



## REPORT ON RATIONALE FOR THE CURRENT LANGUAGE POLICY

**By**

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*"Language is not everything in education, but without language, everything is nothing in education" H.E. Wolff*

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## 1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Malawi's current language policy provides that lessons are delivered in English from standard one upwards. The main aim of this study was to find the rationale behind the current language policy in Malawi. The participants of this study were policy makers from the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, parents of learners who are in primary school, secondary school and colleges, the learners in all these three institutions from private and public schools, development partners and civil society organizations. The qualitative data was collected using a questionnaire and data was analysed descriptively. A majority of parents prefer that their children learn in English even though some felt that this is contributing to loss of interest in education and in some cases drop outs. A majority of learners prefer to learn in English as it enables them to communicate with both local and international counterparts and gives them an advantage when it comes to employment opportunities. According to the government of Malawi, the rationale for the current language policy was to enable learners improve their English language skills from an early age. Proponents of the mother tongue policy fault this policy by citing among other things that it was not founded on research, compromises education quality and learning abilities for learners. The preference for mother tongue instruction is founded on the basis that it contributes to active participation of learners in class and ease of understanding for concepts. The study has established that it is not the language of instruction that matters but how the learners learn. The question of whether or not English as a medium of instruction promotes skills formation therefore needs further research.

**Key words:** *English, mother tongue, mother tongue instruction, language of instruction, medium of instruction, policy, policy makers, learners, education.*

## 2. Introduction and Background

There are 12 native languages in Malawi, but the Ministry of Education recently adopted an English-only language of instruction policy in the school system. English is favoured in the labour market in Malawi and there are practical challenges involved in cultivating so many mother tongues in an under-resourced school system. However, there is substantial academic evidence to show the detrimental impact which non-mother tongue instruction has on children's development. Therefore, the overall effect of this policy on skill-formation and labour market readiness of Malawians is not clear. It is quite conceivable that the emphasis on English at the expense of mother tongues may undermine children's education and ultimately be detrimental to the formation of the desired English language skills and labour market readiness.

This study therefore want to establish '***The effects of English only instruction on skill formation and labour market readiness of young Malawians***'. English is not one of Malawi's native languages. Failure to speak or write it in acceptable terms should never be a yardstick for employment or skill formation. The role of Malawi Scotland Partnership (MaSP) in this research project therefore is to find out the '***Rationale for the current language policy in Malawi***', in order to understand the explicit and implicit aims the policy sets out to achieve.

### **3. Objectives of the Study**

Overall, the project has two aims:

1. To promote an informed and effective discussion between academics and stakeholders in Malawi in order to strengthen the evidence base for policy making
2. To identify remaining gaps in the evidence base in order to inform an application for a large collaborative research project.

### **3. Literature Review**

There is adequate legal framework in Malawi to back up the government's plan to ensure that education in the country equips people with relevant skills of survival and make a significant contribution to the country's social and economic development. Owu-Ewie & Eshun (2015) have argued that the ultimate goal of any language policy in a multilingual society must be to solve communication problems. The National Education Sector Plan of 2008 states that in Malawi, the mission of education is to provide quality and relevant education to the Malawian nation. Such education should enable people to acquire relevant knowledge, skills and expertise and competences to perform effectively as citizens, workforce and leaders with an aim of reducing poverty in the country. The Education Bill of 2012 in section 5 subsection 1 under the goals of education in Malawi, states that the purpose of education in Malawi shall be to equip students with knowledge, skills and values to be self-reliant and to contribute to national development. The Bill further states some aspirations but for purposes of this study, I have isolated a few ones relevant as follows:

- Develop in the students an appreciation of one's culture and respect of other people's culture;
- Impart vocational and entrepreneurship skills in the student in order to raise personal income and improve living standards
- Develop in the students respect for practical work in order to stimulate industrial development
- Develop in the student knowledge, understanding and skills needed by Malawians to compete successfully in the modern and ever changing world
- Develop in the students a spirit of inquiry, independent thinking and problem solving and;
- Promote innovation and development of appropriate technologies

The key thing for us to note is to discuss whether or not the system is ably equipping students with appropriate skills and positioning them to contribute significantly to national development. This is the basis of this study. The Bill however falls short to identify the target of these provisions as according to a world Bank report of 2010, Malawian education system is the most elitist system in Africa as it provides the most inequitable distribution of public resources for education in that 10% of the most educated people access up to 73% of public resources thus rendering the bulk of the population with the remaining 27% to share.

The public system of education in Malawi which 90% of the population relies on requires that you be in school for a minimum of 12 years before you can ever be qualified to pursue tertiary education. For others, the period can extend up to 15 to 18 years due to class repetitions. And so from grades 1 to 4, pupils in primary school were taught in the dominant vernacular language of the area based on the mother tongue policy directive by government. While in these early years English was still taught as a language, pupils started learning in English from

grade 5 onwards. Chilora (2000) argues that this language policy can be traced back to the colonial era. Before Malawi gained independence in 1964, vernacular languages were used as a language of instruction for the first 2 to 3 years of primary education. Mchazime (1996) as cited by Chilora (2000) argues that during that period, Chichewa, then known as 'Chinyanja' was widely used in the central and southern regions of the country, while 'Chitumbuka' was widely used in the northern part of the country. At the time, most schools were being run by missionaries and their aim was that while the indigenous were getting an education, their main interest was to get them to read the Bible in a language they could easily understand.

Four years after Malawi attained its independence; there was a major shift in the language policy. Based on the results of a census conducted in that year (1968) Chichewa was found to be a language which was widely spoken by the people and therefore it was elevated to a National Language. Footitt, et al, (2018) have argued that while Chichewa is a good language, it falls short on some technical terminology. Fairclough, et al, as cited by Dixon and Peake (2008) argue that language maintains and reproduces unequal power relations in that texts are not neutral but ideological and when readers accept the meanings contained in the texts, the meanings become naturalised thus legitimating and entrenching hegemonic practices. According to Chisala (1996) the justification for the elevation of Chichewa into a national language was to foster national unity in a small multi lingual society. Chisala further states that in the same year, English was made the official language of government, education, the judiciary and business and Chichewa was also, on paper, elevated to official/national language status. The choice of English in this regard is largely accredited to the country's colonial history than anything else.

This language policy had an impact on the overall education system in Malawi in that programmes for training teachers in the use of Chichewa as a language

of instruction were developed and implemented in all teachers training colleges. In addition, the Government in 1989, following the elevation of Chichewa as a National Language, approved that **ALL** text books for standards 1 to 4 except for English must be written in Chichewa. Mchazime (1996) cited by Chilora (2000) states that even though the learners text books were written in Chichewa, the teacher's guides were written in English; the justification for this was to create a backup for those teachers whose native language was not Chichewa. Mchazime (1996) further states that even though this was the case, it was still a bit challenging for teachers with a non-Chichewa background to teach in Chichewa and according to Ministry of Education, the teachers would only teach in Chichewa during inspection times by Ministry officials. What this meant was that pupils would be the hardest hit as they could not understand the native language of the teacher and this therefore heavily compromised their ability to learn.

Malawi saw a change in its politics with the introduction of multiparty politics in 1993. And so by 1994, a new government was in place and there were various changes made for political expediency including in the education system. One of these changes was the introduction of a '*Free Primary Education*' (FPE). This was introduced to increase the access of primary education to as many children as possible. And indeed, the number of these pupils rose from 1.9 million to 3.2 million in one year. However, according to Wamba and Mgomezulu (2014) the gains of this policy have been diminished by the fact that a significant number of pupils enrolled in primary schools repeat classes or drop out of the system before they reach standard 8.

The increase in the number of primary school going children exerted so much pressure on the already overburdened system in that it increased the teacher pupil rate from 1 to 35 to 1 to 60 and the classroom pupil ratio from 1 to 60 to 1 to 120 and text book pupil ratio from 1 to 2 to 1 to 6. These contributed to low

performance of pupils in national examinations. Chilora (2000) states that in order to alleviate this problem, government recruited more 'untrained' teacher into primary schools. Government further directed that with immediate effect pupils from standards 1 to 4 must start learning in their vernacular languages with immediate effect; where vernacular language meant the language commonly spoken in the area where the school is located. The justification for this, according to the policy, was that pupils would be given an opportunity to participate fully in classroom discussions if they were to use a language they are very much familiar with. What was not foreseen however, was the impact of those decisions not only on the quality of the education being provided, but the impact of this on the pupil's learning abilities. Kishindo (2015) observes that as was characteristic of the UDF government of the time, this directive was made without proper consultation of key stakeholders such as NGOs involved in education, educationists, language practitioners, linguists, parents or students themselves. He adds that even the manner in which the directive was made was nothing short of a cavalier and the public's response to the same was not only uncompromising, but also vicious as most feared that the policy would fuel tribalism in the country.

Wamba and Mgomezulu (2014) have argued that over 20 years after the Free Primary Education was introduced, its goals remain elusive as this created a trade-off between quantity and quality. They further assert that free primary education to some extent accounts for the current state of primary and secondary education in Malawi. There is yet to be further research to this assertion anyway. But Wright (2004) as cited by Dixon and Peake (2008) adds that nationally driven policies are not always properly implemented because perceptions about language are quite different from the reality.

The government further announced that this slight tweek to the language policy would not affect teachers posting but that teachers would still be posted to

areas depending on need and not necessarily looking at the native language of the teacher. According to Chisala (1996) as cited by Chilora (2000) the new policy triggered debate among education stakeholders who raised the following issues:

1. Mother tongue instruction would force teachers to go and work in their home areas; thereby taking them away from their families or familiar social economic systems. In Malawi, there is a saying that goes around which suggests that children of policemen, medical personnel and teachers do not do well in school. But no research has been done to understand the underlying causes of this notion. One of which could be that these jobs require a lot of posting from one area to the other. Children therefore are always on the move and this can never be rooted in their education.
2. Mother tongue instruction would force the country into tribal lines and thus go against the government of Malawi's aim to promote national unity, patriotism and a spirit of leadership and loyalty to the nation
3. Mother tongue instruction would be difficult to implement because there were no instruction materials available; the only teaching materials available were those in Chichewa and English
4. Mother tongue instruction would affect the learning of English in a bad way
5. Mother tongue instruction would be difficult to implement in urban areas where children had varying language backgrounds

The above listed concerns by the education stakeholders made sense at the time and are still relevant to date. Two important implications to note from this policy both of which affect pupils learning abilities and impact heavily on the general quality of education are:

- Children were exposed to more than one language during lessons as their text books would still be written in Chichewa, the teacher would use an English guide and the lesson would be delivered in a vernacular language
- The second thing would be that teachers, whose native language was not Chichewa would teach in a language with which they were comfortable thus contravening the policy totally. In other words, if a teacher's native language was Tumbuka from the north, but that teacher was placed in a school in Mangochi which is a predominantly Yao speaking area, then the teacher would teach in Tumbuka thus rendering learning difficult for the pupils. It is also worth noting that Chichewa is currently the only Malawian language used in schools (Williams 2007; Mtenje 2012; Kamwendo 2013 as cited in a 2016 UNICEF report). Mtenje (2012, p. 98) believes that "there is almost no indication of [the directive] being implemented in the foreseeable future."

The mother tongue instruction policy for Malawi's first four years of primary education had remained unimplemented up to 2014 due to the many problems that stood in the way. It is worth adding that this policy was only implemented in public schools and not private schools as most teachers still preferred to use a mother tongue language in the early years of primary school. Private schools tend to use English as a language of instruction from standard 1. As observed in a 2016 UNICEF report on '*The impact of language policy and practice on children's learning: Evidence from Eastern and Southern Africa*', the Government of Malawi took a backseat approach in the implementation of this policy until 2004 when the pilot was commissioned. Kamwendo (2000) presents the following as some of the challenges:

1. Negative attitudes towards mother tongues or vernacular languages as either curricular subjects or media of instruction.

2. Lack of adequate sensitization/publicity about the policy's goals, objectives and merits.
3. Non-availability of resources, e.g. lack of teaching/learning materials (readers, teachers' guides, etc.). A study by Narayan (2012) cited by Wamba and Mgomezulu (2014) confirms that, students in several developing countries which embraced the '*Education For All*' policy including Malawi, cannot read or write properly even after completing primary school education if they have limited access to learning resources and if their teachers have limited access to teaching resources. Suffice it to say that the challenge of learning resources in school is not unique to Malawi as observed by Mda (2004) cited in Nixon and Peake (2008), other nations which are way ahead in terms of economic development like South Africa, face the same challenges too.
4. Non-availability of a teacher training programme whose special emphasis would be on mother tongue instruction.

The question we may pose now is: why did the Ministry of Education in Malawi rush into announcing the mother tongue instruction policy before adequate consultations and fact finding had been done? Kamwendo (2000) provides possible answers:

- Political pressure,
- Funding problems, and
- Lack of meaningful dialogue between researchers (academics) and policy makers (government officials).

According to a World Bank report of 2010 on the Education Systems in Malawi, the country is offering poor and deteriorating quality education in primary schools as documented by the Southern African Consortium For Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) scores and national examination pass rate. The report further states that the number of children who reach a minimum level of

mastery in English reading was cut in half in the period from 1998 to 2004 and in 2004 it was barely at 9%. The decline was also attributed partly to the introduction of free primary school education. The reports further states that this poor result is a concern in itself, and since English is the language of instruction, this overall poor performance could have very adverse effects on the entire student learning process. This is underscored by a study by Mchazime (2001) done for his doctoral degree and cited by Kishindo (2015) in his paper titled, '*The bird that was not allowed to fly*' focussed on standard 7 pupils which is a class before they sit for national primary school examinations. The results of the study revealed that primary school children in Malawi are not prepared for instruction through the medium of English and their participation in school work was hampered by a lack of mastery in the language even though they had had 3 years of exposure to the same.

Additionally, SACMEQ data provides for students skills level assessment. There are eight skill levels for each subject area which are hierarchical and they enable the assessment of skills which students have either attained or not attained. Results show that more and more students have drifted into lower literacy levels and a sizeable number of students have proceeded to higher levels without a good mastery of skills thereby putting the quality of Malawi's education into question. This report however falls short in providing details regarding why the competence and skill levels have dropped in the past few years.

The mother tongue instruction policy is also favoured in other African states like South Africa. According to a 2001 report on Language Education Policy Framework for South African Higher Education by the South African Council for Higher Learning, the mother tongue instruction policy is a pedagogically sound approach to learning and that multicultural communication requires clear government support and direction. The report further argues that the ethos of

African Renaissance demands that special attention be given to the development and use of African languages to facilitate the regeneration of the continent. While the report also recognises that tough choices and decisions have to be made on the merits and cost factors associated with the adoption of the mother tongue education, research and current practise point strongly to the advantages of mother tongue education. To a great extent when you really look at this issue from a critical perspective, in a country like Malawi where only 10% of learners have minimum proficiency in English at standard 4, the decision for vernacular would be somewhat justified.

Zambia has always had English as a language of instruction until recently in 2018 when they reverted to use of vernacular languages in the early stages of school. Their argument being that education standards were going down as pupils were not participating actively in English. In South Africa most institutions of higher learning use English as a language of instruction almost at the expense of the local languages. The Council for Higher Learning argues that this is largely due to the demographic shift in the student population at all South African Institutions i.e., an increasing number of African language speakers are enrolling at formerly white, coloured or Indian institutions. The general trend in South Africa is that most higher education institutions see the obvious solution to their language of tuition problems in a remedial perspective that is to say, as long as students are afforded better access to English as a second language and academic development or support programme then things will be alright. The report further states that an education language policy can have meaning and validity only when it is firmly grounded in the overall provisions of national plans. Additionally, a language policy for Higher Education for instance can only be successfully formulated as a part of a comprehensive language policy to cover all levels of the education system. If a policy is proposed for one sector of the system only, it could have unintended consequences for the other sectors.

As will be discussed in the data analysis, most parents who have school going children in Malawi would prefer to have their children learn in English thereby further entrenching the default position of the language as a medium of instruction. Other parents however, as we shall see from the data analysis in the preceding chapter, prefer to have their children learn in their mother tongue as they argue that it speeds up the learning process for the children. It is also worth noting here that English is the language of instruction in Higher Learning institutions in Malawi. However, De Klerk (2002) cited by Nixon and Peake (2008) argues that allowing space for parents to have a say in the construction of school language policies without allowing any information to be disseminated about the cognitive benefits of learning in the mother tongue is counter-productive as parent actively choose English under the belief that the earlier the children learn the language, the more proficient they will be. De Klerk (2002) further argues that cultural and economic power of English is believed to provide social mobility and employment. Indeed, it is the aim of this study to prove this notion right, to ascertain whether or not proficiency in English as a medium of instruction contributes to skills formation and increases employability levels for young Malawians. Mckinney's (2007) work with young people in Johannesburg, South Africa and Rudwick's (2004) work with Zulu youth in the same country indicate the ambivalences young people feel about English and African languages. For many, they say, being seen to choose English over their mother tongue, or the loss of the mother tongue, results in exclusion from a range of social networks. This choice is made harder when the discourses of schooling which privilege English competence mark children as successful or unsuccessful from early primary school onwards (Makoe, 2007). It has often times been argued in Malawi that English is not a measure of intelligence, and there have been several cases where children are punished by their teachers in school because they spoke Chichewa or their mother tongue in class. This, according to Kamwendo (2009) is often times observed in private schools where

the language of instruction is English from standard 1 and pupils are encouraged to communicate in English at all times. Others have been teased by their fellow pupils thereby largely affecting the esteem of the children involved. This study will get to the basis of whether or not English as a language of instruction contributes to skills development and employability levels of young people in Malawi. The study will go further to understand the rationale behind the language policy that seems to prefer English as a medium of instruction from early years of primary school going forward and whether or not this has an effect on skills acquisition and disposition.

Chilora (2000) argues that the language policies of the past in Malawi were being implemented without prior national social linguistic surveys to assist policy makers to assign judicious, rational and well-motivated functions to the various languages of the country. Kamwendo (2000) explains that sociolinguistic surveys gather information which can be of great use to policy makers or policy implementation groups like academics, politicians, journalists for their daily undertakings. He adds that, at most, a sociolinguistic study provides the following details:

- Identification of the languages of a country. This process also involves the identification of the various dialects of these languages and their mutual intelligibility.
- Geographical distribution of the languages identified. To this end, linguistic maps or atlases can be made. Core areas where the languages are spoken are then identified.
- Demographic information, i.e. the estimated number of speakers of each language or dialect.
- Domains of language use, etc.

The information received from the language surveys then assists the policy makers to answer questions such as:

- Which are the dominant languages which can be used in the country's education system?
- What roles will the languages play in education, i.e. as media of instruction or curricular subjects?
- Which zones of the country need certain specific languages as media of instruction?
- Is there a national lingua franca which can be used as a medium of instruction in all parts of the country?
- For which languages are teachers already available, and for which languages is there a shortage of teachers?
- Is there need for further training of teachers, and if so, what kind of training do the teachers need?

Between 1996 to 1999 four sociolinguistic surveys were conducted in Malawi for Yao, Tumbuka, Lomwe and Sena speakers. These surveys were effected after the introduction of the new language policy. According to Chilora (2000) in all these four areas, people recognized Chichewa as the language of wider communication in the country and opted for the adoption of local languages in early years of education. Centre for Language Studies reports of 1998 and 1999 can provide more details on the four surveys.

In 1999 the UNESCO and GTZ in Malawi funded a national stakeholder symposium on language policy review. According to Kamwendo (2000) the symposium clearly demonstrated that language policy in education, just like any other kind of social policy, requires a reasonable amount of research and consultations with the major stakeholders. Language issues can be politically delicate, hence decisions made on languages need to be acceptable to the majority. Therefore, the language policy formulation process should be carefully administered to ensure that in the end a good policy is arrived at.

According to Lo Bianco (1991), a good language policy has the following features:

- It can be defended: with the use of evidence from research. The case for Malawi in 1996 was that the Ministry of Education was struggling to defend the mother tongue instruction policy given that no local research had been undertaken.
- It must be realistic: taking note of the available resources. In other words, the policy must be down to earth. In the context of Malawi, the mother tongue instruction policy was declared against a background of meagre and diminishing resources, making the implementation of the policy impossible.
- It must be humanitarian, just and democratic: In other words, a good language policy promotes the culture of good governance and respect for human rights.
- It must serve national interests: A good language policy must adequately address national interest, without compromising the linguistic needs and opportunities of the various social or linguistic groups in a country.

Additionally, according to Corson (1999) as cited by Dixon and Peake (2008), a language policy must be rooted in the discourses of the schools. The policy must begin with the problems all stakeholders have concerning the school, it has to gather information from all relevant stakeholders on the nature of such problems and it has to provide solutions, and its policy guidelines which are widely negotiated by the stakeholders themselves. In the case of Malawi however, such wide consultations are only inferred when it comes to language policies.

In Malawi, little is known whether or not parents are consulted on language policies or indeed any school related issues apart from some of them being part of a school management committee whose job it is to determine a school's uniform among other things. For the bulk of the Malawi population, most parents speak in their mother tongue at home and even when they are addressing their

children and the pupils in turn tend to speak the same. Thus they get to be exposed to the English only at school. In cases where the parents themselves are unable to speak English, then chances are very slim that children will get to speak the language outside school and it can only be imagined whether this has an effect on the children's overall ability to do well in school with English as the only medium of instruction. Often times, parents who exceptionally want their children to be speaking in English both at home and in school use this not as a basis to support their children's learning only, but at times as a way of showing off to their peers, but also as a confirmation to themselves that they are getting value for their money; given that private schools are expensive in the country.

Dixon and Peake (2007) have argued that speaking English at home makes children's acceptance into the culture of school that much easier. However, Abdullah (2015) argues that teachers must realize that education occurs in the context of social climate. Thus, for children who are not used to speaking English at home, they will remain inactive in class for fear of being mocked when they try to speak English in class thereby hindering their academic progress.

Children will get into the culture of the school anyway whether or not English is being spoken. By the mere fact that they are in school facilitates a conscious realization to them that they are in a different world which is totally different from what they are used to at home. Placing this importance on the spoken English would project it as a language of power and may be viewed by others as a move to inherently make other languages seem inferior as far as learning is concerned. But English in Malawi is a prerequisite for passing national examinations at any given stage. You can score distinctions in all subjects but if you have a fail in English you can never access public tertiary education; and so already, English has a status that wields so much influence in as far as attaining education in Malawi is concerned. Nixon and Peake (2007) argue that by

teaching in English in both primary and secondary schools, the system wants to prepare students for tertiary education. They add that, the reluctance of the 'bottom' to make changes in deference to the 'top' is in itself indicative of resistant to policies which challenge the position of English as the dominant language across educational contexts.

Fairclough (1992) as cited by Nixon and Peak (2007) conclude that if we do not deal with the question of language in education and mother-tongue instruction seriously and in an informed way, then the divide between the children who leave school literate and those who do not widens. We need to have evidence based information that will facilitate the balance between these two notions in as far as developing African nations is concerned. The National Education Sector Plan (NESP) of 2008 recognises primary education as a basis for all education even though it also has the most challenges. The plan further asserts that if the system in primary education is right, it will therefore prepare students for knowledge acquisition for secondary and tertiary education. Language is therefore an integral part of this process.

In 2004 however, the Government of Malawi planned to implement a new education Act which called for the use of English language as the language of instruction to learners from standard one. An article on Nyasatimes by Masina (2014) argues that the new Act empowered the Minister of education to choose any language as a medium of instruction in schools as the minister would deem fit. According to the article, the then Minister of Education in Malawi Lusicious Kanyumba said that the choice and justification of English was aimed at:

1. Improving English grammar and language among primary school learners in the former British colony. He added that English speaking had been a problem to our pupils even to those who had completed secondary school education and that,

2. It was government's wish to see pupils write and speak good English even in primary school.

However, Kamwendo (2015) argues this motivation for the early use of English as the medium of instruction is flawed because it was based on the assumption that pupils had to wait till standard 5 to be exposed to English, yet the truth is that English has always been a compulsory subject from standard 1. He adds that it is through English as a subject that learners are first exposed to the grammar and speaking of English. When it comes to medium of instruction, the expectation is that learners should have been already exposed to grammar and speech. The distinction between English as a subject and English as a medium of instruction is largely misunderstood in most public debates in Malawi and this has always been a challenge even from 1996 when the mother tongue instruction was introduced. Critics of the mother tongue instruction used to mistakenly argue that learners would not be exposed to English if they learn in their mother tongue. Kamwendo adds that in Malawi, learners learn English and NOT acquire it as acquisition has everything to do with getting the language through natural ways and since Malawi is not an English-dominant country in spite of having a relatively huge appetite for English, and low access to pre-school education, learners are mostly exposed to English when they start primary education.

As observed by Kirkpatrick (2013:14) cited by Kamwendo (2015), there is sometimes a danger in having English as a medium of instruction, especially in non-English dominant African countries such as Malawi as pupils end up being "*taught by teachers whose own English proficiency is inadequate for the task*". And this observation stands very true for many public and private schools in Malawi. It is therefore on this basis, as observed by Kamwendo (2015) that the straight for English medium of instruction will actually exclude the overwhelming majority of Malawian learners from attaining quality education as English will become a roadblock to the same and thus turn into a '*medium of destruction*'.

The announcement of the new policy according to Masina (2014) didn't go well with education stakeholders, who, a few days after the announcement demanded government to rescind its decision. A group of education students at Chancellor College led by Beaton Gafala spoke to Aljazeera and said that the reasons given by government on the adoption and implementation of the policy were 'out of tune' as speaking good English to them did not translate into someone being 'educated'. Gafala added that to them, the role of education is to help learners master actual concepts and not how to talk of the concepts in good English or any other language for that matter. He further stated that it was therefore more sensible to start using English as a language of instruction from standard 5 because this is when learners have mastered the basics of many concepts that they could even start translating into whatever new language they want to learn. He further added that all developed countries citing France, Portugal and Spain use their local languages and wondered why a poor nation like Malawi would insist on using a language from their colonial masters.

However, when Aljazeera spoke to Mr Benedicto Kondowe who is the Executive Director for the Civil Society Coalition on Education he argued to the contrary by backing the Act because according to him, 'Malawi lags behind most countries in the race of implementing English as a medium of instruction'. But Kamwendo (2015) counter argues that there is serious danger in merely picking up practices and policies from other contexts and expecting them to work well in local contexts. Burns (2014) further argues that the rapid spread of English as a medium of instruction in other countries does not imply success. Burns further observes that according to a study by Hamid et al conducted in 2013 in ten Asian countries, they found that implementation of this policy is 'fraught with difficulties and challenges', some of these include social division, inequitable resource allocation, **shortage of competent teachers** and learners, content and language trade-offs and inappropriate methodologies. However, Kondowe

adds that besides improving a good command of the English language, the question of what language enables better and more effective learning remains paramount. While each of the above stated challenges is important in its own right, it is pivotal to realise, as observed by Khan (2011) that, no amount of investment in the education sector can improve quality of education unless there are well qualified teachers to impart quality language education.

The radical change in this current policy is in the area of '*medium of instruction*'. This was surreptitiously introduced on the eve of the tripartite election of May 2014 as part of the new Education Act of 2013. Thus, not so many people paid much attention to it as they were focused on the elections. The Act specifically stated that:

- The medium of instruction in schools and colleges shall be English
- Without prejudice to the generality of subsection (1), the minister may, by notice published in the Gazette, prescribe the language of instruction in schools

Simango (2015) in his article, '*Learning English or Learning in English*' seeks to critique what seems to be the rationale Malawi's policy on using English as a medium of instruction from standard one all the way to higher education and seeks to demonstrate that however well-intended the policy might have been, its formulation was ill-conceived and its implementation is likely to exacerbate the problems facing the education system in Malawi rather than solve them. He adds that the policy is not informed by research findings and works against the principles of pedagogy. Burns (2014) observes that lack of research in the development stages of a policy facilitates naïve goals which come about without careful consideration of the power and agency of micro-level actors like teachers and the students themselves.

It is comforting to note that the challenges of implementing English as a medium of instruction are however not unique to Malawi as observed by Burns (2014), presenting her research findings in the journal of Asia argues that lecturers are challenged by their own language abilities, students' language competence and learning styles, pedagogical issues, and resource availability when implementing English as a medium of instruction.

Simango (2015) argued that whilst the choice of a colonial language such as English, as a medium of instruction is considered as 'normal' and 'acceptable', the question of 'mother tongue Education' is either frowned upon or treated as anathema by many. Kishindo (2015) adds that language-in-education-policy in Africa has been fraught with several negative factors including indecisiveness, individual interests and lack of political will. Bamgbose (1991:11) as cited by Kishindo (2015) argues that African language policies are generally characterised by: avoidance, vagueness, arbitrariness, fluctuation and declarations without implementation. While Malawi has experienced most of these problems in the past, it is the 'declaration without implementation' as well as the 'arbitrariness' (policy not informed by expert opinion or research) that is very much affecting the current language policy in Malawi at the moment.

Using Malawi which adopted English as a medium of instruction as a case study, Simango (2015) argued that there is no question to the notion that mastery of English is beneficial to anyone who wants to play a part on the global scene, but that one needs to distinguish between acquisition of knowledge on one hand and mastery of the same on the other. Maake (1994), Brock-Utne (2006, 2007) as cited by Simango (2015) argue that quality education necessarily leads to acquisition of knowledge; and this is almost guaranteed when learners receive instruction through a language with which they are familiar, and this is often the mother tongue. Additionally, Kamwendo (2015) argues that while the importance of English cannot be over emphasized, we still need to ask how

learners access English and gain competence in this globally important language. Is it through English being used as a medium of instruction, or when English is taught as a subject or both? He adds that one has to acknowledge the fact that if learners are given a solid foundation in English as a subject, then they will face fewer hurdles later on when they begin to use the same language as a medium of instruction. As observed by Kaplan, et al (2011), adopting English as a medium of instruction as a 'silver bullet' to solve major social problems is a 'fiction'. Abdullah (2015) concludes that learners who use English as a second language will remain torn between two worlds until society truly embraces diversity and the notion that biculturalism and bilingualism are assets.

Kamwendo (2015) observes that in 1953, UNESCO recommended that for the initial phases of education, the mother tongue is the best medium of instruction. Fifty years later in 2003, UNESCO re-issued its position on mother tongue in education and clarified that mother tongue instruction should not mean or imply that international languages such as English should not be accessed by the learners. As Beka (2016) observes, the success of Mother tongue instruction highly depends on people's attitude towards it; this means therefore, irrespective of the gains that may be accrued by implementing the policy, progress may not be seen if the attitude towards the same are negative.

Malawi Scotland Partnership operates in the five thematic sectors in which the Scottish Government has an interest in Malawi. These are Education, Energy, Sustainable Economic Development, Health and Civic Governance. As such therefore, MaSP mobilizes members who are implementing Scottish Government funded projects in these sectors. Speaking informally to one of members of the education forum, Paul Chimphamba, who is the current District Education Manager for Blantyre District (he wrote a thesis with University of Cape town on the same in 2007 as part of his Masters degree requirement) he argued that even though the current language policy requires that lessons be given in

English as a medium of instruction, practically teachers are still using local or mother tongue languages popularly spoken in specific areas.

We must probably consider what is at stake if we have to implement a language policy. Simango (2015) argues that in a multilingual country like Malawi, careful consideration needs to be taken in formulating language in education policies to ensure that a language that is chosen is one that results in quality education everywhere in the country. Owu-Ewie and Eshun (2015) add that in countries where the official language is different from indigenous language as is the case for Malawi, it is a very challenging task for that government to initiate a far-reaching language policy of education which will have positive impact on children's learning across the board. And this is why those countries tend to take short-cut policies which have detrimental effects on children's academic success. Simango adds that additionally, policy makers have to take into consideration the global realities of the day and the linguistic context within which Malawi finds itself because the object of learning English at the end of the day is NOT necessarily to acquire knowledge and skills in the general sense; but to acquire the ability to communicate (ones knowledge) with others in English since it is the official language of business. Mohammed (2015) states that in 2015, Tanzania announced that it will dump English as an official language and opts for Kiswahili instead. The official language even in Parliament of Tanzania among members is Kiswahili. Critics of this policy argued that in a globalised economy where English is the language of politics and trade, it was not clear where Tanzania was placing itself in this regard looking to the next five decades.

Simango (2015) argues that it is important for the curriculum to provide for the teaching of this language to allow learners gain access to knowledge which, at higher levels of learning is available almost exclusively in English. What this will entail therefore is that, there will be a challenge to formulate a language policy

that, on the other hand, facilitates meaningful learning and on the other hand allows for the mastery of English. Simango continues to argue that it stands to reason to say unless learners are intimately familiar with English; the language should not be used as a vehicle for acquiring knowledge. This therefore brings to question the rationale behind the current language policy in Malawi which requires that lessons be given exclusively in English in Malawi from standard one onwards. The majority of learners entering schools in Malawi for the first time bring virtually zero mastery of English; how, then, are these learners expected to acquire knowledge through the medium of English and by what means can teachers tap into the learner's previous knowledge as a basis for teaching new information? Research may dig deeper on this notion, but this may be the reason why teachers all over Malawi have on their own resolved not to abide by the policy and chosen to teach the learners from standard 1 to 4 in a language they (learners) are familiar with to facilitate knowledge acquisition. Simango gives examples from studies by (Szanton 2005, Wolff 2002 and others) who found out that there are indeed some 'hidden costs' associated with the use of foreign languages as a medium of instruction one of which is the significant contribution to the high drop out and failure rates in schools among African children.

Further, the realities of the educational system in Malawi also have to be considered in policy formulation on language of instruction in schools. The Malawi education system as observed by Simango (2015) is structured like a pyramid as it allows for many learners to enter the school system at the lowest level but allows for very few to get to higher levels as most are sieved out at the end of primary school and thus never make it to secondary school. In secondary school, more are also sieved out during the junior certificate examination albeit it had been abolished in 2018. What this process entails is that less people tend to finish secondary education where the proficiency of English is assumed to be functional. Additionally, this also means the majority of learners in Malawi do not

access the knowledge which the education system is meant to make available to them.

Simango also punches holes into the current language policy by arguing that its timing is wrong as it comes at a time when there is a growing body of knowledge suggesting that the previous policy was on the right path and that implementing the new policy will result in reversing the gains that had been made thus far.

Speaking to a former senior government of Malawi official who worked in the Ministry of Labour regarding skill acquisition and young people's employability he had this to say, *"There is zero input from labour market information as far as they go in informing policy development in Malawi. The reason for this is also that there is inadequate or no credible labour market information. There are no statistics about employment, situation of the labour market, the nature and type of employment among other things. The Ministry of Labour in 2017 received funding from the African Development Bank (ADB) to come up with a Labour market information system. The system has not yet been rolled out as we speak. You get to hear that unemployment rate is at 20 to 25% in Malawi but that percentage does not reflect the reality on the ground due to the way 'unemployment' is defined which is using international standards. International standards require a study to be conducted and so people will be asked whether or not they are looking for a job; if a person is not looking for a job then they cannot be categorised as though they were 'unemployed'. It only considers those people who are actively seeking for employment. In Malawi, 98% of the young people are 'employed' in the informal sector, but since most of them do not pay taxes and ran businesses which are not registered legally, what they do cannot be categorised as 'employment'".*

As noted by Mohammed (2015), in Tanzania, foreign Investors have complained about the lack of capacity in the labour force, with English language skills being

a major area of concern. The country's decision to turn English into a foreign language therefore could exacerbate this problem. In Malawi as well, most unskilled labour force cannot hold a conversation in English, and while further research may to be had on the relationship between English skills and the labour force, the role that English plays in the labour market cannot be over emphasized. While on a business trip in China in 2016 (Canton Fair), I could not help but notice that the young people who were in management in the companies we visited had one thing in common, they could all speak English easily. Subsequent conversations with individuals revealed that skills in English set them apart in the labour market especially for jobs that involved foreign investors/customers.

The National Education Sector Plan (NESP) of 2008 has argued that technical and vocational training should benefit both in and out of school youths and that the training at this level must be aligned to the needs of the labour market. However, the needs of the labour market are always changing and there is thus a mismatch between what employers want and what students are being taught in schools. Our technical and vocational training colleges focus much on theory rather than the technical elements of the courses which brings into question whether or not students are able to grasp concepts which may not be better explained in mother tongue languages based on the fact that at times Chichewa can be limiting in terms of vocabulary. Coupled with unavailability of internship programmes which expose students to the world of work, young people graduate from technical colleges without proper skills that will set them apart in the world of work and this exacerbates the unemployment levels to a very large extent. The NESP however puts into question the alignment of courses offered at higher education levels relative to national needs.

It must also be highlighted that access to higher education is not a guarantee. As a matter of fact, the World Bank (2010) argues that higher education is, along

with primary education, the level to which households contribute the least and it is also the level with the lowest number of students from the poorest families. This renders young people, the bulk of which come from poor families to low or no access to higher education that contributes to their skills development and improves chances of employment. The report further argues that access to Technical Vocational Education Training (TEVET) is largely limited to holders of the Malawi School Certificate of Education (MSCE) which is attained at the last class of secondary education which places a pass in English as a mandatory subject for a student to attain the same. This therefore effectively excludes the majority of the country's youth from the publicly subsidised TEVET system. To pursue further education, whether vocational or academic, in practise, in Malawi, you needed to have passed English as a subject; as a matter of fact you cannot obtain a Malawi School Leaving Certificate which is awarded at the end of secondary education if you did not pass English.

Wamba and Mgonezulu (2014) have argued that the Government of Malawi has largely surrendered its grip on the education sector to donors who collectively make up for 30% of the ministry of education's recurrent budget. According to Nielsen (2001), in 2001 alone 70 to 80% of the education development budget was donor funded. This excessive reliance on donor funds in the sector has serious implications for the ministry of education, science and technology as there is pressure exerted on the ministry from the donors to make some policy changes before aid is even dispensed. The donors identify and define the educational needs and often impose on solutions with minimum consultation with relevant stakeholders thus contravening the provisions of the Policy Framework For Poverty Alleviation Programme by the government which advocates that poor people be 'empowered' to improve their plight and contribute to national development .

There have been instances where donors have sent volunteers to teach in primary and secondary school. Some of these teachers have been those with a low command of the English language albeit they come from a material rich background. The government of Malawi has been at pains to accept these teachers for fear that if they reject them there may be sanctions of some sort and the suspension of aid. Now because of this massive intrusion of outsiders, there have been several misconceptions about who really owns the schools. Is it donors, the government, missionaries, private owners or who

## **SUMMARY OF CHAPTER**

1. Malawi is not short of legal framework that is aimed at equipping learners with relevant skills to contribute to national development. Whether this is working or not is another thing all together; and the question of to what extent the labour market influences policy in the education sector may require a separate research study
2. The language policy in Malawi can be traced by to the colonial era. People learnt in their mother tongue because missionaries that time needed them to read and understand the word of God on their own from the Bible. Chichewa on the other hand was elevated to a national language in 1968, four years after Malawi gained independence. All teachers therefore were expected to teach in Chichewa in the first four classes of primary school thereby giving non-Chichewa speaking teachers more problems. The justification of this policy was standardization and the promotion of unity.
3. In 1994, Malawi gained its multi-party democracy and the then Government led by Bakili Muluzi. In 1996 this government introduced the Mother Tongue Policy which meant that learners from standard 1 to 4 in primary school were taught in their mother tongue/vernacular language

as a medium of instruction. The justification of this policy was that children learn better and faster and participate more in class if they are taught in their mother tongue during the first four years of their formal education. However, this policy was made without proper consultation with relevant and key stakeholders and what was not foreseen however, was the impact of the decision not only on the quality of the education being provided, but the impact of this on the pupil's learning abilities

4. The public's reaction to the mother tongue policy was generally on the fears that it may fuel tribalism in the country as it meant that a Tumbuka speaking teacher could only teach in an area where Tumbuka was spoken as a vernacular language. And coupled with unavailability of resources like teaching/learning materials produced in the vernacular, this policy was doomed to fail from the start
5. Suffice it to say that other neighbouring countries like Botswana and South Africa have also adopted the mother tongue policy under the argument that the policy is a pedagogically sound approach to learning but that the multicultural communication requires clear government support and direction
6. The Government of Malawi in 2003 amended the Education Act and adopted English as a medium of instruction from standard 1 onwards. This is the current language policy in use in the country at the moment. The policy was not implemented until 2004 when the then Minister of Education Lusicious Kanyumba announced the same
7. The justification of this policy is twofold: (a) to improve English grammar and language among primary school learners in the former British colony given that English speaking had been a problem to our pupils even to those who had completed secondary school education, and (b) to ensure that pupils write and speak good English even in primary school.

8. Additionally from (7) above though Chichewa is considered a 'national language', the truth of the matter is that Malawi has several languages and it will therefore be a logistical nightmare to have teaching and learning resources in all major languages. It was also going to be almost impossible to find a common language for schools in urban areas for example; English was therefore preferred as a common language
9. The above stated justifications may be shot down because English in all public schools in Malawi is taught as a subject from standard 1 and yet this argument presents a scenario where it is assumed that learners only get exposed to the language in standard 5. The only change was in the fact that it was made into a medium of instruction
10. The timing of the introduction of this language policy was wrong as it came at a time when there was a growing body of knowledge suggesting that the previous policy (mother tongue policy) was on the right path and that implementing the new policy will result in reversing the gains that had been made thus far.
11. Some sceptics saw the policy as a barrier to their acquisition of high quality education, especially education through the English language. The misconception was that education acquired through the mother tongue medium is of inferior standard. This misconception came from the generally negative attitudes which many people in Malawi have for local languages. To this end, the new language policy was regarded by some Malawians as unjust, and aimed at curbing their efforts to gain good education.
12. There must be a distinction between English as a subject and English as a medium of instruction. Critics of the mother tongue instruction mistakenly argue that learners would not be exposed to English if they learn in their mother tongue. However, learners learn English and NOT acquire it as acquisition has everything to do with getting the language through

natural ways and since Malawi is not an English-dominant country in spite of having a relatively huge appetite for English, and low access to pre-school education, learners are mostly exposed to English when they start primary education.

13. The formulation of the policy on English as a medium of instruction was ill-conceived and its implementation is likely to exacerbate the problems facing the education system in Malawi rather than solve them. Additionally, it was not informed by research findings and therefore works against the principles of pedagogy
14. While there is no question to the notion that mastery of English is beneficial to anyone who wants to play a part on the global scene and the labour market, there is need to distinguish between acquisition of knowledge on one hand and mastery of the same on the other.
15. Careful consideration needs to be taken into account when formulating language in education policies to ensure that a language that is chosen is one that results in quality education everywhere in the country. Policy makers have to take into consideration the global realities of the day and the linguistic context within which Malawi finds itself because the object of learning English at the end of the day is NOT necessarily to acquire knowledge and skills in the general sense; but to acquire the ability to communicate (ones knowledge) with others in English since it is the official language of business
16. The majority of learners entering schools in Malawi for the first time bring virtually zero mastery of English; they can therefore not be expected to acquire knowledge through the medium of English as a language of instruction
17. There are some 'hidden costs' associated with the use of foreign languages as a medium of instruction, one of which is the significant

contribution to the high drop out and failure rates in schools across the country

18. Over reliance on donor resources by the Ministry of Education renders the Ministry powerless when it comes to the development and the implementation of policies in the sector. Whoever brings in more resources tends to have an upper hand regarding the direction of the sector and the policies thereof.
19. While major global education stakeholders like UNESCO have encouraged mother tongue instruction in early childhood and primary education as the way to go, the success of the same largely depends on the attitudes towards it.
20. Additionally, even though many countries are adoption EMI, it is a fact that its implementation brings along some challenges like fuelling social divisions, inequitable resource allocation, shortage of competent teachers and learners and content and language trade-offs among others.
21. It is imperative to appreciate the fact that it is a daunting task for a government of a multilingual country like Malawi to determine a far reaching language policy which will have positive effects on children's learning and often times the easy way out is used i.e. the use of a foreign language which ends up having adverse effects on learner's academic success.

#### **4. Methodology of the Study**

This is a qualitative research study and based on the uniqueness of the same, the first port of call was to come up with a '*Political Economic Framework*' (PEF) which identifies key stakeholders who shall be engaged in the study. After the identification of the stakeholders, there was need to determine what their interests were as well as their incentives for getting involved in the subject

matter. Without this process, it was going to be challenging to collect the necessary data.

#### **4.1 Research Philosophy**

This study is inclined towards the *interpretism research philosophy approach* which argues that the world and reality are not objective and exterior to the researcher but are socially created and given meaning by people Bryman and Bell (2007). Saunders et al (2003) argue that Interpretivists believe that it is necessary to explore the subjective meanings of people's actions in order to understand them. Their strongest argument is that a research study should aim at discovering the details of a situation to understand the reality working behind them. And so if we do not understand the details of the education policy development system in Malawi, we can never really make progress in trying to understand the justification behind the actual policies themselves guided by what the policy makers would have been thinking at the time.

#### **4.2 Research Strategy**

The strategy employed in this study is a 'survey' approach. This is a non-experimental, descriptive research method which becomes useful when a researcher wants to collect data on phenomena that cannot be directly observed (such as opinions on justification of choice of policy).

#### **4.3 Data Collection Methods**

This study used the following data collection methods:

- Secondary data

- Interviews
- Questionnaires

The data collected was both primary and secondary and was obtained qualitatively.

#### **4.4 Sampling**

The below table provides for possible institutions that make up the 'Political Economic Framework' for this study that could have been sampled. Due to other limitations however, however the donors engaged were UNICEF and the British Council. The international organization engaged was VSO. The local civil society organizations engaged were Link Community Development and the Civil Society Coalition on Education (because it is a network organization for all CSOs working in the education sector). The technical college engaged was the Lilongwe Technical College. There were a few selected secondary and primary schools which were engaged and parents of learners who attend public and private schools. The study also engaged learners from both public and primary schools.

<b>POLITICAL ECONOMIC FRAMEWORK (PEF) FOR LANGUAGE POLICY DEVELOPMENT</b>		
<b>Stakeholder</b>	<b>Interests</b>	<b>Incentives</b>
<b>Government of Malawi:</b> The Ministry of Education Science and Technology	To develop and enact policies in the education sector which will equip students with knowledge, skills and values to be self-reliant and to contribute to national development.	National Development and Global Development Goals i.e. SDG 4 on Quality Education
<b>Malawi Institute of Education</b>	To Improve and maintain the quality of education in Malawi by designing, developing, monitoring and evaluating the national school and primary teacher training education curricula and providing continuing professional development for education personnel	Positioning education to respond to current and future needs
<b>Donors:</b> USAID, British Council, UNICEF, UNESCO, USAID, The Food and Agriculture Organization, The Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), The African Development Bank (ADB), The World Bank, Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA)	Collectively, the interest of donors is to improve the quality of education in Malawi. They provide about 40% of public expenditure in the education sector to support Government efforts in this regard	Each one of the donors have a different interests in the sector
<b>International Organizations:</b> The Open Society Foundation, Economic Research Council, International Institute for Education, Save the Children, VSO, World Vision	To support government to achieve the Global partnership Goals on education	While their interests and area of focus differ, they all have an interest to alleviate poverty in Malawi as they believe that education can help the country move towards development.
<b>Local Civil Society Organizations:</b> (Link Community Development and Civil Society Coalition on Education)	To provide checks and balances in the sector and conduct budget tracking exercises on education expenditure. They also engage communities on education related issues	Achieve education for all
<b>Technical Colleges</b> (Lilongwe Technical College)	To provide technical, entrepreneurial and vocational training to students in Malawi	development of technical skills for students in the face of high levels of unemployment
<b>Secondary Schools both private and public</b>	To provide secondary education in Malawi	Prepare students for tertiary education
<b>Primary School both private and public</b>	To provide primary education in Malawi	Create a solid foundation for students in education
<b>Parents</b>	To provide necessary requirements and provisions for their children to enable them get an education. These may include fees, moral support and food among others. Parents also participate in community school management committee meetings and activities	Raise an educated nation
<b>Learners/students</b>	To learn by attending classes and acquire skills for life	Get a better life and become responsible citizens

## 4.5 Data Analysis

The data in this study varied greatly as it was qualitatively collected. Therefore the analysis was based on the author's judgement even though the data also went through cognitive analytical procedures to produce codes at different levels which later facilitated easy but objective analysis.

The data evaluation was concluded on a total of 84 respondents as follows:

**Figure 1: institutions and category of respondents**

Institution	Category of Respondent		
	Parents	Teachers	Learners
Technical Colleges	4	5	4
Government secondary schools	4	5	7
Private Secondary schools	2	3	4
Government Primary schools	4	8	8
Private Primary schools	5	8	7
	Number of respondents		
CSOs	2		
Central Government	2		
Donors	2		
MIE	0		

## 4.5.1 Data Analysis

### Project Background

In Africa, language policies which do not reflect the multilingual repertoires of individuals have led to citizens being unable to effectively engage with education and economic systems (Djite 2008). Malawi's language planning has consistently exhibited a tension between the roles of English and Malawian languages (Kayambazinthu 1998) and has been repeatedly criticised as being uninformed by evidence-based research (Moyo 2001). There is insufficient interface between researchers and policy makers and little input from the 'grass-roots realities' of the Malawian linguistic and social context (Mchombo 2017, p198).

Early schooling through mother tongue instruction has consistently been promoted as beneficial for learners (UNESCO 1953, 2008). However, the newly introduced English-only language-in-education policy follows a global trend towards the introduction of English as a sole language of instruction. This has been criticised by Malawian linguists as inappropriate (see Miti 2015) and has led to renewed debate regarding which languages are suitable for education in Malawi.

The Malawi Growth and Development Strategy III: 2017-2022 focuses on Education and Skills Development as Priority Area II. The Malawian Government have identified an unemployment rate of 20.4%, partly caused by school-leavers' lack of skills development in the areas necessary for participation in the job market. A key goal in addressing this issue 'is to create a labour force that can meaningfully contribute to the development of the country' (Government of Malawi 2017, pxviii). This area is also recognised in Sustainable Development Goal 4: Quality Education, as Indicator 4.4 addresses the need to increase the

number of youth and adults who have relevant skills for employment (United Nations 2017).

Our ODA country partners have identified key priority areas in which they can harness their expertise to address these issues which have in turn informed our key thematic areas. Hosting a consortium meeting at the initial stages of the project ensures that collaboration continues across the multidisciplinary areas within the partnership. The reports being produced by partners will provide evidence on: the implementation of the new language policy; the needs of employers; the value of particular languages in the labour market; and the perspective of policy makers.

### **DAC list partner countries**

A single country on the DAC list will directly benefit from this project: Malawi (Least Developed Countries). Moreover, we will draw on expertise from South-Africa (Upper and Middle Income) with the input from Prof Chetty, setting in train links for South-South capacity building. Furthermore, Malawi can be regarded as a case study and the findings from which are relevant to several other countries in similar circumstances, in particular Commonwealth countries in Africa.

### **Fit with country context**

This project shines a light on the tension between internationally recognized best practice, (i.e. mother tongue instruction), the resource constrained education system of one of the world's poorest countries, and local perspectives on what is likely to work. By commissioning new evidence from local experts and using this as a basis for dialogue between diverse experts and stakeholders, we support

the policy making process to seek the most effective solution, given the practical constraints of the context.

### **Relevance to development challenges**

This project contributes to several of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. In particular, by supporting quality education (SDG4) and by promoting skills formation, which better enables people to access decent work, which in turn benefits economic growth (SDG8). Moreover, as language of instruction policies may disproportionately affect the most vulnerable populations, improving policies can reduce inequality (SDG11).

### **Sustainability**

An explicit aim of this project is to pave the way for a more in-depth interdisciplinary research project on the impact on the interaction between language of instruction, skills formation, employers' attitudes and labour market outcomes. Given the close fit of this project to the UN's sustainable development goals and relevance to many African countries in the Least Developed Countries category of the DAC list (e.g. Zambia, Rwanda, Uganda which have also recently changed their policies), we anticipate that we will make a substantial application to the Global Challenges Research Fund before the end of 2019.

A dedicated Co-I (Simms) will lead efforts to monitor funding opportunities and prepare the consortium for legacy activities after the project has formally concluded. A whole day will be dedicated to these activities at our 2<sup>nd</sup> face to face consortium meeting in Lilongwe, Malawi in June 2019. Building on experience from participating in European research consortia, Simms will

prepare a draft collaboration framework that will be further developed by the consortium and those interested in future collaboration will need to commit to.

This is likely to be successful as we are already building on a critical mass of relationships from the prior work of Hermannsson and Reilly.

## **Methodology**

### **Study population**

The survey was conducted among key the stakeholders concerned with the language policy. It included donors, Civil Society Organizations, teachers from both private and government sector (for both primary, secondary and tertiary level of education), learners from both private and government sector (primary, secondary and tertiary level) and parents whose children are in either primary, secondary and tertiary level of education from both government and private sectors.

### **Data collection**

The study deployed qualitative approaches of data collection, and data were generated through self-administered questionnaires. There were 84 participants in the study: 4 college learners, 5 parents of college learners, 5 college teachers, 2 civil society organisations, 2 donors, 8 government primary school learners (GPSL), 4 parents of GPSL, 8 teachers of GPSL, 7 private primary school learners (PPSL), 4 parents of PPSL, 8 teachers of PPSL, 7 government secondary school learners (GSSL), 4 parents of GSSL, 5 teachers of GSSL, 4 private secondary school learners (PSSL), 2 parents of PSSL and 3 teachers of PSSL and 2 policy makers from the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology. Questionnaires had different questions for the different groups of participants.

## **Data analysis methods**

Hard copy questionnaires filled with responses were scanned and imported into NVIVO10 software (QSR, Melbourne, Australia) to facilitate organization and analysis. Questionnaires with responses were read and re-read for familiarization with the data. Scanned questionnaires were coded both deductively based on the predefined themes of the questionnaires and inductively by allowing themes to emerge from the responses of the participants.

## **Key Results**

In examining views about languages suitable for learning in Malawi, the study identified themes related to the current language policy which included: knowledge of the policy, rationale of the current language policy, challenges related to policy, achievements of the policy, consultation with and involvement of stakeholders in the development of the language policy, and the role of the language policy in skill formation and preparing young people for the labour market.

### **The current Language policy in Malawi**

The study has found that the main language to be used starting from primary school is English. However, there seems to be a conflict between the new language policy and the Education policy of 2013. Some parts of the Act allow for Chichewa to be used in Junior Primary Schools (1-4) as shown in the quote from a donor pasted below:

The new policy stipulates English as the language of instruction from the first year (Standard 1) of primary school in a country where English is not the dominant language of communication in both social settings and a household. This is unlike previously where the medium of instruction in the lower grades was in Chichewa and other mother tongues. During the enactment of the policy, the Ministry

This study has found that none of the stakeholders interviewed apart from the ones from Government, were consulted for the development of the new language policy as shown in the quote from a donor pasted below:

### **Policy achievements**

Findings from this study have revealed that this language policy allows learners to communicate with other nationals easily and this was highlighted across all the study participants. This study has also revealed that the new language policy has improved reading and writing skills and this was based on the responses from parents and teachers.

The new language policy has made the teaching process faster. This was highlighted by teachers as quoted below:

4. What are some of the notable achievements of the current language policy?

- students are now able to communicate with fellow students and teachers.
- Teaching is a bit faster now that each student know and understand English.

From another perspective, some parents who have wards in college, government primary school teachers, private primary school parents and government secondary school learners reported that the policy has limited or no achievements but rather the policy continues to contribute to failure rates of learners (some indicated that others have since dropped out due to frustrations). See the below quote from a parent pasted below:

5. What are some of the notable achievements you have noted in your child since they started learning in this language?

no achievement at all he keeps failing

### **Policy adequacy at the labour market**

Participants were asked if the policy is adequately equipping young Malawians and teachers for the labour market and responses varied amongst them. Results showed that the policy allows young Malawians to get employed in different organizations that exist nationwide and international-wide. Furthermore, the policy has allowed young Malawians to interact with other nationals hence allowing them to compete at an international market. However, other respondents argued that it is difficult to ascertain whether or not the policy has contributed to skills formation because exams which, being conducted in English can only reveal the candidate's knowledge of English and not assess subject knowledge or the skills learned.

### **Policy Rationale**

English was made the official language of government, education, the judiciary and business and Chichewa was also, on paper, elevated to official/national language status. The choice of English in this regard is largely accredited to the country's colonial history than anything else. Free primary education was introduced in 1996 three years after the country became democratic; and the language of instruction from standard 1 to 4 reverted to the vernacular. The rationale of this was based on a study results by the Centre for Language Studies which showed that learners learn best in a local language in lower school.

Chichewa as a national language has made knowledge acquisition simple as it's a language spoken by many and makes interaction and knowledge sharing a bit easier. However, Malawi has so many languages and it was going to be a logistical nightmare especially when it came to resources for teaching to produce such in each language. Additionally, teaching in each recognized language would have meant that Malawi should have colleges that would teach in each of the languages and teachers in the same for each of the languages; and so the adoption of English was the better option.

Labour market needs can be instrumental in formulation of language policy as they always stipulate what the public demands out there in terms of communications and transactions in a workplace. If these indicate language as an impediment to interactions, policy makers need to be responsive and come up with strategies and policies that best address these issues.

### **Challenges of the policy**

There are challenges that are associated with the implemented language policy of which participants highlighted on learners part. Learners find it difficult to understand subjects that are in English making them perform poorly in these subjects. Further, a Lilongwe Technical College teacher narrated that it is difficult for students to understand when teaching them.

3. What were the challenges associated with this policy as a teacher?

difficult for student to understand  
when am teaching.

On the side of donors, this study revealed The use of English in the delivery of lessons at all stages of education does not offer a conducive and inclusive learning environment as English is not a pre/dominant language in most communities in Malawi, and hence it has a negative impact on children in terms of performance, socialization and their self-esteem.

Use of English as a language of instruction in schools contributes to a teacher-centred approach because the language is unknown to students and reinforces passiveness and silence in classrooms. It suppresses the learners' potential and ability to express themselves freely.

The other challenge is non-availability of instruction materials from the centrally procurement system in the sector as quoted below:

resourcing. Both teachers and materials are never provided due to fiscal constraints which further compromises learning on part of the children together with teachers due to in-effectual teaching-learning processes. Local literature is similarly non-existent, or even where it exists, the schools lack the resources to complement the centrally provided material with local language readers; or in other instances, the procurement modalities constrain access to such material.

### **Policy relevance on skill development for young Malawians**

Importantly, the policy has led to the acquisition of new skills. Results have showed that young Malawians have acquired communication skills which they use to communicate nationally and internationally. Furthermore, young Malawians have acquired new learning skills of which they are able to write international exams and compete with other international students.

### **Effectiveness of the policy**

Despite facing challenges in one way or the other, the language policy has contributed to the developmental needs of both young people and the country at large. Young people are able to communicate with other people at an international level hence allowing them to do business with people from other nations.

### **Language preference**

Stakeholders were asked which language they would have preferred to be used by learners and the majority highlighted English. Primary school learners, parents and teachers would have preferred Chichewa with one college learner who would have preferred French. Still some teachers indicated that they would rather have a mixture of a vernacular language and English

10. If you were a decision maker, which language would you prefer to learn in?

English.

11. Give reasons for your answer in 9 above?

- + I will be able to understand what I want to be in future
- to communicate with people from different countries
- I will be able to write,
- I will be able to participate

#### 4.6 Study Limitations

The study faced the following limitations:

- As can be deduced from the political economic framework above, the education sector in Malawi has various stakeholders who could have been part of this study. However due to time constraints and resources, the study only sampled out a few of these stakeholders
- It was a bit challenging to access some senior government officials who might have part of the actual drafting of the currently language policy as well as those individuals who had a deeper understanding of the old policy
- Most people wanted to be paid to provide data in this study and when this was not forthcoming they opted out of the same. This largely compromised on specific time lines and objectivity of data in terms of representation

- The study seems to be hanging which calls for continued research to be conducted if the overall aim of the study is to be achieved
- Lack of labour market data specific to Malawi was also a challenge in the study
- While there was overwhelming literature on English as a Medium of Instruction there was little information on the present research objectives that looked specifically to the rationale on policy development in the same

## 5. Discussion of Results, Conclusion and Recommendation

### 5.1 Introduction

The previous chapter was an outline of the findings of the study. This chapter is a summary discussion of those findings. The chapter highlights the key issues found and emphasizing their importance, the chapter will summarise the results and provide recommendations on the way forward regarding language policy issues in Malawi.

### 5.2 Study Aim and Objectives

Overall, the project had two aims:

1. To promote an informed and effective discussion between academics and stakeholders in Malawi in order to strengthen the evidence base for policy making
2. To identify remaining gaps in the evidence base in order to inform an application for a large collaborative research project.

The role of Malawi Scotland Partnership (MaSP) in this research was to find out the '**Rationale for the current language policy in Malawi**', in order to understand the explicit and implicit aims the policy sets out to achieve.

### 5.3 Summary Discussion Of The Findings

The following is a summary of the findings of this study.

Results indicate that respondents recognize or are aware that English is the medium of instruction in Malawi. The results also show that Malawi's education

system has various challenges which include lack of quality learning and teaching materials, insufficient educational infrastructure and high levels of illiteracy among others. Be that as it may, the role of language is paramount in the education sector as it is regarded as being more than a medium of instruction but rather as a means through which individuals; acquire skills which make them useful citizens of the nation. In this regard therefore, the study has revealed that policy makers must consider carefully when developing policies in this regard because the ultimate goal of learning or language for that matter is that the bulk of the population must be empowered to make significant contributions to the economy.

Results of the study have also revealed that the rationale for the adoption of English as a medium of instruction is as follows:

- To Improve English grammar and language among primary school learners in the former British colony.
- To improve English speaking, listening, reading and writing skills among learners from standard one
- Learners acquire functional literacy and numeracy at an early stage when they learn in English
- To facilitate logistics in the delivery of education in Malawi by using a language that was universal i.e. given the many languages which Malawi has, Government could not afford to produce learning and teaching materials in all languages and indeed have teachers in colleges for each of the languages
- To prevent tribalism in the country
- To ensure common understanding in terms of communication at national and international levels. Malawi is part of a global village

- Chichewa as a language is limited and even though it is recognised as a national language, it is not enough for the country's transformation process. Some concepts can also only better be described in English

Looking at the first two arguments stated above, Malawi is lucky in that children are exposed to the English language the first day they step in school; however, they cannot be expected to master the same in those early stages of school. While it is common for private school going kids to speak good English and use correct grammar as early as standard one or two, the results therefore cannot be attributed as standard practise for the bulk of learners in the country who access public education. An education system must never be discriminatory, therefore, if it does not work even for a minority of the population, something must be changed to ensure that the needs of those are also included when enacting or developing language policies; no one must be left behind. While a good command of the English language would put anyone at an advantage internationally, the same has no bearing on a person's skills set or abilities and therefore policy makers must not only ensure that learners master the language, but that the language itself is used as a basis to nurture and sharpen the skills of the learners; the key thing is to strike a balance in this regard i.e. English must be a complimentary language when it comes to education especially in the early years of learning as this has a pivotal role as far as skills formation is concerned. In the final analysis, it must not matter which medium of instruction is used, but **HOW** learners are taught.

Regarding the participation of learners in a global environment, the study has revealed that the current language policy is not adequately equipping young people for the labour market in Malawi as English is not the only necessary language especially on the global market. With the coming in of globalization, languages such as mandarin are gaining large significance because of the growth in the economy of china.

There are no adequate jobs available for young people in Malawi especially new graduates under formal employment. Young people have resorted into finding informal employment and/or entrepreneurship where language of instruction or English for that matter is rendered insignificant. However, young entrepreneurs must still have a substantial command of the English language as they still need to communicate with stakeholders in their line of business.

Results of the study have provided the following challenges for the current language policy:

- The policy was not based on research
- It disenfranchises the bulk of the population
- It was founded on wrong assumptions as children are already exposed to English from standard one where it is taught as a subject
- Affects learning as children learn and participate better in a familiar language
- Learners acquire knowledge and skills with less difficulty when they learn in vernacular
- It becomes difficult for both students and teachers to clarify certain areas of the teaching and learning. It would have been easier if Chichewa or and local language to be used side by side with English
- It relegates and almost demonizes the role and use of local languages
- It is a fallacy to argue that English as a medium of instruction facilitates skills formation there may be a need to have further research to prove this. For instance, most examinations especially national ones are in English except for Chichewa. These examinations only reveal a learners knowledge of English and NOT subject knowledge or the skills learned
- Young peoples' literacy and numeracy skills are impaired from having to develop them in a second language and not their mother tongue.
- Poor resources to implement the current language policy effectively

Using the mother tongue in early education leads to a better understanding of the curriculum content and to a more positive attitude towards school. The government of Malawi is currently moving from a teacher-centred approach to a learner-centred approach and by using the learners' mother tongue, the learners are more likely to engage in the learning process and thrive. Further, this allows learners to make suggestions, ask questions, answer questions and create and communicate new knowledge with enthusiasm. It gives learners confidence and helps to affirm their cultural identity. This in turn has a positive impact on the way learners see the relevance of school to their lives as most pupils especially those in rural areas do not see the relevance of education, coupled with lack of role models from their own villages, school is usually regarded as an unnecessary punishment.

Teaching in a mother tongue is also a more effective and efficient way to manage and improve the teaching workforce. Training teachers to have high levels of competency required to teach subjects effectively through English is costlier and more time consuming than Governments can afford at the moment, this is why you will find primary school teachers struggling to speak correct English even the ones who are tasked with teaching English as a subject.

There is a mix up between local language and mother tongue. The two mean two different things. A local language in Malawi is the commonly spoken language in a certain region. With the massive in-migration as families look for work, you find local languages are not the same as mother tongues – languages spoken at home. This further complicates learning for the children. Additionally, there is poor teacher preparation. In Malawi, teaching colleges do not teach teachers to instruct in the local languages. The policy thus ends up being misconstrued further complicating learning on the part of the child. That is why in many classrooms today, you find the teacher in the classroom mixing up both English and local language and writing notes in English. This has become the

norm in most of the countries in the sub Saharan region as well. Coupled with poor resourcing, both teachers and materials are never provided due to fiscal constraints which further compromises learning on the part of the children together with teachers due to in-effectual teaching-learning processes. Local literature is similarly non-existent, or even where it exists, the schools lack the resources to complement the centrally provided material with local language readers; or in other instances, the procurement modalities constrain access to such material.

The results show that the majority of parents who have children in primary, secondary and colleges prefer that their children learn in English and the reasons they gave was because it facilitates communication both locally and international. However, a significant number of them indicated that their children had dropped out of school citing lack of understanding of English from teachers as a reason. This goes to show that there must still be a balance between English and the local languages in the education system. It was also interesting to note that some parents indicated that the current language policy has enabled their wards to not only communicate in English but also write both chichewa and English better. Almost all parents indicated that they have never been consulted before on the development of a language policy and they felt this was an anomaly as parents have a role to play in the education of their children and that the education system needs to incorporate parents if education of learners is going to be meaningful beyond the classroom.

The study results have also shown that teachers prepare their lessons in English and prefer to use English as a medium of instruction from early stages because it equips learners for the global world. However, a significant number of them advocated for the use of both mother tongue and English from standard one. Almost all teachers indicated that they use vernacular languages to explain some English concepts better and to facilitate comprehensive learning and

would be most grateful if the policy would allow this officially. Some further argued that the current language policy hampers skills formation as learners for fear of using wrong English words shun away from active class participation.

For college teachers however, the results were a bit interesting. They argued that the use of English in examinations is producing poor outcomes and most college students especially those in technical vocational training colleges do not have a good command even though they could be good with their hands. They however expressed that the government is justified to demand English as a medium of instruction from early stages of education because it would equip students to conceptualise things better in tertiary education.

#### **5.4 Conclusions**

The following conclusions have been made based on the linkages between the objectives of the study and the findings thereof:

- i. The rationale for English as a medium of instruction in Malawi was aimed improving the mastery of English among learners from an early stage even though English is still taught from standard one as a subject
- ii. There is need for thorough consultation and involvement of key stakeholders when deciding on language policies
- iii. Despite facing so many challenges, the current language policy is still preferred above the older policy
- iv. The quality of education in Malawi has declined now in spite of making changes in the language policy over the years which goes to show that the challenge is not in the medium of instruction in itself but rather, how the teachers prepared to teach the curriculum, how are they deployed, how the children are taught in the classrooms, how the classrooms are resourced to support the teaching-learning processes, how the parents

are supporting their children among other elements as these are the key ingredients to learning.

- v. A language, any language must help the majority of the population understand the practicalities of life that make sense to their daily living i.e. why we must wash hands after toilet use, or whether or not to use organic or inorganic fertiliser for various crops or how to prevent and cure diseases locally but at the same time, the language must also help learners in school to solve mathematical problems and understand technology and so on. If these are not achieved or facilitated through language, then an education system would be labelled a failure
- vi. There is a world of knowledge that backs the use of mother tongue in early years of education the argument being that learners learn better in a language in which they are familiar. However, there must also be a balance in this regard which must ensure that other languages like English must also be introduced at an early stage as children have a capacity to learn more than one language at the same time
- vii. Language policies which do not reflect the multilingual repertoires of individuals have led to citizens being unable to effectively engage with education and economic systems
- viii. Malawi's language planning has consistently exhibited a tension between the roles of English and Malawian languages and has been repeatedly criticised as being uninformed by evidence-based research
- ix. There is insufficient interface between researchers and policy makers and little input from the 'grass-roots realities' (these include parents, teachers and learners) of the Malawian linguistic and social context
- x. Prior research suggests abandoning mother tongue instruction has particularly detrimental impacts on the more economically vulnerable populations (low income, rural) and serves to exacerbate educational

attainment gaps, which ultimately can lead to further divergence of labour market outcomes.

- xi. There must be a clear distinction between English as a subject and English as a medium of instruction. Critics of the mother tongue instruction mistakenly argue that learners would not be exposed to English if they learn in their mother tongue and yet learners are exposed to English from day one as it is taught as a subject.

## **5.5 Recommendations**

This study makes the following recommendations:

- That there must be a study that specifically looks at how the current language policy is ferrying especially when it comes to equipping young people with the necessary skills as global citizens
- That language policy development processes must be inclusive to allow for the participation of every possible stakeholder as education can really not be left in the hands of teachers alone
- That the Government of Malawi and stakeholders (donors and CSOs) must ensure that the ultimate goals of education in Malawi must benefit the larger part of the population
- More research needs to be commissioned that looks to bridging the gap between Malawi's socio economic challenges and language policies.

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