

Malawi well on the way to improving parliamentary oversight, thanks to PSA Alliance

By Andrew Mpesi

AA Malawi Project Officer

The PSA project, through Action Aid Malawi, has been instrumental in the progress of developing a [Parliamentary Budget Office \(PBO\)](#). Previous efforts to promote the idea of a PBO for Malawi reach as far back as 2006. The importance of establishing a PBO lies in its ability and capacity to understand the need for planning, and to understand budgeting processes within a broader public resource management system to ensure [better oversight of public resources](#). It aims to ensure that MPs have a better understanding of the budgeting process. This is something that had been lacking in parliament in Malawi.

Real progress and development has been realised only since 2016 and has included a learning exchange with Uganda's Parliament's Budget Committee. The visit, which was facilitated by ActionAid Malawi, was aimed at allowing the Malawi delegation insights into the importance of establishing a PBO. Chairperson of Uganda's Parliament's Budget Committee, Amost Lugolobi said that "before the PBO, Parliament was just used for the purposes of rubber-stamping the budget...but the PBO has deepened the involvement of Parliament and provides back up support to the Budget Committee".

The process to date of establishing the PBO has involved facilitating the set-up of a task team responsible for prioritising the proposed PBO. This task team was made up of representatives of the executive (including the principal secretary in the Office of President and Cabinet, Ministry of Justice, the Law Commission, Ministry of Finance, and the department of Human Resources and Development), parliament (the Speaker, Deputy clerks of parliament, and parliamentary committee clerks) and other civil society organisations. This task team, established in January 2017, developed a Terms of Reference for the PBO, and a staff establishment structure for the PBO – both of which have been approved by government (executive and parliament). The current status of the PBO is that the Ministry of Finance has agreed to fund the office and has allocated MWK 70,000,000 (US\$100,000) towards the establishment and staffing of a PBO in the 2017/2018 mid-year budget review. In addition, the Ministry of Finance is currently reviewing the Public Finance Management Act (PFMA) to include the establishment of a PBO in the revised version.

While Action Aid Malawi had played a facilitator role in the establishment of the task team and the work of the task team, it will continue to play a role once the PBO is established through training of staff that are recruited, and providing support for the PBO. This includes ensuring the Malawi PBO joins the African PBO Network to engage in learning and knowledge exchange.



Members of PBO Task team interacting with a member of parliament from Budget and Finance parliamentary committee from Uganda

The biggest lessons learnt by Action Aid Malawi in the process of helping to establish the PBO is that:

- a) while the PBO is a technical office, it is viewed by politicians as a political office which means there is often tension between the executive and parliament. This has hampered progress on establishing the PBO until now. However, having learnt from the challenges of the past, AA Malawi realised it was more strategic to work with bureaucratic levels of parliament and the executive, which has taken out the political elements;
- b) scepticism from the committee clerks needed to be managed as they felt threatened by the PBO and the perceived power it holds, and its ability question the work of parliamentary committees with regards to PRM;
- c) not enough resources were allocated to the facilitation of the establishment of the PBO. A PBO is essential because without it parliamentary oversight is highly compromised. As such, adequate resources should be allocated to this particular objective within the project.