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The 'invisible hand' of archives and records management in the Malawi 2063 vision

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Abstract

Transparency, accountability, and well-informed decision-making are key components of Malawi's growth plan, the Malawi 2063 Vision. Proper archives and records management serves as the foundation for the Malawi 2063 aspirations. This crucial element is disregarded, though. This article looks at how important archives and records management is to Malawi's 2063 vision. The study highlights the opportunities and challenges facing Malawi's archives and records management through a qualitative examination of the policy document and focus group discussion. The results highlight how important strong records management systems are to guaranteeing accountability, transparency, and evidence-based decision-making. This paper also highlights some of the opportunities and challenges that the field of archives and records management is facing. Towards the end, the article suggests ways that archives might have been incorporated into the Malawi 2063 Vision to enhance the nation's ability to fulfil its development goals. The study adds to the expanding body of research on the value of archives and records management in advancing development goals and suggests that Malawi's archives and records management practices be strengthened.

Keywords: archives and records management, evidence-based decision-making, Malawi 2063 Vision, transparency, accountability

Introduction and background to the problem

The Malawi 2063 Vision, the country's ambitious growth plan, provides a detailed plan for turning Malawi into an upper-middle-income economy by 2063. Although the vision highlights the importance of agricultural productivity and commercialization, industrialization and urbanization in propelling economic progress, archives and records management serve as a subtle but crucial foundation for the entire undertaking. Archives and records management is the unsung hero that has the power to create or break the effective realization of the Malawi 2063 Vision. This article highlights the need for strong records management systems in guaranteeing accountability, accountability, and evidence-based decision-making while examining the role of archives and records management in advancing Malawi's development goal.

By 2063, the Malawi 2063 Vision seeks to make the nation's economy upper-middle income. However, the efficient administration of archives and records which are essential for fostering accountability, transparency, and evidence-based decision-making, is crucial to the successful realization of this objective. Notwithstanding the significance of archives and records

management, Malawi has some obstacles to overcome in this field such as poor infrastructure, inadequate resources, and a shortage of qualified staff. Additionally, the role of archives and records management in advancing development goals is not well understood or valued. In a nutshell, Malawi's records and archives management situation is disorganized, which could jeopardize the nation's development initiatives. Thus, it is necessary to look into how archives and records management may help Malawi achieve its development objectives and to come up with plans for improving the nation's archives and records management procedures. Research on the precise function of archives and records management in advancing the Malawi 2063 Vision is also lacking. By investigating the role that archives and records management play in advancing Malawi's development objectives, this study seeks to close this knowledge gap.

Research questions

- What is the role of archives and records management in relation to the Malawi 2063 Vision?
- Explore the opportunities and challenges the field of archives and records management face in Malawi?
- How can archives and records management be integrated in the Malawi 2063 Vision?

Research objectives

The overall aim of this study is to explore the importance of archives and records management in supporting Malawi's development goals, as outlined in the Malawi 2063 Vision. The specific research objectives are to:

- Investigate the role of archives and records management in into Malawi 2063 Vision
- Examine the challenges and opportunities in the field of archives and records management face in Malawi
- Propose ways for integrating archives and records management into Malawi 2063 Vision

Literature review

This section is guided by the themes emanating form the objectives of the study.

Malawi 2063 Vision

According to the World Bank Group (2023), Malawi is the fourth poorest country in the world, with 70 percent of its population living on less than \$2.15 a day, as estimated using data for 2019 based on Gross National Income (GNI). Malawi developed the Malawi 2063 Vision (MW2063 Vision) in an effort to escape this poverty trap. The MW2063 Vision is a forward-thinking, youth-focused plan that seeks to transform Malawi into an industrialized, self-sufficient, and inclusive "upper-middle-income country" by 2063. The three main pillars of the MW2063 Vision are urbanization, industrialization, and agricultural productivity and commercialization. Mindset change, an efficient governance system, public sector performance, private sector dynamism, human capital development, economic infrastructure, and environmental sustainability are the seven enablers of these three pillars. This MW2063 Vision replaces Vision 2020, which sought to make Malawi a technologically advanced middle-income nation by the year 2020, secure, democratically mature, environmentally sustainable, self-sufficient, with social services, vibrant cultural and religious values, and equal

opportunities for and active participation by all. The MW2063 Vision on a global scale is associated with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which seek to build a better and more sustainable future for all.

According to Keakopa (2018), the function of records management as an enabler has been mirrored in the developmental initiatives. By guaranteeing that Malawians have access to information, the second enabler of MW2063 Vision promotes efficient governance structures and organizations that encourage openness and transparency in governmental decisions and procedures (National Planning Commission, 2020). Despite this context, this statement implicitly acknowledges the critical role archives and records management play in advancing Malawi's development objectives. In this vein, Malawi's archives and records management practices should therefore not continue to be ineffective, erratic, and inadequate to ensure that the nation's development initiative is not jeopardized. On the contrary, this can jeopardize the nation's development initiatives. Thus, it is necessary to look into how archives and records management may help Malawi achieve its development goals and to come up with ways to improve the nation's archives and records management systems. In order to achieve its ambitious plan, the government must address the management of archives and records, which is a cornerstone of the nation's development that provides valuable data and insights to support accountability, encourage transparency, and influence decision-making.

The current state of archives and records management in Malawi

There are both opportunities and challenges in the current state of archives and records management in Malawi. A recent functional review has given National Archives of Malawi (NAM) the status of a government department, the Department of National Records and Archives Services (NRAS), among other opportunities. A significant portion of the NRAS's yearly funding increase for the NRAS nation's archives and records management is being celebrated (NAM Annual Report, 2023). In the same way, the NRAS is hopeful as it anticipates the start of building on the state-of-the-art cultural complex center in Lilongwe, the country's capital city, which will house the NRAS.

According to Ngoepe (2018), "wicked problems" like corruption, bad governance, healthcare, and other issues are present in most, if not all, African nations. It is advanced that funding for records management initiatives is inadequate in certain archival institutions (Gupta & Bukhari, 2022; Makwae, 2021; Makgahlela, 2021). Xiao et al. (2021) substantiates by arguing that senior management occasionally supports records management by providing financing for records management initiatives. To be specific, in Malawi, Mweso (2019) notes that resource allocators had been finding it extremely challenging to value and prioritize the roles of the national records and archives. This attitude has bred lots of challenges in the archives and records management industry. In particular, poor infrastructure, scarce resources, and a shortage of qualified staff define Malawi's archives and records management current challenges (NAM, 2010). All of these have an adverse effect on Malawi's records management and archives. For instance, the judicial system is subject to bribery demands in the legal proceedings (TI, 2019). In Malawi, the problem of missing court documents is evident in the Kafantayeni Project. The Kafantayeni Project was a large-scale resentencing process of murder convicts (Carreau, 2020). The missing court files is attributable to poor record-keeping practices in Malawi. This was a large-scale resentencing process of murder convicts (Carreau, 2020). The missing court file is attributable to poor records keeping practices in Malawi.

The prior public sector reforms concentrated on reorganizing public institutions and fixing dysfunctional operational systems rather than addressing inefficiencies in records management, the majority of public institutions are still struggling with the consequences of inadequate record keeping practices in Malawi (Mweso, 2019). Similarly, the MW2063 Vision appears to be elusive when it comes to the role of archives and records management and archives. A recent study conducted by the M'mbelwa District Council attempted to rectify this regression by suggesting methods for enhancing the management of records in order to improve service delivery (Padoni et al, 2024). This was done in an effort to meet MW 2063 Vision requirements. Thus, investigating the role of archives and records management in connection with the MW2063 Vision is essential.

Archives and development

According to Netshakhuma (2020a), records management is a crucial component of institutional governance that oversees and manages an organization's recorded information from its creation to its disposal. Archives and records management have, of course, been recognized as important development drivers (Saurombe, 2020). Records and data management are essential to achieving growth goals. Monitoring the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGS), for instance, necessitates gathering, processing, analyzing, and disseminating a hitherto unheard-of volume of data and statistics at the subnational, national, regional, and international levels (Cangiano, 2024). A lack of transparency in government spending records slows down economic development and undermines social stability (Zuiderwijk, Shinde & Janssen, 2019).

Archives and records management are vital for fostering transparency, accountability, and evidence-based decision-making, all of which are necessary for accomplishing development goals (Thurston, 2020). Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16.10 of the UN promotes public access to information. In a similar vein, Agenda 2063 of the African Union suggests that in order to support sustainable development, access to indigenous African cultural knowledge be made available. In the Malawian scenario, some of the enablers of the Malawi 2063 vision framework include effective governance systems and institutions. The role of archives and records management in this endeavour is still unspoken in this document, though. Even worse, little is known about the precise role that archives and records management play in advancing the Malawi 2063 aspiration. By investigating the unseen role that archives and records management play in advancing Malawi's development goal, this study seeks to close this knowledge gap.

Research methods

A combination of document analysis, thematic analysis, and focus groups with the 24 archivists and records managers at the NRAS regional offices in the North, Center, and South comprise this qualitative research approach. Every member was instructed to carefully review the MW2063 Vision. They were given a week to recommend ways that archives and records management could be incorporated into the vision document and to highlight areas in which they thought records and archives may be useful. Thematic analysis was used to identify, categorize, and code themes following focus group discussions (Cresswell, 2018). These participants also possessed professional certificates, diplomas, or degrees and had at least five years of experience. Their ages ranged from 25 to 50, and their positions spanned from chief archivist to archives assistant. The participant responses about any modifications or extra information were verified by the researcher (Adu, 2018).

Findings and discussion

The role of archives and records management in relation to the Malawi 2063 Vision

The following topics surfaced during the focus group discussion on the function of archives and records management in connection with Malawi 2063 Vision: accountability and transparency, evidence-based decision-making, training and capacity building, and infrastructure and resources.

Theme 1: Transparency and accountability

Governments work hard to enhance the functioning of their institutions in an attempt to reach developmental milestones. The second enabler of MW2063 Vision supports efficient governance structures and institutions and encourages openness and transparency in governmental decisions and procedures (MW2063, 2021). According to the study, encouraging accountability and transparency in government requires effective records management and archiving. Participants pointed out that holding public authorities responsible for their conduct depends on having access to accurate and trustworthy information.

“The promotion of accountability and transparency in government is largely dependent on archives and records management. Forget about holding public officials accountable for their actions if you don't have access to accurate and trustworthy information” (Participant# 7).

This shows that archives and records management guarantees Malawians have access to information. In this way, citizens are enabled to hold governments responsible and to make informed judgments. This may result in good governance. Good governance would be ensured by bolstering Africa's institutions to function well in terms of accountability, openness, and the rule of law, according to the Mo Ibrahim Foundation (2018). Good governance and records management are closely related. According to Saurombe (2019), records are strategic tools in e-government that facilitate communication between citizens and public institutions and foster confidence between them. According to De Mingo and Cerrillo-i-Martínez (2018), citizens need access to documents in order to keep track of governments' operations and hold them responsible for their acts.

It is impossible to deny the importance of archives and records management in fostering accountability and openness in Malawian governance. Having access to trustworthy and accurate information promotes greater public participation. This is especially crucial in Malawi, as the country's progress has been hampered by a lack of accountability and openness. The administration of archives and documents must thus be a top priority for the public, commercial, and civil society sectors.

Theme 2: Evidence-based decision-making

Another theme that emerged was the issue of evidence-based decision-making. According to the UN (2017), high-quality data is essential for both the public and private sectors to make well-informed decisions on the 2030 Agenda's implementation. According to the study, maintaining records and archives is essential to assisting with evidence-based decision-making.

In order to make well-informed judgments about the implementation of MW2063 Vision, participants pointed out that having access to accurate and trustworthy data is crucial. “Archives and records management and archives are crucial for assisting with evidence-based decision-making. Making educated decisions is challenging in the absence of access to precise and trustworthy facts” (Participant #11).

This background emphasizes how crucial records management and archives are to promoting evidence-based decision-making. Through good archives and records management, the Malawian government, empowered by the Access to Information Act of 2017, promotes the availability of accurate and trustworthy data, assisting development practitioners and policymakers in making evidence-based decisions. In Malawi, the management of archives and records is crucial since data-driven decision-making depends on them to meet the nation's development objectives.

Challenges and opportunities the field of archives and records management face in Malawi

Theme 3: Capacity building and training

Additionally, records are required to support company operations and assess organizational performance (Kgomoeswana et al., 2024). Employees with proper training are essential to the performance of the organization. To keep up with technological advancements, officials also require frequent training (Tsabedze and Ngoepe, 2020; Tintswalo et al., 2022). In order to improve the abilities and expertise of archives and records management professionals in Malawi, the participants reflected that training programs and capacity building are necessary.

"There is a need for capacity building and training programs to enhance the skills and knowledge of archives and records management professionals in Malawi. This will help to ensure that archives and records management practices are effective and efficient" (Participant #21).

The study discovered that, despite the MW2063 Vision's insistence that it focuses on human resource development, training programs and capacity building are necessary in Malawi to improve the abilities and expertise of the country's archives and records management specialists. There is light at the end of the tunnel as the Malawi University of Science and Technology (MUST) recently began offering a degree course in archives and records. This is a welcome development as there are no institutions in Malawi that train records managers or archivists to a degree level, so there are only a few records managers who were trained outside of Malawi, which many committed archivists and records managers find difficult to achieve.

Theme 4: Infrastructure and resources

The process of performing office tasks involves the creation and usage of a variety of papers, scripts, and media (Ayu et al., 2019, Zulfiriani et al., 2019). From the time of creation until their disposal, Malawi's public sector documents are under the jurisdiction of the NRAS. According to the report, Malawi's archives and records management requires better infrastructure and resources. There are no archival infrastructures specifically designed for the archives and records management in Malawi. It makes use of makeshift frameworks taken from colonial governance. Region-specific records management centres are leased spaces. Worse

still, the NRAS offices do not have the technology necessary to keep up with the latest developments.

"To support Malawi's archives and records management practices, better infrastructure and resources are required. This includes having the necessary equipment and storage facilities" (Participant #4).

Despite the above concerns, the government plans to construct a National Arts and Culture Center on Lilongwe's Capital Hill, which will house the NRAS as well as other cultural departments. A purpose-built archival structure will be registered for the first time in Malawi. The government's growing interest in the nation's archives and records management is hinted at by this development.

Integrating archives and records management with Malawi's 2063 Vision

The final goal was to suggest ways in which the Malawi 2063 Vision might have integrated archives and records management. The areas where the participants felt archives and records management were to be essential included mindset change, effective and efficient governance systems and institutions, maintaining the rule of law, fighting corruption, transparency, and accountability.

Furthermore, the study discovered that participants would have liked the subtitle of the document, "culture," which is a fundamental aspect of urbanization, to fully cover the role of archives and records management. They reasoned that all facets of a people's lives are included in their culture. Culture keeps records of anything that happens in other areas of life.

"It is understandable why the NRAS has always been under the Ministry of Culture" (Participant 5).

Additionally, the study found that discussants thought archive and records management could have easily shown its pervasive position within both the pillars and enablers categories and not carving out a specific area in the vision statement. The opposing school of thought argues that the MW2063 vision will be "over documented" with 'archives and records management', if the purpose of the role of archives and records was documented in all the suggested areas.

Conclusion and recommendations

Overall, the study emphasizes on how important archives and records management are to advancing Malawi's development agenda as stated in the Malawi 2063 vision. Effective archives and records management can act as a catalyst for the country's development, according to the results of the document study and focus group discussions. The study emphasizes how important it is to have efficient archives and records management practices in order to support accountability, openness, and evidence-based decision-making. The results show that better archives and records management procedures are required, along with training initiatives, infrastructure upgrades, and capacity building. Participants made suggestions regarding the optimal way on how the archives and records management in the Malawi 2063 vision could have been integrated. The study adds value to the expanding scope of research on the significance of archives and records management.

The study's conclusions have a number of implications for Malawi's records management and archiving procedures.

- Increased accountability and transparency: Government and public institutions can benefit from improved accountability and transparency through the use of efficient archives and records management techniques.
- Evidence-based decision-making: When it comes to policy and development activities, archives and records management can help with evidence-based decision-making.
- Socio economic development: By facilitating access to accurate and trustworthy information, good records management and archival practices can support economic development.

Based on the study's findings, the researcher suggests that Malawi's archives and records management procedures be strengthened. The particular recommendations listed below are suggested:

- Offer training and capacity building programs: To improve their abilities and expertise, archives and records management professionals should get training and capacity building programs.
- Upgrade resources and infrastructure: The Malawian government ought to make investments to upgrade the resources and infrastructure for archives and records management, including the creation of digital archives and records management systems.
- Encourage advocacy and awareness: Records managers and archivists should encourage advocacy and awareness regarding the significance of archives and of archives and records management in supporting Malawi's development goals.

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