

Decentralization and Child Welfare in Malawi: Conceptual Issues and Benefits

Pius T. Tanga*, Abie Sumbulu and Benson L. Kansinjiro**

*Social Work / Social Development, University of Fort Hare, PB X1314,
Alice 5700, South Africa*

*E-mail: * <ptangwe@ufh.ac.za / tanga8_2000@yahoo.co.uk>, ** <200905762@ufh.ac.za>*

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ABSTRACT The concept of decentralization is explored alongside the changes and benefits brought by decentralization to child welfare in Ntchisi and Lilongwe districts, Malawi. Noting that most programs under the current decentralized system have placed more emphasis on community based approach to child welfare, it is only safe to conclude that social development shapes the understanding of district officers in the two districts under study. It became apparent that the district officers' understanding is more related to the concept of devolution, which entails divesting the decision-making power to grassroots level. The practice on the ground, however, suggests that devolution in the two districts is achieved albeit to a limited extent. The changes are consistent with the functionalist thinking of change and progress.

INTRODUCTION

In 2005, as part of the process of living up to the Malawi government's policy of devolving some of its functions, the Department of Child Development Affairs in the Ministry of Women and Child Development devolved its core functions to the district level. According to Guidelines and Standards for the devolved Functions to Assemblies (2003), by devolution of core functions is meant to integrate the district social welfare offices into the single administrative authority of the district council and alleviate poverty (Chiweza 2010). Reforms leading to local governance have been considered as a means towards creating an opportunity structure for the local communities to "fight against poverty at close range" (Samuels et al. 2009: 90).

The district social welfare offices' role is to serve as a focal point for coordination of child welfare functions. In the *Strategic Plan for the Ministry of Women and Child Development* (2006), the Ministry outlined the functions of the social welfare office as that of the provision of child protection, early childhood development, probation and after-care for children in

conflict with the law, administration of social protection including cash transfer schemes targeting children, provision of care and support interventions for orphans and other vulnerable children (OVC) as well as the coordination activities of stakeholders involved in addressing child welfare interventions.

However, it is not clear as to whether this decentralization brought about any changes in the execution of child welfare activities at district assembly. It is also not clear how decentralization in child welfare is contributing to the very objectives of decentralization, which is the alleviation of poverty and in particular enhancing child wellbeing. This paper therefore explores the experiences of district officers in the districts of Ntchisi and Lilongwe in Malawi. The paper starts with the staff's understanding of the concepts of decentralization and child welfare. It then proceeds to discuss the benefits of and changes brought about by decentralization. An attempt is made to relate the officers' experience with the functionalist theory upon which the study was anchored.

The Concept of Decentralization

The concept of decentralization has generated its own debate so much so that there is no precise agreement as to what constitutes it. However, there are common features that underline

Address for correspondence:

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

the conceptualization of decentralization even when looked at across disciplines. Samuels et al. (2009) have defined decentralization as the transfer of political power, decision-making, and resources from the center to sub-national levels of government or from the core to the periphery. The definition connotes two things. The first is the divesting of such responsibilities of certain responsibilities and the second is the devolving to other authorities. On a related note, Coudouel and Paternostro (2006:17) observe that decentralization harbors three principal concepts of deconcentration, which is about granting increased responsibilities to a lower agency delegation, which connotes the assignment of particular functions to another entity, and devolution, which is considered as the assignment of a degree of political autonomy and resource control and administrative powers to sub-national governments.

The analysis of the concept of decentralization is also revealing in other elements. According to Wittenberg (2003:5), decentralization takes three dimensions, namely, fiscal, administrative and political. Fiscal decentralization deals with granting autonomy to the lower levels to generate their own revenue as well as the authority to spend and allocate resources without having to seek approval from central government. Administrative decentralization relates to the independence to recruit and manage staff. It also entails holding the staff accountable to the stakeholders at the sub-national levels. The main feature of political decentralization is the passing of actual power and political accountability from the center to the sub-national levels. As noted by Hussein (2004), the major forms of decentralization that have been adopted by Malawi are political and administrative decentralization.

Child Welfare

The understanding of child welfare cannot be divorced from the overall discipline of social welfare. Therefore, to contextualize the notion of child welfare, a discussion of social welfare is fundamental in this paper. Furthermore, the historical aspects shaping social welfare are not different from child welfare. Therefore, the origins of child welfare are explored through the narrative of social welfare.

It is difficult to give social welfare a precise definition. It is, however, argued that social welfare in its simplest forms connotes wellbeing,

which is a condition or state of affairs as it applies to individuals, groups and communities. Social welfare therefore refers to three elements, which include the degree to which social problems are managed, the extent to which needs are met and finally the degree to which opportunities for advancement are provided.

The concept of "child" comes with its own controversies in both theory and practice. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) defines a child as any person below the age of 18. The definition adopted by many countries helps to identify children by statistically categorizing and associating persons with similar characteristics within a particular framework of age. However, laws in some countries have tended to offer varying definitions of child. For instance, in Malawi, different laws provide for various definitions of the child. Section 23 of the Constitution of the Republic of Malawi (1995) defines a child as a person up to the age of 16 for purposes of labor. For marriage, the age is set at 15 years. The various definitions based on age create confusion in implementing child welfare programs much as at times they offer flexibility in focusing specific groups of children.

Laird and Hartman (1985:12) define child welfare in two ways. First, child welfare is defined as "conditions of living in which children develop spontaneously through all stages of maturation". These may include, but are not limited to laws on child protection, and essential services such as health and education, governance institutions, and community structures. This is a broad definition encompassing a range of factors that constitute the wellbeing of the child (Laird and Hartman 1985:61). The definition thus assumes that child welfare is an end in itself hence it is about all factors considered essential to serve the best interests of children (Johnson and Schwartz 1997:165).

While the definition succeeds in looking at all children and their needs in a holistic manner, it fails to delineate the boundaries of what child welfare ought to be, a factor that might make the definition difficult to translate into policy and practice. It is worth noting that what constitutes wellbeing is relative and not value free. By implication what constitutes child welfare in one country such as America might not be the same in another country such as Malawi. Furthermore, in the context of this broad understanding, all institutions, legal and policy frameworks, pro-

grams and structures that enable children to meet their needs, can be seen as child welfare. Yet, this might not be the case in practice. For instance, provision of an essential service such as road infrastructure cannot be child welfare despite having a profound impact on children's needs. As a result, the whole concept becomes vague and ambiguous.

Secondly, child welfare tends to refer to a range of services and programs dealing with children that are vulnerable and/or in a state of deprivation. In this regard, child welfare is a more specific concept referring to system and services provided for children "in need" within society (Anglin 2002:236). The system and services may focus on the social, special education, developmental, health, alcohol and drug abuse issues of and protecting children from harm.

Unlike the previous definition, this definition can be merited for setting a target for child welfare, namely children "in need". This offers clarity of purpose if the concept is used as a basis for informing policy and programs around children. However, the definition narrows the concept of child welfare to merely child protection. As Parton (2009:715) notes, focus on child protection does not adequately cover all critical issues around children, and as such, wider issues of child wellbeing tend to be overlooked. Moreover, the concept is reminiscent of the residual approach to conceptualizing social welfare (Patel 2005). Therefore the demerits characterizing the residual thinking hold if child welfare is defined in this way.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on a larger study conducted in Ntchisi and Lilongwe Districts of Malawi. There is no known research done on decentralization in Malawi as this decentralization first took place in 2005 when decentralization through functional devolution was implemented in the Ministry of Women and Child Development. Babbie (2007:87) explains that exploratory research, which is part of qualitative methodology, is ideal for a relatively new area of research. This methodology is not only suited for finding out what happens (Henning 2004) to enable the researcher to observe social life as it happens daily, but to understand it, as well as the meaning people attach to it (Babbie 2005). The qualitative methodology served to get in-

depth experiences of district officers regarding the challenges facing child welfare issues under decentralization.

Three methods were used for data collection from a sample of 37 participants. First, a semi-structured interview schedule was administered to 7 officers in the management ranks of the district. This included District Social Welfare Officers, the District Commissioner, the Director of Planning and Development, the District Community Development Officers, Victim Support Unit Officers, the District Youth Officer and District Labor Officers. Second, focus group discussions were held for the majority of social welfare officers and community development officers in the lower grade with a total of 23 participants. The study employed the idea that in cases where the research purports to explore thoughts and feelings, focus group interviews are ideal because they generate detailed information as participants are motivated to talk on the basis of the group dynamics factor (De Vos et al. 2011) and they are a "means of understanding how people feel or think about an issue" (Delpont and Roestenburg 2011: 186). This provided an opportunity to gain a detailed picture of their conceptual understanding and experiences of decentralization and its impact on child welfare in Malawi. The third group comprised 7 heads of other departments at the district management rank in key sectors implementing other child welfare related functions in health, education, youth programs, and child protection. Finally, the study also utilized policy and program documents that were available on decentralization and child welfare in order to get a recorded background of events. The triangulation of the various methods of data collection eliminates any doubt of the validity or reliability of the findings of this study and instead enhances its trustworthiness (Willis 2007). Data analysis was qualitative in nature and was done and interpreted manually. The findings were presented in themes as they emerged during the discussions and interviews with the participants.

RESULTS

A number of themes emerged from the findings and include the understanding of the concept of decentralization and the benefits of decentralization, some of which include working collaboration and planning are decentralized.

The Understanding of the Concept of Child Welfare by District Officers

The majority of the participants understood child welfare to mean all activities related to children. For district social welfare officers, child welfare covers early childhood development, health, education, child protection, and psychosocial support to children, families and communities at risk of deprivation. For most district social welfare officers, casework interventions are the main preoccupation of their work. This is even echoed in the outline of functions devolved to the districts. Yet, as they further reported, the need to tackle issues of children in a holistic and integrated manner seems to explain the rationale behind the fact that case work interventions (as social welfare officers noted) towards children in need of special protection is no longer getting much attention, rather developmental social work is favored.

One of the participants (who happened to be a senior officer in Lilongwe) noted that child welfare “involves the wellbeing of any child. It involves responsibility over people especially children”. The same was also echoed by officers in Ntchisi. One senior officer for instance concurred, “Anything that concerns improvement of the condition of children is child welfare”.

The majority of community development officers also viewed child welfare as all activities that seek to promote the development of children. There was general consensus among the community development officers that child welfare constitutes all activities that seek to promote the development of children. They cited economic empowerment programs, community capacity building, and functional adult literacy programs as equally pivotal in child welfare. No wonder, when asked to explain what has changed under decentralization, one of the social workers said, “Under decentralization, social work activities with and for children have taken on community based approaches, which are hence forth developmental.”

District Officers’ Understanding of Decentralization

The understanding of the concept of decentralization was generally described by the ma-

jority of the district officers as referring to “*mphanvu ku anthu*” (meaning power to the people). This understanding implies full decentralization in which the ordinary people take charge of the affairs and decision-making processes regarding services in their districts.

There was a split view of the officials on the definition of decentralization regarding the control of resources such as fiscal and human capital. One participant, for instance, described it as a situation wherein all public officers report to the district commissioner. Other officers attempted to define decentralization as a state of affairs in which all public sectors fall under one administrative authority at the district level and are able to control their own resources (fiscal, human or material).

The Benefits of Decentralization

The majority of the participants reported that decentralization has brought many benefits to the districts and to child welfare provision in particular. According to them, benefits such as working in collaboration, decentralization of planning, increased and decentralized funding, and so on, as discussed next, have accrued as a result of child welfare decentralization in Malawi.

Working in Collaboration

There was consensus among the participants that decentralization has helped in pulling together human resources that were initially working in isolation. According to them, the human resources are coordinated by the leadership of the District Commissioner, who happens to be the head of the secretarial arm of the district council. Furthermore, sectors including child welfare are expanding the number of staff working at the district level in a move aimed at increasing the capacity of districts. It is interesting to note that by the time this research was completed, the Ministry of Gender, Children and Community Development had begun sending more senior staff to serve as heads of social welfare and community development at district level.

Planning is Decentralized

Unlike before, districts do their own planning, budgeting and implementation of activities based on the needs of the communities.

During a focus group discussion with Community Development Officers, one officer said, "The community development section is able to plan for itself. Initially, before the current decentralization, all planning was done through provincial offices and central government". As result, it was further reported that there is a sense of community ownership of projects at community level, and that communities are proactive on their own to benefit from development. In the words of one senior officer interviewed in Lilongwe, "Development is demand driven, where communities have to demand what they want from the district council."

The majority of the officers also regarded planning as being integrated and multi-sectoral in nature. The planning of child welfare activities now takes into consideration the multi-sectoral nature of issues that affect children. As noted by one district officer, "There exists some synergy in child welfare activities, and programs are modeled on the holistic manner of approaching a child."

Furthermore, a greater number of officers reported that planning for development has been made simple under decentralization. Technocrats no longer generate plans on behalf of communities. Rather communities, through generating the Village Action Plans and district development plans, put forward their priorities, which district technocrats simply consolidate and support.

Increased and Decentralized Funding

There was resounding agreement by district officers who revealed that the districts now have a pool funding arrangement through which all sectors (child welfare inclusive) get and process their funding. In addition, they stated that although not enough, there are more financial resources going to the districts than before. In both the social welfare office and in community development, funding for the year was reportedly to have increased, a situation, which is hoped, will gradually keep improving.

Prioritization of Child Welfare Issues

The districts' visions and aspirations are expressed in the Lilongwe District Socio-economic Profile (SEP) 2006). In a bottom-up process, the SEPs are then translated into District Development

Plans (DDPs) and Village Action Plans (VAC), which provide an outline of activities in terms of priority for all public agencies, reflecting the needs of the communities in the districts (Lilongwe District Socio-economic Profile 2006). As observed by officers, these planning frameworks have resulted in creating a sense of ownership, and the shaking off of 'white elephants' because services and programs are implemented according to their own wishes and aspirations. This, according to the participants, was initially a centralized event or a top-down process.

However, some officers reported that child welfare is not prioritized by the districts. For them, evidence for claims is the way in which the district managements allocate funds for the implementation of projects. One of the district officers noted for example that:

Deciding on projects to benefit from Local Development Fund (LDF), public works programs that have an indirect benefit for children tend to take priority. Even construction of Early Childhood Development Centers or payment of school fees for needy children is not considered for local development fund support.

It was also generally felt that the district development planning is biased towards hardware projects, which in essence are about infrastructure development of the district. Yet, most of the issues that matter in child welfare are software in nature, essentially having to do with the psychosocial development of children.

Others however pointed out that most of the support under the Local Development Fund and other related sources are currently going to constructions that have to do with improving the environment of schools, healthcare provision and road construction among other things. Lilongwe, for instance, has 135 projects being financed by the Local Development Fund. The projects are all about construction of teachers' houses. In addition, in both Ntchisi and Lilongwe, the biggest proportion of government funding goes to the district health services, with much of it going to the procurement of essential drugs. Therefore, child welfare can be regarded as a priority on account of health and education getting the most from district funding.

However, the views of officers regarding changes brought by decentralization are diverse. Participants reported that there is more work, as there is increased demand for child welfare services. As noted by one participant, "Decentral-

ization has raised community expectations that the child welfare office has all the answers to their challenges". Yet, there still remain various challenges preventing the child welfare office from fulfilling and accomplishing its vital role effectively. The challenges are discussed in detail in the following section. Finally, the officers also reported that decentralization has come with the flourishing of community-based organizations through which devolved child welfare functions are implemented. Decentralization therefore seeks to bring services closer to the people.

DISCUSSION

In a country such as Malawi, where more people live in rural areas, community-based organizations have served as a vehicle for translating decentralization into reality. The functionalist theory expounds the idea of goal attainment as a direct result of the functions of the various parts of society. A system, according to Talcott Parson's work on structural functionalism, must define and achieve its primary goals (Ritzer 2008:101). As can be seen from the impacts and the changes brought about by decentralization, the goal of bringing social welfare sectors and all other institutions under a single administration unit is being achieved, although a few sectors are as yet to fully devolve their functions. Furthermore, in terms of advancing fiscal decentralization, the districts are now controlling their own funding obtained through government subventions, local revenues and donor funding. Promoting grassroots participation and/or community driven socioeconomic development is one of the objectives of decentralization. The findings demonstrate that since adopting decentralization, the districts implement programs based on village action plans generated by the communities themselves.

According to the Guidelines and Standards for Devolved Functions to Assemblies (2003), ensuring improved public service delivery is at the center of devolution. Accordingly, the envisaged changes that decentralization is expected to bring include:

Integration of government agencies at the district and community levels into one administrative and management unit, rationalization and absorption of human resources, composite budgeting and provision of funds for the decentralized functions and services, and reliev-

ing the central and sectoral institutions of the implementation of operational responsibilities and transferring them to districts thereby promoting popular participation for the governance and development of districts (Guidelines and Standards for Devolved Functions to Assemblies 2003: 1).

What seems to be coming out clearly corresponds with the institutional view of welfare. Welfare from an institutional viewpoint entails all programs that ensure the wellbeing of society. This view tallies with the social development thinking. According to Midgley (1995), social development is about linking the social goals of the development process with economic empowerment issues.

The general picture emerging from the officers' understanding of child welfare can be synthesized in line with the residual, institutional and social development view of social welfare. First, a description by district social welfare officers of what constitutes child welfare corresponds with the fact that the devolved functions to district social welfare offices focus on specialized casework interventions with the vulnerable groups. This, therefore, implies that child welfare is thus remedial and residual in function (Patel 2005). District social workers' and social work systems in parts of Africa are modeled on Western social work. Just as Anucha (2008:231) wrote after independence, African countries simply adopted Western social welfare systems, methods and administration, which failed to address the real problems facing the African people.

Furthermore, other district officers, other than social workers, demonstrated that they understand child welfare from an institutional perspective. In this case, they concur with Colby (1989:8), Midgley (1995:5) and Patel (2005) among others, who look at social welfare as the promotion of people's wellbeing through a wide range of services, programs targeting individuals, groups and communities. From this, it can be concluded that such understanding assumes that child welfare is a means towards a desired state of affairs. The means can therefore include education, health, casework interventions with vulnerable groups and water and sanitation among others.

Finally, the other picture drawn from the district officers' understanding of child welfare relates to social development as both a means and

a state of social equality. Bernstein and Gray (1997), point out that social development focuses on structural change at macro-level, the process of which also integrates the dynamic system of economic growth. District Community Development offices understand their work as including community economic empowerment activities, community mobilization, community capacity building and functional adult literacy. They also understand their work as complementing the work of all other sectors in advancing wellbeing and bringing about the change at communities. Their understanding is in line with definitions provided by Samuels et al. (2009) as well as Coudouel and Paternostro (2006), who view decentralization as the divesting of the political or decision-making process, resource control and administrative authority to the sub-national governments. Such an understanding therefore best denotes devolution.

The move aimed at increasing the capacity of districts of working in collaboration with other stakeholders to make decentralization as a system work, fits well with the functionalist theory. Explaining how the functionalist perspective works, Haralambos and Holborn (2000:10) point out the following:

A system is an entity made up of interconnected and inter-related parts. Each part will in some way affect every other part and the system as a whole...and to survive, its various parts must have a degree of fit or compatibility.

An interesting factor that emerged concerns a positive point of multilevel intervention. At the moment, casework practice is suggested as the mainstay of intervention with a voice of need from the participants calling for the consideration of group work and specifically community development. Literature suggests that a social work practitioner may use any or all of the three methods of intervention in an integrated fashion, that is, casework, group work or community work (Frey and Dupper 2005; Potgieter 1998). It is encouraging to note further that the practitioners have been able to pick up this need brought about by the introduction of decentralization. These changes can be described as large scale in that they involve the macro-level system of the two districts. (Ritzer 2008:99).

CONCLUSION

The research demonstrated that district officers view child welfare as a range of services

and programs aimed at enhancing the wellbeing of children. This understanding is located in the theoretical perspectives of social welfare. In this regard, it has been established that services specifically provided by the social welfare office can best be described as residual in nature, because they are mostly in the form of specialized case work interventions targeting individuals and their vulnerability. On the other hand, other views looked at child welfare as all services provided by the government or local council aimed at promoting the survival, growth and development of children. Such an understanding takes on the institutional view of looking at social welfare. Considering that the district council is an integration of various sectors into a single unit in which sectors work towards achieving unity of purpose (that is, ensuring child wellbeing), it can be concluded that the districts' understanding fit well with both the social development view of social welfare and the functionalist theory. Such thinking transcends both the residual and institutional view of looking at welfare. Social welfare services are thus provided and expanded on the premise that appropriate capacity is available. Yet, in the case of the two districts, capacity, in terms of human resources, material and financial needs, is still inadequate, and thus rendering decentralization the creation of a state of disequilibrium.

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

RECOMMENDATIONS

Following are some of the salient recommendations:

- ♦ There is need for the local government ministry in Malawi to fast track the process of facilitating the completion of dev-

olution by all sectors involved in child welfare. This would be more in the best interest of the children and communities who are the direct beneficiaries.

- ♦ Comprehensive capacity building plan for upgrading existing social workers coupled with a major recruitment drive for well qualified staff needs to be developed. This will help address the capacity gaps that are currently being experienced at the district level.
- ♦ Since child welfare is not an end in itself but also a tool for social development, there is need to enhance the understanding of social welfare in a way that embraces the concept of social development. In this way child welfare will be implemented as an institution in which the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.
- ♦ There is need for continued advocacy for increased resources to the social welfare offices in the districts. Increased funding is more likely to translate into improved coordination of child welfare. One way is to create a task force for engaging with donor partners and Malawi Government's Ministry of Finance to improve funding levels to the social welfare sector in general.

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