to make a concerted effort to explain its economic policies and objectives to all Malawians, especially those living in rural areas. The necessity for and enormous difficulties associated with major economic restructuring in Malawi needs to be stressed. All political actors must remember that basic concerns such as access to food, water, transportation and credit facilities, and protection from inflation and crime, continue to shape the political perceptions of ordinary Malawians.
- o A comprehensive civic education programme is needed to provide information to potential voters on the structure, function and responsibilities of local government prior to next year's elections. Any civic education campaign must start from the assumption that the majority of rural Malawians know virtually nothing about current local government structure or responsibilities.
- o Political parties wishing to field candidates in local government elections should be aware of the strong and consistent preferences of potential voters. Local, well-known, polite and educated candidates are favored in virtually all parts of the country. Individuals who do not reside in the area they wish to represent will be at a clear disadvantage.
- o Members of Parliament need to increase the amount of time they spend in their constituencies and improve their constituent relations skills. Towards this end, Parliament and political parties should find ways of ensuring that MPs fulfill their responsibilities as representatives of the people of Malawi and come to Parliament with a clear understanding of the priorities and views of their constituents. It is in everyone's interest to change the current perception of MPs as uninterested and inaccessible individuals.
- o Efforts by women to assume local leadership positions and to compete in local government elections must be encouraged and supported if the current trend of deteriorating status and influence among Malawian women is to be reversed.

MUTU UMODZI SIUSENZA DENGA
1994 NDI Focus Group Survey

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The research indicates that there is a wide diversity of opinion among the people of Malawi, and that political debate is ongoing and vigorous, however, this survey reveals a number of basic themes which transcend regional, ethnic, social and political divisions. The most important of these is the desire of ordinary Malawians to play an active, participatory role in the political and economic development of their country. People want to contribute to the development of their villages in real and substantial ways, by influencing the political system, participating in local political debate, increasing their economic opportunities, and improving the educational status of themselves and their families. Many participants, however, feel cut off from the political system and unable to influence the rapid change which is currently taking place. A participant in Mangochi District stated that "Democracy means free access to authorities, but our M.P. has never come back to our village since the elections, so there is no democracy in Malawi." Other important findings of the focus groups are:

Expectations People have very high expectations of the new government, and believe that the democratization process currently underway in Malawi should provide an opportunity to solve many of the chronic problems they face in everyday life. Some of the promises made by politicians before the May 17th elections are now viewed with skepticism, but participants still believe that the government has a fundamental responsibility to improve their quality of life. A participant in Nkhokhota District presented a far reaching list of responsibilities for the new government that was echoed throughout the country. "The government should ensure peace, provide employment, improve the price farmers receive for their maize, reduce the price of fertilizer, and provide food and clean water to our village."

Political and Economic Transformation The participants see political and economic change as part of the same process. People appreciate their new political freedoms and the climate of openness which now prevails, but are more immediately concerned with their economic well being. The political transformation that began with multiparty elections will be viewed as incomplete until the basic quality of life in the villages improves. A woman in Dedza District was happy that the new system had brought political change, but felt that "Democracy should also bring food and opportunity."

Political Participation People are eager to participate in the political system. Participants feel that personal contact with political and civic leaders is extremely important, and that face to face interaction is the only reliable means of making their opinions known to their elected representatives. Such contact has generally not occurred since the elections, and people feel frustrated by their inability to actively participate in their new political system.

Civil Society There is very little awareness of the role and function of civic organizations in Malawi, and few organized community groups exist at the village level. People do, however, have a strong sense of community, and informal or traditional civil structures are a vitally important part of village life. Although the participants in Nkhata Bay had discussed the ideas presented in the focus group many times among themselves, they stated that "...NDI is the only organization that has come to hear our thoughts."

These general themes suggest several recommendations:

- o All political actors in Malawi - political parties, the Parliament, the government, civic organizations, donors and ordinary people - must recognize that improving the standard of living in the villages is a vital component of Malawi's political transformation.
- o Linkages between the Parliament, political parties and the people must be improved, and concerted efforts should be made to include all members of society in national political debates. Towards this end, channels of communication within the parliament, the government and the parties also need to be strengthened so that local party officials and Members of Parliament can accurately articulate party and government policy to their constituents, and encourage public involvement in political debate.
- o Civic organizations must be supported, and should be viewed as an essential component of Malawi's political system. National civic organizations must encourage the participation of rural Malawians if they are to be effective, but traditional, informal and grassroots organizations should be seen as the most important means of bringing the public into the political system.
- o The ability of women to participate in the political system and to improve their economic status must be improved if real economic and political change is to take place in Malawi. Such an improvement will require a change in attitude amongst politicians, traditional leaders, and the male population in general.