



THE IMPACT OF CORRUPTION ON REVENUE COLLECTION: A CASE STUDY OF MALAWI POLICE SERVICE

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ABSTRACT :

Corruption in public institutions undermines revenue mobilization, particularly in developing economies. This study was done to examine its impact on revenue collection within the Malawi Police Service (MPS), which generates non-tax revenue for the government through fines, licenses, and service fees. Despite this mandate, the MPS is often cited as one of Malawi's most corruption-prone institution. The study sought to identify common forms of corruption, assess their effect on revenue performance, evaluate internal controls, and propose strategies for accountability.

A mixed-methods design was adopted, using questionnaires and document reviews from 90 respondents, including police officers, auditors, oversight body officials, and the public. Data were analyzed with descriptive statistics, correlations, regression models, and thematic analysis.

Findings revealed bribery, fraud, and embezzlement as the most prevalent practices, leading to revenue shortfalls, loss of public trust, and weakened institutional efficiency. Internal controls were inconsistently applied. The study recommends stronger auditing system, digitized revenue-collection systems, staff capacity building, revised incentives and strict sanctions to enhance transparency and accountability in revenue collection.

Keywords: Corruption, Revenue Collection, Malawi Police Service, Internal Controls, Accountability

INTRODUCTION

Revenue mobilization is the lifeblood of any sovereign state, forming the essential financial foundation for national development, infrastructure investment, and the sustainable delivery of public services. For developing economies like Malawi, which often rely on external donor funding, the efficiency of domestic revenue collection is not merely a fiscal objective but a requirement for economic sovereignty and long-term stability (Moore, 2014). Effective revenue systems enable governments to fund critical sectors such as healthcare, education, and security which helps in fostering inclusive growth and poverty reduction.

Corruption in public institutions is a global concern, but its implications are higher in developing countries like Malawi, where government resources are limited, and the demand for basic needs is high (Chinsinga & Mangulama, 2016). The strategic positioning of the MPS, with its officers acting as frontline interfaces with the public, places it at a critical junction of state revenue collection. However, this very position also creates profound vulnerabilities. The efficiency and integrity of this revenue collection function are severely compromised by the pervasive scourge of systemic corruption. Globally, corruption is recognized as a devastating "tax" on economic development, distorting markets, stifling foreign and domestic investment, undermining the integrity of public institutions, and eroding the social contract between citizens and the state (Shleifer & Vishny, 1993; Mauro, 1995).

In the specific context of the Malawi Police Services, it has been shown that there is a persistent problem of corruption at various levels. For example, motorists and businesses often report being solicited for bribes by officers in exchange for waiving penalties or issuing permits. This kind of behavior in the end create revenue leakages and misrepresent the integrity of financial reporting within the institution. However, while such practices are widely discussed in the media and civil society organization reports, there is limited academic research that systematically explores the nature and the extent of corruption and its impact on revenue collection in the MPS.

Understanding the impact of corruption on revenue collection requires deep research of both direct and indirect influences. Corruption directly reduces the amount of money collected by diverting funds away from official channels. Indirectly, it demoralizes the service and promotes a culture of impunity. This study seeks to address these issues by exploring how corrupt practices affect the revenue generation of the MPS.

Therefore, the overall aim for the study was to assess the relationship between corruption and revenue collection within the Malawi Police Services, and to assess the effectiveness of various internal mechanisms in mitigating the negative effects of corruption. The study's findings are expected to contribute valuable insights to public sector management reforms, and to provide recommendations for enhancing revenue performance through better institutional accountability and integrity systems.

Through a case study approach focusing on the Malawi Police Services, this study has generated evidence that can inform anti-corruption strategies not only within MPS, but also in other government institutions engaged in revenue collection. The ultimate goal of this study is to support Malawi's broader efforts towards public sector reform, improved governance, and sustainable economic development.

Background of the topic

Revenue collection is an important process in public finance management and a key player towards national development. It enables governments to fund most important services such as education, health, infrastructure, and security services. In Malawi, the need for effective revenue collection has been emphasized by ongoing budget deficits and reliance on donor support. Public institutions like the MPS play a notable role in revenue collection through many ways and one of them being traffic fines. However, the effectiveness of this role is not being well recognized through widespread corruption that threatens both the volume and credibility of collected revenue.

Corruption has commonly been defined as the abuse of power for private gain. This has been a subject in most countries and it is widespread in law enforcement agencies globally, and Malawi cannot be excluded. Within the MPS, forms of corruption include bribery, embezzlement, misreporting of fines collected, and unofficial settlements that allow offenders to evade formal penalties (Mtuwa & Chiweza, 2023). According to the Malawi Governance and Corruption Survey (Afrobarometer, 2021), the police consistently rank among the most corrupt institutions in the country. The situation has led to public dissatisfaction, reduced compliance with legal frameworks, and significant leakage of public funds.

The 2013 Cashgate scandal, which exposed misappropriation of public funds through fraudulent payments, called for a fight towards anti-corruption reforms in Malawi. This included the strengthening of the Financial Intelligence Authority (FIA), efforts to digitize public financial management systems, and increased oversight by the Auditor General and the Anti-Corruption Bureau (ACB). Despite these initiatives, corruption still continues due to weak internal controls, limited enforcement of disciplinary measures, and a culture of silence within public service (Chinsinga & Mangulama, 2016). For instance, irregularities in police revenue collection continue to be highlighted in audit reports, with missing receipts and unexplained revenue variances reported as recently as 2024 (Nation Audit Office, 2022).

While a number of studies have examined corruption in the civil service or the public procurement sector (Phiri, 2020) little empirical research has focused on its direct impact on revenue collection in law enforcement agencies. It is against this background, that this study investigated the impact of corruption on revenue collection within the Malawi Police Services. The study explored the extent and nature of corrupt practices, the effectiveness of internal accountability mechanisms, and the influence of anti-corruption reforms. The findings are expected to provide insights for policymakers, civil society, and development partners seeking to strengthen transparency, accountability, and revenue mobilization in Malawi.

Importance and purpose of the topic

Revenue collection is the backbone of any government's ability to deliver essential public goods and services such as healthcare, education, infrastructure, and security. In Malawi, where most project financing is done by the donors, strengthening domestic revenue mobilization is critical in order to achieve financial independence and sustainable development. The Malawi Police Service (MPS), as a law enforcement institution, plays a unique role in generating non-tax revenue through fines, licenses, and service fees.

However, this revenue function has been undermined by widespread corruption, particularly through bribery, fraud, and embezzlement. Such practices not only reduce the amount of funds remitted to government accounts but also erode public trust and compromise institutional legitimacy.

The purpose of this study was therefore to examine how corruption affects revenue collection within the MPS, assess the effectiveness of existing accountability mechanisms, and recommend reforms that can enhance transparency, efficiency, and financial performance in Malawi's public sector contribute to a more comprehensive understanding on the connection between governance and financial performance in Malawi's law enforcement sector.

Objectives of the research

The overall objective of this study was:

- To assess the impact of corruption on revenue collection within the Malawi Police Services (MPS).
- The study was further guided by the following **specific objectives**:
- To identify common forms of corruption affecting revenue collection within the MPS
- To evaluate the extent to which corruption reduces actual revenue collected versus expected targets.
- To assess the effectiveness of current anti-corruption measures within the MPS.
- To recommend strategies for improving transparency and accountability in revenue collection.

Scope of the discussion

This study focused on investigating the impact of corruption on revenue collection within the Malawi Police Services (MPS). Specifically, it examined the forms and prevalence of corruption, its effect on revenue collection performance, and the moderating role of internal controls, oversight mechanisms, and accountability policies. Geographically, the study limited to selected police formations within central west division. This scope was intended to provide a manageable yet representative sample of the MPS operations that directly handle public funds.

While the findings may not be generalizable to all government departments, the focus on MPS provided a valuable case study for understanding how corruption at the operational level affects public revenue and what institutional mechanisms can be strengthened to address these challenges.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview of relevant research

Corruption had been widely recognised as one of the most serious obstacles to effective governance and the performance of public institutions. The World Bank (2021) defined corruption as the abuse of public office for private gain, a broad description that encompassed practices such as bribery, nepotism, fraud, and embezzlement. These practices undermine governance structures and economic development, particularly in resource-constrained countries like Malawi.

In Africa, where institutional capacity was often controlled, corruption took on structural dimensions, becoming embedded within bureaucratic and political processes (Hope, 2020). In the context of law enforcement, corruption becomes challenging because it compromises the integrity of an institution tasked with upholding law and order.

In Malawi, corruption was identified as a systemic challenge that undermined both political accountability and service delivery (Anders, Kanyongolo & Seim, 2020). The Afrobarometer Corruption Perceptions Survey (2021) revealed that 42 per cent of Malawians believed that “most” or “all” police officers were corrupt, while 40 per cent reported having paid a bribe to an officer in the previous year. These perceptions illustrated both the magnitude of the problem and its deep entrenchment within everyday interactions between citizens and the police.

Theoretical Frameworks

Principal-Agent Theory

Principal Agent Theory provided one of the most influential frameworks for understanding the dynamics of corruption in public institutions. According to this theory, corruption arises when an agent (e.g., a police officer), who is entrusted to act on behalf of a principal (e.g., the government or the public), pursues personal interests at the expense of their duty. This misalignment is often worsened by factors such as weak oversight mechanisms, inadequate measures for misconduct, and low levels of compensation. When monitoring systems are ineffective and the consequences for engaging in corrupt acts are minimal, agents are more likely to engage in bribery, fraud, or other forms of corruption. Poor remuneration further contributes to these behaviors, as individuals may seek alternative, often illegal in order to supplement their income (Rose-Ackerman, 1999).

It has been argued that the incentive structure also played a pivotal role in shaping agent behaviour. When remuneration and working conditions were inadequate, officers rationalised corrupt practices such as bribery or embezzlement as a necessary supplement to their income. This finding aligned with the “efficiency wage” argument, which held that low pay and poor working conditions increased the likelihood of misconduct (Besley & McLaren, 1993). In Malawi, where police salaries were often below subsistence levels, the temptation to seek informal income was heightened, reinforcing the agency problem.

Another important insight from the Principal Agent framework was the issue of information asymmetry. Agents typically possessed more information about their day-to-day operations than the principal, who relied on them for accurate reporting. This imbalance created opportunities for officers to misreport, manipulate records, or conceal corrupt transactions. For example, fines collected at traffic stops could be underreported, with the difference pocketed by the officer, while the principal (the state or public) remained largely unaware of the discrepancy.

Furthermore, the theory illuminated how corruption became self-reinforcing when oversight mechanisms were compromised. If supervisors themselves were complicit in corruption, the monitoring process became ineffective, and agents operated with even greater impunity. In Malawi, reports of collusion between frontline officers and senior supervisors suggested that the agency problem extended across hierarchical levels (Kayuni & Tambulasi, 2010). This multi-layered agency failure meant that corruption was not merely the result of individual nonconformity but a systemic issue embedded in institutional practices.

Importantly, Principal Agent Theory also underscored the role of deterrence. Where the probability of detection was low and the expected permissions negligible, agents calculated that the benefits of corruption outweighed the risks. This logic reinforced the need for robust monitoring, credible sanctions, and institutional reforms aimed at reducing discretion and monopoly power. Mechanisms such as digitalisation of payments, random audits, and external citizen oversight were consistent with the theory’s prescriptions for reducing agency problems (OECD, 2018).

In summary, Principal Agent Theory offered a compelling framework for analysing corruption in the MPS. It highlighted how misaligned incentives, information asymmetry, weak accountability, and poor remuneration encouraged agents to prioritise personal gain over public duty. By demonstrating that corruption was not simply a moral failing but a predictable outcome of structural and institutional weaknesses, the theory provided a strong justification for reforms aimed at realigning incentives, strengthening oversight, and reducing opportunities for misconduct.

Rational Choice Theory

Rational Choice Theory suggested that individuals engaged in corrupt behaviour on the basis of a calculated assessment in which the expected personal benefits outweighed the potential risks or costs. In the context of the police service, officers were assumed to evaluate the advantages of engaging in practices such as bribery, fraud, or embezzlement against the probability of detection and the severity of sanctions. When the likelihood of being caught was low, and the expected punishment minimal or easily avoided, officers considered corruption a rational and advantageous strategy (Treisman, 2000). The theory assumed that individuals were utility-maximising actors, making decisions not out of ignorance, but through deliberate cost-benefit analysis. Within the Malawi Police Service (MPS), officers often faced a decision between enforcing traffic laws lawfully resulting in modest state revenue but no personal gain or accepting bribes from motorists, which offered immediate private benefits with limited risk of punishment. Given that oversight mechanisms were weak and disciplinary measures rarely enforced, the “rational” choice for many officers was to engage in corrupt practices.

A key institutional factor shaping this decision-making process was the absence of strong surveillance and reporting systems. Manual and paper-based recordkeeping makes it easier for officers to underreport fines or substitute official receipts with unofficial ones. Without digital tracking or external monitoring, the probability of detection was minimal. In addition, disciplinary mechanisms were inconsistent. Officers implicated in corruption were rarely prosecuted, and even when cases reached disciplinary bodies, sanctions were often symbolic or politically influenced (Anders, Kanyongolo, & Seim, 2020). This environment of impunity further lowered the perceived cost of engaging in corruption.

The theory also highlighted the role of extrinsic incentives. Low police salaries and inadequate working conditions in Malawi increased the relative attractiveness of corruption. Rational Choice Theory thus complemented economic perspectives such as Becker's (1968) model of crime, which suggested that illegal behaviour increased when the expected returns were higher than the expected losses. In this sense, corruption could be viewed as a form of rational adaptation to unfavourable economic conditions, especially when state institutions failed to provide adequate discouragement or welfare.

Importantly, the framework also implied that corruption could be curbed by shifting the balance of the cost–benefit analysis. Enhancing detection mechanisms such as digitalising payments for fines and licences would increase the likelihood of exposure. Increasing the strictness and certainty of sanctions would raise the cost of engaging in corrupt acts. Likewise, improving conditions of service, including remuneration and welfare support, would reduce the perceived need to supplement income through illicit means. Together, these measures would alter the calculus of officers and make lawful conduct the more rational option.

In summary, Rational Choice Theory provided a useful lens for understanding corruption in Malawi Police Service through portraying it as a deliberate and calculated choice rather than an unavoidable cultural trait. It examined why corruption persevered in contexts where institutions were weak, oversight limited, and have sanctions that are ineffective. It also offered clear suggestion for reform: increase monitoring, raise the probability and severity of punishment, and realign incentives to make lawful behaviour the rational strategy

DISCUSSION

Explanation of key concepts

.Corruption

Corruption is the abuse of entrusted power for personal or private gain. In Malawi Police Service context, it commonly takes the form of bribery, fraud, and embezzlement, which divert funds away from official channels and weaken institutional integrity.

Revenue Collection

Revenue collection refers to the process of mobilizing funds to support government operations and service delivery. For the MPS, this includes non-tax revenues such as traffic fines, bail fees, and licensing charges.

Malawi Police Service (MPS)

The MPS is both a law enforcement body and a collector of non-tax revenue. Its strategic position makes it critical for state revenue mobilization, but also highly vulnerable to corruption due to frequent interaction with the public and discretionary enforcement powers.

Internal Controls

Internal controls are institutional systems, policies, and procedures designed to prevent misuse of resources, safeguard revenue, and ensure accountability. These may include audits, proper documentation, automated payment systems, and supervisory checks. Weak or poorly enforced controls create opportunities for corruption.

Accountability

Accountability involves the duty of institutions and officers to be transparent, report accurately, and justify their actions to oversight bodies and the public. In the MPS, accountability is essential to build trust, improve compliance with fines and fees, and strengthen governance in revenue collection.

Respondents

A total of 90 respondents participated in the study. The respondents were strategically sampled from three distinct stakeholder groups to ensure a comprehensive and multi-perspective analysis of the research problem. The demographic characteristics of each group were; Malawi Police service (30), Oversight Institutions (20), and the General Public (40) were the representatives of the sample.

MPS Officers (n=30) provided invaluable insider perspectives on operational procedures and institutional challenges. The group displayed diversity in rank, role, and experience. The cohort included a mix of frontline officers directly involved in revenue collection (e.g., traffic officers, sergeants, inspectors) and administrative staff responsible for processing and managing funds (e.g., cashiers, accounts clerks, HR officers). This ensured insights from both the point of collection and the point of accounting. On work Stations representation, the respondents were drawn from multiple stations within the Central West Division to mitigate geographic bias. On years of service, the distribution of experience was well-balanced, providing views from both new and highly experienced officers. The range included officers with less than 5 years of service, offering a fresh perspective, to others with over 20 years of service, providing historical context on institutional practices.

Oversight Institutions (n=20) provided a critical, external assessment of the Malawi Police Service's (MPS) accountability and governance mechanisms. Comprising professionals mandated with ensuring institutional compliance, investigating malfeasance, and strengthening internal controls, their responses offer an authoritative perspective on the systemic challenges within the MPS. The demographic composition of this group was designed to capture insights from both external watchdogs and internal oversight bodies, ensuring a holistic view of the accountability landscape. While MPS officers may report on internal processes from an operational standpoint, the oversight institutions provide a more independent appraisal of those same processes, often highlighting gaps, weaknesses, and instances of non-compliance that may not be fully visible or admitted to from within the MPS. This triangulation of sources strengthens the validity and objectivity of the study's findings regarding the effectiveness—or ineffectiveness—of existing accountability frameworks.

General Public (n=40) — the citizens whose compliance and trust are essential for effective revenue collection. Their perceptions and lived experiences provide crucial data on the demand-side dynamics of corruption and its direct impact on public willingness to engage with official revenue channels. The

demographic composition of this group was designed to capture a cross-section of the populace that has frequent and necessary interactions with the Malawi Police Service (MPS). Respondents were strategically sampled from major urban centers in Malawi characterized by high levels of economic activity, and consequently frequent interaction with MPS revenue collection units. This focus ensures the data is relevant to the study's context of significant revenue generation and leakage. A fundamental criterion for selection was that all respondents had a direct interaction with the MPS within the past 12 months. This ensures that their responses are grounded in recent and concrete experience, providing data on actual behavior and contemporary perceptions rather than abstract or outdated opinions.

Analyzing findings

Prevalence and Forms of Corruption

The study confirms that corruption within the MPS is widespread, systemic, and multi-dimensional, spanning petty bribery, favoritism, nepotism, and grand-scale embezzlement. Evidence suggests that these forms of corruption form an interconnected ecosystem where low-level acts reinforce high-level schemes and vice versa.

Petty Bribery and Facilitation Payments

Petty bribery, sometimes referred to as “grease money” or “survival corruption,” is particularly pervasive among traffic officers and frontline staff. The research found out that 63.3% of officers acknowledge the frequent solicitation of bribes, corroborated by 45% of public respondents who admitted to paying bribes within the previous 12 months. This demonstrates that bribery is not sporadic or exceptional, but normalized as part of routine interactions. Petty bribery operates as a dual mechanism:

Expediting Fees: Officials deliberately slow down standard procedures, creating opportunities to demand unofficial payments. For instance, processing of driving licenses, traffic fines, or permit applications is artificially delayed, compelling citizens to pay to avoid prolonged inconvenience.

Normalization of Corruption: These “small” payments are culturally framed as tokens of appreciation, survival strategies, or standard practice. The regularity of these interactions fosters a climate in which both officers and the public accept corruption as inevitable.

This aligns with global research on street-level bureaucracies, where frontline officials exploit discretionary power over citizens in the context of weak oversight and low remuneration (Lipsky, 1980).

Grand Corruption and Collusive Practices

At the upper level, corruption manifests as bid-rigging, policy capture, and embezzlement. Data reveals: Large-scale, high-level corruption involving collusion among senior officials and powerful actors, often linked to public contracts and policy manipulation

Infrastructure projects are over-inflated in cost or executed substandardly, allowing excess funds to be siphoned for personal gain.

Political connections enable selective enforcement and insider trading, undermining meritocracy and equitable access to public resources.

This form of corruption has a disproportionately large fiscal and social impact, inflating costs, compromising service delivery, and eroding public trust in urban governance.

Favoritism and Nepotism

Favoritism and nepotism were identified as pervasive, particularly in promotions, postings, and discretionary decision-making. This manifests in:

Selective enforcement: Regulations applied inconsistently, fast-tracking well-connected individuals while imposing punitive measures on others.

Provision of inside information: Confidential data on land, projects, or development plans is leaked to allies, enabling financial gain at public expense.

The resulting environment is one where merit is subordinated to patronage, further entrenching a culture of impunity.

Embezzlement and Revenue Diversion

Embezzlement occurs through underreporting of fees, ghost projects, and diversion of official collections. Key mechanisms include:

Unrecorded transactions: Payments made off the books, bypassing official accounting channels.

Theft of official collections: Partial or full revenue from fines is pocketed, reducing transparency and fiscal integrity.

Ghost projects: Entirely fictitious initiatives or inflated real projects are approved, with excess funds misappropriated.

The consequence is a direct financial loss for the government, accompanied by diminished service delivery and public confidence.

Impact on Revenue Performance

Corruption has a quantifiable and negative effect on revenue collection. Survey findings reveal that:

- 73% of MPS officers agree that corruption reduces official revenue.
- 62% confirm underreporting of fines and penalties.
- 80% of public respondents believe government revenue is lost to corruption.

These findings demonstrate the creation of a parallel, informal revenue stream that competes with formal collection channels. Citizens often rationalize bribery as cheaper and more convenient, while officers gain 100% tax-free personal income, creating a mutually reinforcing incentive structure.

Mechanisms of Revenue Leakage

Two primary mechanisms drive revenue loss:

Direct Diversion of Funds: Money is intercepted before it reaches government accounts, either through unrecorded transactions or partial theft of official collections.

Erosion of Trust and Compliance: Citizens lose faith in the system and avoid official channels, preferring bribes or evasion. This reduces voluntary compliance, weakening the social contract between government and citizenry.

The interplay of these mechanisms generates a self-perpetuating cycle, where low revenue increases pressure on officers to supplement income through corruption, reinforcing the system.

Effectiveness of Anti-Corruption Measures

The evaluation of existing measures reveals a structurally weak and operationally compromised system. Key findings include:

Audit Paradox and Oversight Weakness

While 65% of MPS officers reported regular audits, 85% of oversight respondents indicated obstruction, incomplete access, or misleading data. The audit process, therefore, serves as a façade of compliance, concealing systemic malpractice.

Inadequate Resources

Oversight bodies face severe resource constraints, with 78% identifying staffing and budget limitations as major hindrances. This impedes investigation, forensic accounting, and enforcement. Resource inadequacy interacts with other barriers—political influence, complex financial schemes, and witness intimidation—to create a self-reinforcing cycle of oversight failure.

Political Interference

While overt interference is rare, qualitative evidence suggests subtle political pressures influence investigations. Investigators often avoid cases involving connected individuals due to implicit threats, maintaining a culture of impunity at senior levels.

Drivers of Persistent Corruption

Three interrelated drivers perpetuate corruption:

Economic Pressures: Low salaries and poor working conditions incentivize officers to seek supplementary income through bribes.

Weak Punishment and Impunity: Lack of credible consequences allows corruption to thrive.

Political Interference and Nepotism: Compromised leadership and patronage networks protect corrupt actors, undermining accountability and meritocracy.

These factors interact to create a resilient, self-reinforcing system where corruption is normalized, perpetuated, and difficult to eradicate.

OBSERVATIONS

Key Insights derived

Corruption is systemic, culturally embedded, and multi-level, not merely opportunistic.

Corruption within the Malawi Police Service (MPS) is not best understood as a series of isolated acts of misconduct but as a deeply systemic and culturally embedded phenomenon. It operates simultaneously at the petty, bureaucratic, and grand levels, with junior officers engaging in “survival corruption” such as soliciting small bribes, while senior officials manipulate contracts, postings, and procurement for personal enrichment. This multi-level entrenchment indicates that corruption has become normalized within the institutional culture, where informal networks, patronage systems, and tacit acceptance override official codes of conduct. It is reinforced by a shared perception that corruption is not only tolerated but expected, making it difficult for individual officers to resist without facing exclusion or retaliation. Thus, the problem is not opportunistic misconduct by a few rogue individuals but an institutionalized practice embedded within the very fabric of organizational operations.

Revenue loss occurs through both direct diversion and erosion of trust, creating structural inefficiencies.

The impact of corruption on revenue collection within the MPS is twofold. On one hand, there is direct diversion of funds through underreporting, embezzlement, and bribery, where collected fees and fines never reach the government’s treasury. This represents a straightforward financial leakage that deprives the state of resources needed for service delivery. On the other hand, corruption corrodes public trust, discouraging citizens from voluntarily complying with fines, fees, or legal processes, as they perceive the system to be unfair or exploitative. This loss of legitimacy creates structural inefficiencies, where law enforcement is weakened, voluntary compliance declines, and enforcement costs rise. The combination of financial theft and trust erosion significantly reduces state capacity, creating a vicious cycle of underfunded services and further corruption.

Anti-corruption measures exist largely in form rather than practice; weak enforcement, limited resources, and political influence render them ineffective.

Although Malawi has established formal frameworks for accountability—such as internal audit departments, disciplinary codes, and oversight institutions—their effectiveness is undermined by weak enforcement and insufficient resources. Anti-corruption units often lack funding, technical expertise, and independence, leaving them unable to carry out thorough investigations or impose meaningful sanctions. Moreover, political influence frequently shields high-ranking officials from accountability, creating a sense of impunity that cascades down to lower levels. As a result, many anti-corruption measures exist only as symbolic commitments, serving to satisfy donor expectations rather than producing substantive change. Without consistent enforcement and credible punishment, such measures risk reinforcing cynicism among officers and the public, as rules are seen as tools of selective punishment rather than instruments of justice.

Sustainable reform requires a holistic approach addressing economic, institutional, and political dimensions simultaneously.

Lasting solutions to corruption within the MPS cannot be achieved through piecemeal reforms such as salary adjustments or isolated digital initiatives alone. A holistic approach is required—one that addresses the economic vulnerabilities that push officers toward corruption, strengthens institutional frameworks for oversight and accountability, and confronts the political dynamics that enable impunity. Economically, reforms must ensure fair compensation and adequate resources for officers. Institutionally, robust systems of monitoring, transparency, and independent audits must be established and enforced. Politically, strong will at the highest levels is essential to insulate oversight bodies from interference and ensure that accountability applies equally across ranks. Sustainable reform, therefore, requires simultaneous transformation across these dimensions, building an ecosystem of integrity where corruption becomes both materially disadvantageous and socially unacceptable.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings indicate that corruption in the MPS is a complex, multi-layered system sustained by economic, institutional, and political factors. Addressing this issue requires more than procedural adjustments; it demands systemic reform, cultural change, and robust accountability mechanisms to restore public trust and ensure effective revenue collection.

A summary of the main points.

- **Strengthen Oversight Capacity:** Equip anti-corruption agencies with sufficient staffing, modern technology, and forensic skills.
- **Enhance Financial Transparency:** Introduce electronic payment systems and real-time tracking to reduce cash-based corruption.
- **Improve Officer Welfare:** Review salaries and working conditions to reduce economic incentives for petty corruption.
- **Institutionalize Ethical Culture:** Develop training, accountability systems, and public reporting mechanisms to foster integrity.
- **Investigate Political Influence:** Conduct studies on subtle political interference and develop safeguards against undue influence.
- **Longitudinal Monitoring:** Track reforms' impact on revenue collection, compliance, and public trust over time.

Recommendation to the Government of Malawi and MPS Leadership

Revise Remuneration and Incentive Structures

It is recommended that the Government of Malawi and MPS management undertake a comprehensive review of compensation and incentives, including benchmarking salaries against comparable public service roles, introducing non-monetary benefits such as housing, medical coverage, and educational support, and implementing performance-linked rewards tied to measurable outcomes and adherence to integrity standards.

Accelerate the Digitalization of Revenue Collection

Cash handling creates opaque opportunities for embezzlement and bribery, and transitioning to electronic payments represents both a technological upgrade and a governance reform. Implementation should leverage Malawi's widespread mobile money infrastructure, mandate payments through licensed platforms like Airtel Money and TNM Mpamba, equip officers with portable POS devices linked to centralized treasury accounts, and ensure integration with Malawi Revenue Authority and Ministry of Finance systems for real-time monitoring and automated reconciliation. This shift would directly reduce corruption by removing cash from the system, enhance transparency and trust through verifiable electronic receipts, improve revenue collection by plugging financial leaks, and increase operational efficiency by streamlining administrative processes and providing accurate real-time data. Lessons from Rwanda and Kenya demonstrate that such digitalization can substantially reduce fiscal leakages, making this a proven strategy for strengthening accountability and institutional integrity in Malawi.

Strengthen Internal Audit Capacity with Autonomy and Authority

The study identifies a critical weakness: the Internal Audit Department within the MPS is effectively neutered, operating with limited capacity, a lack of independence, and no authority to enforce its findings. This renders it a symbolic entity, allowing corrupt practices to thrive in the shadows without fear of internal discovery. To transform this unit from a paper tiger into a powerful deterrent, a fundamental restructuring is required.

To Oversight Institutions (ACB, Parliament, Independent Complaints Commission)

Oversight institutions such as the Anti-Corruption Bureau (ACB), the Parliamentary Public Accounts Committee, and the Independent Complaints Commission (ICC) hold a constitutional and statutory mandate to safeguard accountability and integrity within Malawi's governance framework. In the context of policing, these bodies are uniquely positioned to detect, investigate, and deter corrupt practices that undermine both public confidence and the rule of law.

Yet despite their mandates, investigations into corruption within the Malawi Police Service (MPS) have often been characterized by reactivity, fragmentation, and limited scope. Interventions are frequently launched in response to media exposés or whistleblower leaks rather than oversight investigations:

- **Reactive Nature of Inquiries:** Most corruption inquiries are launched only after scandals break in the media, making oversight appear defensive rather than proactive.

This section proposes that oversight bodies adopt a systematic, risk-based, and collaborative model of joint investigations. By combining resources, harmonizing priorities, and adopting clear investigative frameworks, oversight institutions can achieve higher impact and sustainability in addressing systemic corruption within the MPS.

To Civil Society and the Media

Civil society organizations (CSOs) and the media are essential pillars in Malawi's governance ecosystem. Where formal oversight mechanisms may falter due to resource limitations or political interference, these actors play the critical role of amplifying citizen voices, shaping public opinion, and holding institutions accountable. In the fight against corruption within the Malawi Police Service (MPS), civil society and the media can be both watchdogs and catalysts for reform.

This section outlines how CSOs and the media can strengthen anti-corruption efforts through public awareness campaigns and advocacy for systemic reform. It also proposes strategies, challenges, and monitoring approaches to ensure that their contribution is impactful and sustainable.

The Role of Civil Society and Media in Anti-Corruption

Civil society and the media act as intermediaries between the state and citizens. Their role includes:

- **Information Dissemination** - Providing citizens with accurate information on their rights, obligations, and the procedures for lawful interaction with law enforcement.
- **Advocacy** - Pressuring government institutions to implement reforms, increase transparency, and allocate resources toward integrity-building measures.
- **Monitoring and Watchdog Functions** - Tracking cases of corruption, documenting systemic weaknesses, and exposing malpractice.
- **Citizen Mobilization** - Encouraging collective action such as petitions, demonstrations, and community monitoring initiatives.
- **Agenda Setting** - Elevating anti-corruption to a national priority by framing it as a matter of public interest and national development.

Launch Public Awareness Campaigns

One of the most powerful tools at the disposal of civil society and the media is the ability to inform and empower citizens. Corruption thrives when the public is unaware of official procedures, legal fees, and complaint channels.

Advocate for Reform

Beyond public awareness, CSOs and the media have the responsibility to push for systemic change. Their advocacy ensures that government and MPS leadership not only acknowledge corruption but also take concrete action to address it.

Priority Reform Areas

- **Budgetary Allocations for Police Welfare**
- **Advocate for improved remuneration packages** to reduce financial vulnerabilities among officers.
- **Campaign for housing allowances, medical cover, and training opportunities** as part of welfare reform.

Digitalization of Police Systems

Push for the roll-out of mobile money and point-of-sale systems for revenue collection to eliminate cash handling. Advocate for digital record-keeping to enhance transparency and accountability:

- **Whistleblower Protections**
- **Campaign for the full enforcement of whistleblower protection laws.**
- **Ensure that safe reporting mechanisms are established and communicated to the public.**

Malawi can learn from these experiences by adopting multi-channel communication strategies and ensuring sustained advocacy beyond short-term campaigns. Civil society and the media occupy a frontline position in the fight against police corruption. By launching comprehensive public awareness campaigns and pushing for systemic reform, they can empower citizens, expose malpractice, and build sustained pressure on leaders to honor anti-corruption commitments.

When citizens know their rights, demand receipts, and report misconduct, and when leaders are consistently pressured to reform welfare systems and embrace digitalization, corruption becomes riskier and less rewarding. The partnership between civil society, media, and the public is therefore indispensable in building a transparent, accountable, and people-centered Malawi Police Service

Suggestions for Further Research

While this study has generated important insights into corruption within the Malawi Police Service (MPS), its scope was limited to the Central West Region. The findings therefore represent only a partial view of a much broader institutional challenge. To build on these findings and strengthen the evidence base for reform, several areas merit further exploration. This section outlines key priorities for future research that would deepen understanding and inform more effective policy interventions.

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