Public Sector Reforms: The State of E-government in Malawi in Provision of Access to Information and Services from 2003 - Present.

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ABSTRACT

The government of Malawi embarked on public sector reforms in many sectors. One such area is the online means of channelling information to the public through the E-government programme. The initiative started in 2003 when the Government adopted ICT as part of its E-governance agenda with the aim of using the information and telecommunications technologies (ICTs) to enable it deliver its programmes and services more effectively and efficiently. This study was carried to bridge the gap in the literature on the state of E-government in Malawi under the Public Sector Reforms in the provision of access to information. it obtained a qualitative approach in which the sample for the study was 5 officers from E-government Department, 5 officers from Public Sector Reforms and 10 public officers for other government departments for triangulation purposes. The study established that the public sector reforms have been a useful tool in ensuring that E-government reaches out to the public and provide access to information and services. Over the years Public Sector Reforms have changed the running of the government from the authoritarian in nature to more of citizen engagement and this has also contributed to the provision of access to information. Some of the notable achievements are the increase in the network courage of the government wide area network, increase in the use of government official emails, the establishment of Integrated Finance Management System, The Payroll and Human Resource Management System, The Road Traffic Department's Traffic Management Information System, the Integrated Border Control System. The signing to law of the Access to Information bill and also the government being party to other international agreements on access to information was noted to be a good catalyst that government is committed to provide information to the public. The challenges noted were bordering on network infrastructure in that the E-governments is concentrated in the urban areas, and also lack of awareness to the general public on the kind of services currently offered online. The study recommended that E-government should do more on awareness programs as a means of providing the public with information so that the services being offered are fully utilised. Furthermore, government should continue to invest and allocate adequate resources to the E-government in order to improve the network infrastructure.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Access to information is a birth right of all the citizens of Malawi as enriched in the constitution of Malawi. Therefore, the government is duty bound in ensuring that it provides a necessary environment and platform through which people can access public information. This study is coming at a time when government is implementing various reforms in the civil service and also in a period of advancement of ICT. It is worth noting that the purpose of every reform is to have a better functional better service and this being the case there is need for information dissemination for the public to be aware of government programs and be able to provide necessary checks and balances. However, in as much as access to information is a birth right, there is gap in the literature on how Public sector reforms under the e-government initiative have influenced access to information from 2003 to present. The year 2003 is significant in this study because it was when the ICT policy was enacted which led to the establishment of the E-government.

1.1 The Public Sector

The public sector is broadly synonymous with "government" and the main focus is on the executive branch. From that perspective, the public sector is made up mainly of government departments and agencies that are staffed by public servants (Schacter, 2000). In this regard, Public Sector reforms (PSR) is about strengthening the way that the public sector is managed. This is the case because research studies have shown that the public sector is more often overextended – attempting to do too much with too few resources; It maybe be poorly organized; its decision-making processes may be irrational; staff may be mismanaged; accountability may be weak; public programs may be poorly designed and public services poorly delivered. Therefore, PSR is the attempt to fix these problems.

According to public service report (2015) The Government of Malawi has been implementing Public Service reforms since the dawn of independence in 1964. These reforms yielded varying results. Some of the reforms failed because of a lack of political will, shared vision, clear strategic direction, ownership of the reform process and

capacity to implement the reforms. In this regard, the President of the Republic of Malawi, His Excellency Professor Arthur Peter Mutharika established the Public Service Reform Commission. The mandate of the Commission was to provide strategic leadership in the implementation of Public Service Reforms, which would result in the provision of dynamic and high quality services to the public at all times. Under these reforms, the e-government was given the bench mark of ensuring that they modernise the ICT systems, tools and processes to ensure effective delivery of service. In addition, 10000 civil servants should have access to the government internet/intranet by June 2016 through the improvement of the GWAN infrastructure.

1.2 E-Government

Evansa and Yen (2006) defines E-Government as utilising the Internet and the World Wide Web for delivering government information and services to citizens. E-government provides access to information and services and enables citizens to contact government agencies through national, state and local website (Komba & Ngulube, 2012). This is a paradigm shift from the use of paper filing system to online (paperless) workflow and documentation. Evansa and Yen (2006) argues that the emergence of E-government was as a result of shift from technology to management and the development of scope performance and policy intentions. This was due to the government seeing internet as more than a "bolt-on" to corporate processes. The concept of e-government appears to be fairly new. However, it is a bi-polar phenomenon, which combines the key characteristics of technological department and public administration. Thus, it concentrates on customer service (front office) and organisational structure (back office). E-government is based on the integration of information technology (IT) capacity, primarily websites, intranets, and databases, to allow self-service through an IT medium (Ashaye & Irani, 2014).

According to the Malawi Communications Regulatory Authority (MACRA) (2003) Electronic government is the utilisation of ICTs in provision of public services. Use of ICTs enhances accountability and promotes equitable allocation and distribution of public resources. ICT plays a crucial role in improving the efficiency of the operations of

the public service; particularly in improving the delivery of quality service to the general public and the provision of national security. Malawi is currently ranked 159 out of 190 countries due to its low utilisation of ICTs for public service provision. This is in agreement with the United Nations E-government survey of 2014 that placed Malawi at 0.2321 on the E-government index which translates to position 166 when rated against other countries in the world in terms of E-government development and implementation (United Nations, 2014). In the policy, two statements were made to show action on the policy. Firstly, Government shall deploy ICTs to facilitate effective and efficient public service delivery and interaction between the public service and citizens of Malawi, companies, government institutions, cooperating partners and other stakeholders of the Government of Malawi. Secondly, Government shall deploy ICTs in order to enhance oversight functions in Government.

An E-government programme was conceptualised as part of the Malawi Information and Communications Technology (ICT). The overall aim is to promote the country's socioeconomic development, supporting the aspirations of Vision 2020, with priority being given to ICT activities contributing to poverty reduction. The e-government element focuses on the modernisation and improved efficiency of public services. Specific strategies have been designed to: Improve productivity, efficiency, effectiveness and service delivery through institutional and organisational reforms; Modernise the public service through the development and utilisation of ICT to support its operations and activities; Promote e-government through government to-government, government-to-business, and government-to-citizens initiatives; Promote the use of ICT to facilitate the decentralisation of government services and operations, and support the delivery of business and government services in rural areas; Improve the basic skills of public officers by on-going training; Develop and enforce standards and best practice to guide the delivery of services to the public.

1.3 Access to Information

Access to information is an enablement mechanism through which the people follow what their government is doing, to monitor whether these public innovations are indeed taking place in their interest, and whether the motive are in line with the aspirations of

the general public. In Malawi, the Malawi Constitution has two provisions on access to information, namely sections 36 and 37: section 36 is about Freedom of the press. The press shall have the right to report and publish freely, within Malawi and abroad, and to be accorded the fullest possible facilities for access to public information. In addition, section 37 is about Access to information. It states that every person shall have the right of access to all information held by the State or any of its organs at any level of Government in so far as such information is required for the exercise of his or her rights (Mambulasa, 2016).

1.4 OBJECTIVES

The aim of the study is to establish the role of e-government in the provision of access to information. Specifically the study will:

- ➢ Understand the history of public sector reforms and access to information in Malawi
- ➢ Examine the role of e-government in providing access to information in Malawi
- ➢ Analyse the successes and challenges in the provision of access to information under the banner of e-government

1.5 PROBLEM STATEMENT

Malawi has made strides to improve access to information. One of the tools has been reforming the public sector so that it is more efficient and effective. This being the case, government has been working on the improvement of the ICT to provide more access to information and services to the public. One a way of reaching out to the public, government established the E-government department to spearhead the process. However, there is lack of documented literature on how public sector reforms have influenced access to information and service delivery through e-government services in Malawi from 2003 to present.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Public Sector Reforms

Schater (2000) cited world bank report of the year 2000 that By the 1990s there was consensus that the pendulum has swung too far in the "anti-public sector" direction. A renewed appreciation of the public sector's developmental role began to emerge. The World Bank concluded recently that PSR has "great potential to reduce poverty" and that "good government institutions which are associated with higher income growth, national wealth, and social achievements". The current consensus is thus that PSR matters a great deal for development, and in at least two ways: (i) first, it will lead to better delivery of the basic public services that affect living standards of the poor; and (ii) second, it will create a climate conducive to private sector development. These conclusions are based on a growing body of studies showing positive links between public sector performance and economic and social outcomes. There is significant correlation between government effectiveness and increased per capita income, increased adult literacy and reduced infant mortality. However, this study is aimed at establishing how the PSR have influenced every aspect of the governance system including access to information.

According the public sector reforms report (2015) it noted that Ministries Departments and Agencies (MDAs) were behind in the utilisation of information technology as a tool to improve service delivery both internally and externally.it was also noted that the Government Wide Area Network (GWAN) was not efficient and was therefore hindering the MDAs from developing in relation to the effective utilisation of Information Technology. In order to deal with the above issues, the Commission recommended that The Government Wide Area Network (GWAN) was not efficient and was therefore hindering the MDAs from developing in relation to the effective utilisation of Information Technology. The Department of E- Government, in the Ministry of Information, Tourism and Culture should be one of the pioneer MDAs in pursuing reforms that facilitate accelerated absorption of IT within the public service, as a vital tool for efficient service delivery in today's technologically driven world. However, it is important to examine how

the reforms have impacted the E-government processes especially in the provision of Access to Information.

Schater (2000) in a study on public sector reforms in developing countries emphasized on why the public sector reforms fail. The major factor contributing to the failure of most PSR efforts has been the "technocratic" approach taken by donors. For too long, donors treated PSR as an "engineering" problem – a phenomenon to be addressed through "blueprint" or "textbook" solutions. There was an assumption that PSR problems and their solutions could be fully specified in advance, and that projects could be fully defined at the outset and implemented on a predictable timetable, over a fixed period. This accounts for the formulaic and mechanistic approach favoured by donors, featuring quantitative targets for payroll and workforce reductions, redrawing of organizational charts, rewriting of job descriptions, training courses for public servants, installation of new systems for human resource and public financial management, The technocratic approach overlooked the fact that PSR, though it has important technical aspects, is a social and political phenomenon driven by human behaviour and local circumstances. It is a long and difficult process that requires public servants to change, fundamentally, the way they regard their jobs, their mission and their interaction with citizens. The technocratic remedies supported by donors underplayed the degree to which progress in PSR depends upon thorough "culture change" in the public service.

2.2 Access to Information

Tilitonse (2003) in their research report found out that Literature on access to information in developing countries suggested that the underlying obstacles to access to public information are determined by socio-economic factors such as levels of education, literacy rates, poverty, and centralization of bureaucracy and availability of ICT services. In Malawi, there are clear variations in the incidence of these factors between urban and rural areas. However, in as much as this study outlined ICT as one of the resources in the provision of access to information, it only provided a generalised picture of the situation on the ground.

Mambulasa (2016) argues that Goal 16 of the Sustainable Development Goals seeks to ensure public access to information. In Malawi, the right to access to information is enshrined in the Constitution but no national legislation supports the right's enforcement. After the adoption of the new Malawian Republican Constitution of 1994 (Malawi Constitution) a statute was required to give effect to the right of access to public information entrenched in sections 36 and 37. Nearly ten years since the reintroduction of multiparty politics of government, no legislative measures were taken to concretise the right of access to public information by the people of Malawi. Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA) Malawi noted this gap and seized the opportunity around 2003 and spearheaded the campaign for the development of ATI legislation. It was a media professional body therefore that initiated the original ATI Bill. Likely because of this, most people in Malawi, including politicians, had been expressing sentiments that the ATI Bill was for the media. The ATI Bill may be invoked by every person, legal or juristic, in Malawi. The ATI Bill was subsequently passed on to the Malawi Government. The people of Malawi still do not have a one-stop-shop statute that specifically gives effect to or operationalize the right of access to information contained in the Malawi Constitution. Nevertheless, the right of access to information is provided for in other pieces of legislation and policies.

African Platform on Access to Information (APAI) carried out a study in 2013 to establish the state access to access to information in the African region. The study was carried out in 2013 which set out to provide a basic assessment on the state of information on the continent as a general reflection on the environment since the passage of the APAI declaration on 19 September 2011. This review covered fourteen countries which included Botswana, Democratic Republic of Congo, Gambia, Kenya, Malawi, Namibia, Nigeria, Senegal, Republic of South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. On the part of Malawi, the following observations were made: there is a constitutional guarantee; specific access to information bill is in progress, strong civil society coalitions are forwarding awareness on access to information with a particular focus area being on education. Furthermore, the public bodies have a designated person that can help a requester to access the information

they need. The barriers that were noted are illiteracy on the part of the public, capacity to store and manage information and political will. The study recommended that after the access to information is passed, focus should be on advocacy on possible implementation problems. However, in as much as there is good progress in the area of access to information, there is a need to establish how the PSR have assisted the processes which is important to check if they are being successful.

Evansa and Yen (2006) in their study discussed the service delivery category that focuses on the ability of the government and citizen to communicate information to each other in an efficient and electronic manner. The citizen greatly benefits from these government communications. One of the most popular benefits of government to citizen (G2C) is the simple posting of forms and registrations that were previously only available to those who were willing to wait in long lines or wait for forms to be mailed to them. Other benefits to serve citizens are the improvement of education information, prison security, and e-voting. The study by the two scholars has provided a benchmark in which the state of e-government in Malawi can be measured against.

Bhatnagar (2004) in his article on E-government and access to information argued that E-government includes the publication of information on a website so that citizens can download application forms for a variety of government services. It can also involve the actual delivery of services, such as filing a tax return or renewing a licence. More sophisticated applications include processing on-line payments. In developed countries, these services are offered in a self-service mode through the Internet, often via portals that are a single point of interaction between the citizen and a broad range of departments. In developing countries, on-line service counters may operate in a department offering services related only to that department. In some countries, citizen service centres have been created at convenient locations where citizens can access on-line services of several departments. At these counters, run either by departmental or private operators. The public does not directly interact with computer screens, and collection of payments is often handled through conventional means. The benefits from the on-line delivery of services include convenience (location and time) and shorter

waiting periods. E-government systems may also lead to greater transparency and reduced administrative corruption. So far, however, the reduction of corruption opportunities has often been an incidental benefit, rather than an explicit objective of e-government. It is therefore necessary the state of e-government in Malawi.
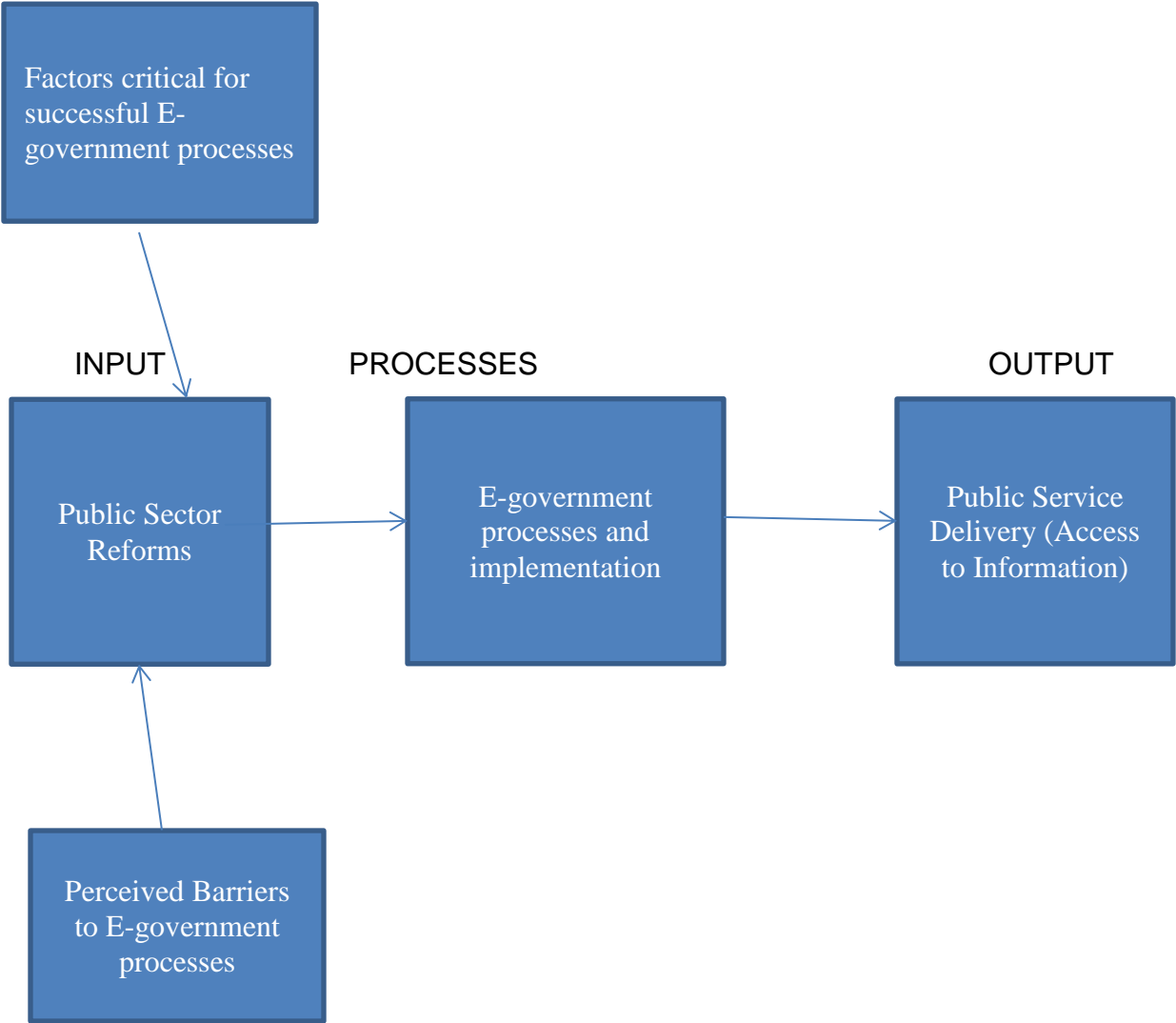
2.3 E-Government

Evansa and Yen (2006) in their study on E-Government: Evolving relationship of citizens and government, domestic, and international development. They found out that Africa has the potential for development but at the present it is greatly impacted by the digital divide. The current rankings for E-Government place it at approximately 50 percent of the world average of E-Government Readiness Index. It should be noted that South Africa scored much higher than other countries in the region in many categories particularly in the Human Capital Indices. It was worthy of note that Ghana has installed kiosks that are wireless payphones in order to help people in rural areas have access to phones. Often development is slow and occurring near cities, leaving the rural areas isolated and without access because of political and economic issues. It is therefore important to check whether what this study found out is also a reflection of the situation in Malawi

The institute for Intergovernmental Research in 2004 recommended that in order to design appropriate E-Government systems, it is important to learn from studies of field experiences. They presented a study made by the University at Albany which defined the constraints of E-Government cooperation. Their study outlined several factors that constrain effective coordination between state and local systems. In the past, coordination between governments has been poor but it is hoped that E-Government applications will improve coordination. Studies at the University at Albany outline several factors that prevent effective coordination between state and local systems such as relationship issues, dissimilarity in conditions, different objectives, inconsistent technology, and differing levels of adaptability. These factors, according to researchers, have led to the development of inconsistent information structures and higher costs. Other studies confirm that there are many obstacles to successful E-Government

implementation, including financial, planning, political objectives, and lack of citizen acceptance and/or interest. A UN study divides these obstacles into the following categories: institutional weakness, human resources, funding arrangements, local environment, and technology issues.

2.4 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The study on the state of E-Government in providing access to information is being understood from the concept of Public Sector Reforms. For the purposes of this study, Public Sector Reforms have been understood as per the definition of the United Nations Economic and Social Council that PSR is about deliberate changes to the structures

and processes of public sector organizations with the objective of getting them to run better. These structural changes may include merging or splitting public sector organizations while process change may include redesigning systems, setting quality standards and focusing on capacity-building. In this case, the conceptual framework attempts to bring to light how the public sector reforms have taken into account both internal and external factors to ensure the desired output of E-Government which is access to information is not being impeded and barriers to the process are being taken care of. Since the public sector reforms is about bringing effectiveness in government establishments, it is therefore follows that E-Government effective processes rests in the reforms. As such the reforms have to take into account all the variables (internal and external factors that may be at play to ensure that the process is successful to produce the desired output. Therefore, the framework gives direction on the kind of questions to inquire from the respondents and in this case the respondents will be officers from the department of E-Government and the Public Reforms Commission.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Study Design

A study design is as a logical progression of stages or tasks, from problem formulation to the generation of conclusions or theory, which are necessary in planning or carrying out a study (Maxwell, 2008). In this particular study, a case study design was employed (the case of E-Government). This was based on the research questions for the study in that they demanded the collection and management of qualitative data to effectively answer the research problem.

3.2 Data Collection and Instrumentation

Baker (2003) defines data collection as a means by which research information is obtained in form of primary and secondary data through various sources, vital to answer the research questions and address the relevant research objectives. This is done through observations, surveys, interviews, questionnaires and review of literature from within the organisations or outside the institutions. In this case, data was collected using in-depth interviews. Questionnaires were used as instruments for data collection; the

study depended on two main types of sources: the written and the oral. The study drew useful insights from secondary written sources such as journals, books and online articles. The oral sources that the paper employs were drawn from interviews that were conducted with officers from the E-government department and public service reform commission. Each of the two departments provided 5 officers and these were key informants on the subject at hand. These key informants were purposively selected. In order to determine the level of knowledge by other public officers, the study conveniently picked a total 10 senior public officers from various government ministries who were asked what they know and if they were aware of the initiatives E-government is undertaking in providing access to information.

3.3 Data Analysis

Qualitative methods of analysis methods will be used. For qualitative data, the method consists of detailed descriptions of situations, events, interactions, direct quotations from individuals about their experiences, attitudes, beliefs, thoughts and excerpts correspondence, records and case histories (Creswell, 1994). Therefore, qualitative analysis will assist in examining the collected data to identify common themes that appear to be of a greater significance. Thus the data was reviewed and systematically coded using the following themes that emerge from the study objectives: the history of the public service reforms and access to information, the role of e-government in providing access to information and also the challenges and possible solutions in the provision of access to information through the E-government. The analysed data was then put into categories or patterns as determined by the themes.

4.0 DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

4.1 History of Public Reforms and Provision of Access to Information

Jika (2016) stated that from the mid-1970s to around 2000, public sector reforms used a management strategy known as New Public Management, NPM. This means that before the mid-1970s, PSR were modelled on a different strategy. Before the 1970s, the public sector took care of all the affairs of the people as far as providing public goods and services were concerned. It was like a welfare state, and this philosophy or approach was known as bureaucratic Public Administration. In the mid-1970s, mostly after the oil crises of the 1970s and the failure of the US dollar as the main determinant of currency exchange regime, it became apparent that carrying all the responsibility in public goods and service delivery was unsustainable to governments. From that time, governments began to borrow practices from the private sector so that the public sector should be run the same way the private sector is, such as running it as a business to make profit. This approach was known as New Public Management.

The shift to NPM was happening in many countries and in Malawi if was adopted in the late 1980's under a World Bank – IMF package described as structural adjustment programs or SAPs. This mainly advocated for privatization (selling some public enterprises to private hands for efficiency and effectiveness); decentralization (giving away decision-making power to some public agency away from the headquarters) and Public-Private Partnership (PPP). The legal instruments that gave these NPM strategies legitimacy were the Privatisation Act passed in 1996, and the Local Government Act, passed in 1998 (Public Sector Reforms Report, 2015).

Towards the year 2000, it was realized that the best form of running the public sector had to take into account human rights issues in which, there has to be stakeholder engagement, transparency, equalities agenda (gender, ethnic groups, age, religion), ethical and honest behaviour, accountability, sustainability. This entailed looking at the people and other organisations as partners rather than as customers. In other words, the idea of strict business was being replaced by the idea of collaboration, engagement

and listening to the people on what value they want the public sector have or demonstrate. Whereas New Public Management was preoccupied with changing the internal structures of the public sector, this new form of management was preoccupied with horizontal approach to management, such as partnering with the people, Non-Government Organisations. This new form of management is associated with governance rather than mere management. This is why the Public-Private Partnership Act was passed in 2010 to give legal direction on this mode of running the public sector.

Officers in the Public Sector Reforms acknowledged that the current mode of running the public sector entails that issues of human rights form the hub, and one most important instrument that enhances this collaboration is ATI legislation. It would thus make little sense to engage in ambitious reforms without putting in place a mechanism that will afford the citizens the capacity to see inside the PSR because through this, the people can check against abuse and corruption and seek accountability for decisions made. At the same time, through ATI legislation, the people can give feedback on the reforms for government to effect improvements. It is important to note that the ATI will work towards replacing the status quo in the provision of access to information. This is the case because many statutes in Malawi dating back to colonial times promote government secrecy and withholding of public information, and yet the information properly belongs to the people. Those who work in the government are merely custodians of the information (Mambulasa, 2016). In addition, there are also other pieces of legislation passed after the Malawi Constitution was adopted that criminalise outright disclosure of information to any member of the public and in some cases, criminalise disclosure without consent from some authority even if it is in good faith. However it is understandable that some information should remain classified due to concerns of national security or other justified reasons for State secrecy. Nevertheless, some of the old statutes are now progressively being reviewed by the Law Commission for conformity with the Malawi Constitution and international law although the pace has been noted to be slow due to staffing and funding levels.

4.2 E-Government Initiatives under Public Sector Reforms in Provision of Access to Information and Services

4.2.1 Provision of E-government Services

E-Government officers responded that there are initiatives which government is doing to support its programs. They cited the funding from the Chinese Government of about USD135 million, in which the Department of e-Government is implementing a number of ICT projects in the country over a 4 to 5 year period from 2013. The projects include establishment of a data centre, provision of e-services such as E-immigration, E-national registration and identification system, sharable geographic information system, electronic document management system, E-Learning platform for the public sector, enhanced electronic communication systems, electronic marketing systems and electronic security systems. Some of the software systems and applications undertaken within the E-Government initiative include a computer based Integrated Finance Management System (IFMIS), funded by the World Bank which aims to provide timely and accurate financial information while enforcing standardised integrated financial management reporting system for government Ministries and departments. The Payroll and Human Resource Management System purchased by the Government aims to overhaul the locally developed government establishment, personnel, payroll, pensions, loans management (PPPAI) that was initiated in 1998-99. The Road Traffic Department's Traffic Management Information System (MalTIS) facilitates motor vehicle registration, issuing of driving licences and road permits.

The Malawi Immigration Department has also introduced a computer based system machine readable passport issuing system which is a fully integrated turnkey passport issuing system incorporating state-of-the-art biometric enrolment, issuing software, and Toppan digital passport printers. In addition, the Department has launched a new ICT innovation border control system in at its international airports, called the Integrated Border Control System, as part of its objective for computerise all its border posts. In addition, on the Immigration website, the public can download passport application forms unlike in the past where they had to go physically to immigration offices.

4.2.2 Development of Document Management System

Some respondents stated that the development of document management system was a response to the results of a national wide survey that was carried out by the national archives with the support from the European Union in 2010. The study was about state of records management in the public service. The results showed that there were poor records management practices which entailed that government was losing a lot of vital information. In response to the findings of the study; government through the chief secretary issued a Circular on 7th May 2012 Ref. No. ADM 316 to all Principal Secretaries and Heads of Departments, all Chief Executive Officers of Parastatals and Subvented Organisations, the Registrar of the Supreme and High Courts of Malawi, and the Clerk of Parliament. The Chief Secretary expressed government concerns on the increased deteriorating standards in the management of records in most public institutions. He observed that most public institutions were not paying any attention to the records managements systems due to among other things, a lack of commitment and involvement of senior officials in ensuring that the systems were operating efficiently.

The Chief Secretary urged all the public institutions to re-examine their records management systems. To this effect he ordered that public institutions should digitise of all strategic records and roll out electronic document management systems. The circular also directed that the department of E- government and the National Archives of Malawi should work hand in hand in providing advice and guidance to all public institutions in order to improve records management systems. However, the circular did not yield desired results as most public institutions lacked financial capacity to acquire the equipment and also to train its staff. Although no significant progress was registered, government in 2014 approved another reform area in which E-government department has to rolled out the electronic document management system by designing and implementing electronic management systems (Public Sector Reforms Report, 2015). To this effect, the E-government is working with various players in the ICT sector such as MACRA to mobilise resources for the project to roll out.

4.2.3 Access to Government Internet and Use of Official Email

Officers from public Sector Reforms as well as E-government confirmed that as part of the reforms, government had put in place a target that it wants to have 10000 civil servants having access to the government internet/intranet by June 2016 and also enforce the use of government emails for official business. This was to be achieved through the improvement of the GWAN infrastructure. Respondents from the E-government explained that at the moment the department has managed to increase accessibility of the network for the civil servants to have internet. The work is being done in phases and it started with Lilongwe where the executive and legislature are. Thereafter in 2015, the network is being made available to some government offices in the Northen region. At present, there are over 6000 public officers who have access to government network. In addition, over 4000 public officers were assigned official email addresses. Future more, to improve the GWAN infrastructure, government launched a Malawi fibre backbone project in May 2017. This is an internet system that is aimed at bringing high speed voice and data transmission in Malawi at lower prices. The project will be done by Huawei a Chinese company at the tune of $23 million (Mkandawire, 2017).

4.2.4 Government Enforcement of the E-government Reform activities

Respondents from both the department of E-government and public sector reforms collaborated that there is a reporting mechanic that was put in place to ensure that the implementation of every activity is on course. There are series of meetings that are carried out on monthly and quarterly basis in which the department of e-government is supposed to be making its submissions on the progress and challenges being faced. This has proved to be effective because once a report has been received by the officers in the public sector reforms; it becomes easier even to lobby for more funding from treasury because no one wants to be seen as frustrating the reforms. Government has also come up with performance agreement in which every department is supposed to sign a contract with the OPC on what it intends to do in particular financial year. This has meant departments to be realist in their plans but also serious in the execution of their programs.

4.3 Related Government Commitments to Provide Access to Information

4.3.1 International Signatories to Access to Information

Malawi has signed a number of international agreements as its commitment to the provision of access to information. Mambulasa (2016) states that Malawi is a State Party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). The ICCPR advocates for the right to access information held by public bodies or authorities as a fundamental human right recognised and protected by international law. Furthermore, Malawi is also a signatory to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) which protects the right to access information. In article 9.26 The African Commission on Human and Peoples Rights formulated the Model Law on Access to Information for Africa.

The Model Law is a guide for the development, adoption or review of access to information legislation by African States. Even though the Model Law is not a legally binding document, and each State Party is allowed to adapt it to suit its Constitution and the structure of its legal system. The Model Law gives seven general principles (Mambulasa, 2016). These principles are internationally recognised and they form the bedrock of modern legislation on the right of access to information, these principles are; Every person has the right to access information of public bodies and relevant private bodies expeditiously and inexpensively; Every person has the right to access information of private bodies that may assist in the exercise or protection of any right expeditiously and inexpensively; This Act and any other law, policy or practice creating a right of access to information must be interpreted and applied on the basis of a presumption of disclosure. Non-disclosure is permitted only in exceptionally justifiable circumstances as set out in this Act; Information holders must accede to the authority of the oversight mechanism in all matters; Relating to access to information; Any refusal to disclose information is subject to appeal; Public bodies and relevant private bodies must proactively publish information; No one is subject to any sanction for releasing information under this Act in good faith.

4.3.2 Open government initiatives

Malawi joined the Open Governance Project (OGP) in 2013 and this initiative reflects Malawi's commitment to improve and strengthen is democracy and good governance (Open Government Project, 2013). Malawi is a least developed country facing social and economic challenges and being part of the OGP gives the country an opportunity to achieve the implementation of sustainable development from 2016 to 2030. The Government of Malawi has embarked on various democratic and public sector reforms in-order to improve public service delivery. For this to be done, government came up with the Malawi Nation Action Plan from 2016 to 2018 in which it has identified key priority which are Access to Information, fight against corruption, empowerment of citizens and citizen participation among others. According to the National Action Plan, Passing Right to Information Bill was Malawi's priority area on the access to information. The relevant future steps were to safeguard the commitments made and ensure they revolve around OGP principles of transparency, accountability and embracing new technologies, and also provide training to as many officials on records management.

4.3.3 Passing of Access to Information Bill to Law

Some respondents argued that passing of the access to information bill into law is one of the important milestones government has made in ensuring that the public is well informed on any development they may wish to know. With the adoption of the ATI Policy in January 2014, policy direction is now clearly defined and hopefully new legislation in Malawi will better respect the right of access to information. This would be in line with Goal 16 of the new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as well as the processes of the African Peer Review Mechanism. Access to information legislation enhances inclusiveness, participation by the people in their governance, accountability, transparency and openness. It arguably therefore plays a critical role in the creation and recreation of just societies for all. In summary the act states that every person shall have the right of access to information which is under the control of a public authority; every public authority shall make available to the general public or, on request, to any person information which is under its control; every public authority shall make

available to the general public or, on request, to any person access to public meetings or to places where information may be obtained; and every private body shall make available, on request, information which it holds on the person requesting for the information, if reasonable evidence is shown regarding the purpose of the request. It further states that a person who requests for information in pursuance of the right in subsection (1) need not give any reason or justification for that person's interest in the information being requested for.

4.4 Challenges in the Provision of Access to Information under the Banner of E-Government

Provision of internet network is one of the biggest challenges for the Malawi government. Some respondents argued that in trying to alleviate this problem, the government had some time back embarked on a project called Government Wide Area Network (GWAN) which was supposed to link all government departments to make their information available on this network. GWAN was also meant to manage government and departments' databases and websites. In so doing the government established the Department of Information Systems and Technology Management Services (DISTMS) to responsible for this activity among others. The department has officers who are posted and assigned to various government departments. Sadly, this GWAN initiative slopped. Government departments and ministries abandoned GWAN and engaged private ISPs. Besides, most of the websites in the public service are dormant and do not carry relevant and up to date information.

The other problem that was noted is that of Inadequate ICT infrastructure especially in the rural areas. As of 2012, there was a total of only 2,112 kilometres of fibre optic cable in the country, concentrated in urban areas (MACRA, 2013). The situation described above makes it a challenge for Malawi to provide electronic services to the general public, especially to those that reside in rural areas. In addition, the country has underdeveloped research and development capacity in ICT. No patented ICT-based innovation has been recorded in the country. The country imports almost all of its ICT

products and services. A related challenge is inadequate specialized ICT professionals and institutional capacity. There are very few certified professionals in specialist ICT areas. Malawi continues to depend on international experts as well as institutions for capacity development and for implementing and managing complex ICT initiatives.

Many respondents observed that there is lack of awareness of E-government services. Awareness programmes on E-government based services have not been implemented on a large scale in Malawi. The result is that many people are not familiar with the developments in the ICT sector. Although this is the case, there are also low levels of online public services and low levels of engaging the citizens using ICTs. There has never been a deliberate policy to facilitate the provision of electronic platforms for citizen engagement in the development process. Public entities, therefore, have not been encouraged to ensure that their services are available online and electronically.

4.5 Solutions to Some of the Challenges

To address the challenge of inadequate ICT infrastructure especially in the rural areas, government has established tele-centres in rural areas. Government is also implementing a Regional Communication Infrastructure Program Malawi Project (RCIP-MW) that will implement fibre optic cable connectivity to Tanzania with very high speed Internet Capacity. Government is currently reviewing the Communications Act (1998) and drafting the Electronic Transactions and Management Bill in order to address the challenges that are affecting the development of ICT in the country.

On the challenge of duplication of ICT activities, Respondents from public sector argued that the approved public sector reforms of 2014, removed the duplication which was created by the existence of two departments which were carrying out similar functions. These were the of project activities in which government had established the department of E-government under the OPC while another department (DISTMIS) under the ministry of information. The inconsistence was that their mandate was the same and both departments were headed by a principal secretary. The challenge was that E-government was being heavily funded while DISTMIS was poorly funded. In

resolving this dilemma the public sector reforms recommended that the two departments should be merged, the name of the department will be e-government to reflect the current initiatives being made. It also recommended that the department should be under the ministry of information has a way of decongesting the OPC which had several departments under it.

5.0 CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

5.1 Conclusions

After a thorough discussion on the research findings, the following conclusions are made: Government has made serious strides in reforming the public sector. The establishment of the Public Sector Reforms Commission in 2014 and also having a secretariat under the OPC gave it the much needed power to enforce reforms in various departments. This is also manifested in the achievements that have been registered by the E-government in provision of access to information and services. There is also a strong monitoring mechanism by the government.

The E-government department is assisting various departments in implementing tangible electronic systems which are making the public to access information and services easily. The main ones noted in the study are the Integrated Finance Management System, The Payroll and Human Resource Management System purchased by the Government. The Road Traffic Department's Traffic Management Information System, the computer based system machine readable passport issuing system and the Integrated Border Control System.

The E-government department has made good progress in ensuring that there is internet connectivity and government office through provision of the GWAN and also provision of email facilities for official transactions. The securing of funding and rolling out of the projects such as the Malawi Fibre Backbone Project which will see the country having high spend voice and data transmission and a low cost. The establishment of Tele-centres in rural areas is another testimony that the department is working in bring ICT innovations to the wider masses.

Government has shown great commitment in the provision of access to information by making other initiatives and legislations. Some of the notable achievements are the passing of the ICT policy in 2003 which led to the establishment of the E-government. Furthermore, government made commitments to the international community through signing of different agreements such as International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights and the Open Government Project. Another milestone for the Access to Information is the passing of the access to information bill into law. This legislation provided the mechanisms and environment on which various initiations including the E-government can operate from.

5.2 Implications of the Results

E-government is a very good initiative and it needs to be encouraged so that the public is able to access information and services through online means which is cost and time effective. However, for this to be achieved, it is suggested that deliberate awareness programs should be carried out to inform the general public of the existence of the E-government and what is has achieved. This will help improve people's understanding and usability of the E-government services. Furthermore, government should continue to invest and allocate adequate resources to the E-government in order to improve the network infrastructure which result in increased usage of online facilities and improve the current state of access to information.

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Appendix – Interview Questions

E-government staff

1. What is your understanding of E-government?
2. What is the relationship between E-government and provision of access to information and services
3. What are paintable landmarks in the provision of information and services through the E-government
4. What have been the challenges in the process of implementation of e-government
5. In your understanding is Malawi doing enough to support the E-government initiative?
6. How has the network infrastructure been developed over the years?
7. How has the public sector reforms impacted the E-government departments in its operations?

Public Reforms Staff

1. Is the public sector reform doing enough in ensuring that its goals are being met?
2. What were the reform areas for the E-government department?
3. What has been the progress in those reform areas?
4. What mechanisms were put in place to ensure that the desired output is being achieved?

Ordinary public officers

1. What do you know about public sector reforms?
2. What is your understanding of E-government?
3. What is access to information?
4. How is access to information important
5. How do you think the public sector reforms have assisted in the area of access to information through the E-government?

6. What are paintable landmarks in the provision of information and services through the E-government?

7. In your understanding is Malawi doing enough to support the E-government initiative in the provision of access to information?

8. What other commitments do you see that are being made in provision of access to information by government?