



Beyond the Transaction: The Political Economy of Donor–Government Collaboration in Malawi’s Social Cash Transfer Program

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Article info	Abstract
Received: 24 Nov 2025 Revised: 22 May 2026 Accepted: 1 June 2026 Published online: 20 Aug 2026 Keywords: Political economy, actor roles, actor collaboration typologies, decision-making	This study investigates the nature and implications of donor-government collaborations in the implementation of the Social Cash Transfer Program (SCTP) in Malawi, a flagship social protection intervention for which donors provide approximately 95% of the financial support. Using a political economy framework grounded in political settlements theory, the study examines how power asymmetries and resource endowments shape decision-making autonomy and program ownership. The study employs a qualitative research design with data collected from government officials, donor agency staff, civil society actors, and other stakeholders involved in SCTP implementation. Data analysis followed a reflexive thematic analysis facilitated by NVivo software. The findings reveal a patron-client and deferential dependency relationship, where donors’ financial dominance enables them to influence decision-making priorities and the pace of implementation, thereby limiting the Government of Malawi’s leadership role. While formal collaborative structures exist, informal power imbalances challenge program sustainability and effective coordination. This study contributes novel insights by moving beyond technical evaluations of the SCTP to analyse the institutional and relational dimensions that underpin donor-government interactions in the Global South.

1.0 Introduction

The developmental challenges facing countries in the Global South create a need for coordinated initiatives among bilateral and multilateral institutions, governments, non-governmental organisations, and private actors in addressing issues surrounding poverty, inequality, pandemics, and climate change. Over the past three decades, international development has been shaped by global agendas, such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and, subsequently, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which emphasise poverty eradication and social protection as central pillars for inclusive growth (SESRIC, 2015). However, despite ambitious targets, many social protection programs in Sub-Saharan Africa, including Malawi’s SCTP, have remained heavily donor-dependent, which raises critical questions about ownership, effectiveness, and sustainability.

In Malawi, SCTP has become a flagship social protection intervention aimed at alleviating extreme poverty and vulnerability among marginalised populations. Experiences in countries such as Botswana and Pakistan illustrate the role of cash transfers in poverty reduction. In Botswana, poverty declined from 30.6 % in 2002/2003 to 19.3% in 2009/2010 (Statistics Botswana 2013 as cited in Botlhale et al., 2015), while in Pakistan it declined from 64.7% in 1990 to 12.7% in 2010 (Afzal, et al., 2019). Similarly, in a quantitative study of Latin America and Africa,

Omilola and Kaniki (2014), found that cash transfers had a substantial impact on poverty reduction in Brazil between 2001 and 2005, Mexico between 1996 and 2006, Kenya between 2007 and 2009, and Namibia. However, although the SCTP in Malawi has registered positive impacts at the household or community levels, these impacts have not translated into substantial reductions in poverty levels at the national level.

This article does not seek to fault social protection interventions per se, especially given the positive experiences documented elsewhere. Rather, it examines the contextual and institutional factors that shape the effectiveness of social protection programs in Malawi. This focus is timely because many studies have concentrated on improving the technical aspects of program delivery at the expense of a broader examination of institutional arrangements and the operating environment (Institute of Development Studies, 2006, p.10) that shape implementation. Accordingly, this study uses political economy analysis, grounded in a political settlements framework, as a theoretical lens for examining the SCTP's institutional arrangements and implementation context.

This article contributes to scholarly and policy discourse by providing a political economy analysis of donor-government collaboration within the SCPT in Malawi, with particular emphasis on the implications of power imbalances for decision-making and program ownership. By moving beyond “funding transactions, the study identifies informal networks, such as patron-client dynamics and dependency relations, that have become embedded in the governance architecture of social cash transfers. The findings provide valuable insights for policymakers, donor agencies, and development practitioners seeking to reform partnerships in ways that enhance government autonomy, harmonise donor inputs, and improve the impact and sustainability of social protection systems in Malawi and beyond.

2.0 Overview of the Political Economy of Donor-Government Collaboration in Malawi's Social Cash Transfer Program

Donor-government interaction is common in the Global South, given the financial and technical resources that donors bring to development processes. In social protection policy, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, donors have played a greater role in introducing and scaling up program interventions. For instance, Chinsinga (2009) and Siachiwena (2020) argue that the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) played an active role in piloting and advocating for the scale-up of Malawi's SCTP from 2006 onward. Similarly, Buur and Salimo (2018) argue that, in Mozambique, the World Bank played a crucial role in championing the adoption of social protection programs. Acknowledging the role of donors in Sub-Saharan Africa, Botlhale et al. (2015) call for donor support to sustain Botswana's domestically driven social protection system, whose sustainability is threatened by declining mineral deposits, a key source of funding. This example underscores the importance of donor-government interaction, particularly in contexts where development challenges persist and development partners remain engaged in line with their commitments (Engström, 2023). This context provides the rationale for examining the nature of donor-government collaboration as a key factor in the effectiveness of the SCTP (Hatelly & Malhotra, 1997; Lusha, 2024), while extending beyond Siachiwena's (2020) focus on institutionalisation.

2.1 Donor-Government Collaborations: Experiences in Program Implementation

Kwak (2002) and Leiderer (2012) argue that, in donor-funded programs, money, expertise, and power are resources that development partners leverage to shape agendas through decision-making platforms. In this context, program ownership may be ceded to the donor community. In a qualitative study, Mukuni and Price (2014) found evidence of donor preferences in the design of the Technical Education, Vocational and Entrepreneurship Training (TEVET) Development Program (TDP), which ran from 2001 to 2008 in Zambia. Using a “quality versus quantity” programming continuum, they observed that donor preferences aligned with “quantity” programming, as TDP resources were stretched across many beneficiary institutions, making them too thinly spread to achieve significant impact (p. 4). This pattern can be likened to aid fragmentation in the field of international development, which often reduces the impact of the aid on the ground.

Mukuni and Price (2014) further record coordination challenges as one feature of interactions between multiple donors and recipient governments. Nonetheless, this experience cannot be generalised, as countries such as Vietnam have managed to enforce coordination among donors. Keeley (2012) notes that enforcing donor coordination requires strong government institutions, as well as investment of time and resources. In this regard, Vietnam created “its own version of the Paris Declaration, the Hanoi Core Statement, and it has not been afraid to reject aid if it comes with what the government sees as unacceptable conditions” (Keeley, 2012, p.107). In Africa, the literature often describes Ethiopia as a strong state that would be positioned to negotiate with development partners, following Keeley’s (2012) argument. However, Carvalho et al. (2021) offer a contrasting observation, arguing that the Government of Ethiopia finds it challenging to balance competing donor demands due to its economic status. More broadly, the Congressional Budget Office (1997) and Carvalho et al. (2021) argue that many developing countries are desperate for financial assistance and therefore cannot afford to lose donor funding. Consequently, they trade off coordination enforcement, leaving the development partners with considerable implementation discretion.

Donor behaviour in such contexts can be understood through Hemsteede’s (2023) study, which found that financial resources and technical expertise give development partners a comparative advantage in shaping SCTP implementation. Keeley (2012) and Bawa (2013) argue that, in such instances, donor preferences may override those of the recipient countries. For instance, Keeley (2012) argues that, although infrastructure development is often viewed in African contexts as a priority for sustainable development, traditional donors have frequently prioritised democracy, decentralisation, and privatisation. This situation can create internal resistance among host countries, such that many African governments adopt a diplomatic posture by accepting available support even when they privately disagree with donor priorities.

Mukuni and Price (2014) conclude that host governments can exercise full project leadership only if they are willing to bear the possible repercussions, or if they contribute more resources than the donor community. Vietnam’s willingness to forgo aid when it conflicts with national priorities provides a useful example (Keeley, 2012). In addition, findings from this study’s fieldwork indicate that key informants viewed the Zambian government’s contribution of nearly 70% of its total SCTP budget favourably because it strengthened the government’s mandate to lead implementation and coordination. In other words, the reviewed literature demonstrates that project financing and institutional design influence program effectiveness. This study therefore examines the nature of donor-government collaboration and its effects on decision-making, offering a lens for understanding SCTP implementation arrangements in relation to program outcomes.

This study adopts a Political Economy Analysis (PEA) framework anchored in a political settlements lens to critically examine the nature of actor collaboration within Malawi’s SCTP. Political economy goes beyond identifying political influence; it examines how power, interests, institutions, and ideas interact to shape policy processes and outcomes (Leftwich, 2004; Mosse, 2004). Central to this framework is the concept of political settlements, which, as Khan (2017) argues, concerns the distribution of power among actors. This concept provides an analytical lens for interrogating whose policy inputs predominate across three interconnected decision-making domains. The first is financial and budgetary decisions, primarily led by the Ministry of Finance, Economic Planning and Development (MoFEPD) and donors in determining the amount and flow of resources. The second is technical and policy decisions, coordinated through multi-stakeholder committees such as the Social Support Steering Committee [SSSC] and the Social Support Technical Committee (SSTC), where donors exercise technical expertise. The third is operational and administrative decisions led by the Ministry of Gender, Community Development and Social Welfare (MoGCDSW) and district-level structures responsible for daily program implementation.

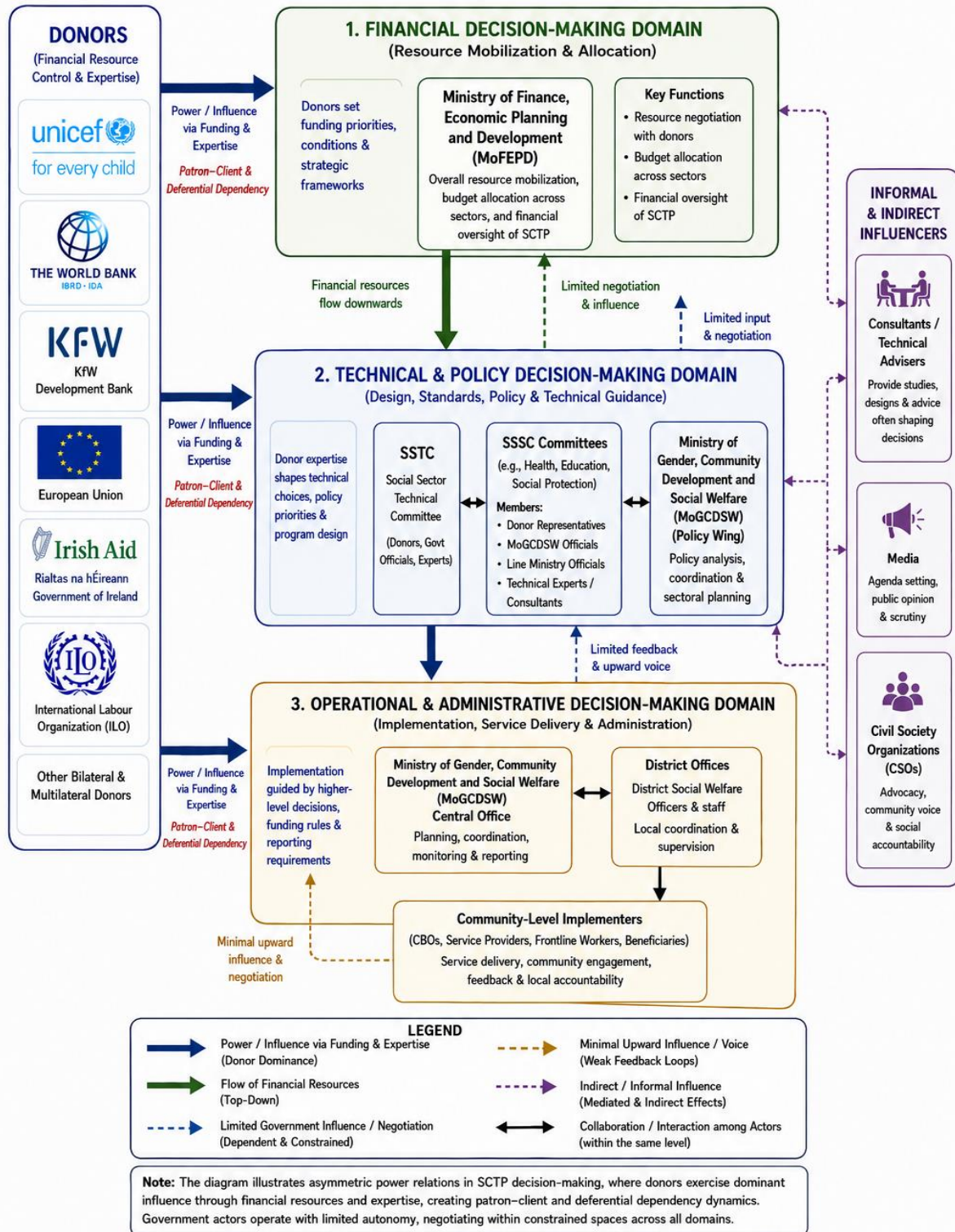
In line with the study’s findings, the PEA framework used in this research is structured around three interrelated elements: actors and their roles, institutions and rules of the game, and power relations within political settlements. Firstly, the study uses political settlements theory to identify the formal and informal (invited) actors engaged in

the implementation of the SCTP. This focus is central to PEA because it views formal institutions as platforms or largely ‘theatres’ within which informal decisions are made by small groups of politicians connected through networks of clientelism and patronage (Booth, 2005, as cited in Hickey, 2007). Accordingly, the study identifies actors ranging from international donors and government ministries to civil society organisations and local actors. These actors possess varying resource endowments, mainly financial and technical, which translate into differentiated bargaining power and influence over decision-making processes (Hemsteede, 2023). Such power enables actors to veto proposals or enforce compliance when their incentives are threatened or satisfied. This dynamic reflects the observed situation within Malawi’s SCTP, where donors provide approximately 95% of program costs and therefore wield substantial leverage over the Government of Malawi.

Second, PEA emphasises that actors’ interactions unfold within an institutional environment composed of formal policies, organisational arrangements, and informal norms or unwritten rules of the game that govern collaboration and resource allocation (Khan, 2017; Leftwich, 2004). This study examines institutional structures such as the newly established Multi-Donor Trust Fund (MDTF) and the SSTC, which play critical roles in mediating donor-government relations, harmonising funding streams, and establishing coordination mechanisms. Although the MDTF alleviates some financial fragmentation in program financing, it also reinforces donor dominance, thereby complicating government ownership and autonomy in decision-making, as discussed in the study findings section. Informal institutional norms also emerged strongly, as behind-the-scenes negotiations, patron-client relationships, and competitive inter-ministerial tensions influence governance beyond formal arrangements (Holmes et al., 2018).

Third, the framework foregrounds the asymmetric power relations underpinning the political settlement, in which donors typically dominate because of their financial resources and technical expertise. As Hemsteede (2023) and Keeley (2012) argue, such comparative advantage sets the pace and boundaries of SCTP policymaking. This asymmetry is reflected in the government’s constrained ability to lead or resist donor preferences, resulting in the diplomatic acceptance of proposals despite private reservations. However, political settlements are not static; they shift in response to broader political, economic, and social changes. This suggests that power relations and corresponding policy outcomes are contingent and contestable (Kelsall, 2018).

To depict the political economy approach used in this study, Figure 1 presents a conceptual framework. The framework highlights the key elements of the approach: actors and their respective roles, the institutional environment comprising formal and informal structure, and power asymmetries. The framework serves both as an analytical lens and as a heuristic tool to guide the subsequent examination of actor collaboration, decision-making autonomy, and program ownership.



Solid arrows represent the strong influence of donors through financing and expertise. Dashed arrows represent limited government influence and negotiation. Dotted lines denote indirect influence from informal actors.

Figure 1: Political Economy of SCTP Decision-Making: Actors, Domains and Power Relations

Figure 1 illustrates the three-layered domains of decision-making within Malawi's SCTP. The *financial domain* is dominated by donor agencies and the MoFEPD, reflecting the flow of funding and strategic control. The *technical or policy domain* includes multistakeholder committees (SSTC, SSSC), where donor expertise significantly shapes policy decisions alongside government participation. The *operational or administrative domain* includes the MoGCDSW and district-level implementers responsible for daily program execution.

The study employed this conceptual framework to move beyond a superficial account of political influence and provide a nuanced understanding of how intersecting actor relationships, institutional arrangements, and power asymmetries systematically shape SCTP governance and outcomes. This analytical approach aligns with key scholarly contributions emphasising that development programs in aid-dependent contexts must be understood through holistic political economy lenses to unravel implementation complexities (Khan, 2017; Leftwich, 2004; Mosses, 2004).

2.2. Political Economy Perspectives on Social Protection

A growing body of literature recognises that social protection programs in the Global South are not only shaped by technical considerations and financial inputs but also by underlying political economy dynamics. Hickey (2011) argues that the effectiveness and sustainability of social protection interventions depend heavily on prevailing political settlements, namely, the informal arrangements among elites that determine how power and resources are distributed. This perspective draws attention to how elite interests and power asymmetries influence program design, funding priorities, and ownership. These themes are highly relevant to the SCPT, where donors contribute a substantial proportion of financing.

Similarly, Slater and Farrington (2009) highlight that social protection initiatives often reflect a complex interplay among state capacity constraints, governance structures, and the strategic actions of domestic and external actors. This underscores the need to examine institutional arrangements and informal power relations as contextual factors that may explain the nature of actor collaboration and its implications for SCTP operations in Malawi. The nature of actor relationships is further elucidated by Wood's (2003) concept of "Faustian bargain," which frames social protection as a political compromise in which elites use targeted cash transfers to maintain sociopolitical stability without necessarily addressing broader structural inequities. This argument resonates with the power imbalance common in aid-dependent countries, where donor preferences may reflect wider political and economic agendas that extend beyond recipient governments' priorities (Hemsteede, 2023). For instance, empirical insights from Bierbaum et al. (2015) and Mukuni and Price (2014) reveal that donor influence increases when state actors lack technical expertise or financial autonomy needed to challenge external agendas. Collectively, these studies suggest that donor-government collaborations are embedded in asymmetric power relations that transcend formal institutional arrangements and decision-making arenas.

The study situates itself within this growing political economy literature by challenging dominant narratives that emphasise purely technical or financial explanations for social protection outcomes. It achieves this by foregrounding how power imbalances, elite bargaining, and donor dependency structurally shape program decision-making and ownership. In doing so, the study advances a more nuanced understanding of the factors that drive the effectiveness of social protection in aid-dependent settings.

3.0 Research Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative research design grounded in a constructivist paradigm to generate in-depth insights into the nature of donor-government collaboration. Specifically, the research focuses on actor roles, the nature of relationships among actors, and how these relationships shape the decision-making processes. This study targeted administrative and bureaucratic officials from MoGCDSW, MoFEPD, development partners, and private institutions at both policy and central levels. In doing so, the study captured actors from the hierarchical structure of the SCTP implementation organogram, including the National Social Support Steering Committee (NSSSC)

and NSSTC. The NSSSC comprises principal secretaries from key ministries, heads of missions from development partner institutions, and representatives from civil society. Hemsteede (2023) argues that the NSSSC is responsible for approving all major social protection policy issues, whereas the NSSTC, which includes several development partners, provides technical direction and recommendations on program implementation.

The study employed a purposive sampling technique to identify actors at the central and policy levels who are involved in SCTP implementation, particularly those engaged in the technical and decision-making processes. This was achieved through stakeholder mapping guided by the National Social Support Policy 2012, which remains in use while the new policy is being finalised. Although stakeholder mapping helped maximise the identification of formal actors, the study also identified informal or invited actors through snowball sampling. This approach was essential given the nature of the study, which required moving beyond formal ‘theatres’ to examine what occurs behind the scenes and within invited spaces. In qualitative research, sample size is shaped by the study’s ontological and methodological orientation. Accordingly, this study included 35 participants, with the final sample size guided by saturation, the point at which no new information emerges. Saturation was determined using two indicators. First, during the snowball sampling process, key informants initially recommended several participants who were not included in the researcher’s stakeholder mapping list. Over time, however, the number of newly recommended participants declined until no further relevant participants were identified. Second, the researcher observed that responses to certain sets of questions no longer generated new information. This prompted the researcher to modify questions and interviewing techniques to deepen the responses and focus on areas where knowledge gaps remained. Through this process, the study reached saturation with the participant distribution shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Participant Categories

Category	Number of interviewees
INGO or donor staff	12
Government officials	14
Academics and consultants (current and former)	3
Members of Parliament	2
Journalists	2
NGO and civil society representatives	2
Total	35

This study collected data from both primary and secondary sources necessary to address three specific and interconnected research questions: (a) Who are the key actors in SCTP implementation, and what roles do they play? (b) What is the nature of the collaboration among actors in decision-making processes? (c) What are the implications of donor-government interactions for program ownership, sustainability, and effectiveness? The methods and tools used to collect data are discussed below.

This study used key informant interviews (KIIs) with a semi-structured interview guide as the primary data collection tool. This type of interview was appropriate for the study because it enabled the researcher to examine both formal and hidden dimensions of human and organisational behaviour (Qu & Dumai, 2011). The study targeted different key informants from different line ministries, committees, and sectors to support data triangulation and consistency. Complementing the KIIs, in-depth interviews (IDIs) were conducted with

stakeholders such as Members of Parliament, journalists, and NGO representatives who, although not SCPT experts, offered valuable perspectives on the policy environment, advocacy, and public discourse surrounding the SCPT. This dual approach to data generation enabled a holistic understanding of SCTP implementation dynamics from both technical and social perspectives (Benard, 2011; Himmelman, 2002). The researcher also conducted a document review to collect secondary data on reported issues concerning the SCTP. These documents included donor reports, government reports, and academic publications. The document review helped identify dominant issues for further exploration during the primary data collection, including the establishment of the Multi-Donor Trust Fund (MDTF), payment arrears, delays in the endorsement of the new policy, and insufficient transfer values, among other issues.

After generating data, the study used a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) package, NVivo 14, to process and interpret the data. The researcher first transcribed the raw data generated from the KIIs and IDIs. The data were then analysed using Braun and Clarker's six-phase analytical process: *data familiarisation, generation of initial codes, development of categories and themes, review of generated themes, definition and naming of themes, and selection of illustrative extracts* (Braun and Clarke, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2020). During this process, the researcher employed reflexive thematic analysis using an inductive, data-driven approach.

4.0 Findings and Discussion

The study used political economy analysis to examine the nuanced nature of donor-government collaboration beyond financial transactions and its role in shaping decision-making in SCTP programming. The findings show that SCTP implementation involves both formal and informal actors whose roles are shaped by the division of labour and differences in power. This has significant implications for actor relationships and provides a lens through which decision-making jurisdictions can be understood. Accordingly, this section demonstrates how actor's roles shape their working relationships and how these relationships influence decision-making processes.

4.1 Actors and Roles

The SCTP brings together a range of actors, including international, local, political, and economic actors, as well as civil society organisations and NGOs, to address conditions of the ultra-poor. Identifying these actors is closely linked to understanding their roles, which include financial support, technical support, service provision, evidence generation, advocacy, and checks and balances.

4.1.1 Financial Support

In most developing countries, the allocation of national budgetary resources for public service provision remains challenging because of financial constraints; as a result, services are often underfunded or not provided. In the context of social protection financing, scholars have argued that such constraints create an essential space for development partners to fill financing gaps (Botlhale et al., 2015; Chinsinga, 2009; Hemsteede, 2023; Hickey, 2007). In the SCTP approximately 95% of funding comes from development partners, and 27 of Malawi's 28 districts are donor-funded. This demonstrates that development partners are key actors in the program. Contributions vary among donors: The World Bank funds 11 districts, the European Union funds 7 districts, the Government of Germany funds 7 districts, and the Government of Ireland funds 2 districts. The cumulative contributions from each donor are presented in Figure 4.1.

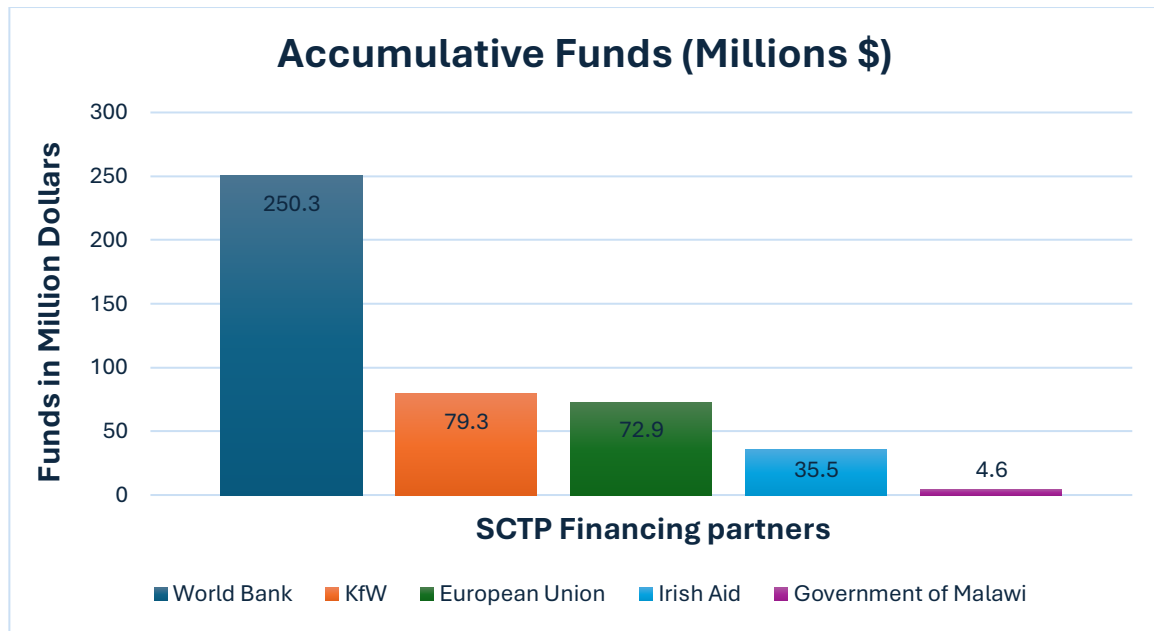


Figure 4.1: Individual Financial Cumulative Contributions

(Source: SCTP 2023 briefing report)

Hemsteede (2023) argues that the financial capacity of development partners gives them a comparative advantage, making it difficult for the Malawian government to reject donor preferences. Empirically, this is illustrated in the conceptual framework presented in Figure 1, where development partners exert influence across all three decision-making domains: financial, technical and policy, and operational and administrative. This arrangement reflects the notion of political settlement discussed by Kelsall (2018), as illustrated by Interviewee 1.

Government is meant to be diplomatic. So, you still accept even though you are protesting. That's how government officials are meant to be. Accept it. Don't frustrate them. Let them do it. But behind the scenes, you see people talking and saying, no, that's nonsense, that's nonsense, that's nonsense. They want us to do this anyway. It's their money. Allow them to do it.

The quotation suggests that the Malawian government is not only financially constrained but also dependent on external financial assistance, which limits its ability to oppose donor preferences or assume a clear leadership role (Congressional Budget Office, 1997). These dynamics reflect the “games within the rules”, whereby power distribution is linked to resource accumulation. As Khan (2017) and Hemsteede (2023) argue, the Malawian government's willingness to compromise its leadership role contributes to coordination challenges (Mukuni & Price, 2014). Holmes et al. (2018) similarly link weak coordination to fragmented financing, a problem that has affected implementation of the SCTP in Malawi for a long time. Recently, the establishment of the Multi Donor Trust Fund (MDTF) in 2023 has harmonised funding mechanisms for SCTP implementation. However, although the benefits of the MDTF should not be dismissed, it remains a mechanism that may reinforce the financial power imbalance between the Malawian government and donors and should therefore be treated with caution, as noted by a former consultant responsible for financial management. This imbalance is evident at the macro-level, where donor agencies dominate decisions on funding levels and allocation and use financial resources to shape strategic priorities and program stopgaps.

Efforts to mobilise additional resources have encountered political orthodoxy. In an interview, one Member of Parliament from the then-ruling party remarked:

As a country, we are not raising enough revenue to meet the budgetary needs. So, in this case, we cannot prioritise social cash transfer. You prioritise salaries of teachers and health workers. You prioritise the construction of roads so that people can see the developments by Chakwera for the campaign.

However, behind this formal narrative, which justifies government action, lies an informal political strategy. Resource commitment should be understood in relation to the government's ability to increase both the real cash value of transfers and program coverage. Ideally, the Government of Malawi has not fully met this expectation, as revisions to the transfer value largely depend on the government's willingness to act; an approach also shaped by donor strategy. This interpretation avoids a narrow reading by acknowledging the statement made by the then President of Malawi, Lazarus McCarthy Chakwera, in the 2024 State of the Nation Address (SONA), in which he stated that "his Administration has increased the monthly allocation that beneficiaries receive from 9,000 Kwacha to 19,000 Kwacha, and this is already being considered for an upward revision" (p. 17). Nonetheless, evidence from the budget presentation at the Bingu International Convention Centre (BICC) in Lilongwe on 28 June 2024 suggests that this increase was nominal rather than real. Therefore, government action should be understood through the lens of 'prioritisation' as the Member of Parliament indicated in the above quotation. This finding resonates with Chinsinga's (2007, 2012) studies, which found that resources tend to follow areas of political prioritisation.

4.1.2 Technical Support

Technical direction and guidance for the SCTP are provided by the SSTC at the central level. The SSTC submits recommendations and proposals to the SSSC for policy endorsement. The composition of the SSTC is largely dominated by development partners because of their technical expertise (Botlhale et al., 2015; Hemsteede, 2023). This expertise, which is reinforced by their financial capacity, enables development partners to commission independent research through consultants and academic researchers as invited actors. Consequently, development partners have a comparative advantage in influencing technical choices, policy priorities, and program design within the technical and policy decision-making domain, as illustrated in Figure 1. Although government actors participate in these processes, their technical capacity and resources are comparatively limited, which constrains their policy influence. For instance, during the fieldwork, information gaps among communities regarding beneficiary selection criteria were found to have motivated UNICEF to champion the piloting of categorical targeting. This initiative shifted policy direction from reliance solely on the proxy means test (PMT) to the use of PMT supplemented by categorical targeting. However, based on Siachiwena (2022) findings, such policy windows should be treated with caution; they can create entry points through which underlying agendas are advanced.

UNICEF and the International Labour Organisation (ILO) provide technical expertise, while actors with a financing role also support the government in financial management, program evaluations, linkages and referrals, development of a beneficiary registry, and development of the management information system (MIS). Similarly, the e-payment initiative has engaged Give Directly, an international organisation running a parallel social cash transfer program, in an invited space to learn from its management of electronic payments. In addition to development partners, the government also provides technical support. Specifically, this support is provided MoFEPD, particularly the Department of Poverty Reduction and Social Protection (PRSP), and the MoGCDSW. The MoFEPD is the policy holder, whilst the MoGCDSW is the implementing ministry (Government of Malawi [GoM], 2018). The MoFEPD provides technical support in the form of policy guidance and alignment of the program with the national development agenda. In contrast, the MoGCDSW provides technical implementation guidance through capacity-building support to the District Social Support Committee (DSSC), a subcommittee of the District Executive Committee (DEC). Holmes et al. (2018) argue that the DSSC comprises members from various line ministries and acts as an advisory body to the Community Social Support Committee (CSSC) at the village cluster level.

4.1.3 Service Provision

The MoGCDSW is mandated to spearhead the implementation of the SCTP. In this role, the ministry provides oversight to ensure that cash disbursement is adequate and predictable, and that district councils have the resources required to facilitate disbursement. With the transition from manual payment to electronic payment, SCTP implementation has incorporated private-sector service providers such as NBS Bank Plc, Telekom Networks Malawi (TNM), and Airtel Malawi, as payment intermediaries. Service provision is therefore a collaborative effort, with district councils playing a central role. However, district council operations dependent on financial and technical support from both the government and development partners. This places district councils in a recipient position, where delays in funds affect timely cash disbursement to service providers and beneficiaries. In an interview, a district officer who had worked in the program for more than 10 years described this recipient role as follows: “What we do is just to cry; ok, when is the money coming? And not necessarily to say who has delayed the money, the funds.” This quotation illustrates issues of power relations (Hemsteede, 2023) and political settlement as a constraint on institutional performance (Khan, 2010, 2017). Khan (2017) argues that enforcing compliance among actors requires ‘holding power’, which neither the MoGCDSW nor the Malawian government possesses. The situation becomes more complex when the government itself delays the provision of funds. For example, at the time of data generation, the government had accumulated six months of arrears. Thus, implementation allows considerable discretion, as arrears are not a new phenomenon, even among development partners.

Another important set of actors within the service provision portfolio comprises NGOs. NGOs such as Save the Children, CARE International, United Purpose, and Christian Aid are mainly involved in implementing cash-plus interventions. Under the resilient livelihoods pillar of the Social Cash Transfer Strategic Plan, 2022-2027, SCTP implementation has recently adopted a more holistic approach by combining cash transfers with livelihood initiatives that empower ultra-poor households to move beyond vulnerability. Cash-plus interventions include livelihood promotion activities, financial inclusion training, and social empowerment.

4.1.4 Evidence-based Dissemination

In the public policy sphere, program implementation follows a systemic framework in which implementation is subject to monitoring, evaluation, and feedback mechanisms (Dye, 2013). SCTP implementation involves IDinsight, a technical partner whose mission is to generate data and evidence for decision-makers and to ensure that decision-making is evidence-informed. This role gives IDinsight the mandate to question the feasibility of any decision made and assess the decision-making process against the parameters of inclusion and exclusion of other actors. In addition, academic research institutions and consultants have been vital in evidence generation and dissemination.

Recently, credit has been given to the University of North Carolina (UNC), the Centre for Social Research (CSR) at the University of Malawi, and the UNICEF Office of Research-Innocenti (OoR), whose work has generated much-needed evidence to inform program redesign and improve interventions. Nonetheless, as Interviewee 1 stated: “Even though they can make a good study, but how they disseminate the results and also the impact is slightly minimal.” This statement is important for understanding decision-making processes because it highlights the tenacity of policy narratives (Institute of Development Studies, 2006), particularly the extent to which some narratives are acted upon at the expense of others. Empirically, fieldwork data show that both the government and donors have been unwilling to adopt the annual cash transfer adjustment formula developed by Ronald Mangani or the proposal to peg transfer levels to the United States dollar (Interviewee 16). This helps explain why achieving adequate transfer levels remains a persistent challenge, as documented by Chinsinga (2009) and GoM (2022). This challenge has motivated the involvement of media organisations, particularly journalists, in disseminating information and highlighting SCTP success stories. Ostensibly, this serves as a foundation for broader advocacy.

4.1.5 Advocacy Support

Actors understand the political climate surrounding SCTP implementation and the need to invest in program advocacy. Advocacy activities are expressed through lobbying, awareness raising, resource mobilisation, and efforts to secure political acceptability. Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) stand out in this category because they raise awareness among communities about SCTP programming, particularly targeting criteria and program conditions. In addition, CSOs work with the Malawian government to identify ways of increasing the government's resource commitment. In this regard, a CSO official stated that: "We've been mounting a lot of advocacy for government to organise, to get organised in the mining sector because that is the sector we have identified to have the potential to bring more money into the economy." This would enable the government to make a substantial contribution to the SCTP funding, thereby promoting domestically driven program sustainability and the attainment of the government's desired leadership position (Mukuni & Price, 2014).

The ILO has been an important actor in advocating to both the government and the donor community. Concerning the government, the ILO has supported the MoGCDSW on several occasions by facilitating meetings with Members of Parliament to lobby for political buy-in. This has included arranging field visits to selected districts to provide political elites with first-hand experiences of the program. The ILO also plays a crucial role within the United Nations (UN) system by advocating for the well-being of ultra-poor households. However, as interviewee 2, a participant from a CSO, stated: "It's only ILO within the UN family that speaks on behalf of the poor. But this is a very small organisation. You should check. It's a very small organisation within the UN family." These sentiments suggest that power politics may be unavoidable. For this reason, the government continues to engage donors in advocacy campaigns that complement ILO initiatives. For instance, an Interviewee 25, a government official, stated: "There was a wave of donor fatigue somewhere, to an extent that it was threatening the existence of the program. So, it had to take us [government] into moving with another gear so that we convince the donors that they should not stop financing." This illustrates the central role of advocacy initiatives in sustaining the program.

4.1.6 Checks and Balances

Khan (2017) argues that the distribution of power in a project setting has implications for compliance enforcement among multiple actors. In this regard, Hemsteede (2023) findings demonstrate a horizontal distribution of power in which donors collectively possess greater financial and technical power than the Government of Malawi. The vertical distribution of power also reveals power dynamics within the donor family itself. This sentiment was echoed by Interviewees 1, 3, 6, 13, who noted: If the World Bank says something, everybody listens and the reason is that they are providing more resources. This is why Khan argues for the need to establish independent checks and balances that regulate alignment between implementation and the agreed policy framework. To improve service provision, the SCTP relies substantially on monitoring and evaluation (M&E), including coordination meetings where all actors share experience. Similarly, the program relies on field monitoring visits and effective grievance redress mechanisms (GRM), which fall under case management. Through the GRM, beneficiaries lodge their complaints through community leaders, suggestion boxes, and the national toll-free line, 351. This mechanism has enabled the program to address some improper practices by some local leaders at the community level.

Additionally, the SCTP relies on the management information system (MIS), a database managed with support from consultants. The MIS serves as a tool for tracking when cash was dispatched by the financing agency, when it was disbursed to beneficiaries, how long disbursement took, and which actors had not dispatched funds. In this regard, the MIS functions as a transparent system that places actors under scrutiny. However, although this initiative is important, compliance enforcement remains weak beyond the transparency mechanisms and negotiated forms of compliance. Taken together, these dynamics indicate considerable discretion in program implementation.

Within the checks and balances framework, SCTP implementation strategically involves the Parliamentary Committee on Community and Social Welfare, which acts as an oversight body and as a bridge between the program and political elites. In this regard, Interviewee 10, a representative of an INGO, stated that: “Parliamentary committee is better placed than civil societies to hold the government accountable on whether the approved budget has been implemented accordingly as they are mandated by law.” However, the effectiveness of this oversight role depends on whether the parliamentary committee prioritize the social cash transfer, an issue discussed earlier and underscored by Hemsteede (2023). Another plausible explanation for the actions of the parliamentary committee is the nature of the “apolitical” ideology underpinning program implementation, which seeks to limit political interference. This chapter’s discussion of key actors and their roles is summarised in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1: Key Actors and their Roles

Role	Formal Actors	Informal/Invited Spaces Actors
Financial Support	World Bank, European Union, KfW, Irish Govt, Govt of Malawi	United States Agency for International Development (USAID), Government of Norway, United Kingdom Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (UK-FCDO), Government of Iceland
Technical Support	MoFEPD, MoGCDSW, UNICEF, ILO, Financing Donors	GiveDirectly, Consultants/Academia, DODMA
Service Provision	MoGCDSW, District & Local Councils (DSSC, CSSC)	NBS Bank, TNM, Airtel, NGOs like Save the Children, CARE International
Evidence Dissemination	IDinsight, UNICEF, ILO, MoGCDSW	Consultants/Academia
Advocacy Support	MoGCDSW, ILO	Civil Society Organizations
Checks and Balances	MoGCDSW, MoFEPD, Parliamentary Committee, DSSC, CSSC	Consultants/Academia

Source: Compiled by the Author

4.2 Actors’ Relationships

Political economy analysis examines institutional arrangements comprising actors, organisations, and the structural working environment, as well as their bidirectional relationships. Actors’ behavior can shape the working environment and the working environment can, in turn, shape actors’ behavior, with these effects mediated through institutional arrangements. Guided by reflective thematic analysis, the study used semantic and latent coding to identify four dominant types of actors’ relationships: cordial, patron-client, competitive, and deferential dependency.

4.2.1 Cordial Relationship

Fieldwork findings indicate that, to a considerable extent, actors maintain cordial relationships. Twenty-two interviewees described these relationships using terms such as good, mutual, beneficial, cordial, positive, informative, and collaborative. These descriptions are visualised in the Word Cloud presented in Figure 4.1, which displays the 30 most frequent words.



Figure 4.1: Word Cloud Visualisation

The cordial relationship is based on the recognition that each actor has a comparative advantage that adds value to SCTP operations. Bayart (2000) and Whitfield et al. (2017) discuss the mutual interdependence of political and economic actors, which is manifested through access to resources, political and social stability, and policy influence and support. Empirically, Hemsteede (2023) argues that although Malawian political elites appear not to prioritise the SCTP, they nevertheless value continued funding from development partners because it gives them the freedom “to pursue their own priorities without having to worry as much about the most vulnerable 10% of the population” (p. 211). Conversely, the SCTP gives development partners visibility and access to policy windows, as well as opportunities to influence policy through domestic actors (Chasukwa, 2018). Fieldwork findings show that cordial relationships among actors rest on a clear division of labour, program harmonisation, consultative processes, and transparent programming. Interviewee 19, a development partner official with 14 years of experience, referred to the roles of UNICEF and Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) as follows: “You know that UNICEF is working on this area, GIZ is working on this area, and there’s always that room or space for dialogue...”

Nonetheless, Khan (2010, 2017) cautions that a good working relationship does not necessarily translate into effective programming because actors are rational beings and pursue self-interests. This concern is reflected in Interviewee 1’s assertion: “The nature of the relationship is good but not effective. Good in the sense that people are just observing and doing whatever they can afford, but it’s not effective because the losers are the people in the communities”. For instance, in consultative processes, decisions must be agreed upon by all parties before they can be adopted. The implication is particularly evident in efforts to increase the cash transfer value: harmonization has depended on broad acceptance, and when such acceptance is absent, the agenda loses momentum. Perhaps for this reason, program recommendations have consistently pointed towards pooled funding, which is currently being pursued.

4.2.2 Patron-client Relationship

The institutional arrangements of any development initiative depend on the financial sustainability of those arrangements, which gives economic actors a comparative advantage. This dynamic creates a patron-client relationship based on resource control, which serves as a tool of power. Booth (2005) argues that patron-client relationships exist in informal spaces such that formal institutional arrangements often function as “theatres” for informal decision-making. Within Malawi’s broader social protection financing arrangements, development

partners play a recognized role in supporting the Government of Malawi by helping to address fiscal constraints. This has created a form of patron-client dependency in which the Government of Malawi exercises diplomatic loyalty to donor preferences to secure continued support (Congressional Budget Office, 1997; Hemsteede, 2023). As depicted in the conceptual framework presented in Figure 1, donor influence operates both vertically and horizontally within the SCPT governance structure.

Vertically, as indicated by arrows, the framework illustrates a top-down flow of power whereby donors exert significant control across hierarchical tiers, beginning with financial resource allocation, cascading through policy decision-making, and extending to operational implementation. This vertical influence shows how donor dominance permeates each successive level of program governance while limiting the government's autonomy at each stage. Horizontally, donor influence extends across peers and collaborating actors, leading to coordination challenges and competition among donors, thereby complicating harmonisation efforts. Together, these vertical and horizontal dimensions explain the persistence of a deferential dependency relationship that constrains the Government of Malawi's ability to exercise genuine leadership and ownership within the SCTP. Twelve interviewees identified this relationship type, as shown in the Project Map presented in Figure 2.

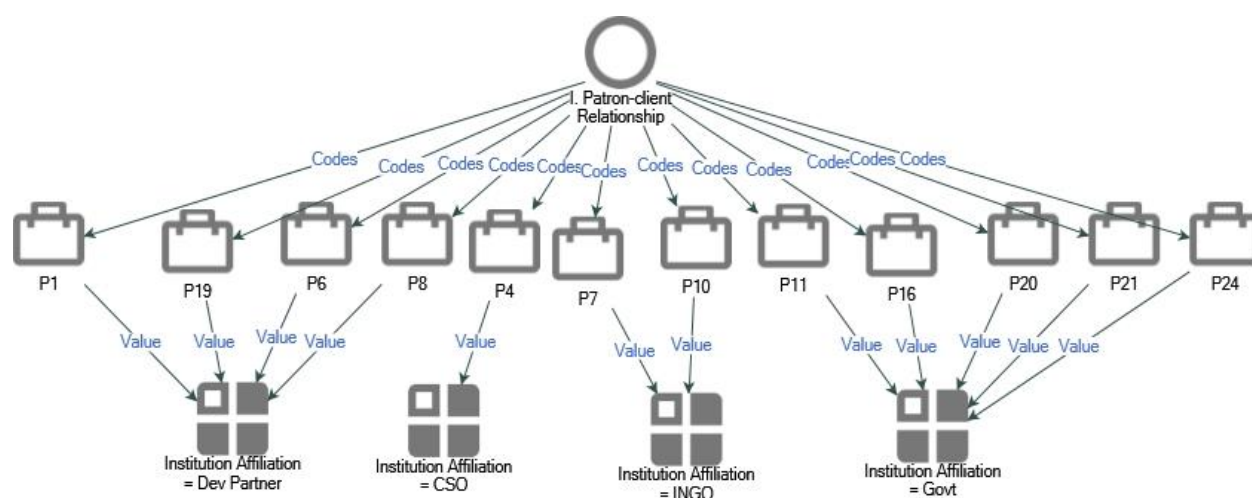


Figure 1: Project Map Visualization

The patron-client relationship has implications for decision-making because money, power, and control become tools that donors can deploy. Consistent with the argument by Kwak (2002), Booth (2005), and Leiderer (2012), a development partner official, Interviewee 6, stated: “There’s that level of informal and almost unsaid decision-making that happens because of where the finance is coming from. I mean, he who has the, you know, pipe, toots the horn.” Against this backdrop, Mukuni and Price (2014) argue that control over program implementation can easily shift to financiers, contrary to the formal arrangement in which the Government of Malawi is assumed to take the leading role. As Interviewee 11 explained, “when the donors say, ‘let’s do it in this manner,’ you’ll find that, you know, the government would say, ‘yes, let’s take that route.’ Let’s take that route.” Similar sentiments were expressed by Interviewees 1, 4, and 24.

Ideally, the patron-client relationship also provides a lens for understanding the pace at which change materializes and how change is sometimes blocked at critical junctures. Policy changes that not have financial implications are more easily adopted than those with upward financial implications. For instance, actors discussed and adopted categorical targeting and electronic payment more quickly than revisions to the cash transfer value or increases in coverage from 10% to 15% or higher. Although fieldwork findings show that revising the cash transfer value is a negotiated process, donors often provide the stopgap funding and therefore influence the direction of the process. As Interviewee 19, a development partner official, stated: “Donors always provide the stopgap. They know what

they want and usually they're the ones who drive it because they're financing it. Just to put it bluntly." This sentiment aligns with Bawa's (2013) findings on the challenges that NGOs face in donor-funded projects in Ghana.

4.2.3 Competition

Actors involved in SCTP implementation not only portray cordial relationships but also competitive relationships. To a large extent, this competition is driven by self-interested agendas. This phenomenon was identified by nine interviewees and applies to both government and donor actors within informal spaces. The SCTP falls under two dominant line ministries: the MoFEPD, as the policy holder, and the MoGCDSW, as the implementer. This arrangement creates internal tension between the two ministries regarding program ownership: Who is the rightful owner of the program? Holmes et al. (2018) argue that in countries such as Ghana, South Africa, and Zambia, where one ministry has sole custodianship of social protection programs, the experience has been commendable. To understand Malawi's program arrangement, the researcher used process-tracing methodology, which found that behind the formal narratives justifying the involvement of the MoFEPD in national program financing lies an informal narrative. Interviewee 1 recalled:

"UNICEF pushed EP&D [Economic Planning and Development] to become policy holder in 2007, when they thought that the Ministry of Gender was delaying doing some other things. When they pushed it there, it got stuck... and everybody has just adopted the mess."

This creates the political settlement landscape described by Kelsall (2018), in which actors choose to settle for the sake of peace, while, in practice, they may consider the MoGCDSW better placed to lead. However, the establishment of the Multi Donor Trust Fund (MDTF) has intensified this tension by recognizing the National Local Government Finance Committee (NLGFC) as a key financial actor within the World Bank business model. Interviewee 23, a consultant, stated: "That's definitely a challenge at the government kind of political level, the kind of the balance of power and who is in control." In this sense, neither the MoGCDSW nor the MoFEPD feels a sense of control and autonomy over SCTP operations.

Similarly, the donor experience is no exception, as it reflects competition among actors. This was illustrated by an experienced development partner, who stated:

Coordinating donors, I can say it is not a simple thing. Donors are always fighting. We are always fighting. Always fighting. It's normal. Reason, when a donor gives money, they want to influence the ministry; they want to influence the ministry. So rarely will a donor support somebody's view when they know the other person will be seen as a key player.

This internal competition among donors introduces fragmentation within what might superficially appear to be a unified donor bloc. Although donors collectively maintain substantial influence over SCTP decision-making arenas, their divergent priorities and rivalries often hinder cohesive donor strategies.

This fragmentation complicates the Government of Malawi's coordination role because it must continuously navigate and negotiate among competing donor agendas. Consequently, the government's position as the "holding centre" reflects ongoing mediation rather than genuine leadership autonomy. For instance, after the introduction of the MDTF, all traditional donors, along with other emerging donors, joined the fund except KfW. The formal explanation for KfW's abstention points to its institutional mandate, which restricts direct fund channelling to government entities in contexts of elevated fiduciary risk. However, informal accounts reveal a more nuanced dynamic: KfW was simultaneously championing a similar pooled funding mechanism known as the Social Support Fund. Yet the World Bank effectively superseded this initiative by swiftly establishing the MDTF, thereby attracting many donors to the fund. Consequently, KfW chose to distance itself, concerned about being overshadowed. This episode exemplifies how inter-donor competition and fragmentation within donor

coordination frameworks further complicate the Government of Malawi’s effort to assert unified leadership over SCTP implementation.

4.2.4 Deferential Dependency

The concept of deferential dependency can be linked to the patron-client relationship. Whereas patron-client relations are built on transactional exchanges, loyalty, and compliance, deferential dependency refers to a tendency in which an action depends on another actor’s approval. The analogy is that of seeking consent before taking a particular action. In this case, the Government of Malawi appears to transcend the patron-client relationship by identifying the World Bank as a financial actor that controls the pace of action, such that the Bank’s readiness and approval determine the government’s course of action. This dynamic is reflected in the statement of one government official: “If the World Bank says something, everybody listens; why, they are providing more resources.” The adopted conceptual framework (Figure 1) situates this dependency within the broader political settlement by highlighting how power asymmetries are operationalized in decision-making processes, not only through formal institutional arrangements but also through subtle mechanisms of consent and acquiescence.

In this case, deferential dependency extends beyond mere financial reliance to encompass the government’s strategic accommodation of donor timelines, priorities, and readiness to act. A clear illustration appears in the account of Interviewee 13, a development partner official with 18 years of experience, who explained:

In a context where the World Bank says we should move from A to B, the government will run onto B without hesitation. You get the point? Maybe the technical panel could say, ‘oh, maybe we should wait.’ But the government says, ‘oh, yes, the World Bank says we are ready now.’ The government will say, ‘yeah, they’re also ready.’ They will start doing it. Such deference weakens the government’s decision-making autonomy.

Behuria, Buur and Gray (2017) and Khan (2010, 2017) argue that understanding institutional arrangements provides a lens through which to interpret actors’ actions. Government officials also actively shape deferential dependency and use it strategically, recognizing that it also influences the actions of development partners. For instance, process-tracing evidence shows that the idea of harmonized funding predated the COVID-19 pandemic and was championed by KfW under the concept of a “Social Support Fund”. When the Social Support Fund failed to materialize, government officials used informal institutional networks and encouraged the World Bank to champion the Multi Donor Trust Fund (MDTF), which later attracted all traditional donors except KfW. This dynamic was captured by Interviewee 11, who stated: “For the other donors, they thought that the initiative was actually coming from the World Bank.”

Applying the political settlements framework in this study demonstrates that deferential dependency is not simply a transactional relationship based on resource exchange, but a structured process of negotiated approval embedded within institutional and informal political norms. This understanding underscores the government’s constrained autonomy within aid-dependent partnerships, where donor approval effectively functions as a gatekeeper for policy change and program implementation. The framework thus helps unpack the nuanced interplay between formal donor influence and informal political accommodation that characterizes Malawi’s SCTP governance.

5.0 Concluding Remarks

This study used a political economy framework to examine the nature of collaboration among actors within Malawi’s SCTP. The analysis reveals a pronounced power asymmetry: donors exert significant influence over all decision-making domains through patron-client and dependency relationships, largely because of their financial leverage and technical expertise. Consequently, the Government of Malawi’s autonomy in program design and implementation remains constrained. The political economy framework applied in this study underscores that the collaboration between donors and the Government of Malawi is not merely technical or administrative but is deeply embedded in resource-based power relations and politically negotiated settlements. Although a cordial and

consultative working relationship exists among actors, these interactions are often circumscribed by the financial control that donors exercise, which effectively shapes the policy and implementation landscape of the SCTP.

Although the study identifies the structural challenges posed by donor dominance, it also highlights the subtle informal negotiation mechanisms that the Government of Malawi and other actors leverage within the existing political settlement. These insights contribute to the broader scholarly literature by illustrating how political economy analysis can reveal the nuances of cooperation and contestation in aid-dependent social protection programs. Rather than advancing broad calls for “reformed collaboration,” this study invites a realistic appraisal of power relations that shape development partnerships and advocates for nuanced, context-sensitive strategies to enhance government agency and sustainable social policy advancement.

However, this study acknowledges certain limitations. The qualitative design, which primarily focused on the central policy level, did not capture all levels of the SCTP implementation structure, including beneficiaries’ perspectives. Additionally, the findings are context-specific and may not be fully generalizable to other social protection settings in sub-Saharan Africa. Future research could employ mixed methods approaches, incorporate beneficiary voices more extensively, and undertake comparative analyses with other countries, such as Zambia and Ethiopia, to deepen understanding of how political economy shapes social protection governance.

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