

# A Retrospective Analysis of the Formulation and Implementation of the Primary School Repetition Policy in Malawi

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**Abstract:** Malawi primary education system is characterized by quite low levels of internal efficiency. Despite access to first grade of primary education being close to universal, the survival rates to the end of the cycle are very low with a completion rate of roughly 35%. High repetition rates have been reported as one major reason for the low completion rates of pupils. As a result various innovative reforms have been designed to ameliorate the efficiency of the system, and one of such reforms is the repetition policy. This paper retrospectively analyses the formulation and implementation of the primary school repetition policy using the stakeholder participation framework. The paper demonstrates how stakeholder participation is critical in the formulation and implementation of education reforms and argues that unless a wide range of stakeholders participate in the policy process, ambitious policies that take much time and effort to produce would never be successfully implemented.

**Keywords:** Repetition policy, Education reform, Policy formulation, Policy implementation, Stakeholder participation.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Malawi primary education system has been described as one of the least developed in Southern African Region. This is because the system is characterized by quite low levels of internal efficiency. According to Rawle (2009) and Chimombo, et al. (2008) despite the access to the first standard of primary education being close to universal, the survival rates to the end of the cycle are very low with a completion rate of roughly 35%. High repetition rates especially in standard eight and the lower grades (one and two) have been reported as one major reason for the low completion rates of pupils (World Bank, 1990; Ministry of Education Science and Technology [MoEST], 1995; Kunje, 1997; Chimombo, et al. 2008). Consequently, various innovative reforms have been designed with the desire to ameliorate the efficiency of the system through an improvement of internal output; that is increasing the rate of promotion to superior classes and the reduction in repeaters rates. Amongst the reforms is the repetition policy. However, such ambitious reforms are bound to fall short of matching the expectations of policy makers if participation of a wide range of stakeholders in the policy process is constrained. This paper analyzes the formulation and implementation of the primary school repetition policy in Malawi retrospectively. The paper demonstrates how stakeholder participation is critical in the formulation and implementation of education reforms and argues that unless a wide range of stakeholders participate in the policy process, the policies that take much time and effort to produce would never be successfully implemented. The paper begins with a description of repetition as a policy problem and how different countries across the globe have attempted to address it. This is followed by a discussion of stakeholder participation as the conceptual framework guiding the analysis, and later a critical analysis of the formulation and implementation of the primary school repetition policy in Malawi. The paper ends with some recommendations on how to improve the policy process and reduce repetition in primary school.

## 2. UNDERSTANDING REPETITION

Repetition, or grade retention, is the practice of making children who have not mastered the curriculum and thus do not reach certain academic standards repeat the year while their peers are promoted to the next year (Brophy, 2006). It can be contrasted from social or automatic promotion which is the act of allowing the same children to continue to the next year of study with the rest of their peer group despite not having met the minimum required standards (Ndaruhutse, 2008). Generally, repetition can be regarded as a practice influenced by culture and linguistics. In Europe, Anglo-Saxon cultures (Great Britain, Ireland and Scandinavian countries-Finland, Sweden, Norway and Denmark) very rarely use repetition as an educational policy tool but instead practice automatic promotion with additional support for weaker learners. In contrast, repetition is institutionalized as a policy in francophone countries (France and Belgium), Lusophone countries (Portugal) and United States of America (Ndaruhutse, 2008). According to UNESCO, (2002) most developing countries are strongly influenced in their education system by the colonial administration, as such the above pattern, can be seen in the present day in most African countries. While most Anglo-phone countries are likely to follow patterns of automatic promotion, Malawi opted for repetition policies that can be traced to the impetus from USAID which is aligned to United States of American policies. Further to this, the continued popularity of the repetition policy in Malawi just like other developing countries can be seen partly as a response to limited resources (Amadio, 1996). A study by Bernard et al. (cited in Ndaruhutse, 2008) found that Anglophone countries have repetition rates that are at least two times less on average than that observed in Francophone or Lusophone countries. Brophy (2006) also revealed grade repetition rates to be almost nonexistent in developed countries that enforce automatic promotion policies, and relatively low (in the 1-5 percent range) in most other developed countries. This suggest that automatic promotion has a greater impact on the reduction of repetition in primary school. However, literature indicates that many school administrators, teachers, and parents believe that repeating the grade is preferable to promotion when students have achieved poorly (Eisenmon, 1997). Yet based on research evidence, Verspoor (2006) concluded that grade repetition is not an effective way of improving children's learning in Sub-Saharan Africa. Studies in Brazil (Gomes-Neto and Hanushek, 1994), Lebanon (El-Hassan, 1998), Pakistan (King, Orazem, and Paterno, 1999) reported by Ndaruhutse (2008) found that repetition is most frequent in rural areas as it tends to be associated with poverty indicators, at both the school and the family levels. The studies revealed that schools in rural areas featured a lot of limitations; short school years, frequent teacher absence, limited supplies, poorly qualified teachers, large classes, multi-age classes, or double shifts. Within the schools, students from the poorest families were also found to be more at risk of repetition because their home backgrounds leave them less well prepared to succeed and because they are likely to miss more school days. Some literature reveal that many children miss many days of school because of more serious health or nutrition problems or because their families require them to assume child care or work responsibilities (Amadio, 1996; George, 2004). This relates to findings from Sub-Saharan Africa by Lockheed, Verspoor and Associates (1991) that family related factors such as illiteracy or low education of parents and income of the family were some major cause of repetition and dropout.

Repetition is normally categorized in two forms depending on the source and reasons for the decision to repeat namely; voluntary and involuntary repetition. Voluntary repetition is where the decision is initiated by the students themselves or their families while involuntary repetition is primarily initiated by the school. In both cases these reflect two major perceptions. Firstly, it reflects that students did not learn much in the previous year therefore ought to repeat so that they can pass satisfactorily. Secondly, there is the perception that students are immature or very young for their year, hence need an additional year in the same class to feel more secure and settled (Amadio, 1996; Wolf, et al. 1999; Brophy, 2006). The use of second languages as medium of instruction has also been indicated as a rationale for repetition. Where the language used at school differs from the language that many students speak at home, parents feel that repeating early grades may enable these students to gain fluency in the language of instruction so that they can begin to learn efficiently especially in situations where pre-primary programmes are limited. This was found to be common in sub-Saharan Africa (Brophy, 2006; Ndaruhutse, 2008). This shows that parents and teachers share the same beliefs that pupils should not be promoted if they haven't mastered the materials covered by the exam, as well as that repetition increase the ability of children. These attitudes and beliefs could likely affect the implementation of the repetition policies if parents, pupils and teachers are not involved as key stakeholders in the policy process. Studies in Senegal, Ivory Coast and Burkina Faso found that because teachers, parents and pupils were not involved in the policy formulation, the school community (head teachers, teachers and inspectors) made the decisions about repetition, and that ministerial decrees or regulations about repetition had little effect on practical policy in the classroom (Ndaruhutse, 2008).

Repetition in Malawi became entrenched in the society to the extent that a large number of pupils routinely repeated all along the primary cycle thereby exacerbating high repetition rates in the education system. For example, in 1993/94 repetition rates for standard 1 and 2 were 23% and 20% respectively and that over 60% of pupils who complete primary school took longer than eight years to complete the eight year primary cycle (Wolf, et al 1999). From 1999 to 2006 the repetition rate remained over 20% (World Bank, 2010). While over 300 thousand pupils in standard 1 to 7 or 16.5% were repeaters in 2008 (Chimombo, Kunje and Ogawa, 2008), the repetition rate rose again to 19.4% in 2014 (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology [MoEST] Statistics, 2014). The pattern has been higher rates of repetition in standards 1 through 3 then a decline until standard 8. The higher rates of repetition in lower classes are attributed to among others; under-age entry, ineffective teaching, lack of pre-primary programmes, use of inexperienced and untrained teachers, few teaching and learning materials and overcrowding in classes (Robinson, et al. 1994; Kunje, 1997; MoEST and UNICEF, 1998). The standard 8 repetition mushroomed due to the insufficient secondary school places that do not meet the social demand, hence leading pupils to repeat in order to improve their scores on the primary school leaving certificate of education (PSLCE), which is used to allocate the positions in secondary schools. It has also been attributed to the lack of non-academic training opportunities (Robinson, et al. 1994; MoEST and UNICEF, 1998). For instance in the past, pupils repeated standard eight as many times as possible to increase their chances of getting selected into the government secondary schools. However, some studies have shown that the percentage of pupils repeating standard eight has been steadily decreasing over the years especially from 1994 (Chimombo, et. al. 2008). It is not known whether this reduction is due to improved efficiency of the system, but others have attributed it to the increased progression due to the proliferation of private secondary schools. Studies also reported an upward trend in the percentage of repeaters in the lower classes (1 and 2) especially after the introduction of free primary education (Kunje, 1997; MoEST, 1995; Chimombo et al. 2008) which was ascribed by others to the tremendous increase in access which significantly overwrought the quality of primary education (Bisika, 2005).

Despite the persistence of repetition in schools, it remains a major setback to the development of the education system due to a number of factors. Repetition is regarded a waste of classroom space, since the participation of repeaters causes overcrowding in the lower classes of standard one, two and standard eight examination classes in Malawi. This overcrowding creates myriad teaching problems as teachers are likely not to mark, grade and return students homework assignments on time. Such behaviors discourage students from working hard and consequently affect their learning performance. Secondly, the age disparities created by repetition among members of the class does not only contribute to teaching problems for teachers, but also creates learning hurdles among the students themselves. The behavior of the older repeaters may affect the younger students since advanced age claims authority and respect in African societies (Jones, 1988). In addition, repetition increases the private and public cost of education shouldered by individual parents and the state. Ndaruhutse (2008) reported that in Malawi 60% of public resources were wasted in 2000 at primary level meaning that the government was financing 20 school years to generate every graduate from primary school, when it should have been financing only an eight-year cycle if there were no repetition or dropout. Relatedly, repetition delays the socio-economic integration of youths in the productive system of a nation and consequently, slows down economic and social development (George, 2004). Furthermore, some studies found the psychological impact of failure and repetition on the individual pupil to be destructive. It is alleged that the repeaters (child) develop inferiority complex and unprogressive attitudes towards peers and school (George, 2004; Chimombo et al. 2008) which is contrary to popular beliefs that some people are possibly motivated to repeat, because to them it means increasing the chances of being selected at a second attempt. These and other myriad challenges associated with repetition influenced the introduction of the primary school repetition policy in Malawi.

### 3. STAKEHOLDER PARTICIPATION IN POLICY

According to Reimers and McGinn (1997) cited by kayira (2008) stakeholders are persons or groups of persons with a common interest in a particular action, its consequences and who are affected by it. This means all people who can influence or be affected by the repetition policy are stakeholders. These include groups as diverse as pupils, parents, teachers, head teachers, senior education officials such as district education managers, education division managers and directors in the Ministry of Education Science and Technology (MoEST), donors, Malawi National Examinations Board, non-governmental organizations, civil society, religious institutions and others. Stakeholders can be identified by focusing on their interest, resources and their position on the policy issue (Brinkerhoff and Crosby, 2002). Besides identifying stakeholders, there is also a need to identify what type of participation should be undertaken and how should

be the participation like. Participation should be considered as the process through which stakeholders influence and share control over the policy initiatives and the decisions which affect them. Participation in the policy process can take different forms which include: information sharing, consultation, collaboration, joint decision making and empowerment (Brinkerhoff and Crosby, 2002). Information-sharing is the one-way flow of information that serves to keep stakeholders informed. This can be done through the print and electronic media, press conferences, questionnaires e.t.c. Consultation involves sharing information and gathering feedback and reaction such as assessing beneficiaries' response to a policy decision. Collaboration is a joint activity in which initiators invite stakeholders to be involved but retains the decision-making authority and control. In joint decision-making there is a shared control over all decision made by stakeholders. This promotes empowerment which is the transfer of control over decision making; resources and activity from the initiators to other stakeholders.

This entails that a wide spectrum of stakeholders can participate in the policy process by involving them differently through the various forms of participation. Stakeholder participation in the policy process is vital for it among others, increases support, legitimacy, transparency and responsiveness to a particular policy or decision. Regardless of where the policy change emerged, if participation of stakeholders is emphasized, it provides assurance and enhances the successful implementation of a policy (Wolf, et al. 1999). Kayira (2008) argued that it is generally an accepted belief that people who participate in policy decisions that affect them are more likely to have sense of ownership and commitment to the decisions. This means, participation opens the door to developing ownership for change, as policies are likely to require a significant shift in attitudes and actions. Stakeholder participation also reduces opposition to a particular policy. By increasing participation, decision-makers are able to pre-empt or cope with the opposition during the implementation process (Brinkerhoff and Crosby, 2002). Therefore, for the purpose of the analysis this paper has singled out head teachers, teachers, students and parents to demonstrate the importance of stakeholder participation in the policy process. These can arguably be referred to as key stakeholders in the primary school repetition policy.

#### 4. THE MALAWI PRIMARY SCHOOL REPETITION POLICY

The primary school repetition policy in Malawi was first introduced in 1992/93 and then revised in 1995/96. In the first policy cycle the policy was formulated in twofold. Firstly, the policy outlined the repetition targets for three year period by limiting the percentage of pupils that should repeat for each standard of the primary cycle (Wolf, et al. 1999). These percentages were supposed to be reduced each subsequent year in order to lessen the problem of repetition. The MoEST (1993) directed that the percentage of repeaters to be allowed per standard be as follows:

**Table 1: Percentage of Repeaters to be allowed according to Policy**

Standard	School Year		
	1993/94	1994/95	1995/96
Std 1	15	10	8
Std 2-3	10	8	7
Std 4-7	10	10	7
Std 8	45	35	30

The second policy targets aimed at curtailing repetition in standard eight. The policy set directives to penalize pupils who repeat standard 8 in hopes of improving their chances of selection for secondary school. According to Macjessie-Mbewe (2004, p.85) the guidelines which the government adopted to allocate form one places beginning 1992/93 were as follows:

- 75% of form one places to pupils who have not repeated standard eight.
- 20% of form one places to pupils who have repeated standard eight once.
- 5% of form one places to pupils who have repeated standard eight two or more times.

However, the wind of change that blew to Malawi's politics in 1994, led to reforms in the education sector that saw the initiation of the second primary school repetition policy cycle in 1995/96. The standard 1-7 repetition policy was revised, such that the set percentages were abolished. Instead, the MoEST (1995) directed that pupils should be allowed to repeat once per class. Some of the reasons highlighted were that limiting people to repeat by setting out fixed percentages was

undemocratic, and also a contradiction to the attainment of education for all advocated through the FPE policy in Malawi. In terms of its nature, the repetition policy is both regulatory and constitutive as it controls the actions and behavior of repeating in schools as well as providing rules or guidelines to education officials (District Education Managers) during the selection of standard 8 pupils to secondary school and head-teachers, teachers and parents in dealing with repetition issues in standard 1-7. By setting such ambitious repetition directives and guidelines for all standards, policymakers hoped to encourage schools to make better decisions about which students could repeat (Wolf, et al. 1999). However, in reality, these ambitious goals could work better if there was a balance between local knowledge and the national policy. Thus it seems policy makers were convinced that the policy would improve the internal efficiency of the education system by reducing the number of pupils repeating in schools and consequently dropout rates as studies in Malawi found that repetition increased the likelihood of pupils' dropout (Robinson, et al. 1994). Secondly, that the policy would improve pupils' progression to secondary schools especially girls based on the argument by USAID (1999) that the reduction in repetition speeds up girls' movement through the education system before reaching puberty thereby reducing the likelihood of marriages, pregnancies and other female adult life, impeding their education. Policy makers also hoped that the policy would contribute towards reducing overcrowding and preventing overage pupils in classes which would in turn improve the teaching and learning. The other compelling thrust was to promote the economic survival of the education system, as resources would not be spent on the same pupils several times but would be used on other pupils, thereby contributing to the access of other pupils to schooling.

### **1.1. Political, social and economic context and its influence on the policy:**

The 1992/3 period was a time of tension, apprehension and political hullabaloo. It marked the apex of the fight against the dictatorial rule of Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda's one party government which had ruled the country for 30 years. Malawians voted overwhelmingly in a referendum to usher in the multiparty democracy in 1993. The repetition policy was introduced in the same period on May 12, 1993 (Wolf, 1999). In 1994 there was the first multiparty general election since independence in which the United Democratic Party (UDF) under the leadership of Dr Bakili Muluzi emerged victors and took over the government. This change of government signified a major thrust in the education reforms, including the inception of the popular free primary education (FPE) policy. Other earlier policies were revised to be in tandem with the UDF government focus of increasing access to basic education for poverty reduction. While the implementation of the standard 1-7 repetition policy was continued, it was revised in 1995/96. Similarly after coming into power in 2004 the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) under the leadership of Dr. Bingu wa Mutharika, the government continued to implement both the standard 1-7 and standard 8 repetition policy. Thus it would be obvious not to envisage a wider participation of stakeholders during the dictatorial regime, than the democratic era that followed.

In terms of the social context, Malawi remains a developing country in the Sub-Saharan Africa lying to the south of the equator and one of the most densely populated countries in Africa with population density of 139 persons per square kilometers and a projected population of 16 million in 2015 (National Statistics Office, 2010). About half of the population has always consisted of children and youth under 15 years of age, which entails a higher demand for primary education. In 1990s about 91% of the total population was rural dwellers, a trend which has not changed much, meaning that more people live in rural areas than in urban areas. Regarding literacy, the adult literacy rates in Malawi stood at 61%, with the literacy levels significantly higher in urban areas (91%) than in rural areas (59%) (Macjessie-Mbewe and Kholowa, 2010). Primary education was characterized by myriad challenges which still persist such as; shortage of infrastructure, teaching and learning materials, shortage of teachers houses, shortage of qualified teachers and high teacher attrition which have adversely affected the quality of education (MoEST, 1998). However, most of these challenges are more pronounced in schools in rural areas than urban areas (Rose, 2003; Milner, 2010). This indicates that the likelihood that pupils would repeat is higher in rural than urban primary schools. Malawi is also one of the countries worst hit by the AIDS epidemic with an estimated 12% of the sexually active population (i.e. 15-49 years) infected with the HIV virus as of 2005 (NSO and ORC Macro, 2005), although the prevalence has now reduced to 11% (NSO and ICF, 2017). As a consequence of the AIDS epidemic life expectancy for the average Malawian decreased from 45 years in 1995 to 39 years. The negative impact of the HIV/AIDS on education has been enormous, with increased pupil/teacher absenteeism, pupil repetition and drop out, teacher deaths, extended sick leave, and budgeting (Maluwa-Banda, 2003).

On the economic front, Malawi was ranked as the world's 13<sup>th</sup> poorest nation with a Gross National Income per capita of USD 160 (UNDP Development Index, 2004). Poverty has been both deep and pervasive. According to a household survey reported by Kadzamira, (2007), 52% of the population in Malawi was classified as poor while 22% classified as

ultra-poor i.e. living in extreme or abject poverty. The Malawi Poverty Reduction Paper (2000) indicated that 91.3% of the poor and 91.5% of the ultra-poor lived in rural areas. This entails that most parents were less likely to afford the cost of sending their children to private primary or secondary schools. Similarly, the repetition policy was introduced after donor aid had been withdrawn in early 1990s following the structural adjustment programme. This was also a time when the economic performance of Malawi, which is predominantly agricultural based with tobacco, tea and sugar as major export commodities was greatly affected by the drought that hit the country in 1980s and early 1990s (MoEST, 2004). For instance in 1990–91, only 2 percent of GDP and 10 percent of government expenditures were being spent on education as a whole (USAID, 1999). Therefore all these, in addition to the narrow economic base, lack of significant mineral resources, land locked status and prohibitive cost to external trade made the country heavily dependent on donors for funds to run the government.

### 1.2. The Malawi education system:

The education system in Malawi follows an 8-4-4 structure: 8 years of primary, 4 years of secondary and up to 4 years of tertiary education. Pre-schooling and adult education are considered to be part of non-formal education. Although there are current efforts to formalize pre-schooling to be part of the formal education system in Malawi (Macjessie-Mbewe and Kholowa, 2010), since independence, pre-schooling has been highly commercial. This means the majority of children in Malawi are less likely to attend preschool before joining the formal primary education. Consequently, under age children are likely to be admitted to primary schools. The administration of the Malawi education system, has been decentralized into six education Division; namely; Northern, Central, Central East, Central West, South Eastern and Shire Highlands. All these division control a number of education districts within their jurisdiction. Each education district is managed by the District Education Manager, who has greater influence over all primary schools in each particular district. Conspicuous to the Malawi education system is the prominence in use of public examinations as the determinant of individual student mobility from one level to another. Pupils have to pass the standardized national examinations called Primary school leaving Certificate Examination (PSLCE) to be admitted into secondary schools. Macjessie-Mbewe and Kholowa (2010) emphasize that, passing the exam alone does not guarantee one being selected to secondary school, but one has to pass with high grades to compete with others in order to be selected to secondary schools. The trend prevails at secondary and tertiary levels. The competition is so intense. For instance only about 30% of primary standard eight pupils get selected to public secondary schools in Malawi (ibid). This means pupils from low socio-economic status who fail in standard eight are likely to repeat or drop out of school. There are two major categories of public secondary schools in Malawi: Conventional secondary schools (CSS) and Community day secondary schools (CDSS). According to the MoEST (2007) 70% of the total enrolment in public secondary education is accommodated in CDSS while 30% go to CSS, yet various studies have confirmed that, the quality of education offered in CDSS is appalling (Kadzamira, 2001; Gwede, 2005; Macjessie-Mbewe and Kholowa, 2010). This could also lead to an impetus for some pupils to repeat standard eight if selected to CDSSs.

### 1.3. Formulation of the standard 1-7 repetition policy:

The first cycle of the standard 1-7 repetition policy has its roots in the Girls Attainment of Basic Literacy Education (GABLE) programme initiated by USAID in late 1980s. The World Bank and USAID (GABLE) conditionality specified that policy directives be issued to reduce repetition (USAID, 1999). Since donor aid had been withdrawn to Malawi in early 1990s due to failure by the government to respect human rights, the country had few choices than to follow donor recommendations (MoEST and UNESCO, 2004). This posits the policy as a product of International Donors “front-loading”. According to Porter and Hicks (1995) front loading is where donors are preoccupied with issues of conditionalities and tend to avoid the implications of the policy reforms on various stakeholders. Gordon and Lancaster (1993) add that such policies often follow a top-down approach with little involvement of bottom stakeholders. Macjessie-Mbewe (2004) states that the Ministry of Education convened a broadly representative committee in 1992 to consider policy options to reduce repetition. However, very little information exist about the range of stakeholders and policy options at that time. But with the dictatorial government, it is unlikely that primary school head teachers, teachers, pupils and parents were part of the stakeholders, meaning that the standard 1-7 repetition policy in 1992/3 (first policy cycle) was formulated in a top-down fashion. Literature indicates that the MoEST adopted the option of restricting repetition rates by prescribing limits. The option was desirable to the government, as it could cut costs, by reducing expenditure on the repeaters and that the USAID promise to promote the policy through its GABLE 1 project ensured its affordability.

#### **1.4. Implementation of the standard 1-7 repetition policy:**

Planning policy implementation involved devising strategies for implementing the policy which included the following: Firstly, communicating the (policy) restriction of the percentage of repeaters to all primary schools and the community. This was done through circulars and the media especially the radio. Some head teachers were also told verbally particularly those who chanced to go the District Education Managers office (then DEO) (Wolf, et al. 1999). Secondly, the primary pupil registration system (PPRS) was established with support from USAID to gather accurate and timely information to monitor the reduction of repetition. In this strategy schools were supposed to use the unique pupil identification number (PIN) when identifying pupils on the report. Thirdly, the USAID school fee waivers under the Girls Attainment in Basic Literacy and Education (GABLE) reform were introduced in the 1992/93 school year. This was aimed at non-repeating girls in standards 2 to 8. It was hoped that targeting non-repeating girls would motivate girls to perform better thereby reducing the high repetition rates. According to Kadzamira (1997) GABLE policy reforms were targeted at improving the overall primary education sector especially the efficiency and effectiveness of the primary education system based on the evidence that the inefficiencies and poor quality of the education system contributed to the poorer education outcomes of girls than boys.

The actual implementation of the policy was fraught with problems both at systemic and school levels. The problems at the systemic level were attributed to weak government support as it lacked the capacity to monitor repetition in schools (Wolf, et al. 1999; Kadzamira, 2007). The weak government support meant that no effort was made to increase popular understanding of the policy. This according to Berg (1991) is typical of reforms that come under donor pressure through conditionalities, which lead to subversion of local ownership of the reform agenda and consequently lowers government's commitment. The abrogation of responsibility by the government led stakeholders such as teachers, head teachers and parents resist the implementation of the policy. This seemed clear that effective reforms requires agendas and initiatives with strong local roots and the broad participation of those with stake in the outcomes, including not only officials from the ministries of education, but also students, parents, teachers and communities. For instance, the registration system run into a multitude of difficulties as the numbers assigned to pupils overlapped, head teachers filled out forms incorrectly and parents registered their children under false names or district of origin (Wolf, et al. 1999). It is reported that teachers often found the policies difficult to understand. They did not comprehend the goals, and they found the policies to conflict with their beliefs that promotions should be based on exam scores or the teacher's sense of pupil competence (USAID, 1999). Teachers stressed that promoting a pupil when they can not read and write was regarded killing the child while repeating was believed to increase the ability of the children (Wolf, et al. 1999). Studies further indicate that most communities showed their ignorance about the policy. Some community members reported to have heard nothing about the policy on the radio, but pointed out that the law allows pupils to repeat as many times as they like (Ibid). It would therefore not be surprising to hear that parents often forced teachers to promote or repeat pupils. Some could request for repetition of their children if they felt displeased with the child's rank in class or when they felt that the child was not mature enough for the next standard (Wolf et al. 1999). Destefano, Hartwell and Tietjen (1995) argue that often opposition to policy implementation is viewed as a struggle of groups "winning" or "losing", but this can also result from lack of policy dialogue. This is clearly exposed in the implementation of the repetition policy. The policy required to a larger extent a shift in the attitude of teachers but had been created without their input and disseminated without explanations of why their practice needed to change. Wolf et al. (1999) indicates that teachers deliberately ignored the policy as they felt that the government did not understand their position, did not tell them why repetition was being discouraged and that they were not oriented to implement the policy.

#### **1.5. The second policy cycle of the standard 1-7 repetition policy:**

The second cycle of the standard 1-7 repetition policy was initiated by the government and the policy was revised on 17-18<sup>th</sup> August, 1995 (MoEST, 1995). The revision of the policy took place before the earlier policy had matured. It is not clear whether this revision was aimed at ironing out the challenges experienced in the implementation, or simply because of the change of government. While the whole gamut of stakeholders both from the 'inside' and 'outside' government took part in the formulation process, no head teachers or teachers from primary schools and parents who are key stakeholders in the implementation of the policy were involved. This is a direct replica of how the policy was formulated in the first cycle in 1993/3 (top-down). According to the report, stakeholders included personnel from USAID, British high commission, Malawi institute of education (MIE), Secondary head teachers (2), MoEST, District Education Officers (2) Teacher Training Colleges, Centre for education research and training (CERT), UNESCO, MANEB, Save the

children, Muslim Association of Malawi, Domasi College of education and Teachers Union of Malawi. The report shows that the policy options that dominated were automatic promotion and repetition. The stakeholders again opted for the repetition policy due to economic constraints for the country to reinforce automatic promotion. They agreed that pupils should be allowed to repeat once per class (MoEST, 1995). However, Wolf, et al. (1999) indicates that in 1995 the Ministry reminded schools that a repetition policy existed and set targets at higher percentages for repeaters in 1995/6 than had existed in 1993 version of the policy. The 1995/6 requirements for repeaters were 18% in standard 1-2 and 10% in standard 3-7. Therefore it is not known which policy directives were schools supposed to follow. But Destefano, Hartwell and Tietjen (1995) stresses that a good test of the efficacy of a reform policy is the degree to which those within the education system from the schools to the central ministry understand the policy. This means lack of clarity of the reforms could greatly impede the implementation process.

MoEST (1995), further indicated that the revised repetition policy set out the following strategies for implementation. The first strategy was that teachers should provide remedial classes for repeaters to ensure that they all get promoted to the next class. It is not clear whether the Ministry of Education Science and Technology (MoEST) considered how practical it was for teachers who are highly demotivated by poor salaries, lack of accommodation and many others could conduct remedial classes. Secondly, the government planned to sensitise the communities, teachers and parents towards supportive attitudes to repeaters. The third strategy was that decisions on whether a student should repeat or not should be done by the teachers in consultation with head teachers and parents. However with the lack of policy dialogue and poor policy communication it meant that teachers could allow pupils to repeat, without following the policy in practice. The last strategy was to empower the community to come up with other initiatives that could reduce repetition rates. There is scanty information regarding the actual implementation of the second cycle. However, a study by Rose (2003) on the community participation policy found that, the local community's involvement in school affairs was in form of resource mobilization. This means, it was very unlikely that the communities would bring initiatives to reduce repetition in schools as they are not involved in decision making. Furthermore, the Malawi Education Country Status Report (CRS) (2008/9) indicated that from their findings, the system required 23 student years to produce one standard 8 graduate instead of the 8 years with an ideal internal efficiency. It further stated that repetition rates had increased over the 1999-2006 period to reach 20% in primary education- a level that was the highest in the region. This meant that stakeholders like head teachers, teachers, and parents continued to ignore the policy.

#### **1.6. Formulation of the standard 8 repetition and selection policy:**

International donors especially USAID and World Bank were also instrumental in the formulation of the Standard 8 repetition and selection policy on May 12, 1993. Macjessie-Mbewe (2004) explains that World Bank agreed with the Malawi government to set guidelines of reducing the likelihood that a pupil will be admitted to secondary school against the number of times the pupil has repeated standard 8. There was no participation of local stakeholders such as head teachers, teachers, parents and pupils. The policy was more of a directive from the top, which is typical of dictatorial regimes. The policy was formulated against the background that the reputation of schools in Malawi rested on how many pupils were selected for secondary schools, and that teachers, parents and pupils all believed that pupils do better on the exam that determines selection to secondary school each time they repeated standard 8 (Wolf, et al 1999). There was no policy dialogue to determine the desirability of the policy decision to the people as such some questions were left unanswered. i.e. how would pupils who are discouraged to repeat standard 8 continue with their education? What would be the impact of the policy on rural student's access to secondary school as literature indicated that repetition was higher in rural areas.

#### **1.7. Implementation of the standard 8 repetition and selection policy:**

The implementation of the policy started in October 1993, just five months after formulation. According to Porter and Hicks (1995) effective reform policies are articulated by leaders directly speaking to communities, teachers, administrators and professionals, by going to the field and by using radio, news papers and other media to present the reform and policy change. In line to this the standard 8 repetition policy was communicated through circulars, radio and verbal communication for teachers who happened to go to the district education office (Wolf, et al. 1999). The other implementation strategies were similar to that of standard 1-7 policy including the registration system for tracking the reduction of repeaters and the school fee waiver for girls under the GABLE programme. The predicament observed in the actual implementation of the policy in standard 1-7 prevailed even in the standard eight repetition and selection policy.



Studies in some schools in Malawi by Wolf, et al (1999) and Macjessie-Mbewe (2004) indicate that teachers, parents, pupils and the community at large were unaware that those repeating standard 8 are penalised according to the new policy. Consequently pupils were encouraged to repeat. Teachers felt that repeating was good because secondary schools were fewer and private secondary schools were expensive. Others stated that the first year in standard 8 was for warm up and the second year was when one should work hard so that they should be selected because after repeating pupils performance improves as they become more familiar with the materials than a beginner (Macjessie-Mbewe 2004). According to Wolf, et al (1999) some head teachers who heard about the policy could not understand its implication as such they remained convinced that permitting pupils to repeat standard 8 would improve their chances of securing a place in secondary school. The authors further explain that:

“At one school, seventy-two percent of the standard 8 pupils had repeated but no pupil had been selected for secondary school in two years. Parents and pupils confidence in the school had decreased and over half of the standard 8 pupils from the previous year had left to repeat at another school” (Wolf, et al. 1999 p.59).

This means lack of stakeholder participation led to pupils wasting time and effort repeating, teachers and school continuing to have high numbers of pupils repeating in standard 8 and the deterioration of the school reputation when repeating pupils were not selected for secondary schools

## 5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The paper has highlighted how the ambitious repetition policies failed to be successfully implemented due to among others, the lack of wider stakeholder participation in the policy process. The evidence reveal that the grassroots stakeholders such as head teachers, teachers, parents and pupils were not involved in the formulation of the primary school repetition policy and that there was little if any information sharing (policy communication) about the policy to schools and the communities. Consequently, the implementation of both the standard 1-7 and standard 8 repetition policies was fraught with so many hurdles, to the extent that up to date repetition rate in Malawi remain one of the highest in the southern region of Africa. Therefore, in order to improve on the management of policies and also specifically reduce repetition rates in Malawi, the following recommendations can be considered. Firstly, a wide range of actors and stakeholders should be involved in the formulation of policies, and that top-down approaches should be minimised. Reform efforts must address the roles and concerns of decision makers, implementers, stakeholders and beneficiaries. Gordon and Lancaster (1993) augment that even beneficiaries who may not be officially included in the development and implementation of a reform effort exert influence on the policy outcomes and critique the policy through the “strategy of non-compliance” or at a minimum “voting with their feet”. Secondly, planning policy implementation should be taken seriously if policies are to be implemented successfully. This should include mobilizing resource, critically considering the personnel needed, technical knowledge, administrative systems and mobilising political support. Thirdly, methods of communicating policies to teachers, students and parents need to be improved so that their behaviour in relation to policies must be with a full understanding of what policies say or mean. The other most important alternative is to broaden opportunities for secondary and post-secondary education rather than seeking to prevent voluntary grade repetition. This would allow every student who attains the minimum passing score to get admission to secondary school, rather than only those who attains best scores and emerge top of the class. In addition, there is a need to consider most promising policy initiatives that address economic and other factors that lead to grade repetition, rather than repetition itself. For instance repetition that result from sporadic school attendance related to health or nutrition problems or family work expectations is likely to be reduced as a country makes improvements in general health, nutrition, and economic opportunities. It would also seem that grade repetition makes sense for pupils who come to school with little exposure to the language of instruction, if it enables them to develop fluency in that language especially where pupils learn in English which is foreign language. In such circumstances a bilingual programme targeted to their needs would be preferable, more particularly because access to preschool is constrained for most of the pupils due to economic factors. Lastly, if automatic promotion is to be considered an option, as it is more preferable to repetition, it must be supplemented with initiatives designed to help low achievers. This could be regarded as a long term strategy as it would require, more teachers, teaching and learning materials etc.

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