

## A Critical Evaluation of Malawi's Free Education Policy from 1994 To Present

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### ABSTRACT

In The introduction of Free Primary Education (FPE) in Sub-Saharan Africa, the implementation of Free marked a significant change in policy with the goal of increasing educational access and lowering poverty. FPE was introduced in 1994 during Malawi's transition to democratic administration, influenced by international data that links education to economic development and better social results, especially for girls. As a case study of more general regional reforms, this paper looks at the history, policymaking process, successes, and difficulties of FPE in Malawi. According to the findings, FPE had a mixed effect on long-term poverty reduction and educational quality, even though it greatly increased access and decreased some gender inequities. Stronger governance, inclusive policymaking, better teacher support, and efficient monitoring systems are all necessary for lasting reform, according to the report. Important lessons can be learned from Malawi's experience when assessing free education systems throughout Sub-Saharan Africa.

### 1. Introduction of Free Primary Education Policy in Sub Saharan Africa

Previous research and analysis on economic development demonstrated that education is key to the improvement of a nation's economic status. Education for girls also according to studies is key in the improvement of women's fertility, birthrate, and other reproduction health related conditions. Therefore, following these findings countries including the Sub Saharan African nations were on the path to improving the standards and quality of education. Several sub-Saharan African nations have removed primary level school fees during the past decades in conjunction with unprecedented initiatives to revive failing educational institutions that had witnessed enrollment levels drop following early expansion since independence. While international financial institutions like the World Bank had advocated for cost-sharing in the 1980s and 1990s, the direct (and indirect) expenses to parents of their children's education had become a barrier to their attendance and sustained enrollment.<sup>1</sup> Girls were disproportionately affected by parents' inability to pay for these expenses, and they were frequently the first to be taken out of school or given permission to withdraw and eventually leading to early marriage. Consequently, a Free Primary Education (FPE) policy was seen in Malawi, Kenya, Uganda, and Lesotho as a step toward achieving universal basic education and as a component of escalating poverty minimization. By ensuring that everyone was given access to a basic education, the elimination of school fees may assist in reducing poverty and in turn enable families break the impoverishment cycle. In Sub-Saharan Africa, which is falling behind in attaining free primary education, it is a crucial initiative. These countries represent and reflect on the operation and success of the FPE over the years as these countries represent various population sizes political, societal, and financial factors.<sup>2</sup> Therefore a key question regarding the FPE is the prevailing understanding or determination of whether the FPE policy has been a success or a failure, and to what extent can stakeholders ensure its sustainability and longevity. In order to demonstrate the results of such a policy shift thus far, this study will explore Malawi's FPE as a case study from when in 1994, when Malawi adopted free primary education, to the present, provides a variety of experiences.

### 2. Malawi Education System during the Colonial and Post-Colonial Periods

Historical precedents for Malawi's education system before gaining independence were based on the schools that European Christian missionaries first built starting in 1875, in addition to the first department of education that was formed in 1926 after a period of British colonial mismanagement. In order to teach moral values and devotion to the British crown, the colonial administration of Britain developed a centralized primary school curriculum in 1933.<sup>3</sup> This curriculum included the study of British history and English. Secondary (high school) education was first offered in the then-Nyasaland Protectorate in 1941, and it

<sup>1</sup> Bentrovato, D., & Dzikanyanga, N. (n.d.). (2017). Knowledge, power and school history in post-independence Malawi: critical analysis of curriculum change (1964-2022). *The South African Society for History Teaching*

<sup>2</sup> Kadzamira, E., & Rose, P. (2003). Can free primary education meet the needs of the poor?: Evidence from Malawi. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 23(5), 501–516.

<sup>3</sup> Ministry of Education, 1973. Education Plan of Malawi, 1963–1980 Malawi Government, Zomba.

was based on an exclusive academic system. The prevailing educational discourse that was given particular attention was the British colonial story.<sup>4</sup>

Years after independence, in the face of a turbulent colonial past, Malawi has struggled to overcome challenges in the development of its public education system. Education in Malawi before 1994 was largely underdeveloped, with Gross Enrollment Rates (GER) and average national years of education completion far below the average for sub-Saharan Africa. Prior to Malawi attaining independence in 1964, education in the region had been systemically oppressed by the British authorities. They maintained a significantly lower allocation for education in the budget than for other sectors, such as agriculture and infrastructure. Discriminatory policies limited the wages of African teachers, forcing many to abandon the profession and leaving an educative void in the rural areas. After receiving independence in 1964, Malawi aligned its education system to the model used in Britain. This system was characterized by rigid hierarchy and patronage, lending to endemic corruption at the highest levels of the system.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore introduction of the One Party Rule by Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda in 1966 had a dramatic impact on the education system of Malawi. Close to the ideals of Apartheid, educational institutions were segregated along the lines of gender, class, and ethnicity. This has left Malawi's educational system ill-equipped to deal with the changing global market, with a lack of access to digital resources and trained faculty hampering progress. In addition, high taxation, unbalanced budget allocations, and centrally operated grant assistance all contributed to the continued development disparity of the education system.<sup>6</sup> Malawi was initially the first country in sub-Saharan Africa to adopt the free primary education policy and more countries consequently followed enacted their own free primary education policies.

The economic policies of the Dr Banda government before 1994, took a hard-line stance against the embrace of modern technology, limiting the possibility for educational advancement. Although primary education was made free and compulsory, access to secondary schooling remained limited. The introduction of the new, democratic government after 1994 made significant improvements to the educational system of Malawi, by abolishing the unconstitutional policies of Dr Banda's authoritarian rule. Increased funding, decentralization of the curriculum, and greater availability of primary and secondary education have all helped to propel Malawi's educational system into the 21 century. Furthermore, the democratized system of governance has had a stabilizing effect, allowing for greater development of the people and nation. These improvements have been accompanied by a greater degree of international aid, as well as an increased intake of refugees from neighboring countries.<sup>7</sup>

### 3. Policy Process and Choice

In accordance with shifting worldwide objectives over the past years, the Malawian government's strategy on education has switched from a focus on secondary and higher education to elementary education. The justification for the change has been a clear attempt to meet the demands of the underprivileged, more specifically beginning from the 1990s.<sup>8</sup> Primary education was given high emphasis by the new administration after democratic elections were held in 1994 because it was thought to be essential to the government's broader strategy for reducing poverty. Due to this change, education increasingly receives the majority of government recurrent spending (24% of relative efficiency flowed to education in 1997)<sup>9</sup>. Within the education sector, primary education receives the majority of recurrent funding.

Following independence, the initial 8 year education growth plan that run from 1973 to 1981 gave secondary and university education precedence at the cost of basic education. At the period, the principal objective of education was to produce middle-class workers to fill the positions that the colonial administration had vacated. In the second education development plan, which was undertaken from 1985 to 1995, basic education was given priority over secondary and university education.<sup>10</sup> The key goals of this strategy were to improve elementary education accessibility, fairness, and relevance.

Despite having commendable goals, these strategies mostly fell short of the demands of the general population. The gross enrollment proportions of 71% in 1993 fell significantly below the projected aim of 85%, and primary enrollments stayed low at the conclusion of the plan period. The 1990 Jomtien summit and the subsequent change in funding emphasis toward elementary education meant that despite steps taken during the plan era to increase access at the basic level, progress remained modest.<sup>11</sup> One of these solutions was the gradual partial elimination of educational expenses (tuition waivers) commencing in 1991 and 1992 with standards 1 and 2-3 during the ensuing two years.

After the very first democratic elections since self-rule in 1994, which resulted in the introduction of a new administration, educational planning began a new phase. In order to achieve universal primary enrollment, reforms that were implemented mostly concentrated on primary learning. From 1994, changes have been made with the goals of enhancing fairness, increasing access to

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 224

<sup>5</sup> National Economic Council, 2000. Profile of Poverty in Malawi, 1998. Poverty Analysis of the Malawi Integrated Household Survey, 1997–98. *National Economic Council, Zomba.*

<sup>6</sup> Ministry of Education/UNICEF, 1998. Free Primary Education: The Malawi Experience 1994–98: A Policy Analysis Study. *Ministry of Education Sports and Culture and UNICEF, Lilongwe.*

<sup>7</sup> Bentrovato, D., & Dzikanyanga, N. (n.d.). (2017). Knowledge, power and school history in post-independence Malawi: critical analysis of curriculum change (1964-2022). *The South African Society for History Teaching.*

<sup>8</sup> Kadzamira, E., & Rose, P. (2003). Can free primary education meet the needs of the poor?: Evidence from Malawi. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 23(5), 501–516.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 508

<sup>10</sup> Kunje, D., Chimombo, J., & Ogawa, K. (2015). UPE policy and quality of education in Malawi. *Comparative Analysis on Universal Primary Education Policy and Practice in Sub-Saharan Africa*, 155–171.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 159

secondary and primary education, and improving education.<sup>12</sup> Some of the significant reforms implemented from 1994 included the commencement of primary schooling without fees FPE, the removal of the need for students to wear a school uniform, from grades 1-4, the mode of teaching will transition to a local dialect and not English as well as the 1995 implementation of school fee exemptions for female secondary (high school) students.<sup>13</sup>

Under the new FPE policy, the 1994 new regime launched a comprehensive campaign of free primary school (FPE). FPE was seen as the primary tool for a more egalitarian nation, for growing and revolutionizing the economic sector, and as a crucial component in the country's development cycle through the newly elected politicians. FPE was also introduced as a reaction to the constituency's popular desire for education. The major goals of FPE were to broaden participation, end disparities in involvement across tribes, and to educate the public about the value of education.<sup>14</sup> As part of the FPE project, the government pledged to undertake the first funding of unaided primary schools, providing enough instructors and academic resources, be in charge of providing classroom equipment, furniture, teacher housing, sewage facilities, and wells and to eliminate all fees, establish education and vocational training, and promote females' involvement in basic education.<sup>15</sup>

Nevertheless it must be noted that the Malawi's policy making strategies and initiatives in education policies as well as other ministries do not have a history of engaging with stakeholders, such as educators, parents, municipalities, local officials, and organizations that work in the field of education. The Department of Education is, even so, hostile to NGO engagement in policy planning, believing that their function is better suited to conventional delivery of services in underserved regions. The FPE was a political issue, thus there wasn't much discussion on the best format with key players like district education officials, schools, researchers, instructors, parents, and students. They might probably make it more difficult to develop and put into practice policies.<sup>16</sup> In the 1994 national elections, the pledge of eliminating primary school charges as a way to improve education accessibility was a top priority of the main political parties. Once in power, the winning party started following through on their promise.<sup>17</sup> As prior studies had demonstrated, tuition charges were a barrier to students attending school, this might be seen as a solution to citizen needs. It is also possible that FPE had a significant influence on the voting since eliminating fees would ensure the financial assistance of foreign organizations and would expand coverage to elementary schools.

Other concerns, including food and nutrition security which is possibly more important for the poor's immediate lives, as individuals themselves stated, might be less apparent and harder to achieve.<sup>18</sup>

#### 4. Understanding the Successes and Failures of the FPE Policy

A noteworthy success story of the free primary education policy in Malawi was that it received a tremendously welcoming response from the general population. Parents were more than eager to send their children to school. Most girls were also encouraged and provided with more access to go to school. Enrollments increased by over 50 percent from 1993-1995 and by 2016 enrollment reached a 173% milestone in 2016. The increases between 1993-2000 were highly attributed to young boys and girls who had previously dropped out of school and reentered once the FPE policy was introduced. Prior to the implementation of the FPE policy, the rate of enrollment in primary school was only 44% with increasing yearly dropouts.<sup>19</sup> The success of free primary education in Malawi can be attributed to a number of measures including: increased accessibility of primary education, improved funding, increased teacher employment, increased parental involvement and increased quality of education, and improved government monitoring.

Accessibility of primary education has played a major role in the success of free primary education in Malawi. Before the introduction of free primary education, families in rural areas often could not afford to send their children to school and educational facilities were often spaced far apart, making it difficult for some students to access them. The introduction of free primary education has allowed for more children to attend school, and for improved infrastructure which makes traveling to school easier. Improved funding has also been key to the success of free primary education in Malawi. The government has increased education expenditure over the years, including increased spending on training teachers, student programs and facilities, and school supplies. This investment has allowed primary schools to offer higher quality education which has a positive impact on enrollment. In total, the number of teachers in Malawi grew from 89,787 in 2000 to 272,941 in 2015. This increase in teachers directly impacts the success of free primary education, as more teachers are better able to monitor and support student's education.<sup>20</sup> With more teachers employed, students can be better supported and monitored, and can receive more customized learning, which can lead to improved graduation rates.

<sup>12</sup> Kadzamira E, Ngaunje O. (2009) Educational Policy Choice and Practice in Malawi; Dilemmas and Disjunctures, *IDS Working Paper 124* 339-578

<sup>13</sup> Chimombi J.P.H. (1999) Implementing Educational Innovations; A study of free primary education in Malawi. *University of Sussex*

<sup>14</sup> National Economic Council, 2000. Profile of Poverty in Malawi, 1998. Poverty Analysis of the Malawi Integrated Household Survey, 1997-98. *National Economic Council, Zomba.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 89

<sup>16</sup> Kadzombe, E.D., (2018), "Causes of Primary School Dropouts," Paper presented at the National Seminar on Problems of Primary School Dropouts, Zomba: University of Malawi

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 229

<sup>18</sup> Khaila, S, Mvula, (2019). Malawi Consultations with the Poor. Country Synthesis Report, Washington, D.C World Bank

<sup>19</sup> Al-Sammarrai, S Zaman, H (2006) Abolishing school fees in Malawi; the impact on education access and equity. *IMPRA paper 130*

<sup>20</sup> Chimombo J (2017) Changing Pattern of Access to basic education in Malawi; a story of a mixed bag in Comparative Education; *Special Issue* 297-312

Parental involvement has also been key to the success of free primary education in Malawi. Improved access to education has allowed more parents to be more actively involved in their child's educational attainment. This involvement can be seen in the fact that 53.5% of all parents in Malawi are now receiving school reports, compared to only 12.8% in 2003.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, parents are now more likely to pay attention to their school needs, as they no longer have to worry about the cost of education due to free primary education.

Lastly, government monitoring has also become a key factor that has led to the success of free primary education in Malawi. The Ministry of Education developed a monitoring system within the ministry and local education divisions that regularly assesses learning and attendance rates, which establishes accountability and ensures that learning needs are being addressed. Furthermore, in 2019 the government established the Free Quality Secondary Education Program, which makes secondary education free for lower-income families.<sup>22</sup>

Malawi's failure or lack thereof to implement free primary education has had wide-reaching consequences for the country's future. In spite of promises from the government, free primary education remains unenforced and has had a negative impact on the country's long-term development and quality of life.

Despite the recognition that education has received for its role in promoting economic growth and prosperity, Malawi is one of several nations that has failed to sustain high standards in education. The government is heavily dependent on funds from foreign donors and funds that have been diverted from several other areas of the economy. Furthermore, despite the fact that FPE is supposed to contain educational supplies like notebooks and composition prompts, the nation frequently fails to put this into practice owing to a lack of funding. If we focus on Malawi's statistics, the GDP per capita had stayed almost unaltered in 2003, which was nearly 10 years after the implementation of free primary education (FPE) in the country. The goal of Malawi to reduce disparities in education accessibility for everyone has also continued to experience challenges in terms of females' ability to attend school.

Another reason behind the country's inability to provide free primary education is a lack of economic resources. Malawi is one of the World Bank's list of Least Developed Countries, meaning it has limited access to economic resources and is unable to fully finance its own social services. This limits the capacity of the government to fund a comprehensive free primary education system. As a result, the government has been unable to fulfill its pledge to provide free primary education since 2003, leaving the country's educational system in dire need of funding. The increase in the numbers of young students enrolling for primary school led to issues of shortage of resources to cater for the demand. Due to the nation's constantly expanding population, enrollment numbers are also rising continuously. Access, however, is not distributed fairly, leaving weaker tribes of people behind. For example, learners in cities have more access to schools compared to learners in the village due to commuting distance, availability and affordability of school resources.

Additionally, due to the country's high levels of poverty, many families are unable to pay for primary school basic needs for their children such as clothing, food, school bags, books, pencils, pens etc. As a result, the demand for free primary education is massively increased, further stretching an already shaky system. With few resources available, the government has been unable to provide enough teachers, schools and other resources, leading to widespread classroom overcrowding and poor quality of teaching and learning. Furthermore, free primary education has been undermined by the fact that many parents only enrol their sons in school and not their daughters; 82 percent of girls remain out of school compared to 71 percent of boys. As a result, the benefits of free primary education remain largely gender-selective and ineffective in achieving total educational equity across the country.

The failure of Malawi's free primary education system has serious long-term implications for the country's economy and quality of life. Those who do not receive an education will be unable to find employment and earn a sufficient income, robbing the country of potential talent and limited economic resources. Similarly, Malawi's development will be hampered as workers and communities will lack the skills necessary to easily access and utilize new technologies, as well as contribute to skill-specific talent outside of the agricultural sector. The process of raising educational standards also faces ongoing difficulties. The learning outcomes of Malawian students are among the worst in the continent: Alarming statistics include the high repeat rate (22.7%) and poor primary school chance of survival (58%) in 2019. Primary education continues to suffer from large class sizes, with an aggregate of 120 students in each class as well as a proportion of one qualified instructor per 64 students.

The FRE program in Malawi is significantly hampered by the omission of the extra educational supplies that families necessitate in order for attend school with their children. As a result, many people lack the necessary clothing and school materials for the kids to attend. Despite the reality that the FPE program was created expressly with Malawi's remote regions in mind—80% of the country's population lives in rural areas. These communities frequently suffer the most impact from the program since they have considerably lower rates of school attendance than metropolitan areas. Due to their location in less affluent communities, these schools frequently provide education of poor quality conditions such as inadequate learning environments, inadequate education, inadequate teachers and poor hygiene standards.

## 5. Recommendations

The case of Malawi has been one that is touted among other subsaharan nations. Furthermore the assertion that education is adequate in alleviating poverty does not seem to stand true for Malawi over the past decades. It is also another assertion that the policy has likely not been exercised to its full potential holding.

The FPE initiative aimed to broaden student involvement and attendance, decrease attendance disparities, and raise perception of the value of education. However, the gap within policy and reality has prevented these goals from being achieved. However,

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 301

<sup>22</sup> Munthali, J (2004) The Education of Girls in Malawi Access and Retention.

through education it is evident that Malawi could not alleviate poverty as projected due to the poor quality of basic education, lack of resources, teachers including other factors than education such as poor governance. Even if a shortage of resources is somewhat to fault, many issues might be solved by strengthening the decision-making process.

Many challenges remain, including improper and inadequate involvement of stakeholders in the education sector, which has led to a lack of resources and reduced accountability. The lack of stakeholder involvement stems from the premises that policies in Malawi including the FPE policy were undertaken as a political initiative to win votes irregardless of the relevance, research, cost, and effectiveness of other key players. To address the issue and streamline FPE in Malawi, it is therefore essential to involve stakeholders in order to improve the quality and efficiency of the policy. Government must encourage, promote and support the involvement of all stakeholders in the policy making process. Stakeholders play a vital role in achieving the goals of education in any country and it is incumbent upon all countries to ensure they are included in the development process. Involving stakeholders not only helps to ensure that policies are more responsive to the needs and resources of local stakeholders, but more importantly, it helps to promote meaningful and sustainable development of the education system. Key stakeholders in education in Malawi includes governments, businesses, civil society, local community groups, students, parents, and teachers. Each of these groups has its own perspectives and interests and should be engaged in decision-making processes related to education. This can be achieved through various stakeholder engagement strategies, such as dialogue and consultation, advocacy, and peer learning.

Second, stakeholders should be consulted on the design of educational policies and programs in Malawi. This can include ensuring that stakeholders have a say in the development and implementation of curricula, examining how best to allocate resources and funds, and identifying measures to ensure that all children attend school and stay in school. Involving stakeholders in such discussions can ensure that the policies enacted are based on the perspectives, needs, and resources of those affected by the policies. Civil society groups and organizations should be encouraged to work with stakeholders in Malawi to monitor and evaluate educational policies and programs. This could include reporting on the effectiveness of policy implementation and the achievement of educational goals, as well as pinpointing potential areas of improvement. Such activities can help to raise the standards of education in Malawi and ultimately benefit students, teachers, parents, and society as a whole.

Furthermore, for the effectiveness of the FPE in Malawi, the government must develop a detailed and comprehensive policy structure that has mandate to assess the effectiveness and sustainability of policies introduced. Properly understanding the system of education policy in Malawi is key to devising effective reform that can improve the education system in the country and ultimately lead to better life outcomes not only for students but the nation as a whole. At the national level, Malawi's Ministry of Education is responsible for creating the legal and policy framework governing education. This includes crafting policies related to the curriculum, school budgets and funding, teacher training, pedagogy and assessment, and other matters of educational quality. The policies created by the Ministry of Education must then be implemented by local government agencies and school administrators, who must figure out how to allocate resources, adhere to the curriculum standards, and develop assessment tools within the framework set by the ministry. At the school level, the focus must be on the day-to-day implementation of policy and how these policies are managing to improve or inhibit the educational experience of students. The analysis would begin by examining the economic resources of the school, understand the terminology of existing policy, and identify the stakeholders involved in school administration, from teachers and students to parents, local government agency representatives and educational NGOs. Furthermore, it is important to look at the efficacy of local implementation, from the quality of instruction to the availability of teaching materials, and assess whether measures are in place for monitoring and evaluating the impact of policy implementation. Furthermore, it is essential to recognize the social context of education policy in Malawi. This might include an exploration of community attitudes towards education as well as gender disparities in enrollment and completion rates. Additionally, it might be beneficial to study the history of policy-making in the country, as this provides insight into the cultural biases and political climate that shape the education system.

Another key suggestion to ensuring the efficiency and effectiveness of the FPE in Malawi is to improve collaboration and communication between the government and the local and international agencies that provide funds and donations to the education sector. Traditionally, Malawi has long had a strained relationship between its government and international donors over the running of its education system. This has led to an increase in negative rhetoric and mistrust between the two sides as both seek to promote and improve the educational standards of a largely poverty-stricken population. It is clear that to improve the educational outcomes of children in Malawi, both the government and donors need to come together in a collaborative and constructive manner. One key area where collaboration could improve the educational outcomes in Malawi is in the development of curricula. Many of the existing curricula focus on rote memorization and do not incorporate the latest educational theory or provide practical applications for the material being studied. The government could seek to reconcile the aims of both parties in developing new curricula that are holistic and practical, allowing students to better understand and engage with the topics being studied.

The government of Malawi should also consider ways to incentivise teachers. Many teachers in Malawi are not motivated to teach due to low salaries, particularly in rural areas. To improve teacher performance and morale, the government should seek the funds to ensure that all teachers receive a livable wage. Moreover, efforts to grow gender equality in education should be prioritized. Sadly, there are large discrepancies in educational achievement between boys and girls in Malawi, with girls often losing incentive to continue their education due to family and community expectations. A joint effort between the government and donors to introduce specialized schools and scholarship programs for girls could help to reduce gender disparities in education. By taking a collaborative approach, the government and donors in Malawi can work together to improve the educational standards of students across the country. A combination of resource investment, incentivisation for teachers, improved infrastructure and gender equality initiatives could help to improve the educational outcomes of Malawian children. Such a partnership would require a strong level of trust and communication between the two sides, but such harmony is necessary to ensure that Malawi's schools can

offer the highest quality of education and help to reduce poverty. In areas with good infrastructure, quality schools should be established and maintained. This means building physical structures that are safe and provide an adequate learning environment. In areas without existing infrastructure, innovative solutions must be developed. For example, establishing mobile schools that bring teachers to students instead of requiring students to travel to classrooms. Additionally, school fees should be abolished so that all students have equal access to education regardless of financial resources.

The next step to improving education in Malawi is to provide adequate resources for students and teachers. Many schools lack essential materials such as textbooks, writing materials and technology, which limits students' learning experiences. Ensuring that all students have access to modern learning materials, as well as providing digital literacy training for teachers, should be a priority. Furthermore, all teachers should be provided with comprehensive and effective training to ensure they are adequately equipped to instruct their students. Finally, education standards in Malawi must be monitored and regularly assessed. This means developing and implementing assessment and evaluation initiatives that measure the performance, progress and outcomes of the education system. All of the steps listed above should be underpinned by a plan of regular reviews and evaluations to ensure that the various efforts in place are making a positive impact and achieving the desired results.

## 6. Conclusion

Malawi is home to an ever-growing population of young people and an education system that is in urgent need of improvement. In a society where access to school is not currently universal or assumed to be. Literacy and numeracy rates lag far behind other countries in the region, it is critical that steps be taken to improve overall education standards in Malawi.

Malawi is considered one of the poorest nations in the world, yet in 1994 it became one of the first five African countries to implement free primary education. Malawi has a long history of providing free primary education to its citizens: in 1994, the government adopted a policy of free primary education with the aim of increasing access to and raising the quality of education for all children. This was made possible through substantial financial support from donors such as the World Bank, UNICEF and USAID. Since then, Malawi has been able to make great strides in expanding access to education: enrollment rates at both primary and secondary levels increased substantially between 2000 and 2010, with more than 90% of primary-age children now enrolled in school. As a result, student learning outcomes have also improved significantly over this period. In addition, since 2009 Malawi has offered schools an opportunity to receive additional funding through its Performance Grants Programme; this helps ensure that disadvantaged students have access to quality education resources. Despite a number of challenges along the way, Malawi has consistently increased school enrollment and reduced gender disparities in primary education. This can be attributed to strong government emphasis on FPE and its focus on allocating more funds on FPE resources which have proven to be successful in driving educational outcomes. It is clear that Malawi's failure to provide free primary education has had dire consequences for the country's long-term development and quality of life. If only when the government is able to bridge the gap between its current educational system and its promise to provide free primary education, Malawi's educational system, and consequently its economic future, will remain seriously compromised. Improving education standards in Malawi is not a simple task and will require a large investment of resources and effort. That said, by providing adequate access to education, providing students and teachers with appropriate materials and resources, and implementing systems of regular evaluation, much progress can be made to the benefit of all citizens of Malawi.

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