Introduction:
Unpacking good governance

Civil servants as implementers and “target population”
According to the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) there is little doubt that African bureaucracies are inefficient and unsustainable. Corruption and mismanagement of public resources are identified as the main impediments to economic recovery. Good governance is being promoted by the Bretton Woods institutions as the instrument for removing these obstacles to economic growth. The term “good governance” denotes a set of policy measures intended to transform “dysfunctional” public institutions into efficient and transparent service providers that will be accountable to the public and subject to the rule of law. It is hailed as the solution to the impasse in development.

Good governance manifests a shift in development discourse. It differs from classic development interventions based on the modernization paradigm, since it is neither about building roads nor transmitting superior scientific knowledge for the purposes of “development”; for example, in order to increase agricultural production. Good governance seems to be about the transmission of a...
different type of knowledge. Its objective is the establishment of systems of management and self-control to improve “efficiency” and “transparency”.

Since the early 1990s, good governance has become the dominant *shibboleth* of development discourse; without uttering this password it has become impossible for governments to receive financial support. Except for countries with substantial oil reserves, such as Nigeria and Angola, there is virtually no African country left where the principles of good governance do not guide public policy. To some observers it appears as if the World Bank and the IMF have succeeded in establishing an all-encompassing system of surveillance and control, which has replaced the ideological antagonism of the Cold War that cunning Third World leaders were so adept at exploiting (cf. Abrahamsen 2000).

Malawi is no exception in this regard. Since the introduction of multi-party democracy in 1994, the government has implemented a whole range of World Bank and IMF-supported programmes to improve governance. A central element of this reform process is the reorganisation of the civil service with the objective of improving efficiency and transparency, deemed essential preconditions for better governance. Civil servants\(^2\) have been in a peculiar position with regard to the implementation of the civil service reform and related measures, as they are both executors and addressees of the reform process, its agents and its subjects. Their response has ranged from various forms of resistance and to the occasional pursuit of illicit extra-office income-earning activities – activities that lend little support to the notion that World Bank and IMF programmes are efficacious. What appeared on paper to be an all-encompassing system of control provoked unanticipated responses by civil servants who had become accustomed to enjoying privileged and safe positions under Banda’s autocratic rule between 1964 and 1994.

The reorganisation of the civil service at the turn to the 21st century cast a shadow over civil servants’ lives. They struggled for security at a time characterised by an overwhelming sense of crisis and uncertainty. In a bid to manipulate the reforms to their advantage, civil servants responded in unforeseen and often illegal ways to protect their positions of relative privilege. Apart from this reorganisation, their everyday experiences were already characterised by extreme uncertainty. HIV/AIDS, malaria, and the pauperisation of rural kin all contributed to their sense of insecurity. Of course, there was no uniform response to the reforms. The experiences of a high-ranking official in Lilongwe’s ministerial headquarters were obviously different from those of a watchman

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\(^2\) I.e. government employees working in the civil service and the army, including temporary workers. Employees of state-owned companies are excluded, as different terms and conditions apply for them.