

## CHAPTER 5

# ENHANCING CIVIL SOCIETY CAPACITY FOR ADVOCACY AND MONITORING: MALAWI'S POVERTY REDUCTION STRATEGY BUDGET

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*Without active citizenship, democracy will be the monopoly of big men in fancy suits spouting buzzwords. “The people” will be treated as passive recipients of fertilizer, maize, schools, bridges, and other necessities but not real power to influence decisions.*

—Dr. Edge Kanyongolo (2007)

**M**alawi has adopted a number of policies to combat poverty, disease, and ignorance, including the Statement of Development Policies. While these have continued to exist on paper, the reality and implementation usually have not matched the rhetoric. The situation changed considerably following the country's shift to a democratic multiparty state in 1994, which ushered in the adoption of a Poverty Alleviation Program as the operative development philosophy. This was subsequently complemented by the longer-term Malawi Vision 2020, developed after allegedly extensive public consultations. Then Malawi adopted its Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS) in 2002 before moving on, in 2006, to the second-generation PRS: the Malawi Growth and Development Strategy (MGDS). However, none of these initiatives has been made fully operational with a fundable action plan, and all have been plagued with implementation challenges.

In exploring the role of an active and critical citizenry from a civil society perspective, the importance of the link between general economic literacy and PRS budget monitoring is vital. A society that better understands the basics of the economy and the development agenda has a stronger knowledge base to effectively demand its rightful entitlement from government. This is achieved through, among other things, monitoring economic and development progress. A critical citizenry can understand and be aware of the indicators to monitor the poverty reduction agenda as well as of the outputs and impacts to expect for any given development agenda.

This case study recounts an interesting success story in empowering a critical citizenry. As a civil society organization (CSO) coalition dedicated to promoting pro-poor participatory economic governance in Malawi, the Malawi Economic Justice Network (MEJN) recognizes that its strength and future is in its ability to build capacity, increase knowledge, and develop advocacy skills among its members. MEJN recognized, at the outset, that economic literacy needed to be developed if CSOs in Malawi were to constructively participate in economic governance issues. This chapter focuses on how civil society's involvement in the nation's economic governance developed, its capacity increased, and its image improved. It describes the main methods the initiative used, its impacts, the challenges it faced, and the lessons learned.

## THE ENVIRONMENT FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

Malawi has historically been poor. Nature plays a role in this, but the many reasons for this also include economic management and the external environment. The country's politics have not necessarily been pro-poor, just as they have not inspired the expected development. Public administration has not been as efficient and effective as hoped in addressing poverty in Malawi, and poverty reduction efforts since the country's independence in 1964 have been largely disappointing.

After the political transition from a one-party system to a multiparty system in 1994, Malawi has been transforming from a closed society, with considerable government control over many aspects of daily life, to a more open and democratic society. Political governance has tended to dominate economic governance. The decentralization process pursued by the government since 1998 has created yet another set of challenges to the work

of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society in general. Nevertheless, decentralization is understood to have the potential to create more space for CSOs to become more involved and more influential. In addition to individual CSOs' advocacy on specific issues, there has also been rapid growth of CSO coalitions and networks to support the people's voice, particularly from the grassroots.

Despite civil society's historical weakness and near-nonexistence for most of Malawi's history, it has shown great resilience and stature in playing a vibrant part in the quickly maturing democracy. Donor support in the mid-1990s made resources available, even to organizations without the capacity to deliver, creating numerous "briefcase NGOs" that affected even NGOs with legitimate claims to representativeness. Exceptions stood out, including churches, faith-based institutions, and other organizations that made good efforts to sustain their grassroots memberships. These efforts include the advocacy that has continuously emerged to monitor the development and policy formulation and implementation processes, including the efforts of MEJN and similar networks.

## **THE PRO-POOR PARTICIPATORY ECONOMIC GOVERNANCE INITIATIVE**

MEJN emerged out of a modest but important November 2000 meeting of about 27 CSOs. Ever since its inception, MEJN has established itself as a major civil society voice on issues of economic governance in Malawi, with the central focus being the formulation and implementation of the PRS. It has been involved in coordinating and facilitating increased civil society and community participation in the national budgeting process and the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) in addition to undertaking a leading role in advocacy and lobbying policy makers and the donor community. MEJN has provided critical information to parliament (especially the Budget and Finance, Public Accounts, and other key sectoral committees), civil society groups, the donor community (especially those that are part of the Common Approach to the Budget groups), and the general public through focused and thematic briefings.

MEJN, whose national secretariat is based in the capital city, Lilongwe, has extended its network structure to the community level through the consolidation of district-based CSOs and NGOs, associations, local assembly officials, traditional leaders, and religious leaders. These MEJN participants

are coordinated by representative committees called MEJN district chapters. The district chapters average 10 to 14 members from institutions representing different socioeconomic groups. They operate with minimum core support and are largely voluntary.

The goal of the coordination program is to strengthen the operations of civil society as an effective alternative voice to government and other stakeholders by promoting civil society participation in shaping development policy and practice, with a specific focus on those policies that directly affect poverty. The purpose is to increase civil society coordination and understanding of economic policy and to create a civil society advocacy coalition on national economic development. The program has the following key objectives:

- Decentralize civil society networks to involve communities at the regional and district level
- Enhance coordination among civil society networks
- Link civil society to decision makers such as parliament, government, and other partners
- Enhance CSO technical capacity to offer credible alternatives
- Document and disseminate civil society work

With support from Development Cooperation Ireland (now Irish Aid), MEJN piloted the coordination of CSO networks to push for division of labor in civil society while maximizing opportunities for synergy. Expectations have grown much faster than capacity. The core partners in MEJN's coordinated effort have been the Civil Society Agriculture Network (CISANET), the Civil Society Coalition for Quality Basic Education (CSCQBE), the Malawi Health Equity Network (MHEN), and the organizations under MEJN's own broader umbrella. The project ensures a unified voice for civil society. MEJN has continued to renew and strengthen its relations with the Council for Non-governmental Organizations in Malawi through joint programming efforts in organizing several joint activities and campaigns, including NGO Week, the Global Call to Action against Poverty, and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) campaign, among others.

### **The Economic Literacy Project**

With initial support from the Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa (OSISA) in 2002 and later from the Canadian International Development

Agency (CIDA) through the CIDA Project on Economic Governance (CIDA-PEG) in 2003, the Economic Literacy Project was conceptualized and incorporated into one of MEJN's earliest programs. Its objectives were to increase civil society's awareness, skills, and knowledge about the economy, more specifically to

- Improve the knowledge of community and civic leaders in economics and public finance
- Enhance civil society technical capacity to plan and design projects to facilitate sound economic governance
- Empower communities with knowledge and advocacy skills on economic governance and rights
- Build community capacity to monitor key policies relevant for poverty reduction in agriculture, health, and education
- Influence and expand the impact of debt relief and the PRS by improving civil society capacity to engage government and international financial institutions
- Enhance pro-poor policy reforms at the national level

The initial project targets were leaders in civil society, communities, and government officials at the central and local assembly levels. The creation of MEJN district chapters to act as both information conduits and platforms for discussing economic governance issues grew out of the Economic Literacy Project. This project has grown into a deeper and wider initiative that includes budget literacy (known as the Budget Participation Initiative), trade literacy, and trade justice (known as the Trade Weather Stations). These have all remained central to the significance of MEJN as a champion for pro-poor participatory economic governance in Malawi and beyond.

### **The Civil Society Budget Training Manual**

Among the most important activities implemented through the MEJN Economic Literacy Project was the development and publication of a user-friendly Civil Society Budget Training Manual that member CSOs have used for training since MEJN kick-started the initial training. MEJN developed this manual in September 2003 drawing upon existing materials on public financial management and civil society applied budget work.<sup>1</sup> It provides detailed insights into the key issues and processes of the Malawi national budget to enable civil society stakeholders with an interest in

economic governance to participate meaningfully in the process. It describes the framework, content, and general processes of the national budget as the policy tool the government uses to facilitate investment, employment, trade, and economic growth.

The manual adopts a user-friendly approach to highlight a general picture of public budgets and citizen roles. It identifies primary stages of the Malawi budgetary process, clearly outlining entry points for civil society to influence pressure points in the system. It also focuses on the most important aspects for civil society, emphasizing essential topics such as gender budgeting and budget advocacy.

### **The Budget Participation Initiative**

In 2003, the project's overall objective was extended from the national level to increasing civil society and local assemblies' knowledge and skills, with an emphasis on policy implementation. The extension of the Economic Literacy Project to the Budget Participation Initiative (BPI) was designed to enhance public dialogue on the budget among civil society and communities, the legislature (parliament), and the executive branch. Project activities included CSO training needs assessments, development of a training manual on budgeting processes, identification and training of local facilitators, and facilitation and conducting of training workshops.

At first, the training workshops were conducted at the regional level in the three main regions of Malawi (northern, central, and southern). A sectoral approach was adopted in targeting comprehensive coverage of leaders and beneficiaries in the three most prominent sectors: education, health, and agriculture. More than 79 CSOs took part in these training workshops during the first year of implementation.

Submissions were developed during the training workshops, and they formed the basis for follow-up project activities such as budget monitoring based on contributions at the national and regional levels to the budgetary formulation process. By popular demand, the training was extended to the district level and was held in several districts. In all of these training sessions, gender was seriously considered in all processes to advance capacity-building objectives and ownership. The process of ensuring local ownership of the budget participation initiative by CSOs and government implementing agencies at the district level (district assemblies) continued with the MEJN secretariat's identification and training of local facilitators.<sup>2</sup> During

2004, 15 facilitators were identified and trained, of whom 6 were women, to conduct training sessions when needed.

As a result, MEJN has been eager to train more local facilitators to expand the impact of training throughout Malawi. The MEJN Secretariat has been developing a special focus on facilitating and coordinating tripartite civil society submissions for dialogue with people in decision-making positions. Targets include members of parliament and government officials at the community, district, and national levels. These challenges and expectations have all been consolidated in the MEJN Programme Support Document (PSD), in which BPI activities have been combined with the Economic Literacy Project, creating a MEJN core program called Budget and Economic Literacy.

### **Tools for Monitoring Government Commitment to Poverty Reduction**

The programs described above to increase economic literacy, increase public dialogue about the budget, and train CSOs to facilitate and support MEJN's Budget and Economic Literacy program have achieved synergies that collectively drive MEJN's overall citizen empowerment effort to achieve pro-poor participatory economic governance in Malawi.

Along the way, MEJN developed several important tools that have been among its most significant contributions: the Service Delivery Satisfaction Survey, independent budget analysis, MPRS annual reviews, and the Public Expenditure Tracking Survey (PETS).

***Service Delivery Satisfaction Survey (SDSS).*** In 2001, MEJN began coordinating civil society efforts to monitor the implementation of Protected Pro-Poor Expenditures (PPEs) as part of government's commitments in the Malawi Poverty Reduction Strategy (MPRS). To achieve its goal, MEJN carried out three Service Delivery Satisfaction Surveys (SDSSs) covering the government's performance in fiscal years 2003, 2004, and 2005 (MEJN 2006). The SDSS findings provide useful platforms for interaction with government officials, parliament, donors, and other key stakeholders. The Ministry of Economic Planning and Development (MEPD) has formally recognized the SDSS as a tool for qualitative monitoring, and the SDSS results informed the development of the MPRS annual review reports. From then onward, MEJN has continued to strengthen

its efforts to monitor the government's MPRS commitments, using several approaches described below.

The SDSS uses a mixed approach of quantitative and qualitative monitoring of MPRS implementation. It assesses citizen satisfaction with the quality of the public services provided by the Malawi government. The data are obtained using a closed-ended questionnaire with ordered choices to capture the opinions and perceptions of the respondents. The questionnaire asks questions about people's access to services, their satisfaction with the quality of services, and the commitment of the staff at the facilities.

The questionnaires were pretested as a part of the enumerators' training before data collection. Data collection is completed over three weeks with the help of the enumerators drawn from MEJN district chapter member institutions, as a way of building their capacity and facilitating ownership from the beginning. The sampling procedure was designed with expert advice and oversight from the National Statistics Office (NSO).

The survey findings have been quite instrumental in the popular debate about national budget formulation, allocations, and execution. The reports formed the basis for civil society interaction with government officials as well as other CSOs. In time, the results became available to inform parliamentary deliberations (among others) on the budget because they provide suggestions for improving the focus of allocations toward pro-poor priority expenditures. In addition to production of the reports, a detailed advocacy and dissemination campaign based on the results has been carefully choreographed to ensure that all the relevant stakeholders are kept abreast of the findings and that implementation of the PRS budget is in line with what the people want.

After carrying out the surveys, the draft report is sent to principal stakeholders for comments, quality control, and data verification. For example, feedback sessions were conducted for all MEJN members from the district chapters, including the enumerators and supervisors who took part in SDSS I, II, and III. The draft reports are then presented to all key parties—especially government ministries and departments—after which a final report is released for widespread dissemination by the media.

The project also reflects gender sensitivity in the SDSS by obtaining gender-balanced perspectives in the household sampling at the village level. As a matter of principle for MEJN research, every other household deliberately has a female respondent to capture gender perspectives. This has also been built into the MEJN PSD as reflected in the MEJN Strategic Plan.

***Independent budget analysis.*** Independent budget analysis (IBA) has been another significant MEJN contribution. Immediately after the finance minister presents budget statements in parliament, MEJN commissions a quick but thorough analysis of the previous budget and the proposed budget to highlight the salient issues to be considered before passing the budget. IBA reports help civil society, parliamentary committees, and other primary stakeholders obtain an in-depth understanding of each year's national budget.

The IBA reports' main objective is to assess the degree to which the budget incorporates activities identified in the overall government's development policy for funding. Second, it assesses the amount of the resources devoted to pro-poor priority expenditures in comparison with the resources devoted to nonpriority poverty expenditures. Third, it reviews implementation and identifies strengths and weaknesses from a pro-poor perspective before offering a synopsis of votes in parliament. MEJN submits the IBA report's recommendations to parliament's Budget and Finance Committee for inclusion into its submission to the national assembly in addition to general circulation and dissemination of the report to all members of parliament and other stakeholders.

This approach ensures that the contributions from civil society find their way into the national assembly debate on the budget. So far, it has been one of MEJN's greatest successes. In general, MEJN budget analysis has been instrumental in revealing most anomalies worth correction and further clarification. The IBA findings have made for some of the most interesting parliamentary debates in recent years. Funding and support for this advocacy effort has come from several partners, including the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, OSISA, the Joint Oxfam Programme in Malawi, and CIDA-PEG.

***MPRS annual reviews.*** Another complementary contribution for ensuring transparent and prudent use of public resources has been an annual review of MPRS implementation compared with the PPEs' performance. A specific submission was made after MEJN commissioned a study that revealed the MPRS was being implemented piecemeal and that the PPEs were not getting enough protection, as became evident when unnecessary diversions of funds were not proportional to overexpenditures in non-poverty-reducing areas.

All of these observations were presented to government and parliament. Specific submissions formed the core in addition to MEJN's overall

presentations and input to the MPRS annual review process. This process underscored the significance of MEJN as a key part of the government committee responsible for MPRS reviews in collaboration with other stakeholders. The MPRS annual review effort has led the MEPD to spearhead an initiative to resuscitate its PRS Support Group. This group has championed implementation of the government-led PRSP Monitoring Master Plan by creating a roadmap for linking the MPRS (both first- and second-generation) to MDG monitoring.

***Public Expenditure Tracking Surveys.*** MEJN has continued carrying out its own Public Expenditure Tracking Surveys (PETS) as part of its efforts to follow the money allocated in selected votes of interest in addition to being a part of the Malawi government team driving the PETS. For example, the government commissioned a pilot initiative, through the MEPD's monitoring and evaluation division, to track how government funds were used in fiscal 2003/04. This was one of the most significant outcomes of the first phase of the SDSS dissemination, whose findings went to the MEPD and the Ministry of Education. A survey management team was put in place comprising representatives from most key stakeholders, including donor agencies, coordinated by the MEPD's monitoring and evaluation division. MEJN, in collaboration with CSCQBE, took the lead in coordinating civil society input into the process.

This project benefited from the expertise of the World Bank-supported Financial Management, Transparency, and Accountability Project (FIMTAP). In 2004, the pilot focus was the education sector. The tracking survey was conducted in several districts of the biggest education zones in Malawi, with technical support coordinated by the NSO in conjunction with the MEPD. After the PETS report was released, MEJN, in collaboration with CSCQBE, moved on to streamline some of the pertinent issues from the report for its own advocacy and lobbying.

Another example of CSO government monitoring is the PETS commissioned by MEJN concerning one channel of the public resource allocations for decentralization, the Constituency Development Fund. Four institutions were analyzed: members of parliament, district assemblies, project implementation committees, and area development committees (ADCs). MEJN hopes the report will inform the government's review of the Constituency Development Fund, which is expected to evolve into a Local Development Fund, according to the most recent government reports about its development plans.

## ADVOCACY FOR ECONOMIC JUSTICE

Since its formation, MEJN has conducted advocacy in parliamentary budget sessions, government trade negotiations, and economic reforms, to mention a few. It has devoted its efforts toward advocacy of pro-poor budget analysis and fair trade positions and against privatization of essential services. MEJN meets with relevant stakeholders, including parliamentary committees and key government departments, and engages the media to disseminate the civil society position along with the government's. In its few years of existence, MEJN has concentrated its advocacy efforts as highlighted below.

### Popularization and Simplification of Key Policy Documents

MEJN has launched several initiatives related to building government social accountability in the budgeting process. As part of developing tools for its projects (all of which are interlinked), MEJN has commissioned simplifications of most of the technical materials—such as the national budget, the Malawi PRSP, and other policy documents—for popularization and dissemination.<sup>3</sup> These materials have been widely disseminated in local languages to district chapters, member organizations, members of parliament, government officials, and other stakeholders, including donors. It is important to note that Chichewa, the vernacular language of Malawi, has been used in documents distributed throughout Malawi to strengthen citizen participation in advocacy related to promoting participatory economic governance.

These popularized documents have been further distilled into leaflets disseminated to the main newspapers: *Weekend Nation* and the *Malawi News*. MEJN also conducted radio programs on popular state radio and television stations (MBC radio stations 1 and 2 and Television Malawi) and private radio stations such as Capital FM and FM 101. In addition, MEJN conducted workshops in all districts as part of sensitization on popular documents. There were separate sessions for community members and traditional authorities, local assembly councilors, district executive committees, and members of parliament. These sessions have proven to be quite useful because the policy documents are new to many participants, even among members of parliament and local government officials whose work was made easier by not having to read long, technical documents.

### **The Fair Trade through Trade Justice Project**

Because Malawi is an import-oriented economy with a negative trade balance, the country is vulnerable to exploitation by its trading partners, multinational corporations, and even wealthy Malawians who benefit from skewed trading arrangements. MEJN has developed a project to promote trade justice and fair trade as well as to enhance civil society knowledge based on trade. Christian Aid, a London-based NGO, provides funds for this project.

By the end of 2004, MEJN had conducted training needs assessments through nationwide consultations during which civil society and local government assembly officials provided input on the campaign's core issues. One need that emerged was a compilation of all trade agreements and protocols that Malawi has with its trading partners, with a view toward assessing the agreements' advantages and disadvantages for poor people. The compilation was completed in 2004 in addition to a research report titled, "Effects of Liberalization on Local Communities." Based on the research findings, awareness workshops will be conducted to begin the process of ensuring trade justice in Malawi.

### **The Civil Society Manifesto**

MEJN has been developing a Civil Society Manifesto (MEJN 2004) or People's Manifesto (as it was renamed for the 2009 elections [MEJN 2009]) as a blueprint containing civil society issues that parliamentary and presidential candidates should address in their campaign promises. The manifesto was developed with citizen input through MEJN's decentralized structures, soliciting citizen's submissions on the priorities they want candidates to address. The manifesto has then been used as an important advocacy tool, having aggregated the people's needs and aspirations into policy demands that have been further verified and validated by people in the districts before being simplified into user-friendly versions and translated into Chichewa.

The manifestos have been unveiled during launches that target political parties and their leadership as well as key civil society representatives, traditional leaders, and MEJN district chapter members. The documents are developed well in advance, prior to the parties' own manifestos, to influence the parties' positions and policy agendas—a phenomenon that has worked quite well in both elections. These versions have been disseminated widely through public roundtable discussions with aspiring candidates and key

stakeholders, district workshops, and radio and television programs preceding the general elections.

An innovative example of the manifestos' dissemination was a music album produced by MEJN, to which eight popular Malawian artists contributed songs for the elections. The album, *Mfundo patsogolo (Policies First, not Personalities)*, emphasized the need for content-based elections and not those based on mere personalities. The manifesto, cassettes, and CDs were distributed to political parties and candidates as well as through the National Initiative for Civic Education (NICE) district offices and other organizations under MEJN district chapters. After presenting the manifesto to candidates, MEJN embarked on a comprehensive nationwide initiative to bring the manifesto to the electorate through community workshops involving influential stakeholders, who in turn disseminated the manifesto more broadly.

The manifesto was acknowledged to have been quite timely in the more than 20 districts visited. Candidates reportedly had been focusing their campaigns more on personality—projecting irrelevant gestures and using scathing attacks and unnecessary innuendo, devoid of policy content, to prejudice the electorate against their opponents. Notably, after the civil society manifesto campaign, some candidates adopted the manifesto, shaping their campaigns around some of the key civil society positions. The more issue-oriented campaigns and materials gave voters a chance to make an informed choice among the candidates in the wake of isolated cases of candidates who were allegedly trying to buy votes.<sup>4</sup>

## **PARTICIPATORY BUDGET MONITORING PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES**

Although many of MEJN's initiatives have succeeded, substantial challenges and constraints remain. The challenges themselves, however, often contain the seeds of opportunity for even greater success.

These challenges include the persistent issue of balancing poverty reduction and economic growth; the need to maximize synergies among both stakeholders and programs; the weak link of MEJN's data and findings with the government policy machinery; the challenges posed by decentralization, including increasing needs for transparency and accountability as well as constraints specific to local governance; the need for greater institutional support and sustainable capacity; inadequate financial resources; and inadequate technical capacity.

## **Balancing Poverty Reduction and Economic Growth**

As an officially endorsed blueprint for reducing poverty in Malawi, the PRS continued to serve as a key instrument and framework for holding government accountable through commitments made in the national budget. During the PRS transition to a more growth-oriented strategy—the Malawi Growth and Development Strategy (MGDS)—the main challenge for all stakeholders, including civil society, has been to achieve the proper balance between social sector and productive sector support to reduce poverty while also generating economic growth. In addition to the good governance agenda, it continues to be important to effectively monitor the PRS’s impact on poverty reduction to determine whether these were appropriate government policies and programs.

## **Maximizing Synergies**

Participatory governance is costly, but it can also be cost-effective for both civil society and government. It can ensure consistency by creating space for verification and cross-checking of data for tripartite comparison of monitoring findings. For the government, this has been quite challenging because of its piecemeal, disjointed approach to rolling out implementation of the Monitoring and Evaluation Master Plan. Nonetheless, there has been a growing desire for cementing relations among the Government Monitoring Master Plan’s key players, particularly its leadership, which has been strengthened.

For civil society, the primary challenge has been to manage the complexities of member organizations’ different institutional interests, constraints, capacities, monitoring mechanisms, and frameworks. MEJN addressed this concern through a joint monitoring initiative that MEJN started in collaboration with other networks. Although still small in scale, this initiative has helped reduce the animosity and rivalry that had been hampering progress, although capacities still remain constrained by the minimal resources available to the overall network compared with the huge expectations it is raising.

## **Weak Data Links with Government Policy**

The limited scope of civil society’s interaction with monitoring and evaluation mechanisms for government policies (such as the PRSP and the

MGDS) has been another challenge, particularly regarding how to link data and findings with the government policy machinery. CSO capacity in research, monitoring, and evaluation must be enhanced to generate information for meaningful engagement with government, donors, and other stakeholders on a consistent, ongoing basis.

### **Opportunities and Challenges of Decentralization**

As deconcentration and devolution advance through increased budgetary control at the district assembly level, the districts will have greater responsibilities for the efficiency and efficacy of public financial management—for example, in the Constituency Development Fund. This shift of responsibility further underscores the need for greater transparency and accountability through diligent monitoring. Decentralization also means that more avenues are being opened for community participation in monitoring.

### **Constraints of Local Governance**

Local governance structures (the village development committees, ADCs, and district executive committees), although in place with clear mandates, appear limited in their capacity and understanding of conditions for true participatory governance. Many actors still view civil society's role as in implementing policies, with decision making and policy formation still occurring at a considerable distance from the people most affected. In addition, pending local government elections (overdue since 2005), some local governance structures are still not operational; they exist only on paper.

### **Institutional Support and Sustainable Capacity**

MEJN has seen its capacity tested at its national secretariat and at the regional and district levels, so it must urgently strengthen and sustain its structures to continue monitoring key central and local government operations, most of which are not yet fully devolved. MEJN has continued making progress in establishing a decentralized system, both at the national level (with other networks' national secretariats) and at the regional and local levels (through its regional coordinators who link up with the district chapters). Internally, MEJN has not received adequate financial and

technical support to achieve its vision. MEJN must comprehensively and critically examine and fine-tune its two parallel structures of representation and clarify and refine how the chapters feed into the policy, positions, and overall direction of the network.

### **Inadequate Resources**

Obtaining sufficient funds to support core administrative functions (such as overhead costs and institutional development) has posed a large challenge to the smooth delivery of almost all of MEJN's programs and activities. Growing demand to produce and disseminate books, policy papers, and other technical papers explaining economic literacy and the government development agenda and strategy has strained its limited resources.

### **Inadequate Technical Capacity**

Lack of capacity remains a big challenge and contributes to civil society's inability to deliver and match high expectations—in part because poor remuneration, among other factors, has caused high staff turnover. This lack of capacity requires the network to nurture its institutional memory, coordination skills, and knowledge about social accountability tools (for example, the Citizen Report Card and Citizens' Jury).

## **RESULTS AND IMPACTS**

MEJN's impact and results are grounded in its solution-based approaches to program development and problem solving. In the course of establishing itself as a major civil society voice on economic governance issues in Malawi, MEJN has stressed the importance of pursuing realistic, balanced advocacy and of keeping its criticism constructive.

The ways in which MEJN has advanced social accountability fall under the categories of enhancing civil society status, strengthening and increasing CSO budget monitoring, increasing public awareness, and developing local capacity.

### **Enhanced Status of Civil Society**

CSOs are now seen as important partners instead of as troublesome, provocative, and confrontational. They now have a much sharper, more

organized, and more professional sense of direction and a strategic programming approach grounded in evidence-based advocacy. These advancements in both status and capacity have facilitated CSOs' engagement with government and other stakeholders in helping to craft and implement policies and programs.

The growing expectations and demand from MEJN members and other CSOs confirm the relevance of the network initiative, the budget and economic literacy modules, and MEJN's tools and methodologies—all of which were once viewed as too technical and only for senior government officials. Participatory budget monitoring encourages community members to increase their skills and knowledge about socioeconomic issues because these are major prerequisites to their effective participation.

### **Proliferation of CSO Budget Monitoring**

At least 10 notable CSOs in addition to those in the MEJN have added economic literacy to their key program areas. These include Action Aid International in Malawi; the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace; the Malawi Council of Churches; the Association for Progressive Women; the Women's Voice, Church, and Society Programmes of the Livingstonia Synod (Northern Malawi), Nkhoma Synod (Central Malawi), and the Blantyre Synod (South) of the CCAP Church (Church of Central Africa Presbyterian); the Active Youth Initiative for Social Enhancement; the Malawi Human Rights Youth Network; the Childrens' Research, Information and Documentation Centre; and selected offices of NICE.

In addition, other civil society networks that have closely collaborated with MEJN now have fully operational efforts to track and monitor government's use of public finances in their respective sectors. These include CISANET, MHEN, and CSCQBE. MEJN district chapters are strengthening and sustaining local-level community mobilization for social accountability.

### **Increased Public Awareness**

MEJN's budget analyses have catalyzed public interest, access, and understanding of budget documents. This interest and understanding, in turn, has helped to popularize budget debates and other key economic bills in parliament. The bills' sudden newsworthiness has increased the demand for economic and budget literacy training and for simplification and popularizing of key policy documents.

MEJN has conducted media advocacy campaigns, such as the “Budget and You” television program (during parliament’s budget session); the *Phungu* (member of parliament) television program (emphasizing public knowledge of their members of parliament and their philosophies of representation versus development); and live radio debates and phone-in programs. Demand for all these programs is high, based on public requests for rebroadcasts of the programs and demand to hold more educational, interactive, and entertaining programs on issues of national importance previously regarded as unsuitable for popular participation.

### **Development of Local Capacity**

Although still at an early stage in their development, the MEJN district chapters have carried out a wide range of activities, some initiated by the MEJN secretariat and others at the chapters’ own initiative. These include trainings, research, awareness raising, and advocacy targeted at local authorities and political leaders. Despite a number of challenges faced by chapters in this work—including transportation, capacity, time, and information resources—the impact of this work is apparent.

By raising MEJN’s profile in their districts and stimulating public debate on critical developmental issues, MEJN chapters have contributed to overcoming the culture of silence and fear that lingered as a legacy of the Banda era. In attempting to institutionalize their participation in local governance through involvement in local assembly structures, chapters are providing a channel for community concerns, analyses, and aspirations because they are accepted as key players at the district level and as part of the executive committees of the district assemblies.

### **LESSONS LEARNED**

As a success story, MEJN’s experience holds important lessons for other CSOs involved in social accountability initiatives: the importance of evidence-based advocacy, the value of constructive criticism, the need to maintain good rapport with parliament, the value of strategic alliances, the priority of capacity-building training, and the need for ongoing media advocacy on the budget.

*Importance of evidence-based advocacy.* MEJN’s success is attributed largely to evidence-based advocacy, as seen in the dissemination of the

research reports, the SDSS, and budget analyses—all of which call for evidence-based policy making by all stakeholders, especially the government. Prominent stakeholders, including government ministries and members of parliament, have grown to rely on and look forward to these analyses for their own policy decisions. Sustaining these policy briefs and evidence is critical to civil society's influence on policy.

***Value of constructive criticism.*** Constructive criticism that offers alternative solutions and a balanced approach to resolving problems encourages the good working relationship that civil society is eager to nurture with government, parliament, corporate partners, and other stakeholders. This is one of the basic ingredients for cementing trust, earning respect, and gaining a fair hearing.

***Maintenance of good rapport with parliament.*** MEJN has developed a good rapport with members of parliament through the parliamentary committees and parliamentary staff—to the extent that committees and staff even look forward to MEJN's support on national budget and economic governance issues. For example, the parliamentary committee for health asked MEJN to analyze the health sector budget when MHEN was undergoing restructuring to ensure that health issues were not left behind during parliamentary debate. The Budget and Finance Committee also asked for continual in-depth analysis of policy issues to enrich their budgetary debates in parliament.

***Value of strategic alliances.*** The MEJN initiative uses a multisectoral, multistrategic approach of involving a larger number of member organizations and representatives at all levels through the division of labor among networks. This distributed the workload, created broader alliances, and took advantage of the knowledge and skills of more specialized organizations.

***Prioritization of training.*** The demand for budget and economic literacy training is widespread as reflected by the increased demand from districts, faith communities, chiefs, councilors, and other local stakeholders. The general public and members of civil society recognize the MEJN's role in capacity building on economic governance issues and national budgeting processes. MEJN needs to prioritize budget training to groups that can offer higher multiplier effects.

***Need for ongoing media advocacy on the budget.*** MEJN tries to conduct prebudget consultations and ongoing media advocacy with the general public through radio, television, and print media. Radio programs, particularly those on community radio or with large audiences,

are good avenues for disseminating and getting feedback from the general public because they promote dialogue. The programs also benefit people who may not have access to the training workshops.

## NOTES

1. Information sources for the manual, all referenced and credited therein, include the World Bank's online resources on covering budgets and public spending and additional material from publications by the Commonwealth Secretariat, the International Budget Partnership, the Institute for Democracy in South Africa, the International Monetary Fund, and the Government of Malawi.
2. These are individuals who belong to the MEJN member institutions vested with the responsibility to anchor the BPI and manage the training sessions at the local level.
3. For example, the simplified materials have been used in the Budget Participation Initiative, the Economic Literacy Project, and the Budget Monitoring Project.
4. Vote buying was raised as a concern in the 2004 general elections. The 2009 general elections were hailed as having been peaceful even though the people's vote greatly surprised all the commentators, who had predicted different results.

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