INFRASTRUCTURE DATA INNOVATIONS IN MALAWI

GUIDING PRINCIPLE 10: EVIDENCE-BASED DECISION-MAKING

The planning and management of infrastructure throughout the lifecycle should be informed by key performance indicators that should promote the collection of data, including data that is disaggregated by stakeholder groups. Regular monitoring of infrastructure performance and impacts is necessary to generate data, which should be made available to all stakeholders.

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BACKGROUND

Malawi has prioritized infrastructure development as a key component in the "Malawi Growth and Development Strategy" (Government of Malawi 2017a). However, the perceived quality of infrastructure remains low, as are the measures for access and service delivery in the education, electricity and roads sectors in particular (IMF 2018, p. 17). Additionally, the country has faced issues surrounding data transparency and has ranked low in Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index, 123rd out of 180 countries (Transparency International 2019). This extends to infrastructure planning and management, where there has historically been limited accountability and data availability relating to major infrastructure plans and projects. Until recently, procuring entities failed to meet legal requirements for disclosing information to the public, and data was previously disclosed via paper-based systems rather than centralized electronic data storage systems, which can significantly impair citizens' access to this data (Infrastructure Transparency Initiative [CoST] 2018).

Over 80 per cent of Malawi's population live in rural areas (World Bank 2019), making effective information dissemination particularly important to ensure that communities are not disconnected from decision-making, infrastructure development and economic opportunities. Malawi has made notable progress with regard to infrastructure data over the past 10 years. Through its membership of CoST, it has introduced an online information portal, a Multi-Stakeholder Group, and several other innovations, which all help to ensure that data relating to the lifecycle of infrastructure is widely available and scrutinized.

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IMPROVING DATA COLLECTION AND AVAILABILITY

Since 2019, Malawi has established key tools to promote infrastructure data disclosure and accountability. Among these are the "Information Platform for Public Infrastructure" – an online disclosure platform that aims to bring infrastructure data closer to citizens. The platform, although still being upgraded, provides a centralized and digitalized storage system for procuring entities, making infrastructure data easier to find and readily available to the public. It is beginning to publish data relating to key stages of the infrastructure lifecycle by region and infrastructure sub-sectors. The government has also engaged CoST to train procuring entity officials on using the platform and for building their understanding of Malawi's legal regime on disclosure, which obliges entities to disclose data in accordance with the CoST Infrastructure Data Standard.

Besides launching the Information Platform for Public Infrastructure, Malawi has also used influential radio stations to reach citizens and raise awareness about the online platform. Radio jingles – a popular communications tool in Malawi – were broadcast to encourage the public to visit the new platform and access data. Similarly, since 2010, regular "assurance reports" have been published, which have validated and interpreted data disclosed on over 90 infrastructure projects to help highlight areas of good practice and key concerns about these projects (CoST 2018, p. 2). The data cover key sectors including education, electricity, roads, water, health and housing. The reports also compare performance across procuring entities. Combined with the Information Platform for Public Infrastructure, these measures will give citizens a better indication of how their taxes are spent on infrastructure (CoST 2018, p. 2).

INCREASED ACCOUNTABILITY

The improved use of data is reinforced by a Multi-Stakeholder Group with representation from government, the private sector and civil society. As with all CoST members, the group plays an important role in publicizing the key issues found in assurance reports. So far, it has used its influence to improve the quality of individual infrastructure projects, as well as spur action on broader reforms. For example, the Multi-Stakeholder Group was instrumental in Malawi's Parliament passing a revised Public Procurement and Disposal of Public Assets Act that legally mandates procuring entities to disclose infrastructure data (Government of Malawi 2017b).

As an additional mechanism to improve accountability and scrutiny of infrastructure delivery, radio outreach has enhanced citizens' awareness with respect to their right to engage with relevant stakeholders. This realization was particularly important during the run-up to Malawi's 2020 elections. Increased dissemination of information and heightened citizen engagement in Malawi prior to the election put accountability high on the political agenda, with major political parties including infrastructure accountability in their manifestos. This can be seen in the manifestos of the Malawi Congress Party (2019) and the United Transformation Movement (2019).

These structures and mechanisms contribute to a systems conception of infrastructure, focusing on the importance of knowledge and institutions in better infrastructure delivery. However, there is currently only limited environmental data available relating to infrastructure and its impacts in Malawi, which would play an important role in achieving SDG 13 (Climate Action) and SDG 15 (Life on Land).

SHARING INFORMATION THROUGH COMMUNITY AND VIRTUAL EVENTS

Before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, Malawi has developed innovative ways to strengthen public participation and provide data to stakeholders through community and virtual events. At events facilitated in Nsanje, Mzimba and Karonga, for example, district council authorities presented an outline of the local infrastructure development agenda, sharing information on infrastructure projects being constructed close to the communities, and offering an opportunity for residents to raise concerns. The events aimed to improve the participation of women and youth by making them accessible – for example by locating events close to residential areas. Female participation is also being monitored, and targeted media training has focused on increasing the attendance of female journalists.

The event in Nsanje focused on the planned construction of dykes to protect from perennial flooding. The authorities outlined construction impacts, including reforestation and the possibility of relocating some communities to higher areas. The communities shared their concern that information on these plans had not been forthcoming, and that they had been excluded during the initial planning. At the event, the authorities pledged to make improvements to address these issues and enhance greater public participation.

Similarly, at an event in Mzimba, communities queried the delay in completing a community centre and again highlighted a lack of data and involvement in the project. The authorities indicated that the delay was due to late payment from the government, which had prevented the main contractor from moving forward with the project. The communities urged government representatives to ensure that projects only begin when financing is available, in order to avoid delays in implementation, and stressed the need to keep beneficiaries abreast of such issues.

In Karonga, a meeting was held with communities on the maintenance of a key road leading to the border with Tanzania. Among other issues, the communities questioned the quality of the road, which had begun developing cracks before it was formally handed over by the contractor. The communities insisted that selection of contractors be conducted transparently, and that the responsible agencies ensure that projects are closely monitored and supervised.

While COVID-19 has hindered efforts to hold physical events, CoST Malawi has been using its positive experience in radio and other online means to enable communities to access data and interact with decision-makers. It has promoted the importance of infrastructure data availability in creating a fairer business environment, using the voice of the private sector representative in its Multi-Stakeholder Group to do so, including through media interviews.

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REPLICABILITY

Under challenging circumstances, Malawi has taken important steps to make information relating to infrastructure publicly available. However, the need remains to improve capacity to collect, analyse and share data relating to specific environmental and social sustainability issues. To help address this, CoST is working with its partner, Open Contracting Partnership (OCP), to explore how their joint standard, the "Open Contracting for Infrastructure Data Standard" (OC4IDS) can be interconnected with environmental datasets (Open Contracting Partnership 2020). This internationally recognized standard brings together the existing standards of OCP and CoST to ensure robust data disclosure across the entirety of the project cycle and make data available in real time.

Malawi's Information Platform for Public Infrastructure drew on the experience of Honduras, where an award-winning online data portal was developed. Centralized, online data platforms can be replicated in different countries so long as the digital infrastructure is in place and the capacity of those using the platforms is strong. With huge sums being spent in COVID-19 economic recovery packages, widely available and comprehensive data will be essential to strengthen accountability and provide better value for money from infrastructure investment, and to give citizens a better understanding of the performance and impacts of their infrastructure.

KEY INSIGHTS

> Malawi's Information Platform for Public Infrastructure — a centralized data disclosure portal — will bring performance and impact data closer to stakeholders and enhance public accountability.

> Partnership between government, private sector and civil society representatives has been instrumental: using infrastructure data to improve individual projects, enacting reforms and establishing disclosure mandates for infrastructure contractors.

> Innovative, flexible and community-centred communication has helped connect the public and decision-makers.

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