

Reform Initiatives in the Malawi Police Service Strategies to Rebuild Public Trust and Operational Efficiency: A Review

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ABSTRACT

The Malawi Police Service (MPS) has faced challenges over the years, including allegations of corruption, inefficiency, and human rights abuses. These issues have eroded public trust and hindered operational effectiveness. This review explores reform initiatives aimed at rebuilding public confidence and enhancing the efficiency of the MPS. This paper also reviews the Malawi Police Service's (MPS) reforms, focusing on their impact on public trust and operational efficiency. The study analyzes key reform initiatives, such as community policing and independent oversight, introduced to address systemic challenges like corruption, political interference, and resource constraints. It explores how these reforms enhance police accountability, improve service delivery, and foster public engagement. However, challenges in sustainability and cultural resistance persist. The paper concludes with recommendations for strengthening reforms and highlights areas for future research.

Keywords: *Police reforms; Public trust; Operational efficiency; Community policing; Malawi Police Service.*

1.0 Introduction

Background: A summary of the problems the Malawi Police Service (MPS) is facing with operational inefficiency and public trust. Challenges like corruption, a lack of accountability, and resource limitations impede the Malawi Police Service's (MPS) attempts to increase operational effectiveness and public trust. According to surveys, the public is not very confident, and many people believe that police actions are biased or motivated by political interests.

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In addition, officers deal with unfavorable working conditions that impact their performance and job satisfaction, such as inadequate training and unclear promotion policies. These difficulties demonstrate the necessity of improved accountability frameworks and resource distribution in order to enhance service provision and restore public confidence. (Mtuwa & Chiweza, 2023; Silayo 2023)

Justification for Reforms: Talk about the necessity of reforms to deal with inefficiency, corruption, and low public participation. Reforms have been implemented by the Malawi Police Service (MPS) to address persistent issues of inefficiency, corruption, and low public participation. Due to widespread accusations of bribery and misconduct against police personnel, corruption has become deeply ingrained in society and has an impact on public trust and service performance. These problems still exist in spite of attempts to increase openness through independent oversight organizations like the Independent Complaints Commission and reform programs like community policing (Mtuwa & Chiweza, 2023; Camacho and Jenkins, 2022). Another area of emphasis has been public engagement, since the problem has gotten worse due to inadequate accountability systems and low levels of community participation. The National Anti-Corruption Strategy II (NACS II) and other initiatives that encourage accountability and multi-stakeholder participation demonstrate Malawi's government's recognition of the need for significant reforms (Camacho & Jenkins, 2022).

However, the execution of reform is still severely hampered by political meddling, inadequate funding, and opposition within the police force. These reforms are justified by the need to improve operational effectiveness, restore public confidence, and address the underlying causes of corruption and poor management in the police force. There is a growing understanding that the only way to rebuild public trust in law enforcement organizations is to make consistent efforts toward accountability and engagement. (Mtuwa & Chiweza, 2023). Reviewing the body of research on Malawian police reforms and their contribution to efficiency and trust is the aim of this paper. The goal of the Malawi Police Service (MPS) reforms is to address ingrained problems such as public disengagement, corruption, and inefficiency. Numerous people have reported police wrongdoing, such as the use of excessive force and bribes, according to recent surveys, which reflect the ongoing mistrust of the public (Afrobarometer, 2022).

Reforms center on bolstering community policing and enhancing accountability through impartial oversight systems in order to restore trust. However, development is hampered by internal opposition, political meddling, and resource limitations. According to Afrobarometer (2022), sustained reforms require ongoing efforts to improve openness and bring the police into line with democratic ideals.

2.0 Conceptual Framework: Police Legitimacy Theory

Debbaut & De Kimpe, (2023) study focus of legitimacy theory was on the relationship between public trust and police legitimacy. According to legitimacy theory, building trust and collaboration with the police depends heavily on the public's perception of the police's legitimacy, or whether they are acting in a fair and just manner. According to Sunshine and Tyler (2003) and Hamm *et al.* (2017), procedural fairness—which includes treating people with dignity, offering justifications for actions, and maintaining objectivity throughout interactions—is the foundation of legitimacy. When the public believes that the police are legitimate, they are more inclined to cooperate with law enforcement and voluntarily follow the law. Because of previous wrongdoing and inadequate accountability systems, Malawians continue to have low levels of trust in the police. Legitimacy-based reforms concentrate on increasing openness and encouraging community policing, in which police personnel interact with local communities face-to-face to mend fences. According to procedural justice theory, these efforts are in line with the idea that establishing legitimacy through just procedures can result in long-term public trust and better service outcomes (McLaughlin 2023; Jackson *et al.*, 2023). Maintaining legitimacy, however, necessitates constant monitoring to make sure cops follow these guidelines and consistent behavior in line with public expectations.

2.1 The theory of organizational change

Brown, *et al* (2024) provided a conceptualization of organizational change theory that sheds light on the difficulties organizations have while putting changes into practice. According to Brown 's Eight-Step Change Model, resistance is caused by a number of things, including organizational inertia, loss of authority, and fear of the unknown. According to Geoghegan and van der Waldt (2019), resistance inside organizations such as the Malawi Police Service (MPS) frequently results from a reluctance to transition from hierarchical structures to community-focused models.

The approach highlights the necessity of strong leadership in order to instill a feeling of urgency, communicate the goal clearly, and empower staff members to welcome change. Resistance to police reform is frequently caused by ingrained behaviors and apprehension that the changes may jeopardize current privileges or job security (Mutupha & Zhu, 2022; Brown, 2019). Employee opposition may also be made worse by officers' limited participation in the planning and execution of reforms, as they may feel excluded from the process.

In order to overcome these obstacles, the authors advises firms to form change-oriented coalitions, produce short-term successes to inspire stakeholders, and integrate new practices into the organization’s culture for sustained success. These ideas could be applied in MPS by making sure leadership is dedicated to maintaining the changes over time, including officers more actively in reform processes, and matching incentives with reform goals.

Table 1: Public Trust and Police Reform Theoretical Frameworks

Theoretical Framework	Concept	Key Focus	Key Citation
Legitimacy Theory	Contends that people are more inclined to trust and abide by police orders when they believe that law enforcement is just, fair, and accountable. When procedural justice is applied during contacts between the police and the public, trust and collaboration increase.	Using procedural justice and fairness to build public trust	Debbaut & De Kimpe, (2023). Police legitimacy and culture revisited through the lens of self-legitimacy. <i>Policing and society</i> , 33(6), 690-702.
Organizational Change Theory	Explains how institutions encounter internal opposition to reforms because of ingrained norms, fear of change, and a fear of losing their status. Stakeholder engagement, effective leadership, and communication are necessary for change to be successful.	Change aversion and methods for overcoming obstacles	Kotter (1996). <i>Leading Change</i> . Harvard Business Review Press.
Community Policing Models	Focuses on police-community cooperation to foster partnerships and proactive participation in order to decrease crime and increase public confidence. Good community relations promote accountability and trust.	Cooperation between the police and the community to foster confidence	Walker (1977). <i>A Critical History of Police Reform: The Emergence of Professionalism</i> . Lexington Books.

Table 1 summarizes Public Trust and Police Reform Theoretical Frameworks. The significance of legitimacy and trust, the necessity of overcoming institutional resistance, and the function of community policing in promoting constructive police-citizen relations are all emphasized.

2.2 Conceptual framework: Models of community policing and public trust

According to Modise, (2023) conceptualization of community policing models, police and community members must work together to foster public trust and improve law

enforcement results. In community policing, police officers collaborate closely with citizens to identify and address local issues, moving the emphasis from reactive crime control to proactive participation. Regular and open communication fosters trust and encourages accountability and understanding between parties (Mutupha & Zhu, 2022; Modise, (2023).

Through local forums, cooperative patrols, and outreach initiatives, community policing initiatives in Malawi seek to close the gap between the public and law enforcement by enlisting community members in crime prevention (Geoghegan & van der Waldt, 2019). Community policing, according to research, increases citizen participation in crime reporting, develops cooperation, and enhances public perceptions of safety. But the effectiveness of these programs is frequently limited by a lack of funding, uneven execution, and internal opposition from police officers used to hierarchical policing methods (Mutupha & Zhu, 2022). Walker's paradigm emphasizes that the success of these reforms depends on the police and communities having trust in one another. A feedback loop is created by regular, constructive encounters between law enforcement and the public. Better cooperation results from more trust, which in turn leads to more effective policing and further strengthens public confidence in law enforcement.

3.0 Reforms in the Police and Public Trust

Malawi's community policing method seeks to restore public trust by encouraging cooperation between the police and local communities, according to research on how more police-community engagement enhances public trust (Dumas *et al.*, 2021). This tactic encourages police officers to actively interact with the community in an effort to improve public safety and solve issues through forums for collaborative problem-solving. (Kumwenda *et al.*, 2023).

A foundation for community policing, which emphasizes crime prevention through collaborations between law enforcement and the public, is provided under the Malawi Police Act (2010). Its complete adoption has been hampered by issues like internal resistance, insufficient training, and resource limitations. Furthermore, there are still disparities in community engagement, with underserved communities getting less attention, which over time can damage trust (Mutupha & Zhu, 2022). It has been demonstrated that attempts to include digital platforms into community policing can increase public participation and speed up response times. According to Kumwenda *et al.* (2023), there are obstacles to the widespread use of these technologies, including inadequate infrastructure and disparities in residents' digital literacy, especially in rural

areas. Community policing in Malawi requires ongoing funding for training, public awareness initiatives, and resource mobilization in order to reach its full potential. In order to evaluate the effects of these reforms over time and guarantee that community policing efforts continue to meet public expectations, monitoring and evaluation procedures need also be reinforced. Independent Oversight Mechanisms: The Independent Complaints Commission's (ICC) function in fostering openness and accountability. Corruption's Effect on Trust: How public opinion has been influenced by past incidents of police misconduct.

4.0 Operational Effectiveness and Police Reforms

Response times, in particular, have improved somewhat as a result of recent reforms within the Malawi Police Service (MPS). In the past, complaints mostly focused on emergency responses that were delayed, which weakened public confidence. Response times have reportedly improved as a result of reforms that concentrate on performance management and resource allocation, which has contributed to the restoration of public trust (Malawi Police Service, 2023).

Increased emphasis on community policing units, improved inter-police station cooperation, and improved performance evaluation systems that link officer rewards to service delivery outcomes are some of the major factors influencing this advancement (Mtuwa and Chiweza, 2023). However, issues including inadequate infrastructure and funding still exist and affect service consistency, particularly in rural areas. To guarantee that these improvements are maintained and improve the effectiveness of police operations even more, procedures for ongoing monitoring and assessment are crucial.

For police reform initiatives to be successful, training and capacity building are essential elements that guarantee officers are prepared to handle changing security demands and provide services efficiently. The Malawi Police Service (MPS) believes that ongoing training will increase officers' professionalism, decrease misconduct, and improve their capacity to interact with communities in a fair way and transparently. Effective police reforms, according to studies, rely on both retraining officers to meet contemporary policing standards and changing policies. Community policing, human rights, use-of-force procedures, and crisis intervention are among the topics covered in training programs. By increasing capacity, officers can better handle crises, conduct efficient criminal investigations, and maintain accountability standards (Jonyo, 2023).

But issues like scarce resources and erratic funding have an impact on how long these programs can last. The introduction of performance-based training models through reforms has connected career advancement with ongoing professional development;

nevertheless, these initiatives must be expanded to include all service units (Malawi Police Service, 2023). To increase MPS's operational capability and public trust, it will be crucial to make investments in training infrastructure and form alliances with foreign law enforcement agencies.

Technology, including digital tools like e-policing, is essential to increasing the Malawi Police Service's (MPS) operational effectiveness. Technology makes it possible for improved service delivery, quicker reaction times, and better data management. During operations, police officers can make better decisions by accessing real-time information through computerized crime databases and electronic reporting systems. According to Kumwenda *et al.* (2023), e-policing systems also streamline the complaint and report submission process, cutting down on human errors and bureaucracy.

Because automated systems track police activity and produce performance data that supports internal audits and reforms, they also increase accountability. Social media and SMS-based systems are examples of digital platforms that encourage community involvement by making it easier for citizens to report incidents and get prompt feedback. Nevertheless, obstacles such as inadequate finance, infrastructure, and digital literacy prevent these technologies from being fully utilized (Mutupha & Zhu, 2022). If every service unit consistently invests in training and technology advancements, the incorporation of technology into policing operations holds great promise for increased efficiency and transparency.

5.0 Implementing Reform Presents Difficulties

Literature on political interference: how political forces impede the advancement of change (Tiscornia, 2024). Political meddling is a major obstacle to the advancement of police reform in Malawi and many other developing nations. Actions driven by political motivations, such as the selective execution of laws to benefit ruling parties and the manipulation of police leadership nominations, frequently undercut reforms intended to advance openness, accountability, and operational independence. The police are used by political elites to quell opposition during elections and control protests, which skews reform goals meant to advance impartial law enforcement, claims iSPEAK (2023).

Police force decision-making autonomy and resource distribution are also impacted by political meddling. For instance, senior officials are occasionally promoted more for political reasons than for merit, which diminishes public trust and limits the efficacy of capacity-building programs (Mtuwa & Chiweza, 2023). These factors make it challenging to maintain changes and impede the growth of autonomous and professional

enforcement institutions. According to the research, depoliticized police operations and robust oversight procedures are essential for changes to be successful. To protect police institutions from political influence, it is crucial to bolster civilian oversight organizations like the Independent Complaints Commission (ICC) and guarantee judicial independence (Camacho & Jenkins, 2022)).

5.1 Cultural resistance: Examining how people internally oppose new policing strategies

Due in large part to deeply ingrained police culture, efforts to introduce reforms inside the Malawi Police Service (MPS) have faced strong internal opposition. Officers used to more conventional, hierarchical policing models frequently oppose changes to accountability and community policing models. Resistance is caused by the continuation of informal norms that run counter to reform initiatives, worries about authority loss, and unease with public scrutiny (Mutupha & Zhu, 2022).

In contrast to previous reactive policing strategies that prioritized law enforcement alone, the transition to community policing necessitates that officers embrace proactive problem-solving techniques and actively engage with citizens. It is also challenging for officers to adopt reforms meant to promote openness and community involvement because of the MPS's bureaucratic and military traditions (Geoghegan & van der Walddt, 2019).

Experts suggest training initiatives and rewards that complement new policing models in order to overcome this opposition, as well as leadership assistance to promote internal cultural change. Making sure that community policing becomes an essential component of police operations also requires tracking and assessing reform initiatives (Mutupha & Zhu, 2022).

5.2 Resource limitations: How reform results are affected by a lack of infrastructure and funding

The success of police reforms in Malawi is significantly hampered by a lack of resources. Inadequate funding impacts the police service's ability to implement crucial initiatives, including community policing, technological upgrades, and capacity-building programs. A limited budget lowers investment in current technology, training facilities, and transportation, which are crucial for operational efficiency. This also impacts the upkeep of vital infrastructure, such as police stations, leading in operational bottlenecks, particularly in rural locations (World Bank, 2023).

Police officers are frequently overworked as a result of the high officer-to-population ratio, which is significantly below the advised international standards, and the lack of trained personnel further exacerbates the problem (Malawi Police Service, 2023).

Without sustained domestic funding, Malawi's police service finds it difficult to adopt and sustain reform-oriented initiatives that require ongoing resources (Global Integrity, 2023). To ensure long-term success, the government must allocate adequate resources and prioritize police reforms as part of its national development strategies.

6.0 Conclusion and Future Research Directions

The implementation of police reforms in the Malawi Police Service (MPS) has brought both progress and challenges in restoring public trust and improving operational efficiency. This imbalance makes it difficult to deploy enough personnel across regions, weakening public trust and engagement as communities feel neglected or underserved. Efforts to fill these gaps through donor-funded programs can also create dependency and inconsistencies. Community policing and the Independent Complaints Commission (ICC) are two examples of reforms that have enhanced public accountability and engagement, which has helped to boost public confidence (Mutupha & Zhu, 2022). The implementation of performance-based metrics and technological tools like as e-policing has been associated with improved response times and improved service delivery, especially in metropolitan settings (Kumwenda *et al.*, 2023).

However, political meddling, a lack of funding, and internal opposition to change continue to hinder the effectiveness of these reforms. Public trust continues to be undermined by the existence of corruption and selective law enforcement tactics, especially in underserved neighborhoods. Police changes must be supported by programs to build capacity, train leaders, and continuously check the gaps between policy and practice in order to guarantee long-term improvement (Mtuwa & Chiweza, 2023).

6.1 Directions for future research

Longitudinal studies are desperately needed to assess how police changes in Malawi may affect public trust and operational effectiveness over the long run. Such research would shed light on whether short-term gains like faster reaction times and greater public involvement are long-term or if they could deteriorate as a result of internal opposition, resource constraints, or political meddling (Mutupha & Zhu, 2022). Moreover, longitudinal studies can monitor how reforms affect crime rates, public attitudes, and police culture in various geographical areas.

Furthermore, comparing findings with other African nations enacting comparable changes might provide insightful information. Communities such as South Africa, Ghana, and Kenya have implemented performance-based reforms and community policing,

although they have encountered obstacles like political meddling and institutional opposition. By identifying common flaws and best practices, comparative assessments would assist develop customized plans for Malawi's reform to be successful (Camacho & Jenkins, 2022). Research conducted across national borders could also investigate how international collaboration and regional alliances promote operational efficacy and accountability in African policing.

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