

Lilongwe: City research brief

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The African Cities Research Consortium (ACRC) is a collaborative research programme, seeking to tackle complex urban development challenges in the continent's rapidly changing cities. ACRC aims to generate robust insights and evidence that will help improve the living conditions and urban services for all city residents, especially disadvantaged communities.

ACRC's research integrates political settlements thinking with city systems analysis, to understand the dynamics underpinning infrastructure and service challenges in cities. Targeted analysis of specific urban development domains provides deeper insights into how sectoral shortcomings can be overcome and residents' needs addressed.

Lilongwe is one of 12 African cities in which ACRC is engaging community organisations, researchers, practitioners, key state actors and non-state agencies, to co-produce knowledge and evidence to advance urban transformation.

Research highlights

- > Conflicts and contradictions in the legal and policy instruments employed by Lilongwe urban sector agencies result in implementation challenges.
- > Excessive political interference is crippling the capacity and efforts of the Lilongwe City Council (LCC) to govern, facilitate development and improve service delivery
- > The council has limited financial capacity, weakening its development control, planning and infrastructure development function. This is due to high default rates on payment of various forms of city rates, inadequate staff capacity, lack of transparency and corruption, an inadequate property database, and outdated billing systems.
- > Many people living in low-income communities run microenterprises as a main or supplementary source of income for their

families. To support the enterprises to realise their full potential, policy and regulatory reforms are needed.

- > A majority of families acquire land for housing development through informal systems of governance.
- > Various reform coalitions (popularly known as thematic working groups) can be used as platforms for potential strategic interventions identified by the domains.

Recommendations for decisionmakers include:

1. Focus on supporting and strengthening active citizenship.
2. Address the dysfunctional land and housing markets.
3. Enact policies that will ensure financial inclusion.
4. Implement effective decentralisation measures for responsive service delivery.

About this brief

This brief was produced by ACRC's Lilongwe team to outline research findings and potential interventions, in preparation for the final city uptake workshop in the programme's Foundation Phase (2022-23).

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Research summaries

Political settlement

Malawi has a competitive clientelist political settlement in which elites agree to compete in periodic elections for control of the state and its resources. The grouping able to command the most support through coalitions and clientelist networks often win elections. Lilongwe, as Malawi's capital city, is a significant site of rent capture and vote generation for the national elites and therefore key to the political settlement.

Malawi's incomplete decentralisation, through the Ministry of Local Government, enables elites to influence development outcomes in various areas in the city, most notably in land allocation. Fragmented authority and an imperative for national elites to earn votes in the city affords local actors – such as traditional leaders, block chiefs and, to a lesser extent, civil society organisations (CSOs) and reform coalitions – some room for agency and manoeuvre. In this context, urban reform will most likely succeed at intersection of interests among politicians and reform-oriented city residents.

City of systems

Urban systems involve flows of energy and resources that shape the quality of urban development domains. Our research investigated health, food, law and order, sanitation, waste management, education, water, transport, energy, and finance. Findings indicate that urban systems have widely failed to reach the scale of demand in nearly all development domains due to incomplete decentralisation. Most urban systems remain under the control of national line ministries with mandates that frequently overlap with Lilongwe City Council. Notable exceptions include waste management and sanitation, which have been devolved to the LCC, but remain contested, as in the case of liquid waste, because this is also claimed by the Lilongwe Water Board.

With the involvement of multiple non-state actors, a highly fragmented governance landscape has emerged. Up to three-quarters of the city's population live in informal settlements. Urban systems have also under-performed due to the LLC's siloed approach to development. Sector-specific laws and policies, most of which are outdated and ill-suited to addressing complex urban problems, are used to guide city development. Clientelist and patronage-based political interference dominates the political and executive arms of the LCC and contributes to

urban system failures. Consequently, decisions typically follow politics rather than policy, presenting a major challenge for addressing Lilongwe's development problems.

Domains

> Informal settlements

Almost 18% of Malawi's population live in urban areas of different sizes. Although this is a moderate level of urbanisation compared to many countries, the rate of urbanisation of 5.2% per annum is very high compared to the national growth rate of 2.8% per year. As such, the national urbanisation level of 18% is expected to rise to 30% by 2030 and 50% by 2050. Our research noted that above 70% of Lilongwe's population live in informal settlements, with high levels of poverty and lacking basic services including housing, water and sanitation.

We found that **the failure of city authorities to provide adequate basic services is reinforcing poverty and social exclusion in informal settlements**. The majority of this population lack tenure security and this has affected people's ability to invest on their property. We also noted that **policies have not paid attention to provision of serviced land, which has stifled the provision of services**.

Due to high rates of urbanisation, **formal institutions responsible for provision of housing are not able to keep up with demand** or to deal with the majority of urban households who are too poor to afford their services. The informal sector is therefore a major supplier of housing, so while there is no shortage of housing in quantity, there is a considerable shortfall in quality. In addition, **climate change particularly impacts informal settlements**, as communities do not have capacities to effectively respond.



Potential informal settlements interventions

Informal settlement dwellers are confronted with a set of interrelated problems. The major one being that they have inadequate access to basic services. This has contributed to informal settlements dwellers being economically, socially and politically disengaged from wider urban systems and excluded from urban opportunities and decisionmaking.

Our suggested solutions therefore include **investment in physical infrastructure, strengthening participatory community structures, expanding livelihood opportunities and building partnerships between communities and duty bearers.**

> Neighbourhood and district economic development

The research findings showed that **most of the household microenterprises (HMEs) are run by women, between the ages of 23–55.** Most female entrepreneurs tend to be younger, while male entrepreneurs make up the older set of the interviewees (average ages of 45–60). The majority of entrepreneurs (58%) are first time business owners who started their enterprises as a means of survival. The **majority of these entrepreneurs have not had formal business training,** and have learned through doing as well as from others around them.

While these HMEs are not a part of any business associations, **most of them participate in community savings groups.** These entrepreneurs **accessed their startup funds from personal networks and none accessed loans from the formal banking system.** There is clear evidence that the formal banking system is not servicing this segment of the society. Some expressed knowledge of financial support for HMEs, such as the National Economic Empowerment Fund (NEEF), but we found evidence that those who had applied had been denied loans due to lack of collateral.



Figure 1: Proposed intervention for neighbourhood and district economic development



Potential neighbourhood and district economic development interventions

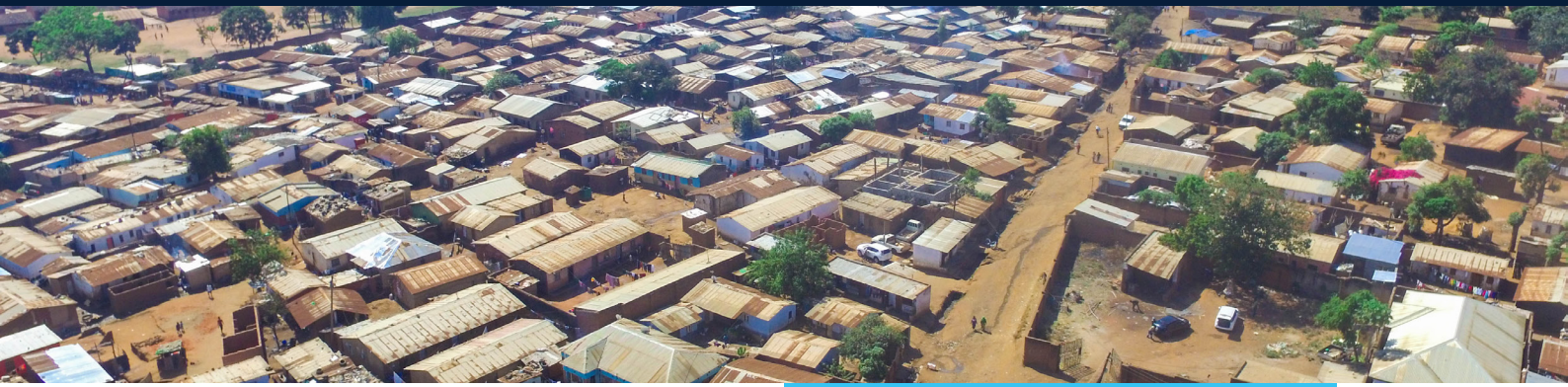
Our research noted that **businesses with significant growth potential lack capital and other business support to achieve growth.** Such businesses face other challenges, such as a lack of skills in business planning and management, which are necessary for access to finance.

Our proposed solutions (Figure 1) include **strengthening existing alternative sources of finance,** such as Village Savings Loans Associations (VSLAs) for entrepreneurs, and **using these platforms for collective economic and political action.**

> Housing

Our research examined critical bottlenecks in housing development and provision. Using housing production chain analysis, we found that **shortage of good quality housing – due to high cost of land and construction materials – remains a critical problem, especially for those with limited incomes.**

The study also showed that **most land acquisition for housing development is through informal systems of governance.** Moreover, the urban planning system, which is supposed to shape and guide urban development, is itself shaped and guided by unrealistic modernist visions of orderliness and functional zoning.



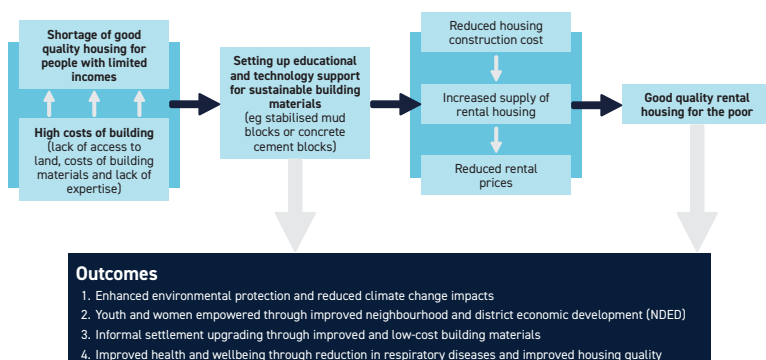
In its current form, **Lilongwe's planning is characterised by serious deficiencies and is hence dysfunctional**. Challenges include tensions between central and local government; insufficient autonomy and decentralisation; and a lack of fiscal, political and bureaucratic capabilities to address the complex problems facing the city, including housing. Consequently, Lilongwe City Council is unable to discharge and exert its local authority to administer and release urban land for housing development, especially for low-income residents.

Potential housing interventions

Shortage of good quality housing for those with limited incomes remains a daunting challenge in Lilongwe city. The reason for this is prohibitively expensive housing construction, due to high costs of urban land, high costs of building materials, and unavailability or limited use of expertise on low-cost construction technologies. Under these conditions, **rental housing is the best option for low-income residents**, creating an **urgent need for good quality rental housing**.

But the question remains: how do we build good quality houses, taking into account the need for sustainable materials that do not add to climate change? We propose **education and support for technical training in the production of sustainable building materials** such as cement stabilised earth blocks and concrete cement blocks, which require less energy to produce. They will also contribute to **reduced housing construction costs, increased supply of rental housing and reduced rental prices**, leading to greater quality and quantity of rental housing.

Figure 2: Proposed intervention for housing



> Health, wellbeing and nutrition

The study findings show that **uptake of any diet is influenced by many social and economic factors** that interact in a complex manner to shape individual dietary patterns. It further reveals that there are well-framed policies and laws that support the uptake of healthy diets at all levels in the country and that there are multiple players in the health, nutrition and wellbeing (HNW) sector at national, city, ward and community levels.

However, the **multiplicity of players at various levels is a major cause of coordination problems**. The national decentralisation programme is the framework for bringing services to the local authorities and ground-level communities. The City Council, as a local authority, is the focal point for the implementation of the programmes of the line ministries. The evidence for this study shows that the Lilongwe Council does not have health and nutrition as priorities in their current Strategic Plan (2020-2024).

Potential health, wellbeing and nutrition interventions

There is **low nutrition uptake despite vast knowledge**. Malawi has policies, systems and structures in place for healthy diets at all levels. Lilongwe city residents, for example, are knowledgeable about all six food groups that constitute healthy diets, but are not eating according to their knowledge. The **biggest challenge is putting that knowledge into practice**.

The legal and policy framework for the wider contexts of nutrition, health, water, sanitation and hygiene is robust, but a lack of coordination between them makes implementation problematic. To improve the uptake of nutritious diets, we recommend **improving harmonisation across policy guidelines, tracking implementation of policies** to enable documentation of achievements and progress, and **strengthening the provision of information around nutrition issues** to the general public.