

# **The political economy of urban food security in Blantyre, Malawi**

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## Abstract

Food security in African cities is a complex issue with historical, political, and spatial dimensions that are often overlooked in the food security literature. This paper argues that exclusionary urban geographies forged in a colonial system perpetuate in postcolonial, democratic Malawi. These geographies of socio-economic exclusion reinforce structural poverty and preclude policy solutions for urban food security. Whereas control over the use of urban space has been nominally devolved to the local levels of governance, two specific policies are given as evidence that in practice there is no functioning mechanism for the low-income majority of urban residents to negotiate for the use of these spaces to support their food security strategies. The result is that the growing problem of urban food security is subordinated to the aesthetic and practical needs of the modern city.

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## Introduction

Southern African cities are becoming increasingly unequal places and policy action has widely fallen short of meeting the basic needs of low-income urban households (Rakodi 1997, Murray and Myers 2006, Parnell and Pieterse 2010). Among the myriad social problems, urban food security is emerging as a concern because urban households are increasingly squeezed between rising food prices and stagnant or deteriorating real incomes (Drakakis-Smith 1997, Crush and Frayne 2010). Conventional approaches to food security have focused on achieving a stable food supply relative to the population (Devereux and Maxwell 2001), and yet this mode of analysis is inadequate for understanding urban food security in places where food is widely available. Food insecurity in southern African cities today is largely a problem of *access*, which is intricately bound up in questions of political, economic, and socio-spatial marginalization of the urban poor (Drakakis-Smith 1994, Maxwell 1999, Ruel and Garrett 2004). Blantyre is typical of many cities in the region in that its internal landscape of extreme inequality is the legacy of a long history of colonialism and underdevelopment. This legacy is not limited to the gap in material wealth; it extends to a gap in the political power governing land use decisions. With no political voice in municipal planning and development decisions, the basic needs of the urban poor are subordinated to the interests of landowners and middle class residents.

In this paper I will use two recent events in Blantyre to demonstrate that urban food security is shaped by tensions over how urban space is imagined, developed, and managed. The theoretical link between food security, politics, and urban space takes place through a political economic analysis of vulnerability in which the disempowerment of certain groups, in terms of their lack of control over resources and their marginalization from political institutions, is fundamental to explaining their greater likelihood of experiencing hunger (Vaughan 1987, Carney and Watts 1990, Watts and Bohle 1993). This approach is fuelled by the need to reveal the *spaces of vulnerability*, which Watts and Bohle defined as (1993: 44) “the locally and historically specific configuration of poverty, hunger and famine.” The historical and geographical details that constitute individual case studies such as the ones analyzed for this paper contribute inductively to a broader understanding of the political economy of urban food security in sub-Saharan Africa.

Maxwell (1999) conducted a political economic analysis of urban food security in sub-Saharan Africa and found it to be a politically invisible issue. He argued that the problem of food access for urban residents in Accra and Kampala was discursively overshadowed by the politically salient issues of rural food production and urban infrastructure. According to Maxwell (1999), urban food insecurity is symptomatic of the political economic changes that resulted from structural adjustment programs, specifically the paradoxical reduction of state responsibility for social welfare just as many countries were adopting democratic political institutions and neoliberal approaches to economic development. Within the neoliberal paradigm, the household is responsible for its own food security. This trend is particularly problematic because neoliberal economic policies are eroding the financial security of the typical urban households while entitlements outside of the marketplace (e.g., subsistence production, social transfers, state redistribution of resources) are drying up (Drakakis-Smith 1994, Maxwell 1999,

Flynn 2005). The result is a reduction in the capacity for income generation at the same time that food security is increasingly dependent on income security.

There have been insufficient case studies on urban food security in Africa that account for the historical geographies and the specific policies that are producing the trends Maxwell identified. This paper seeks to address this gap by mapping the evolution of poverty in Blantyre and using this to analyze the impact on urban food security of two recent policies: the cancellation of the community-based Ndirande Forestry Stewardship Programme (NFSP) in 2010 and the eviction of informal vendors from city streets in 2006 under *Operation dongosolo* (OD). These two policy decisions curtailed the freedom of urban residents to use public urban spaces to reduce their household vulnerability. Moreover, they were implemented with excessive force while the Government was undermining local democratic institutions. These policies have deepened and expanded structural poverty in Blantyre while extending the pernicious effects of the original colonial land grab in the late nineteenth century and the socially divisive logic upon which Blantyre was established.

The events discussed in this paper foreshadowed the widespread protests in Malawi's cities in July 2011 (and the 19 deaths that resulted from police retaliation) in that they illustrated the truncated progress toward democracy and human rights in Malawi's multiparty era. One of the most glaring failures in recent years has been the failure of the Government to call local elections since the last council terms expired in 2005 (Kayuni and Tambulasi 2009, Blantyre City Assembly 2007). The current situation is a stark reminder of the limitations of formal democracy when it is subject to manipulation and corruption. Local issues, including urban food security, continue to be marginalized from political action or debate in part because of the lack of formal options for residents to voice their concerns – in spite of a constitutional guarantee of democracy at the local level. These developments support Maxwell's (1999) argument while offering further insights into the role of land use disputes in which the urban poor are pitted against politically influential middle class and elite residents and foreign investors. The remainder of this paper will be taken up with detailed accounts and analysis of the political history of Blantyre and the two case study events. The analysis ultimately points to a troubling trajectory away from poverty reduction goals associated with development in Malawi.

### **Methodology**

The case studies presented in this paper are informed by qualitative fieldwork I conducted in 2010 for my dissertation. The background information about the NFSP comes largely from a group interview with the Ndirande Farmer's Association, a semi-structured interview with a male participant, and an unstructured meeting with the Director of Town Planning and Estate Services. Unfortunately, extensive data mining on the Internet and at libraries in Malawi did not yield additional documented information about this program. The events surrounding the removal of vendors were gleaned from the two daily newspapers in Malawi (*The Nation* and *The Daily Times*). I systematically reviewed six months of news (March to August 2006) encompassing the events in question. Additional contextual information is drawn from the observations, interviews, and participative mapping activities that constituted the rest of my field data.

### The colonial roots of the urban divide

The complex geography of food insecurity in Blantyre is underlain by the complex geography of the city itself. In a recent report, UNHABITAT (2010: 20) characterized the urban geographies in Africa as:

“highly-disjointed, dysfunctional and unsustainable urban geographies of inequality and human suffering, with urban areas increasingly composed of small islands of well-being that are spatially and socially segregated from rapidly growing and increasingly impoverished masses - the ‘urban divide.’”

This ‘urban divide’ was forged over decades of intrusion by foreign governments and corporations, settlers, and a politically repressive postcolonial regime. The bifurcated geographies of African cities in terms of living standards and the built environment has spurred a renewed interest in understanding the terms upon which the very different, and yet proximate, sections of the city interface and interact (Falola and Salm 2004, Murray and Myers 2006, Parnell and Pieterse 2010). The metaphor of a disjointed patchwork aptly describes Blantyre, where densely crowded settlements, vast tracts of undeveloped land, traditional villages, mountains, river valleys, commercial and industrial areas, and low-density suburbs all mark distinct kinds of spaces within the municipal boundaries (Figure 1).



**Figure 1 Aerial view of central Blantyre showing CBDs, THAs and notable historic sites (base map Google Earth)**

Blantyre Township was established in 1894 on the site occupied by the Blantyre Mission of the Church of Scotland and the African Lakes Company, hence the original

vision of the city as the centre for “Christianity and commerce” (Ross 1996). As with other colonial urban settlements of the time, indigenous Africans were seen as primitive and unfit for “civilized” urban life and urban residency was restricted to European and Asian settlers (Iliffe 1987, Power 1995, Myers 2003). The economic potential of the Nyasaland Protectorate as a centre for the ivory trade and plantation agriculture never materialized and as a result European settlement was sparse; by 1907 the European population of Blantyre was only 192 (McCracken 1998). Blantyre was unique among British colonial cities in Africa in that it was never the political capital of the colony and as a result European traders and estate owners had relatively more freedom to build and govern the city according to their taste and ignore the needs of urban Africans (McCracken 1998). The little influence that Africans had in other colonies as a result of the moral façade of colonialism was absent in Blantyre because it was at arms length from the political center at Zomba. Indigenous Africans were forced to settle in fringe areas, which were described by Blantyre’s Medical Officer as “collections of badly built, unsanitary and densely packed huts of a temporary nature springing up around the margins of the Township” (Iliffe 1987: 167). The original area of European settlement can be observed today in the low-density housing area of Sunnyside to the south west of the central business district; this area is now occupied by the city’s elites (Figure 1).

The areas of the city that today make up the most notorious slums originated as Native Lands during the colonial period. Native Lands were established throughout the Protectorate during the massive and rapid land alienation in the late nineteenth century. European settlers and corporations expropriated vast tracts of land, usually as speculators, creating squatters or tenants of the existing inhabitants (Pachai 1973, Ng’ong’ola 1990). Economic setbacks and political decisions taken in London meant that the colonial economy failed to prosper and much of this land was never developed (Vail 1977). The Government recognized early on that the vast tracts of undeveloped land held by speculative investors was preventing economic development and they instituted the Native Lands Ordinance in 1904, which mandated that ten percent of each estate exceeding 800 acres be given to African farming families for a nominal annual rent (Pachai 1973, Ng’ong’ola 1990). The Government was weak in the face of settler opposition and the law was never enforced. In time, some of these tracts of land were absorbed into the city boundaries and contribute to a patchwork effect of densely populated areas adjacent to tracts of undeveloped land (Figure 1). Some of these undeveloped areas are forest reserves, while others are held in freehold or as crown lands. Figure 1 illustrates the striking unevenness of land distribution within the centre of Blantyre where densely populated areas abut empty tracts of land.

Colonial Nyasaland experienced minimal industrial development and there were few employment opportunities in Blantyre. As a result, most would-be rural to urban migrants bypassed Blantyre for the farms and mines of South Africa and the Rhodesias (McCracken 1998). The mass migration of workers out of Nyasaland was exacerbated by the dire lack of Government investment in Africans’ social welfare, to the extent that Vail (1977: 382) characterized the colony in the 1930s as “the Empire’s slum.” Most Africans who engaged with the urban economy, working mostly in subservient positions as domestic help and day laborers, settled in peri-urban areas around the city and walked to

work. A 1957 survey found that within a 4-mile radius of Blantyre-Limbe<sup>1</sup>, 73% of men were working in town, and within a 4-8 mile radius, 66% of men were working in town. Moreover, 71% of adults had been born in or near the village where they lived (McCracken 1998: 252). These people formed an integral part of the urban economy of Blantyre-Limbe, and yet their home lives were outside of the city boundaries and hence their well-being was not considered to be part of the mandate of the City Assembly. This pattern of partial integration of Africans as laborers but not as residents is the foundation for the persistent idea that the lower classes are out of place in the city, which underpins the policy decisions taken in both of the events discussed below.

The end of colonialism in itself did not erase the vast socio-spatial inequalities that were produced in the colonial era. The dearth of investment in the welfare of urban Africans, coupled with the sustained growth of the urban population, precluded straightforward solutions to more equitable urban development in postcolonial Blantyre. The first postcolonial President of Malawi, Kamuzu Banda, ruled for 30 years in a repressive single-party political system (Power 2010). Banda had lived most of his life outside of Africa and his attitude toward the majority of Malawians was often consistent with racist settler attitudes (Lwanda 1993, Jones and Manda 2006). His economic development model was based on estate agriculture and hence rural transitory labor (Kydd and Christiansen 1982, Harrigan 2003), reserving urban life for a select group of educated, cosmopolitan elites. The urban-rural divide in Banda's vision of Malawi was clearly stated in 1988, when he said: "cities were meant for civilized persons, and in that regard people should be able to differentiate life in the city from that of the village by the way you look after the city. If you should be proud of the city don't bring village life into the city" (Jimu 2005: 44). This quotation unveils a conceptual binary that emanates from the colonial political economy of "civilized" city versus (presumably) "uncivilized" village, which served as the blueprint for the bifurcated city the Banda government engendered with the establishment of the Traditional Housing Authorities (THAs) in 1964.

The THAs were conceived as areas where people could construct homes made out of traditional materials and circumvent municipal construction standards for housing (Blantyre City Assembly 2000). They preserved "traditional" leadership structures in keeping with rural political institutions (Patel and Svasand 2007). Blantyre's five THAs (Ndirande, Zingwangwa, Bangwe, Chilomoni, and South Lunzu) were managed by the parastatal Malawi Housing Corporation (MHC), which reported to the central Government. This policy reinforced the two-stream course of development that had been established along racial lines during the colonial era, and was now discernible in distinct "traditional" and (by implication) "modern" areas of the city. It also allowed the central Government to maintain paternalistic control of traditional areas and helped to justify a two-tiered system for urban services and living standards.

The numerous socio-economic injustices in Malawi during the Banda era, which contradicted the postcolonial ideal of self-determination, were perpetuated through the use of political violence (Englund and Mapanje 2002, Chirwa 2007, Power 2010). Banda held extremely tight control of all aspects of people's lives and imposed the motto: "unity, loyalty, obedience and discipline" (Lwanda 1993: 100). Police and politically

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<sup>1</sup> Limbe was established in 1907 six kilometers east of downtown Blantyre at the site of the Nyasaland Railway yards. It is now part of the City of Blantyre but retains a distinct downtown core.



subservient traditional courts had the power to arrest, detain, and even execute people. The hallmark of Banda's tyranny was the Malawi Young Pioneers (MYP); this national youth movement was mandated to keep public order and to blindly obey the leader and they often did the dirty work of keeping the public in line (Lwanda 1993, Jones and Manda 2006, Power 2010). Social order was expressed in clean, orderly and safe urban spaces and aside from a few sites and services schemes, the majority of the urban poor were contained within THAs. Political control became more difficult to sustain during the 1980s as structural adjustment reforms eroded living standards even for the urban middle classes (Drakakis-Smith 1994, Rakodi 1997). The trend of declining real incomes and increasing unemployment transcended the political transition to multiparty democracy in 1994. Throughout the 1990s severe economic problems were exacerbated by political corruption and the HIV/AIDS pandemic; the optimism that democracy would lead to improvements in people's daily lives soon evaporated (Chirwa and Chilowa 1999, Englund and Mapanje 2002, Harrigan 2003, Englund 2006).

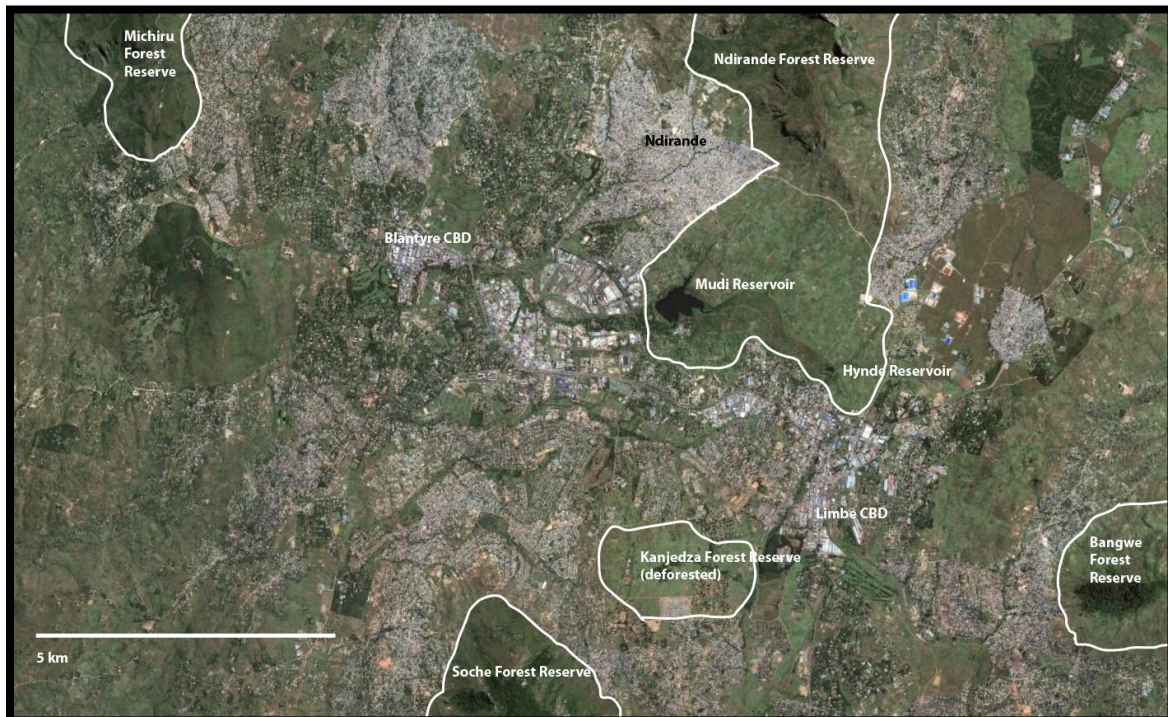
The enhancement of public participation in governance was a central goal of the new constitution, which modernized urban governance under an elected city assembly rather than the overlapping traditional and bureaucratic authorities (Patel and Svasand 2007). The THAs were transferred to the City Assembly in 1992 (Blantyre City Assembly 2000) and all legal jurisdictions removed from traditional authorities within the city limits (Cammack *et al.* 2009). Nonetheless, to this day the traditional authorities continue to exert *de facto* control over many aspects of people's lives. Chome and McCall (2005) noted that in a pilot project for land titling reform, most people chose to continue using traditional authorities for land titling, even when user fees were waived, because the traditional system was more reliable, accessible, and seen as more legitimate within the community. This situation has been reinforced by the failure of the Government to hold local elections since the City Assembly's mandate expired in 2005. The result is a political vacuum for local issues that hinders policy innovation and implementation on the issue of urban food security, undermining the optimistic political reforms of the 1990s. The examples described in this paper clearly demonstrate how this political vacuum is having a disproportionate effect on the urban poor. Taken in the longer historical context of land alienation and exclusive urban development, these events can be seen as the latest chapters in the long story of urban poverty in Malawi.

### **The eviction of urban farmers and the fight for agricultural space**

Subsistence food production by urban households in Blantyre is an important form of food entitlement despite the increasing pressure on arable land in and around the city (Crush *et al.* 2011). Urban households access land in various ways: some people can afford to rent or buy land in and around the city for farming and others find unused and unguarded land to farm. The most common way to access farmland among low-income urban residents is through customary mechanisms. The continued *de facto* use of the THA system provides some people in town with farmland within the city if they belong to the traditional authority structure. Many other people travel to their home villages on a regular basis or send cash to rural relatives to buy farm inputs and pay workers to farm their land. Even this option can be untenable for many households who cannot afford the cost of travelling to their villages and the cost of transporting their harvested food.



The extensive open land within the city boundaries of Blantyre seems to provide the potential for low-income households to benefit from urban agriculture if they could gain access to that land and farm it sustainably. The most conspicuous source of available land is in the large number of forest reserves (Figure 2) that date back to the colonial period, such as Kanjedza (established 1922: 159 ha), Soche (established 1922: 388 ha), Bangwe (established 1930: 4 205 ha), Michiru (established 1960: 3004 ha), and Ndirande (established 1922: 1 433 ha) (Mauambeta and Kafakoma 2010). With the exception of Kanjedza Forest Reserve, these reserves were situated on the mountains surrounding the original township. The impetus for the establishment of reserves came from London (Ng'ong'ola 1990) and was part of a wider movement within the British Empire to preserve biodiversity and natural beauty, as exemplified by Gardiner's romantic description of Michiru Reserve's "garden landscape" (Gardiner 1958). There were also the pragmatic issues in Blantyre of preventing erosion and preserving the cleanliness of drinking water that flowed off the mountains (Blantyre City Assembly 2000). The forest reserves are seen differently by different stakeholders: urban planners see them as the source of Blantyre's physical attractiveness, the Blantyre Water Board (BWB) and consumers of piped water see them sources of clean water, and the urban poor see them as repositories of natural resources including firewood, wild foods, and farmland. In the context of an extremely unequal political economy, negotiation over the use of these resources has given way to the interests of more powerful groups taking precedent over the food security needs of the poor.



**Figure 2: Forest reserves in Blantyre (base map: Google Earth)**

The authoritative control of space during the Banda era meant that the forest reserves were well protected from poachers and squatters. This protection was all but lost

in the transitional period of the early 1990s when austerity measures under structural adjustment had reduced the number of forest guards and the severe economic downturn induced people to make use of forest resources. According to the Director of Town Planning and Estate Services, by 1995 Mount Ndirande was completely deforested. In an effort to address the environmental and aesthetic problems associated with a denuded mountain, the City Assembly introduced the Ndirande Forestry Stewardship Programme (NFSP) through which local residents would be granted land in the Reserve for cultivation and in return they would plant trees (from saplings provided by the City Assembly) and ensure that the trees grew to maturity. The NFSP was in keeping with the National Environmental Policy, which aimed to enhance cooperation between communities and governments in the management of environmental resources. It also coincided with the decentralization policy that put more control over resource management into the hands of the City Assembly (Blantyre City Assembly 2000). The NFSP signaled a progressive approach to urban resource management that encompassed multiple goals of forest preservation, community partnership and capacity building, and urban food security.

According to the group we met with who represented the Ndirande Farmer's Association (NFA), the allocation of plots was *ad hoc* and spontaneous. One day in 1996, authorities from the City Assembly arrived and allocated the available land on a first-come, first-served basis. The farmers we spoke with recalled that many people did not believe that the land allocation would be legitimate so they did not show up on that day and they were left out of the program. Each farmer was allocated at least two acres, with some having as many as eleven acres of land. The farmers established the NFA to represent their collective interests and ensure that ownership rights were recognized. When an "owner" wanted to rent out the land rather than farming it him or her self, he or she would verify the title with the NFA. The farmers also informed us that when an "owner" died the control of the land would be transferred to a surviving spouse or child. There were men and women "owners" and there were some women on the committee when we met with them in 2010.

The economic impact on the households who were granted plots of farmland can hardly be overstated. The leader of the NFA, himself controlling 11 acres of land, harvested 100 bags of maize in 2009 (5 000 kg) worth MK 200 000-350 000 (US\$1 333-\$2 333); this was a fortune compared to the MK 100-200 one of his farm laborers might earn in a day through *ganyu*. *Ganyu* is a form of temporary, short-term employment with deep roots in the political economic history of colonialism in rural Malawi (Bezner Kerr 2005). It is now practiced widely in town and gives expression to the socio-economic divide that exist within Ndirande, partly defined by gender, but also by the length of time in the community, social ties, and the chance acquisition of land for farming through the NFSP. The socio-economic strata within Ndirande helps to dispel the impression that the 'urban divide' is between two groups; in reality power is unevenly diffused through society, most notably in terms of gender difference. Development initiatives focused on urban agriculture have been critiqued based on the fact that urban agriculture tends to benefit wealthier households with access to land, labor, and financial resources (Mkwambisi *et al.* 2011), and yet the example of the NFSP destabilizes the assumption that because households who farm are less poor that the farming is not benefitting poor households. Notwithstanding the possibility that people were able to access these plots of

land because of their wealth or political connections, the households who participated in the NFSP were residents of Ndirande and most of them would not have had the opportunity to produce their own food had the program not existed. In illustrating the relative prosperity of households participating in the NFSP, the stark reality that emerges is one in which food security is *exceptional* and denotes prosperity. Structural poverty is the norm in Ndirande and the NFSP should be seen as a respite from the normalized condition of food insecurity.

Our meeting with NFA members took place while they were in the process of fighting the termination of the NFSP. At the time of our meeting in May 2010, the farmers told us that the Government had already reclaimed 300 of the 700 acres they had allocated in 1996. The remaining farmers, who were in the process of being evicted, said that there had not been any opportunity to negotiate their compensation. The compensation was based on the trees on each plot, with certain predetermined amounts given based on the type and maturity of each tree. The farmers said that the households who had already lost their land were having a difficult time feeding their families now that they did not have access to this land for cultivation. Some were able to resume farming on rural customary land; others were attempting to start businesses with the capital they received as compensation, but small businesses are rarely profitable or reliable enough to support a household. They noted that this situation was even more difficult to witness because many of the fruits on the trees they had planted were rotting or being taken by forest guards and thieves. They said the forest was already starting to deteriorate because of firewood poachers in those areas where the farmers had been removed.

The farmers were told that the reason for their removal was to protect the reservoirs at Mudi Dam (built in 1953) and Hynde Dam (built in 1929) (Figure 2). This reason was confirmed by the Director of Town Planning and Estates Management. The BWB, a parastatal company whose board is appointed by the President (Blantyre Water Board 2011), manages the municipal water supply and hence the reservoirs. The BWB is not accountable to the farmers, nor is it accountable to the City Assembly, and yet it controls a large parcel of land in the centre of the city surrounding the dams. Its decisions have a profound effect on the livelihoods of the people living alongside the secured area, often in squalid conditions, and yet there is no effective mechanism for them to negotiate a mutually beneficial solution because the chain of authority goes directly to the President of the country through a series of political appointments. The Government of Malawi has in effect overruled the City Assembly regarding the NFSP, displaying a lack of regard for the needs of the residents of Ndirande who are known to support the opposition party.

As justification for its position on the NFSP, the BWB claimed that the fertilizer used by the farmers was running down the mountain and contaminating the reservoirs. This claim is sadly ironic given that some of the farmers were receiving subsidies from the Government to buy the very fertilizer deemed to be environmentally hazardous by the BWB. If the fertilizer is hazardous to the health of the urban population who enjoy piped water, the residents of the “modern” city, then why is not also considered hazardous to people in rural areas who drink water from places near their fields treated with fertilizer? Even within Ndirande, many people are using water drawn from wells and streams that are heavily polluted by human and industrial waste, and yet this does not prompt action

on environmental protection. The double standard in this case is staggering, and yet in the absence of local democracy and in the context of crushing poverty, the options for public protest are severely limited.

In addition to controlling the use of space through the BWB, the central Government also claims jurisdiction over the forest reserves even though this responsibility was formally devolved to the City Assembly in the 1990s. The management of the reserves by the central Government means that decisions about the use of these important resources are far removed from the immediate needs of the communities around them (Blantyre City Assembly 2000). The devolution of power to the City Assembly, which according to the Director of Town Planning and Estate Services was the impetus for the NFSP in the first place, could help to create a more cooperative dynamic between residents and landowners. In my assessment, the application of organic farming methods and intercropping with fruit-bearing trees could resolve the dispute regarding the reservoirs while preserving the socio-economic, ecological, and aesthetic benefits of the NFSP. Unfortunately, despite the expanded role of local governments laid out in Malawi's constitution, the trend seems to be in favor of more centralized control. The clearest evidence of the lack of political will can be observed in the Government's procrastination on holding local elections. As the years pass without local elections, it is increasingly apparent that the Government fears contradictory political voices in the local assemblies and does not want to risk giving power at any level to one of the opposition parties.

The NFSP was conceived during a brief historical moment in Malawi when democratic political institutions facilitated policy innovation that could promote fairness in the use of Blantyre's natural resources. The decision to terminate the program was taken outside of democratic institutions and the effect was to subvert the basic needs of the urban farmers to the need to supply the formal parts of the city with clean water. The possibility of compromise was precluded because the Government did not require the political support of the people of Ndirande to maintain power. In the following section, the political contingencies guiding decisions about urban space are even more clearly exposed. Vending was suppressed under Banda, then encouraged in the first multiparty Government, then suppressed again. Moreover, even Mutharika himself alternated between protecting vendors and forcibly evicting them. The situation may be more pernicious than the invisibility of urban food security; these examples show that governments are aware of the issue, and have acted to address it, but only when these actions also support the primary goal of maintaining a city that can facilitate "modern" living and attract investment. Food insecure urban households are the victims of a political calculation that their support is not necessary to hold on to power.

### **The eviction of street vendors and the fight for commercial space**

The economic climate of Blantyre is one in which very few people have waged employment; even those with stable employment usually find their incomes to be insufficient and engage in supplemental income-generating activities. The controversy in this section over *where* these informal activities should take place is common to most African cities (Brown 2006, Meagher 2010). In the 1990s, informal economic activities such as vending flourished in public spaces as one of the few available sources of income for people marginalized from the formal labor market (Rakodi 1997, Tinker 1997,

Hansen and Vaa 2004, Jimu 2005, Meagher 2010) and periodic crackdowns re-iterated the underlying class tension of African urban spaces (Iliffe 1987, Murray and Myers 2006). *Operation Dongosolo* (OD), was one such crackdown that took place in the formal spaces of Malawi's four cities on April 18, 2006. OD was a counter-reaction to the proliferation of vendors in the 1990s and early 2000s, which in turn had been a reaction to the extremely tight regulation of public space during the Banda era and the deteriorating economic conditions in the era of structural adjustment (Jimu 2005, Tambulasi and Kayuni 2008, Kayuni and Tambulasi 2009). The political manipulation leading up to OD and the brutality of the operation itself were harbingers of future backsliding by the Government in terms of human rights and democracy in Malawi, which is currently undermining poverty reduction initiatives.

In terms of informal economic activities, vendors' claim to the right to occupy urban public spaces for their livelihood activities can be read as an expression of their political and economic freedom under the 1994 constitution (Jimu 2005, Kayuni and Tambulasi 2009). This sense of economic freedom was encouraged by the first President elected in the multiparty system, Bakhili Muluzi (UDF), who was a businessman and the self-professed "Minister of Vendors" (Kayuni and Tambulasi 2009). He promoted informal trading as a form of entrepreneurialism that could spur economic development in Malawi in the context of a *laissez-faire* economic policy. With funds provided by the charitable Press Trust foundation, Muluzi oversaw the construction of flea markets for informal vendors. The construction of the markets suggested an intention to marginalize informal business activities, as they set away from busy commercial areas, surrounded by alienating walls, and extremely inadequate in size (Kayuni and Tambulasi 2009). Furthermore, by the time they were constructed in 2002, the UDF Government had been widely discredited by corruption scandals, a severe famine in 2001-02 that was directly linked to irresponsible policy decisions, and a number of white elephant projects such as the flea markets (Englund and Mapanje 2002, Devereux 2002, Harrigan 2003).

The defining moment of Muluzi's second term was his attempt and failure to amend the constitution and allow himself to serve a third term as President (Ott *et al.* 2004, Hussein 2009). In lieu of running himself, Muluzi handpicked Bingu wa Mutharika as the UDF's presidential candidate in the 2004 election. Mutharika won the presidency but public dissatisfaction with party politics led to a fractured Parliament containing nine parties and 39 independent MPs (Hussein 2009). In 2005, Mutharika formed his own party, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), out of a group of independent MPs and defectors from other parties and they governed with a minority in Parliament until 2009 when the DPP won a majority. These historical details are vital for interpreting the backdrop for OD because in 2004, the UDF-affiliated Mayor of Blantyre had attempted to remove the vendors from the streets but Mutharika stepped in to protect the interests of the vendors. At the time, he had argued that they had the right to engage in economic activity according to the constitution and that the markets were inadequate for them to run viable businesses (Sabola 2006b, "Vendors: time to go" 2006). In hindsight, the fact that he would publically undermine the Mayor suggests a misalignment within the UDF at local and national levels, but more importantly it illustrates the *realpolitik* at the heart of Mutharika's governing style. When the Government announced OD in 2006, many citizens including vendors did not believe that it would happen based on Mutharika's recent public support for vendors' right to economic activity. This backdrop made the

message even clearer that cities in Mutharika's vision of Malawi would be orderly spaces more reminiscent of the Banda than the Muluzi era.

As with the termination of the NFSP, there was no negotiation with the vendors about their compensation or alternative livelihood activities. Mr. Chimombo, the secretary general of the Malawi Union for the Informal Sector (MUFIS), was quoted on April 12 saying "we (the vendors) are just spectators in the whole process, Government never consulted us but all we get are intimidatory announcements" (Namweza 2006). On April 17, the day before the eviction, vendors gathered in Blantyre to hold a public prayer as a protest against the policy (Nkawihe 2006). The public prayer was brutally dispersed as the police fired tear gas at the crowds. The Minister of Local Government and Rural Development George Chabonda responded by saying: "Come April 19, there will be no vendor in the streets. This is not a Government of failures, just ring me the day there will be vendors in the streets" (Ng'ambi 2006). The harsh actions of the police and the belligerent language from the Government signaled that there would be no public debate on the matter.

The enduring impact of OD on the livelihoods and sense of place of poor residents of Blantyre was captured in a poignant article about a woman from Ndirande, Mrs. Mangani, who was selling boiled potatoes near the Makata Industrial Park (Sabola 2006a). She said that the authorities were always harassing her and others like her and "every time they find us they beat us up and confiscate whatever we are selling." The President inadvertently corroborated Mrs. Mangani's accusation of police brutality in a speech he gave on Labour Day (May 1) 2006, in which he said simply: "I did not say some [vendors] should stay. I have ordered that if you get them, just beat them up" ("Bingu attends" 2006). Mrs. Mangani's testimony exposed the profound absurdity of the *post-dongosolo* city where a woman can be beaten up and intimidated for selling boiled potatoes. The title of the article, *Trading from dark corners*, is more likely to evoke illicit activities, such as prostitution or drug trafficking, rather than lunch. Mrs. Mangani stated her feelings about the new situation: "we have become fugitives in our own country. All our freedom of doing business is gone. We are like foreigners" (Sabola 2006a). Mrs. Mangani's statement has wider resonance in light of the long history of exclusionary geographies in Blantyre. Malawi's poor have been denied a sense of belonging to the city since its inception and OD sent a harsh message to people like Mrs. Mangani that despite the new democracy, they are out of place in the "modern city."

Some editorial commentaries in the newspapers directly expressed the need for class-based exclusion; they casted vendors as "others" relative to the literate, formally employed, English speaking authors who see themselves as the rightful inhabitants of the city. Chingwalu (2006) described the clean streets of the 1980s and contrasted them with the "irritating" and "discomforting" spaces in 2006; he showed his contempt for vendors by arguing that since profits must be so low for these businesses, they support themselves through petty crime. He then claimed that people who have little choice but to earn their livelihoods in the street should not be in the city at all. He went so far as to blame urbanization for the country's food shortages: "regardless of drought and other natural disasters, the low production [of food] is a result of people not utilizing the land which is available. What are these people doing in the street instead of going to the villages and produce for their country?" The Executive Secretary for Malawi Institute of Physical Planners in Lilongwe (Kenan 2006) expressed a similar point of view in his editorial

when he wrote that Malawi's cities have been "left to the dogs for the past decade." The discursive effect of this rhetoric is to dehumanize the vendors, and by extension the urban poor, in a clear echo of racializing discourses during the colonial period. The political expression of this attitude of superiority leads to the containment of the urban poor rather than the confrontation of the political economic structures that perpetuate and deepen poverty.

Informal vending is not only a source of income for households, but it is also a means of food distribution that tends to benefit low income consumers who value the convenience, small quantities of food, and the ability to barter and buy on credit (Atkinson 1995, Tinker 1997, Crush and Frayne 2010). The economic beneficiaries of clean and orderly public spaces are formal food vendors, most notably supermarkets. Shoprite, a multinational grocery store chain based in South Africa, opened in Blantyre in 2001. It enhanced the "modern" city of Blantyre by offering a consumer environment in keeping with generic commercial spaces anywhere in the world. Whereas the target Shoprite customers in South Africa are low-income earners, when I asked people in Blantyre about where they buy their food, Shoprite was seen as out of reach for all but a slim minority of urban professionals. Policies that privilege the expansion of supermarkets rather than food distribution through the informal economy therefore impact food access for low-income earners as well as their income-earning opportunities. OD set Blantyre on a course of development that exacerbated the socio-economic divide and the implications of these events are now coming to fruition. A focus on the modern aspects of urban development without any mechanism for integrating the urban majority into the urban economy contributed to violent clashes with police in 2011. Political strife is inevitable when, like Mrs. Mangani, people are made into criminals as they attempt to feed their families.

### **Conclusion**

The events recounted in this paper highlight the fact that the 'urban divide' that characterizes contemporary cities in Africa has been the product of locally specific conditions as well as broad trends in African history such as colonialism, land alienation, and postcolonial dictatorships. Whereas improvements in democratic institutions in past decades promised more inclusive development and *negotiation* rather than decree over the use of urban resources and the occupation of urban space, the policies in this paper show that the institutional mechanisms have been undermined. Though imperfect, the NFSP and the liberalization of the informal use of public commercial spaces opened up new opportunities for poor urban households to achieve food security in the wake of disastrous structural adjustment reforms. The cancellation of the NFSP and the eviction of street vendors have closed down these options and, as Maxwell (1999) hypothesized, the issue of urban food security has been erased from public discourse. Mutharika's *realpolitik* approach has meant that the only political representation available to most poor residents of Blantyre is through virtually powerless opposition MPs. Substantive policy action is therefore stymied by the locally specific political economy but the denial of the existence of urban poverty is facilitated by the reiteration of the age-old binary of urban and rural space, which in its simplicity precludes realistic analysis of complex geographies such as Blantyre's.



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