

# **An Investigation of How Local Councils in Malawi are Guided by Decentralization Policy in Project Selection and Implementation : The Case of Nutrition Security Projects in the District Development Plan 2017-22 of Zomba District Council**

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## **Abstract**

Decentralization policy prescribes active and wide participation of citizens in project choice and implementation for Malawi's local councils to achieve ownership and sustainability. From both literature and empirical data, this paper examines how decentralization policy in the local councils guides project choice and implementation focussing on nutrition security projects. The study was carried out through a case study of Zomba district local council with concentration on governance aspect as there was insufficient data to show how decentralization policy corroborates projects selection and implementation in the local councils. Purposive sampling, coupled with snowball sampling, was used to identify respondents and data was analysed through thematic area analysis using Nvivo for windows. The paper concludes that selection and implementation of projects, especially on nutrition security, in the local councils is carried out with abundant disregard to governance structures as stipulated in the laws and decentralization policy. It recommends, among other strategic measures, filling of all key positions in the local councils and put in place a transparent and responsive implementation framework.

**Keywords:** Malawi, Decentralization Policy, Local Council, Project selection and implementation, Nutrition security

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## **1. Introduction and Background**

Decentralization policy is informed by Local Government Act (1998) where citizen participation in projects selection and implementation is guaranteed. All local councils in Malawi are mandated to pick and implement their programmes in accordance with the dictates of the policy. The District Development Plan (DDP) 2017-22 for Zomba district council has eleven priority areas with food and nutrition security at household level as priority area number one. This study sampled nutrition security as one of the strategic areas for projects implementation in the local council to examine how the policy facilitates progress and achievement of milestones in nutrition projects. The study came at a time when stunted growth due to malnutrition was at a high prevalence rate of 37% (Ministry of Health - MoH, 2021).

Malawi as a country, relies on agriculture sector as a key driver of economic growth since the dawn of independence in the mid-60s. According to Farmers Union of Malawi (FUM, 2018) and Wood et al (2013), agriculture sector contributes to 30% of the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Since independence, government priority was on agriculture production for industry development (Office of President and Cabinet - OPC, 1987). Consequently, agriculture production focused on tobacco and maize production for industry and food security respectively, and this was at the expense of nutritious food production through livestock, legumes and other nutritious food items.

When non-state actors on nutrition found their way into public discourse following change of regime, they proceeded advancing malnutrition as a key issue for government policy direction. Research studies were conducted and papers presented on stunted growth due to malnutrition in terms of causes and effects until government adopted nutrition into its policy framework. Hence the decentralization policy from the Local Government Act of 1998 recognized nutrition security as one of the proponents of socio-economic growth in the country. Therefore, nutrition interventions would be pursued through decentralization structures in local councils where citizens' participation in decision making on issues affecting their lives was certain. FAO (2015b) and United Nations Systems Committee on Nutrition (UNSCN, 2014) contend that countries focusing on nutrition security register notable economic growth. However, a number of research studies including USAID (2014), European Commission (2018) and WFP (2015) established that nutrition insecurity is very high in Malawi such that half of under-five years children and at worst 54% of under-two years children were stunted. Pollitt et al (in Bhargava, 2014) and Barker (in Wood et al, 2013) found out that stunted growth prevents mental and physical development. Hence a fertile environment for unproductive human capital.

## 2.0 Problem Statement

Zomba district council is one of the 35 local councils spread across the country. Studies have revealed that operationalization of decentralization policy, as a legal requirement through Local Government Act, 1998, is rarely traced in the grass root structures under these local councils (Chiweza, 2010; Malamulo, 2012; O'Neil, 2014). World Bank (2010) and O'Neil et al (2014) disclose that there is no follow up with project implementation in local councils and that the councils are technically loose. Although this is the case, nutrition insecurity, also referred to as malnutrition, as priority area number one for project selection and implementation in Zomba local council, is one of the outstanding challenges which contributes to draining more than 10% of Malawi's GDP (WFP, 2015). Similarly, AU et al, (2012) point that the cost of hunger in Malawi is at \$597 million annually due to losses in health, education and economic productivity sectors caused by malnutrition. OPC (2007) states that malnutrition causes most of the deaths in the country. Signs of chronic under nutrition resulting into stunted growth are very common in Malawi (WHO & UNICEF, 2009). Ministry of Agriculture Food and Security (MoAFS, 2010) established that stunted growth prevalence rate was above 43% while USAID (2014) and European Commission (2018) pointed that the rate was at 41%. Latest figures show that stunted growth is at 37% which is still considered very high and a threat to Human Capital Development as one of the enablers for Malawi 2063 agenda (MoH, 2021). In Zomba district, stunted growth is at 36% (MoAFS, 2018). It is not surprising, therefore, that the country's nutrition policy documents of 2007-12 and 2018-22 describe malnutrition as a national crisis, and the Malawi Growth Development Strategy (MGDS) III (2017-22) recognizes it as an issue which requires urgent interventions. However, as established earlier, such interventions fall into an environment characterised by governance bottlenecks in project selection and implementation. The study investigates this problem and offers recommendations to deal with it at local council level such as Zomba district council which prioritizes food and nutrition security in the 2017-22 district development plan.

## 3.0 Purpose and objectives

The main purpose of this study was to establish leverage by decentralization policy in project selection and implementation focussing on nutrition security projects in the local councils of Malawi, and the following were the objectives; (1) Establish the understanding of key stakeholders on the role of decentralization policy in project selection and implementation in the local councils and; (2) Identify factors affecting selection and implementation of projects in the local councils focussing on nutrition security programming and productivity.

## 4.0 Literature Review

### 4.1 Citizen Participation in Project Selection and Implementation

Malawi Government adopted decentralization policy in 1998. This was widely applauded by policy makers and development practitioners as a game changer in terms of paradigm shift from top-down to bottom-up governance in public service delivery. The agriculture sector as a main stay of the country's economy and as one of the key sectors promoting food and nutrition security was among the pioneers of implementing the policy. Hussein (2013 and 2017) state that decentralization entails involvement of the citizenry in decision making by the central government, and as stipulated in the Local Government Act (1998), local councils would be at the centre of project selection and implementation following devolution of powers from central government. Hussein (2005), pointed that, in democratic dispensation, sustainable economic growth links positively with wider citizen participation, hence, the agriculture sector was one of the sectors which pioneered implementation of the decentralization policy. Thus, the hunger for sustainable economic growth was strong. However, Chiweza (2010) discovered that projects selection and implementation, especially in the agriculture sector, remains under central government control. While central government holds on control, the National Multi-Sector Nutrition Policy (2018-22) concedes that malnutrition has negative impact on physical and mental development of under five years children. Also, Pollitt et al (in Bhargava, 2014) and Barker (in Wood et al, 2013) argue that malnutrition affects both physical and mental development from human conception and this deters social and intellectual development. Consequently, the country loses \$597 million annually due to losses in health, education and economic productivity sectors caused by malnutrition (AU et al, 2012).

### 4.2 Overview of Global Governance for Nutrition Security projects

The UN General Assembly (UNGA) of 2015 had one of the key resolutions to put in place sustainable food systems that will promote nutrition security, thus, member states were challenged to prioritize nutrition projects (Branca et al, 2017). This was against a background of alarming prevalence rate in stunted growth where 155 million children of under-five years and 640 million adults were malnourished around the globe. GIZ (2017) states that about 800 million people in the world are undernourished and 2 billion people suffer from malnutrition globally. The European Union (EU) member states formulated an implementation plan which aimed to dealing with high prevalence rate of malnutrition through prioritizing among other key thematic areas; enhancing political and policy dialogue and identifying viable interventions (Lein, 2013). The International

Conference on Nutrition (ICN2) of 2014 (in Branca et al, 2017) strongly recommended countries to come up with effective implementation plans in a bid to achieve six nutrition targets which include 40% reduction in stunted growth for children under five years of age, and deal with three diet-related noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) targets by 2025. FAO (2015a), reveals that in Europe and Asia, more than 55% of adults are enduring the effects of stunted growth due to, among other reasons, weak governance systems. However, Engel (2014) points to the situation in Netherlands and wonders whether the absence of meaningful progress in addressing malnutrition is due to lack of nutrition knowledge or faulty implementation of known solutions. According to Hawkes (2017), one of the key barriers to winning the fight is lack of evidence-based policies.

In Africa, countries continue suffering from triple burden of malnutrition where, among other measures, governance interventions such as formulation and reviewing of social protection policy frameworks, evidence-based nutrition solutions, efforts to translate political commitments and declarations and building resilient systems are encouraged (FAO, 2017). Similarly, Nutrition International (2020) noted that the PINKK project which was implemented in Senegal leveraged on household centred approach where nutrition security was promoted through linking nutrition and governance and building resilience for most vulnerable households. This turned out a strong recommendation to countries in sub-Saharan region. According to Engel (2014), Kenya registered significant progress in terms of reducing stunted growth for under five children from 35% in 2009 to 26% in 2014 due to how they governed project implementation and reviewed for further programming (Engel, 2014). However, Mugambi et al (2017) emphasize on communication advocacy and social mobilization strategy as catalysts for maximizing nutrition outcomes. Branca et al (2014) settles it by recommending the need to not only strengthening communication in the governance but also enhancing implementation and coordination structures.

In SADC region, countries came up with food and nutrition security strategy 2015-22 where activities include food fortification for nutrition following strong evidence that child stunting in the region was as high as 50% in some countries (SADC, 2014). To achieve intended outcomes, the strategy strongly recommended broad participation and consultation during implementation for the sake of ownership and commitment at all levels. Although this high level commitment is noted, Ash (2016), established that governments in the region were yet to demonstrate ownership. There was inadequate nutrition governance and coordination for successful delivery of interventions. Further, it was established that, among other strategic measures to maximize intended outcomes, there was inevitable need to enable local government structures to oversee and deliver nutrition services to ensure local ownership of nutrition programs and outcomes.

In any case, project implementation and coordination vary from one community to another, from one country to another and from region to another because of geographic, demographic, economic and political factors which create different institutional environments (Engel, 2014). Therefore an in-depth analysis of implementing institutions is important to establish weak links in the governance and implementation frameworks.

#### *4.3 Overview of Malawi Governance for Nutrition Security projects*

The Decentralization Policy (1998) is clear in terms of how both central government and local councils should proceed with selection and implementation of various projects; It “*promotes popular participation in the governance and development of districts.*” At local level, project selection and implementation in key sectors of the economy such as agriculture, education and health are coordinated by the council in accordance with decentralization policy. Reddy (2015), however, reveals that in the agriculture sector, grassroot levels, where smallholder farmers are located, have no voice in the production value chain. Thus, they are never given a voice at any level of decision making. As a result, project implementation lacks ownership. According to Malumbo (2012), local citizens in Malawi are rarely given space to participate in processes of public policy making across the entire public sector.

The Constitution of Malawi recognizes principles of national policy that facilitate socio-economic development of the nation, and nutrition is one of them. Section 13 (b) of the Constitution states; “*The state shall actively promote the welfare and development of the people of Malawi by progressively adopting and implementing policies and legislation aimed at achieving adequate nutrition for all in order to promote good health and self-sufficiency.*” Through this constitutional aspiration, the country has nutrition policy documents of 2007-12 and 2018-22 which offer guidance on implementation of nutrition security projects. Further, food and nutrition bill has been drafted and is ready for parliament deliberations to enact a law which will facilitate enforcement of the right to adequate food and nutrition.

In the jurisdiction of Zomba district council, stunted growth emerged from 52% in 2006 (Nutrition Policy 2007-12) to 36% in 2018 (MoAFS, 2018). According to UNSCN (2014), this is due to policies that do not focus on strategic production of nutritious foods. This is the case despite government identifying nutrition security as an important component in social economic development of the country and Zomba district council has considered food and nutrition security as priority area number one from 2017-22. However, on the one hand, IFPRI (2018) demonstrates that nutrition security is beyond production of food because reducing stunted growth

does not only require enough food but also how food is prepared and consumed. On the other hand, how projects are designed, implemented and coordinated contributes to failure or achievements of milestones in dealing with stunted growth (Ash, 2016). The Nutrition Policy (2018-22) and Malawi Growth Development Strategy (MGDS) III identify the use of local structures such as, District Nutrition Coordination Committees (DNCCs) and Village Development Committees (VDC) under the Area Development Committees (ADCs) in project design, implementation and coordination as stipulated in the decentralization policy but there is very little information to show how these structures are engaged in all the councils which includes Zomba district council. Key researchers in nutrition projects such as, FAO (2015); USAID (2014); European Commission (2018); IFPRI (2018); IFPRI (2015); Smith et al (2003) and Fan (2017) have published widely on Malawi's nutrition projects but have not examined how these projects are designed and implemented as required by policies. This scenario is not uncommon in the key development sectors under the local councils. Chingaipe & Msukwa (2012) discovered that citizens at grassroots levels, in all councils, are engaged through consultation meetings where policy makers and duty bearers are on the fore front of identifying and justifying issues.

## 5.0 Methodology

Semi-structured questionnaire was used to conduct interviews through in-depth and FGDs sessions. The questions focussed on key issues as highlighted by study objectives and the nature of questions were exploratory hence open-ended. Thus, a deductive approach was used to establish depth of the subject matter. The study did not intend to test a hypothesis or theory, rather, it sought to build on a theory that can help in understanding and predicting on the phenomenon under study. As a case study, it is capable of uncovering rich details towards a particular situation hence helpful in generating theories to generalize and predict on a phenomenon (Collins & Hussey, 2009). Weber (in Bryman & Bell, 2007) contends that this method lead to full understanding of the causal explanation of situations. It explores and explains depth of a phenomenon by means of reference to human behaviour towards a similar phenomenon. It is therefore qualitative. The thrust of the matter is to explore and explain how decentralization policy guides project selection and implementation in the councils.

All interviews were recorded and conducted in the comfort of participants' offices while FGD sessions were conducted at the conference room of Zomba District Council offices where all participants usually meet for their regular council meetings. The choice of interview venue was sensitive to respondents' convenience. Kamper et al (in Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007) discovered that where respondents are not comfortable in a research study, chances are high that their participation will lead to collection of invalid or low quality data.

### 5.1 Data Analysis

Themes from collected data were generated using NVivo for windows. Data was transcribed and subsequently, an open coding system adopted from Grounded Theory data analysis was employed. According to Gibbs (2010), this model of analysis is by far the most popular technique for qualitative analysis because it is exhaustive. The three stages in the open coding system were applied. These are; (1) Open Coding: Developing data categories; (2) Axial Coding: Interconnecting the categories, and; (3) Selective Coding: Explaining connected categories and produce theoretical propositions.

### 5.2 Sampling and Sample Size

A total number of 36 participants were sampled purposively. This was a nonprobable sampling which was executed through snowball sampling technique where few identified study subjects recruited other subjects from among their acquaintances. The study was politically sensitive and it required participants to be persuaded from within themselves. As a result, out of the 36 participants, there were 18 ward councillors, 15 key staff under the district council departments and 3 key staff from NGOs who implement projects in the council. The sample size was distributed to 18 participants for FGDs interviews and 18 for in-depth interviews. However, 4 out of the 18 participants for in-depth interviews did not participate. One of them withdrew in the due course of the interview while three of them ignored to participate. The table 1 below shows positions and departments of participants that were sampled.

**5.2.1 Table 1: Positions and Departments of participants**

ID	Positions	Departments
1	District Commissioner	Council Secretariat
2	Director of Planning & Development	Council Secretariat
3	Director of Administration	Council Secretariat
4	District Social & Welfare Officer	Council Secretariat
5	Director of Finance	Council Secretariat
6	Senior Nutrition Officer	Council Secretariat
7	Special Needs Division Coordinator	Education
8	School & Health Nutrition Coordinator	Education
9	School & Health Nutrition Coordinator	Education
10	Food & Nutrition Officer	Agriculture
11	District Agriculture Dev. Officer	Agriculture
12	Director of Health & Social Services (District Health Officer – DHO)	Health
13	Chief Preventive Health Officer	Health
14	District Nutrition Coordinator	Health
15	District Medical Officer	Health
16	Project Officer	PCI
17	Project Coordinator	Emmanuel Int.
18	Community Dev. Officer	Save the Child.
19	18 Ward Councillors	District Council

### 5.3 Ethics

This study involved human interaction hence, all research ethics protocols were observed. All participants were informed about their rights to refuse participation or withdraw from participating at any time. They were also ensured about confidentiality and anonymity. A consent form was filled by all participants except three of them who opted for participation without filling the form.

## 6.0 Findings and Discussion

Study findings are discussed and arranged in accordance with objectives i.e. (1) establish the understanding of key stakeholders on the role of decentralization policy in project selection and implementation in the local councils and; (2) identify factors affecting selection and implementation of projects in the local councils focusing on nutrition security programming and productivity.

### 6.1 Establish the understanding of key stakeholders on the role of decentralization program in project selection and implementation in the local councils

It was noted that almost all key stakeholders involved in project selection and implementation within Zomba district council were aware that decentralization policy promotes citizen participation in decision making, particularly regarding project choice, designing and implementation. It was reported that as a result of decentralization programme, there were some improvements on service delivery as implementation of some locally initiated projects were possible, and, to some extent, people were able to hold their leaders accountable through following up project details such as funding amount and quality of works and services delivered. The decentralization programme had implementation structures such as DDCs, ADC and VDCs, which formed key stakeholders in project selection and implementation at grass root level. Project implementation in various interventions including nutrition security projects were supposed to be carried out through these structures. However, it was established that the central government would not devolve most of the services as stipulated in the decentralization policy. For example, respondents discussed that the responsibility to choose projects to implement at district level was still in the hands of central government. In most cases, communities were advised to implement construction projects for structures such as roads and schools following directive from central government. But, most of the councilors mentioned that the district council had centralized power such that they are rarely consulted on what projects to consider and how to implement.

Similarly, the study revealed that food and nutrition as priority area number one for the DDP – 2017/22 in Zomba district council had made no specific strides due to, among other reasons, lack of collaboration with decentralized structures which resulted in lack of ownership. Largely, the DDP prioritized infrastructure development in various sectors with food and nutrition projects implemented as opportunistic interventions, integrated in HIV and AIDS projects. Precisely, the council never implemented a standalone nutrition project from within its budget. Respondents felt that there was no visible direction in nutrition projects because central

government appeared wandering about the issue as evidenced by shifting of nutrition programme coordination from OPC to ministry of health although the ministry of health was mainly mandated to deal with curative interventions of malnutrition cases as opposed to preventive interventions. Nonetheless, other ministries such as Agriculture and Education were also reported to have nutrition programmes. As a result, respondents reported that it was confusing regarding which entity was responsible for coordination of nutrition security in the district and the country as a whole. Meanwhile, implementation of food and nutrition security projects in the district was essentially left as a responsibility of NGOs except the Agricultural Input Program (AIP). Most of respondents held that there was still minimal impact out of food and nutrition security interventions in the district due to little commitment from central government and disjointed coordination.

However, the agriculture office under Zomba district council reported from their records that in 2010, stunted growth prevalence rate at national level was at 47% and 48% for Zomba district. At the time of this study, the Zomba district agriculture office said that the national prevalence rate was at 37% and 36.4% for Zomba district suggesting a 10% and 12% drop respectively in a space of ten years.

According to EU (2016), Department of Nutrition, HIV and AIDS (DNHA) coordinates nutrition interventions from central government through structures of line ministries and district councils but the EU report is quick to point out that sector coordination has been largely disconnected. This is not surprising because, as the findings revealed, ministry of health focuses on curative interventions as opposed to preventive interventions which are at the centre of nutrition programming. This approach at central level trickled down to local councils as it was established that coordination issues on food and nutrition projects were more of a problem than a challenge. Inversely, coordination of physical infrastructure projects was treated with utmost attention. Nevertheless, a country which has all required infrastructure development with malnourished population would never reach self-sufficiency and would remain trapped in poverty because, as revealed in this study, evidence shows that countries continue to spend a fortune of their national budget on malnutrition cases at the expense of human capital development, and this is a high risk to Malawi 2063 agenda. Also, the focus on physical infrastructure development on the part of Zomba district council, collapses the purpose of putting nutrition security as priority area number one for the period 2017-22.

The table 2 below summarizes how participants in a sampled department responded to key question on the role of decentralization policy in project selection and implementation for the council.

**6.1.1 Table 2: Participants common responses**

<b>Key Question: How do you relate decentralization policy to project selection and implementation, especially on nutrition, in the council?</b>		
<b>Department</b>	<b>Common Response</b>	<b>Frequency per department</b>
Council Secretariat	Citizen participation in choices and projects implementation through ADCs and VDCs	6 out of 6
Agriculture	Involving citizens in project implementation	1 out of 2
Education	Involving citizens in planning and execution of projects	2 out of 3
Health	Consulting and involving citizens in project implementation	3 out of 4
NGOs	Citizen involvement at all levels of project implementation	2 out of 3
Ward Councilors	Citizens must be consulted on what projects and how to implement ( <i>Mphanvu ku anthu</i> )	13 out of 18

## 6.2 Identify factors affecting selection and implementation of projects in the local councils focussing on nutrition security programming and productivity

### (i) Lack of Political Will

It was gathered that the council had been distributing funds for community projects through Local Development Fund (LDF), which is allocated to constituencies through Constituency Development Fund (CDF). The fund is, in most cases, unilaterally controlled by a Member of Parliament (MP) representing a constituency, who decides which projects to be implemented in his/her constituency. Councillors whose mandate entails identifying development projects for the CDF are rarely consulted.

All participants in this study could not recall specific projects, especially on food and nutrition, which an MP in the whole district of Zomba considered to implement. This was linked to influence by the council through directives from central government to prioritize physical structures such as roads and buildings blended as *chitukuko chowoneka ndi maso* (development which is physical and visible). It is regarded as a powerful political tool especially during campaign for elections into public offices. Politicians are able to point and count their achievements through physical and visible structures. For example, president of the ruling party who was also head of state prior to elections in 2019 elected a billboard along Mangochi to Liwonde road which his government constructed and the billboard showed the president's face with a caption in bold font; "*Chitukuko chowoneka ndi maso.*" This reflects the thinking and priority indicators when considering projects at central

government level which influences priorities in the local councils. Subsequently, nutrition budget lines in the councils are regarded as abstract and invisible and are overlooked at will.

**(ii) Lack of Consultations**

Almost all participants mentioned that MPS make unilateral decisions, in clear violation of laid down procedures in decentralization policy which demand councilors and community structures to be consulted. One of the participants said “if councilors were given a chance to suggest what type of projects to implement, I would among other projects suggest to establish an orchard in my area- *koma pano ma khansala angokhala ngati chipatala chopanda mankhwala (As it is, councilors are like a clinic without drugs, they are not useful).*”

Further, the council relied on NGOs to implement food and nutrition security projects in the district. It was gathered that some NGOs would come and start implementing projects without consulting the council. They would go through District Executive Committee (DEC) which used to work on behalf of the council at the time when councilors were not there. This has created a governance gap because the DEC is only an advisory body to the council committee which comprises of all elected councilors.

**(iii) Poor Planning**

Other study participants described the NGOs as not inclusive in their planning and execution. It was pointed out that NGOs lacked inclusiveness in their programming. Most of them would proceed with implementation on their own after reporting to the DEC. There were only two NGO projects applauded by participants because the council was involved in all the stages and these were Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) and Support for Nutrition Improvement Component (SNIC).

**(iv) Lack of Coordination**

It was well reported that when NGOs report at the DEC, they were left to implement without tracking their progress. They would report at their own pace and sometimes they would not report until end of their project. This encouraged some NGOs to implement activities that could not satisfy project objectives and at worst, carrying out activities outside scope of their project. Also, there was no sharing of information in terms of success stories. For example the adoption of care group model by Malawi government where households are grouped and form a cluster, then get briefed on health and nutrition was widely commended to have noticeable impact but most of stakeholders lacked this information because they operated in isolation.

**(v) Nutrition Misconceptions and Knowledge**

It was noted that, some people interpret malnutrition-related illnesses as effects of witchcraft. They would, therefore, resort to traditional remedies thereby worsening the situation. Further, some men perceived nutrition-related illnesses as women’s responsibility thereby introducing a new dimension of gender into the problem. In addition, the use of soda when cooking relish and other foods was reported and described as deterrent to nutritious benefits from the food. Participants argued that soda removes nutrients from food. However, they were quick to point that this is due to lack of sustainable sources of energy for cooking. They mentioned that during rainy season, most of households are unable to access enough firewood which is the only means of cooking food in rural areas. When they get few firewood, soda becomes handy because food is ready for consumption within a short period of cooking. When soda is not available, they are unable to cook locally found nutritious food such as beans because they take an hour or more to be ready for consumption. Also, it was added that high levels of illiteracy were contributing to lack of understanding during implementation of available interventions.

**(vi) Misappropriation of funds**

Some projects were reported to have been abandoned or taking long time to complete due to misuse of funds. For example, SNIC project was well funded by donors and focused on nutrition interventions for the entire district. The project collapsed before completion due to pulling out of donors following discovery of unaccounted expenditure in large amounts.

**(vii) Key Staff Capacity Building**

Most of the key staff at the council required basic training in project management. For example, at the time of conducting interviews for this study, there was only one key staff who was trained in project management, and by the time of writing report, the staff was transferred. This was by all means not conducive for effective and efficient project implementation, tracking and measuring progress. It was not surprising to note that there was no clear implementation framework to guide and coordinate project implementation.

**(viii) High Vacancy rate in key positions**

The study gathered that almost 50% of key positions at the council were vacant such that planning and implementation of the district development plan was very slow. It was mentioned that this was due to inadequate funding to recruit professionals into the positions.

**(ix) Inadequate Funding to councils**

The Republic Constitution demands that 5% of annual national budget should be allocated to councils for their projects but it was reported that this was still a dream. As a result some of the key functions at the council including communication and civic education on various projects were idling.

## 6.1 Analysis of the Findings

It must be reported, however, that political will on food and nutrition was noted at central government level through the AIP and other policies on food security, sustainability of DNHA department, nutrition policy documents of 2007-11 and 2018-22, and SUN 3.0 Strategy although no clear guidance in terms of implementation framework has been established in this study. In addition, central government adopted implementation model of care groups where communities are grouped and briefed on health and nutrition. The available political will is challenged to walk the talk of the decentralization policy while supplementing with other innovations such as the care group model. It has been revealed that decentralization policy structures and models were only created and imposed on other stakeholders such as NGOs to use and not for the central government and local councils. The presence of a practical political will, on the matter, at both local and central government levels, will among other key issues, enable prioritizing nutrition projects, allocate resources for recruitment of staff into key positions and capacity building. Best of all, practical political will, will consider creating a unit responsible for coordination of projects in local councils. Nevertheless, research evidence warns, according to Christensen & Laegreid (2011), that interventions managed by an institution with no horizontal coordinating power to other sectors find it difficult to succeed. According to OPC (2013) Performance Enhancement Department (PED) was commissioned in 2012 because it was noticed that Ministry of Economic Planning and Development (MEPD) which was responsible to coordinate reforms in the public service lacked bargaining powers.

With regard to inadequate funding, this has always been a disarming excuse, on the part of both central and local governments. They justify with such an excuse why some projects and interventions are not being carried out. Interestingly, primary data in this study reveals that some funds in the local council were misused. This rises on both legs against the narrative of inadequate funds. Further, NAO (2021) reported that millions of funds for Covid19 interventions were abused in local councils across the country including Zomba district council. Furthermore, Ministry of Finance - MoF (2021) reported that local councils across the country including Zomba district council recorded payroll transactions that were pointing to abusing of funds for the months of August, September and October 2020. Such reports are inconsistent with the excuse of inadequate funds for failing to implement and coordinate projects that directly hinge on sustainable socio-economic transformation such as food and nutrition security.

The table 3 below shows factors discussed above and their frequency as responded by participants;

**6.2.1 Table 2: Frequency of factors**

<b>Key Question:</b> <i>What are the key factors affecting project selection and implementation in the local councils focusing on nutrition security programming and productivity?</i>	
<b>Factors</b>	<b>Frequency out of 28 participants</b>
<i>Lack of Political Will</i>	22
<i>Lack of Consultations</i>	23
<i>Poor Planning</i>	9
<i>Lack of Coordination</i>	23
<i>Nutrition misconceptions and Knowledge</i>	8
<i>Misappropriation of funds</i>	24
<i>Key Staff Capacity Building</i>	14
<i>High vacancy rate in key positions</i>	17
<i>Inadequate Funding to councils</i>	21

## 7.0 Conclusion

This study has established that Decentralization policy is a well known guiding tool for project selection and implementation in Zomba district council and all local councils across the country. Zomba district council registered some improvements in terms of service delivery due to decentralization policy. The council was now able to implement certain initiatives from within itself as stipulated in the policy. Structures such as DDCs, ADCs and VDCs are in place in all communities to facilitate citizen participation and implementation of various projects.

Nonetheless, through literature review and primary data, it has been noted that there is abundant disregard of the structures when selecting and implementing projects in the councils. Further, it has been revealed that central government is very slow to devolve powers to the local structures on various development projects including nutrition security projects. At Zomba district council, there was very little to be documented in terms of milestones for food and nutrition security as priority area number one for DDP 2017/22. Food and nutrition interventions were implemented as opportunistic activities embedded in HIV and AIDS programme. Most of the projects and interventions for the priority area number one of the council are left for NGOs to implement. Ironically, NGOs are accused of operating in isolation where among other issues, they leave out other intended



activities and also divert to areas outside project scope without seeking guidance of the council. This trickles down to issues of lack of coordination in project implementation.

Further, the study revealed that both local and central governments prioritize physical infrastructure development *chitukuko chooneka ndi maso* (development which is physical and visible) at the expense of important projects focussing on nutrition, whose benefits have no physical representation like a road, bridge or borehole but have direct and severe impact on the country's economy. As a result, the country continues to register high malnutrition levels which, in turn, is leading to both financial and economic losses due to weak human capital development. This is happening when the country has all necessary policy documents in place. Hence, a call for action through not only political will in both local and central governments but also enhanced public awareness on malnutrition, strengthening the role of gender in malnutrition and capacity building at Zomba district council and other local councils in the country.

Additionally, the study has revealed that most of the problems and challenges associated with the use of decentralization policy in the local councils are structural and governance based. For example, Zomba district council was reported to have almost 50% vacancy rate in key strategic positions and that almost all of the available key staff required training in project management as part of capacity building. On the popular excuse of inadequate funding for not implementing some projects, this study has established that it is not a reasonable scapegoat especially when the study has also arrived at misappropriation of funds in local councils including Zomba district council.

## 8.0 Recommendations

The study offers the following recommendations;

- i. A transparent and responsive implementation framework should not only be prepared but also implemented, coordinated and monitored in the councils with meaningful support from non-state actors.
- ii. Central Government should demonstrate use of evidence in decision making by filling up all key positions in local councils as a matter of priority.
- iii. Local and Central Governments should not only be committed to *zitukuko zowoneka ndi maso* but also non physical infrastructure projects that have direct bearing on the global and local economy such as nutrition security projects.
- iv. Abuse of funds in local councils must always be accounted for and perpetrators punished according laws.
- v. Local and Central Governments should not negotiate on the dictates of own laws. The decentralization policy which is backed by the Constitution and Local Government Act, 1998, ought to be implemented in full.

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