# Challenges Facing Decentralization and Child Welfare in Ntchisi and Lilongwe Districts in Malawi

Pius T. Tanga[1], Abie Sumbulu[2] and Benson L. Kansinjiro[3]

*Department of Social Work / Social Development, University of Fort Hare, PB X1314,
Alice 5700 South Africa*
*E-mail: [1]<ptangwe@ufh.ac.za / tanga8_2000@yahoo.co.uk>,
[2]<asumbulu@ufh.ac.za>, [3]<200905762@ufh.ac.za>*

**ABSTRACT** The challenges facing decentralization in Ntchisi and Lilongwe districts regarding child welfare in Malawi are explored through the lenses of the district officers. Using an exploratory design and qualitative research methods, the study explored the phenomena of decentralisation from the experiences of district officers who are at the centre of implementation of decentralised core functions of child welfare. The study utilizes the functionalist perspective in which decentralisation is seen as a system that should lead to the functioning of the social whole. The findings showed that the challenges being faced by the child welfare implementation in the current framework of decentralization are dysfunctional to the system. It is concluded that the challenges should serve as a test for the decentralized system's ability to adapt to the environment and its needs to achieve a social whole of bringing government closer to the people.

## INTRODUCTION

Chinsinga (2007:90) argued that since the 1990s developing countries have been adopting decentralization as a "vehicle for good governance, development and poverty reduction". In a bid to implement programs consistent with the Malawi Decentralisation policy of 1998, and the Malawi Local Government Act, the Malawi Ministry of Gender, Children and Community Development devolved its core functions in child welfare to the districts in 2005. The devolution of the child welfare functions has been in terms of both fiscal and administrative decentralisation. Just as the case is with all decentralization efforts the world over, decentralisation has the underlying aim of bringing government closer to the people (Cross and Kutengule 2001).

In line with this goal, devolving core child welfare functions implied that district social welfare offices have to administer child welfare functions under the direct control of the district commissioner and in line with the people's aspirations and wishes. The benefits of decentralization have been well documented. Wittenberg (2003: 6), for instance, provided some merits for decentralisation. First, decentralization is said to foster democracy in which local decision making processes are buttressed; second decentralization enhances efficiency levels in provision of service delivery through low transactional costs and ability to raise revenue locally. In addition, decentralization is said to promote development in which local people fight poverty at close range. Wittenberg (2003: 9) further observed that "none of the claims in favour of decentralisation is universally accepted". Challenges in the implementation of decentralization abound. It is against this background that this study attempted to explore the challenges facing decentralisation and child welfare in Malawi through the lenses of district officers in Ntchisi and Lilongwe districts. The challenges are explored from a functionalism view point.

## TRENDS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHILD WELFARE

Mather and Lager (2000: 2) observed that child welfare has been a subject of focus in social work since the mid-nineteenth century. Just as the case is with social welfare, the history of child welfare can be traced from the pre-industrial era, when the family and the community took care of needs for the aged, sick and the vulnerable groups in society (Tanga 2013). According-

*Address for correspondence:*
Abie Sumbulu
Department of Social Work / Social Development,
University of Fort Hare
PB X1314, Alice 5700, South Africa
*E-mail:* asumbulu@ufh.ac.za

ly, the traditional community and family coping mechanisms served as a life line for the care of individuals that faced challenges of adjustment in their lives. This approach in the history of social welfare was informal in nature and rested on the fact that communities were operating at mechanical level, living communally and their ways of living were not as complex as the case today.

In Africa, the history of social welfare is well documented by several scholars. Anucha (2008: 232), for instance, observed that the historical context of social welfare in Africa is important in understanding how the current social welfare systems work. It is argued that the current social welfare systems have been shaped by exogenous forces of pre- and post- colonization. Anucha further pointed out the factors influencing social work practices in Africa as including:

*early missionary activities, voluntary organizations, tribal societies, traditional customs and practices, pre-and post-colonial economic, political and social realities including policies social welfare policies implemented during colonial periods.*

Social welfare can, thus, be traced through three phases of history namely pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial. In the pre-colonial phase the needs of the vulnerable or the poor were being taken care of by the traditional family and community's mechanisms (Tanga 2013). Kreitzer et al. (2009: 146) note that all cultures have had a social support system that addressed the basic needs of the more vulnerable people including children. They further observed that the traditional system was based on norms, moral values and an established economic system. A religious system revolving around belief in ancestors provided a framework for guidance and punishment throughout the life. The coming of the missionaries to Africa also heralded further provision of social welfare in the form of charities to indigenous families and communities. Yimam (1990:32) reported that:

*the starting point of the idea of social welfare as understood in the West is in the late eighteenth century when the missionaries made their first ever attempt to educate Africans in...the British colony of Sierra Leone.*

At that time Sierra Leone was being created as a place for re-settling freed slaves from America. Such being the case, education was consid-

ered essential for the progress of the people. In other parts of Africa controlled by Britain, wives of colonial civil servants took part in developing social welfare services albeit on a scale that required minimum financial support.

Although, missionaries and the traditional care system continued to provide social welfare services, colonial administrations throughout Africa came to recognize that government too is responsible for provision of social welfare. This stemmed from the realization that industrialization and growth of the African urban bourgeoisies eventually led to the decline of the traditional care system. Additionally, like the case with South Africa in the 1920s and 1930s (Sewpaul and Lombard 2004: 539), a need arose to address poverty among the settler white population, which acted as a starting point for efforts into government providing social work services. As Kreitzer et al. (1990: 146) noted European social welfare systems were, thus, introduced into non-western countries including Africa. For instance, as observed by Yiman (1990: 37), the British Colonial Administration developed the Colonial Development Act in 1929 to set up funding mechanism for supporting colonies focusing on health and education. The act was later broadened in 1940, to encompass more issues around welfare services. The French also had similar legislative frameworks which were put in place in 1928.

Yiman (1970) concluded that despite these legislative efforts, serious formal organization of social welfare services by the colonial administrations was seen after the Second World War. For this reason, scholars writing on the origins of professional social work agree that it was only in the 1950s that formal social welfare systems were introduced in Africa. These systems, however, did not have regard for the traditional systems since they were simply a replication of the western systems based on social welfare focusing on individualized, case work methods. It is not surprising, therefore, that social welfare services under colonialism failed to deal with mass poverty and oppression that the African people experienced (Kreitzer et al. 1990).

In the post- colonial Africa, social welfare systems did not depart in model from what was implemented in the colonial era. At the dawn of independence, most African countries emerged with social welfare systems that resembled those that were in their former colonizers (Anucha 2008:

231; Kreitzer et al. 1990). In the sub-Saharan Africa, the social welfare institutions and frameworks were set up in all countries formerly under the French and the British. African states sent their people to the West to attain social welfare education so that they could take up responsibility of social welfare systems left by the colonizers. As Anucha (2008) related, "social workers sent to the West studied social work theories, methods and administration of western social welfare systems". Ironically, as Laird (2004: 695) explained, what they (African social workers) learnt and acquired was irrelevant to the socio-economic realities of the African people which included effects of colonialism itself, mass poverty, illiteracy and poor health among others.

In Malawi, the genesis of organized social welfare systems emanated from the work of the voluntary service organizations and some public spirited individuals during the colonial era. *The Development of Human Resources* (1971: 160) outlined that the social welfare systems were developed along the British pattern. Upon attaining independence however, Malawi is reported to have modeled its social welfare to reflect the socio-economic realities of the rural way of life of most Malawians. This implied that the existing traditional mechanisms have had to be utilized as a life-line for provision of social welfare support alongside the formal social welfare service mechanisms.

One of the prominent developments of the independent Malawi has been (like other African independent states) the establishment of the Department of Social Welfare whose role has been to address social issues such as destitution, repatriation, family and matrimonial disputes, re-integration of retired migrant workers returning from the neighboring countries, special education for people with disabilities and rehabilitation and after-care services. Apart from general community development activities, key services around child welfare that appear to have been established include early childhood development services, reformatory services and public assistance which were being offered through voluntary organizations and/or the missionaries. However, since its establishment, social welfare services have been highly centralized, with the central government assuming more powers in the management of services.

In developing countries, some child welfare functions are delivered through informal mechanisms, because of financial constraints, religious and Non-governmental organizations provide child welfare services to complement what the state is able to provide. Collins et al. (2009: 78) observed that although developing countries have little or no formal child welfare systems, government authorities assume broader oversight role in children's issues, often placing more attention on health and education.

## METHODOLOGY

This research is a part of a larger study that was conducted in Ntchisi and Lilongwe Districts of Malawi. Research into decentralization and child welfare in Malawi is relatively new. It was only in 2005 that decentralization through functional devolution was implemented in the Ministry of Women and Child Development. Therefore, this research was exploratory. Babbie (2007: 87) maintains that exploratory research is ideal for examining new research interests; and when the subject of research is relatively new.

The research used a qualitative methodology. This methodology is not only suited for finding out what happens but also "…how it happens…and why it happens the way it does" (Henning 2004: 3). In this research the qualitative methodology served to get in-depth experiences of district officers regarding the challenges facing child welfare under decentralization. Data was collected in three ways from a sample size of 37. First, focus group discussions, made up of 23 participants, were employed for the majority of social welfare officers and community development officers in the lower grade. The study employed the idea that in cases where the research purported to explore thoughts and feelings, focus groups interviews are ideal because they generate detailed information as participants are motivated to talk on the basis of the group dynamics factor (De Vos 2005).Second, a semi-structured interview schedule was administered to a group of 7 officers in the management ranks of the district which included District Social Welfare Officers, the District Commissioner, the Director of Planning and Development, the District Community Development Officers, Victim support Unit officers, District Youth Officer, 49 District Labour Officers. This provided an opportunity to gain a detailed picture of their con-

ceptual understanding and experiences of decentralization and its impact on child welfare in Malawi. The third group comprised 7 heads of other departments in the district management rank, key sectors implementing other child welfare related functions in health, education, youth programmes, and child protection.

In addition, the study also utilized policy and program documents that were available on decentralization and child welfare. Notably, the study benefits from such documents as the district social economic profile for Lilongwe, Ntchisi District Service Charter, and situational analysis reports among others. The use of multiple sources (Willis 2007) triangulates the data, which promotes the study's trustworthiness – a qualitative equivalent of validity. The essential idea of triangulation is to find multiple sources of confirmation when the researcher wants to draw a conclusion (Willis 2007). Data analysis was qualitative in nature and was done manually. The findings are presented in themes as they emerged during the discussions and interviews with the participants.

## RESULTS

The major themes that emerged portray the challenges facing decentralization and child welfare in Malawi and include resistance to change; dual reporting; poor attitudes towards the social welfare sector; resources constrains, lack of orientation on devolution of child welfare, limited capacity of officers, fear of losing power and child welfare services left to Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) workers.

### Resistance to Change and Dual Reporting

All the district officers reported that they still owe their allegiance to their line/central ministries. Because of this, they revealed that they are not ready for any change as it might affect them negatively, except with the permission of their line/central ministry. A few (three) district officers stated that the problem with actual implementation is that those at the top are not willing to hand over power as they control important functions from where they benefit and derive their powers. One district officer noted that this is the case because according to him:

*line/central ministries do not want to relinquish all their powers to the districts. They still*

*control promotions, staff transfers, recruitment, and payment of salaries and hence automatically exerting more influence over district officers than the district commissioner.*

On a related note, four of the officers reported that there exists dual reporting on the part of some of the social welfare officers and community development officers, resulting from decentralization. They have to report to their line ministry and also to the central ministry in the capital, Lilongwe.

### Poor Attitudes Towards Social Welfare Sector

The majority of the participants reported that many sectors and officers in districts generally view social welfare office in relation to child welfare as one that is inferior. Many factors were cited as contributing to this attitude. First, activities implemented by the district social welfare office are not part of the priority list in the Malawi growth and Development Strategy, which is an over-arching government policy driving and reflecting the socio-economic development agenda of Malawi. Second, it is not only one of the least funded sectors at the district level, but it is also one of the sectors with the least ranked cadre of staff at the district level. This is compounded by many other challenges which include the relegation of "social welfare officers to an inferior status in the eyes of stakeholders and fellow implementing partners", noted a social worker during group discussions in Lilongwe. In view of this, seldom does the district consider social welfare office as priority requiring special consideration when budgeting and planning for district activities.

### Resource Constraints

All the participants reported low funding to their district welfare offices. Table 1 summarizes the average monthly funding for the two districts as reported by district officers.

**Table1: Funding for the two districts**

| District | Amount |
|---|---|
| Lilongwe Social Welfare offices | MK 100,000 (ZAR 5000) |
| Ntchisi Social Welfare | MK 60,000 (ZAR 3000) |

They also reported that there are more financial resources going to the Districts than before, although the resources are still not enough to

meet the needs of the district. In both social welfare office and community development, funding for the government financial year 2010/2011 was reportedly to have increased, a situation which is hoped to gradually keep improving. District Officers further pointed out that in terms of advancing fiscal decentralization, the districts are now controlling their own funding obtained through government subventions, local revenues and donor funding.

## Lack of Orientation on Devolution of Child Welfare

All the officers at district level also reported that when the Ministry of Gender, Children and Community Development was devolving its core functions in 2005, no orientation for district officers was conducted. The officers believed that orientation would have clarified some of the issues that officers are facing - such as reporting lines and the role of the central/line ministry among others. The orientation would have further prepared the officers for demands of a decentralized system. One of the social workers in Lilongwe reported that there are "situations where they divide their loyalty between serving the district commissioner and their line ministry would have been minimized". However, others pointed out that the Ministry must have assumed that officers understood decentralization through various short courses they have been attending on decentralization.

## Limited Capacity of Officers

One challenge facing child welfare services provision is the lack of capacity among the various relevant government and non-government partners as reported by half of participants. The lack of capacity is in terms of the numerical strength of social welfare officers. For instance, it was found that there are approximately 100 government social welfare workers posted in all the 28 districts in Malawi. There are 3 social workers in Ntchisi and 12 in Lilongwe. This, however, would not seem to be enough to provide efficient child welfare services as stated by the participants.

Most of those who complained of insufficient staff said that even if they were to be adequate, the quality of the workers in terms of qualification is also not adequate to match the expectations of the ideal social worker. One of them stated that, for instance, in Ntchisi all social workers were trained only up to certificate level. Commenting on the capacity of social welfare officers, one of the participants in Ntchisi complained that the quality of staff in social welfare is way below what is available in other sectors such as health and education. The sector (social welfare) is one with the least graded officers at district level in terms of rank and professional training.

In addition, it also transpired during interviews that most sectors (including those involved in child welfare) are sending staff that are fresh from school and have little or no experience. They, thus, require "further capacity building before they can actually become more effective", noted one senior officer in Lilongwe.

## Fear of Losing Power

All the participants reported that there is fear of loss of power and control over vital resources by line ministries at central level that has resulted into delays to effect full decentralization. In some cases, central ministries claim not have decentralized physical asserts such as buildings, among others. The officers in Ntchisi, for instance, cited a scenario in which central government is still clinging to control the community development training centre, which also houses the community development office. Yet, it is failing to maintain the centre despite generating funds through workshops and other activities within the district. In youth sector, processing of funding and control of other vital resources for implementing youth programs still rests with the line Ministry of Youth and sports at central government level.

## Child Welfare Work Left to NGO Partners

Some of the officers also reported that most of the child welfare work is being implemented by partners and/or donor partners. One of the officers said that "NGO and Donor partners tend to dictate the terms for implementing programmes under their support thereby making the district council's role ceremonial.

## DISCUSSION

The challenges facing decentralisation and child welfare can be described in the functionalist perspective as dysfunctional to the function-

ing of the institution of social welfare and the district at large. Societies and their institutions are supposed to behave in an orderly manner according to norms and expected patterns of behavior - implying that different parts of a society are modeled and operate in terms of rules (Haralambos and Holborn 2000:9). In this same breath, the challenges facing child welfare could imply that the parts that are supposed to maintain the system of decentralisation are not performing their functions satisfactorily. However, while the function of maintaining the decentralized district structure lies primarily with the various sectors and institutions at district level, the other challenges facing the district emanate from the external environment. Accordingly, the system is failing to adapt. In Talcott Parson's structural functionalism, a system survives if among other activities it is able to "cope with external situational exigencies. It must adapt to its environment and adapt the environment to its needs" (Ritzer 2008: 101).

Regarding staff capacity, in Lilongwe only one practitioner has a graduate qualification, and the qualification is in an area other than social work. As a result, the experiences of working as social workers are, therefore, compromised as they are based on the on-the-job training attained as a result of being employees in the ministry. This has an implication on service delivery in that access to quality social welfare services is limited or compromised. Child welfare ought to be entrusted to professionals if it is to be effective in serving the people that is meant for. The limited capacity of officers in Ntchisi and Lilongwe has resulted in what Parry-Williams (2007) explains as:

*arguing the department's case for resources, promoting networking and advocating on policy is made harder when you have limited educational background and capacity and as a consequence may lack the authority needed to be convincing at the district level.*

As noted by the participants regarding limited capacity of officers in both districts, decentralization has also created increased demand for social welfare/child welfare services. In response, there are attempts at increasing the number of officers to attend to the increasing demand for services at district level. For instance, in 2007 the government recruited an additional group of about 60 social welfare officers to the districts. Since 2009 it has further redeployed

more officers to head both child welfare and community development at senior rank. Yet, this has not correspondingly gone with substantial increase of resources, expansion of infrastructure and related material support among others. In this regard, work is compromised. One officer gave an example of lack of office space for case work interventions (such as counselling) requiring special rooms for meeting clients. Chinsinga and Kayuni (2006: 18) note that both community and social welfare offices have been facing critical funding constraints. Although, in the 2010/2011 government financial year, funding from central government to the two offices has increased, generally it is not enough to meet the operational needs of the two offices. Yet, these are equally critical in implementing child welfare programmes. As UNICEF (2008) points out, resource constraints to the decentralized district are likely to create a danger of relegating child welfare to secondary importance of case work interventions (such as counselling) requiring special rooms for meeting clients.

The fear of losing power has led Ministries/ sectors to take control over staff of the districts meaning that they can transfer them any how without consulting the district commissioner. This is coupled with the fact that staff end up being shunted around offices and losing stability. As a result investments that district councils can make in the staff are lost once transfers are made. One participant gave an example of himself that "I was trained by donors to serve in a particular project in Ntchisi, only to be transferred to Lilongwe before the impact of my training could be realized".

The relegation of child welfare work to NGO partners has caused some concerns among the officers. Chinsinga and Kayuni (2006) attribute the cause of this to funding constraints on the part of government partners to fully implement child welfare activities as creating a gap for such partners to fill. Although, this is an opportunity, some officers felt that the situation compromises the leadership role of government partners in provision of child welfare. They report to their line Ministries as well as to the district commissioner, a situation that confuses the officers even further. This results in divided loyalty on the part of the officers. This is contrary to the very objectives of decentralization. Some of the objectives of Decentralization Policy are to elimi-

nate dual administration; and to promote accountability and good governance.

## CONCLUSION

The challenges should be looked at as a normal occurrence to every system. Although, from the functionalist view, such challenges can be said to be dysfunctional to the districts, they can serve as a catalyst and motivation for making the sectors think about ways and means of improving the system. In the context of structural functionalists, these challenges can best be described as setting the context under which the decentralized system is adapting to the environment and its needs. In the face of decentralization, there is hence an urgent need for upgrading of such staff so that they execute their functions in a more effective way.

It has been emerged that decentralization has brought about many changes. There is more work to do on the part of district officers in their bid to meet the demand for child welfare services. There is now integration of sectors into single administrative unit, albeit with few sectors remaining to devolve their functions. Such an integration of all sectors inherent in decentralization is not only consistent with the functionalist view but also the social development approach because it helps to link specialized case work interventions of social welfare with a wide range of services such as, inter alia, health, education, food security, and economic empowerment programmes which are integral to ensuring child well-being.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Decentralization, as much as it has its strong points, its downside is that it can make people feel uncomfortable. Decentralization brings about change and change can be uncomfortable. Seemingly the change agents did not plan the transformation with the participants that is the employees). As a result they did not want to accept the reality that decentralization means that they are under and answerable to the district Commissioner. Remedial work was however offered by offering sporadic training which did not seem to work. It is recommended that employees be informed of intended changes so that that they can take possession of the process from the beginning. In this way decentralization will be people driven and will not seem to be coerced on them.

## REFERENCES

Anucha U 2008. Exploring new direction for social work education and training in Nigeria. *Social Work Education,* 27(3): 229-242.

Babbie ER 2007. *The Practice of Social Research.* 7th Edition. Belmont: Wadsworth.

Chinsinga B 2007. District assemblies in a fix: The perils of self-seeking tendencies in decentralisation policy reforms in Malawi. *African Development*, XXXII(1): 89-111.

Chinsinga B, Kayuni H 2008. *Community Development in Malawi: A Situational Analysis Report.* Zomba: Department of Political and Administrative Studies.

Collins ME, Kim HS, Cassandra C, Perlstein J 2009. Addressing Issues of Globalization in the Training of Public Child Welfare Workers: Lessons From Training Program in the USA. International Social Work, 52(1): 52-83. From <http//isw.sagepub.com.> (Retrieved on 12 December 2012).

Cross S, Kutengule M 2000. Decentralisation and Rural Livelihoods in Malawi. *LADDER Working Paper* No.4, September 2001.

De Vos AS, Strydom H, Fouche CB, Delport CSL 2005. *Research at Grass Roots for the Social Sciences and Human Service Professionals.* 3rd Edition. Pretoria: Van Schaik Publishers.

Haralambos M, Holborn M 2000. *Sociology: Themes and Perspectives.* 5th Edition. London: Harper Collins Publishers.

Henning E 2004. *Finding Your Way in Qualitative Research*. Pretoria: Van Schaick.

Kreitzer L, Abukari Z, Antonio P, Mensah J, Kwaku A 2009. Social work in Ghana: A participatory action research project looking at culturally appropriate training and practice. *Social Work Education,* 28(2): 145-164.

Laird J, Hartman A 1985. *A Handbook of Child Welfare: Context, Knowledge and Practice.* London: The Free Press.

Mather JH, Lager PB 2000. *Child Welfare: A Unifying Model of Practice*. London: Brooks/Cole Thomson Learning.

Parry-Williams J 2007. *Assessment of Capacity to Manage Alternative Care in Malawi*. Lilongwe: UNICEF: ESARO.

Ritzer G 2008. *Modern Sociological Theory.* 7th Edition. Boston: McGraw-Hill.

Sewpaul V, Lombard A 2004. Social work education, training and standards in Africa. *Social Work Education*, 23(5): 537-554.

Tanga PT 2013. The impact of declining extended family support system on the education of orphans in Lesotho. *African Journal of AIDS Research*, 12(3): 173-183.

*The Development of Human Resources* 1971. Cairo.

UNICEF 2007. *Community Safety and Security: Justice for Women and Children: Project Proposal for Malawi.* Lilongwe: UNICEF.

Willis JW 2007. *Foundations of Qualitative Research: Interpretive and Critical Approaches.* Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.

Yiman A 1990. *Social Development in Africa 1950-1985: Methodological Perspectives and Future Prospects.* England: Avebury.