

**Water and Environmental Sanitation Network (WES Network) Qadri House Area 3 – Behind NBS Bank, P.O Box 3210, Lilongwe, Malawi**

SITUATION ANALYSIS – WATER, SANITATION, HYGIENE SECTOR

The importance of water to Malawi’s economic growth and social stability cannot be overemphasized. From international commitments such as the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals to Malawi’s own Malawi Growth and Development Strategy III, water is often touted as crucial to Malawi’s socio-economic survival often with the much-cited rhetoric, “Water Is Life”. This acknowledgment stems from a further recognition of how other strategically important sectors, such as energy, health, education and agriculture, are underpinned and reinforced by functional and thriving water resources management i.e. water is the threshold limitation to sustained economic growth and poverty eradication.

Not since the mid-90s has Malawi gone through a dire water crisis as the one she is experiencing now. Despite achieving what was initially considered impossible for a developing country by increasing water coverage from 51% in 1995 to 86% by the 2015 Millennium Development Goal target, cases of water shortages remain commonplace, frequent and unresolved. Mpira-Balaka Dam dried up leaving half a million people with no access to safe water. Similarly, Chitete Dam in Kasungu has dried up leaving the population of Kasungu Municipality in dire need of water. Cholera, a preventable waterborne disease, continues to ravage rural and urban populations, with 30 cumulative deaths registered as of April 2018. Persistent blackouts have hobbled Malawi’s already stunted economic growth due to dwindling water levels in the Shire River and, by extension, in Lake Malawi – the same Lake that local studies project will drop by another 4.34 meters by 2035. A dropping water table in some parts of Malawi is leading to dry boreholes forcing women and girls to spend hours fetching water instead of pursuing personal development through education or small-scale enterprises. The once thriving fisheries industry that supported surrounding communities around Lake Chirwa is now a distant memory.

If left unchecked, Malawi will not meet its 2030 commitment to achieve the Sustainable Development Goal 6 for Water and Sanitation and, subsequently, will not meet goals for poverty eradication, food security, health and well-being, clean energy, economic growth and ecosystem conservation.

Malawi’s leadership needs to urgently rethink the nation’s approach to water, sanitation and hygiene. Existing solutions that have emphasized increased infrastructure development e.g. more borehole drilling, though necessary, are not an end in and of themselves and more concerted thought and effort must be invested in the systems and services that sustain the infrastructure and the surrounding natural ecosystem. The previously highlighted challenges continue due to a persistent failure to address the following issues: 1. Inadequate Funding for Water Services Sector: Despite its demonstrated strategic importance to Malawi’s socio-economic growth and the underpinning of other strategic sectors, the water service sector continues to be seriously underfunded relative to its supposed significance. 2. Poor Water Resources Management: Even with multiple demands from communities and private industry for consumptive and productive uses, Malawi’s ecosystem-dependent water resources remain poorly managed as a result of catchment degradation and watershed mismanagement. Decades of unfettered degradation has culminated into dwindling water resources, e.g. previously perennial rivers have silted, which has had knock-on effects on rural villagers who remain trapped in an endless cycle of water poverty. 3. Limited Accountability of Stakeholders: Malawi has commendable legal and policy instruments that guide and regulate the management of water resources and infrastructure to ensure sustainable supply of water for future generations. Though this be the case, policies are deliberately flouted and clearly stipulated water regulations are hardly adhered to by various stakeholders, more significantly, given their political power and influence, by ruling party politicians who reallocate scarce water investments in a manner that is not aligned with water policies, laws or district plans.

4. Low Prioritization of the Water Services Sector: Though a key service sector, the water service sector has, since 2014, been merged with Agriculture and Irrigation to form the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Water Development. The rationale for this arrangement was purely political, i.e. to reduce the number of Cabinet Ministers, without consideration for the technical ramifications of such a merger. Since the merger, water sector issues, such as those abovementioned, have not been prioritized with more focus on agriculture and irrigation which are considered more populist in the public space.

QUESTIONS FOR PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES

(a) In recognition of the insufficient financing to the water, sanitation and hygiene sector, the government of Malawi made an international commitment in 2014 to allocate 3% of the national budget to the water and sanitation sector. To date, the national allocation to the water sector has not significantly changed and continues to hover around 1%. What are your plans and the specific actions you will take to ensure that the water, sanitation and hygiene sector is allocated at least 3% of the total national budget?

(b) Water and Sanitation Services is a key service sector but is severely underfunded at the district level where core services are meant to be delivered to citizens. Unlike in other key service sectors like health, education, and agriculture, there are no resources allocated for service delivery and support services at district level where they are needed the most. Services such as water monitoring, support for repair and maintenance, catchment protection, etc., do not have any budget lines allocated. How will your government ensure that we finally decentralise water sector funds to be used by government in providing these services at district level?

(c) Malawi has great policies which are designed to guide the water sector. However, it is a well-known fact that water is used by all political parties to gain votes and political favours - for example, giving cash handouts or subsidies, like the Ndirande “borehole subsidy” pilot announced in November 2018, that circumvent government policies and undermines the sustainability which the policies were designed to ensure. What mechanisms will you put in place to ensure that members of your party and indeed any other stakeholders do not go against existing government water and sanitation policies and guidelines and when they do how will you hold them accountable?

(d) 95% of Malawi’s energy comes from hydroelectric power. The blackouts the nation faces on a daily basis are a direct result of poor water resources management. The briefcase solutions the government has taken to address the energy challenges Malawi is facing, such as renting expensive diesel-powered generators, have completely ignored the source of the problem,. Given that hydroelectric power is the primary source of energy for Malawians, aside from diversifying energy sources, what will be your plan to ensure that water resources are managed properly to allow for adequate power generation?