

Globalising Resistance: Social Movement Activism in Malawi

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Attendant with the rise of the good governance discourse of the 1990s and beyond, contemporary research on social activism in Africa has tended to be rooted in normalised conceptions of civil society operating in partnership with the state. The proliferation of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) over this period has attracted considerable attention from international donors and researchers alike – so much so that, for many, NGOs have now become synonymous with civil society. As a consequence, considerable gaps are evident in the literature on social movement activism and what this means in specific African contexts.

Drawing from an empirical study of political and social activism in Malawi over a six year period (2000-2006), this paper aims at making a contribution in this regard, focusing on the agency and activism of a civic network of organisations and individuals known as the Malawi Economic Justice Network (MEJN). Arguing that MEJN constitutes a social movement in that it embodies many of the associated characteristics identified within the literature (a decentralised structure; an emphasis on popular participation and direct democracy; a dynamic membership; and a strong internal solidarity (della Porta and Diani, 1999; Tilly, 2004; della Porta, 2009)), the paper follows the journey of the network – from its genesis within the Jubilee campaign for debt cancellation, to its consolidation through the Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS) process, to its fragmentation with the attraction of donor funding, to its re-invigoration through challenges posed by its local district membership base – and identifies both the enabling factors and the constraints to its success in effecting social and political change over this time. MEJN's experience and journey demonstrates the increasingly globalised nature of African social movement activism and highlights both the opportunities and constraints to strategies for change posed by this globalisation.