

“Public Service Provision Where the State is Weak: Ndirande, Malawi (2009-11)”

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At the heart of urban Malawi – in its oldest and largest township, Ndirande – the state is hardly present. Utility workers, police officers, health professionals, street cleaners, and market officials are found working there, but compared to a population of over 200,000, they are few in number. In this impoverished nation the paucity of resources is of course, partly to blame for rudimentary public services. But research undertaken within the Africa Power & Politics Programme points to other causes, including the party-politicisation of service provision, weak local governance, the inability of groups to form and work together, and neglect due to jurisdictional ambiguities, weak rule enforcement, and a refusal by officialdom to take responsibility. After the 1994 transition to multi-partyism, the state created by Kamuzu Banda withdrew while the township expanded. Ndirande has remained habitable only because other actors have filled the gap. Interacting with the few sector officials are a variety of ‘town chiefs’ (who play a number of key roles) and citizen (quasi-)volunteers who oversee markets, security, water provisioning, and health outreach activities. These institutions are hybrids, rooted in various ‘modes of local governance’ and resonating culturally with traditional systems. While highly imperfect, they make Ndirande a place where it is possible to live. Of particular interest in this paper are two institutions – the chiefs’ *bwalo* courts and community water provisioning – as they exemplify both the hybrid nature and the challenges, successes and failures of Ndirande’s public service institutions.