

"The Wonderful Treasure"

A Case of the National Archives of Malawi

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BACKGROUND

The National Archives of Malawi is a Government Department in the Ministry of Youth, Sports and Culture. It was established in Zomba in July 1947 as a Branch of the then Central African Archives. Later in 1953 the name Central African Archives was to National Archives of Rhodesia and Nyasaland following the birth of the Federal government. The responsibility of the Zomba Branch of the Federal Archives was to be the official repository of Government records as well as those records belonging to private institutions and individuals, who were connected with the territorial activities. When the administrative links of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland severed in December 1963, the Zomba Branch was in January 1964 declared the National Archives of Malawi.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE AND SET UP

The Deputy Director of Culture, formerly designated as Government Archivist, who reports to the Director of Culture in the Ministry of Youth, Sports and Culture, heads the Department. Currently the headquarters of the National Archives of Malawi is based in Zomba. It is situated next to the Zomba State House in what used to be the residence of the Chief Secretary of State during the colonial era. There are also two Regional Records Centres based in Lilongwe and Mzuzu, respectively.

The organizational setup of the National Archives of Malawi is structured into six operational programmes and these are:

- Records Management Services
- Public Archives Administration
- Historical Manuscripts Collection
- Legal Deposit Library
- Conservation and Document Restoration Services
- Administration and Support Services

MISSION

The mission of the National Archives of Malawi is to collect, organize, preserve and provide access to the country's documentary heritage, irrespective of the media for reference, research and posterity. This heritage comprises of records of enduring (continuous) values, printed works and audio visual materials. The mandate of the National Archives of Malawi as a custodian and preserver of the national documentary heritage is derived from two statutory obligations of the Laws of Malawi, viz: the **National Archives Act** (Chap. 28:01) and the **Printed Publications Act** (Chap. 19:01).

FUNCTIONS

The main functions as derived from its legal framework include the following:

- To regulate the preservation of public records of enduring value and disposal of ephemeral records in line with Standing! Specific Records Retention and Disposal Schedules! Instructions.
- To promote sound and proper records management practices in Government Departments, corporate bodies and private institutions through the provision of advisory services regarding the creation, maintenance and disposal of records. In undertaking this function the National Archives of Malawi operates a nation-wide

records management inspection programme whereby National Archives officials go out into the field to assess the records management situation in various institutions. In the process records that are of less value are destroyed according to the standing disposal instructions while those with enduring value are transferred to the National Archives for professional appraisal and permanent preservation.

- To conserve documents with a view to enhance their life span as archival materials through binding, microfilming, lamination, etc.
- To provide reference services to government records and other documents deposited with the National Archives of Malawi.
- To provide authorized access to public archives and historical manuscripts to researchers, scholars and the general public.
- To provide for the registration of newspapers and preservation of printed works published in Malawi.
- To promote bibliographic services and research through the publication of the Malawi National Bibliography and select bibliographies on issues of national interest.
- To administer the International Standard Book Numbering (ISBN) system in Malawi and provide advisory service to publishers in the country on the use and application of the ISBNs system.

PUBLIC IMAGE OF THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES IN MALAWI

In Malawi many people ask if the National Archives of Malawi is contributing anything to national development. To an archivist the answer to the question is obvious - the National Archives of Malawi is a catalyst for national development.

But for officials in the echelons of government, parastatal and private sector organizations the answer is different. To most of them, the National Archives of Malawi is just a dumping ground for closed files. They also regard the National Archives as a non-developmental institution that is likened to an empty pit that swallows money endlessly with no tangible results. The only time senior government officials think positively of the "**National Archives**" and realize that it is one of the most vital institutions is when calamity has fallen on them.

For the junior civil servant, the National Archives is just a place where old unwanted records are kept for whatever reason. To the ordinary Malawian in the village, the word "**Archives**" is predominantly non-existent.

PUBLIC IMAGE OF THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES IN AFRICA

In Africa very few governments appreciate the importance of an archival institution in national development, notwithstanding its over-riding importance over other projects like a new hospital, a new road, a new school, a new recreational centre, an agriculture project, etc, for the community. When it comes to evaluation of development projects, it is very difficult for government to consider a project proposal on Archives development as a priority because of its perceived low capacity for income generation.

For African government, it is generally sensible for them to evaluate development projects based on their revenue-generating potential or some other tangible potential because of the multiplicity of economic problems affecting them. With this approach of project evaluation based on income-generation potential, the National Archives programmes are automatically ruled out from government support. Consequently, most governments do not take Archives as something worth as a national priority.

WHAT DO WE TREASURE FROM NATIONAL ARCHIVES?

With the scenario that has just been explained above, the question that one would quickly ask is, "Why then should we maintain an archival institution like the National Archives of Malawi if indeed it is a dumping place for obsolete documents or if indeed it does not contribute to national development?" The answer to this question is very simple. First and foremost, the National Archives of Malawi is a **WONDERFUL TREASURE FOR THE NATION**. Despite the prevailing economic problems, Malawi cannot afford to survive without its "Archives". How?

Economic Solution for the Management of Government Information Assets (Records)

The National Archives provides an economic solution to the management of government information assets through the application of systematic and scientific information management systems. In other words, government is an institution. The paper work (records) that it creates is like fuel that keeps it running. The National Archives of Malawi came about because of the need to contain the ever-growing volumes of paper, which like fuel has to be tamed, controlled, conserved and then exploited.

Information Bank for Economic Development

As a custodian and legal keeper of government records, the National Archives of Malawi is the Information Bank for the Nation - keeping large volumes of records that are preserved as government's information assets. These assets are used as reference tools for economic development planning process thereby eliminating time wastage and money through duplicated efforts. To say that Archives are the memory of the nation and that neither government nor a human being can function effectively without archives is as true as it is hackneyed.

Life-blood for every Organization

Although one cannot convincingly argue with the "unconvinced" in government echelons that government would collapse if it loses its archival heritage, it is a fact that "Records constitute the life-blood for every organization". Whether one likes it or not, records constitute the cornerstone for national development. With no records in place, development projects would not be carried out effectively. While it is generally correct to contend that a competent person can hardly calculate the actual amount of money that the government and its citizens would lose through the destruction of any considerable part of its Archives, it is also a fact that one can easily predict the losses that would be incurred in the event of such calamity and the legal, administrative as well as operational havoc that would ensue.

To illustrate this fact, let us think of a government project in one of the cities or towns. For people to know that there is progress on this project there must be an indicator. Apart from the physical indication of a project, there is need for records to be maintained in to avoid repetition, to save time and avoid waste of human and financial resources. Progress of the project has to be recorded so that posterity can look back and say: **Yes, work was indeed done by this and that government**. For the records of government serve as the only evidence of its organization, functions, policies, decisions, procedures, operations and all its successes or failures. The National Archives of Malawi as a repository for government records is therefore an invaluable tool for national development.

Protection of the State

The National Archives **protects the state against unfounded or ill-founded claims**. Without Archives, the nation would not be able to safeguard its title of sovereignty and national security would be put to risk. In international disputes, **archives are the source of information from which arguments are drawn to support the contentions of government**. The National Archives of Malawi **safeguards the rights of the people of Malawi and their title of sovereignty** so that there is continued peace in the country. Without records, there would be rampant fighting between people as well as nations in quest of their entitlements of property and territory.

Dispute Resolution

An example on this issue **is the case of border dispute between Tanzania and Malawi** in the late 1960s and early 1970s. At that time the President of Tanzania the late Julius Nyerere and the President of Malawi the late Dr Hastings Kamuzu Banda were at loggerheads because of the boundaries along the Songwe River in the Northern region of Malawi and part of Lake Malawi in the northern part of the country. **Julius Nyerere was claiming that the whole of Songwe River and the Northern part of lake Malawi belonged to Tanzania. Dr Hastings Kamuzu Banda** got angered with the claim and **was too curious to resolve the issue** amicably because it was going to result into a war between the two countries.

The solution to the problem came from the National Archives of Malawi. The National Archives of Malawi **simply produced a few maps showing partitions of the two countries** during the colonial period and presented them to Dr Banda in order to resolve the territorial dispute. Without these records (maps) from the National Archives, Malawi and Tanzania would have been at war and many people would have perished or lost their lives.

Fighting Corruption and Financial Fraud in Government

The National Archives helps to **fight corruption** through the prevention of institutions and individuals from the unilateral destruction of public records that are required for audit trail and fighting corruption. Without records corruption would be the order of the day and be regarded as normal life in public institutions. For example, recent developments in Malawi show that those who abuse public resources or office when they are in power are taken to task through the Anti-Corruption Bureau. This is made possible because the National Archives Act provides for the maintenance of authentic and reliable records in all public institutions. The unilateral destruction of public records would also result in depriving Malawians of their right to information as enshrined in the Republic of Malawi's Constitution.

Promote Accountability

Archives help **to promote accountability in public institutions**. Without records the Government would become bankrupt, as nobody would be accountable for public monies. For example, if the Malawi Revenue Authority were not keeping records of revenue collected it would be very difficult for them to account for the monies collected for government.

Spearhead for Good Governance and Transparency

The National Archives **spearheads good governance and transparency in government**. Development cannot take place where there is no good governance and transparency as there would be perpetual abuse of resources by political leaders. If the National Archives of Malawi or any other public institution were not mandated to control the maintenance of records in public institutions, political leaders would not be accountable to their actions. Interested parties use archives to verify the authenticity of official transactions by the political leaders in power at any given time. Institutions are obliged to maintain their records because of this mandate on record keeping and archiving.

Promote the Rule of Law

The National Archives **promotes the rule of law** by maintaining and providing authentic and reliable legal records to the state as well as individuals to be used as evidence in court during legal proceedings. Without these records innocent and poor citizens would suffer the consequences of injustice. Their rights to safety of life and security of property would be greatly compromised, as perpetrators of insecurity and injustice would go scot free during trials in court due to the absence of proper records.

Safeguards Entitlements of Employees

Archives safeguards entitlements of employees. Without records employees in the public service and large organizations would not be able to get their salaries, as nobody would be able to know their entitlements. In the same way retired civil servants would not be able to get their pensions.

Facilitate Prompt Decision-Making

The National Archives facilitate prompt decision-making. Without records public institutions would be making a lot of mistakes in their decision-making processes and would be taking too long to decide on issues of national interest thereby creating elements of inefficiency in government. The Government would not be able to provide the necessary social services to the people because it would be very difficult to make budgets for the basic necessities. National resources would be directed to the wrong people. For example, when there is a disaster such as food shortage and drought, people would not be able to get the services they deserve if there are no proper records of the victims. Wrong people would benefit from the resources that were meant for the most vulnerable people.

Promote Administrative of Justice

Archives promote administrative justice. When Malawi became a multiparty state in 1994 where the Constitution provided for the establishment of the offices of The Ombudsman and The National Compensation Tribunal, the National Archives of Malawi became the only source of information for the administration of justice for those who were politically victimized or unlawfully dismissed from public service under the one party state. The Office of the Ombudsman is one of the regular clients for the National Archives of Malawi as it relies on the files from the Archives to make a decision on complaints by individuals against the public service.

One of the very clear examples on the issue of promotion of administrative justice is the case of the Jehovah's Witness. Most of the Jehovah's Witness went into exile in the

early 1970s and lost their property most of which was forfeited by Government or just abandoned by the owners for fear of political retribution. But when the multiparty democracy came in Malawi the Jehovah's Witnesses got compensated through the National Compensation Tribunal because the National Archives of Malawi was able to provide information on the value of property that was forfeited by Government under the Forfeiture Act.

Memory of the Nation

The National Archives is the memory of the nation and preserver of our tradition. Currently, the National Archives of Malawi is maintaining a significant collection of historical manuscripts belonging to private institutions, religious bodies and individuals alike. These historical manuscript collections have proved to be very useful sources of information for historical research on Malawi.

Preserver of Posterity

In Malawi, the National Archives of Malawi is the largest institution in the country that keeps very rare and unique documentary materials such as books, newspapers, official records of government, and audio visual materials that make the people appreciate their posterity. A good example of such materials is the collection of very old vernacular publications. Still on the part of publications, the National Archives of Malawi is keeping more of the very old publications in other languages dating as far back as 1680s and 1890s. One of the most cherished titles is a book written in French entitled, "*Description de L'univers livre cinquieme de Afrique Ancienne and Modern by D.E. Butler*" which was published in **1683**. The National Archives of Malawi is also keeping a good collection of the oldest newspapers from as far back as **1894** while the public archives include records dating as far as **1908**. The National Archives of Malawi also maintains a very good collection of gramophone records on traditional music and political songs in praise of the former head of state the late Dr Banda. This collection is unique in the sense that with the growth of music equipment technology, many people have lost the gramophone record player media. The National Archives of Malawi offers the opportunity to revive their memory of the old songs.

Encourages Research

The National Archives as an information bank for Malawi encourages research amongst research scholars by providing reliable primary sources of information on Malawi from which researchers can glean facts for their research programmes in such areas as HIV/AIDS, agriculture and food security, irrigation, navigation, education, mining, transport, environment, internal security, etc.

Source of Continuity for Official Business

Archives are the source of continuity of official business. From the Archives, government administrators and development planners alike will learn how the pre-independence administrators and planners used to work despite the problems of transport, manpower and tools - thereby providing continuity of official business without engaging in expensive repetitions in development planning. Administrators of that time gave no excuse for failing to undertake their duties owing to problems of transport, manpower and tools. They visited villagers, counted their houses, animals like goats, recorded their children (both dead and alive) and asked about their trade, blacksmith works, and so on. The administrator of the time was not a manager of the armchair i.e.

a manager who did not believe in theoretical work but action.

Guidance on Businesses Management

Archives guidance on the manage businesses. Without past records (archives) businesses would collapse because the managers would not know whether the business is making profits or not. If there are no records of profit or loss in a business, it means that there is no mechanism to control expenditure for the survival of businesses. Competent managers would not make good decisions due to the absence of retrospective information.

Control of Outbreaks of Diseases

Archives in the form of records help to contain the outbreak of diseases. Without records medical doctors would not be able to contain the outbreaks of diseases in time and many people would die, and that is why nowadays in Malawi people are urged to keep their health booklet (records) properly and take the booklet with them as they go to the hospital for medical attention so that the doctors should be able to have a fair picture of their illnesses.

Serves as Evidence of Peoples Lives

Archives serve as evidence of our lives. Archives document evidence of our lives and activities thereby preserving our culture. Archives are therefore a documentary heritage which must be jealously safeguarded by all as a nation without a heritage is as good as a "man without a soul" - "chilengwalenga" as is usually known in Chichewa.

MAJOR CHALLENGES

- Lack of purpose built infrastructure
- Inadequate funding
- Lack of equipment
- Understaffing
- Lack of appropriately trained personnel
- Lack of transport

PLANNED PROGRAMMES

- Develop a Strategic Plan for the Department
- Development of a Records Management Policy for Malawi
- Review the current Legal Framework (National Archives Act and Printed Publications Act) to incorporate emerging issues of e-records
- Skills Development for Staff in areas of Computerization and Digital Archiving
- Computerization of Document Retrieval Systems
- Establishment of a Digital Archive for Vulnerable Documents
- Source funding for the restoration of the Conservation Unit
- Approach potential donors to provide support for the construction of a purpose-built Archival Infrastructure

Conclusion

As we have noted from the few examples explained above, it is therefore apparent that the National Archives of Malawi is an invaluable asset for Malawi. It is a wonderful treasure for the nation. Malawi cannot afford to live without a fully-fledged and well-developed archival institution. It is important that senior government officials who are responsible for resource allocation should change their mindset from believing that the National Archives of Malawi is a non-developmental institution by likening it to an open pit that swallows money endlessly with no tangible results. Without records, there would be total chaos in the country with regard to the provision of socio-economic services. National development programmes cannot take place without the maintenance of records.

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