

Assessing ODA in Malawi: Which Way to a Better Future?

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Abstract

The primary objective of Official Development Assistance (ODA) is well recorded in relevant literature. History of the field of development studies suggests that ODA is only a temporary solution intended to jumpstart economic progress. This paper assesses and explains the impact of ODA in Malawi specifically focusing on the period 2000 – 2016. Statistical data from reliable sources was analyzed using Microsoft Excel tool pack to determine correlations between selected development indicators. Findings suggest that the impact of ODA on economic development in Malawi is not very meaningful for several factors including malpractices and the attitude of Malawi government. Drawing on the findings, this paper warns against the risks associated with ODA dependency. The findings are discussed and a more promising pathway to a better future for Malawi is proposed. In particular, this paper recommends preparing an exit strategy from ODA dependency and pursuing an alternative development avenue to economic independence and self-sustenance in order to avert the risks associated with ODA dependency.

Key words: Malawi, ODA, Self-sustenance, Economic growth, Innovative entrepreneurship

1. Introduction

Malawi's economy largely depends on Official Development Assistance (ODA). This has been the case since independence from British colonial rule in 1964 (OECD 2019). Between 2000 and 2016, Malawi received gross ODA value of US\$13.4 billion from both bilateral and multilateral donors (Computed from CIA 2020 and World Bank). While one might expect such a huge amount of aid to make a significant difference on the economic landscape of Malawi, poverty remains high with over 70.3 percent of the country's population still living below \$1.90 per day (World Bank 2020). But why is Malawi unable to capitalize on ODA to gain a foothold on the rungs of the development ladder? That is the question I will attempt to address in this paper. I will argue that Malawi's attitude towards ODA is a contributing factor to the country's stagnation in poverty.

To make my case, I will carry out the following tasks. First, I will sketch Malawi's profile with respect to basic development indicators to help the reader understand the context of my argument. Next will be a brief background to the field of development and the origins of ODA to elucidate its objective. Third, I will analyze the impact of ODA on development in Malawi, specifically focusing on the period 2000 – 2016. This will be followed by discussion of the findings before concluding with a way forward for Malawi to prepare for a better future.

2. Country profile

Malawi, formerly called Nyasaland, is a developing country located in South-East Africa bordered by Zambia to the North-West, Tanzania to the North-East, and surrounded by Mozambique from the South-West to the South-East. The present geographical shape of Malawi was inherited from the British colonial masters who left her with one leg like a person in need of assistance to stand properly. Total population is 17.6 million with an annual growth rate of 2.9 percent (NSO 2019:4).

It covers 118.5 thousand KM² of land and has a freshwater lake deemed as an important UNESCO heritage site which runs from the country's North-East to South-East. In terms of development, Malawi lags in many areas including food security, health, and economy.

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Presently, about 3.3 million Malawians are undernourished due to hunger (FAOSTAT 2020). Infant mortality rate currently stands at 37.8 deaths per 1000 live births, while life expectancy at birth is less than 64 years (World Bank 2020). Economically, Malawi is a regular victim of trade deficit due to insufficient import substitutes as there are few domestic manufacturing companies. In 2018 alone, Malawi spent 36 percent of her GDP on imports, exceeding export earnings by 7 percent (World Bank 2020). Largely, Malawi's economy leans on ODA, and this has always been the case for decades (OECD 2019). Apparently, the country cannot stand properly without ODA, yet ODA is not intended to be a permanent solution as I shall explain shortly. But before that, a pause for a moment to trace the historical origins of development and ODA.

3. Historical background to development and the origins of ODA

The history of development cannot be exhausted in this paper due to limited space. However, it suffices to say that the development enterprise emerged in the wake of the missionary exploration and attained its political countenance after World War II when the United States implemented the Marshall Plan. Early missionaries like David Livingston (1813-1873) did not only intend to spread Christianity, but also to civilize non-western people by giving them western education and to commercialize their markets (Sindima 1992:4). Unfortunately, the missionary endeavors related to development were hijacked, leading to colonialism which involved establishment of European settlements in foreign lands like Africa and imposition of their administration on the natives. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, the French, the British, and the Dutch emphasized development in their colonies, a policy known as trusteeship whose intent was to modernize or transform their colonies into western like societies (Stokke 2009:40; Craggs 2014:6). Modernization of non-western contexts like Africa was animated in the post-World War II era following Harry Truman's 1949 inaugural speech in which he sanctioned humanitarian development in the developing countries as a mandate for the rich countries (Stokke 2009:44).

3.1 The emergence of ODA on the development scene

It is widely opined that ODA first emerged under the Marshall Plan, which involved financial transfers from the United States government to Europe as a political tool for gaining global dominance in defiance of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republic (Stokke 2009:42; Dodds 2014:11). While this view cannot be dismissed, it must also be acknowledged that another US objective was to help revamp economies of the countries that had been devastated by the aftermath of World War II (Stokke 2009:42; Binns 2014:100). At the time, development was considered as synonymous with economic growth (Thirlwall 2014:26). It is, therefore, hardly surprising that the Marshall Plan had a greater emphasis on enhancement of market economies. The Marshall Plan achieved its desired outcome as economies of most of the European countries that participated in the program managed to get back on their feet. This success influenced the United Nations to consider the Marshall Plan as a suitable model for development. Soon, the United Nations incorporated the Marshall Plan in its development strategy and extended financial transfers to poor countries in the non-western regions like Sub-Saharan Africa in the name of ODA (Stokke 2009:42). Thus, the initial primary objective of ODA was to bolster economies of poor countries to enable them to participate in open markets at global level.

3.2 Expanded use of ODA

The initial primary objective of ODA to encourage open market economies was later broadened following the rise of the human centered and capabilities approach to development circa 1980s. This followed severe criticism wedged against the understanding of development as synonymous with economic growth. The central argument was that economic growth is not tantamount to improved living standards because its measuring unit, the GDP, does not consider income distribution among individuals in a given population (Thirlwall 2011). It was argued that a country's economy may reflect growth when majority of the population are still living in abject poverty due to uneven distribution of income. In addition, poverty includes diseases, unnecessary deaths, hopelessness before hunger and natural disasters (Goulet 1985:23). The roots of criticisms leveled against the emphasis on growth can be traced to influential scholars such as Denis Goulet, David Korten, and Amartya Sen.

Denis Goulet's seminal work of 1971 which was later revised in 1985 argued that it is erroneous to measure development in terms of economic growth (Goulet 1985:253). Instead, he suggested that priorities of any authentic development must include what he termed 'enhancement needs' which by way of definition means goods or services that enable humans to invent, explore possibilities, and bring their capabilities to maturity as a people with dignity (Goulet 1985:242, 248).

David Korten challenged economic growth as not the only hope for the poor because economic and political structures usually work in favor of the nonpoor, leading to uneven distribution of income (Korten 1990:3). Alternatively, he recommended ‘people centered development vision’ that looks to justice, sustainability, and inclusiveness as key dimensions of authentic development (Korten 1990:5, 67-68). The 1998 Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen suggested enhancement of individual capabilities to participate in the community through provision of what he termed ‘instrumental freedoms’ namely political freedoms, economic facilities, social opportunities, transparency guarantees, and protective security (Sen 1999:24). According to Sen, attention to individual capabilities enhances our understanding of the nature and causes of poverty because capability deprivation may prevent individuals from utilizing opportunities presented by the ‘instrumental freedoms’ (Sen 1999:90).

These voices contributed to the rise of human centered and capabilities approach to development with Human Development Index (HDI) taking center of the stage as an important yardstick for gauging development progress (Thirlwall 2014:27; Tomalin 2014:431). The understanding of development as freedom attracted some scholars to devote their energy to the role of human rights in development, leading to the emergence of the rights-based approach. Many issues which were previously neglected such as marginalization of women, environmental degradation, conflict, health, and illiteracy surfaced and became integral to the development agenda. This new understanding of development persuaded the international donor community to channel ODA towards literacy boost, gender equality, human rights and other related projects with governmental and Non-governmental Organizations (NGO) sanctioned as implementing agencies. It must be underscored that economic growth was not jettisoned as it majestically made its way into the HDI as one of the development indices. Also, worth noting is that in human centered and capabilities approach, facilitating creation of an enabling environment for human flourishing remains the primary objective of ODA and most citizens of western countries share the notion that it is their moral duty to end global poverty in its different forms of manifestation (Curtis 1998:5). Having traced the origins of ODA and its primary objective, I now turn to the impact of ODA in Malawi.

4. The impact of ODA in Malawi

To better understand the impact of ODA in any country requires first analyzing trends of ODA inflows and compare them with trends of GDP growth rate because, as much as GDP does not always reflect the actual income distribution at the grassroots level, it still stands out as an important gauge which provides a glimpse of development progress. It is therefore no surprise that GDP was inevitably incorporated into HDI despite severe criticisms in the early stages of the development enterprise. Malawi receives ODA in different forms and from different sources. Over 40 percent of ODA to the country comes in form of cash grants, while 60 percent is donated in form of food aid and equipment for hospitals, mining and other sectors. Sources of ODA to Malawi include Global Fund, the GAVI Alliance, EU institutions, JICA, CIDA, China, and the United States which tops the list as the largest bilateral donor (Development Initiatives 2013:271). It must be clarified here that calculating aid inflows to a particular country is complex because, though important, other forms of ODA are usually not accounted for such as technical assistance and debt relief (Development Initiatives 2013:77). Jeffrey Sachs (2005:296-298) has argued that debt relief is not aid because it does not add to actual resource flows, especially in a situation where an indebted country cannot service it. As benign as this view may sound, it seems helpful to still count debt relief as aid so that the cancelled debt is accounted for. That said, this paper focuses on ODA in all forms including debt relief, food, clothes, cash transfers, and equipment intended for promoting economic development and the welfare of the poor.

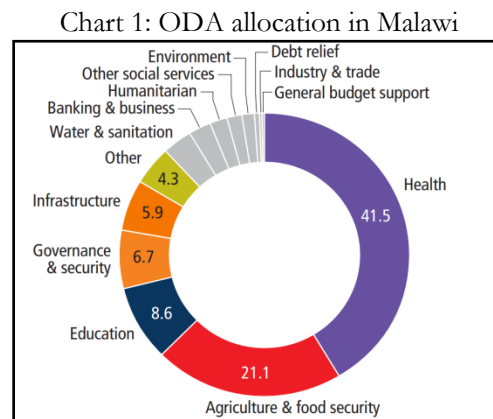
4.1 Trends of ODA inflows to Malawi

Trends of ODA inflows to Malawi have continued through the years since attaining independence in 1964. Every year between 1964 and 2019, Malawi has never missed on the list of ODA recipients (OECD 2019). What has caused this continued inflow of ODA to Malawi is not easy to explain because, if aid is intended to promote economic development and welfare of the developing countries in all spheres of life including health, education, food security, income, and infrastructure, simple logic would demand that by now Malawi should have been discharged from the intravenous drip of the ODA dosage.

Surprisingly, that is not the case for Malawi. Perhaps, a more robust explanation about the continued flows of ODA to Malawi needs to derive from the impact it has made on the development landscape of Malawi. That is my task in the next subsection.

4.2 ODA and development in Malawi

To analyze the impact of ODA more objectively, we must focus on the sectors toward which it is channeled. In Malawi, health, and agriculture and food security sectors are allocated significant portions of ODA. For instance, in 2013, the former received 41.5 percent, while the latter got 21.1 percent (see chart 1 below). The remaining crumbs of ODA went to Education, governance and security, infrastructure, and other interventions shown in chart 1. Considering that health and agriculture and food security get a lion’s share, it is only fair to focus on these two sectors to understand the impact of ODA in Malawi. As such, I critically analyzed trends of selected health and agriculture indices to determine the impact of ODA in Malawi. On health, I specifically focused on infant mortality rate, life expectancy, and prevalence of undernourishment due to food insecurity, while on agriculture, I focused on agricultural gross value per capita (US\$) and GDP growth rate. It seems sensible to consider GDP as an indicator of agricultural performance in Malawi because agriculture is the backbone of Malawi’s economy as it accounts for 42 percent of the country’s GDP (FAOSTAT 2020). I specifically focused on the period 2000 – 2016 because of consistent and readily available data. Findings from data analysis are shown in table 1 below.



Source: Development Initiatives (2013).

Table 1: Correlation matrix of ODA, health and agriculture indices

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1 Infant mortality (%)	--					
2 Life expectancy (yrs)	-0.97**	--				
3 Undernourishment (%)	0.94**	-0.96**	--			
4 GDP growth rate	-0.18	0.08	-0.26	--		
5 Agr gross val. Per cap (\$USD)	-0.55*	0.60*	-0.73**	0.47	--	
6 ODA value per capita (USD)	-0.73**	0.74**	-0.83**	0.38	0.71**	--

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, two-tailed. $n = 17$.

To generate this table, data was analyzed using Pearson correlation (r) in Microsoft Excel App. The findings show that there is a significant correlation between ODA value per capita and agricultural gross value per capita, $r(15) = 0.71$, $P < 0.01$. This means that ODA accounts for 50 percent of variation in agricultural gross value (R^2). Considering that 21.1 percent of ODA is injected into Agriculture and food security sector, it might be suggested that ODA is not as impactful on agriculture as desired. Although correlation does not mean causation, in this case it is a crucial factor because a substantial portion of ODA is channeled towards agriculture. Similarly, correlation between agricultural gross value and GDP growth rate would denote causation because agriculture contributes 42 percent of Malawi’s GDP (FAOSTAT 2020).

However, the period 2000 – 2016 indicates no significant correlation between these two variables, suggesting that agriculture did not contribute towards GDP growth meaningfully. This could be attributed to reduction in agricultural exports as most of the agricultural yields seem to be consumed locally. Evidence for this can be seen in the correlation between agricultural gross value and undernourishment, $r(15) = -0.73$, $P < 0.01$, which indicates a significant reduction in the proportion of hunger-stricken people. However, this is not to claim that hunger reduction is solely attributed to agricultural yields because part of ODA inflows to Malawi come in form of food aid (Development Initiatives 2013:270). Thus, ODA also directly impacts on hunger reduction, $r(15) = -0.83$, $P < 0.01$.

In terms of health, the impact of ODA seems to be quite meaningful as shown in table 1 above. Infant mortality rate (deaths per 1000 live births) significantly reduced in the period 2000 – 2016, $r(15) = -0.73$, $P < 0.01$, while life expectancy improved in the same period, $r(15) = 0.74$, $P < 0.01$. It must be reiterated here that as much as correlation does not necessarily imply causation, the variations in infant mortality rate and life expectancy can be safely attributed to ODA considering that the health sector gets 41.5 percent of total ODA which Malawi receives (Development Initiatives 2013:271).

5. Discussion of the findings

The impact of ODA in Malawi cannot be underestimated, especially in the health sector. The country made significant strides in reducing infant mortality rate between 2000 and 2016 from 122.28 to 44.8 percent (CIA 2020). During the same period, life expectancy also improved from 38 to 61 years (CIA 2020). While this progress seems encouraging, it is not sustainable because it is highly dependent on ODA. This is a situation where an abrupt end to ODA would be like pulling the plug. Likewise, food security is not sustainable due to dependency on major donors like the United States (Development Initiatives 2013:270), meaning that without help from such donors, Malawi would experience unprecedented food crisis and starvation. While one might expect agricultural exports to improve in the wake of ODA and boost Malawi's GDP, the impact of ODA seems too little to make a difference. This is not surprising because ODA does not always induce economic growth. Elsewhere, I have shown that sometimes the correlation between ODA and GDP growth rate in Malawi can be inverse (Dambula 2016:9557).

Why ODA does not improve economic growth is commonly attributed to several factors including unfavorable conditions attached to ODA, less donor commitment, and lack of good political will. ODA, especially bilateral aid is usually attached to unfavorable conditions (Page 2019:25). For instance, some bilateral donors stipulate that any procurement of goods and services be done in their countries. Such conditions strip ODA off 25 percent of its value, thereby reducing its impact (World Bank 1998:6). One of the scholars who attribute the failed impact of ODA to less donor commitment argues that it is difficult for the developing countries to achieve meaningful development progress because they receive insufficient aid (Sachs 2005). He calls for a 'big push' (more aid) as a solution (Sachs 2005:250). On lack of good political will, empirical evidence shows that ODA is less effective and has little impact in countries with weak economic policies (World Bank 1998:4). Indeed, Malawi cooperates with bilateral donors such as USAID and DFID whose aid is tied, and the negative effects of such aid cannot be ignored.

Similarly, that donors do not always live up to their pledges seems true to Malawi. But we must also ask why donors do not commit to their pledges? For Malawi, donors seem to be frustrated by lack of good political will and probity. A case in point is the infamous cashgate scandal in which government officials systematically embezzled US\$ millions of public funds (Dionne 2014). Also, in 2017, a former cabinet minister, Honorable George Chabonda, was accused of corruption (Masina 2017). Perhaps most conspicuous is former president Elson Bakili Muluzi who allegedly diverted foreign aid to his personal accounts (France-Press 2006). The effects of such malpractices are acknowledged in the Malawi Growth and Development Strategy III (MGDS III) (GOM 2017:32) where it reads "incidences of corruption have eroded public trust in government and caused misallocation of resources. This points to the urgent need for strong governance and reliable judicial systems to implement MGDS III." Reflecting on these incidents with respect to the relationship between ODA and agricultural productivity, infant mortality, and undernourishment in the period 2000 – 2016, it might be suggested that the impact could have been greater if it was not for the malpractices. Apparently, only a small fraction of ODA is channeled towards development and a 'big push' on Malawi would only bulge the personal accounts of government officials.

As much as the conditions attached to aid and lack of good political will contribute to ODA ineffectiveness in Malawi, also worth noting is dependency syndrome. Malawi seems to be counting on ODA as something she deserves every year, defying its primary intent to serve as a temporary solution to facilitate development. For instance, in 2011, ODA accounted for 40 percent of government budget (Donnelly 2011). This has been the case since independence. Clearly, Malawi does not have an exit strategy from dependency on aid. The MGDS III, which is the country's development roadmap has five priority areas that do not point to a future without depending on ODA. According to MGDS III (GOM 2017:32), Malawi seeks to invest in Agriculture and Climate change management to enhance food security, environmental conservation, manufacturing, and trade; Education and Skill development to improve productivity, employment, and technology adoption; Energy, Industry, and Tourism to increase employment and exports; Transport and ICT infrastructure to beef up agriculture, private sector, education, and health services,

global partnerships, and security; and Health to improve productivity while also reducing unemployment and gender inequality.

To achieve these development priorities, Malawi's hopes are banked on ODA as alluded to where the country calls for good political will and uncorrupt judiciary to win donor confidence (GOM 2017:32). There is no vision about attaining economic independence and self-sustenance. This dependency syndrome seems to be an important reason why Malawi has remained on the intravenous drip of the ODA dosage for so long. The country appears to be addicted. But this continued dependency on ODA risks unprecedented consequences should donors decide to hold their money. Already, the world witnessed decline of aid in the period 1992 – 1995 by 14 percent and further drop by 4.2 percent to reach its lowest in 1996 (Curtis 1998:5). This should be a wakeup call for Malawi to prepare an exit strategy from dependency on ODA to become self-sustained. In the next section, I suggest what I think is a more promising development avenue to nudge Malawi's economy toward self-sustenance.

6. Preparing for tomorrow, today

Considering that ODA is not a permanent solution to poverty alleviation and that its availability is not a guarantee, Malawi needs to rethink her development strategy and come up with a plan to operate without ODA. In this paper, I would like to recommend innovative entrepreneurship as a cardinal avenue with potential to bail Malawi out of ODA dependency. Yes, why not as if innovative entrepreneurship is esoteric that only a few individuals in the West and East can possess? All humans are created equal with innovative capabilities. That God created humans in his image should uplift humans as endowed with capabilities to innovate, create, and flourish. By way of definition, an innovative entrepreneur is a person who believes in their capability to innovate products to suit the dynamics of demand on the market (Baporikar 2001). Conspicuous examples include Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook, Jeff Bezos of Amazon, and Jack Ma of Alibaba. Of course, innovative entrepreneurship ought to be coupled with good political will in order to thrive (Verheul, Wennekers, Audretsch and Thurik 2001). I am stressing innovative entrepreneurship rather than entrepreneurship in general because it directly relates to private sector development and economic growth (OECD 2012).

Private sector is key to development. It creates employment, generates revenue for government operations, and enhances GDP growth (Chaitra 2014). But its flourishing rests on innovative entrepreneurship (Wong, Ho and Autio 2005; Chaitra 2014). Empirical studies affirm that an increase in the number of innovative entrepreneurs induces economic growth (Coe and Helpman, 1995; Guellec and van Pottelsberghe de la Potterie, 2001). Interestingly, the Malawi Growth and Development Strategy III does not consider entrepreneurship as a development priority. Where entrepreneurship is mentioned, it is only a cursory statement and it appears under priority number two, 'education and skills development' (GOM 2017:37). In addition, Malawi has no strategy for promoting entrepreneurship (GOM 2017:40). It is therefore not surprising that some of the leading schools in the country such as Chancellor College and Mzuzu University do not offer any degree programs that are designed to train and encourage students to become innovative entrepreneurs. This is a missed opportunity because collegiate training in entrepreneurship is a potent force for success (Reynolds, Hay, and Camp 1999; Sánchez 2010). Incorporating entrepreneurship in Malawi's development agenda and school curriculums could foster economic growth and self-sustenance.

7. Conclusion

The future of the economy of Malawi will remain bleak if the country continues to depend on ODA. This dependency risks catastrophe to Malawians because it is not a guarantee that ODA inflows will continue infinitely. One sure-fire way out of poverty to a prosperous future for Malawi is to prepare an exit strategy from depending on ODA and invest in interventions that can jumpstart the economy and usher the country to self-sustenance. I have suggested that transition from ODA dependency to self-sustenance can be achieved through innovative entrepreneurship. Innovative entrepreneurship does not only undergird economic independence, but also enhances private sector development, which is key to self-sustenance. However, to transition smoothly from ODA to entrepreneurship requires cultivating the spirit of entrepreneurship among the youth. This can be achieved successfully by incorporating entrepreneurship as a priority in the Malawi Growth and Development Strategy and introducing entrepreneurship courses in the local schools. I have drawn on empirical research findings to whet my argument for the importance of innovative entrepreneurship education. Considering the risk associated with ODA dependency as discussed in this paper, Malawi should intensify promotion of innovative entrepreneurship in order to avert depressing consequences should the taps of ODA run dry.

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