

Disability inclusive employment in urban Malawi: A multi-perspective interview study

Jennifer Remnant¹  | Lena Wångren² | Sarah Huque³ |
Katherine Sang⁴ | Limbani Kachali⁵ | James Richards⁴

¹Scottish Centre of Employment Research,
Strathclyde University, Glasgow, UK

²University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK

³University of St Andrews, St Andrews, UK

⁴Edinburgh Business School, Heriot-Watt
University, Edinburgh, UK

⁵Malawian Congress of Trade Unions,
Lilongwe, Malawi

Correspondence

Jennifer Remnant, Scottish Centre of
Employment Research, Strathclyde University,
Glasgow, UK.

Email: jennifer.remnant@strath.ac.uk

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Abstract

The paper presents interview data from Malawian government representatives, trade unionists, employers and people with disabilities from the country's largest cities Lilongwe and Blantyre. Findings relate to the gap between the discourse of employers and government officials and that of workers with disabilities. Firstly, we find a policy-based assumption of a formalised workforce that is not representative of the predominantly informal disabled workforce. Secondly, the disruptive, intermittent and often reactive nature of non-governmental organisation (NGO) interventions can limit long-term inclusivity agendas and undermine the work of disabled activists in Malawi. Lastly, we present findings on the stigmatised nature of disability in these urban centres. We find that stigma is economic: Urban workers with disabilities are discriminated against locally by employers, landlords and banks on assumptions they will not produce or earn enough to meet productivity demands, rent or repayment costs.

KEYWORDS

disability, employment, inclusion, informal work, stigma

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1 | INTRODUCTION

People with disabilities are more likely to be poor and poverty contributes to sustaining disability (Groce et al., 2011; Trani & Loeb, 2012). People with disabilities in Malawi are poorer than their non-disabled peers in terms of access to education, healthcare, employment, income, social support and civic involvement (Eide & Ingstad, 2011). It is also the case that those who live in a state of chronic poverty are more likely to have a disability. Should they become ill or injured, these already poor people are also less likely to be able to afford the medical care that would keep an illness or injury from becoming a permanent disability. This paper adds further nuance to our understanding on the relationship between work and disability in Malawi by identifying important gaps between policy and practice and how that gap results from an assumption of a formalised workforce, more like that found in the United Kingdom than the largely informal and entrepreneurial economy of Malawi.

There is limited available research on workplace management and support for workers with disabilities globally, as focus is largely directed at the causes of disability and access to appropriate healthcare facilities. This paper addresses institutional barriers to disability inclusive employment in urban Malawi, examining specifically the relationship between the Malawian government, trade unions and employers and the potential for a shared understanding of disability to facilitate economic inclusion for workers with disabilities. It responds to three central research questions: (1) Are there assumptions about the nature of the workforce (un/formalised) present in employment legislation and policy? and (2) How is disability understood and responded to by workplace stakeholders in Malawian urban centres? and the third question which arose from the data: (3) How have non-governmental organisation (NGO) interventions shaped long-term inclusivity planning within the Malawian labour force?

The paper outlines the Malawian employment context and where people with disabilities are situated within that before reflecting on international development strategies in the country and the long-term implications of colonialism. The focus of the paper is on key areas of discrimination and denial of access to employment for people with disabilities in Malawi and the implications of poorly designed policy (assumptions about formal vs. informal) and implementation gaps. Though Article 27 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) articulates important supports for people with disability in work and employment, this paper identifies how despite efforts to enact these supports, assumptions present in governmental policy and NGO practice limit the enactment of CRPD commitments.

There are numerous stakeholders in Malawi invested in improving employment outcomes for all working individuals, including people with disabilities. There are also key organisations engaged in positive cooperative practices trying to improve the experiences and outcomes of those in the labour force, including government representatives, trade union representatives and employer representatives. This paper acknowledges the significant role of these organisations and recognises the potential of the Malawian tripartite model of employment governance made up of trade union leadership, employers and government officials. The paper offers new trajectories to better promote inclusive practice across the Malawian workforce. Building on interviews with workers with disabilities, trade unionists, employers and disability activists in Malawi, we emphasise their call for practice-led local interventions and training alongside addressing stigmatisation. We conclude with recommendations for disability inclusion which consider the specific dynamics of the economic and political contexts under which key actors operate. We provide recommendations that acknowledge how accessible employment in Malawi might be shaped and informed by the fourth industrial revolution. Characterised by a fusion of technologies, the blurring of lines between the physical, digital and biological spheres of work offers opportunities for growth for the Malawian workforce.

We would like readers to note that we use 'person-first' language throughout the paper to reflect the language used in Malawi and the CRPD rather than language advocated by social model of disability scholars who use 'disabled persons' to recognise that people with impairments are disabled by an inaccessible environment and society.

1.1 | Population, work and disability in Malawi

Malawi is a landlocked country in south-eastern Africa. It is considered among the world's least developed countries, with around 86.5% of the population living in rural areas. Like many other low-income countries, Malawi has an agriculture-based economy, with the agricultural sector accounting for about 30.2% of gross domestic product (GDP). The agricultural sector is dominated by rain-fed maize and tobacco grown by smallholders (Pauw et al., 2011) and contributes approximately 34% of overall GDP (Pauw et al., 2011) and accounts for 64.1% of employment. Employment research in Malawi has focused on rural experiences of work in Malawi including farming (Hazarika & Sarangi, 2008), sex work (Tavory & Poulin, 2012) and poverty (Ellis et al., 2003). Less research explores the nature of informal work in urban areas and business districts.

In 2020, the labour participation rate among the total population aged between 15 and 65 in Malawi amounted to around 77.79%. This equates to 3.5 million people in the Malawian workforce, with the vast majority being subsistence farmers. This workforce is largely informal, making it difficult to estimate unemployment and underemployment rates in the country. The estimated proportion of wage and salary earners is thought to be lower than 14%, though this is anticipated to fall further because of COVID-19 and civil service downsizing and privatisation. Job creation and economic growth in the country are hindered by low literacy levels and limited access to educational resources. Only 58% of the adult population is literate requiring a focus on education to enable economic engagement (Mambo et al., 2016).

The organisation, safety and support of the labour force are negotiated by a tripartite model of leadership that includes the Malawian Congress of Trade Unions (MCTU), the Malawian government and the country's employer's association. Much of their focus is on supporting young people to enter the formal economy, rather than people with disabilities. Malawi has a young population—in 2015, its median age was 17 years (Statista, 2021). This places current and future employment at the heart of the country's development policies (Chinsinga & Chasukwa, 2018), but with a specific focus on young people. Consequently, Malawi has several policies and programmes that seek to tackle youth unemployment (Sumberg et al., 2020). These include the Malawi Growth and Development Strategy, the National Employment and Labour Policy, the National Youth Policy and the Malawi Decent Work Country Programme. As part of a wider objective to solve the youth employment challenge in Malawi, these policies aim to improve the transitions of youth from school to work. This focus on youth employment is emblematic of a wider trend across sub-Saharan Africa and can be considered a contributory factor in why many interventions fail to produce more inclusive employment (Fox et al., 2020).

People with disabilities then encounter barriers to employment that reflect those of the many other people who are competing for jobs in Africa. These barriers include, as mentioned previously, limited job prospects, particularly in rural areas, lack of work-based learning and quality skill and professional development provision programmes (Ismail & Mujuru, 2020), specific gender-based barriers experienced by women including the continued informality of the care economy (Khan, 2020) alongside conceptual flaws in private sector development programmes due to limited adaptability, the appropriate addressing of geographical and locally specific contexts and audiences (Quak & Flynn, 2019). Disability in Malawi relates to access to healthcare, poverty, health complications and lack of access to education. This has specific implications for the nature of disability activism in the country, disability support and the management of workplace disability. People with disabilities in Malawi are significantly more likely to have never attended school than their non-disabled counterparts and are more likely not to be working. As such, their socio-economic prospects are less favourable compared to the general population, which already has a low baseline. People with disabilities in Malawi are more likely to be chronically poor and experience extreme poverty (Munthali, 2011).

In 2007, Malawi ratified the United Nations CRPD, which includes specific instructions for supporting people with disabilities in work and employment in Article 27. Successive independent governments of Malawi have introduced increasingly progressive legislation aimed at promoting the inclusion of persons with disabilities, which started, notably, long before their ratification of the convention. This legislation included the 1971 Handicapped Person's

Act, which established the quasi-governmental Malawi Council for the Handicapped (MACOHA) and much later the 2012 Disability Act, which expanded Malawi's commitment to the rights of persons with disabilities. In 2019, the Disabilities Bill was introduced for consideration within the Malawian government, which would update and merge the two previous Acts. Malawi has also produced the 2006 National Policy on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities and the 2018 National Disability Mainstreaming Strategy. In terms of workplace protections, Malawi has also ratified International Labour Organization (ILO) convention numbers 100 (on equal remuneration) and 111 (on discrimination). Consequently, Malawi has an adequate and evolving policy and legal environment for promoting and upholding the rights of people with disabilities.

Despite this, the employment numbers for people with disabilities in the country remain steadfastly low. Based on the 2018 census figures, Malawians with disabilities make up 12% of the employed labour force of Malawi when epilepsy and albinism are included (National Statistical Office, 2019). However, when the standardised 'Washington Group' definition (which excludes epilepsy and albinism) is used, Malawians with disabilities make up just 0.9% of employed individuals (*ibid.*). This indicates a complex hierarchy of disability, whereby disabilities which are less visible and/or require fewer access accommodations appear to enable access to formalised employment even if the outlined statistics are in the context of inconsistent information on disability more broadly and a largely informal workforce (*ibid.*). Though there is limited available information, what research there is reflects global research on work and disability, which has evidenced exhaustively that disabled people are disadvantaged in the workplace and experience economic exclusion (Coleridge et al., 2005).

Economists have noted the potential of the fourth industrial revolution to address some of this inequality. Building on the third digital revolution, the fourth has the potential to raise global income levels and improve the quality of life for populations around the world; technology continues to support remote working, as well as engaging in leisure activities and consumerism. Technological innovation has the potential to result in disabled people being able to engage equally as part of the digital community, with long-term gains in efficiency and productivity. It has the potential to include the progression of workers with disabilities and the economies of sub-Saharan Africa (Ayentimi & Burgess, 2019). Theoretically, the fourth industrial revolution will cause transportation and communication costs to decrease, logistics and global supply chains to become more effective and the cost of trade to diminish, all of which will open new markets and drive economic growth.

However, other economists argue, the revolution could yield greater inequality, particularly in its potential to disrupt labour markets (Gross, 2019). As automation substitutes for labour across economies, the net displacement of workers by machines might exacerbate the gap between returns to capital and returns to individual workers. Education and work in sub-Saharan Africa will determine the livelihoods of nearly a billion people in the region, including Malawi, and drive growth and development for generations. As the global transformation of work unfolds in Africa, policymakers, business leaders and workers must have access to resources and knowledge that allow them to proactively manage this continuing period of transition (Leopold et al., 2017).

1.2 | International development, NGOs, labour and disability in Malawi

To understand the employment context in Malawi and understandings and initiatives regarding disability, it is necessary to recognise the long-term and ongoing effects of colonialism in the country and impact of international aid. Malawi was ruled by the British, known first as British Central Africa and later as Nyasaland. The country achieved full independence, as Malawi, in 1964 and remains part of the British Commonwealth, and as such has continued ties to, and a political landscape heavily influenced by the United Kingdom. Literature on development, colonialism, science, technology and education in Malawi has suggested that attitudes adopted from colonialists are a major hindrance to development, including attitudes to labour and education (Dzama, 2003). Increasingly, there is a view that colonial legacies are significant contributors to underdevelopment in countries such as Malawi (*ibid.*).

Development work in Malawi, including the work of NGOs, is considered by some to represent a form of 'neo-colonialism' (Langan, 2018) that continues to inhibit the development of various African countries. In the form of foreign aid, initiatives funded by global donors can be found in all sectors of Malawian life, particularly in relation to education and health. International development is often philanthropic, informed by notions of religiosity or organisational priorities. Foreign aid has been criticised as a 'commodification of third world [sic] poverty' (Jefferess, 2002) and westernisation-as-development in terms of both policy and practice (McNamara, 2019). There is ongoing debate regarding the effectiveness of international patronage in challenging structural poverty (De & Becker, 2015), with critiques relating to a hierarchy in the delivery of aid based on donor preferences and agendas, whereby interventions and support are done for a given population, rather than with or by them (Morfit, 2011).

Disability, as a result in the high levels of international development projects relating to health, is a focus of foreign aid and interest in Malawi. Extensive international funding has been injected into improving water and sanitation access for people with disabilities (Biran et al., 2018; Mactaggart et al., 2018), improving access to education (Le Fanu, 2014; Winter & Blanks, 2020) and initiatives focused on particular health conditions such as HIV/AIDS (Lindgren et al., 2013) and albinism (Dart et al., 2018), though notably little work has been focused on creating a more inclusive workforce. It is necessary for these work-focused interventions to support people with disabilities to learn specific skills, relevant for the contemporary Malawian labour market, and it is not clear that this training is being made available.

Though there is international interest in developing the Malawian economy and prioritising education for Malawian people to further enable their economic engagement, and ratification of the CRPD, it appears to have had limited impact in actually improving labour participation for people with disabilities (Braathen & Kvam, 2008). There appears to be a complementary lack of academic literature exploring the impact of international development schemes on the lives of people with disabilities in relation to employment, other than to acknowledge inequality in opportunity, access and income from work (Coleridge et al., 2005). This paper addresses this gap by exploring contemporary experiences of managing and governing disability in the Malawian urban workforce.

2 | METHODOLOGY

The study design for this research was interview and focus group based, employing an abductive analytical approach. It has cultivated interesting and novel empirical findings from multiple workplace stakeholders. Below, we outline recruitment, data collection, participant characteristics and the analytical approach of the study.

2.1 | Recruitment

Twelve informal market workers with disabilities, two senior civil servants, one politician, three trade union officials, six trade union representatives, three disability organisation leaders, one education representative and one employer's association representative were recruited to this study ($n = 29$). Participants were recruited by the MCTU which was a partner organisation for the project. The organisation of the Malawian workforce is subject to tripartite management from the Malawian government, the Malawian employer association and MCTU. This meant that partnering with MCTU ensured access to relevant stakeholders. Participants were targeted for recruitment specifically because of their job role and responsibilities. Participants with disabilities were recruited from a central market in Lilongwe.

A focus group was conducted with the market workers in Chichewa [the primary Malawian language] with translation offered by a research partner from MCTU. The focus group was digitally recorded, and our research partner wrote notes on what was said in English for analysis. The focus group was not transcribed. The focus group was conducted in a meeting room at the market and lasted approximately 120 min (2 h).

All other participants attended either group or one-to-one interviews. Interview participants met with the research team face-to-face, in their place of work, MCTU offices or in the hotel restaurants where researchers were staying. Interviews were conducted in English and digitally recorded with permissions. Interviews were semi-structured, and participants were asked about how long they had held their role, who they answered to, what they considered disability to mean, what they thought trade union activity could achieve in Malawi, what obstacles workers with disabilities face in Malawi and how they could better support disabled workers.

Interviews were conducted over a period of 2 weeks in August 2019 and lasted between 30 and 90 min. This project focused on disability discourse across the various stakeholder groups, identifying where understandings of disability differed, the reach of policy and the management and support of employees with disabilities. Material decisions relating to support at work in Malawi are informed by several different stakeholders, and it was important to understand what influenced these decisions and what implications they had for people with disabilities in Malawi. The different stakeholder groups and their characteristics are outlined below.

2.2 | Participant characteristics

Table 1 provides summary information about the focus group participants, and Table 2 provides summary information about the interview participants to this study.

TABLE 1 Focus group participants

Market workers with disabilities (<i>n</i> = 12)	All male group, all experiencing visible physical impairments. Unionised workers	Recruited by a trade union official, focus group conducted in Chichewa
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TABLE 2 Interview participants

Participant group	Details—M/F = male/female
Civil servants and politician (<i>n</i> = 3)	Roles in education, employment and disability 1(M) 2(M) 3(M)
Government disability organisation representatives (<i>n</i> = 2)	2 representatives from MACOHA, a government-funded disability organisation, 4(M) and 5(M)
Independent, disability-led organisation representative (<i>n</i> = 1)	1 representative from FEDOMA, an independently funded disability organisation, 6(M), identified as disabled
Trade union officials (<i>n</i> = 3)	From the Malawian Congress of Trade Unions (MCTU) 7(M) 8(M) 9(M)
Trade union representatives (<i>n</i> = 6)	Mixed Union representation including teaching, university lecturers, hospitality and construction 10(M) 11(M) 12(M) 13(M) 14(M) 15(F)
Higher education representative (<i>n</i> = 1)	Course leader at Malawian University 16(F)
Employer's association representative (<i>n</i> = 1)	17(M)

As is apparent from Tables 1 and 2, our participant group was disproportionately represented by male participants, and outside of the focus group, only one other participant identified as disabled. We recommend further work exploring the perspectives of disabled working women as well as those with other disability types. We recognise that men with visible, physical disabilities face fewer barriers in employment, and in representation, than those with hidden impairments or intellectual difficulties or those experiencing deaf blindness. These particularly marginalised groups face additional intersectional barriers that are beyond the scope of this current paper.

2.3 | Analysis

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and anonymised. Data from this study were treated as confidential and kept secure in compliance with relevant UK data protection legislation (Data Protection Act, 1998). Transcripts were uploaded to NVivo 10 for data management and to facilitate constant comparison (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2011). Repeated ideas and concepts became apparent in the data by comparing transcripts (and focus group notes) and discussion within the research team. Analysis was informed by post-colonialist and disability focused literature and activism (see Meekosha, 2011). The purpose of the interviews was to understand the subjective perspectives of participants relating to work and disability relative to the experiences of disabled employees, the nature of the labour force and the content and assumptions present in relevant policy. Exploring these phenomena from multiple perspectives allowed for further depth but also provided additional validity as a qualitative form of triangulation (Flick, 2004).

Our analytical process can be considered abductive in approach, in that the development of codes was informed by a 'practical compromise of induction and deduction', realistically capturing the process by which the subsequent theorising occurred (Shepherd & Suddaby, 2016, p. 79). The development of codes was informed by specific theoretical and political framings; however, literature relating to the disruptive impact of NGO involvement and the stigmatisation of disability was revisited after data collection, and as such, all elements of this paper are empirically informed.

The interviews and focus group were conducted in a cultural, social and political context that the visiting researchers were not familiar with and where the repercussions and consequences of colonialism persist. The research team were familiar with ethical debates relating to White, Western researchers conducting research with Black African communities and maintained constant dialogue with Malawian research partners to inhibit unintentional manifestations of colonialist or racist practices. The research team recognises the need to democratise and decolonise research to promote multi-epistemological research partnerships (Chilisa et al., 2017). All research team members advocate for collaborative research, both in relation to the above and regarding the shared understanding in disability studies to 'not [do research] about us without us' (Zhang, 2017). The research team includes individuals with varied experiences of disability. This positionality informed data analysis relating to participant understandings and explanations of disability.

The analytical categories derived from this data centred on (1) the policy-based assumption of a formalised workforce that was not representative of the predominantly informal Malawian workforce where most disabled workers are located, (2) how the disruptive nature of NGO interventions limits long-term inclusivity planning within the labour force and (3) how the stigmatised nature of disability in these urban centres is largely economic/anticipatory discrimination.

3 | FINDINGS

Analysis of the interview transcripts and focus group notes provided insight into the manifestation of policy, international support and localised discrimination. Below, we provide illustrate data excerpts to highlight these findings before drawing them together in the discussion with recommendations for future practice and research.

3.1 | What is said and what is done: The policy–practice gap

This section highlights the disconnect identified between policy and practice regarding inclusion. A key finding in the data related to the disconnect between policy and government rhetoric regarding employee rights and the experiences of workers with disabilities and trade unionists. Government representatives, and MACOHA, the government-funded disability organisation, were consistent in providing positive rhetoric regarding the capability and potential of people with disabilities. Throughout these interviews, disability was infrequently framed as a problem, and participants largely adhered to the social model of disability: that it is that they situated disability an issue of inaccessible environments (physical, political or social) that are disabling for individuals, not a necessary result of their impairments or health conditions. These participants provided a consistent understanding of disability, a good understanding of the legislation and policy in place to protect and support people with disabilities and appeared to recognise the importance of accessible and inclusive employment.

Participants explained that the Ministry of Gender, Children, Disability and Social Affairs has a mandate:

... to actually ensure that persons with disabilities, of course combined with other persons, taking part in the national development, and also their rights are being promoted and protected. Our functions are several-fold, but mainly it's provide policy direction, facilitate disability mainstreaming, promote and protect rights of persons with disabilities, and also raise awareness on disability issues, programme monitoring and coordination. We monitor and coordinate all disability programmes in the country ... That's on paper that is [laughs]. And also capacity-building of the [development] sector itself. (1M)

The above civil servant's final comment about what is 'on paper' implies an understanding that what the government aims to achieve is not necessarily reflective of what happens on the ground. Other participants, specifically people with disabilities and trade union representatives, were able to add further clarity to how the gap between policy and practice manifests for people with disabilities with regard to finding and maintaining employment. While government officials referred to nationwide policies, their lack of impact was acknowledged across the dataset. A higher education representative noted:

If you ask people about the policies here ... people know nothing. We have a Disability Act, but when you go out there, people know nothing about it! (16F)

She continued to explain how the Disability Act was already under review, but was critical of what she viewed superficial and superfluous alterations to legislation:

And I hear that those people there in the Ministry department, they are even considered an idea of reviewing it. How do review an Act which in reality has not been implemented?! Why do not we put those resources to implementing it, or to bringing awareness to people their rights provided in the Act?! Why are you reviewing it, for God's sake? There's no implementing, there's no monitoring of the things we said we are going to provide in terms of for example infrastructure [e.g. of buildings being constructed are made accessible/disability inclusive]. ... There's nothing like that. (16(F))

These concerns were replicated in interviews with trade unionists who commented on how in urban markets people 'are not friendly to people with a disability' even though 'the law is there' (14M). Trade union representatives were also concerned by complementary legislation:

... the Labour Relations Act speaks about equality, it says there should be no discrimination whatsoever, even of the grounds of disability ... The issue is the practice on the ground, the issue is the practice. (12M)

In this respect, the data mirror the findings of research from around the world, including the United Kingdom, with regard to disability and employment, that despite the presence of protective legislation, discrimination against disabled people sustains (Friedman, 2020).

Unlike many other international contexts, Malawi has MACOHA, a disability organisation that functions as a government agent with government funding and is run by field officers in different districts. MACOHA plans work for local districts, works with people with disabilities and community leaders, refers people with disabilities to different services (e.g. health, social inclusion and empowerment) and encourages mainstreaming disability inclusion. Representatives from MACOHA discussed their easy access to government officials, 'as MACOHA we are a government agent' (4M). Despite this, representatives of the organisation offered conflicting information about their efficacy. They organised institutions which exclusively employed a disabled workforce and taught vocational skills such as weaving but struggled to demonstrate integration into the wider working population. This issue was compounded due to organisational difficulties in collecting accurate statistics on the employment status of disabled people after work with MACOHA.

The gap between policy and practice was summed up by a trade union official, 7M. He explained that the legislation in place in Malawi to support workers with disabilities was built on a flawed assumption about the nature of the workforce that also challenges trade union representation and access:

The number of people that are in decent jobs are just few, around 1 million against an active population of 9 million, in terms of economically active. So what that means [is that] 1 million people are the one that are feeding the 16 million, because of the taxes. (7M)

The policies developed by the government have little impact on the vast majority of the workforce which is informal and entrepreneurial, as they are more applicable to organised and formalised workforces, and easier to police. Recruitment to trade unions is also easier in formalised workplaces, meaning that a key platform by which workers with disabilities can access support is not available to most informal workers who are also unlikely to be able to sustain regular subscription fees. Consequently, despite the collaboration and outlook of the MCTU, Malawian government and employers' association, there remains a challenge in implementing inclusivity in work.

Fortunately, numerous participants were able to articulate plans and suggestions to address the efficacy of the Labour Act and Disability Act:

We just need to make sure that we use the available platforms that are there to create awareness, using different modes and different medias ... organising also with disabled members—reach them, understand their situation, organising them, and understand how to assist them ... Maybe we notice that because of the operations of the policy, there are certain gaps, we can also recommend and say 'we need enforcement in A, B, C, D, E' ... (8M)

3.2 | The influence of the 'charity model' in disability focused development interventions in Malawi

A second key finding of the study was to identify the role of organisations with development aims and international aid funding in promoting or inhibiting inclusive employment in Malawi. A first issue identified by participants was how development initiatives, due to their tight focus or organisational agendas, often viewed people with disabilities

as being subject to support rather than an employee. Here, the FEDOMA representative explains the limited inclusivity of NGOs as workforces:

Just to say another thing: you'd find that most of these ... international NGOs they will come to Malawi. They come with their agenda of inclusion. But you'd find that for them to accommodate persons with disabilities, it would not be easy for them. You'd find they have signed commitments, whatever, out there, but [when] they come to Malawi—nothing like that is happening. So those are some of the challenges that we are experiencing. ... in the international NGOs fraternity or the NGO fraternity, it's not that easy for them to take up persons with disabilities. So if we were to say, maybe [if] they [started] opening up all these sectors, it would be much better. (6M)

This comment was supported in interview data from a civil servant. He, 3M, explained how issues related to disability and education were 'considered charity issues' that had been led by missionaries, where disability was a tragedy, not a human or workforce diversity issue. This participant went on to explain that this meant ongoing efforts were necessary to undo these previously charity-based assumptions about disability and mainstream these changed aims and agendas into government systems and budgets. He explained that the charitable and philanthropic background of disability inclusion activities had also resulted in assumptions from government officials and the public more widely that the government budget for such initiatives should be small, despite the 'resources required' being 'quite expensive' (3M).

A result of the charity model of disability, support for Malawian workers with disabilities has been that some government investment has allowed development organisations to become outdated in their training provision. Instead of tooling workers with disabilities with skills appropriate for the contemporary Malawian workplace, participants expressed concerns that the only training available did not make them competitive in the job market. This was discussed at length with a representative from FEDOMA and independently funded disability organisation:

... some of these vocational trades seem to be outdated. You'd find they are offering trainings in tin-smith, maybe shoe-repairing. And when you look at those kind of areas you'd find that they are not as marketable as they used to be maybe ten, twenty years ago ... (6M)

These specific manual jobs were identified by numerous participants as being those conducted by workers with disabilities. Trade union officials commented on the difficulty in providing support these workers, encouraged into outdated self-employment roles:

... If anything, you see people with disability along the streets sewing shoes, cleaning shoes... they do their own small businesses, but the protective measures that they get at that level even are not as good as those that would be offered to people with ability. (9M)

This was supported by the data from the focus group of market workers with disabilities in Lilongwe. They evidenced awareness of various development schemes locally for people with disabilities but explained how the schemes did not result in them being more competitive in the job market and therefore did not increase their income which was their primary concern in relation to work. They commented on how there was training available that either did not develop their specialities, address skills demand in the marketplace or was inaccessible either due to the time it took to access, or distance to training site. However, there was an obvious awareness across the participant group that it was necessary to challenge international assumptions about poverty and ensure that people with disabilities were able to access better, more relevant training:

Persons with disabilities have a lot of challenges, and as far as employment is concerned ... for one to be employed, you need education, you need training, and then you can talk about employment. (8M)

3.3 | Local-level economic stigma

Despite the robust tripartite model of governance developed for the Malawian workforce, between the government, MCTU and employers' association, numerous significant workplace stakeholders have not absorbed the political definition of disability espoused in policy. What was apparent in our data was that this middle layer of both informal and formal stakeholders included lenders, landlords and large companies and was incredibly important for local economic and individual work plans. In particular, the positive policy rhetoric of government was not reflected in the actions of local, informal, but significant decision makers who were not subject to the governance, leadership or influence of government, trade unions or the employer's association. Participants identified market landlords, local informal lenders and formal bank employees who specifically limited or withdrew economic involvement and support offered to workers with disabilities due to their reservations about their earning ability. There is an assumption that to have an impairment is to render a worker an unsafe investment.

As a result, workers with disabilities in the informal economy are unable to earn adequately, because they are unable to borrow the capital necessary to build their business in a labour market defined by insecure, informal work.

In terms of self-employment [i.e. informal workers] they have problems accessing opportunities for empowerment; opportunities to get some trainings [i.e. lack of skills development/training] or to get loans. (2M)

The above participant was able to provide numerous examples of informal/self-employed people with disabilities had been promised loans for their business, but had the offer withdrawn when the bank realised they were disabled. The participant, who was a civil servant, explained that in some instances, his department had been able to intervene for individual borrowers but that this was ad hoc and inconsistent. MCTU representatives echoed concerns about the ability of workers with disabilities to borrow and explained how it was difficult to engage with lenders as they were outside of trade union influence.

Disabled participants to the focus group were able to provide numerous examples of this economic stigma. They were able to discuss in detail how they had sought to rent particular premises in the marketplace, rent or buy equipment or borrow capital from local informal landlords and formalised banks and were denied explicitly on the basis of their disability. However, this issue was increasingly being recognised by independent disability organisations who were advocating for financial inclusion and to challenge discrimination:

So we have been working very much hand-in-hand with the Malawi microfinance network to make sure that amongst their members they have to promote issue of financial inclusion, even inclusion of persons with disabilities so that they benefit from their services (6M)

None of our participants had received disability-specific funding or benefited from microfinancing projects, though participants involved in disability activism organisations reflected on microfinancing as a positive step to improve the economic participant of workers with disabilities in Malawi, despite wider reservations about the practice (Brickell et al., 2020; Duvendack & Mader, 2020). It is also necessary to acknowledge here that the data did not suggest much improvement in terms of the formalised economy and discrimination in urban areas. One participant explained how the assumptions of employers despite the tripartite labour governance in Malawi including the employer's association:

I think the biggest challenge is to do with attitude. ... There is a very big attitude problem, to say, people think 'these people cannot work, they cannot perform, so they will just be a cost to the organisation' (4M)

The above participant was a representative from MACOHA, the government-funded disability organisation. He commented on how workers with disabilities with a high level of education often ended up working in teaching as it is considered the most accessible profession. Further participants confirmed this to be true, but largely because teachers with disabilities were employed to teach in schools specifically for children with disabilities and therefore environmentally accessible. Other urban workplaces were considered inaccessible by participants:

In a nutshell, I think: the work environment, or the conditions of work that I see, they are not, very conducive to people with disabilities in their way ... I know there is a law that made it clear [...] All these workplaces—hotels, offices—they must be disability friendly ... (8M)

The data highlighted clearly that in organised workplaces, there was an issue with workplace disability inclusion that persists in spite of robust policy and legislative protections and is reflective of workplace discrimination levelled against disabled workers across the world. The specifics of the Malawian context relate to the nature of the workforce, the influence of international and development funding and the ‘unreachable’ mid-level stakeholders making material decisions about supporting disabled people based on outdated charity-influenced assumptions about disability. These are discussed in the following section.

4 | DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper has identified three important findings: (1) that there is a disconnect between policy and practice regarding inclusion; (2) that the dominant ‘charity’ model utilised by NGOs focusing on people with disabilities pushes people towards particular potentially unsuited or dead-end economic self-employment activities that are not reflective of the changing work landscape; and (3) that a range of mid-level actors between the policy level and actual employment (lenders and landlords) are not acting in line with government policies or the CRPD. These issues contribute to the continued disadvantage of workers with disabilities in Malawi and the global connection between disability and poverty.

By not recognising the specifics of the Malawian workforce, national legislation, though progressive and well intentioned, is difficult to enact for most working-age people with disabilities in the labour force. The issue of majority informal economy work is reflected in the challenges faced by the tripartite model of leadership that includes the MCTU, Malawian government and the country’s employer’s association. Not only is much of their focus is on supporting young people to enter the formal economy, with limited focus on disabled workers who are significantly less likely to have attended school than their non-disabled counterparts, but they also have better access and reach in formalised workplaces. Though Malawi ratified the United Nations CRPD in 2009 and has introduced increasingly progressive legislation aimed at promoting the inclusion of persons with disabilities, the guidance and commitments they contain do not address the particulars of the labour force and the needs of workers with disabilities.

Local economies depend on money lenders and information of financial markets (Bolnick, 1992), This paper has identified that decisions are made at this local level that inhibit the ability of informal disabled workers to progress their business or develop themselves professionally. We identified that this level of decision making is beyond the reach of the tripartite direction of the labour force as the lenders of capital and landlords were not represented in planning or policy and had few legal obligations to provide for disabled entrepreneurs. To ensure what is referred to as the fourth industrial revolution includes the progression of workers with disabilities and the economies of sub-Saharan Africa (Ayentimi & Burgess, 2019); it is necessary that they have equal access to capital. We recommend that the Malawian government and trade union representatives find ways to target local lenders and to encourage them to support entrepreneurs managing disability, outlining the business case for diversity within the economy and the benefits of supporting entrepreneurs and workers with disabilities. We recommend that NGOs consider working

with or in partnership with people with disabilities in Malawi to develop microfinancing options for those in the informal economy.

New and more creative methods of financial support that are led by the needs of workers with disabilities can inform how the fourth industrial revolution manifests in Malawi (Ayentimi & Burgess, 2019). This change in the nature of work will continue to blur the boundaries between physical, digital and biological spheres and as such represents an opportunity for the Malawian labour force to become more equitable and improve access to goods and services while diminishing the need for over work with the replacement of labour with machines. Digital platforms have the potential to provide security to workers in the informal economy and greater accessibility for workers with disabilities who might not have to navigate inaccessible environments when entering/staying in the labour force. Digital platforms might also provide communication streams for trade union representatives and government officials to engage with workers with disabilities.

To support workers with disabilities in the Malawian employment context, it is necessary to recognise the long-term and ongoing effects of colonialism in the country and international aid. Increasingly, there is a view that colonial legacies are significant contributors to underdevelopment in countries such as Malawi (Dzama, 2003), and this is supported by this study. Participants clearly articulated what can be described as a hangover from colonialism in the form of international development initiatives which are not tailored to the needs of workers with disabilities, but instead provide vocational training that has limited use and progression opportunity, draws on medicalised models of disability and is rooted in charity and philanthropy. Development work in Malawi, including the work of NGOs, is considered by some to represent a form of 'neo-colonialism' (Langan, 2018) that continues to inhibit the development of various African countries. In the form of foreign aid, initiatives funded by global donors can be found in all sectors of Malawian life, though intervention so far has done little to address the employment prospects of people with disabilities. To address this, we recommend that NGOs and trade unionists working in Malawi promote self-advocacy by workers with disabilities and support the voices of workers with disabilities within their respective organisations.

Disability, as a result in the high levels of international development projects relating to health, is a focus of foreign aid and interest in Malawi. Extensive international funding has been injected into improving water and sanitation access for people with disabilities (Biran et al., 2018; Mactaggart et al., 2018). However, as this paper identifies, development is philanthropic and informed by notions of religiosity and organisational priorities that assume disabled people to be passive subjects of aid rather than autonomous individuals. This paternalist approach is further situated in a context of a wider 'commodification of third world [sic] poverty' (Jefferess, 2002). This westernisation-as-development (McNamara, 2019) model has brought with it inconsistent funding, out-of-date skills training and undermined government efforts to mainstream disability equality in the workplace. In acknowledging how this limits the development of informal urban disabled workers, this paper contributes to the ongoing debate regarding the effectiveness international patronage in challenging structural poverty (De & Becker, 2015).

Though there is international interest in developing the Malawian economy and prioritising education for Malawian people to further enable their economic engagement, it appears to have had limited impact in improving labour participation for disabled people (Braathen & Kvam, 2008). This paper addresses the lack of academic literature exploring the impact of international development schemes on the lives of disabled people in relation to employment by focusing on the testimonies of those viewing their input from a place of lay expertise. This paper has explored the contemporary experiences of managing and governing disability in the urban Malawi workforce.

5 | RECOMMENDATIONS

A central recommendation of this paper is to close the policy gap identified above. This can be addressed by (1) addressing the economic middle points, including local lenders, landlords and employers, by influencing them to be more inclusive and (2) holding NGOs accountable to follow the policy framework outlined in the CRPD. This work

could be completed in consultation with organisations including MCTU and organisations led by people with disabilities at a local level. We further recommend that policymakers and researchers reject Western understandings of poverty in Africa and disability that are colonial and ableist. Narratives in the global north situate sub-Saharan African poverty and disability as issues to which the continued intervention through charity and philanthropy is the unproblematic answer. It continues to be necessary to allow people with disabilities to be worked with, not for, and to be recognised as experts in their own needs and requirements. It is important to undermine assumptions regarding the work capability of people with disabilities and recognise them as economically engaged workers and entrepreneurs capable of personal agency, rather than objects of pity and charity.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from Prof Katherine Sang, Heriot-Watt University. The data are not publicly available as they contain information that could compromise the privacy of research participants.

ORCID

Jennifer Remnant  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7562-1547>

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