

Changing the world
with **women and girls**
act:onaid

Imagining Feminist Wellbeing Economies In Malawi and Beyond

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Acronyms

Afreximbank	African Export Import Bank
AWID	Association for Women's Rights in Development
DWCP	Decent Work Country Programme
FEAM	Feminist Macroeconomic Alliance
FWE	Feminist wellbeing economy
GBV	Gender-based violence
GDP	Gross domestic product
GNH	Gross National Happiness
GRB	Gender-responsive budgeting
IFI	International Financial Institutions
ILO	International Labour Organization
IMF	International Monetary Fund
MNC	Multinational company
MNSSP	Malawi National Social Support Programme
NPF	National Performance Framework
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
SAP	Structural adjustment programme
SSE	Social and solidarity economy
TRIPS	Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights
USA	United States of America
VAT	Value-added tax
WEAI	Wellbeing Economy Alliance
WTO	World Trade Organization

1. Introduction: The failures of the current economic model

The world is experiencing the manifestation of multiple crises that have been 500 years in the making and intensified by globalisation and the neoliberal economic paradigm (see Box 2). The COVID-19 pandemic is the latest iteration of the world's 'unwellness,' which flows from debt crises, the climate crisis, social unrest, political brutality, and the normalisation of fascist politics across Europe and the United States. The impact is severe for women in the Global South, who are the most likely to experience job and income losses, precarious health, appalling deficits in socioeconomic and emotional wellbeing. This illustrates a fundamental failure of the prevailing economic model in its violence towards women in the Global South, as well as Black, Brown and migrant women in the Global North.

Since the early 1980s, the world (and the Global South in particular) has been subjected to a new socioeconomic crisis every few years. This began with Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) (See Box 1), instituted by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) after World War II to help 'stabilise' economies, but which demanded suffocating austerity. SAPs created instability and volatility and further weakened the ability of States, particularly in Africa, to cope with other prevailing crises and pursue post-independence plans to reverse colonial policies. At the same time, social inequality had been growing at an alarming rate, both within nations, and between the Global South and North. This is particularly cynical, given that countries of the Global North have the controlling stake in these financial institutions, which were established to enforce and maintain colonial power relations.¹

This is a form of minority rule with pointed and deliberate racial and power imbalances. It means that the role of non-Western member States in those neoliberal financial institutions is reduced to that of a mere rubber stamp. As Jamie Martin describes:

"These institutions gave civil servants, bankers, and colonial authorities from Europe and the United States the extraordinary power to enforce austerity, oversee development programs, and regulate commodity prices. Many of them had civilizational, paternalistic, and white supremacist assumptions, which they used to justify meddling in the economies of other states." Martin argues that these institutions were, in fact, repackaging 19th-century practices of financial imperialism in a new, more sanitised form, given the decline of the European empires and the rising claims to self-determination.²

Box 1: Structural Adjustment Programmes

SAPs originated in the 1970s through a series of financial stresses including decreasing oil prices and several debt crises, and required onerous repayment modalities to the IMF and World Bank. They were based on loans, which provided countries with the resources to continue functioning and rebuild their infrastructure and services. SAPs were a series of policies designed to decrease the role of the State in the economy, while expanding that of private companies (and privatisation) in offering essential services for citizens. SAPs have had multiple adverse impacts for countries - particularly those of the Global South - including diminished health outcomes, under-nutrition, decreasing access to healthcare for the poorest sections of society, and food insecurity. SAPs (in their ongoing forms) threaten the sovereignty of national economies, particularly of African countries, and leave them susceptible to the influences of external capital and foreign policy.

Therefore, deeper analysis is required of the systemic impacts of colonialism that we continue to experience today, and their contribution to the daily experiences of women, girls and marginalised communities.

The language of fiscal consolidation or fiscal adjustment is another mechanism to continue on the well-worn and largely failed path of structural adjustment, without calling it as such. Fiscal consolidation has almost the same austere impacts as SAPs,³ demanding higher taxes and lower public spending. It makes rigid expenditure assumptions without contingency considerations for unpredictable events like climate-related floods and hurricanes, as well as other disasters. Yet, these are in place and are disproportionately impacting countries of the Global South.

Evidence shows that income inequality increased by 11 percent in low-and middle-income countries between 1990 and 2010, 20 years following SAPs. Furthermore, losses incurred by the Global South outpace their aid receipts by a factor of 30. Hickel et al. suggest that this is a result of 'Unequal Exchange Theory,' which enables countries of the Global North to disproportionately extract natural, labour and financial resources from countries of the Global South. They further argue that, in 2015, the North syphoned enough from the South to end hunger 70 times over.⁴

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the biggest global health emergency in a century occurred and half of the low and middle-income countries¹ contended with a sharp decline in health spending. During the pandemic, when domestic and inter-partner violence intensified, investments in gender-based violence (GBV) prevention and response were highly inadequate at 0.0002 percent of the overall COVID-19 response.⁵ This escalation of violence against women and girls during the pandemic has been described as a 'collision of pandemics'.⁶ Furthermore, according to the Commitment to Reducing Inequality Index, half of the countries tracked had cut social protection spending, 70 percent cut their share of education spending, and two-thirds failed to increase their minimum wage in line with gross domestic product (GDP). During the same period, when additional revenue was acutely needed, 95 percent of countries did not increase taxation on the wealthiest people and corporations. In fact, the top tax rates for businesses fell resulting in more regressive tax regimes (See Box 2).

This means that the lowest paid workers carry a disproportionately high tax burden compared to higher wage earners.

Box 2: Regressive tax, where does Value-Added Tax feature?

Indirect taxes are generally found in the form of consumption tax, usually value-added tax (VAT). Without the application of exemptions, VAT is a regressive tax because all people pay the same rate, regardless of their income, and because poor people necessarily spend a greater proportion of their income on consumable goods. In some countries, such as India, basic food items are not exempt from VAT, meaning that the poorest households pay a higher proportion of their total expenditure in tax than the rich. However, many countries' VAT systems include zero-ratings and exemptions on certain items, such as basic food and cooking fuel, which are intended to lighten the tax burden on the people experiencing poverty. Studies have shown that these measures generally prevent the tax from being regressive. However, the effect can be that the highest burden of tax, as a proportion of income, moves to middle-income households and not to the wealthiest. These groups are likely to benefit most in absolute terms from exemptions and zero-ratings because they spend the most on commodities.⁷

In the midst of everything described above, globalisation is creating new flows of low-paid, exploited, feminised labour across the world. This is notable in the realm of care work, as Black and Brown women migrate to seek income opportunities as teachers, nurses and caretakers for children and the elderly. The bulk of this migration is from the Global South to North. The Global Care Chain depends on these women to provide low or even unpaid, unprotected labour across the world, with little or no access to social protection

1. These terms are used for conceptual familiarity but are problematic and do not reflect the colonial and extractive context as to why some countries are 'low income,' even though they have large natural resource endowments. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9185389/>

provisions. The work of Black feminists like Kimberly Crenshaw and Sylvia Tamale has provided an intersectional analysis of the gendered, racialised, ableist, patriarchal class oppression upon which the Global Care Chain feeds.⁸

Conditions for Black women are worsened by the limitations of coping mechanisms in informal economies, where women are disproportionately concentrated and which have little or no safety net or social protection provisions. Further, the situation for these women becomes increasingly precarious as they face systemic workplace and sexual violence that most of their male counterparts do not contend with. They are once more the collateral damage of austerity measures that have decimated labour opportunities across African, Asian and Latin American countries and damaged subsidised health and care services across Europe and North America. The result is a neocolonial appetite for gendered and racialised ‘cheap Black labour’.

Unless there are significant political and ideological shifts, particularly in the Global North, as the primary architects, the neoliberal consensus is almost certain to continue to consolidate unabated. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) has

examined IMF country reports from 81 low and middle-income, and 45 high-income countries from between 2016 and 2020. It found that they showed plans for austerity measures including: “(i) elimination or reduction of subsidies, including on fuel, agriculture and food products (in 132 countries); (ii) wage bill cuts/caps, including the salaries of education, health and other public sector workers (in 130 countries); (iii) rationalising and further targeting of safety nets (in 107 countries); (iv) pension reforms (in 105 countries); (v) labour market reforms (in 89 countries); and (vi) healthcare reforms (in 56 countries).”

The report continues: “According to Ortiz and Cummings, many governments are also considering revenue-raising side-measures like taxing and selling public assets. These can severely impact economically vulnerable populations by introducing or broadening consumption taxes such as VAT. These have already been raised in 138 countries, while 55 countries have privatised State assets and services. The IMF’s subsequent reports confirm that the COVID-19 pandemic only exacerbated these measures and the institution aims to continue fiscal austerity until 2025”⁹



Tiwonge, a University Student at Lilongwe University of Science and Technology sharing a light moment with fellow students

The system today is centred on profit through the exploitation of the most vulnerable and unsustainable extraction from the environment that we must protect in order to survive. None of this is congruent with what wellbeing or human progress should be or how it should be measured. None of it can lead us to a de-racialised, non-patriarchal, feminist wellbeing economy (FWE). We need an alternative economic model centred on care, that values women's unpaid and paid labour and has the capacity to rectify the wrongs of the colonial legacy, SAPs and the neoliberal paradigm. It is important to remember that these systems of mutuality and care are not necessarily new, but can reclaim indigenous philosophies that have been eroded or sidelined by slavery, colonialism and neoliberalism. For many African countries, which have been economically devastated by neoliberal prescripts, this represents an important path to radically reimagining a more autonomous, decolonised, socially-transformative possibility.

This report aims to reveal the damaging impacts of the current neoliberal paradigm and economic structures, and enables us to rethink and reimagine a radical transition to an equitable and sustainable new global economic order and a future that puts humanity and wellbeing at its core. It explores and sets out the principles, ideas and concepts for FWE that rejects the notion of profits over people and presents a new vision for society and communities. Transitioning to FWE will require a systems-change approach that seeks to reveal the devastating impacts of colonial legacy, the continued illicit financial flows, tax evasion, agri-business and capitalist extraction of natural resources. It will require applying a decolonial lens and alternative approaches such as agroecology, pluralism and wellbeing as a metric of development (rather than GDP). The research also considers what this agenda means for IFIs, donors and other countries in the Global North.

This report focuses on Malawi as the context of study and application, one of many countries in Africa grappling with acute economic challenges deriving from the factors mentioned above. It is still dealing with the impacts of the IMF and World Bank imposed SAPs, and the consequent mounting debt that it's repaying every year. Simultaneously, Malawi is also experiencing a growing feminist and civil society activism demanding economic justice,^{10/11} which makes it a suitable case study for this paper.

Rooted in a vision of FWE developed by feminist activists in Malawi, this report explores some possibilities that could be pursued and implemented to achieve a radical transition to FWE.

The report begins by explaining the methodology for this research, including the limitations and challenges encountered in the process. It then analyses the current economic paradigm, the failures and shortcomings of the current economic model and reliance on GDP, neoliberalism, and the impact of austerity policies. It also explores the gendered impacts of the current system, and need to shift to a FWE adopting a decolonial and intersectional approach. It then introduces the economic, social and political scenario of the Malawian context, it's reliance on debt and resource extraction by multinationals, key factors of its population and the impacts of this system on the most vulnerable groups. The paper goes on to lay out the key components needed to shift to a wellbeing economy, recommending policy pathways for the Malawian context. This is with the recognition that this is an initial attempt at formulating what it means to re-imagine a new economic order with many conversations yet to be had and therefore this being a continued and iterative process. It is thus important to consider the questions posed by Lyn Ossome *"In our demands to those who leverage global power, how do we collectively articulate what human rights mean in context where scarcity and exclusion are historical? how do we derive accountability from global governance structure without erasing or minimizing differences, that are very much a legacy of the colonising structure that still determine how most of the world experience social life."*¹² Finally, it presents ideas and examples from other countries where the shift to a wellbeing economy has been attempted and explored, followed by ways forward and recommendations for international financial institutions (IFIs), donors and governments in the Global North.

Methodology²

This participative, action-orientated research process is aimed at supporting feminist movement-building and advocacy in Malawi.

The research in Malawi is based on engagement with several stakeholders, including:

- Government – through interviews with representatives from key government ministries, including the Ministry of Gender, Children and Community Development, Ministry of Trade and Industry, Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security, Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, and Ministry of Health
- Academia and broad civil society – through interviews
- We also convened two workshops in Lilongwe, Malawi's capital city, with members and representatives of the Feminist Macroeconomic Alliance (FEAM), workers' organisations, women farmers, LGBTQIA+ rights groups and sex workers, to build a vision of a FWE and develop an advocacy agenda around this.

Limitations and challenges

There were several limitations to the research. Firstly, as the research rolled out, it became apparent that the majority of the workshop and interview respondents, including key informants, were not aware of the subject matter, 'including on' the concepts of a wellbeing economy the concepts of a wellbeing economy and FWE. This, we consider, will make this work groundbreaking in Malawi. It is an initial attempt at formulating what it means to reimagine a new economic order and therefore is a new and initial step in that direction, with many conversations yet to be had.

Secondly, the research was limited by bureaucratic rigidities as most government respondents were reluctant to freely express themselves on a number of areas, which they deemed sensitive.

These challenges have been overcome by an attempt to exhaust the literature on the subject and gain valuable knowledge from the visioning workshops, where the majority of participants were graduates of the Malawi Feminist Macroeconomics Academy.³

1.1. Challenges posed by the current dominant economic paradigm

Neoliberalism (See Box 3) emerged as the dominant economic model in the 1980s, from the Bretton Woods Institutions of the IMF and World Bank. It was bolstered by the creation of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1993.

Neoliberalism supports the belief that economic growth is best measured by GDP (see Box 4), and that the free market is the best means of 'efficient distribution of resources'. This means 'freeing' markets and corporations from State intervention, removing State regulations (deregulation), opening markets to foreign investors (liberalisation), opening local markets and producers to larger global companies (competition), privatising State assets and resources (privatisation) and reducing government expenditure in public services (austerity).

This approach is based on the unproven assumption that the private sector is more efficient than the State. This supposedly increases quality and consumer choice. Neoliberalism treats people as 'consumers' rather than citizens and community members with agency. Under neoliberalism, the environment is viewed as a resource from which to extract value and wealth. This justifies the privatisation of common land and neocolonial landgrabs in the Global South. It also justifies the racism and sexism that are apparent in the structural violence on which neoliberalism functions. This approach assumes that individual responsibility and personal profit are more important than broader community good and preserving the public commons. One of the hallmarks of neoliberalism is the austerity policies that aim to structure or restructure domestic policies and service provision in the name of 'development' at the expense of the most vulnerable and excluded.

2. Further information can be made available from original research conducted namely 'Forging A Feminist Economy' in 2023, compiled by Vincent Kondowe and Ruth Nkhwazi in Malawi, with analysis from Lebohanga Liepollo Pheko.

3. Annex 1 shares further information on the methodology of this research.

Box 3: Neoliberalism, Austerity policies and the State

Neoliberal austerity has been instituted by organisations such as IMF and World Bank, as they put conditions on loans to countries to commit to SAPs to reduce the role of the State. This is an ideological attack on the State, particularly in the Global South, to be able to meet the needs of all its citizens through service provision and accountability systems. This impacts its legitimacy to govern. Global North-South inequalities, established during colonialism, have widened significantly. Over the past 40 years, as nations have become richer, governments have become notably more impoverished due in large part to increases in private wealth and the huge amounts of private ownership in stocks, bonds and other assets¹³

The current mainstream economic model will continue this trend of massive wealth inequalities within and between States, whilst reducing their capacity to deliver for citizens, who are left to fend for themselves. There cannot be a credible claim that any social provision exists while women living in poverty, working people, farmers and public sector workers witness the removal of safety nets, the evaporation of their access to secure and safe work and increasing dependence on precarious, low-paid and invisible jobs.

Austerity policies violently remove public services, even though women pay direct and indirect taxes to the State. Privatisation shifts the costs of basic public services to women, through labour and out-of-pocket payments which, in turn, impacts household incomes and indebtedness. This concurrently cross-subsidises extractive global corporates, who evade taxes with the complicity of States. The objective of austerity is to prevent States from behaving like States and to outsource and privatise public services like healthcare, education, electricity and water. The former IMF Managing Director, Christine Lagarde, officially denied that IMF still advocates for SAPs, despite data showing that the IFI has been compelling countries into labour flexibilisation, pension reforms, and public sector wage bill cuts. Thus, austerity could be described as ‘SAPS 2.0’. Previous research by ActionAid found that austerity cuts in 15 countries, related to IMF policy advice or loan conditionalities, have prevented the recruitment of over 3 million nurses, teachers and other essential public sector workers, the majority of whom are women.¹⁴ The pursuit of such policies throws into question the stated commitments of the IMF and other IFIs to promoting gender equality. It positions them as contributing directly to the systematic violation of women’s human dignity.

Box 4: The inadequacies of GDP

A growing economy is typically considered to be a primary measure of the wellbeing of a country, and the main goal for authentic, people centred development. The term economic growth refers to an increase in output (production of goods and services) over time. Orthodox economists measure output of a society using GDP.

GDP is a monetary value of all final goods and services produced and does not measure quality of life. It disregards the contribution of women to the national system of accounts. It disregards qualitative factors like joy, wellbeing, or a sense of community. GDP does not count the unpaid care economy, or quality of life and work, and assumes that the earth has infinite resources to be extracted and that women’s labour is also an infinite gift, particularly that of women in the

Global South. GDP is silent on past and ongoing oppressions and injustices like racism, colonialism and patriarchy, ignores indigenous knowledge, and centres white, male supremacy in all its manifestations. Meanwhile, it attributes factors like weapons manufacture, extractive industries, and illicit practices like smuggling and drug dealing.

Despite this, mainstream economists and policymakers often assume that an increase in GDP corresponds to an increase in human wellbeing. The origins of free market capitalism are embedded in ideas of individual freedom, free enterprise and the separation of the market from human relationships. This ethos is institutionalised through IFIs and international trade architecture, which normalise the abuse, exploitation and oppression of non-White people, especially Black and Brown women.

1.2. The gendered impacts of austerity policies

Austerity-related budget cuts have led to diminished expenditure on public services, on which women depend for their right to live dignified lives. This decreases women's livelihoods and income, especially those employed in the public sector, such as teachers, nurses and other carers, simultaneously increasing their unpaid care work and time poverty. The 2022 ActionAid report entitled 'The Care Contradiction' indicated that a staggering 85 percent of the global population will be living under some form of austerity by 2023.¹⁵ It pointed to a shortage of 5.9 million nurses, more than the combined populations of Botswana and Lesotho. At the start of the pandemic, the overall shortage of health workers globally was almost double that, with a shortfall of 10 million people.¹⁶ The global health workforce comprises 70 percent women, although only 25 percent are in senior management.¹⁷ This shows how men 'lead' while women deliver the global health system, many with low or unpaid positions with no protection or recognition.

The figure increases for frontline health workers, 90 percent of whom are women, and who are the first

in line of contact with patients and the public.¹⁸ This became particularly significant during the COVID-19 pandemic when access to vaccines was deeply discriminatory, racialised and gendered. Women had the highest infection rates, with 70 percent affected at one point. Even before the pandemic, many women health workers were underpaid and were living without basic protections. Some were not even classified as essential workers and were ineligible for paid sick leave.¹⁹ Women health workers are often on short-term contracts, which makes them disposable when austerity cuts are made. To compound these conditions, many women health workers face verbal, physical and sexual abuse on the job. In countries like Malawi, many women midwives working in the remote countryside are concerned for their physical safety and access to support or police stations.²⁰

These policies are based on assumptions that women, particularly Black and Brown women, can absorb paid and unpaid labour with no state subsidies, daycare, affordable healthcare or accessible transport, and while living on decreased wages. This confirms the racialised, patriarchal violence embodied by IFIs, and calls for more decolonised, feminist policy approaches and the need to centralise women's realities.



Thokozani, a nurse at Mangochi District Hospital assisting a child after injection.

2. A Feminist Wellbeing Economy

Feminist networks and scholars have long highlighted the shortcomings of the global economic system, including how it makes women's unpaid care work invisible and thrives on the exploitation of Black and Brown women in the Global South. Over the last decade, there has been an increase in research focusing on the gendered impacts of macroeconomic policies and the prevailing economic structures on women and minority groups. This is partly due to the work of numerous feminist scholars, as well as intense advocacy by feminists in the Global South. They have called for economies that value and recentre care, wellbeing, love, reciprocity and cooperation, both within households and across communities and borders.

2.1 Conceptual framing – the wellbeing economy

The concept of FWE closely overlaps with this thinking, as well as those in the more 'mainstream' wellbeing economy movement. This movement has grown significantly in recent years, signalling the growing recognition of the need for a fundamentally different approach. Since 2018, the Wellbeing Economy Alliance (WEAll) has been a leading global coalition to advance the wellbeing economy agenda, bringing 350 organisations together from across 45 countries in Africa, Latin America, South and South East Asia, the United States and Europe.²¹ It follows the work begun by WEAll Africa, which was launched in 2015 at the University of Pretoria in South Africa.²²

As with other forms of feminist economics, FWE calls for the recentring and revaluing of care. It challenges the false separation of the spheres of productive and social reproductive labour, where the former is more valued and better remunerated. This demands that States prioritise investments in care policies and infrastructure, including universal gender-responsive public services and social protection.

Furthermore, FWE ensures that human economic activity is embedded in nature rather than destroying it through never-ending material acceleration and GDP growth. This recognises social wellbeing, human rights, dignity and justice.

2.2 The urgent need for a feminist wellbeing economy

FWE is grounded in economic democracy. This approach understands that when economic policy is solely concerned with the achievement of output-based metrics such as financial stability and GDP growth, it is inadequate to address the influence of patriarchy and structural racism on economic outcomes. Pursuing the FWE approach at a national level and creating an enabling environment for this at the global level would provide a solid framework for States to fulfil their commitments to human rights and dignity, women's rights, labour rights and climate justice. This requires an honest recognition of current and historical injustices in the global economic system by countries of the Global North and IFIs, and bold steps to ensure restitution and reparations for their centuries of exploitation of peoples and countries in the Global South.

This shows an urgent need for: significant changes to the global economic architecture and decision-making spaces; global commitments to the eradication of tax avoidance, evasion and illicit financial flows; debt cancellation and workout mechanisms; and the IMF to refrain from imposing austerity measures that restrict the ability of States to uphold their rights obligations; Policy space to allow countries to invest in sustainable, feminist-centred industrial strategies; support agroecology and sustainable agriculture; and invest in public services. The latter is not only to provide gender-responsive services, but also as a means to generate decent jobs, promote feminist values and redress inequality, intersecting forms of discrimination and structural violence.

Unpaid care work is largely considered 'women's work', is undervalued within households and

communities and further devalued by States at the macro level. Rather than being recognised as productive work, it is treated as an obligation with the presumption that women will subsidise the State when public services are absent, deficient or under-resourced. This deficit in public services comes at the expense of women's access to quality work, education, political participation, and the important right to rest and leisure. Paid care work is equally undervalued, typically concentrated in the lower paid more insecure and lower-status roles, where women are typically employed. Sectors that reproduce 'traditionally female' care roles like nursing, social work and nursery and primary school teaching are considered lower than secondary school and university teaching which have more men, more prestige, and better pay. COVID-19 exposed the significance of this work, which must be fairly remunerated.

Finally, a just and radical transition to FWE will require reparations for climate damage to adapt to, and mitigate for climate damage. It will require a rapid establishment of a fund for effective disbursement mechanisms to address loss and damage and effectively support countries in the Global South Greater corporate accountability is required in policies that allow the financing of new oil, gas and coal, and to plug loopholes that enable general corporate financing of fossil fuels.²³

Recent ActionAid research states that the continued financial support to fossil fuels from banks is completely disproportionate to what they allocate to climate change. For example, in the seven years since the Paris Agreement, banks have spent 20 times more on fossil fuels in the Global South than they have allocated to climate mitigation funds for countries most affected.²⁴

2.3 A new Intersectional approach – agroecology & plularism

The FWE approach entails production systems that are orientated towards meeting human needs rather than profit. This includes a shift away from large-scale intensive export oriented agribusinesses and monoculture, and the commodification of lands and soils predominantly by northern MNCs. It includes a shift towards agroecology and measures to support small-scale farmers that guarantee nutrition and food sovereignty, particularly in the Global South. It also includes the recognition of local knowledge and the plurality of economic models. Feminist visions of the economy understand that these models must be built on, and through, the creation of anti-racist, decolonial feminist spaces for decision-making, and meaningful participation and leadership particularly for women.



Kitty, a nurse at a Rural Health Centre in Dedza, Malawi getting instructions from her supervisor

These commitments illustrate that GDP undervalues care, voluntary and low-paid work, while recognising the environment only as natural capital to be exploited for profit. This exploitation is rooted in colonial logic. FWE and other wellbeing economy approaches (see examples discussed in section 4.4) create space for the development of alternative metrics to measuring social progress beyond economic growth. The feminist and wellbeing economic models include several dimensions of wellbeing to reflect different needs, including material, emotional and spiritual. This approach recognises that racial justice and sovereignty of the Global South must lead to removal of hegemonic white supremacy. in economic and political governance.

This is underpinned by values which play a key role in supporting sustained social and political processes, for instance, by encompassing transparency and democratic decision-making which can lead to more equitable outcomes. By supporting the conscious management of natural resources there is hope to move towards achieving greater environmental sustainability.

This allows for an intersectional analysis that looks not just at women's positioning, but also how different systems of power and access to power interact and impact on different groups in society, such as those based on race, class, sexual orientation and gender identity, migrant status and geographical location.

2.4 Feminist alternatives and reimagining agendas for change

Several crises are converging in our current world – including economic, social, financial, ecological, health, labour, industrial, infrastructural and agricultural - and nearly all of them pre-date the arrival of the COVID-19. Feminist networks and movements have long been calling for urgent structural changes. During the COVID-19 pandemic, feminist networks co-created demands that imagined societies beyond austerity, neoliberalism, patriarchy and racialised policymaking. These included, for instance, the Association for Women's Rights in Development's (AWID) Feminist Bailout,²⁵ the African Feminist Post COVID-19 Economic Recovery Statement,²⁶ and the Hawaii State Commission's feminist economic recovery plan.²⁷ These works recognise that wealth

is created through collective unpaid and paid labour, while inequality within and between countries is driven by the unfair and unjust distribution of the products of that labour. They start from the premise that investment in households, wellbeing, rights, freedoms and the equitable distribution of social and political power and budgetary resources is the basis of a successful and sustainable economy. One of the key pillars is to create collective wealth and communities of care supported by States, that recognise the paid and unpaid labour of the care economy. Public policy should prioritise social outcomes and social reproduction (or care work), to eliminate all forms of structural discrimination, exclusion and domination and secure the health of the planet and humanity.

Key demands of these feminist manifestos include: people-centred planning, which prioritises household welfare including universal, affordable and accessible healthcare; intersectional, non-racist approaches to policymaking and women's rights; and a reframing of ecological concerns and equitable distribution including women's land rights, food production and food sovereignty.

2.5 African regional perspectives on a feminist wellbeing economy

In an African feminist context, feminist economy concepts constitute a response to the colonial constructs enforced by the Bretton Woods Institutions, namely the World Bank, IMF and WTO.

The self-organised struggles of women in African countries, and elsewhere in the Global South, has highlighted critical issues of autonomy, freedom and equality. This aligns with the values of FWE, as do the values of reciprocity and community care, which reflect many African values of mutuality and communal living.

In the advent of independence from colonial powers in the 1960s and 1970s, many African governments sought to introduce social and economic policies which revive these values as a means to redress the devastation wrought by colonialism on the political, social and economic institutions of their countries and the wider continent. In the advent of the debt crisis of the 1980s, many governments were compelled to abruptly eschew these policies and implement IMF-prescribed SAPs. As such,

the process of transitioning to FWEs can also potentially engender a feminist decolonisation of economies, breaking away from the current restrictive, neocolonial, exploitative macroeconomic confines of power asymmetries in favour of equitable, accountable economic sovereignty and democracy.²⁸

Drawing from feminist manifestos responding to COVID-19, FWE also points to the need for: ensuring decent and dignified work for all, including those engaged in the informal and gig economy; stopping evictions; halting sovereign debt payments; and dismantling corporatised global economic systems. FWE provides the language to rethink concepts such as common goods and public provisioning. To institute progressive, feminist taxation models which focus on taxing wealthy MNCs and elites to help generate the desperately needed resources for the State to invest in gender-responsive services, infrastructure and social protection.

An African regional feminist perspective and framing of FWE recognises the interlinkages between gendered power relations at home, which affect women's bodily integrity, sexual autonomy and reproduction, and their outside roles - as - workers in precarious, insecure jobs; defenders of the commons in an extractive economy; unpaid carers filling the gap left by neoliberal States; smallholder farmers in communities dealing with land grabs; or as survivors and victims in a militarised world. FWE rejects the notion of toxic growth – including growth of military expenditure and war – growth that results from exploitive labour and environmental practices, racist and patriarchal practices. A FWE-orientated State would have the necessary mechanisms to redistribute expenditure towards greater community wellbeing, and place those most dispossessed and marginalised at the centre of policy and social care.²⁹

A key element is to acknowledge past and current oppression and structural discrimination to avoid perpetuating it. The redistribution of power requires pathways to participative, democratic, decentralised economic and political decision-making, and centering feminist intersectional and decolonial analysis. To enable these pathways, it is important to establish or strengthen processes in which local communities have control over the means of production, distribution, exchange and markets.

2.6 Decolonising the economy

Decolonising the global economy, and dismantling its systemic and structural pillars requires an intersectional approach which, can recognise the multiple oppressions it is built on. These include colonialism, land occupation, and the transatlantic trade in human beings (known as the slave trade). They extend to apartheid, race capitalism, and the exploitation of Black and Brown women's labour.

Decolonising the global economy requires the demolition of systems and structures that support the Global North's coercive and inequitable power in global economic governance.

In order to be effective and revolutionary, these new structures must reflect true international polity rather than the narrow interests of northern countries. They must divest from racist, sexist, colonial, extractive, exploitative and coercive relations to wield power. This includes complete debt-cancellation, recognition of all sovereignties, tangible commitments to meaningful climate, colonial and economic reparations. It demands that countries of the Global North desist from militarising economic relations for an economy vested in human, social and societal wellbeing and embedded in feminist principles.

This requires an investigation into who continues to benefit from the current economic order and how, and the impacts on countries, populations and the day-to-day lives of people where the extraction of resources and labour a reality. It is also the impact on day-to-day lives of the effects of racial capitalism that are present in institutions and minds several years after colonialism, and that continues to be perpetuated through neoliberalism.

2.7 Decoloniality and language

A key element of the above is to look at how language and communication at geo-political level continue to play a key role in maintaining the status quo, and to question some terminologies led by the Global North that reinforce its power and exclude voices of the Global South.

We recognise that some of the terminologies used in this briefing paper are fluid and represent political and socio-geographic viewpoints. Therefore, this paper draws from decolonial feminist theories and is positioned in the lived realities of those in the Global South. One of the challenges of this work is to use westernised international development language to critique westernised economic models. This creates a tension with which decolonial semantics is willing to engage. The approach of this paper is to name commonly used terminology and explain, when and why, this may be at odds with the way it is understood or experienced in the Global South. It also suggests that some popular development terms are unconsciously couched in top-down terminology and the frame of northern normativity.

One of these is the use of the term - Human Rights. Over time, the co-option of the term human rights in international development and by several western centric institutions has led to it being eroded, coerced, thereby acquiring a colonial lens of violence and northern racism. David Cook Martin describes these as the “*ongoing hypocrisies of western liberalism*” and argues that the journey of human rights is intimately entwined with colonialism and slavery.³¹ The term human rights has also been invoked in recent decades in association with coercive western militarism to justify violent regime changes in the African region. This is in strong contrast to the intended aim of human rights based approaches to centre human dignity, which was historically adopted by many multi-lateral, bilateral, regional, national and micro-level frameworks and movements to hold duty bearers to account. For many in the Global South, the term human rights is now tainted and hollow without its basic tenets of human dignity and the importance of dignified life with access to food, shelter and work.

Human dignity³² suggests that while dignity cannot be quantified, its absence is quickly felt, and represents an individuals’ economic, political and social freedom. Several feminist, social grassroots, and indigenous movements have used human

rights based approaches as an essential tool for achieving freedom, justice and equality through adequate access to dignified life including food, shelter, work and beyond, and within the economic, social cultural, collective rights frameworks. We aim to build upon this crucial work that resonates deeply with the decolonial thinking of feminist and activists. Keeping this in mind, this section seeks to re-centre the concept of human dignity within the wider context of human rights and rights-based approaches, and within the framework of Feminist wellbeing economies.

Dignified work is sometimes used in tandem with **Decent work**. This paper appreciates that the ILO Decent Work Agenda is key to several countries’ labour and development strategies, including Malawi. ‘Dignified’ signifies sovereignty over one’s time, resources and access to land, particularly for women. This is significant in the context of precarious, informal, unpaid labour, which is disproportionately performed by women, an issue which is not entirely resolved by the decent work framework. Dignified work also refers to women’s control over the means and dividends of production, and the need for women to have control over their income and given the gendered power dynamics in many households, this is crucial.⁴ The paper also refers to **Quality work** and uses it almost synonymously with dignified work, with the addition of satisfaction and self-actualisation in work. This is a valuable component of the FWE commitment to measuring the things that matter.

Gendered in/equality, women’s human rights and **feminist equality** to be used instead of **gender equality**. Neoliberal feminism and development language use terms like gender equality and choice, with a focus on individuals rather than systemic sexism, and can be neoconservative. Gender equality as a term is devoid of political power and often ignores violent patriarchal oppression and the systematic oppression of women. The feminist struggle for equality calls for emancipatory structural and systems change. Black and African feminisms are steeped in liberation from structural racism, sexism, classism, neoliberalism, colonialism and white supremacy. These align with the revolutionary systems and structural shifts that FWE fundamentally calls for. Whilst the term gender equality is depoliticised, gendered is used by feminists to convey deeper transformative power.

3. The Malawi context:

The report focuses on Malawi as one of the several countries in the Global South still grappling with the challenges posed by SAPs, debt and loan conditionalities. It has been long impacted by the neoliberal policy agenda, resulting in greater impacts for those who are most marginalised, including women and girls. Amidst the acute economic challenges, there is growing feminist and wider civil society activism demanding economic justice. Young women and gender-diverse people in Malawi are calling on their Government to urgently adopt an FWE approach to the economy, including: redressing women's unequal share of unpaid care work; investing in gender-responsive public services and social protection (including health, education, early childcare and agriculture); ensuring decent and dignified work for all and freedom from sexual harassment in the world of work, including for sex workers and those engaged in the informal sector; ensuring women and LGBTQI+ people's empowerment and equal participation in the economy; and instituting progressive taxation and gender-responsive budgeting. This section provides a closer look into the Malawian context, navigating its transition from a welfare state into a neoliberal macroeconomic policy regime. It also explores particular issues around poverty compounded by austerity, the debt burden and the implications specifically for women.

3.1. From a welfare State to a neoliberal macroeconomic policy regime

Malawi is a relatively small, land-locked country in southern Africa, sharing borders with Zambia, Mozambique and Tanzania. It was colonised by the British in 1891 as Nyasaland and gained independence in 1964. The country is hugely dependent on exports of raw cash crops as a means to earn foreign currency, with raw tobacco being the country's largest export, and other significant ones including gold tea and soya.³³ The

fiscal deficit was estimated at 9.4 percent in 2020, a decline from 6.7% in the previous year.³⁴ This decline was driven by \$345 million in spending to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, interest payments amounting to 5.3 percent of GDP, and a re-run of the 2019 presidential election.³⁵ Also, Malawi's population grew significantly from 3.6 million people in 1960 to an estimated 19.1 million in 2021,³⁶ 80 percent of whom are aged under 35.³⁷

The market economy approach being implemented in Malawi prioritises economic growth, as measured by GDP, based in the free-market logic that market-efficiency is more reliable than even minimal State intervention. This neoliberal approach was adopted in the early 1980s when Malawi, like many other formerly colonised countries in the Global South, began implementing drastic economic policy reforms in response to coercive policy advice attached to World Bank and IMF loans. The purported purpose of the structural adjustment and fiscal consolidation policies was to revive the country's declining economy and reinstall economic stability and growth. The unchallenged orthodoxy of structural adjustment had been largely successful in their neoliberal agenda, and the only break from this model was under the presidency of Bingu wa Matharaika between 2004 and 2012. He provided state subsidies to farmers, revalued the Malawi currency and expelled non-Malawian businesses, before his death in April 2012, in the middle of his second term as president. The next President, Joyce Banda, immediately re-engaged with transnational capital.³⁸ As a result, the current context in Malawi is characterised by high levels of poverty that continue to impact both women and girls the most.

a. Poverty compounded by austerity

Despite implementing austerity and fiscal consolidation policies, material poverty in Malawi remains endemic. According to official statistics, 70 percent of Malawi's population live in extreme poverty, with less than \$2.15 a day, the fourth highest rate of extreme poverty in the world.³⁹ However, it must be noted that the poverty indices

designed and used by global governance structures like the United Nations and the Bretton Woods institutions have been critiqued because of their data collection and interpretation methods.^{4/40} This forms part of a vision of shifting away from GDP, poverty indexes and other neoliberal methods of counting growth and poverty.

Notwithstanding the issues with official indices, it is clear that, due to austerity measures and ‘tightening belts,’ very few households in Malawi now have better incomes. In 2017, poverty was estimated to be 51.5 percent and declined marginally by 2019 to 50.7 percent.^{41/42} However these indices are problematic as poverty encompasses far more than income, for example, access to clean water, affordable healthcare and education - central pillars of human dignity and wellbeing. Many of the households that are not in absolute poverty live in relative deprivation and cannot afford a safe home, a clean environment or social amenities. Moreover, between 2010/11 and 2016/17, income poverty in female-headed households in Malawi increased from 57.2 to 58.7 percent.⁴³ For their male-headed counterparts, it remained at 49.1 percent over the same period. Further, rural communities in Malawi are much more likely to live in poverty - the national poverty rate was 59.5 percent in rural areas compared to 17.7 percent in urban areas in 2016/17.⁴⁴

In fact, evidence suggests that SAPs and ongoing economic reforms have contributed to the sharp decline of the Malawian economy,⁴⁵ and diminished living conditions as evidenced by failing health, education and agricultural systems.⁴⁶ In 2020, only 18 percent of the country’s total population had access to electricity compared to the 34 percent average in comparable African countries.⁴⁷ This again places the onus on women’s unpaid labour to source energy and fuel supplies. The African

“African ‘growth’ over the last twenty years has been accompanied by pervasive unemployment, whilst wealth and inequality gaps are now at their highest levels. Decades of reduced public spending has left millions without access to basic services such as healthcare, whilst the movement towards privatising those services and resources (including water and energy) further compromises equitable access as a result of basic services being commodified and subject to market rules and shareholder needs.”⁴⁸

Pheko, L.L. et al (2020)

Feminist Post-COVID 19 Recovery Statement says:

‘A lot of these shifts are the legacies of coercive policy advice from the IMF and World Bank, which have consistently included cuts and restrictions to the public sector wage bill in Malawi.’ This has a profound impact on the ability of the State to employ people in key sectors such as in health and education, where the majority of employees are women. Women also make up the majority of agricultural extension workers, yet often do not have consistent access to markets or access to agricultural inputs. For instance, the IMF advised Malawi to freeze or cut its public sector wage bill for four consecutive years between 2016 and 2021, and demanded that the wage bill stay below 25 percent of the national budget and 8 percent of GDP. One specific example of this is Malawi’s 2017 Extended Credit Facility Review, which included advice to *“strengthen control over the wage bill and other current spending”*, with little regard for public sector worker’s livelihoods.⁴⁹ The Malawian Government was also requested to shift the composition of its budget, which had been in favour of higher social and capital spending. Once more, the care economy was left to be carried by women’s unpaid and unrecognised labour. These calls were echoed in the 2018 Article IV report and again in 2020 during COVID-19.⁵⁰

The IMF forces constant trade-offs between social spending and public sector wages, prioritising unnecessary physical infrastructure over wages for public sector workers, and indeed over African people’s lives. These trade-offs are often illogical, particularly because women’s employment in, and contribution to, the market economy cannot effectively occur without a subsidised care structure (such as public nurseries). This also feeds into the racist notion⁵¹ of Black women’s ‘resilience’ that is normalised by gender-blind policymaking.

However, despite IMF advice, as of October 2021, Malawi was projected to experience a 1.2 percentage point increase in the public sector wage bill over seven years.⁵² This appears to follow considerable pressure from unions and civil society organisations, as well as the Ministry of Education, which was frustrated at being prevented from recruiting and deploying teachers they had trained.

4. Indian officials have noted that, even though India is the fourth largest economy with GDP averaging 9 percent, it sits at 126 out of 177 nations on the Human Development Index. They further note that the number of people living at the poverty line decreased from 50 percent in 1977/78 to less than 23

However, the IMF continues to advise the country to curtail growth in public sector wages.⁵³ This downward pressure can deter the Government from adequately investing in the recruitment of teachers, doctors and agricultural extension workers who have been trained at huge cost and are essential to any nation's health, food sovereignty, skills-base and basic social service provision.

b. Privatisation and the individualisation of wellbeing

Another result of SAPs has been for the Government to privatise State-owned enterprises, including the Malawi Agricultural Marketing Board, which provided crop storage and subsidised fertiliser to smallholder farmers. The IMF and World Bank coerced the Malawian Government to reduce its deficit by ending agricultural subsidies and selling grain stocks, which were viewed as a 'distortion of trade'. This is an illustration of a dehumanising policy that disregards the access of 'resilient' Black women to food and livelihoods. The campaigning group at Debt Justice reported that: *"In 2001/02, and again in 2004/05, the removal of support for farmers and selling of grain stocks combined with drought to create serious food crises. Thousands of people died and millions suffered."*⁵⁴

In Malawi, most loan agreements with the IMF are negotiated behind closed doors, with the executive arm of the Government and with no parliamentary or public scrutiny, including by women's rights organisations or feminist networks. This completely undermines democratic accountability and transparency and compromises the possibility of the State achieving its obligations to women's economic citizenship rights. This is predicated on the assumption that these matters are 'too technical' for people beyond the Ministry and Treasury, which completely contradicts the democratic commitments set out in the Malawian Constitution. Significantly, the Government must be able to explain to the population how loans are impacting the people of Malawi, while enhancing equity and the wellbeing of women.⁵

The cynical consequence of constraining public sector wages is to strengthen the domestic and international private sector. The perverse pressure to reduce public sector salaries is supposedly to make the private sector more competitive. However, it usually leads to a dangerous downward spiral to dilapidated public services, disgruntled public

sector workers, and disenfranchised citizens, most of whom cannot afford private services. Whilst squeezing the public sector, the IMF is committed to the false belief that African countries need to mobilise more financing from and to the private sector.⁵⁵ For instance, the '2018 IMF Surveillance Review for Malawi' suggested that private and development partners could collectively mobilise for further credit assistance, while stating plans to expand user fees and charges.⁵⁶ The IMF did not indicate in which sectors these fees would be enforced and have not expressed concern about the pernicious human impacts. This is despite ample data showing that austerity interventions are failing women and girls, in particular, who are the first to be excluded from health and education services, when user fees are introduced.

Persons with disabilities have also been particularly impacted. Because of privatisation, the basic services they regularly need have been commodified and are viewed in terms of personalised responsibilities. This is 'neoliberal responsibilisation' and completely disregards the differential capabilities of members of society.⁵⁷ For instance, in advocating for their 'self-determination,' neoliberalism introduced policies forcing individuals to make direct payment for health services rather than State provision, as a way to 'deinstitutionalise' management of healthcare for persons with disabilities and normalise 'neoliberal responsibilisation' austerity.⁵⁸

Urbanisation and spatial planning has been another casualty of the structural transformation of economies. The contraction of public spending means that infrastructure and service delivery have not grown at the same rapid rate as urbanisation in most African countries. For instance, over 50 percent of African urban dwellers in Africa live in informal settlements, and only 40 percent of the urban population of the continent have access to adequate sanitation facilities.⁵⁹ Without additional measures, urbanisation is unlikely to reduce overall poverty in Malawi, much less contribute to shifting towards FWE outcomes.

5. Further information can be made available from original research conducted namely 'Forging A Feminist Economy' in 2023, compiled by Vincent Kondowe and Ruth Nkhwazi in Malawi, with analysis from Lebohanga Liepollo Pheko.

COVID-19 impacts on the economy and women in Malawi

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Malawian economy cannot be underestimated. During lockdown measures, women kept the economy going through unpaid care and domestic work including home schooling, food preparation and caring for the elderly and sick. Many were also working as frontline health and auxiliary workers. Girls' education was disastrously impacted by school closures, and access to sexual and reproductive health services was also severely restricted. Child marriages increased by 83 percent in Malawi by August 2020 since the previous year.⁶⁰ This appears to have been the result of parents' lost livelihoods, and the hope that 'marrying off' their children might create a financial lifeline for the family.⁶¹

The pandemic hugely affected GDP growth in Malawi, which declined from 5.7 percent growth pre-COVID to 1.7 percent in 2020,⁶² worsening the trade balance and fiscal deficit⁶ Travel restrictions imposed as a COVID-19 preventive measure resulted in a reduction in domestic revenue and reduced export revenue, a major stream of revenue for Malawi. In addition, Malawi registered a decline in revenue collection by an average of 35 percent per month during the COVID-19 period,⁶³ further increasing fiscal pressure on the country.⁶⁴

The Government's response included \$20 million in spending on healthcare and targeted social assistance programmes (0.25 percent of GDP), which included hiring 2,000 additional healthcare workers, as well as tax

waivers on imports of essential goods.⁶⁵ The strain on Malawi's healthcare system was exacerbated by a lack of adequate access to COVID-19 vaccines, with the Global North's disproportionate and racist hoarding of vaccines. This was compounded by the Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) agreement, which prohibited the production of generic medication. This represents the commodification of knowledge and health through the prohibitively high cost of patents and concentration of complex industrial processes in the Global North.

During the pandemic, South Africa, Brazil and India drafted a TRIPS waiver to enable countries in the Global South to produce cheaper generic vaccines, allowing them to circumvent colonised policy governance and save Black and Brown lives. In June 2022, WTO ruled in favour of a TRIPS waiver to enable the production of generic COVID-19 vaccines across African, Asian, Caribbean and Latin American countries. However, this did not resolve the issue of limited vaccine production capacity and did not include industrial designs such as the machinery and processes required to produce the vaccines, or trade secrets including essential manufacturing processes and copyrights. Without all of this, the waiver is a pyrrhic victory that still requires a country like Malawi to develop expensive industrial mechanisms to produce a generic vaccine. For all the reasons of neoliberal indebtedness stated above, this is not currently feasible and only continues to strain an already faltering public health system and the many women whose labour is predominantly supporting it.

c. Easing the debt burden

Malawi is embroiled in a staggering debt crisis, which has also significantly affected public sector spending. Malawi's debt hit 66.7 percent of GDP in 2022 and is predicted to rise further in 2023.⁶⁶ The country's debts date back to its early years after its independence in 1964, when banks and government institutions from the Global North lent the country large sums to help it to rebuild after

decades of colonial rule. The global economy is, however, extremely volatile with unpredictable fluctuations in commodity prices and interest rates. Along with other unforeseeable external shocks such as droughts and pandemics, Malawi has been constantly prone to unmanageable levels

6. A fiscal deficit is the shortfall between government revenue and expenditure, while the trade balance is the difference between the value of the goods that a country exports and those it imports.

of debt.⁶⁷ According to the IMF Debt Sustainability Analysis, in 2021 Malawi's external debt payments shot up from 5 percent to 31 percent of government revenue. This greatly exceeds the country's spending on health and education combined.^{7/68/69}

The IMF predicts that this debt will stay at over 30 percent of government revenue until at least the early 2030s. Sixty percent of it is owed to IFIs such as the World Bank, IMF and African Development Bank, but the huge increase in service payments comes primarily from expensive loans from the African Export Import Bank (Afreximbank) and the Trade and Development Bank to cover the costs of vital imports.^{8/70} Of Malawi's debt payments in 2022, 72 percent were to commercial lenders (53 percent alone to Afreximbank), 15 percent to the African Development Bank, World Bank and IMF, 5 percent to China and 8 percent to other multilateral institutions and governments. The average interest cost on the commercial loans can be as high as 9 percent.⁹ Spending did not increase during the pandemic, and in 2023, the IMF predicts it will be 0.5 percent lower than in 2019.⁷¹ Even by 2025, public spending will only be 4 percent higher than in 2019, and 10 percent higher than 2015, which constitutes growth of less than 1 percent a year. This represents yet another lost decade for Malawi, which is still unable to finance vital public services that are so crucial to enabling dignified lives and feminist equality.⁷² In June 2023, Afreximbank reported that they are considering restructuring Malawi's \$850 billion debt to enable the country to obtain even more debt through an IMF credit facility.⁷³ This is essentially pushing the country further down the road for down the road for another generation of constricted public sector provision.

Between May 2020 and December 2021, and in line with the G20 and the Paris Club Debt Service Suspension Initiative, the Malawian Government engaged all its creditors in discussions to suspend debt service payments from January to December 2021. The Initiative was designed to support low-income countries to surmount the economic and health demands arising from the COVID-19 pandemic.⁷⁴ Under the scheme, Malawi was granted temporary debt repayment relief from the Abu Dhabi Fund for Development and the Saudi Fund for Development.⁷⁵ This enabled the country to release 1 billion Kwacha (about \$1 million) for social protection programmes to help redress the impacts of the pandemic. While this example

shows the huge impact that debt suspension and cancellation can make, it does not address the fundamental problems. The current economic approach, including austerity and privatisation, encourages cuts to expenditure in areas such as education and health and undermines States' commitments to human rights and dignity. Most of these are prescribed by IFIs as part of aid conditionalities. This is demonstrated by research by ActionAid that found that in 15 countries, recommended IMF cuts add up to nearly \$10 billion – the equivalent of cutting over three million primary school teachers.⁷⁶

This reveals a structural problem of indebtedness and the neocolonial conditionalities that they carry.⁷⁷ It is also notable given that many major donor countries such as the United Kingdom, the United States of America (USA), Germany and other European Union countries constitute the major shareholders of the IMF and World Bank. Furthermore, Europe and USA hold complete dominance over the presidencies of these institutions due to a 'gentlemen's agreement' dating back to when they were first created after World War II.

3.2. Gendered norms in the Malawian economy

Feminised inequality and patriarchal norms remain entrenched in Malawi. Labour force participation rates for women in Malawi are similar to that of men, but around 89 percent of women workers are in the informal economy, largely in the agricultural, forestry and mining sectors.⁷⁸ Discriminatory laws and norms against LGBTQIA+ people are still in place, as are deeply conservative social norms on women's roles,⁷⁹ and the Malawi Penal Code criminalises same-sex sexual activity and the gender expression of transgender people. This law has been in place since 1930, enacted by the

7. In 2019, Malawi's spending on education amounted to 2.9 percent of GDP, whilst its spending on health amounted to 7.39 percent of GDP

8.. Primarily from IMF Country reports (IMF (2021)), but bilateral creditor data is supplemented with information from the World Bank International Debt Statistics Database. The bilateral individual data does not add up to the total amount given by the IMF, but this is due to discrepancies between the IMF and World Bank data.

9. The IMF say that the loans from Afreximbank and Trade Development Bank are high interest, but do not reveal the exact interest rate. However, figures in their Debt Sustainability Analysis allow us to estimate the average interest rate across these loans and the foreign exchange swap lines as 9 percent. The IMF says the average nominal interest rate on the external debt is 3.1 percent. With a total external debt of \$3,853 million, this is external interest of \$119 million. From the World Bank's International Debt Statistics database we have calculated that the average interest rates on bilateral and multilateral debt are 1.6 percent and 0.8 percent respectively. This means that these two groups of creditors account for \$25 million interest in 2022. This leaves \$94 million of interest owed to AFREXIM Bank, Trade Development Bank and on the FOREX swap lines, which is 9 percent of the total debt owed to these creditors. In contrast, the average interest rate on the bilateral loans is 1.6 percent and multilateral loans is 0.8 percent.

British colonial government to reflect Britain's own criminal law. The Penal Code was exported across most British colonies and protectorates during this period.⁸⁰

The aggregated work of women in Malawi, as other parts of the world surpasses that of men, both within and outside the home. Despite this, women are paid less on average and positions of power in both public and private organisations remain male-dominated,⁸¹ defying all conditions of decent and dignified work. For example, women in agriculture earn only about half the income of men, on average 512 kwacha compared to 800 for men.⁸² They spend more than six times longer on unpaid care and domestic work than men.⁸³ Meanwhile, just 22.9 percent of parliamentary seats are held by women, with the proportion holding seats in local government even lower, at 14.6 percent.⁸⁴

GBV remains prevalent in Malawi, with one-third of women reportedly experiencing physical violence after age 15 and one-fifth suffering sexual violence. Forty two percent of women aged 20-24 were married before age 18.⁸⁵ GBV is not only a gross violation of human rights and human dignity, it also prevents women and girls from engaging in the public sphere, including accessing paid work and educational opportunities.

Malawi has taken some important steps to improve various forms of social protection that are particularly beneficial to women and gendered equality. These include stronger maternity leave provision, which helps women to reconcile work and childcare and paternity leave for men, provided for in Section 47A (1) of the Employment (Amendment) Act (2021),⁸⁶ introduced in October 2021.⁸⁷ This has been hailed as pioneering for policies that can shift patriarchal social norms and advance gendered equality in family contexts. This creates potential pathways for women and men to explore family life with paid and unpaid work responsibilities rather than continuing to treat women as the default carers. However, within the provisions, men are entitled to only two weeks of parental leave and only once every three years.

Malawi's Gender Equality Act (2014) promises, among other things, a minimum quota of 40 percent of women in public sector jobs.⁸⁸ Although it has not yet been implemented, the Act aims to regulate employment relationships in public institutions. For the first time, this legislation provides women with the means of individual legal redress against sex discrimination in pay, promotion, recruitment and other workplace-related issues.



Members of Young Urban Women's movement in Mchinji, Malawi working together to advance women's economic justice and feminist macro-economic alternatives.

3.3 The vision of Malawian women for a FWE

“We are currently paying double for public services – you pay for services through taxes, but poor quality means you feel you have to pay again for private services.”

Workshop participant

As part of this research, ActionAid Malawi convened a workshop with 40 young urban women - including members of FEAM,¹⁰ women farmers, trade unionists, members of the sex workers association and members of the LGBTIQ+ community - to explore and develop a vision of FWE across their diversities. A second workshop was held to validate the findings and begin to develop an advocacy agenda for achieving their vision.

It is noted that the participants could not speak for all women and gender-diverse people in Malawi, and that some notable groups were missing, including women living with disabilities or members of sectoral social justice movements like climate activists. However, it is hoped that the following core components of FWE that they identified can help lay the grounds for ongoing advocacy in these areas.

According to some workshop participants, FWE in Malawi means:

“an economy where women and the marginalised are provided with adequate support in terms of infrastructure, resources and protection of their human rights and dignity. It is sensitive to the rights of marginalised groups and responsive to their needs. It is an economy that measures its growth and success by measuring improvement in the quality of lives of people and promotes sustainability and resilience.”

Critical to the vision of workshop participants is the question of government accountability. For them, FWE means a transparent, accountable and democratic government that explains to the citizenry the conditionalities behind government loans. Deliberate mechanisms would be put in place for scrutiny of all loan agreements, along with platforms for citizens to engage proactively in exploring alternative forms of resource mobilisation. These mechanisms would provide a platform for the Government to clearly demonstrate how a loan promotes peoples’ wellbeing by stipulating how funds

will be utilised. This should go beyond the provisions of the current ‘loan bill’ presented to the National Assembly for approval by members of Parliament, to vote on whether a loan should be taken or negotiated. Loan bills presented to the National Assembly are always approved, making it clear that the process is done to rubber stamp a loan that has already been agreed on. The current process is non-participatory and non-inclusive as it only involves the Ministry of Finance, Economic Planning and Development and Cabinet members. In some cases, some of the Cabinet are no more aware of the loan bill negotiations than the general public is. Therefore, the recommended approach would make sure that the concerns of feminists have been addressed in the way the government acquires and utilises the loan agreements with its lenders.

Key components of FWE for Malawi

The Malawi workshop participants identified the following elements to form the core principles of FWE:

1. **An economic model that puts people before profit and ensures equity, dignity and food security**
 - A world that puts people before profit and ensures equity, human dignity and food security, leading to improved living standards for all Malawians, allowing them to live longer, healthier and happier lives.
 - An inclusive society and fair economy where women and all genders are empowered and people participate fully.
2. **An economy that focuses on women’s wellbeing**
 - An economy that focuses on women’s wellbeing, from an intersectional lens, and redresses the multiple forms of discrimination they face based on their gender. For example in trade and in education.
 - An intersectional approach to all economic and social activities that recognises how some groups of women – such as women migrants – face added injustices.

10. The Feminist Macro-Economic Alliance Malawi (FEAM) has helped establish a national feminist macroeconomic academy, through which it is building young women’s knowledge of the gendered impacts of neoliberal macroeconomic policies, such as austerity, regressive taxation, and labour market deregulation. It also supports feminist movement-building within Malawi on the subject, targeting both the Government and IFIs.

3. Challenging gendered social norms, recognising and valuing care

- The unpaid work that women perform is recognised and valued. Stereotypical community and reproductive roles are challenged along with heteronormative notions of the family and gender roles in the home.
- There needs to be a normalisation and valuing for men to be carers and women to be breadwinners, with children raised to understand that care is both a role for the father and the mother. This requires education to challenge existing gender norms and relations.
- Women and marginalised groups are free to express themselves however they want, free from gender stereotypes and prejudice.

4. Readily available, high-quality rights-based provision of public goods and services by the State

- This includes health, education from primary to tertiary level; early childhood development centres; potable water and decent housing; and justice services that accessible to all, including those living in rural areas. Orphans, the elderly, the disadvantaged and those with disabilities are provided with adequate care, income support and other forms of social protection. Domestic resources are mobilised to ensure the government can adequately resource public services without having to take loans.

5. Dignified work and women's economic justice

- An end to exploitation of labour, especially of women and marginalised groups, including fair and equal living wages.
- The formalisation of the informal sector, including by ensuring access to social protection, such as pensions, safe working conditions and freedom from harassment, including for women in agriculture.
- More training and hiring of people from LGBTQIA+ communities.
- Greater access to markets for women, with state protection for local businesses.

- Have sovereignty over one's time, resources and access to land; control over income, means and dividends of production

6. Freedom from GBV and access to sexual and reproductive health and rights

- Women, LGBTQIA+ and non-binary people live free from all forms of violence and harassment.
- Youth, including young women, have access to sexual and reproductive health and rights, including access to sex education to engender mutual respect and understanding.

7. Environment protection and food security

- Economic activities are geared towards benefiting nature and the environment.
- Local farmers are not forced to compete with MNCs.

8. Improved governance, accountability and decision-making

- Widespread civic education so people know their rights, can make informed decisions and choices, and hold the government accountable. This would include education on feminism, decolonisation and the slave trade, so that our children understand what happened and how.
- More women and people from marginalised groups taking up space in positions of power and being recognised for their skill and creativity.
- Women and marginalised groups participate equally in decision-making, including meaningful youth participation. Rights-based governance, with citizens knowing and understanding loan terms and conditions. A sovereign nation free from outside interference.
- Transparent debt and financial management across all departments. Political immunities are removed and corruption is addressed, and a just and fair legal infrastructure that addresses illegalities is instilled.
- Policies are depoliticised i.e. Equity for all people, irrespective of their status in society, political position or affiliation.

4. Transitioning to a Feminist Wellbeing Economy in Malawi and beyond

Shifting to an economic model that prioritises care, human rights and wellbeing, requires the recognition and reorganisation of the fundamental role of social reproduction. It requires redressing the systems of oppression embedded in our current economic structures and institutions. FWE offers a much-needed decolonial, rights-focused paradigm that centres the wellbeing and care of people and the environment in ways that seek to redress intersecting systems of oppression.

One of the grave outcomes of the mainstream, patriarchal, Western-created economic model is the erasure of the contribution of women's unpaid and underpaid care work to the global economy. The wellbeing economy is expressed through notions of community, collectives, cooperation and solidarity. As well as being central to feminist economic alternatives and wellbeing economy approaches, such concepts reflect key tenets of many pre- and post-colonial African state approaches to development.

4.1 Transformative frameworks, policies and institutional shifts

Realising the Malawian vision of a FWE will require transformative change to legislative frameworks, policy reformulation and the repurposing of key institutions. For example, the Treasury will need to be able to formulate taxation policies that are progressive, whilst clamping down on tax avoidance, evasion and illicit financial flows.

a. Mobilising resources and eliminating tax avoidance and evasion

There is an urgent need to mobilise resources to finance investments in gender-responsive public services and social protection, and support the radical transition to FWE. Taxation policies are deeply gendered and can place a higher tax burden on women, especially women living in poverty, such

as through the introduction and expansion of VAT (see Box 2 on VAT) and regressive taxation on food, fuel and other essential items.

Instituting strong systems of progressive taxation with adequately resourced tax authorities, along with measures to eliminate tax avoidance and evasion by MNCs and wealthy elites, is one of the most reliable and sustainable ways for any country to raise resources. For instance, in 2015, Oxfam calculated that lost tax revenue from money held by wealthy Malawians in one bank in the tax-haven of Switzerland could pay the salaries of 800 Malawian nurses for one year.⁸⁹ Tax holidays and evasion by MNCs saw Malawi lose \$10 billion in taxes over 10 years, and this is almost certainly just the tip of the iceberg.⁹⁰

Malawi's tax system is already considered to be relatively progressive in relation to southern Africa and other low-income countries.⁹¹ For instance, it taxes MNCs at 35 percent (compared to a global average of 23.37 percent),⁹² and in 2022, the Government announced the removal of VAT on cooking oil and water.⁹³ However, VAT has since been added to various grains and cereals, despite high food prices already driving increased levels of food insecurity.⁹⁴

More can certainly be done to increase the progressivity of Malawi's tax system, including by decreasing reliance on consumption taxes such as VAT, which impact women more, and by expanding the taxes on wealth. However, MNCs utilise various methods to avoid paying relevant taxes and stay on almost permanent 'tax holidays'. These companies have the legal skills and corporate power to do this with stealth and impunity. Many companies do not actually do business with competing companies but trade amongst themselves through affiliates or subsidiaries.⁹⁵ Past reports have shown that mispricing and double-invoicing cost Africa \$6 billion in one year, while profit-shifting costs developing countries \$100 billion per year in lost corporate income tax.⁹⁶

Malawi's Domestic Resource Mobilisation Strategy (2021-2026) seeks to expand the country's tax base and increase tax compliance, aiming for a five-point increase to the tax-to-GDP ratio.⁹⁷ Although it includes some critical goals, such as counteracting international tax avoidance and evasion, it also commits to broadening the VAT base. It does so by the number of items that are zero-rated and exempt, many of which are essential items like vegetables, bread, wheat, laundry soap, salt, pharmaceutical products and condoms, which impact food poverty and sexual reproductive rights. After years of lobbying, sanitary pads are tax-exempt in Malawi.⁹⁸ So, if the application of VAT does not have a strong gender lens, more regressive measures could be introduced that undermine steps to Malawi's commitment to eradicating gendered (in)equality.

Encouragingly, the DRM strategy does state that Malawi will seek to increase its tax base by renegotiating old or disadvantageous tax treaties. Many of them disproportionately benefit countries of the Global North and limit the country's ability to tax MNCs. For example, Malawi has double taxation treaties with the UK (1956), France (1963) and the Netherlands (2015).⁹⁹ Malawi should also take measures to curb tax incentives granted to MNCs, as a means to attract investments, and introduce measures to track whether such incentives are beneficial.¹¹ For instance, in seeking to attract investors in the mining sector, the Government needs to ensure that companies are taxed progressively and pay what they owe, supported by strong legislation and monitored by routine audits. Moreover, given the social and environmental harms associated with the extractive sector, stringent mechanisms are needed to ensure that profits and resources from the mining sector are redistributed equitably, especially to local communities.¹⁰⁰

b. Shifting towards agroecological approaches

Over the past decade, national food security policy in Malawi has centred self-sufficiency on maize. Nearly 70 percent of the Ministry of Agriculture's annual budget has been allocated to the fertiliser input subsidy programme, which provides farmers with coupons for hybrid maize seed and fertiliser.¹⁰¹ Over half of farming households in Malawi were targeted by the programme to receive an annual subsidy coupon,¹⁰² although this number has declined substantially in recent years.¹⁰³ The subsidy

is expected to tackle smallholder food insecurity primarily through the agricultural income pathway as farmers produce a surplus of maize which they can sell. However, there is evidence to show that food insecurity persists despite bumper maize crops. In 2019, harvests amounted to 3.4 million tonnes, 3.3 million in 2020 and 3.8 million in 2021.¹⁰⁴ The same has been noted for other produce like rice and pulses. Despite this, and a market and export-oriented approach to food production, challenges in access to food and malnourishment persist. In addition, recurrent shocks and hazards contribute to the persistent smallholder food insecurity in Malawi, particularly floods and prolonged dry spells, poor livelihood strategies, poor policy implementation and high poverty levels.¹⁰⁵

An agroecological approach may be more aligned to FWE in Malawi and help relieve smallholder food insecurity and food poverty, by using feminist ethics that recognise that women make up the majority of smallholder farmers. Agroecology seeks to ensure long-term productivity by restoring biodiversity and the different types of ecosystem functions. It is especially key to supporting food production and human wellbeing (i.e., clean water, nutrient cycling, and climate regulation).¹⁰⁶ It represents an alternative approach to agriculture that could enable food security and greater resistance to climate change. Practices vary based on local social and environmental conditions, knowledge, and preferences but often include crop rotation, polyculture, agroforestry, and the use of green manure and crop-livestock mixtures.¹⁰⁷ Agroecology is associated with social movements, such as food sovereignty movements, which assert that it has transformative potential to address social and economic dimensions of food security.¹⁰⁸ Food sovereignty is characterised as the ability for people to *"define their own food and agricultural systems."*

c. Gender-responsive budgeting as a policy tool

'Gender budgeting' or 'gender-responsive budgeting' (GRB)¹² are umbrella terms referring to tools, techniques and systems used to incorporate

11. Intervention by Oxfam Malawi, at the Global Days of Action for Tax Justice event convened by ActionAid Malawi and the Feminist Macroeconomic Alliance of Malawi in 2023.

12. Gender budgeting' or 'gender-responsive budgeting' are umbrella terms used to refer to a variety of tools, techniques and systems used to incorporate a gender perspective in budgeting processes—ultimately promoting the effective mainstreaming of gender in policy-making .

a gender perspective in budgeting processes, and ultimately to promote the effective mainstreaming of gender in policymaking. It has a long history across several countries of the Global South, notably South Africa as a pioneer, with uneven levels of success. For example, GRB can be misused to ‘pink wash’ state expenditure. In practice, GRB should radically restructure expenditure and revenue in order to redistribute assets, access to goods and services, and dignified work conditions. In the context of FWE, this entails examining and reallocating prices, tax revenues, monetary policies, purchase subsidies, women’s ownership of land and other assets, their voice and control over those assets, recognition of paid and unpaid work (both monetary and non-monetary), structural disparities between women and men and their life outcomes.¹⁰⁹

Malawi introduced GRB training in 2003 to train civil society groups and civil servants responsible for public finance, supported by UNDP and UNFPA.¹¹⁰ The training has been utilised in some areas of state budgeting, which has resulted in a Strategic Road Map for participants. The Malawi Local Government Authority and Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development have also developed a programme to train women councillors in GRB.¹¹¹ The enhanced capacity of these institutions eventually resulted in a gendered review of several budget instruments, including Treasury instructions, budget guidelines and the Programme Based Budget Manual.

In order to ensure investments to advance gendered equality in every sphere, it is vital that GRB training is extended to other ministries, including the Treasury and ministries of health, education, labour, agriculture and the environment. This is necessary so that GRB can be systematically applied to all relevant budgets and reviewed at a national level. This could also ensure that the labour of identifying and implementing solutions does not rest entirely with women.

During a crisis (such as a pandemic or post-structural adjustment), GRB can be an additional means to track the flow of public money from the Government to its final outcomes for different genders.¹¹² For example, during a pandemic, GRB can apply four key elements to administrative processes including gendered innovations in - a) knowledge processing networking; b) mechanisms; c) innovations in learning processes and building capacities; and d) public accountability and benefit incidence.¹¹³

4.2 Potential policy pathways for the transition to FWE in Malawi

Malawi has been the site of extensive Bretton Woods interventions, many of them counterproductive. There are some contemporary policy interventions that workshop participants (and the research that informed this paper) consider to be useful entry points to transitioning towards FWE. Existing policy frameworks in Malawi that could facilitate a radical transition to a FWE include Malawi 2063, the Decent Work Country Programme and the National Social Support Programme.

Malawi 2063

Malawi 2063 is a long-term vision for Malawian development for the period 2020-2063, developed by the National Planning Commission. Its main objective is to transform Malawi into “a youth-centric, inclusive wealthy and self-reliant industrialised upper middle-income country.” It sets out to “create a strong economy with a competitive manufacturing industry that is driven by agriculture and mining, with globally competitive economic infrastructure and human resources, a dynamic private sector and world-class urban centres with requisite socio-economic amenities”.¹¹⁴

Although it follows a neoliberal frame of economic growth, parts of Malawi 2063 could anchor the FWE framing and potentially be built upon and used as levers for FWE advocacy. For example, Malawi 2063 refers to the role of the Government as “an inclusive and democratic developmental State” instead of merely facilitating private sector investment. The achievement of such a State is centred on three factors: a visionary and development-oriented benevolent leadership; a competent and relatively autonomous State bureaucracy; and a strong public-private alliance that promotes the common development agenda of the country. A democratic developmental State philosophy is built on vibrant, responsive and accessible public services and investment in job creation and wellbeing, as opposed to private sector profits.

The notion of ‘quality of life’ featured in Malawi 2063 is undefined, but could potentially be a pathway towards FWE, if a definition is developed with input from women’s rights organisations and other marginalised groups. They could collectively develop indicators for measuring quality of life, along

with systems for allocating budget accordingly and tracking progress (see 4.1c on Gender Responsive Budgeting).

Vision 2063 regards addressing gendered equality as one of the key human capital development enablers. It only does so in the context of ‘an economic driver,’ rather than centring feminist wellbeing or even basic women’s rights. Vision 2063 *“recognises the impact of gender inequality on all sectors of the economy and social life and aims to end all gender-based discrimination and harmful practices way before 2063.”* Yet the plan does not propose any structural shifts to transfer power to women and does not speak to the rights of non-binary people or address the protection of sex workers or the LGBTQI community.

The Government plans to attain these three pillars by investing and supporting other key areas, namely: human capital development; public sector performance; economic infrastructure; and environmental sustainability. These could support investments in areas such as health, education and environmental protection. Such investments are vital for FWE to be achieved and will require the Government to resist calls for further austerity measures. They include early childcare as well as elder care, and expanding social protection such as paid paternity leave. Malawi currently has zero expenditure or anticipated budget allocation for paternity leave, although it has been introduced in law. However, analysis by ILO demonstrates the affordability of these measures, arguing that they eventually pay for themselves, and that they create pathways to reduce the gender wage gap and ‘normalise’ dual parent childcare beyond gendered prescripts.

The focus on industrialisation as a way to increase Malawi’s ‘self-reliance’ by moving it up the value chain and beyond the export of raw commodities requires appropriate planning. It must be done in a way that guarantees dignified work and jobs for women and all workers, while safeguarding the environment and food security. Trade and foreign direct investment frameworks should have feminist principles.¹¹⁵ These should protect Malawi’s policy space by ensuring that domestic traders, companies and sectors are protected from inequitable and damaging competition with MNCs. In addition, it should exclude any investor-State dispute-settlement clauses that allow MNCs to sue Malawi if they feel their profits are threatened.

It should compel foreign investors to respect local labour rights, human dignity and environmental standards. Finally, the framework must support technology transfer and the strengthening of local supply chains.

Malawi’s Decent Work Country Programme

Decent and Dignified¹³ work are a critical component of the vision for FWE developed by the women and LGBTQI+ people consulted for this research in Malawi. Malawi, like all countries, has numerous commitments to decent work, most notably the 32 ILO Conventions and one Protocol, which it has ratified, as well as SDG 8.

Malawi’s second Decent Work Country Programme (DWCP II) articulates the Government’s commitments to and strategy for addressing decent work deficits in the country, and how it will work with ILO to support the achievement of this goal.¹¹⁶ DWCP II aims to contribute to Malawi’s wider development objectives through employment promotion and deliberate policies that ensure that economic growth translates into decent, secure and rights-based employment for women, men and youth.

DWCP II notes that while Malawi has progressed in developing and enacting some relevant policies and laws, gaps remain in implementation, largely due to the Governments’ limited technical and financial capacity. This includes existing policies and laws aimed at eliminating gender-based discrimination in the labour market, which also call for strengthened representation of women in decision-making at all levels. It further highlights that the Malawian Government has not yet ratified several key conventions which relate to gendered equality and women’s rights, including ILO C.156 on Workers with Family Responsibilities, ILO C.183 on Maternity Protection, and ILO C.190 on Violence and Harassment. These would need to be ratified and implemented as a matter of priority to support the attainment of FWE.

In addition to the creation of decent work, the strategy also prioritises the ratification and application of international labour standards and fundamental principles and rights at work, and enhancing and extending the coverage and quality

13. See section 2.7 for further clarification on terms used and their purpose

of social protection. It gives significant attention to the promotion of decent work in the agriculture sector. This is crucial since agriculture is the main source of employment, especially in the tobacco, tea, and coffee sectors. Social dialogue should be mainstreamed across all labour areas.

If the DWCP is effectively implemented, using a gender-responsive lens, and with recognition of other intersecting dimensions of exclusion and oppression, it could contribute towards the achievement of FWE in Malawi. Some important pillars include age, migrant status, sexual orientation and gender identity. The employment priority clearly recognises the broken system of unequal employment between women and men, noting that men have a higher employment rate than women (86 percent and 74 percent, respectively). However, the strategy only minimally addresses the (related) disproportionately high burden of unpaid work shouldered by women. The DWCP suggests that the equitable gender distribution of work and family responsibilities is essential, including elements of childcare, maternity and paternity protection to create and normalise non-discrimination in these roles. Investing in the public care sector could potentially generate decent work for women and help redistribute unpaid care work from households and communities to the State.

Social protection is also a critical area to support the attainment of FWE. This includes commitments to extend protections to people who work in the parallel (informal) sector, where most women in Malawi are employed. The DWCP includes a strategy for expanding pension protections for all workers, including those in the informal sector, and measures to support the development and implementation of Malawi's broader national policy framework on social protection and the Malawi National Social Support Programme II.

Interventions to support the National Social Support Programme rollout include: reviewing the effectiveness of poverty-targeting mechanisms; conducting discussions on rights-based and lifecycle approaches to social protection; increasing knowledge and public debate including by engaging with women's rights organisations and other civil society actors; supporting evidence generation to support increased government funding; and provision of technical and managerial capacity building and support.

It is important that the targets in this and future DWCP strategies disaggregate the data they collect by gender. This should ideally move beyond gender binaries to recognise how non-binary and other gender non-conforming people are specifically impacted by decent and dignified work deficits. This includes their experiences of violence and harassment in workplaces and requires explicit measures of redress.

The Malawi National Social Support Programme II¹¹⁷

Despite recent improvements in the coverage of social assistance programmes in Malawi, only a fraction of people who need the support actually receive it. Many programmes rely on direct support and implementation by development partners, while State-run programmes are limited by capacity and resource constraints. This results in a fragmented approach to social protection that concentrates on acute poverty-focused targeting, rather than addressing widespread poverty and vulnerability. According to ILO, the limited overall coverage is further undermined by low benefit levels, and limited linkages between the social protection systems and humanitarian responses.

The Malawi National Social Support Programme II (MNSSP II) was launched in early 2018 to improve the coverage, quality and integration of the social protection system by 2023. The programme confirms the Government's commitment to delivering social support by providing income and consumption transfers to those living in poverty and food insecurity. Interventions under this framework include cash transfers, public works, school meals and village savings and loans programmes. It also recognises the gendered dimensions of poverty on women and the impacts of disasters and shocks (although it barely mentions climate change in this regard), as well as the importance of women's participation in decision-making. Implementation is supported by ILO under DCWP II.

A complementary initiative designed to support the implementation of the MNSSP II is the Social Support for Resilience (SoSuRe) Programme.¹¹⁸ This European-funded project is implemented in partnership with the Ministry of Gender, Social Welfare and Community Development, Irish Aid and various international non-governmental organisations. It aims to reduce poverty and

enhance resilience among 270,000 people from the most vulnerable households in Malawi. This includes funding for cash transfers and to strengthen national social protection systems.

Given the ongoing sizeable gaps in coverage, the implementation of MNSSP II falls far short of what is needed to support FWE in Malawi. However, it sets a foundation on which to build and expand coverage and ensure that universal social protection is accessible to all. Planning and implementation of the next iteration could provide a vital opportunity in this regard.

4.3 Economic sovereignty and decision-making: The role of the Global North and IFIs¹⁴

In this intertwined global economy, where power still rests in the Global North, Malawi's ability to recover from its debt distress and meet its State obligations will remain constrained. It is fundamental that countries in the Global North and IFIs, as well as private lenders, cancel Malawi's debts and support the creation of a sovereign debt workout mechanism. This has long been demanded by civil society in the Global South.¹¹⁹

Disturbingly, there are plans to further indebt climate-affected countries like Malawi through the provision of loans to support them to adapt to and mitigate the impacts of climate change. This is being offered as a solution despite these countries being the least responsible for the climate crisis, and without any reference to climate colonialism and climate reparations.¹²⁰ It is not clear, for example, whether the countries most culpable for the climate crisis will make equivalent contributions to the loss and damage fund that was established at the 27th Conference of Parties in November 2022.¹²¹

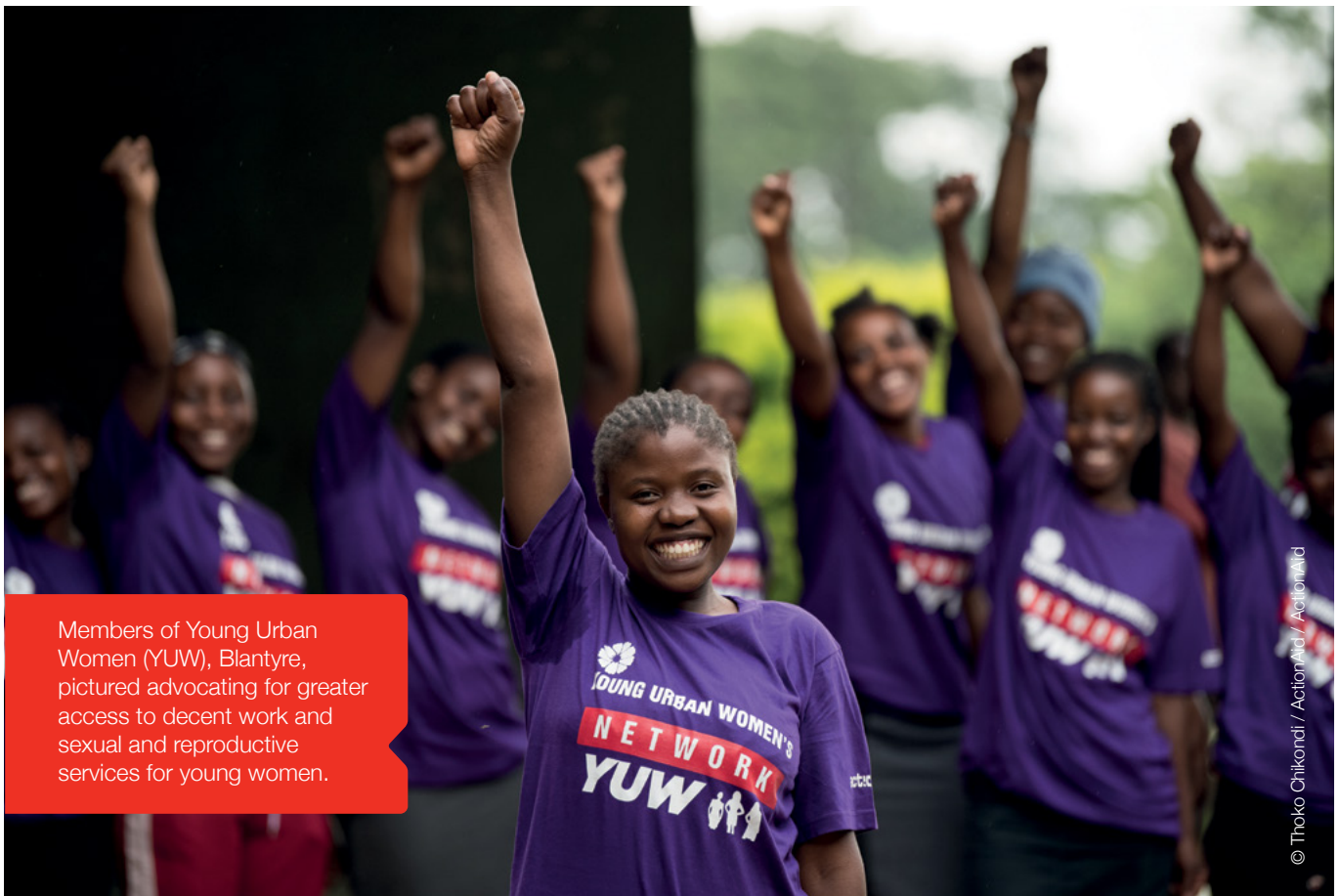
There are other options for mobilising and reorientating resources to countries in the Global South, including stronger measures to sanction tax avoidance and evasion by MNCs. Offenders include the United Kingdom, which has a significant number of tax havens within the territories it occupies. In 2022, a landmark vote at the United Nations General Assembly paved the way to move tax policymaking away from the elite OECD countries to the United Nations. Under this new global tax body, all countries can have an equal say by ensuring tax rules are just and resources are redistributed

equitably. Oxfam has shown that wealth taxes of just 5 percent on the world's multi-millionaires and billionaires could raise \$1.7 trillion a year.¹²² This far exceeds the proposals for loan-based climate finance being considered. Targeted windfall taxes on the excess profits of the biggest fossil fuel and energy companies, which have soared whilst countless households across the world have faced hunger and cold, could potentially yield hundreds of billions. Previous analysis by ActionAid showed that taxing just five big tech companies could raise \$32 billion, while the US Congress has estimated that a Financial Transactions Tax of 0.1 percent could raise \$777 billion in revenue over 10 years.¹²³

Given the protracted economic and climatic challenges facing Malawi and the constraints on its fiscal space to respond, the country remains highly dependent on aid. It is problematic that such a resource wealthy country is still in the aid and debt web. While aid funds are important as the country seeks to rebuild from the damage of COVID-19 and inflation, a decolonised, equitable funding model is essential in that rebuilding. Austerity and privatisation measures promoted by the IMF and other IFIs undermine these sizeable social investments and their associated commitments to gendered equality.

Trade and investment are other areas in critical need of reform. These need to be gender-transformative, respect workers' rights, protect sovereign policy space of countries. It should also enable them to invest in public services, agriculture and domestic industries in order to produce higher value goods and move up the value chain. Multilateral systems of global economic governance also need to be reimagined and reconfigured so that the majority of the global population is adequately represented to address past and ongoing harms and exploitation.

14. Further information can be made available from original research conducted namely 'Forging A Feminist Economy' in 2023, compiled by Vincent Kondowe and Ruth Nkhwazi in Malawi, with analysis from Lebohang Liepollo Pheko.



Members of Young Urban Women (YUW), Blantyre, pictured advocating for greater access to decent work and sexual and reproductive services for young women.

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4.4. Examples from other contexts

In recognition of the inadequacies of GDP growth and the primacy of the market as a means to ensure gendered equality, human rights, dignity and wellbeing of people and the environment, many civil society organisations and social movements, as well as governments and multilateral institutions have developed and promoted alternative models and frameworks for a wellbeing economy. A number of these are briefly introduced below.

The contexts include a number of high-income countries,¹⁵ such as Canada, Aotearoa (colonially known as New Zealand)^{16/124} and Scotland, who face nowhere near the kinds of resource constraints that Malawi is subjected to. However, it is hoped that the approaches they have taken could provide insights and inspiration for governments everywhere. In addition, Canada and Scotland have both adopted ‘feminist foreign policies,’ while Aotearoa has been working towards more strongly integrating indigenous perspectives and values into theirs.¹⁷ This raises questions and potential opportunities for linking and ensuring coherence across the two agendas.

None of these alternative approaches are without criticism, and almost none of them are built on feminist or decolonial approaches (with the exception of Aotearoa). The majority of these models have been developed by male scholars in the Global North and carry the limitations of their world view. Many have been created in narrow geographic contexts in the Global North with little to no reference of mutuality with or responsibility towards the countries of the Global South. All the same, they do offer a basis for developing deeper analysis and possibilities that can be adjusted for Malawi’s specific context.

Numerous other examples of wellbeing economy initiatives from around the world, from government to community level, are documented on the WEAll website. WEAll has also developed a policy toolkit for the participative visioning, planning, implementing and measuring of a wellbeing economy.¹²⁵

15. A politically problematic term given the colonial and extractive means of accruing these economic dividends

16. Aotearoa

17. These values include “manaaki – kindness or the reciprocity of goodwill; whanaunga – our connectedness or shared sense of humanity; mahi tahi and kotahitanga – collective benefits and shared aspiration; and kaitiaki – protectors and stewards of our intergenerational wellbeing”.

The Feminist Economic Recovery Plan for COVID-19

When feminist voices led the drafting of the Hawaii Feminist Economic Recovery Plan for COVID-19, they significantly shifted their Government's pandemic policy. Their proposals include lifting the minimum wage, introducing universal basic income and universal healthcare, and restructuring the tax system through increased property and corporate taxes. They also suggested restructuring the sectors where women are concentrated to ensure better wages and protection.¹²⁶

Canada was inspired by this and drafted 'A Feminist Recovery Plan for Canada'. The effort was led by The Institute for Gender and the Economy and the Young Women's Christian Association, and the Canada plan is rooted in decolonial, anti-racist, feminist principles that recognises the structural exclusion of indigenous people and migrants. The plan aspires to

*"build an economy that works for everyone, actions that resist, counteract and dismantle sexism, anti-Black racism, anti-indigenous colonial racism."*¹²⁷

Sultana, A. & Ravanera, C. (2020)

The Social and Solidarity Economy¹²⁸

The social and solidarity economy (SSE) is about developing economies that are not profit-driven, but based instead on the principles of solidarity, social reproduction, self-management and collective wellbeing. SSE is often embedded within cooperative movements and other traditional and modern systems of cooperation, as well as community-based mutual ownership and exchange, such as barter and time banks.

At a global level, the United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on SSE (created in 2013 as part of the post-2015 Agenda) is putting SSE forward as a possible alternative model of production, financing and consumption that can deliver on sustainability and social justice. This taskforce, and ILO, also highlighted the important role that SSE organisations played globally in the COVID-19 response, including in the care sector.

By enhancing community access to and control over economic resources and services, SSE

approaches serve to challenge or find ways to be resilient against the social and economic exclusion caused by mainstream economic approaches. Several Latin American countries have passed laws and constitutional articles and created Secretariats dedicated to SSE. In Africa, Uganda and South Africa both have policies aimed at supporting cooperatives as components of SSE, whilst Morocco and Mali both have ministries for SSE.

Aotearoa Wellbeing Budget

In May 2019, Aotearoa unveiled the country's first Wellbeing Budget, built around the Treasury's Living Standards Framework for considering the intergenerational wellbeing impacts of policies and proposals. The budget recognised that, while economic growth is important, it does not guarantee improvements to living standards, measure the quality of economic activity, or take into account who benefits and who is left behind. All budget proposals were assessed on the difference they would make across a range of economic, social, environmental and cultural considerations for both the current and future generations. This approach is known as *He Ara Waiora*, roughly translated as the 'Human Wellbeing'¹⁸ framework, and focuses on lifting the living standards of all Aotearoa citizens.¹²⁹

Research was commissioned to identify priority areas for the Living Standards Framework, which in turn informed, the baseline on which the Wellbeing Budget policy development and implementation would be measured. The indicators aim to go beyond GDP to include wellbeing and sustainable development, and integrate Te Ao Māori perspectives. As the 109 wellbeing indicators covering 22 topics were only finalised in 2019, currently 39 have no data sources and 17 still use a proxy source.¹³⁰

The first Wellbeing Budget represented a new way of developing and communicating the country's budget, showing a formal mechanism that embeds wellbeing measurement frameworks into government decision-making and budgeting processes. In order to achieve genuine and enduring change, Aotearoa has also required the reorientation of the public sector and systems geared towards the new approach.

18. This refers to *waiora* which refers to a broad conception of human wellbeing, grounded in *wai* (water) as the source of *ora* (life) among *mātauranga* Māori.

Canada's Quality of Life Framework

In 2021, the Canadian Department of Finance released a 'Quality of Life Framework' to define and measure success in the search for greater quality of life in the country, and improve its decision-making in this regard.¹³¹ Having previously concentrated on economic indicators to measure progress, the Quality of Life Framework covers a range of issues such as mental health, family violence, access to green space, social connections, job security, access to childcare, quality of long-term care, racial inequalities, justice, low-paid essential work, gender imbalances in caregiving responsibilities, and gaps in the social safety net. These measures were also incorporated into the country's COVID-19 Economic Response Plan.

The framework consists of five major domains (Prosperity; Health, Environment, Society, and Good Governance) and a set of indicators to track and report on performance within each one. For example, 'health' may be measured by indicators such as life expectancy, levels of physical activity, or rates of depression and anxiety. Besides these five domains, there are measures of inequality and sustainability which focus on factors like greenhouse gas emissions and the public debt-to-GDP ratio as a means to assess environmental and fiscal sustainability.

Bhutan's Gross National Happiness Index

After experiencing the failures of GDP as the sole indicator of development, Bhutan created a Gross National Happiness (GNH) index in 2008, to gauge the wellbeing of its citizens.¹³² The GNH index is a holistic approach which measures the happiness and wellbeing of the Bhutanese population. It includes nine domains, supported by 33 indicators: psychological wellbeing, health, education, time use, cultural diversity and resilience, good governance, community vitality, ecological diversity and resilience, and living standards. The GNH Index allows for the analysis of the nation's wellbeing based on each person's achievements under each indicator. In addition to analysing the happiness and wellbeing of the people, it also guides policy design to further create enabling conditions for the weaker-scoring survey results.

Despite these efforts, the 2019 World Happiness Report found that Bhutan is far from the happiest

country in the world, ranking 95th out of 156 countries. Much of that has to do with the nation's poverty and the challenges of bringing economic and social equity to a predominately agricultural society that is also deeply patriarchal. Despite this, the World Bank calls Bhutan a developmental success story, with decreasing levels of extreme poverty and improvements in gender equality, as well as a stable political and economic environment.

In looking at Bhutan, it must be noted that the country's political system is very closed, and the country is also one of the last surviving monarchies. As such, the implementation of its policies may not be easily replicated in other democratic political systems.

The Scottish Government Wellbeing Economy

In a quest to measure the effectiveness of the public sector and what matters most to the people, the Scottish government introduced the National Performance Framework (NPF) in 2007.¹³³ The NPF assesses Scotland's progress using 'National Indicators' to measure wellbeing. It has had a significant impact that helped to give the public sector, and individuals and organisations across the voluntary and private sectors, a very clear vision of the kind of country Scotland aims to be.¹³⁴

In 2018, the NPF was reviewed and 11 national wellbeing outcomes drafted from data collected from consultations on around - children and young people, communities, culture, economy, education, environment, health, fair work and business and human rights. These outcomes were grouped into thematic areas and also embedded to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and Action Plan for Human Rights.¹³⁵ The performance of each of the 81 National Indicators is assessed annually as improving, maintaining or worsening, and a decision is made for each based on its own "Criteria for Change".¹³⁶

4.5 Alternative measures of progress towards societal wellbeing

The following metrics are available to States and multi-lateral institutions to measure progress towards the achievement of FWE: access to public services, living incomes, food security, accountability and transparency, inflation and affordability, mental

health, levels of educational attainment, women's autonomy and decision-making power, access to family planning, transparency on economic policies, equal participation and the end of corruption are among a few.

Progress towards FWE and a just and radical transition can be measured using tools that are gender-responsive and inclusive, with mechanisms to ensure that national budgets allocate funds as necessary. A number of methods for measuring economic health have been developed, which could be helpful to countries such as Malawi, linking to the concept of 'high quality of life' deployed in the Malawi 2063 strategy. These include:

- **Genuine Progress Indicator:**¹⁹ This incorporates social and environmental factors not measured by GDP, such as the cost of ozone depletion, crime or poverty on a nation's economic health.
- **Thriving Places Index:**^{20/139} This focuses on a breakdown of holistic elements that help support thriving communities and economies, including a wide variety of factors to measure economic health such as mental and physical health, education and learning, work and local economy, and "green" infrastructure.
- **Genuine Savings Indicator:**²¹ The World Bank's indicator argues that factors such as public investments of resource revenues and the social cost of pollution emissions are equally relevant in determining the overall level of saving.
- **The Happy Planet Index:**¹⁴⁰ Developed by the United Kingdom New Economic Foundation, this index combines four elements – life expectancy, wellbeing, ecological footprint and inequality – to show how efficiently people in different countries are using environmental resources to lead long, happy lives.

19. The Genuine Progress Indicator is an attempt to measure the real increase in economic welfare. It measures the improvement in economic welfare costs and was designed by US. economists Clifford Cobb, Ted Halstead and Jonathan Rowe.

20. The Thriving Places Indicator is interested in creating thriving local conditions for people, ensuring the process is equitable and sustainable for future generations. It was designed by the Centre for Thriving Places

21. The GSI is an indicator to assess an economy's sustainability. It defines wealth beyond orthodox national accounts, and recalculates national savings figures based on this new definition. It was designed by environmental economists David Pearce and Giles Atkinson in 1993.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

The COVID-19 pandemic and accompanying crises have pushed back gains in women's rights and driven countless people back into poverty. As such, momentum around the world is growing for feminist alternatives and economies focused on care and wellbeing, including in Malawi. Although context specific, many of the challenges facing the country and its people are experienced by others in the Global South. As such, and although by no means exhaustive, it is hoped that the vision, analysis and potential policy pathways presented above offer examples and insights that are relevant to other contexts. Also, it can help lay the grounds for the forging of more feminist economies everywhere as an urgent economic, human rights and dignity, women's rights and environmental imperative.

The transformation of the global economic architecture and institutions is central to this, to ensure that they are genuinely democratised, representative, accountable and transparent. The transformation will be manifest by northern power holders decolonising their economy to shift power, resources and decision-making back to the Global South.

Recommendations to the Government of Malawi

The following recommendations draw from the proposals of the feminist activists convened through the research, as well as the additional analysis that was undertaken. The Government of Malawi could:

- Enhance transparency and accountability to citizens, including women's rights organisations and feminist networks, and engage in people-centred decision-making by establishing platforms to share and seek feedback on proposed economic reforms. Explore alternative forms of domestic resource mobilisation beyond IMF/ World Bank loans, and demonstrate how any existing loans are being utilised. Increase levels of parliamentary scrutiny and oversight in this regard.
- Adequately finance gender-responsive public services (GRPS) to bolster services that are critical to wellbeing, human rights and dignity and address gendered (in)equality. It would also mean to redistribute women's unequal share of unpaid care and domestic work to ensure decent and dignified work for public sector workers. Refrain from implementing austerity measures that harm women and those facing intersecting forms of marginalisation.
- Explore and implement progressive domestic resource mobilisation mechanisms that enable the government to finance gender-responsive public services and social protection. This includes by ensuring MNCs pay their fair share of tax reviewing tax holidays and double taxation treaties, ensuring sufficient taxation of the mining sector, rather than increasing VAT, or placing an undue tax burden on small domestic businesses, especially in the informal sector.
- Fully implement Malawi's ILO Decent Country Work Programme to uphold the right to decent work for women across all sectors of the economy, including for those working in the informal sector. Invest in understanding further the elements of dignified work and how this can be achieved. This includes: supporting the creation of sustainable green jobs that help foster a wellbeing economy; investing in public services such as health and education; ensuring equity in recruitment processes, living wages, equal pay and access to social protection; and freedom to form and join a union and engage in collective bargaining. Ratify and implement ILO C190 on ending violence and harassment in the world of work, along with robust policies to ensure health and safety.
- Ensure that the country's trade and foreign direct investment treaties and frameworks are gender-transformative and safeguard Malawi's policy space by ensuring that - domestic traders, companies and sectors are protected from unfair competition with MNCs; that they

exclude ISDS clauses; and that investors abide by values of care, wellbeing and environmental standards, support technology transfer and the strengthening of local supply chains.²²

- Expand the National Social Support Policy so that social protection is universal and accessible to all, including those in the informal economy and living in rural areas.
- Creating an enabling environment for young women to participate in income-generation and enhance their economic security, including by providing interest-free grants to young women and supporting the training and hiring of LGBTQIA+ people and sex workers.
- Invest in and support the rollout and implementation of agroecological techniques to promote food sovereignty and the climate resilience of smallholder farmers, rural communities and anyone facing food insecurity in Malawi. This is implemented by the rebuilding of gender-responsive agricultural extension services.
- Implement Gender responsive budgeting and planning nationally. Also ensuring the national budget is designed to address the specific needs and rights of women and other marginalised groups.
- Develop alternative metrics and indicators to GDP, as a means to measure social and economic progress and wellbeing in Malawi. For example, based on the 'quality of life' concept in Malawi 2063. Engage in a participative process with women, youth, LGBTQIA+ and wider citizens, especially those from the most marginalised groups, in order to develop the baseline indicators and process for assessing progress. Use this as a basis to develop a wellbeing economy budget for Malawi grounded in feminist principles.

Recommendations to IFIs, donors and countries in the Global North:

The Global North needs to ensure a manifestation of economies that anchor community and human care and wellbeing, and enable countries to meet their commitments to feminist ethics, dismantling racism and sexism. This includes committing to reparations for climate damages caused by the Global North and extraction in the Global South. However, this will require far-reaching systemic changes to make this a possibility. These changes include dismantling the neocolonial global economic architecture and its decision-making institutions and processes. It requires a complete shift in the orientation of Global North countries and IFIs, such as the IMF and World Bank. These need to draw on the thinking and analysis of feminist economists and scholars, especially those from the Global South, to inform their understanding of the economy and policies and approaches that recognise, value and recentre care, wellbeing, human rights and dignity, women's rights and environmental sustainability from an intersectional perspective. Furthermore, this includes aligning aid budgets accordingly, with greater financing for feminist equality, including direct, long-term, flexible funding to women's rights organisations and feminist movements.

Specifically, this requires countries from the Global North and IFIs to:

- **Support investments in gender-responsive public services and social protection, particularly in the care economy** Refrain from impinging on the ability of States to uphold their obligations for human right and dignity and to eliminate gendered (in)equality. This is achieved through loan conditions or policy advice to cut public spending in key sectors such as health and education, including cuts and freezes to the public sector wage bill and social protection.
- **Promote progressive forms of taxation** such as wealth taxes, corporation and capital gains taxes, and the capacity of national tax authorities to collect them, rather than expanding regressive taxes such as VAT.
- **Take steps towards the eradication of tax avoidance, evasion and illicit financial flows:** Institute wealth taxes on multimillionaires, billionaires and MNCs, particularly fossil fuel and energy companies and big tech. Proactively

22. For more on gender-just trade see: <https://www.actionaid.org.uk/publications/from-rhetoric-to-rights-towards-gender-just-trade>. For alternative FDI frameworks, see: https://www.actionaid.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/an_alternative_fdi_framework.pdf

support the creation of a United Nations global tax body that is genuinely representative of the Global South.

- **Proactively engage in measures to restructure and cancel the debt of countries facing debt** distress, including by supporting sovereign debt workout mechanisms. Enact binding requirements for private lenders to participate in debt workout processes.
- **Advance Feminist aligned strategies** and approaches that protect workers' rights and land rights; safeguard local traders and producers; respect the policy space of countries to invest in public services and support fledging domestic industries; and exclude ISDS and measures that place investor rights over human rights and dignity and measures to tackle the climate crisis.
- **Pay reparations for climate damage** and ongoing risks by disbursing grant-based support, including by contributing to the United Nations Loss and Damage Fund based on responsibility for the crisis. Also by providing the requisite aid to countries for adaptation and mitigation.
- **Implement binding regulations for holding companies to account** for violations of the rights of workers and communities and environmental harms linked to their value chains and activities, including by introducing mandatory human rights and dignity due diligence requirements. In addition, support the creation of a United Nations Binding Treaty on Business and Human Rights.
- **Commit to improving accountability, transparency and representation**, along with widespread reform within the IMF, World Bank and other IFIs, by calling for firm adherence to obligations that recognise human and labour dignity, across all policies and approaches.
- **Commit to undertaking systematic women's rights** impact assessments to understand policy impacts and how they must advance, rather than damage women's rights and feminist principles; systematically engage with civil society formations such as women's rights organisations; be transparent when loans are being negotiated; install transparent processes for electing leaders, and measures that ensure equitable and transformative representation,

voice and decision-making power for countries in the Global South.

- **Support the development and use of alternative metrics to GDP** to assess societal progress and the eradication of gendered (in) equality, progress on human rights and dignity, protection and environmental protection and realise redistribution of resources.
- Create and lobby for a transparent process for electing leaders combined with reforms that ensure equitable representation, voice and decision-making power for countries in the Global South.

Recommendations to Malawian feminist activists, women's rights groups and their allies:

- **Establish knowledge hubs to champion and popularise** feminist economic approaches, including the concept of FWE. These could build understanding and serve as spaces for organising and development of joint advocacy.
- **Seek to establish a multistakeholder standing committee** between civil society organisations and government agencies, as a key space to solicit buy-in with key government institutions such as the Parliament, Cabinet, the Ministry of Finance, Economic Planning and Development, the Presidency and political parties. This could also be a space to foster dialogue on key economic policies between feminist movements, wider civil society, and feminist and other heterodox scholars, with Government, including in relation to debt and loans, as a way to increase transparency, participation and accountability. This would give an opportunity for women, transgender, and non-binary people to push for their priorities in all of their diversity.
- **Build the evidence for policy reforms towards FWE**, including by supporting women's groups in mapping, documenting and researching key issues, such as the care crisis and how it manifests in women's lives.
- **Maximise Malawi's thriving and diverse civil society sector** by engaging with movements on the need for a shift to FWE. This could include convening different movements that work on

women's labour rights in order to build counter power through advocacy and campaigning. This would include a decent minimum wage to caregivers so that the extractive, exploitative and violently gendered model is challenged.

- **Support feminist alternative economies** – and initiatives that provide grounded alternatives and can document lessons and possibilities. This includes reconstructing the binary between the private and the public, since these are deeply integrated, and recognising a mutual interface between waged and unwaged labour and social reproduction. This appreciates less hierarchical

relationships between people and nature and is embedded in indigenous understandings of mutuality.

- **Demand climate reparations and a feminist, decolonial approach** for climate sovereignty that is devolved from extractive industries and damaging and exploitative industrial processes that disproportionately privilege international capital interests over Malawian workers, producers, communities and industries.

ANNEX 1: Methodology Note

1.1 Overarching Strategy and Conceptual Framework

The research is largely qualitative and premised on feminist research principles such as Political Economy Analysis (PEA), Theory of Change (ToC) and Analytical Legal Research. This is grounded in the nature of the research questions, the intended outcomes, and other ancillary objectives of feminist macroeconomic paradigms. The analytical legal research informed the study on how the law can be utilised to enable a transition to a Feminist Economic Wellbeing. The approach also explored ways of decolonising the economy while exploring state sovereignty by adopting an economic model that is locally defined vis-à-vis the dominant narratives of neoliberal policy dogma. It is framed through a decolonial feminist approach to create a liberating research space for the marginalised communities participating in this research.

The qualitative data were collected through stakeholder consultations at national, district and community levels using different data collection tools. The report also benefitted from the review of research reports, publications and existing data.

The approach to this assignment used the following methodical approaches:

1.2 Stakeholder Consultations Through Visioning Workshops

Using a theory of change approach (visioning) of problem analysis to bring different voices and perspectives. These workshops were convened twice.

1.3 Desk-based review of secondary literature and data sources

An in-depth desk-based review was undertaken of secondary literature and data sources on Wellbeing Economy mirroring the feminist pedagogy, assumptions and alternative solutions to neoliberal economic praxis from both local and the international level.

1.4 Key Informant Interviews

At least 15 key informants were targeted from government, non-state women's groups and institutions and academia. Due to unforeseen circumstances and non-responsiveness, many of these interviews did not take place.

1.5 Data Analysis

The data for the study was analysed using discourse and content analysis.

ANNEX 2: Glossary

Agroecology is a sustainable approach to farming to produce healthy food and preserve natural resources, applying social, biological and agricultural sciences, and integrating these with traditional, indigenous and farmers' knowledge and cultures.

Austerity refers to government policies that are implemented to reduce gaps between money coming into the government (revenue) and money going out (spending). Austerity policies typically cut government spending and increase taxes. Although it is the government who ultimately decides whether to implement austerity policies, they can feel compelled to follow IMF advice to implement austerity to access IMF loans.

Conditionalities are the conditions that countries must abide by to access an IMF loan. Conditionalities specify economic reforms (usually encompassing austerity measures such as public spending cuts). The IMF expects that these rules will help countries reduce debt and pay back their loans faster.

Decent and dignified work is paid work for women and men in conditions of freedom, equality, security and human dignity. It involves opportunities for work, earning a living wage, rights at work such as freedom from violence, access to social protection (such as paid parental leave and pensions) and safeguards the right to engage in collective bargaining.

Ecofeminism is both a philosophy and a movement that sees a connection between the exploitation of and degradation of the natural world and the subordination and oppression of women through patriarchal structures.

Extractivism describes an economic and political model based on the exploitation and commodification of nature by removing large amounts of a nation's natural commons for sale on the world market.

Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems.

Fiscal consolidation is the IMF's official term for 'austerity.' Fiscal consolidation can include cuts to government spending and increased taxes, as well as privatisation of public assets and services like hospitals and transport.

Fiscal Justice is people having the space, voice and agency to exercise their rights and using this to influence and monitor fiscal systems (tax, budget cycles and public spending) to mobilize greater revenue and increase spending for quality public services.

Gender based violence (GBV) is violence that is directed at an individual based on their biological sex or gender identity. It includes physical, sexual, verbal, emotional, and psychological abuse, threats, coercion, and economic or educational deprivation, whether in public or private life.

Gender Responsive Public Services (GRPS) describes essential, rights-based services such as education, health, transport, water and sanitation, childcare, agricultural extension and street lighting which are publicly funded, universal, and publicly (not privately) delivered, gender equitable and inclusive, focused on quality, and in line with human rights framework

Heteronormativity is the belief that heterosexuality is the default, preferred, or "normal" mode of sexual orientation. It is predicated on use of the gender binary, classifying gender into two distinct, opposite forms of male and female, masculine and feminine, and assumes sexual and marital relations are most fitting between opposite sexes. It aligns biological sex, sexuality, gender identity and gender roles.

Instrumentalism describes a conceptual approach that sees and adopts women's rights and empowerment primarily through the lens of contributions to wider societal and economic outcomes such as GDP growth. It is sometimes referred to as the "business case" for women's rights.

International Financial Institutions (IFIs) are financial institutions that have been established or chartered by more than one country to provide loans and other forms of financial support to countries. They include the Bretton Woods institutions – the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the International Finance

Corporation (IFC) – as well as multilateral and regional development banks.

Intersectionality is the concept that different forms of structural oppression overlap. Gender is one of the bases of discrimination. Others include class, caste, race, age, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, work, health, HIV status, educational levels, physical abilities and so on. None of these oppressions operate independently of the other, they are interlinked.

Just Transition and Radical Transition is a framework of principles, processes and practices that build economic and political power in order to shift economies from exploitative and extractive paradigms towards sustainable production. The term is used by the trade union movement to secure workers' rights and livelihoods, and by climate justice advocates to combat climate change and protect biodiversity.

Macroeconomics the economy as a whole on a national or international level.

Multinational Corporations (MNCs) are large companies producing or selling goods and services in several countries across the world. Also known as transnational corporate organisations, they are characterised by large budgets and centralised control in a parent country.

Patriarchy is a system of power which influences everything that we do. Within this universal system, men dominate women physically, socially, culturally and economically. Patriarchy plays out in the economy, society, government, community and family. It is apparent in every sphere of life, giving rise to accepted discriminatory behaviours, attitudes and practices also known as 'patriarchal norms.' The way patriarchy manifests itself in relationships, the family, community and society changes over time and "by location and cultural context."¹²²

Privatisation is when a public asset (such as land) or service (such as health or education) is transferred from public (government) ownership to a private company to own and manage for a profit. Privatisation often means that services that were formally provided by the government and were free or very low cost can increase in cost or not be provided at all to the poorest communities because they are not as profitable. Any profit made on the fees charged is given to those who own the company instead of being put back into the government.

Taxes are a compulsory contribution to the state revenue levied by the government on various forms of economic activity. When we buy everyday products such as milk or fuel, or when we earn over a certain amount from paid work, we often have to pay tax to the government. Companies and businesses also pay taxes. Tax is the main way the government receives money that it needs to pay for public goods and services.

Unpaid care & Domestic work is non-remunerated work carried out to sustain the wellbeing, health and maintenance of other individuals in a household or the community, including domestic work (meal preparation, cleaning, washing clothes, water and fuel collection) and direct care of persons (including children, older persons and persons with disabilities, as well as able-bodied adults) carried out in homes and communities.

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