

## Non-state Actors and Democratic Consolidation

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**NUFU Project on Democratic Consolidation in Malawi**

**WP 2009: 1**



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### **NUFU Project on Democratic Consolidation in Malawi**

Position paper for the sub-group on non-state actors in politics

### **Indexing terms**

Civil society  
Democratisation  
Democratic consolidation  
Malawi

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## Introduction

The concept of ‘non-state actor’ is defined negatively and denotes a set of actors that comprises organised activity located between the state and the family (Wood 1990). It is often used interchangeably with civil society. A multitude of terms have emerged over the years and created considerable conceptual confusion which persists to this day (Kumar 1993, Howell and Pearce 2001, Tostensen et al. 2001). Therefore, an operational delimitation is needed to offer a contribution to the overall theme of non-state actors in democratic consolidation. We interpret non-state actors as potentially covering several types of institution:

- private businesses;
- media organisations;
- political parties;
- non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or voluntary associations, or more generally civil society organisations (CSOs);
- interest organisations, such as trade unions, confederations of employers and businesses, farmers’ associations, etc.

In view of the overall theme of the NUFU project – democratic consolidation – and the constraints of available research time and capacity, we have made a selection among the broader range of ‘non-state actors’, i.e. political parties and certain types of civil society organisations. In practice, we focus on a sub-set of ‘civil society’: political parties and three types of civil society organisations.

## Political parties

Political parties fall under the umbrella of ‘non-state actors’ because of the theoretical significance normally attributed to political parties in democratic consolidation as formulated by Schattschneider (1942): “To speak of democracy is to speak of a system of competing parties”. One justification for dealing specifically with parties is that although parties are, in principle, private, voluntary organisations based on supporters and separate from the state, they are distinguished from other civil society groups by their very function in the political system. Political parties are private organisations producing public goods by means of their functions: nominating candidates and seeking office control in order to implement policy (Schlesinger 1991).

Generally, political parties are performing seven functions in the political system (Dalton and Wattenberg 2002): (i) candidate nomination; (ii) electoral mobilisation; (iii) issue structuring; (iv) social representation; (v) interest aggregation; (vi) forming and sustaining governments; and (vii) social integration. For some of these functions parties have almost a monopoly, while other functions are shared with other types of actor. Candidate nomination is usually *the* most important function of parties, although in most political systems it is also possible for independent candidates to vie for office. Parties are also unique in the sense that interest aggregation and the need to create a coherent political programme for almost all types of issues and political priorities across the board, are only performed by parties, whereas most individual interest groups are mainly concerned with promoting and articulating a narrow range of issues or a single cause.

Although there is an extensive literature on the role of parties in a democracy (Randall and Svåsand 2002), it is not obvious what precise properties parties need to possess in order to enhance the quality of democratic governance: the link between parties and democracy is more often assumed

than demonstrated (van Biezen 2003). Two dimensions have been addressed in particular: the qualities of political parties themselves as *organisations*, and the qualities of the party *system*. The organisational quality of parties refers to the degree of internal democracy. Parties are ostensibly voluntary organisations whose members join voluntarily in pursuit of common political objectives. The members decide on the rules of the organisation and the policies to be pursued by the party and elect the leadership. Both in theory and in practice this ‘fairy tale’ version of the party has been attacked. Theoretically, it has been argued that too much democracy inside a party may actually prevent it from competing efficiently for votes. In a competitive party system party leaders need space for autonomous decision-making. It has also been argued that there may be a contradiction between the political preferences of party members and the party voters, the so-called May’s law (Kitschelt 1989, Norris 1995). The members elect their party leader, but the voters elect their political representatives. Thus, democratic accountability in the political system is a relationship between voters and leaders. Empirically, several studies have argued that although the party statutes appear democratic, in practice they are not (Michels 1965).

With regard to the qualities of the party *system*, four variables are seen as critical: (i) the number of parties; (ii) their relative size; (iii) their ideological orientation; and (iv) the pattern of interaction between the parties. However, in terms of democratic governance it is unclear what the most beneficial scores on each of these variables might be. A democracy requires more than one party, but too many parties are usually seen as a problem by creating political fragmentation. In terms of relative size, the most problematic characteristic of a party system is when one party dominates over all other parties for a considerable time (Giliomee and Simkins 1999). Parties are supposed to represent and articulate different political preferences and offer alternative political solutions to the problems at hand. Two extreme positions are usually seen as negative for democratic governance. First, the *absence* of ideological differences between parties is not seen to be conducive to democratic practice. If parties become too similar, it is argued, voters will lose interest in the political process because they cannot see any impact of a party change in government. On the other hand, too *widely polarised* parties are also seen to be negatively associated with democratic governance as polarisation inhibits necessary political compromise and prevent cross-party consensus on issues of long-term importance for the political system. A party *system* also requires some form of stable interaction pattern between the parties. If all parties are, in principle, likely to associate with or enter into coalition with any other party – regardless of ideological orientation – the consequence will be a totally unpredictable set of political alliances formed and dissolved by accidental factors. To these four qualities we should add a fifth: a party system should consist of parties with some form of stability, or institutionalisation (Randall and Svåsand 2002).

Parties are institutions but nowhere do parties function entirely according to the formal statutes (Panebianco 1988). Traditions, informal factions, daily routines, resource scarcity, unequal distribution of resources between participants are factors that skew the operations of a party in favour of some participants to the detriment of others. In weak and under-resourced parties such as those in Malawi, it is particularly likely that formal rules will be replaced by informal practices. Meetings of the parties’ national executive committees are rarely held and the rules for national conventions not observed. The current incumbent party did not organise a national convention until January 2009, almost four years after it was registered. And the sole purpose of the convention was to formally nominate the party founder, President Bingu wa Mutharika, as the party’s presidential nominee for 2009 and to endorse the nominees for the 193 parliamentary constituencies – in spite of continuous controversies over several of the primary elections. All office holders at the national level continue to serve by virtue of being appointed by the president.

The empirical study of the linkage between parties and democratic consolidation in Malawi can take as its point of departure three main questions:



First, to what extent do parties in Malawi perform the seven functions usually ascribed to parties in a democracy? Of the seven functions, candidate nomination is the most important, but parliamentary candidate nominations continued into 2009 to be marred by irregularities, resulting in a record number of independent candidates.<sup>1</sup> In the 2004 election 12.4 per cent of the parliamentary candidates were women. Of the 193 elected MPs, 27 women were elected, accounting for only 14 per cent (Smiddy 2006). Thus, Malawi currently falls significantly below the goal of 30 per cent women MPs as set by the Southern African Development Community (SADC).<sup>2</sup> Smiddy's tables also demonstrate the variation between parties in terms of female candidates. In the UDF one-fifth of all candidates were women, while the corresponding figure for the MCP was only 6 per cent. Empirical studies of the representation of women in parliaments have focused on two independent, but related processes: the nomination process inside the parties and the election itself (Kittilson 2006). It will be an important part of this project to examine the nomination processes prior to the 2009 parliamentary election to investigate to what extent the factors identified by Kittilson are also relevant for the Malawian parties and to what extent parties stick to the rules when nominating candidates or if informal practices prove more important than formal rules. It has been found in most empirical analyses of candidate nominations that the most important factor influencing nomination is incumbency: those already elected are more likely to be re-nominated than any challenger (Gallagher 1988).

A second question is to what extent parties in Malawi are internally democratic? This problem area is particularly relevant for the study of informal practices vs. adherence to the formal party statutes as regards candidate nominations, policy formulation, alliance formation with other parties, and party financial matters. The role of women inside parties is as important as the role of women in parliament. Kittilson (2006) shows how internal party organisation statutes and practices impact on the likelihood of women to be nominated by a party. The issue of internal democracy is crucial because of its impact on the electorate's perception of the political process and political actors.

A final question with regard to democratic consolidation is to what extent the party system has become institutionalised and balanced?

## Civil society

The significance of civil society in terms of democratic consolidation is somewhat more disputed. It has been argued that the often repeated *a priori* claim that civil society contributes unequivocally to democratic consolidation does not necessarily hold in practice. Rather, a differentiated approach is necessary. Many CSOs no doubt play a constructive consolidating role while the activities of others make no difference one way or the other. Still others may have a profoundly anti-democratic function. In other words, individual CSOs play an ambiguous role in the democratic consolidation process (Tostensen 1993). Therefore, it is a matter of empirical investigation whether or not civil society makes a significant contribution. If it does make a contribution it must be ascertained how significant it is. The dispute does not hinge on the empirical finding of a correlation between the presence of civil society organisations and democratic government. The right to associate and to form organisations *is* one of the fundamental rights in a democracy. The problem is to establish and document the mechanism whereby civil society contributes to democratic governance or to its opposite, and, in the context of newly democratised African states, to ascertain how easily the concept travels to that geographical area.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.nationamw.net/print.asp?article\\_id=2902](http://www.nationamw.net/print.asp?article_id=2902). Accessed on 16.02.09.

<sup>2</sup> Female representation is actually better at the cabinet level. Currently five of the 22 ministers are women, whereas at the start of the Mutharika administration there were only two out of 21.

Three types of organisation seem particularly relevant empirical foci in the Malawian context: (i) religious associations; (ii) human rights and democracy promoting associations; and (iii) organisations mobilising the interests of women. The inclusion of the first of these, the religious associations, is warranted on account of the significance attributed to them by analysts of Malawian society.<sup>3</sup> Various faith communities are present throughout Malawi and have already proven to play an important political role through the Public Affairs Committee (PAC), comprising Protestant churches, the Catholic Church, and the Muslim community. As a newly democratised country, it can not be taken for granted that democratic practices and procedures will automatically have been internalised among all groups in the population, nor that political elites or state authorities will act in a manner consistent with democratic norms. Thus, in a time perspective where the focus is democratic consolidation, the role of this kind of CSOs is potentially of great importance. Women's organisations are included because of their significance in targeting a part of the population that generally has had least access to political power, as well as having been disadvantaged generally in the social organisation of Malawi. These three types of civil society organisation share a common characteristic: a connection between the national and international community. For the faith communities this link is obvious, but as democracy promotion and gender issues are also part of the international aid agenda, organisations within these fields also span the domestic-international divide.

The selection of these three types of civil society organisation nevertheless fails to include actors that are deemed to be of equal, and perhaps greater, significance to democratic consolidation: the development of independent media outlets that may provide citizens with information. Failure to include these actors is inevitably a drawback in understanding an important component of democratic consolidation, upon which the very groups we will focus are also dependent.

Below we first present arguments in the literature suggesting why civil society is significant for democratic consolidation.

According to (van Rooy 1998:30) civil society is generally understood as “the population of groups formed for collective purposes primarily outside of the state and the marketplace”. Civil society can also be seen as forms of networks connecting individuals in an organised way, beyond family and kinship-based networks. The positive association between civil society and democracy was strongly emphasised by Alexis de Tocqueville in his classical study of American democracy. Not only was freedom of association a critical part of a free society but he also argued that “... no countries need associations more – to prevent either despotism of parties or the arbitrary rule of a prince – than those with a democratic social state” (de Tocqueville 1848/1965:192). Associations of citizens were the primary shield for the political minority which faced an all-embracing majority party in government. Voluntary associations are, therefore, part of the balancing of political institutions in a democracy. Modern empirical sociological and political research provides strong support for an association between civil society and a democratic system. In their classic study *The Civic Culture* Almond and Verba found that the citizens' political self-competence, including subjective competence in influencing government, was strongly correlated with organisational membership (Almond and Verba 1963). Although there were differences in subjective competence levels between types of organisational memberships and number of memberships “the most striking finding is the contrast between those who are members of organisations that they do not perceive as being political and those who are members of no organisation” (Almond and Verba 1963:254). They also show that people participating in voluntary associations tend to take a stronger interest in politics, are more familiar with political issues, and participate more in political activities than

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<sup>3</sup> More Malawians report church group membership than any other type of membership and church leaders are contacted more often by Malawian citizens than any other type of leader (Mattes et al. 2000:62–63).

people without such membership. More recent studies, such as that of Erlach (2006) confirm these findings.

In contemporary studies, where the concept of social capital is used to analyse the extent and depth of mutual bonds between citizens (some of which through voluntary association membership), there is concern for the future health of the democratic system because of a decline in both the number of members in voluntary associations and the activity levels among those who are members (Putnam 2000). However, the empirical findings from one country – USA – turn out not to be valid in other countries, such as Sweden, Britain and Germany (Putnam 2003).

Putnam's theory about the positive linkage between civil society, social capital and democracy has been tested in completely different settings and largely confirmed. Booth and Richard analysed social and political attitudes among urban citizens in six Central American countries and found that civil society activism did contribute to social and political capital.<sup>4</sup> Formal group activism in particular contributed to higher scores on all political capital variables (Booth and Richard 1998).

The link between civil society and democracy is usually expressed in citizen participation through electoral institutions and processes. Civil society organisations mobilise support for issues and channel the concerns into the political system via elected representatives and links with political parties or in the shape of varieties of social corporatism. Recent strands of democratic theory broadens this perspective and may be seen as a response to a perceived democratic malaise scenario emanating from studies of declining electoral turnout, the exodus of members from political parties, and the increasing distrust of political institutions and political elites. In this perspective, the role of civil society organisations in a democracy is one part of a wide range of mechanisms connecting citizens to public authorities through continuous interaction, rather than the occasional voting events (O'Flynn 2006). One version of this perspective is the theory of 'associative democracy' that argues in favour of devolving as many social activities as possible to self-governing associations. This will reduce the size and complexity of the state and the functioning of democratic government will be improved: "... of all the reform doctrines now current, only associationalism gives due recognition to the reality of an organisational society and seeks to address the problem by democratising institutions in civil society and by decentralising the state" (Hirst 2002:2). Thus, associative democracy, through civil society organisations, will rescue the democratic state from the declining tendencies that can be observed in the contemporary context. Cornwall and Coelho offer perspectives on how to promote a 'participatory sphere' of institutions with "a semi-autonomous existence, outside and apart from the institutions of formal politics, bureaucracy and everyday associational life ..." (Cornwall and Coelho 2007:1–2). A deepening of democracy requires not only formal constitutional rights, but also the creation of spaces of power enhancing the ability of marginal groups to have a direct input into the formulation of as well as the implementation of public policy. Examples of such arenas are political-administrative bodies linking the bureaucratic apparatus of the state at the grassroots level with actors representing local citizens, such as local civil society organisations.

The common perspective in this literature is the correlation between a vibrant civil society and the health status of a democracy. There are several mechanisms that connect the nature of civil society with the nature of the democratic system. Civil society organisations are – and should be seen to be – an inevitable consequence of the democratic right to associate. The creation of – and membership in – civil society associations may be stimulated by self-interest among the participants, but the net consequence for the polity as a whole is positive. This is so because the governance of private associations provides a learning experience for the participants, which may be transformed into

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<sup>4</sup> Political capital measured as 'support for democratic norms', voting behaviour, campaign activism, and contacting public officials.

political capital and transplanted to political arenas, in the form of advancing interests, stimulating political participation in order to influence public policy and recruitment to political office. Self-interested civil society organisations have to compete both with organisations pursuing the opposite objectives as well as with organisations with an altruistic agenda. Civil society organisations are seen as ‘schools of democracy’ strengthening the input-side of democracy, by providing both ‘support for’ and ‘demand from’ the political system (Easton 1965).

A premise of this interpretation is that the organisations themselves are seen as being internally democratic – a view challenged by Michels (1902/1965). In Michel’s pessimistic scenario democratic governance requires political parties (and other organisations), but these very organisations would inevitably become undemocratic, thus undermining the national level of democracy. A further premise is that for each advance of a cause, there would also be an advocate for the alternative view that would act as a countervailing interest. The growth of civil society organisations is in this perspective seen as a positive indicator of the sound health status of democracy. But an alternative view is that at a certain point, excessive growth of organisations may actually strangle democracy by overloading the political system with demands from special interest groups (Rauch 1995). As Putnam and Gross note, not all civil society organizations are necessarily of the benign type, contributing to participation and democratic values (Putnam and Goss 2003). Similarly, (Carothers 2000:20) warns against falling into the “... misleading notion that civil society consists only of noble causes and earnest well-intentioned actors”. Thus, although it is generally assumed that civil society organisations contribute to democracy, there are certain qualifications: “civil society is only as democratising as its practitioners” (Cornwall and Coelho 2007:6). To contribute to macro-level democracy, civil society organisations would also have to balance each other so that no single interest would dominate over all other interests all of the time, while extreme fragmentation is also to be avoided as excessive demands on political decision-making institutions may lead to political paralysis and prevent necessary change.

Another perspective on civil society’s contribution to democratic consolidation is that it acts as a watchdog in the political systems. Without organisations to support them, individuals would be more vulnerable. Voluntary associations develop expertise and capacity to monitor governmental policies. Civil society contributes, therefore, to the accountability of political elites. By mobilising on issues and concerns among the population, CSOs are also pursuing change and reform in the political system. Civil society organisations, as part of larger social movements, are oppositional in nature. In this perspective, CSOs are a necessary supplement to political parties because they represent those segments of society that are on the outside of the political institutions (vonDoepp 2002).

CSOs sometimes enter into coalitions with a view to bolstering their bargaining power vis-à-vis the state (James 2002, James and Malunga 2006). In Malawi there are a number of such coalitions that have existed for a considerable period of time with remarkable stability. They tend to be sector-based. Cases in point include the Malawi Economic Justice Network (MEJN); the Land Task Force (LTF); Civil Society Agriculture Network (CISANET); and Civil Society Coalition on Quality Basic Education (CSCQBE). They articulate demands from the grassroots to the political authorities and act as watchdogs on the activities of the powers that be, e.g. monitoring and budget expenditure tracking. They have been particularly active in debates on poverty reduction policies (Nyirenda 2002, Bwalya et al. 2004). While acknowledging that these coalitions are inherently unstable and highly dependent on external donor funding, they have nevertheless contributed significantly to lively democratic debates on salient policy matters in Malawi.

## Civil society in new democracies

The democratisation process has involved not only a change from single party rule to multi-party contest, but also a general opening of space for social and political activities, including for civil society.<sup>5</sup> To many scholars and political actors, the prospect for democratic consolidation depends on the development of a robust civil society: "... the prospects for democratic consolidation are strengthened by the growth and development of a powerful civil society, reflected in the presence of vigorous organisational vehicles for popular participation" (Gill 2000).

Several issues have emerged in the study of civil society in new democracies. One such issue concerns the very concept of civil society. How well does the concept 'travel' to new contexts? (Lewis 2002). A second question is what role international assistance plays and ought to play in the evolution and funding of civil society organisations. The study of civil society in emerging democracies has also been concerned with the linkage between CSOs and the political-institutional structure, and with the internal nature of such organisations.

## Conceptual travelling

While no consensus exists about the precise nature of civil society, most operationalisations of the concept include voluntary associations, i.e. organisations that citizens themselves form and join voluntarily. The objectives of those organisations are usually not part of the definition, but some authors make a distinction between interest groups in the economic sector, such as trade unions and business organisations, and other types of voluntary organisational forms. The most important question is to what extent this operationalisation provides an accurate representation of civil society in societies outside European and North American contexts. De Ulzurrun, for example, has shown how sensitive the measurement of social capital is to variations in the type of associations that are used to operationalise the concept in comparative studies (de Ulzurrun 2002). Similarly, Haddad argues that "studies of comparative civil society have been systematically biased in favour of the types of volunteer participation found commonly in the United States and against those commonly found in Japan" and therefore provide us with an incomplete understanding of citizens' engagement with the political process (Haddad 2006).

Since the concept of civil society refers to the whole array of collective actors between the state and the individual and his/her family, it obviously also covers institutions that are informal, but nevertheless important for citizens' relationship to the political system, such as traditional authorities.

## International assistance and civil society

Strengthening civil society has been an important part of donors' support for democratisation, precisely because it was assumed that these groups were necessary components of successful democratic consolidation. In the absence of a multi-party system social movements and civil society organisations spearheaded the transition process from an authoritarian to democratic regime,

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<sup>5</sup> See for example [http://www.norad.no/default.asp?V\\_ITEM\\_ID=2680](http://www.norad.no/default.asp?V_ITEM_ID=2680) with regard to Norad, while the British aid organisation DFID is involved in more than 500 projects run by civil society organisations: <http://aida.developmentgateway.org/aida/DoSearchSource.do>.

including in Malawi (Chirwa 2000). Following the formation of a democratic form of governance strengthening civil society became part of the general development assistance agenda. Support for civil society was seen as a means of bringing development assistance directly to the grassroots, rather than going the cumbersome route through bureaucratic state structures for expensive infrastructure projects. This optimistic view is not endorsed by everyone. It has been argued, for example by Jenkins (Jenkins 2001) that the donors' embrace of civil society as an instrument in development is fraught with contradictions. Local CSOs may compel authorities to be more accountable to citizens, but this does not necessarily mean that these groups subscribe to the neo-liberal economic policies promoted by donor agencies. The likely consequences are that it is not civil society in general that will be supported, but a particular brand of CSOs that furthers the donor's own agenda. Moreover, in a study of the effects of democracy assistance, including support for civil society, de Zeeuw concludes that support for NGOs had a short-term perspective focused on high-visibility projects like seminars and workshops, but "... international partners often seemed uninterested in longer-term institutional support aimed at strengthening the institutional capacities and sustainability of NGOs" (de Zeeuw 2005).<sup>6</sup> When a particular project was completed, the local NGOs were left without means to sustain their activities. This may be a particular problem that for democracy-promoting organisations which are likely to receive extensive support during election time, but little attention between elections, even though continuous monitoring of the rules of the political game throughout the entire electoral cycle is as important as monitoring elections as discrete events. Among donors support for women's organisations has become a prominent part of their agenda.<sup>7</sup> What consequences does the international sponsorship have for women's organisations? Are they becoming even more dependent on foreign support than other civil society organisations, and does it lead to a gender-segregated organisational society where women are being mobilised in some organisations but not in others?

In spite of these critical perspectives, several studies confirm the overall positive link between civil society and democracy in newly democratised states. Tusalem analysed the relationship between strong civil society and political freedoms and civil liberties in 65 transitional states and found support for a positive relationship: "... across the board a strong civil society is not only likely to deepen the degree of freedoms gained by citizens post-transition, but also to lessen state corruption, promote the rule of law, and establish greater governmental effectiveness because it counterbalances, challenges, devolves and decentralises state power to make it more accountable..." (Tusalem 2007). Also, Lane and Ersson found that the strength of the civil society sector in South Africa was an important variable predicting the level of democratic governance in the country. Among other institutional and cultural variables the strength of civil society compensated for the negative predictions associated with such variables as economic inequality, ethnic and religious fragmentation and the dominant status of the ANC as the incumbent party (Lane and Ersson 2007).

## Civil society and the political process

Support for civil society was seen as a less contentious form of democracy support than direct support for political parties, which often meant choosing between supporting the opposition versus the incumbent party. More recently, it has been realised that both elements are needed (Kumar 2005).<sup>8</sup> In established democracies CSOs have been linked to the political process through several mechanisms. In the 'cleavage model' of politics (Lipset and Rokkan 1967) the conflicts in a given society can be understood as structured through the concepts of social movements, civil society,

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<sup>6</sup> See also (Sardamov 2005) and (Robinson and Friedman 2007).

<sup>7</sup> See for example: <http://www.undp.org/governance/gender.htm> and [http://www.oecd.org/topic/0,3373,en\\_2649\\_34541\\_1\\_1\\_1\\_37413,00.html](http://www.oecd.org/topic/0,3373,en_2649_34541_1_1_1_37413,00.html)

<sup>8</sup> See for example (USAID 2004).

voluntary associations and political parties. According to this model political parties are embedded in a network of civil society structures, but in contemporary, recently democratised states with a weakly institutionalised party system, the collective actors may be operating more autonomously from each other. Cross-cutting voluntary associations may compensate for the weakness of political parties, as argued in the case of Zimbabwe (O'Kane 2001).<sup>9</sup>

## The internal nature of civil society organisations

The internal governance of civil society organisations in established democracies does not match the ideal-type of 'schools in democracy'. On the contrary, Michels (1911/1965) pessimistic view of internal party affairs has inspired the study of other types of organisations, such as trade unions (Lipset et al. 1956). Another problem that has been identified, in parties as well as in voluntary organisations, is the widespread passivity among the members (Zielonka-Goei 1992, Wollebæk and Selle 2004). It is a matter of empirical investigation to find out whether civil society organisations in new democracies are afflicted by the same tendencies towards elite dominance and passive memberships. Just as the representation of women in political parties tends to decrease higher up in the party hierarchy, the same phenomenon may also appear in voluntary associations.

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<sup>9</sup> The linkage between civil society and politics may actually be stronger in newer democracies because of a weakly institutionalised party system. See (Bratton et al. 2005). Their analysis of the Afrobarometer data revealed that political participation is more influenced by civil society organisational participation than by political parties.

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## SUMMARY

This working paper provides a review of the literature addressing the role of civil society or non-state actors in democratic consolidation, with particular reference to Malawi. Civil society comprises private businesses; media organisations; political parties; non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or voluntary associations, or more generally civil society organisations (CSOs); interest organisations, such as trade unions, confederations of employers and businesses, farmers' associations, etc. Special attention is drawn to the question whether the concept of civil society and its diverse operationalisations emanating from European and North American contexts travel well to empirical realities elsewhere. The problem of donor dependence is also discussed.

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