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POLITICAL ECONOMY IN THE WEEDS

EMBRACING COMPLEXITY IN ANTI-CORRUPTION WORK

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Introduction

The Malawi Anti-Corruption Civil Society Support (MACCSS) programme provides a powerful case for understanding how anti-corruption (AC) efforts unfold in complex, politically charged environments. Jointly funded by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) and USAID, MACCSS (2024–2026) combines grants and technical assistance worth £1.75 million to strengthen civil society's role in promoting accountability. The initiative works through a portfolio of civil society issue-focused interventions with national and district partners across sectors such as agriculture, mining, constituency development funds, justice and infrastructure.

Malawi serves as both an opportunity-rich testing ground for systems-change initiatives and a cautionary case illustrating the constraints and pressure points such reforms face. This blend of promise and challenge renders Malawi pivotal for understanding governance transformations in comparable contexts. It is one of the poorest countries in the world, with corruption deeply embedded in its political and bureaucratic systems. Decades of clientelist politics, weak enforcement institutions and low public-sector pay have entrenched behaviours where access to state resources is viewed as an entitlement to extract rents for their own benefit and that of particular interests. In the wake of the September 2025 elections, these longstanding dynamics continue to shape the operating environment. Consequently, MACCSS's mandate remains unchanged: to equip committed civil-society organisations from national bodies to rural district groups with the knowledge, networks, and confidence to serve as policy-reform champions, watchdogs, and mobilisers of citizen voice and national advocacy priorities.

At first glance, the logic of working with civil society in contexts where state capacities are weak is straightforward: if CSOs are trained in strategic advocacy, intervention design, operational planning and media engagement, they will become effective in exposing and preventing corruption, thus fulfilling their assumed watchdog function. Yet the experience of implementation shows that capacity alone does not guarantee influence and that change is difficult and non-linear. The real story of MACCSS lies in how its partners are learning to “work in the weeds” — embracing uncertainty, adapting to shifting power dynamics, and building alliances that make accountability and anti-corruption transformation possible.

The Strategy: Ambition and Assumptions

MACCSS's design draws from the classic anti-corruption playbook, which is reflected in the programme's strategy (Theory of Change), which suggests that enhancing CSO technical and organisational capacity results in greater citizen engagement and oversight and, ultimately, in reduced opportunities and incentives for corruption.

Consequently, capacity building is pursued through three interdependent strands:

- *Financial resources* – seed funding / grants £10,000 – £50,000 to locally designed interventions.
- *Technical support* – training and mentoring in advocacy, media work, Political Economy Analysis, Gender and Social Inclusion (GESI), and thematic areas such as mining or procurement.
- *Organisational strengthening* – support for financial management, grant compliance, safeguarding, MEL, and other core systems essential for sustainable CSO operations.
- *Learning* – facilitation and convening of peer exchanges where national and district level partners jointly reflect, share evidence and refine strategies.

Just observing the above, it would be tempting to assume that technical support and trainings are enough to build stronger organisations and that the recipients of the support will automatically be able to translate skills into action and

results. Experience, however, shows that this logic fails to grasp the incremental and iterative nature of building competencies, while also underestimating the political nature of corruption and the depth of systemic inertia. What MACCSS is revealing is that effectiveness depends less on training or resources than on learning by doing, building relationships, moving with opportunities and the capacity to adapt.

Working in the Weeds: Navigating Complexity and Adapting Practice

An overarching lesson from the MACCSS programme is that in practice, progress is messy and contested, which should not be surprising. As in many other countries, power in Malawi is acquired, shared and maintained through networks of patronage, built and cemented on non-transparent deals that cut across the state, business and political parties. Corruption trickles down to the grassroots, where public service providers and street level bureaucrats routinely manoeuvre the prerogatives stemming from their official mandates to extract benefits and resources for themselves and their social networks. Therefore, corruption in Malawi is woven into the political settlement itself and embedded in social norms that normalise and lend acceptability to corruption. As a result, when anti-corruption efforts begin to bite, they often provoke pushback: investigations stall, whistle-blowers face intimidation, and reform champions are side-lined or even threatened. The experience of the Zuneth Sattar case, in which high-level prosecutions led to institutional backlash, illustrates how success can generate its own resistance.

Civil society faces additional constraints. Many organisations operate on shoestring budgets and remain dependent on donor funding, which is often project-based and problematises the continuity of their endeavours. Corruption fatigue also reflects public scepticism among intended beneficiaries that activism will not change anything. Legal restrictions on public-interest litigation, slow access to information, and the risk of regulatory reprisals further limit civic space. At district level, organisational inertia is strong: as one partner admitted, “this is how we have always done things.”

From capacity building to facilitated partnership

Here the lessons of MACCSS validate those of many other FCDO governance programmes in that conventional grant making and capacity building too often produces donor-compliant but citizen-disconnected CSOs. Grants managed without attention to the contextual conditions and needs can constrain flexibility, distort incentives, and monetise the engagement. MACCSS learned from this and adopted a **facilitated partnership approach**, deploying mixed local teams to broker relationships among civil society, media and AC institutions, and FCDO sister programmes while encouraging CSO implementing partners to be in the driver's seat in deciding priorities, providing them a safe space to innovate and to build their capacities through learning by doing. The focus shifted from funding activities to nurturing trust, reflection and adaptive learning within a cohort of champions.

The **Accountability Working Group (AWG)** – made up of our core partner organisations, together with regular **learning exchanges**, sits at the centre of our work. MACCSS understands its role as a facilitation hub; encouraging trust building, peer exchanges and the emergence of coordinated action, decidedly moving away from focusing and insisting on pre-established good governance practices and an emphasis on procedures and delivery mechanisms. MACCSS-hosted convenings bring together partner CSOs, journalists / media, communities and duty bearers to co-create interventions, share evidence and reflect on progress along with challenges. The emphasis is on brokering relationships and supporting iterative experimentation, not on enforcing rigid workplans. Mentoring and technical accompaniment are complemented by targeted and demand-led training, and small, flexible funding support is provided to pilot critical ideas whose design evolves as lessons and proof of concept emerge.

Learning by doing and reflection

For MACCSS and its partners real capacity is being built iteratively, through cycles of action and reflection. The MACCSS Monitoring, Reporting, Evaluation and Learning (MREL) system promotes “utilisation-focused” learning loops following the self-reinforcing logic of implementation, analysis, discussions and, adaptation. Quarterly Pause and Reflect meetings with the AWG provide a collective space to share not only achievements but also setbacks, echoing MACCSS core principle that *mistakes are data and information that tell us something to consider*. These reflection processes strengthen partners’ confidence and sense of agency. Gradually, shifts are becoming visible: district networks collaborating instead of competing; local journalists and activists pooling evidence from civil society work; civil servants recognising that transparency can strengthen, not threaten, their legitimacy. These may seem like small wins, yet they build the **bottom-up resilience** that sustains reform beyond donor and MACCSS project cycles.

Embracing uncertainty

Working this way demands tolerance for ambiguity and deviation from plans. Anti-corruption work that matters will always provoke contestation. MACCSS is still unfolding, but it demonstrates that technically skilled support and facilitation, pace that is set by the stakeholders themselves, moving on needs and emerging gaps as well as patience and political awareness are all more effective than rigid top-down management. Progress depends less on control than on cultivating curiosity and responsiveness with a relational approach that puts partners always in the driving seat. MACCSS recognises that **grants alone can distort incentives** encouraging compliance rather than collaboration.

By combining seed funding with tailored technical mentoring and facilitation, partners gain the freedom to adapt their strategies as contexts shift, as was experienced during the September 2025 election period when political will and action waned. Yet, partners acted strategically during that election period to influence the Anti-Corruption agenda through political manifestos, providing evidence where doors opened by politicians. An indicative example of the success achieved through these means was the fact that the AWG was able to get several key questions into the 2025 Presidential Debate that reflected on issues related to corruption in specific sectors.

Setbacks and detours are expected in the process, just as opportunities are; embracing the political landscape mix (and pivoting) is what partners know and do so well.

Key Lessons Learned

- Embrace complexity.** Change is adaption and pivoting to reality, which is not linear. In governance programmes, unexpected developments and temporary reversals are signs that systems are shifting.
- Local ownership matters.** When partners are in the driver's seat, as in MACCSS's co-creation of interventions, impact and sustainability improve, even if the route diverges from initial plans.
- Facilitation over funding.** Hands-on mentoring and relationship-brokering build deeper capabilities than unidirectional training, grants and results frameworks.
- Learning by doing.** Regular reflection converts experience into strategy; failures become data for adaptation.
- Build trust and coalitions.** Engagement with credible institutions such as the Ombudsman, with champions in the state and in FCDO sister programmes, and leaning on the collective experience of the AWG, altogether shows that reform depends on collective effort, on nurturing emergent anti-corruption networks, rather than on building the capacity of individual actors.
- Resilience grows from below.** District alliances illustrate that sustainable accountability takes root when communities see anti-corruption as linked to livelihoods and services, not as an abstract governance agenda.
- Gender and inclusion strengthen legitimacy.** Integrating GESI principles by addressing corruption in mining, infrastructure, agriculture, sectors critical for women and marginalised groups broadens both the reach and credibility of anti-corruption efforts.

Implications for Malawi and Beyond

MACCSS demonstrates the value of **working politically and adaptively** in anti-corruption programming with local stakeholders driving the agenda and the development of local approaches that work in Malawi for and by Malawians. Technical solutions and training alone cannot overcome entrenched incentives; transformation emerges from iterative learning, trust-building, and responsiveness to context. For donors, this means funding models that prioritise flexibility, process, reflection and a willingness to be surprised by unexpected gains as much as outputs and indicators. For practitioners, it means patience, humility and a willingness to depart from the usual approaches and find out how to "work with the grain" of local systems rather than against them.

As Malawi moves ahead of the 2025 elections result, the programme continues to focus on citizen energy with CSOs and media bringing collectively concrete accountability demands. The long-term vision is a network of capable, connected CSOs and local champions who can sustain anti-corruption momentum with decreasing external support.

Ultimately, the MACCSS experience reinforces a simple but profound insight: **anti-corruption work is not about perfect plans but about adaptive partnerships.** Change happens through relationships, experimentation and persistence. The task is not to eliminate uncertainty, but to navigate it with integrity and learning at the core.