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Operation Dongosolo and the Geographies of Urban Poverty in Malawi

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Abstract

Urban poverty in southern Africa is a multi-dimensional issue comprised of both deeply rooted historical factors expressed in the built environments of cities and contemporary factors related to on-going political and economic changes. The tension between states and street vendors throughout southern Africa is part of a perennial struggle for the use of urban space. For many low-income urban people, vending provides crucial resources, both in terms of household income and the distribution of basic goods through informal networks. This article focuses on the consequences for urban food security of street vendor evictions in Blantyre in 2006, under Operation Dongosolo. Dongosolo reshaped the geographies of where people could buy food and where they could earn a living. It re-established the primacy of formal-sector businesses and middle-class lifestyles, which served both contingent political purposes and longstanding expectations of what urban space should look like. I elaborate on three factors that led to Dongosolo: problems with the decentralisation process and the implementation of local democratic institutions; the formation of the Democratic People's Party (DPP) as the governing party and the associated shift in patronage networks; and the cultural attitude that the poor do not

belong in the city. Close reading of the causal factors and consequences of Dongosolo for the urban poor demonstrates the structural nature of urban poverty in Malawi, which is embedded in local debates over the purpose of cities.

Introduction

Tensions over the use of urban spaces often reveal deeply embedded political economic structures at the root of urban poverty. In 2006, the Government of Malawi implemented Operation *Dongosolo* in Lilongwe, Blantyre and Zomba and forcibly evicted vendors from the streets.¹ Government insisted that vendors must conduct their business in flea markets, which were too small to accommodate all active vendors and too far from the main commercial thoroughfares, putting informal vendors at a disadvantage. *Dongosolo* exposed several fundamental problems with urban development in Malawi that remain unresolved.

Here I provide an analysis of the factors that created the conditions for *Dongosolo* and the political motivations behind the government's actions. My analysis is based on fieldwork on urban food insecurity in Blantyre – a problem that is fundamental to the understanding of urban poverty.² *Dongosolo* changed how low-income households could earn a living in the informal sector to buy food, and it changed the places where food was available, in some cases making it less physically accessible. I aim to emphasise the contextual factors that led to *Dongosolo*, which are also key factors in producing and

¹ *Dongosolo* refers to order, discipline, systems and structure. See S. Paas, *Dictionary Mtanthauziramawu: Chichewa/Chinyanja-English: English-Chichewa/Chinyanja* (Zomba, Kachere Books, 2009), p. 85.

² D. Maxwell, 'The Political Economy of Urban Food Security in Sub-Saharan Africa', *World Development*, 27, 11 (1999), pp. 1939–53; J. Battersby, 'Beyond the Food Desert: Finding Ways to Talk About Urban Food Security in South Africa', *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography*, 94, 2 (2012), pp. 141–59.

embedding urban poverty in cities like Blantyre. Many aspects of this story are familiar to other southern African countries, and hence the article also seeks to contribute to the understanding of urban poverty in southern Africa more broadly.³

Dongosolo was played out in the core areas of Malawi's cities and yet had consequences for the country as a whole, for both rural households who relied on occasional vending in town as well as those urban households no longer able to earn a living through street vending. The symbolic importance of cities to demonstrate progress and prosperity is in direct conflict with the reality of Malawi's profound poverty in rural and urban areas. Poverty is multi-dimensional and therefore difficult to measure and compare between different places. The comparison of Blantyre's urban poverty rate to the national rates of poverty illustrates this complexity. Malawi's Integrated Household Survey showed a sharp decline in the poverty rate in Blantyre City, based on consumption expenditures per person per year, from 23.7 per cent in the 2004–5 survey to 7.5 per cent in the 2010 survey.⁴ This rate was far below the national average of 50.7 per cent in 2010. The ostensibly positive story of actual poverty reductions due to economic growth is meaningless in light of the much higher cost of living, including food costs in Blantyre City relative to rural areas. The same survey found that a similar proportion of households had very low levels of food security in Blantyre City (31.1 per cent) as in the nation as a whole (32.5 per cent). The need to allocate a higher proportion of income to basic needs like food, housing and water puts pressure on urban households'

³ D. Potts, "'Restoring Order'?: Operation *Murambatsvina* and the Urban Crisis in Zimbabwe', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 32, 2 (June 2006), pp. 273–91; F. Musoni, 'Operation *Murambatsvina* and the Politics of Street Vendors in Zimbabwe', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 36, 2 (June 2010), pp. 301–17; A. Kamete, 'Missing the Point? Urban Planning and the Normalisation of "Pathological" Spaces in Southern Africa', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 38, 4 (October 2013), pp. 639–51.

⁴ Malawi National Statistics Office, *Integrated Household Survey 2010-2011* (Zomba, 2012), available at: http://www.nsomalawi.mw/images/stories/data_on_line/economics/ihs/IHS3/IHS3_Report.pdf, retrieved on 17 January 2014.

budgets, and this pressure is often relieved through informal sources of food, housing and social support.⁵ Policies like *Dongosolo* display insensitivity to the needs of the urban poor, intertwined with the lack of consultation, lack of appropriate market facilities and lack of participatory urban governance. I use food insecurity as an indicator of poverty, as it is entangled with both livelihood security and the experience of poverty.⁶

The next section provides a brief discussion of the qualitative research methodology informing this article. Following is a historical overview of urban and commercial development in Malawi with particular reference to political events that shaped urban food distribution networks. This section leads into a discussion of the events that took place in 2006 during *Dongosolo*. The subsequent three sections elaborate on key factors that created the conditions for *Dongosolo*. The first of these focuses on the cancellation of the local elections scheduled for 2005 and the long-term lack of effective local governance to meet the everyday needs of urban residents in Malawi.⁷ The second section focuses on the role of neopatrimonialism and the significance of *Dongosolo* for demonstrating the shift from United Democratic Front (UDF) to Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) governments. The third section addresses tension over the meaning of urban space and the idea that the urban poor are out of place in the city.⁸ Discourses that centre

⁵ J. Crush and B. Frayne, 'Supermarket Expansion and the Informal Food Economy in Southern African Cities: Implications for Urban Food Security', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 37, 4 (December 2011), pp. 781–807

⁶ For a useful overview of the link between geography, food security and poverty, see M. Watts and H. Bohle, 'The Space of Vulnerability: The Causal Structure of Hunger and Famine', *Progress in Human Geography*, 17, 1 (1993), pp. 43–67.

⁷ R. Tumbulasi, 'Local Government Without Governance: A New Institutional Perspective of Local Governance Policy Paralysis in Malawi', *Public Policy and Administration*, 26, 3 (2010), pp. 333–52; D. Cammack, 'Local Governance and Public Goods in Malawi', *IDS Bulletin*, 42, 2 (2011), pp. 43–52; A. Chiweza, 'Local Government', in N. Patel and L. Svasand (eds), *Government and Politics in Malawi* (Zomba, Centre for Social Research, 2007), pp. 137–74.

⁸ G. Myers, *African Cities: Alternative Visions of Urban Theory and Practice* (London, Zed Books, 2011); S. Parnell and E. Pieterse, 'The "Right to the City": Institutional Imperatives of a Developmental State',

the problem of urban poverty on the poor themselves help to justify the logic of removing livelihood options from vulnerable groups to align with planners' aesthetic preferences. *Dongosolo* served to hide urban poverty from view rather than to address it, exacerbating household poverty dispersed within informal settlements despite the image of clean and orderly streets.

Researching Urban Livelihoods and Urban Food Security

The literature on urban food security in southern Africa, spurred largely by the African Food Security Urban Network, has raised the profile of household food insecurity as a critical issue for understanding urban poverty in the region.⁹ My research was conducted in Blantyre, Malawi in 2010. It focused on the challenges households face in accessing food, and how the challenges and opportunities for attaining food security are gendered. To demonstrate the effects of *Dongosolo* at the time when the fieldwork took place, I draw from the interactions in the field through in-depth interviews, group participative diagramming sessions, observation of markets and group interviews with community-based organisations. The sampling frame for in-depth interviews was based on a preselection of six urban wards (Nkolokoti, Limbe West, Ndirande North, Soche East, Soche West and Likhubula) from which at least six respondents were selected ensuring gender parity and a purposively designed variety of respondents in terms of age, household composition and approximate income level. Various gatekeepers were used to contact participants, including community-based organisations, churches, a mosque,

International Journal of Urban and Regional Research, 34, 1 (2010), pp. 146–62; J. Robinson, *Ordinary Cities: Between Modernity and Development* (London, Routledge, 2006).

⁹ J. Crush and B. Frayne, 'Urban Food Insecurity and the New International Food Security Agenda', *Development Southern Africa*, 28, 4 (2011), pp. 527–44.

markets and references from participants. Interviews were conducted with the aid of an interpreter, digitally recorded, transcribed and translated into English when necessary. Participative diagramming provided a way of addressing the limitations of in-depth interviews in understanding the range of places where people accessed food. The groups were made up of acquaintances brought together by various stakeholders in the preselected wards. Eight sessions were conducted ranging from four to eight participants per session. Most of the participants were female, although in three sessions men also participated. I researched *Dongosolo* from newspaper accounts drawn from a review of six months of newspapers (March – August 2006) printed in Malawi's two daily papers (*The Times* and *The Nation*). The newspaper accounts are combined with secondary research on the history of Blantyre's urban development.

Historical Geographies of Urban and Commercial Development

I found in my fieldwork that people in Blantyre accessed food from various types of venues that could not be neatly characterised as either formal or informal. These places fell on a spectrum of formality depending on who built and maintained them, who operated there and what amenities were available. Some markets were constructed with public funds but housed stalls operated by independent vendors renting on a day-to-day basis. Other types of markets were built and managed by Traditional Authorities outside the purview of municipal officials. These markets were relatively informal compared to publicly funded markets, but relatively formal compared to the places where people would gather under the sun in their neighbourhoods to hawk their wares. The complexity of Blantyre's commercial landscape, as observed through an investigation of where

people were buying food, raised intriguing questions about the historical evolution of food trading in Blantyre. *Dongosolo* was an important single event in this process as it re-established the primary purpose of the city as a place for formal businesses and middle-class lifestyles. It de-centred the informal systems of commercial exchange that many of the most vulnerable residents rely on for their livelihoods and for accessing food.

Blantyre was established in the nineteenth century on a site that had already seen mass displacement due to conflict and famine. As with other central African cities, it acted as a hub for the settler economy.¹⁰ Nyasaland (colonial Malawi) was economically underdeveloped relative to other southern African colonies, reflected in the slow growth of the settler population in Blantyre, which by 1931 had only 504 European and 609 Asian residents.¹¹ The Townships Ordinance (1931) provided for the constitution of townships and the election of councillors in Nyasaland. Councils did not have jurisdiction over ‘Africans’, who fell under ‘Traditional’ governance structures.¹² The welfare of Africans lay outside the purview of the Township Councils, which meant that the little urban planning that existed was not intended for indigenous needs. Southern African settler societies commonly held the idea that urban Africans were characteristically transient, and therefore not integrated into the urban social fabric.¹³

Rapid rural to urban migration in Nyasaland accompanied rapid economic expansion after World War Two.¹⁴ State investments in planning and infrastructure

¹⁰ A. Ross, *Blantyre Mission and the Making of Modern Malawi* (Blantyre, CLAIM, 1996).

¹¹ J. Power, ‘Race, Class, Ethnicity, and Anglo-Indian Trade Rivalry in Colonial Malawi, 1910-1945’, *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 26, 3 (1993), pp. 575–607.

¹² Chiweza, ‘Local Government’, p. 148.

¹³ J. Ferguson, *Expectations of Modernity: Myths and Meanings of Urban Life on the Zambian Copperbelt* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1999); H. Moore and M. Vaughan, *Cutting Down Trees: Gender, Nutrition, and Change in the Northern Province of Zambia, 1890-1990* (New York, Heinemann, 1994).

¹⁴ J. McCracken, ‘Blantyre Transformed: Class, Conflict and Nationalism in Urban Malawi’, *Journal of African History*, 39, 2 (1998), pp. 247–69.

followed the growth in urban population. The first urban plan was produced in 1951. The 1950s also saw rising interest among social scientists in the economic lives of Africans living in and around Blantyre. David Bettison's field research found that most 'African' urban households drew on multiple livelihood strategies in the formal and informal sectors, and in agriculture, commerce and industry.¹⁵ Among the women surveyed in the peripheral zone (up to four miles distant from the main built-up area around Blantyre-Limbe), 73 per cent had purchased maize for household consumption, many in large amounts and nearly all in local markets in and near Blantyre-Limbe. Their households relied more on purchased maize than on maize they produced, and 'certain villagers in every village are very heavily dependent on purchases'.¹⁶ Calculating the share of maize consumed that was obtained from sources other than own production, the study found that more than half (53 per cent) came from these other sources, mainly purchases.¹⁷ The high proportion of households purchasing maize helped to dispel the assumption that indigenous communities were primarily agricultural.

Peri-urban markets such as the still bustling Lunzu and Bvumbwe markets were essential places for urban food provisioning for members of the indigenous urban communities. In the 1950s, a bus was designated to take people from the city centre to Lunzu Market to purchase food and conduct trading activities.¹⁸ The same markets are popular today, according to participative diagramming sessions during which groups of residents were asked to 'map' all of the places where they procured food. Stories about

¹⁵ D. Bettison and P. Rigby, *Patterns of Income and Expenditure—Blantyre-Limbe, Nyasaland* (Lusaka, The Rhodes-Livingstone Institute, 1961); D. Bettison, 'The Private Domestic Servant of Blantyre-Limbe', *The Nyasaland Journal*, 12, 1 (1959), pp. 36–45; D. Bettison, *Cash Wages and Occupational Structure in the Urban Area of Blantyre-Limbe, Nyasaland* (Lusaka, The Rhodes-Livingstone Institute, 1958).

¹⁶ Bettison and Rigby, *Patterns of Income and Expenditure*, p. 86.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

¹⁸ H. Chihana, 'Urbanization and Food Production and Marketing: The Case of Lunzu Market Area in Blantyre, 1895--1964', *The Society of Malawi Journal*, 47, 1 (1994), pp. 1–31.

the longstanding importance of these markets also emerged in several in-depth interviews. One older man had moved to Blantyre in the 1950s and resided in one of the few formal housing areas for Africans of time. He recalled riding his bicycle over 15 kilometres to peri-urban markets to buy maize, the staple food in Malawi. He recalled that ‘rice, bread, sugar – we used to buy in town in formal shops . . . any time we wanted maize we used to travel to Lunzu or Mpemba’.¹⁹ His recollections of the foods available in town reflect the fact that urban retailing catered to settlers' lifestyles. Typical indigenous foods were accessible only at the urban margins, which reflected their economic marginality but also symbolised the inappropriateness of African products in the colonial urban environment.

While peri-urban informal markets catered to urban Africans' needs, the formal food trading enterprises were owned and operated by Europeans and Asians.²⁰ The business privileges enjoyed by Europeans and Asians were a major grievance inspiring the independence movement. After independence the Government of Malawi instituted a policy of ‘Africanisation’ of the economy. This policy included the nationalisation of commercial enterprises in the name of the people of Malawi but under the ownership of the president, the governing Malawi Congress Party (MCP) and loyal party elites.²¹ Asians were particularly targeted in Malawi as elsewhere in former British colonies; they were banned from conducting commercial activities outside the major urban centres, while banking policies restricted their access to credit.²² The establishment of the

¹⁹ Anonymous, male, 70, retired public servant, Nkolokosa (Blantyre), 12 May 2010.

²⁰ Power, ‘Race, Class, Ethnicity’.

²¹ J. Kaunda, ‘The Administrative Organisation and Processes of National Development Planning in Malawi’, in G. Mhone (ed.), *Malawi at the Crossroads: The Post-Colonial Political Economy* (Harare, SAPES Books, 1992), pp. 50–89.

²² N. Patel, *A Quest for Identity: The Asian Minority in Africa* (Fribourg, Institute of Federalism, 2007).

People's Trading Company (PTC), a national network of grocery retailers, marked the beginning of parastatal control of retailing across Malawi. The PTC was launched in 1973 as a division of Press Holdings Limited (PHL), a company owned by the country's first president, Hastings Kamuzu Banda, soon after the restrictions on Asian commerce came into effect.²³ After launching the PTC, PHL acquired several European-owned trading companies. The control of commercial activities through these parastatal holdings created a 'formal sector' that was thoroughly integrated with party politics and state bureaucracy.

The centralised control of the use of urban space in the 1970s and 1980s mirrored the centralised control of economic activities and political discourse. Banda held extremely tight control over all aspects of people's lives, governing by the motto, 'unity, loyalty, obedience, and discipline'.²⁴ He believed Malawi's cities should present an image of prosperity and progress by maintaining their European characteristics. In 1988 he said, '[C]ities are meant for civilised 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'.²⁵ Soon after he gave this speech, Banda launch the 'Red Star Directive,' by which any building could be demolished based on 'an observation from the president'.²⁶ This directive illustrated the political significance of a city's appearance, and in particular how buildings expressed

²³ J. van Donge, 'The Fate of an African "Chaebol": Malawi's Press Corporation After Democratisation', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 40, 4 (2002), pp. 651–81.

²⁴ J. Lwanda, *Kamuzu Banda of Malawi: A Study in Promise, Power and Paralysis: Malawi Under Dr. Banda 1961--1993* (Glasgow, Dudu Nsomba Publications, 1993), p. 100.

²⁵ I. Jimu, 'Negotiated Economic Opportunity and Power: Perspectives and Perceptions of Street Vending in Urban Malawi', *African Development*, 30, 4 (2005), p. 44.

²⁶ Blantyre City Assembly, *Blantyre Urban Structure Plan Volume 1: Background Study Report* (Blantyre, 2001).

the sense of order that Malawi's dictator aimed to instil in Malawian society and convey to visitors. Informal vendors were clearly not part of this idyllic urban space.

Even as Banda sought to present an image of social order in Malawi's cities, structural adjustment policies were eroding the livelihood security of the urban middle class and deepening poverty levels for low-income and precarious households throughout sub-Saharan Africa.²⁷ A survey conducted in 1988–89 in informal settlements in Blantyre and Lilongwe found widespread poverty and high rates of food insecurity.²⁸ Many households in the lowest income category spent more per month on food than they earned. While profoundly affecting people at the household level, structural adjustment policies also led to the restructuring of PHL in 1983 into Press Corporation (Press Corp), which operated independently of Banda and the MCP. Press Trust held the majority of shares in Press Corp and received predetermined dividends.²⁹ The funds accrued to Press Trust were held in Banda's name, a compromise that facilitated negotiations for restructuring the rapidly failing state-dominated economic model that had evolved under the one-party system. Press Corp was profitable for the next decade, and Banda amassed great wealth through Press Trust, ostensibly in the name of Malawians but legally in his own name.³⁰

A sense of optimism that democratic institutional reforms could help rectify the extreme socioeconomic inequality in Malawian society accompanied the transition to

²⁷ J. Briggs and I. Yeboah, 'Structural Adjustment and the Contemporary African City', *Area*, 33, 1 (2001), pp. 18–26; D. Drakakis-Smith, 'Food Systems and the Poor in Harare Under Conditions of Structural Adjustment', *Geografiska Annaler, Series B, Human Geography*, 76, 1 (1994), pp. 3–20.

²⁸ W. Chilowa, *Food Insecurity and Coping Strategies Among the Low Income Urban Households in Malawi* (Bergen, Norway, Chr Michelson Institute, 1991).

²⁹ J. Harrigan, *From Dictatorship to Democracy: Economic Policy in Malawi 1964–2000* (Aldershot, Ashgate, 2001).

³⁰ van Donge, 'Fate of an African "Chaebol"'.

multiparty democracy in 1994.³¹ The new liberal constitution guaranteed ‘economic freedom’ for Malawians, which many interpreted as the freedom to engage in commercial activities in the formerly circumscribed centres of Malawi's major cities.³² The first president elected under the multiparty system, Bakili Muluzi of the UDF, was a businessman who actively encouraged popular entrepreneurialism and called himself the ‘Minister of Vendors’.³³ As discussed below, Muluzi and many other prominent UDF members were extensively involved with businesses in the informal sector. Banda’s MCP had established such extensive control over economic activities that the only realistic source of economic funds for an opposition movement came from economic activities outside of MCP influence, hence the informal sector.³⁴ The UDF subscribed to a neoliberal orthodoxy that speciously equated unregulated informal business activities with *laissez-faire* capitalism. Political support for the informal sector combined with increasing livelihood insecurity meant that street vending proliferated in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The proliferation of vendors profoundly changed the urban environment, including how and where people could access basic goods such as food.

Among the few urban infrastructure projects completed during Muluzi’s presidency were the flea markets in Blantyre, Zomba and Lilongwe.³⁵ Following the election of the UDF in 1994, Finance Minister Aleke Banda, who had been a close ally of President Banda in the first decade of independence before being imprisoned throughout

³¹ H. Englund and J. Mapanje (eds), *A Democracy of Chameleons: Politics and Culture in the New Malawi* (Zomba, Kachere, 2002); H. Englund, *Prisoners of Freedom: Human Rights and the African Poor* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2006); D. Cammack, ‘Malawi’s Political Settlement in Crisis, 2011’, *African Power and Politics Programme Background Paper No. 4* (London, ODI, 2011).

³² H. Kayuni and R. Tumbulasi, ‘Political Transitions and Vulnerability of Street Vending in Malawi’, *Theoretical and Empirical Researches in Urban Management*, 3, 12 (2009), pp. 79–96.

³³ Jimu, ‘Negotiated Economic Opportunity and Power’.

³⁴ J. Lwanda, ‘Kwacha: The Violence of Money in Malawi’s Politics, 1954-2004’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 32, 3 (2006), pp. 525–44.

³⁵ Similar markets were later constructed in Mzuzu and Limbe.

the 1980s, led a legal battle to have the Press Trust converted into a public charity.³⁶ He prevailed in 1997 when the Press Trust ‘became a charitable trust in the interest and for the benefit of the people of Malawi, advancing and promoting especially education, health, welfare, and housing’.³⁷ The flea markets were the first major public projects funded by the Press Trust. According to Kayuni and Tambulasi, these markets were intended as gifts to vendors in exchange for their political support.³⁸ The flea markets immediately became white elephants because most vendors found it more profitable to sell in the streets. Chinsinga and Kayuni noted that the relevant stakeholders had supported the construction of flea markets, but the consultation with vendors was superficial and the markets fell short of meeting their needs.³⁹ Closed off from pedestrian traffic in the streets and located in marginal positions within the city centres, the markets also lacked sufficient capacity; in Blantyre, vendors' advocates estimated there were 4,000 active vendors, and yet the flea market was only built to accommodate 400.⁴⁰ Despite their functional shortcomings, the construction of the markets signified unprecedented state support for the informal sector in Malawi.

The Events of Operation *Dongosolo*

The precursor to Operation *Dongosolo* occurred in 2004 when the Mayor of Blantyre announced that the City Assembly would force vendors to occupy the flea markets.

Despite the mayor’s pronouncement, police did not act to remove the vendors because it

³⁶ H. Sindima, *Malawi’s First Republic: An Economic and Political Analysis* (Lanham, MD, Oxford University Press, 2002).

³⁷ van Donge, ‘Fate of an African “Chaebol”’, p. 12.

³⁸ Kayuni and Tambulasi, ‘Political Transitions’.

³⁹ B. Chinsinga and H. Kayuni, ‘The Complexities and Paradoxes of Governing the Informal Sector in Malawi: The Case of Street Vending in Zomba and Blantyre’, in D. Banik (ed.), *The Legal Empowerment Agenda: Poverty, Labour, and the Informal Economy in Africa* (Surrey, Ashgate, 2011), pp. 107–30.

⁴⁰ F. Phiri, ‘Union Intervenes in Vendors’ Saga’, *The Nation (Malawi)*, 10 April 2006, p. 6.

was an election year and they were key supporters of the ruling party.⁴¹ Bingu wa Mutharika, a political outsider, was the UDF's candidate for president in 2004.⁴² Ironically in light of his responsibility for *Dongosolo* two years later, Mutharika stepped in to protect the economic interests of the vendors in 2004. According to an editorial column in *The Nation*, he argued that 'there was need for government to give the vendors an alternative place from where to carry out their business'.⁴³ His statement tacitly acknowledged the inadequacy of the flea markets and secured vendors' political support. The UDF won re-election, and Mutharika became president. He introduced a technocratic approach that reflected his previous experience with the World Bank and focused on economic growth, financial stability and combatting corruption. In the process he 'adopted a distinctly Banda-esque personal style'.⁴⁴ Months after the election, Mutharika left the UDF and formed the DPP. Several MPs who had only recently been elected as members of other parties crossed the floor to join Mutharika's DPP. Against this politically tumultuous backdrop, the first local council terms expired in March 2005, and the government postponed local elections.⁴⁵

Operation *Dongosolo* clearly signalled to vendors that Mutharika did not support them as Muluzi had supported them. After months of warnings from the government and protests from informal sector organisations, on 18 April, 2006, vendors were forcibly removed from the central business areas of Blantyre, Limbe, Zomba and Lilongwe. On 12 April Davies Chimombo, the secretary general of the Malawi Union for the Informal

⁴¹ T. Sabola, 'Vendors Eviction: Who Benefits?', *The Nation (Malawi)*, 27 April 2006, p. 12.

⁴² D. Cammack, T. Kelsall and D. Booth, 'Developmental Patrimonialism?: The Case of Malawi', *African Power and Politics Programme Working Paper No. 12* (London, ODI, 2010).

⁴³ 'Vendors: Time to Go', *The Nation (Malawi)*, 18 April 2006, p. 2.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p 32.

⁴⁵ Tambulasi, 'Local Government Without Governance'.

Sector (MUFIS), said, '[W]e [the vendors] are just spectators in the whole process, Government never consulted us but all we get are intimidatory announcements'.⁴⁶ On 17 April, the day before the eviction, vendors gathered in Blantyre to hold a public prayer in protest.⁴⁷ Police fired tear gas to disperse the crowds. The Minister of Local Government and Rural Development 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'.⁴⁸ President Mutharika echoed his Minister's belligerent language in a speech on 1st May 2006: 'I did not say some [vendors] should stay. I have ordered that if you get them, just beat them up'.⁴⁹ The pugnacious tone of these statements represented the DPP government's resolve to gain control of the national agenda in a divided and acrimonious minority parliament.

From an urban food security perspective, Operation *Dongosolo* brought about a shift in where people could access food and where they could engage in livelihood activities. *Dongosolo* re-established the primacy of formal trading in core urban areas and displaced informal trading networks to unplanned and marginal areas of the city. Fieldwork revealed location as a critical factor in household food security status because of the unevenness of access to market facilities. Some households had difficulty accessing the markets where affordable food was available, whereas in other places low-income households were food secure because they had easy access to a variety of affordable markets. The geographical challenge of accessing affordable commercial food

⁴⁶ G. Namweza, 'President Shifts Vendor Eviction to April 18', *The Daily Times (Malawi)*, 12 April 2006, p. 4.

⁴⁷ M. Nkawihe, 'Vendors, Police Clash: Over 40 Vendors Arrested', *The Daily Times (Malawi)*, 18 April 2006, p. 1.

⁴⁸ M. Ng'ambi, 'LL Vendors Vow to Fight Back', *The Daily Times (Malawi)*, 18 April 2006, p. 3.

⁴⁹ 'Bingu Attends Labour Day Celebrations', *The Nation (Malawi)*, 2 May 2006, pp. 1,3.

sources exposed the importance of mobility for food security.⁵⁰ Restrictions on informal vending were also detrimental to livelihood security for many households. Informal vending is one of the few viable livelihood options available to many people who lack the education, skills and social networks to find employment in the formal sector. *Dongosolo* showed the DPP government's disregard for the needs of vulnerable urban households, focusing its urban policy on social order and middle-class amenities.

The following sections examine political, economic and cultural factors that created the preconditions for *Dongosolo*. These factors are broadly relevant to explaining the persistence of structural poverty in Malawi's urban communities.

Weak Urban Governance

Dongosolo signified the shift in Malawian politics away from the *laissez-faire* economic policies of the UDF government and toward an increasingly developmentalist national agenda, represented by the ability of the state to impose order in the city. The reinstated observance of Kamuzu Day in 2008, which had not been officially observed since the onset of multi-partyism in 1994, symbolised the resurgence of authoritarianism and centralised governance under Mutharika's leadership.⁵¹ During the 2009 national elections, all parties appealed to the nostalgia for order and stability that had come to be

⁵⁰ L. Riley and B. Dodson, 'Gendered Mobilities and Food Access in Blantyre, Malawi', *Urban Forum* (19 January 2014), available at <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12132-014-9223-7>, retrieved on 5 February 2014.

⁵¹ J. Kainja, 'Kamuzu Day and Malawi's Festival of Forgetting', *Africas a Country*, 22 May 2013, available at <http://africasacountry.com/kamuzu-day-and-malawis-festival-of-forgetting/>, retrieved on 30 July 2013; G. York, 'The Cult of Hastings Banda Takes Hold', *The Globe and Mail*, 20 May 2009, available at <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/the-cult-of-hastings-banda-takes-hold/article4273860/>, retrieved on 30 July 2013.

associated with Dr. Banda's presidency.⁵² Hussein wrote of Mutharika in 2009: '[T]he incumbent has adopted Kamuzu Banda's style of leadership and has officially assumed the title *Ngwazi* (conqueror) which was used by Kamuzu'.⁵³ The symbols of Banda-era authoritarianism were matched by policies that increasingly restricted civil liberties and political opposition.⁵⁴

Mutharika's re-adoption of Banda-era symbols coincided with the postponement of local elections and the enactment of *Dongosolo* by the national government.

Dongosolo was reminiscent of the centralised control of urban space the country had experienced during Banda's three decades in power. Banda's MCP government had removed decision-making power from city councils with the amendment to the Local Government (District Councils) Act passed in 1966. Under this amendment all councillors had to be MCP members, selected by the president and without human resources or financial powers.⁵⁵ The Department of Town and Country Planning, which controlled the development and use of the formal areas of the towns, was under the direction of the president and cabinet.⁵⁶ The president also controlled the informal areas, known as Traditional Housing Areas (THAs). THAs were created in 1964 under the Housing Act as designated areas within cities where people could construct homes without adhering to the building standards in planned areas.⁵⁷ Intended as an expedient

⁵² M. Hussein, 'Opposition Politics in Malawi: Hopeful Signs Amidst the Warnings', *South African Journal of International Affairs*, 16, 3 (2009), pp. 347–69.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 359.

⁵⁴ Cammack, 'Malawi's Political Settlement in Crisis'.

⁵⁵ D. Cammack, E. Kanyongolo and T. O'Neil, "'Town Chiefs" in Malawi', *African Power and Politics Programme Working Paper No. 3* (London, ODI, 2009).

⁵⁶ E. Kalipeni, 'Contained Urban Growth in Post-Independence Malawi' *East African Geographical Review*, 19, 2 (1997), p. 63.

⁵⁷ Blantyre City Assembly, *Blantyre Urban Structure Plan*; W. Chilowa, *The Role and Management of Traditional Housing Areas: Malawi National Housing Policy Workshop: 15-17 April, 1996* (Zomba, Centre for Social Research, 1996); T. Pennant, 'Housing and Urban Land Force in Malawi', in *Malawi: An*

way to accommodate the massive influx of migrants to the cities, THAs also preserved the potency of Traditional Authorities in cities.⁵⁸ The THAs were managed by the Malawi Housing Corporation (MHC), a parastatal institution accountable to the president, and therefore influenced by national political concerns more than local residents' concerns.⁵⁹ Following the passage of the Chiefs' Act in 1967, the president had the authority to de-legitimate dissenting Traditional Authorities.⁶⁰ The central government therefore had multiple levers with which to manage the daily lives of the majority of urban residents. The net effect was that through the Department of Town Planning, the MHC and the president's influence over Traditional Authorities, the central cadre of the president and his cabinet held exceptional -- near total -- influence over urban affairs. This system helped facilitate tight regulation of informal trading.

The decentralisation process began in 1992 when the responsibility for the management of THAs was transferred from the MHC to the City Assemblies, along with previously centralised planning functions.⁶¹ The 1994 constitution provided a framework for further devolution and improvements to local governance. It also preserved customary law and hence buttressed the authority of 'town chiefs' in the THAs and in peri-urban areas within the city boundaries.⁶² The 1998 Local Government Act mandated that local elections be held every five years and that elected councillors representing wards would be the only voting members. The first and only elected council lasted from the local elections in November 2000 until council terms expired in March 2005. Since 2005, the

Alternative Pattern of Development: Centre for African Studies Seminar Proceedings No. 25 (Edinburgh, University of Edinburgh, 1984), pp. 547–82.

⁵⁸ Cammack *et al.*, "'Town Chiefs' in Malawi".

⁵⁹ Sindima, *Malawi's First Republic*.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Blantyre City Assembly, *Blantyre Urban Structure Plan*.

⁶² Cammack *et al.* "'Town Chiefs' in Malawi".

cities have been run provisionally by chief executives appointed by the president.⁶³ In the absence of formal democratic local governments, Traditional Authorities continue to meet many of the day-to-day needs of most residents in former THAs.⁶⁴

Significantly, central government executed the directive for *Dongosolo* at the same time that they postponed local elections. With no city councillors, the only democratic accountability came from sitting MPs. Interviews conducted in 2010 revealed some people's perceptions of the roles of different levels of government in addressing urban poverty. I asked respondents to whom they turn when they do not have enough food. People rarely received assistance from any level of government. The most commonly reported emergency sources of food were relatives and neighbours. Many people expressed a view of MPs as out of touch with the daily challenges people face in accessing food. A man who supported his household through a precarious income earned by crushing rocks and selling them at the roadside, said, 'We don't trust MPs. These people, we can see them maybe sharing a little amount of money only during campaign times. But as soon as the campaign ends they feed their own bellies'.⁶⁵ In another neighbourhood, three women said that they had heard of MPs giving food to people in need; one of these women said the MP had found her a job.⁶⁶ Individual MPs might have addressed some of the needs of residents through neopatrimonial relationships, but the benevolence of MPs is not a substitute for institutional reforms.

⁶³ At the time of writing, local elections are scheduled to be held simultaneously with national elections in 2014.

⁶⁴ J. Chome and M. McCall, 'Neo-Customary Title Registration in Informal Settlements', *International Development Planning Review*, 27, 4 (2005), pp. 451–77; Cammack *et al.*, "'Town Chiefs" in Malawi'; Blantyre City Assembly, City Without Slums Initiative, UNHABITAT, and Alma Consultancy, *Situation Analysis of Informal Settlements in Blantyre City, Malawi* (Blantyre, 2006).

⁶⁵ Anonymous, male, 35, gravel crusher, Misesa Village (Blantyre), 21 July 2010.

⁶⁶ Anonymous, female, 32, student and door-to-door vendor, Nkolokoti (Blantyre), 13 May 2010; anonymous, female, 27, office administrator, Nkolokoti (Blantyre), 17 May 2010; anonymous, female, 28, piecework, Nkolokoti (Blantyre), 20 May 2010.

I raised the issue of local governance in some in-depth interviews. Some people said that local councillors would be in a better position to understand their problems than MPs. A retired former bureaucrat said, ‘Of course in unplanned areas we want councillors because we feel there will be change. Local councillors are important to help the people. Most MPs . . . do not stay with the people and they do not know the concerns of the people’.⁶⁷ A young man in a planned housing area expressed a similar view when he said: ‘The councillors are needed . . . [a councillor] lives so close to the people, and he is supposed to be staying here so that he should be listening to our problems’.⁶⁸ These comments echo Maxwell’s argument that strong local governance is vital for urban food security since problems in daily food provisioning, as well as other concerns such as safety, environmental health and housing tend to be localised and often outside of the purview of central governments.⁶⁹

Informality and Neopatrimonial Politics

The shift from UDF to DPP government was a key factor in the implementation of *Dongosolo*. Connecting *Dongosolo* to political events requires a focused examination of postcolonial Malawian politics, and the way in which urban informality has evolved within Malawi’s political economy. African cities have long been places where informal economic activities have proliferated and even defined the urban experience.⁷⁰ Here, Malawian cities are not exceptional. During the colonial period, the imposition of a

⁶⁷ Anonymous, male, 65, retired civil servant, Ndirande (Blantyre), 29 June 2010.

⁶⁸ Anonymous, male, 28, piece work, Naperi (Blantyre), 9 July 2010.

⁶⁹ Maxwell, ‘The Political Economy of Urban Food Security’.

⁷⁰ D. Potts, ‘The Urban Informal Sector in Sub-Saharan Africa: From Bad to Good (and Back Again?)’, *Development Southern Africa*, 25, 2 (2008), pp. 151–67; K. Hansen and M. Vaa (eds), *Reconsidering Informality: Perspectives from Urban Africa* (Uppsala, Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2004).

formal economy oriented to external trade and serving the interests of settler society relegated normal forms of exchange among indigenous people to the status of the shadow or informal economy. The proscription of activities such as street vending and beer brewing in the formal areas of town historically signified that these planned commercial areas were reserved for the formal sectors of the economy.⁷¹ In practice, formal and informal economic sectors have always operated interdependently, and most enterprises have formal and informal aspects. Nonetheless, for heuristic purposes this section presents a type of formal–informal duality rooted in the Malawian context. This duality reveals some of the political motivations for *Dongosolo*, helping to link political economic changes to the reinforcement of structural urban poverty in Malawi.

Lwanda argues that money, more than ideology or the need to address poverty, has animated Malawian politics since the transition to multiparty politics in 1994.⁷² Rather than resolve social divisions created under colonial rule, MCP policies preserved them, while it consolidated control over the formal private sector by establishing a variety of parastatal companies.⁷³ Its leadership also facilitated the takeover of large agricultural estates by party elites, including President Banda, which increased their direct control over the Malawian economy. It allowed them to channel resources through the party membership and hierarchy.⁷⁴ A combination of political violence and neopatrimonialism kept the economic system in place even as neighbouring countries sought to reform the structural inequalities that had been ingrained under colonialism.⁷⁵ The MCP maintained

⁷¹ Power, “‘Eating the Property’”; McCracken, ‘Blantyre Transformed’.

⁷² Lwanda, ‘Kwacha: The Violence of Money’.

⁷³ Sindima, *Malawi’s First Republic*.

⁷⁴ Harrigan, *From Dictatorship to Democracy*; J. Kydd and R. Christiansen, ‘Structural Change in Malawi Since Independence: Consequences of a Development Strategy Based on Large-Scale Agriculture’, *World Development*, 10, 5 (1982), pp. 377–96.

⁷⁵ Power, *Building Kwacha*; Lwanda, ‘Kwacha: The Violence of Money’.

power as long as it could manage to strategically redistribute resources while suppressing political dissent. The result was a highly centralised system of control based on patronage and intimidation.

When formal opposition groups emerged in the early 1990s, their financial backing came from the few economic activities outside of MCP control, which at the time meant the informal economic sector.⁷⁶ Resources diverted from parastatal enterprises also supplemented these activities.⁷⁷ By the early 1990s, Muluzi was ‘one of the biggest independent businessmen outside the Banda/Tembo [MCP] business hegemony’.⁷⁸ Muluzi's personal wealth and the wealth of the business wing of the UDF provided the funds needed to build a patronage network that could rival that of the MCP. The UDF patronage network was rooted in the informal economy, and this affiliation partly informed their support of the small-scale informal sector. The dependence on funds coming from the party's ‘business wing’ influenced UDF policies that favoured the ‘trading/retail class’, and ‘at no time during the UDF's 1993 convention were the socio-economic interests of the peasantry taken into account’.⁷⁹ In Lwanda's analysis, the rise of the UDF within the multi-party system reflected the re-ordering of importance of the formal and informal sectors, with the dominant patronage system linked to the informal sector.⁸⁰ Despite major political changes, popular political discourse continued to be limited by a new neopatrimonial network rather than a new political economic

⁷⁶ Lwanda, ‘Kwacha: The Violence of Money’.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 536. Lwanda cites several accusations to this effect that emerged in various UDF corruption scandals.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 533.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 537.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

paradigm.⁸¹ This limited the effectiveness of institutional reforms, including decentralisation, designed to de-centre the influence of patronage networks and improve popular participation in policy development.⁸²

Malawi's 1994 political reforms took place within a broader context that favoured unfettered capitalism, state austerity and *laissez-faire* economic policies.⁸³ Structural adjustment policies led to a decline in formal urban employment in the public and private sectors.⁸⁴ The external push to adopt *laissez-faire* policies converged with the UDF's political interest in increasing the economic influence of its leaders at the expense of established formal sector enterprises.⁸⁵ In light of the politics of informality, the construction of the flea markets with Press Trust funds as a 'gift to vendors' signified a redirection of state patronage to informal sector economic actors. The unpopularity of the markets among vendors, due to their disadvantageous locations and poorly conceived construction, showed that even as heroes of the informal traders, the UDF elites were largely unaware of the real needs of the urban poor.⁸⁶

Economic and political power have become entangled in Malawi in a specific way that has shaped how the rules of informal commerce have been applied in Malawi's cities. The rules were relaxed under the UDF (1994--2004) when vendors and other informal

⁸¹ K. Phiri, 'Reflections on Party Ideologies and Programmes', in M. Ott, K. Phiri and N. Patel (eds), *Malawi's Second Democratic Elections: Process, Problems and Prospects* (Zomba, Kachere, 2000), pp. 67–86.

⁸² Tambulasi, 'Local Government'; Lwanda, 'Kwacha: The Violence of Money'; J. Lwanda, 'Changes in Malawi's Political Landscape Between 1999 and 2004: *Nkhope ya Agalatia*', in M. Ott, B. Immink, B. Mhango and C. Peters-Berries (eds), *The Power of the Vote: Malawi's 2004 Parliamentary and Presidential Elections* (Zomba, Kachere, 2004), pp. 49–86; Englund and Mapanje, *Democracy of Chameleons*.

⁸³ Potts, 'Urban Informal Sector'; C. Rogerson, 'Globalization or Informalization? African Urban Economies in the 1990s', in C. Rakodi (ed.), *The Urban Challenge in Africa: Growth and Management of Its Largest Cities* (Tokyo, United Nations University, 1997), pp. 337–70.

⁸⁴ W. Van der Geest and R. Van der Hoeven (eds), *Adjustment, Employment & Missing Institutions in Africa: The Experience in Eastern and Southern Africa* (Geneva, ILO, 1999).

⁸⁵ Lwanda, 'Kwacha: The Violence of Money'.

⁸⁶ Chinsinga and Kayuni, 'The Complexities'; Kayuni and Tambulasi, 'Political Transitions'.

economic actors were aligned with the government. The establishment of the DPP in 2005 forced Mutharika to find financial and political support outside of UDF networks. Muluzi had so publicly affiliated himself with informal vendors that they were unlikely to shift their support to the DPP. Fertiliser subsidies introduced in 2005 gave the DPP a political base among rural smallholder farmers, which made vendors politically expendable.⁸⁷ *Dongosolo* signalled Mutharika's exit from the UDF and Muluzi's patronage networks. The forceful rhetoric in Mutharika's public statements about *Dongosolo* indicated that he would re-assert the potency of the central government. The orderliness of the city would recreate the sense of security and certainty that many people remembered from the Banda era.

Vendors generally opposed *Dongosolo* and the manner of its implementation. The removal of street vendors to markets enforced spatial marginalisation of the urban informal sector to make way for growth in the formal sector economy. Businesses that benefitted from the policy were likely to become DPP supporters. The problems vendors faced in the flea markets meant that most informal commercial activities dispersed to the neighbourhood level. This dispersal has led to uneven geographies of food access in Blantyre, where some areas benefit from well-developed markets while others suffer from underdevelopment. With the City Assembly hindered by delayed elections, the responsibility for public works projects like markets tends to fall on Traditional Authorities and vendors themselves. Cammack's analysis of the aftermath of a fire at Ndirande Market in 2008 showed that party politics hindered vendors trying to organise and rebuild the market. Construction was delayed by arguments over who would pay to

⁸⁷ Cammack, 'Malawi's Political Settlement in Crisis'.

rebuild it and in so doing reap the rewards in patronage.⁸⁸ In 2010, Ndirande Market was only partially rebuilt, and few vendors were using it. Vendors and customers alike favoured more informal markets for reasons of convenience and price, but perhaps political party affiliations also influenced customers' decisions about where to shop.

Urban Inclusiveness

Ideas about the meaning of urban space help to explain the political motivation and support for *Dongosolo*. Cultural legacies of colonialism continue to shape how people imagine, build and manage cities throughout southern Africa.⁸⁹ Blantyre's geography reflects the cultural norms of the colonial society that founded the city. In colonial Blantyre, most formal areas were built for Europeans, with a small 'Asian Quarter' in central Blantyre and a small industrial worker compound for 'Africans' near Limbe.⁹⁰ After independence, indigenous elites occupied formerly European neighbourhoods and reproduced socio-spatial divisions along similar boundaries. The racial segregation built during settler colonialism continues to shape social divisions in Blantyre. The forced removal of street vendors reinforced historic social divisions and socio-economic inequalities, with the effect of erasing poverty from designated formal urban areas rather than seeking to address its root causes. One of the causes for the continuation of urban poverty in Malawi is widespread denial of its very existence, especially among the more powerful economic and political classes. For them, poverty is associated with rural smallholder farming and seasonal agricultural labour. The colonial idea that all Africans

⁸⁸ Cammack, 'Local Governance'.

⁸⁹ S. Parnell and J. Robinson, '(Re)theorizing Cities From the Global South: Looking Beyond Neoliberalism', *Urban Geography*, 33, 4 (2012), pp. 592–617; Kamete, 'Missing the Point?'

⁹⁰ McCracken, 'Blantyre Transformed'.

in the city are transient has translated into the contemporary attitude that certain classes of Africans, including street vendors, are out of place in the city. The lack of acceptance of the urban poor as part of the city's social fabric precludes any attempt to accommodate their basic needs.

The editorial columns in newspapers published around the time of *Dongosolo* provide evidence of the view of street vendors as external to the urban social fabric. Some editorials directly expressed the need for class-based exclusion, casting vendors as 'others' relative to the literate, formally employed, English-speaking columnists and commentators who consider themselves the rightful inhabitants of the city. One columnist 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 assuming that they supported themselves through petty crime.⁹¹ 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, blaming urbanisation for the country's food shortages: '[R]egardless of drought and other natural disasters, the low production [of food] is a result of people not utilising the land which is available. What are these people doing in the street instead of going to the villages and produce for their country?'⁹² A prominent planner expressed a similar point of view when he wrote that Malawi's cities have been 'left to the dogs for the past decade'.⁹³ This rhetoric dehumanises the vendors, and by extension the urban poor, and echoes colonial discourse on race and social position.

In interviews, some low-income residents also argued that the poor should return to their villages. One young mother when asked if there were people in town staying

⁹¹ D. Chingwalu, 'Of Street Vending and Touting', *The Daily Times (Malawi)*, 10 April 2006, p. 30.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ J. Kenan, 'Vendors, Politics and Law', *The Daily Times (Malawi)*, 17 April 2006, p. 18.

without food, stated, '[Y]es, they are many. The reason is most of them do not think of going to their home village to cultivate land when it is time to cultivate'.⁹⁴ This woman's home village in Chiradzulu District, adjacent to Blantyre, was more easily accessible than that of people with customary land in more distant districts. Yet despite her poverty she did not return to Chiradzulu to cultivate. A vendor in Zingwangwa Market also felt that staying hungry in town is a choice not a necessity. He said that food insecurity was widespread in Blantyre, due to people not going to their villages to cultivate. As he elaborated:⁹⁵

Everyone who is here came from the village where there is land on which their parents used to cultivate. When you go there and work on the land for two months and come back you will surely have food during the harvest season and you can also have the chance of selling some surplus. But many people just stay here, thinking that they will buy food, depending on *walkman*.⁹⁶

These opinions may have been shaped by the political climate in 2010, one year after the DPP won a decisive majority victory based largely on the expansion of maize production attributed to the fertiliser subsidy programme.⁹⁷ The commentary of a female groundnut vendor suggests that Mutharika's message about work ethic influenced people's perceptions of their own poverty. She said that those who cannot get enough food in

⁹⁴ Anonymous, female, 22, unemployed, Angela Goveia (Blantyre), 25 May 2010.

⁹⁵ Anonymous, male, 46, market vendor, Zingwangwa (Blantyre), 6 May 2010.

⁹⁶ *Walkman* denotes small quantities of maize purchased for daily consumption. The origin of *walkman* dates the practice of purchasing maize in small quantities to the time when the eponymous personal music device was popular in the 1990s. People were embarrassed to be seen walking around with these small quantities of maize because it signified that their household did not have food, so they would pretend that it was a WalkmanTM. In light of the local meaning of food security as having a good *supply* of maize in the home, which is linked to the agricultural experience of having a full granary, the popularity of *walkman* is highly emblematic of the experience of urban food insecurity in Malawi.

⁹⁷ Cammack, 'Malawi's Political Settlement in Crisis'.

Blantyre are lazy. When I asked her if poverty is getting worse these days she replied: ‘No, because most people are working hard since the president said that every person who wants to eat and be well must work’.⁹⁸ The early successes of the fertiliser subsidy programme and widely publicised GDP growth from 2007–10 had created a brief sense of optimism before the effects of corruption and economic disarray began to derail progress in 2011.

Many of the newspaper accounts of *Dongosolo* revealed the consequences of invisibility on the livelihoods and sense of place of the urban poor. This was poignantly captured in an article about a woman from Ndirande, Mrs Mangani, who was interviewed where she sold boiled potatoes at the roadside a few months after the eviction.⁹⁹ The authorities always harassed her and others like her, and ‘every time they find us they beat us up and confiscate whatever we are selling’.¹⁰⁰ *Dongosolo* created a tense environment in which a woman could be beaten up and intimidated for selling boiled potatoes. The sardonic title of the article, *Trading From Dark Corners*, seemed to evoke illicit activities, such as prostitution or drug trafficking, rather than food vending. Mrs Mangani stated her feelings about *Dongosolo*: ‘[W]e have become fugitives in our own country. All our freedom of doing business is gone. We are like foreigners’.¹⁰¹ The message she received from *Dongosolo* was that people like her are out of place in the city. Without physically relocating poor urban residents to rural areas, *Dongosolo* spatially contained and thereby constrained the livelihood activities of a specific type of urban resident.

⁹⁸ Anonymous, female, 30, market vendor, Mbayani (Blantyre), 13 May 2010.

⁹⁹ T. Sabola, ‘Trading From Dark Corners’, *The Nation (Malawi)*, 18 August 2006, p. 20.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

The perception that any hungry person in the city had the option to go to a village to farm on customary land was highly problematic. The interviews revealed many circumstances that prevented people from returning to their villages when they faced food insecurity in town. Some of the obstacles noted in interviews included lack of food in the home village; lack of good schools in the rural areas; lack of money for transportation to the village; lack of money to buy fertiliser; the use of their customary land by others; and being born in town resulting in a weak claim to customary land. Several of these problems are illustrated by the case of a man living in the unplanned housing area of Nkolokoti.¹⁰² He had migrated to Blantyre years earlier with the intention of saving enough money to then migrate to South Africa and send remittances to his rural relatives. He barely made ends meet as a night watchman, unable to save enough to go to South Africa. He said that since he came to Blantyre his house in the village had collapsed, and other relatives had been cultivating on his land. To move home would require time and money to cultivate and wait a year for the first harvest while also seeking to build a new house. He said ‘the children’s future here is not certain because if you, the father, are struggling, it means the children will not get educated and therefore they will not have a good foundation’. He said his life would have been better had he stayed in the village. His situation illustrates the difficulties people face if they return to rural areas when life in town is hard. Yet, the popular perception that they are mobile and have alternatives to being poor in town provides an excuse not to make substantive urban reforms to address poverty.

The cultural attitude that makes light of urban poverty is an important part of the context that allowed *Dongosolo* to take place. The lack of political will to address urban

¹⁰² Anonymous, male, 32, night watchman, Nkolokoti (Blantyre), 19 May 2010.

poverty is not surprising considering that the urban poor are politically expendable, their means of influencing democratic institutions are cut off and their problems are widely understood as a consequence of their being in town rather than a problem with town itself. There can be no progress on urban food insecurity as long as the central question is *who has the right to live in the city* rather than *what policies can reduce urban poverty*. These tensions are not simply based on class differences, but rather rest on highly contextual social differences based on political affiliation, length of time in the city and place of origin and location of residence within the city, for when the poor are politically useful their presence in cities is tolerated. The idea that the poor do not belong in town resonates with longstanding racial assumptions in the region that indigenous Africans are transient in urban spaces. Similar efforts in other southern African cities to exclude the poor from urban areas show that this colonial idea has permeated discourses of urbanisation and continues to influence urban policy across the region.

Conclusion

The politics of *Dongosolo* permeated discourses about the poor well after 2006 as the difficulty of many urban residents to meet their basic needs for housing, water and food continued as a result of DPP economic policies. In 2011, protests in Malawi's cities led to brutal repression by police, who killed 20 protesters.¹⁰³ A standoff between civil society leaders and the DPP Government continued until Mutharika's sudden death of a heart attack in 2012. Joyce Banda succeeded Mutharika as president, promising to focus on

¹⁰³ Cammack, 'Malawi's Political Settlement in Crisis'.

poverty-related issues and bring an end to corruption.¹⁰⁴ Her macroeconomic policies have led to rampant inflation and currency devaluation.¹⁰⁵ These economic conditions have put increasing pressure on urban households, swelling the population of vulnerable households. In 2013, government again implemented *Dongosolo*.¹⁰⁶ This time the government seems to have consulted vendors,¹⁰⁷ but tensions between vendors operating from flea markets and those in the streets is also evident in the news reports.¹⁰⁸ While the underlying tensions have not been resolved, some hope for change can be found in the government's promise to hold local elections in 2014. The competitive field of political parties lining up for the 2014 election might stimulate the government in power to implement new policies to gain urban votes.

Events such as *Dongosolo*, including Zimbabwe's Operation *Murambatsvina* in 2005 and South Africa's Operation Clean Sweep in 2013, indicate the extent of the challenge of creating inclusive cities that can accommodate a variety of livelihoods people must use to meet their basic needs.¹⁰⁹ To meet the policy challenge of urban poverty governments must address a host of issues related to governance, economic structures and cultural attitudes. This will also require a long-term vision for cities that

¹⁰⁴ E. Gerson, 'A New Leader for Africa', *The Huffington Post*, 19 January 2013, available at: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/elliott-gerson/a-new-leader-for-africa_b_2511815.html, retrieved 17 January 2014.

¹⁰⁵ F. Phiri, 'Malawi Sees First Major Protest under President Banda', *Reuters*, 17 January 2013, available at: <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2013/01/17/uk-malawi-protests-idUKBRE90G0O120130117>, retrieved 17 January 2014.

¹⁰⁶ 'Blantyre Vendors Clash with Malawi Police, City Council: Operation Dongosolo', *Nyasa Times*, 6 June 2013), available at: <http://www.nyasatimes.com/2013/06/06/blantyre-vendors-clash-with-malawi-police-city-council-operation-dongosolo/>, retrieved 17 January 2014.

¹⁰⁷ G. Matonga, 'Meeting Resolves to Remove Malawi's Street Vendors', *BNL Times*, 12 September 2013, available at: <http://timesmediamw.com/meeting-resolves-to-remove-malawis-street-vendors/>, retrieved 17 January 2014.

¹⁰⁸ 'Blantyre Vendors Clash'.

¹⁰⁹ Musoni, 'Operation Murambatsvina'; N. Tolsi and M. Nxulmalo, 'Jo'burg's "Clean Sweep" is a Dirty Affair', *Mail & Guardian*, 1 November 2013, available at: <http://mg.co.za/article/2013-10-31-joburgs-clean-sweep-is-a-dirty-affair>, retrieved 17 January 2014.

can overcome the spatial injustices of the past. The story of *Dongosolo* highlights the vigilance required to reshape equitable and sustainable cities in Malawi and elsewhere in southern Africa.

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