

Access to Education Rights - A Case of Malawi

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ABSTRACT

Access to education is a fundamental human right recognized by various international treaties and national constitutions. In Malawi, the right to education is enshrined in the Constitution and supported by policies aimed at promoting inclusive and equitable education for all citizens. However, significant barriers persist that hinder access to quality education, particularly for marginalized groups such as girls, children with disabilities, and those from impoverished backgrounds. This paper examined the current state of educational access in Malawi, highlighting key challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, insufficient funding, cultural attitudes towards education, and the impact of socio-economic factors. It also explored government initiatives and non-governmental efforts aimed at improving educational access and quality. The analysis underscores the importance of community involvement and policy reform in addressing these challenges. Furthermore, this study emphasizes the role of international organizations in supporting Malawi's educational framework through funding and technical assistance. By identifying best practices and successful interventions, the paper aims to provide recommendations for enhancing access to education rights in Malawi, ensuring that every child has the opportunity to achieve their full potential through quality education. Ultimately, achieving universal access to education in Malawi requires a concerted effort from all stakeholders, including government agencies, civil society, and local communities, to create an inclusive educational environment that respect and promote the rights of every individual.

Keywords: Education, education rights, sustainable development, human rights, and Malawi.

INTRODUCTION

Sustainable development goals ascertain that the right to education is a basic and fundamental human right that has to be ensured at all costs. This has been universalized in different international and national policies, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) amongst others. The argument further postulates that when an individual has access to education, they are equally empowered to access other fundamental human rights such as the right to employment, the right to health and other fundamental rights. However, in the developing world, the right and access to education is not fully realised as there is a gap between those who have access to education and those that do not. However, in Malawi, access to education rights is limited, failing beyond in achieving this fundamental right. This paper therefore focuses on access to education rights within Malawi.

Education Rights: Malawi Perspective

Malawi's education system has undergone significant changes since the country gained independence in 1964. Malawi is part of the international community and often ratifies treaties and protocols that detail with the right to promote and enhance education. In theory, Malawi has to ensure that treaties and protocols ascend to law and become part of operating procedures. This is ensured under article 211 of the 1994 constitution of Malawi, as revised in 1998, stipulating that all international agreements ratified by Malawi before the Constitution entered into force on 18th May 1994 are binding on and form part of the Malawi national law, unless the Malawian Parliament subsequently. Therefore, in theory, conventions such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child apply as directly as part of national law.

In addition, Article 13 and 25 of the Malawi Constitution promotes the right to access education. In essence, Article 13 postulates that the state has to make all efforts to ensure that educational resources are applied in Malawi and that primary education has to be made free and compulsory. The clause also postulates that there shall be no discrimination in educational access, promoting equality in access to education. Furthermore, Article 25 postulates that primary education shall be made compulsory, with each learner having free access to education. Nerd (2023) however notes that this clause has not yet been realized as free primary education in Malawi is still not being practiced. Furthermore, as the clause suggest, private-public partnerships are permissible, provided that they meet regulations. This however has made education inaccessible to greater population in Malawi as private education is expensive (Nerd, 2023).

It is pertinent to note that the education system in Malawi is structured into several levels, which include primary, secondary, and tertiary education.

1. **Primary Education:** Primary education is free and compulsory for children aged 6 to 13 years. The government introduced the Free Primary Education (FPE) policy in 1994, which led to a dramatic increase in enrollment rates. However, challenges such as overcrowded classrooms, inadequate teaching materials, and a shortage of qualified teachers have persisted.
2. **Secondary Education:** Secondary education in Malawi consists of four years of schooling following primary education. While there are efforts to expand access to secondary education, it remains limited due to high fees and competition for places. Many students who complete primary school do not transition to secondary education.
3. **Tertiary Education:** Tertiary education includes universities and colleges that offer higher learning opportunities. Access to these institutions is competitive and often limited by financial constraints.

Scholarly literature underscores the urgent need to address hindrances to access to education rights in Malawi. These studies highlight the challenges faced by rural schools, the consequences of educational disparities, and the barriers to social and economic mobility. By building on the insights and findings from previous research, this study aims to contribute to the existing knowledge and propose potential solutions towards access to education rights in

the Malawi context. The purpose of the study is to investigate into the access of education rights in Malawi. The study seeks to explore the benefits of access to education rights on both the individual and country perspective. It is also the focus of the study to identify barriers to access to education rights in Malawi. An understanding of the barriers will necessitate the study into proffering recommendations that can be implemented to ensure that the right to access education is promoted and realised in Malawi.

PROBLEM DESCRIPTION

In as much as the right to access education is universally accepted, it is yet to be realised in Malawi. Malawi is a signatory to international conventions such as ICR, ICESCR, UNHR amongst others that promote the universal access to education. Furthermore, the Constitution of Malawi, national policies and education white papers also promote the accessibility of education. According to UNICEF (2024), only 61% of children in Malawi attend primary education and the rate becomes even lower as learners progress through the education system. This is because only a third of learners who attend primary school go on to access secondary education, leaving the majority of children in Malawi lacking access to this fundamental right. This is noted by De Clerq (2020) who argues that the primary school completion rate in Malawi is at 31% and only 15% enrol into secondary education. This is further challenged by the ratio of pupils to qualified teachers, which stands at 78:1 in primary schools and 44:1 in secondary schools (UNICEF, 2024). In primary schools, there is an average of 111 students per classroom, which impact on the access to quality education for learners.

According to Theu (2024), the major issues that limit the access to education in Malawi include lack of education funding as well as shortage of teachers. This is because the educational sector is heavily under-funded, as education contributes to less than 10% of budget allocation. There is lack of education infrastructure in Malawi, especially in public schools, that report high attendance by learners. As noted by the World Bank (2024), only 4.1% of Malawi's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is allocated to the education sector, making it one of the lowest in the world. In addition, shortage of teachers also impact on the right to access education. The African Development Bank reports that this shortage has a significant impact on the quality of education because classes are often overcrowded, and teachers are unable to give individual attention to each student (Theu, 2024). However, there are other challenges limiting access to education in Malawi such as socio-economic issues, inequality, lack of inclusive education amongst others. These issues have therefore prompted the research on issues of access to education in Malawi.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the study are:

- To investigate the barriers to education access in Malawi.
- To analyze the effectiveness of policies aimed at improving education access in Malawi.
- To explore the impact of education access on socio-economic development in Malawi.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study utilised the qualitative approach to enquiry. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), the qualitative approach is an enquiry to a phenomenon through utilising the shared experiences and attitudes of the participants. This means that critical to qualitative research is

the beliefs and perceptions of the research participants. This approach however was utilised in the study for it ensures a deep understanding of the research problem through capturing deep and insightful information from the sources consulted. Furthermore, the case study research design was used. The rationale of using case study design is that it allows for the exploration of key characteristics, meanings and implications of the case (Flick, 2016). A case study design also allows for the observation or interrogation of a group of individuals in their natural context to determine outcome. The use of a case study design allows for the capturing of attitudes, reasons, motives and values of participants in reference to the matter under study.

The study utilised purposive/judgemental sampling. As noted by Leedy and Ormrod (2015), this is the sampling method where participants have active and informed understanding of the matter that is under investigation. Data was therefore collected through use of semi-structured interviews. David and Sutton (2016) are of the view that semi-structured interviews are a combination of structured and unstructured interviews where the researcher has a list of questions that they ask to participants and also have the liberty to ask follow-up questions with participants. Semi-structured interviews are also used in the study for they allow for probing where the researcher can ask follow up questions to participants to have an effective comprehension of the matter under review. The study utilised the face-to-face structure of interviews. Face to face interviews were used by the researcher with the aim of receiving beneath the surface reaction. Dodd and Epstein (2015) supports this assertion and argue that interviews are appropriate for revealing information about complex emotionally laden subjects or for probing the sentiments that may underlie expressed opinion.

Thematic analysis was utilised to analyse the data. This is where data is reviewed and analysed in similarity to the core themes of the precepts familiar with the participants in more specific terms (Kumar, 2014). In this perspective, data was collected and coded in a manner that represented the entire setting and range of questions asked. Information gathered was therefore grouped into themes that were recurring and themes that represented the research objectives.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

The study utilised the ecological theory, developed by Brofenbrenner and Morris (1988) in trying to define the characteristics that are required for the development of an individual. The theory suggests that the development of a human being is defined by the individual characteristics of such a human as well as the environment that they live. This theory in relation to the study means that in understanding access to education rights in Malawi, there is need to look at the individual characteristics of a learner, the school they attend, their family and the community they live in and national policies supporting education for these are important in determining the success of such a policy.

The various principles of the ecological theory determine the characteristics and the environment that the learner lives in have a role to play towards access to education. This is important within the study as it highlights the role of stakeholders in accessing education and how they can effectively play their part for the development of learners in Malawi. The

ecological theory therefore is important in the study on an analysis on the access to education rights in Malawi.

Literature Review

In Malawi, the right to education is crucial for several reasons. Firstly, access to educational rights enhances empowerment. Todaro (2024) argues that education empowers individuals by providing them with knowledge and skills necessary for personal development and economic independence. It enables people to make informed choices about their lives. In addition, access to education enhances economic development. This is because a well-educated population contributes significantly to national development. Education enhances productivity, innovation, and competitiveness in the global economy. Nerd (2023) further argues that education enhances social equity: Ensuring access to quality education helps reduce inequalities within society. It provides marginalized groups—such as girls, children with disabilities, and those from low-income families—with opportunities for advancement.

It is imperative to note also that access to education rights have health benefits. Educated individuals tend to have better health outcomes for themselves and their families (De Clerk, 2021). They are more likely to understand health information and make informed decisions regarding nutrition, sanitation, and healthcare. In addition, when individuals are educated, they actively participate in community developments. Education fosters civic engagement by equipping individuals with critical thinking skills necessary for active participation in democratic processes and community development. All in all, access to education is recognized as a fundamental human right under various international instruments, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989).

However, there are challenges faced in the Malawi context that impact on access to education rights. One such challenge is education inequality. According to Todd and Cheryl (2018), educational inequality is the unequal distribution of educational opportunity, financial and educational resource as well as qualified teachers. In addition, educational inequality in this era of the coronavirus pandemic (Covid-19) has also translated to lack of digital assets that results in lessening of a student or population's educational academic success or performance. Scholars have extensively examined the issue of educational inequality and shed light on its causes and consequences. Ebersolm and Ferreira (2012) are of the view that poor resources and inadequate infrastructure are the main cause of educational inequality within rural areas. Schools in Malawi lack the adequate infrastructure that is required to ensure effective education. As noted by Luckett and Shay (2020), there is a high teacher-student ratio within rural schools and this affect the development of learners and application of effective learning skills. De Clercq (2020) therefore emphasizes how educational inequality leads to underperformance in rural schools, ultimately hindering the socio-economic development of communities. This highlights the interconnectedness between education and other development initiatives such as health, food security, income, and employment.

Poor infrastructure and limited resources are also barriers to education rights in Malawi. Maiholt (2015) underscores the consequences of these challenges, including limited access to academic resources, qualified teachers, and technology in disadvantaged communities. This is

further comprehended by the historical disadvantages and oppression experienced by marginalized groups, leading to unequal educational outcomes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION BASED ON FINDINGS FROM THE STUDY

Barriers to Accessing Education in Malawi

There are numerous barriers to accessing education in Malawi. Amongst such include overcrowded classrooms, caused by shortage of teachers. Shakari (2024) argues that Malawi faces issues with overcrowded classrooms where the ratio of teacher to student ranges from 1:110 to 1:130. This number is overwhelming to teachers and complicates their delivery of quality education. In addition, overcrowded classrooms have an increase on the strain and physical mentality of both teachers and students, leading to lack of effective delivery and comprehension of the subject delivered. Sharra and Silver (2023) however had a divergent view on the matter arguing that there is high turnover rate of teachers in Malawi due to low wages and lack of morale. This is leading to high teacher and student ratio. There are some learners who require special needs and attention from teachers and lack of such impact negatively on their ability to succeed in education. Therefore, overcrowded classrooms caused by shortage of teachers are a barrier to access to education in Malawi.

Another barrier to access to education in Malawi is lack of quality education, causing high rate of illiteracy. In a study conducted by Esau (2024), 83% of first grade learners are unable to read a single syllable and 92% fail to read a single word. These statistics present a critical gap in foundational literacy skills that are important for academic success and lifelong learning. It is worth noting that lack of students to read and write at such early stages in their academic careers severely limits their capacity to be able to comprehend other subjects and this perpetuates a cycle of poor educational outcomes (Mutaro, 2024). The goal of education in a system is to create lifelong and lasting skills in learners and failure to do that defeat the purpose of education. In this regard, lack of quality education is a barrier to accessing education in Malawi.

Another barrier to accessing education in Malawi include lack of implementation of government policies. This challenge is not only experienced in Malawi but in the developing world as a whole where governments introduce education white papers but fail to see them through due to implementation challenges, monitoring and evaluation amongst others (Chimombo, 2011). This is confirmed by Lemani (2022) who argues that policies are created to address education challenges but lack effective implementation to make them meet their mandate. For example, the Special Needs Education guidelines have been developed in light of government's commitment to allow all school aged learners with special educational needs to fully participate in education, but the policy is yet to achieve its desired result. Therefore, lack of implementation is a challenge towards accessing education in Malawi.

Effectiveness of Current Policies and Initiatives in Improving Access to Education in Malawi

Various laws and policies have also been implemented to enhance education in Malawi. Amongst such include The National Education Sector Plan (NESP), implemented between 2008 and 2017, which was meant to rehabilitate existing schools and building school infrastructure. These included building 1000 houses for teachers annually at all levels as well the construction

of 50 primary schools. The Joint Financing Arrangement was sought to fund the process. This plan has been credited for ensuring access to primary education across gender lines. However, there still remains a challenge of lack of adequate learning infrastructure and resources for learners, especially in primary schools in Malawi.

The government has also implemented non-discrimination laws to ensure that education is accessed in Malawi. Such policies include affirmative action in selecting learners for secondary and tertiary education, where females from rural areas and marginalized areas benefited (Murray, 2020). Furthermore, in efforts to enhance accessibility through non-discrimination, the government also introduced frameworks to ensure that children with special needs have access to education (UNICEF, 2024). In as much as inclusion of learners with special needs is yet to be implemented effectively, positive steps to address the issue are noted in Malawi (Sharra and Silver, 2023).

The government has also set up training centres for teachers to ensure access to quality education. As noted by Bill (2018), teachers play a critical role in ensuring that learners have access to quality education and when teachers are properly trained and developed, there is a low rate of teacher turnover. Furthermore, with the aim to reduce of pupil-teacher ratio, transfer of teachers from community day secondary schools (CDSSs) to primary schools was implemented in Malawi. However, despite all these efforts, education access in Malawi is still below the internationally recognized standard.

The Impact of Education Access on The Socio-Economic Status of Individuals and Communities in Malawi

The sustainable goal to education has been framed as one of the sustainable development goals for education plays a key role towards the development of a society. The conventional understanding on the importance of education is that it empowers communities to live above the limitations of society, end poverty, hunger and education is key towards the achievement of other sustainable development goals. This is confirmed by Kagia (2007) who opines that education is vital to end socio-economic challenges facing communities, especially in the developing world. The international community has therefore come up with methods, mechanisms and instruments that ensure access to education for all. This has been adopted by countries in the developing world where basic education for a start has been made a fundamental human right to be accessed by all.

Access to education is important towards access on the socio-economic status of individuals and communities in Malawi. This is because education link to other development goals such as access to health and nutrition, economic development and other social development initiatives. Ideally, the sustainable development goal to education is important towards the achievement of other developmental goals because it ensures that communities have access to information, knowledge, attitudes and values that are necessary towards societal enlightenment to accept new and improved forms of thinking (Naidoo, 2018). This means that when communities have access to education, it leads directly to the progression in achievement of other sustainable development goals. An example is that of education and its impact towards the development of rural communities where farmer can be informed to practice new forms of farming such as zero tillage, green houses and horticulture to improve and sustain on their livelihoods. This means

that from education, there is the achievement of the goal of nutrition, ending poverty and health to mention just but a few.

In addition, access to education is also important towards the achievement of other developmental goals as it ensures that people and communities are able to meet on their basic and fundamental rights. Chimbombo (2011) is of the view that acquiring education makes a society more informed on their rights and freedoms and in the end, make people play critical roles in societal development. Accessing education makes people be aware of their right to vote, freedom of speech, movement and other basic fundamental rights important for societal development. This means that people who are educated have a role to play in societal development thus a pathway towards achievement of other sustainable development goals.

Furthermore, access to education is important in the achievement of other developmental goals as it socialises people in the dominant political and cultural value systems. With education, people get an understanding on their social values, norms and obligations and this is progress towards societal development (Nerd, 2024). When people are educated, they are informed on terms and processes that ensure societal development and this means that they get to access health from professionals, ensure gender development through including women in societal processes and people participate in electoral processes that have impact on their development. In other words, through socialisation, the sustainable development goal to education ensures the achievement of other sustainable development goals.

CONCLUSION

Lack of education resources is amongst the school-related barriers to accessing education in Malawi. In most public schools, there is lack of adequate and sufficient education resources that are required for effective delivery of education. Another school related barrier to accessing education rights in Malawi is lack of human capital. Contextual barriers to accessing education in Malawi include lack of inclusive education. This is because teachers do not have the required training and development to be able to manage classroom activities including learners with learning disabilities. Furthermore, there are socio-cultural barriers to accessing education.

The policies that have been implemented in Malawi have ensured that the gap between girls and boys accessing education in primary school is addressed. In primary school education, discrimination based on gender has been reduced. Males and females have the same access to education as provided for in international conventions such as CRC and CEDAW. The Constitution and the UPE of 1995 has ensured that females have access to education. In addition, notable success has been ensured through construction of school infrastructure in Malawi. Policies such as NESP, education white papers and other policies have been successful in enhancing adequate infrastructure for learners in Malawi. Independent Malawi faced challenges of large sums of learners requiring education but without adequate resources.

Policies implemented to enhance access to education in Malawi have however registered notable failures in meeting its required goals and objectives. There is high student to teacher ratio in Malawi, averaging 1:130 in primary schools. This is a challenge towards access to education which details on the need for quality education. Teachers therefore are not able to cope with the large numbers of learners, leading to drop-outs, absenteeism amongst others.

Another challenge not being addressed by education policies in Malawi include lack of trained and equipped educators.

Access to education in Malawi ensures that the community has access to health. When a community has embraced education, there is belief and appreciation in modern technologies that ensure access to health. When communities are educated, they have a comprehension of the impact of their right to vote and participation in development discourses. This is important towards achievement of comprehensive and representative policies. An educated community is able to understand the importance of gender equality towards societal development. When women are educated, they participate in politics, development, medicine and other innovative discourses that ensure development of communities.

Interventions for Improved Access to Education in Malawi

There is need for an effective implementation of training and development for teachers. This comes from lack of teacher engagement within education policies as they do not have the capacity to ensure the success of such. This means that teachers in the professional training have to be taught on how to handle learners from different backgrounds with different attributes. Furthermore, the recruitment of teachers has to be in conformity with increasing numbers of learners in Malawi. In addition, teachers in the jobs have to go for workshops and conferences to train them in reference to the contemporary times and changing nature on education. If this is ensured, factors affecting education access in Malawi can be addressed.

There is also need for principals, headmasters and the government to avail resources towards effective implementation education in Malawi. This comes from the huge numbers in teacher-learner ratio which is affecting teachers to engage effectively with learners. Teachers are not able to cater for large classrooms and are not able to engage effectively with learners. Therefore, there is need to ensure that teachers have a low student-teacher ratio that ensures that they are able to give attention to each and every learner and ensure that learners are able to meet their educational goals and objectives.

There is need for the practice of effective policy making by authorities to ensure that stakeholders are included in the development of policies of education. This means that the government has to ensure that community buy-in, engagement with parents, teachers and school bodies is ensured to come up with an effective inclusion policy for all learners. When policies are made through representative democracy, these policies in turn impact effectively on the target audience as policy makers would have collected enough and effective information.

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