

# Malawians say Constituency Development Fund benefits politicians most, should be managed by local committees

**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 989 | Diverson Chirwa and Witness Tapani Alfonso**

## Summary

Since 2006/2007, Malawi's central government has used the Constituency Development Fund (CDF) to funnel money to electoral constituencies to support local development needs and reduce poverty at the grassroots level (Nyirenda & Kalyani, 2023; Government of Malawi, 2014; van Zyl, 2010; Tsubura, 2013). During its most recent session, which adjourned in April, Parliament increased the amount given to each constituency by 10%, to 220 million kwacha (about USD 126,500), after doubling the amount a year ago (Longwe, 2025).

While supporters extol the potential of the CDF to promote local development through investments in health care, education, water, agricultural services, security, and electricity, critics voice concerns about poor accountability, corruption, elite capture, and mismanagement of the fund due to limited community involvement in decision-making processes (Mwangi, 2005).

One characteristic of the CDF is that members of Parliament (MPs) have typically exerted strong influence on how the monies are spent, leading some analysts to argue that the CDF benefits MPs more than it does their constituents (Tsubura, 2013; Tshangana, 2010). On 26 May, in a landmark judgement, the Malawian Constitutional Court declared the current arrangement of the CDF – specifically, the involvement of MPs and the voting rights they have enjoyed in managing the fund – unconstitutional (Banda, 2025). It is as yet unclear how this historic ruling will affect future constituency-based projects.

Findings of the most recent Afrobarometer survey reveal that a majority of Malawians are unaware of the CDF, especially in rural areas. Among those who are familiar with the fund, two-thirds welcome the doubling of resources in 2024-2025, but almost three-fourths think MPs and other politicians benefit more from the CDF than ordinary citizens.

A slim majority say the fund should be abolished, but if it continues, virtually all citizens want multiple-stakeholder constituency committees to decide how the monies are used.

## Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan survey research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. Nine survey rounds in up to 42 countries have been completed since 1999. Round 10 surveys were launched in January 2024. Afrobarometer's national partners conduct face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Malawi, led by the Centre for Social Research at the University of Malawi, interviewed a nationally representative sample of 1,200 adult Malawians in August 2024. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3

percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in 1999, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017, 2019, and 2022.

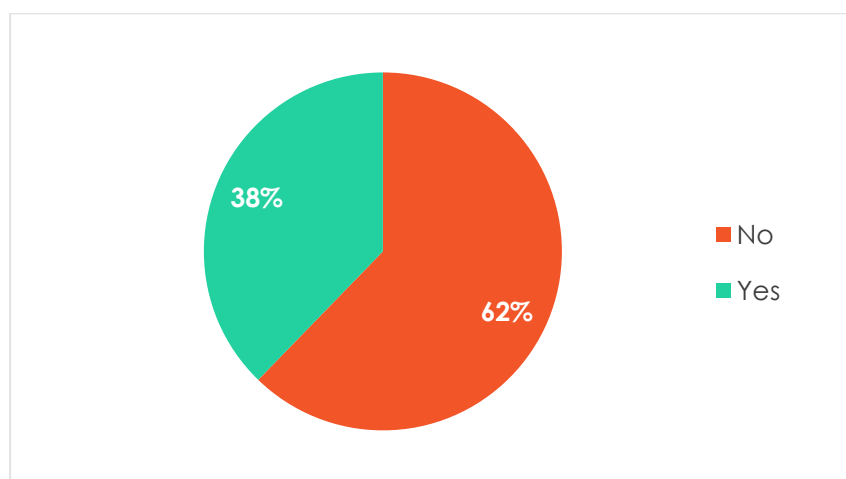
## Key findings

- Only about four in 10 Malawians (38%) say they have heard of the Constituency Development Fund (CDF).
- Among those who are aware of the CDF:
  - Close to seven in 10 (68%) say the doubling of funding amounts in 2024/2025 was justified.
  - Almost three-fourths (72%) say MPs or other politicians benefit most from the CDF, 10 times the proportion (7%) who think that ordinary constituents are the primary beneficiaries.
  - More than half (55%) say the CDF should be discontinued, while 43% want it to be maintained.
  - An overwhelming majority (91%) say the use of CDF resources should be determined by constituency committees comprising multiple stakeholders rather than MPs alone.
- More than four in 10 (43%) say village or area development committees would be best placed to manage local development projects, compared to 25% who would assign this task to MPs.

## Citizens' awareness of the CDF

Although the CDF has been operating for nearly two decades, most Malawians are unaware of it. Only 38% say they have heard of the CDF, while 62% express ignorance of this funding mechanism (Figure 1).

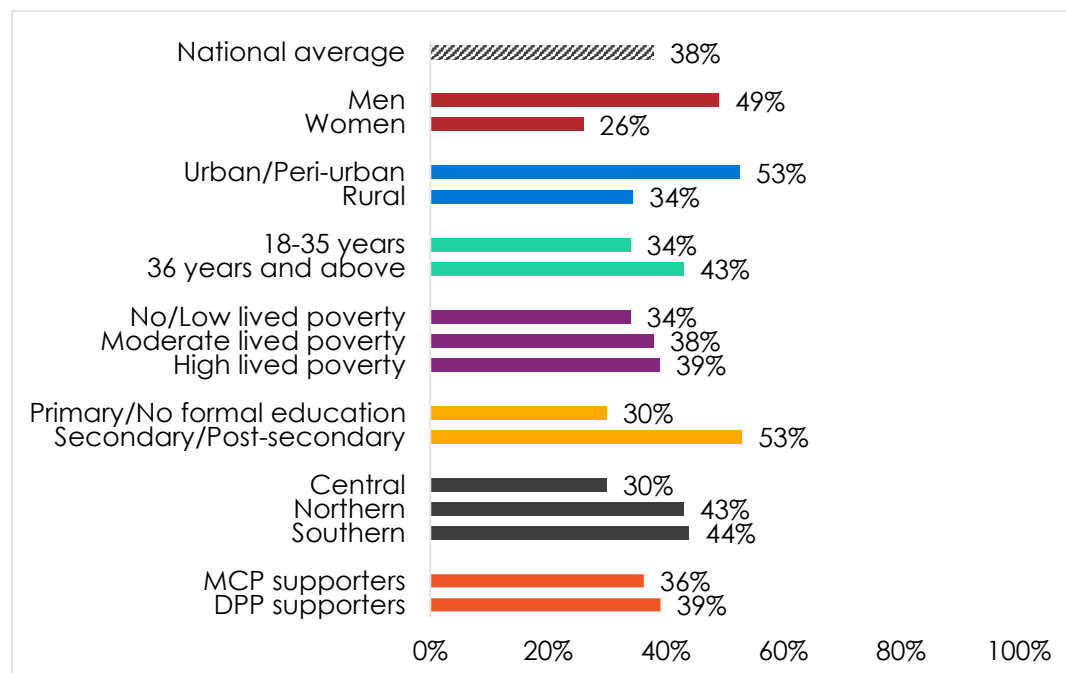
**Figure 1: Awareness of the CDF | Malawi | 2024**



**Respondents were asked:** Have you heard of the Constituency Development Fund or CDF?

Awareness of the CDF is particularly low among women (26%), people with primary or no formal education (30%), and inhabitants of the Central Region (30%) (Figure 2). Supporters of the ruling Malawi Congress Party (MCP) (36%) and adherents of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) (39%) record similar awareness levels.

**Figure 2: Awareness of the CDF** | by demographic group | Malawi | 2024



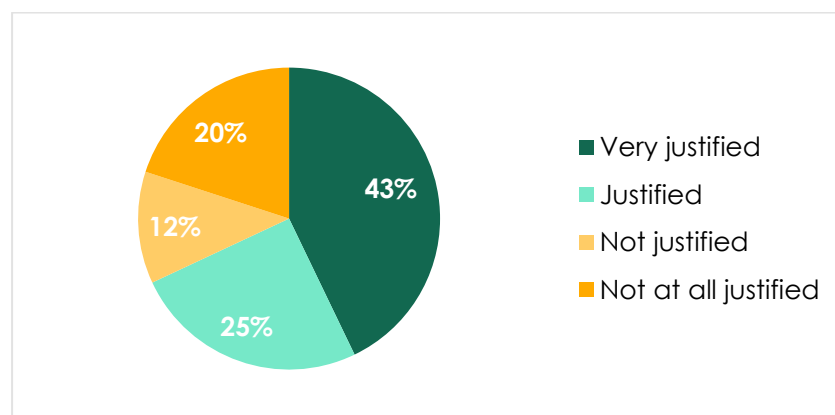
**Respondents were asked:** Have you heard of the Constituency Development Fund or CDF? (% "yes")

### Increase of CDF amount

Resources allocated for the CDF have increased repeatedly, starting at K1 million in 2006 and reaching K100 million in 2022-2023 (Nation Online, 2024). The amount was doubled in the 2024/2025 budget, then raised again by 10% this year, even as some members of Parliament proposed hiking it to K500 million (Shayibu, 2025).

In its August 2024 survey (i.e. before the latest increase), Afrobarometer asked respondents who were familiar with the CDF whether they considered the doubling in 2024/2025 justified. More than two-thirds (68%) of them welcome the increase, including 43% who consider it "very justified" (Figure 3).

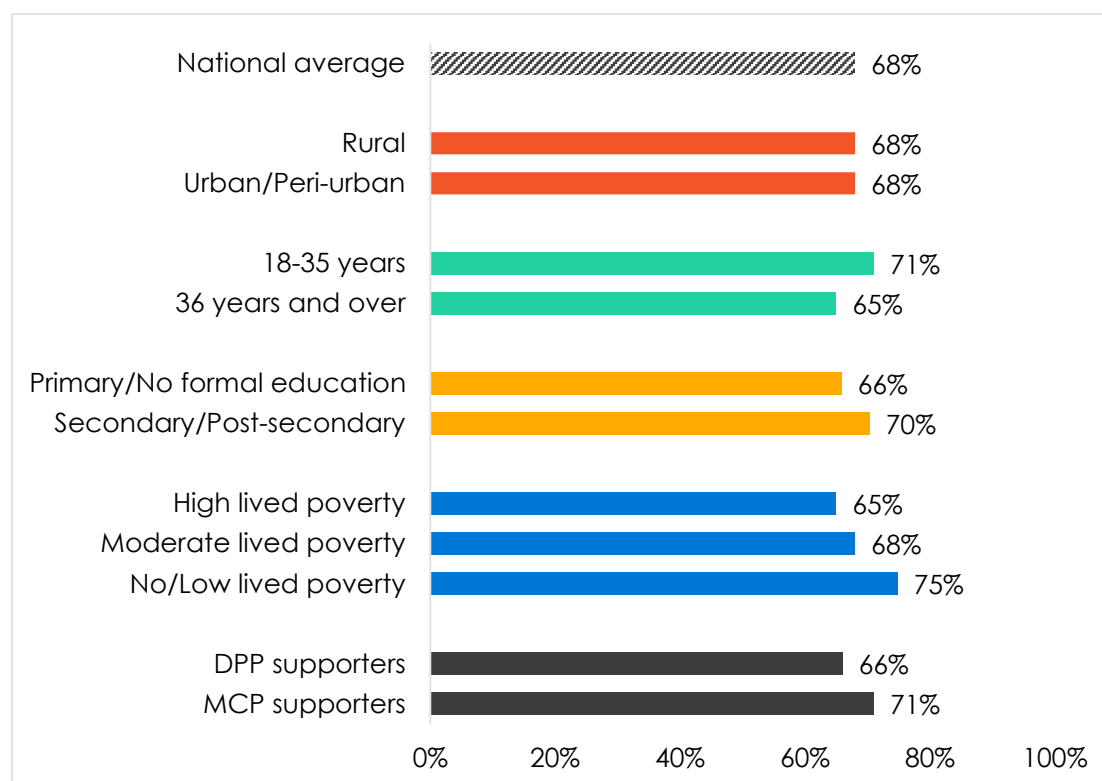
**Figure 3: Is increased CDF amount justified?** | Malawi | 2024



**Respondents who were familiar with the CDF were asked:** Over the years, the government has been increasing the amount of money allocated for the Constituency Development Fund. In the most recent increase [before the survey], the amount was raised from K100 million to K200 million per constituency. In your opinion, how justifiable is this increase? (Respondents who had not heard of the CDF are excluded.)

Support for the CDF increase is slightly stronger among more educated citizens and among youth (Figure 4). It also rises with citizens' economic status, reaching 75% among well-off respondents.<sup>1</sup> MCP supporters (71%) are more supportive of the increase than supporters of the DPP (66%).

**Figure 4: Support for CDF increase** | by demographic group | Malawi | 2024



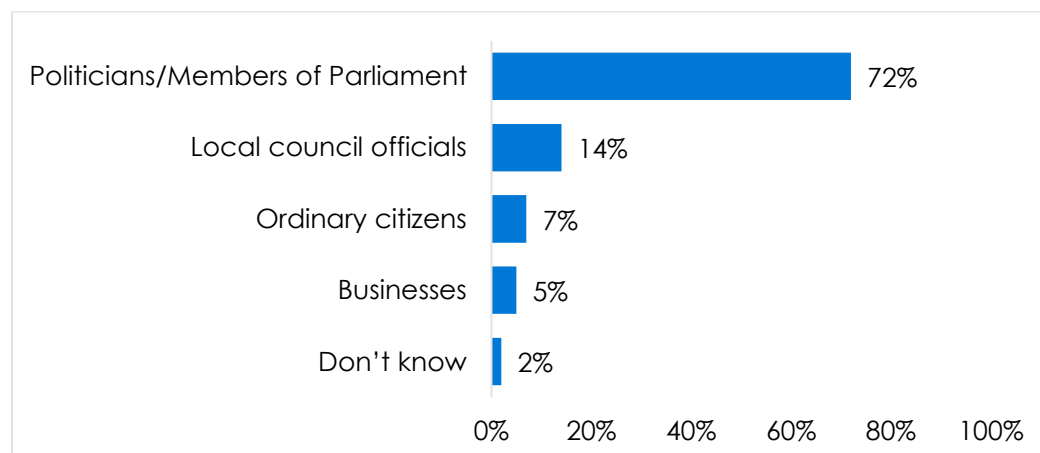
**Respondents who were familiar with the CDF were asked:** Over the years, the government has been increasing the amount of money allocated for the Constituency Development Fund. In the most recent increase [before the survey], the amount was raised from K100 million to K200 million per constituency. In your opinion, how justifiable is this increase? (Respondents who had not heard of the CDF are excluded.) (Fewer than 100 respondents in the Northern Region have heard of the CDF, so the margin of error for this figure is higher.)

### Who benefits most from the CDF?

The primary objective of CDF resources is to support local development projects to benefit citizens in the constituency. However, more than seven in 10 Malawians (72%) who are familiar with the CDF say that politicians and MPs benefit most from the funds (Figure 5). Another 14% think local council officials are the primary beneficiaries, while only 7% say ordinary citizens gain most from the funds.

<sup>1</sup> Afrobarometer's Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents' levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the preceding year. For more on lived poverty, see Mattes and Lekalake (2025).

**Figure 5: Who benefits most from the CDF? | Malawi | 2024**



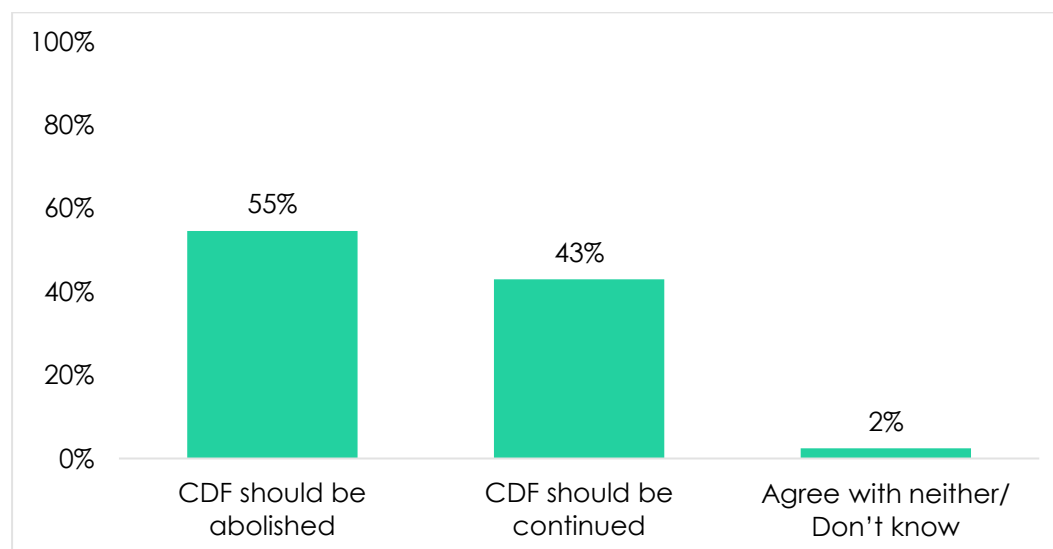
**Respondents who were familiar with the CDF were asked:** In your opinion, who do you think benefits most from the Constituency Development Fund (CDF)? (Respondents who had not heard of the CDF are excluded.)

### Should the CDF continue or be abolished?

Afrobarometer asked respondents who had heard of the CDF whether this funding mechanism for local development should continue or be abolished. Malawians are divided: A slim majority (55%) say the fund only serves the interests of a limited group of people and should be abolished, while 43% say it helps address local development needs and should be maintained (Figure 6).

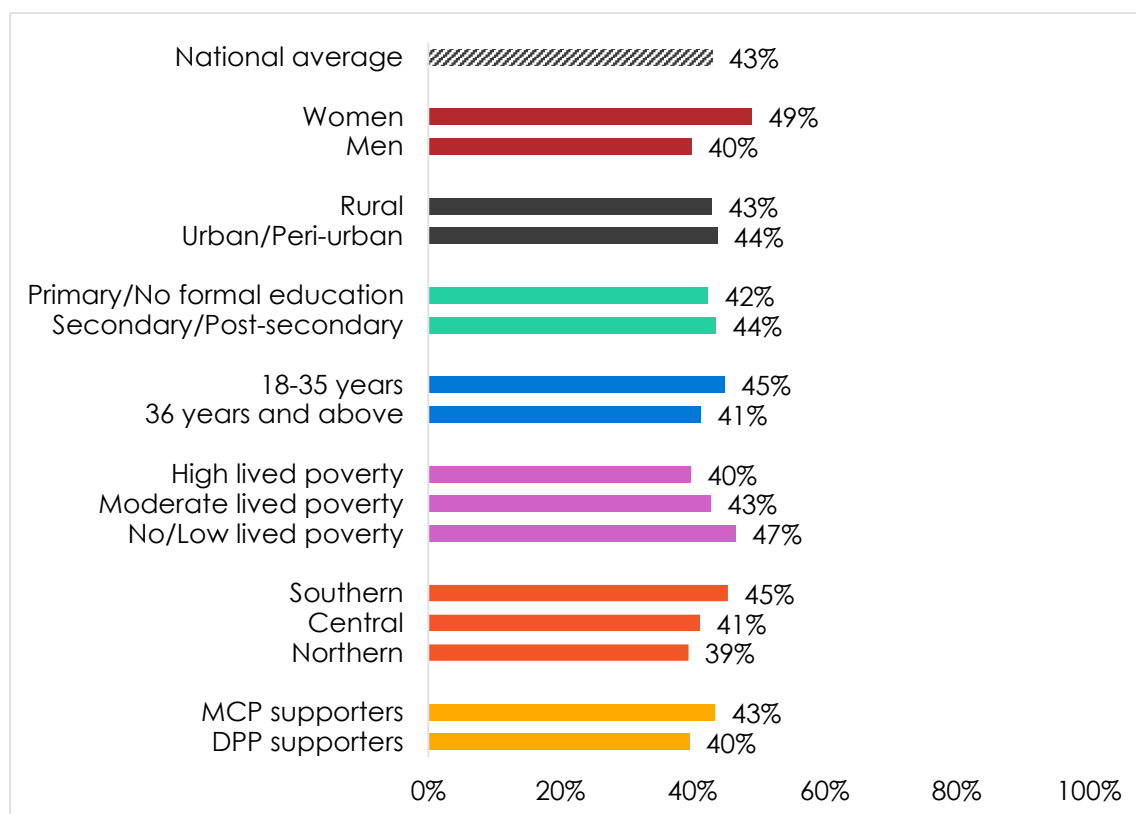
Support for continuing the CDF is weaker among men than women (40% vs. 49%) and decreases with citizens' experience of poverty, from 47% among better-off respondents to 40% among the poorest (Figure 7). Residents in the Southern Region (45%) are more supportive of continuing the CDF than those in other regions (39%-41%).

**Figure 6: Should the CDF continue or be abolished? | Malawi | 2024**



**Respondents were asked:** Which of the following statements is closest to your view?  
Statement 1: The Constituency Development Fund (CDF) should be sustained because it helps development needs of local communities.  
Statement 2: The Constituency Development Fund (CDF) should be abolished because it only serves the interests of a few people.

**Figure 7: Support for continuing the CDF | by demographic group | Malawi | 2024**



**Respondents were asked:** Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

Statement 1: The Constituency Development Fund (CDF) should be sustained because it helps development needs of local communities.

Statement 2: The Constituency Development Fund (CDF) should be abolished because it only serves the interests of a few people.

(% who say the CDF should be continued)

(Fewer than 100 respondents in the Northern Region have heard of the CDF, so the margin of error for this figure is higher.)

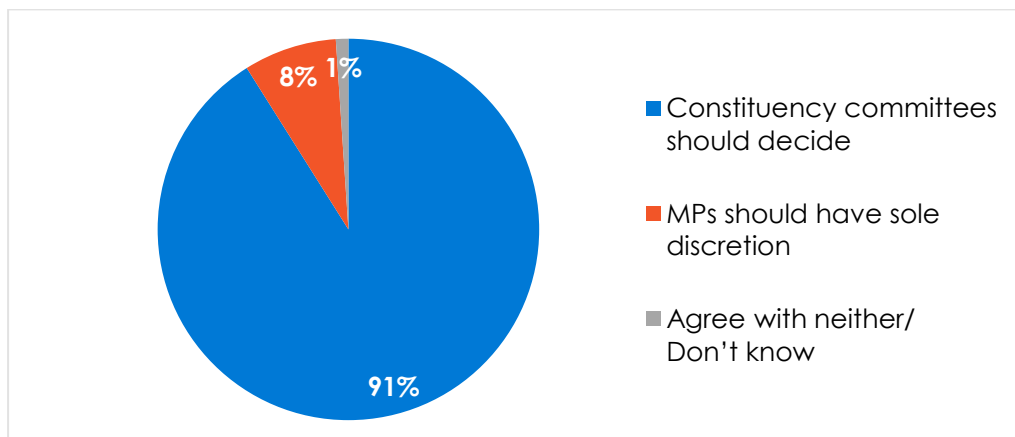
### Who should decide how to use funds?

Since the establishment of the CDF, MPs have had a commanding influence on how the funds are used. Asked who should have the right to decide how constituency development monies are used in a local constituency, Malawians overwhelmingly (84%) say every constituency should have a committee of stakeholders that makes these decisions (Figure 8). Only 13% would grant MPs sole discretion in deciding how the funds are spent.

Support for letting constituency committees determine how the funds are used is strong, at more than three-fourths of respondents, across key demographic groups (not shown).

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**Figure 8: Who should decide how CDF resources are used? | Malawi | 2024**



**Respondents were asked:** Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

Statement 1: Members of Parliament should have the sole discretion for deciding how the Constituency Development Fund or CDF should be utilised.

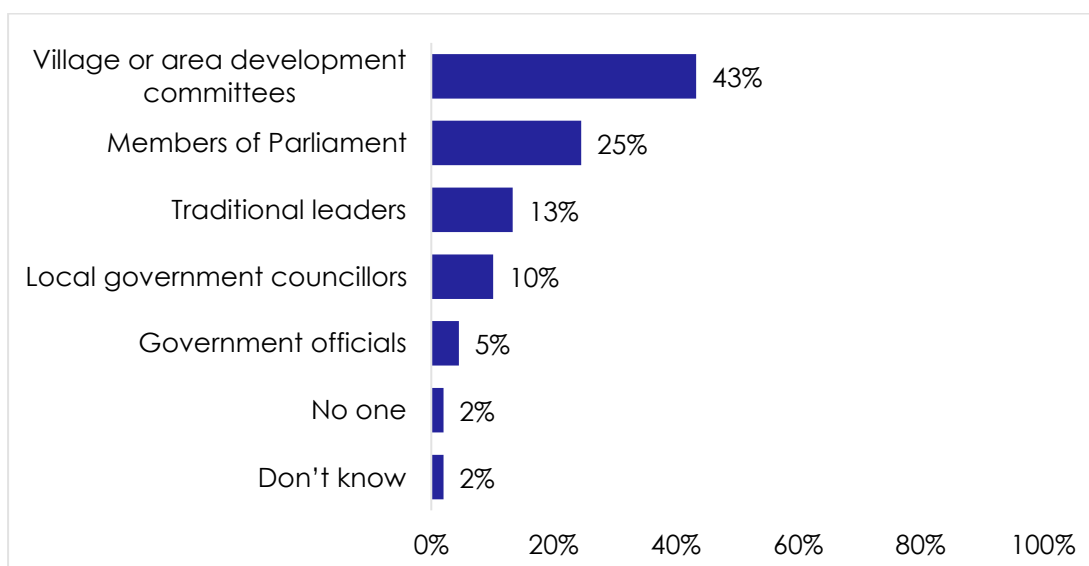
Statement 2: Every constituency should have a committee made up of different stakeholders that should be tasked with deciding how the Constituency Development Fund or CDF is utilised.

### Who should manage development projects?

MPs also play a leading role in managing CDF-supported projects. But only one in four Malawians (25%) say parliamentarians are best placed to manage local development projects. More than four in 10 (43%) would assign that responsibility to village or area development committees (Figure 9). Smaller proportions would instead tap traditional leaders (13%), local government councillors (10%), or government officials (5%) for the job.

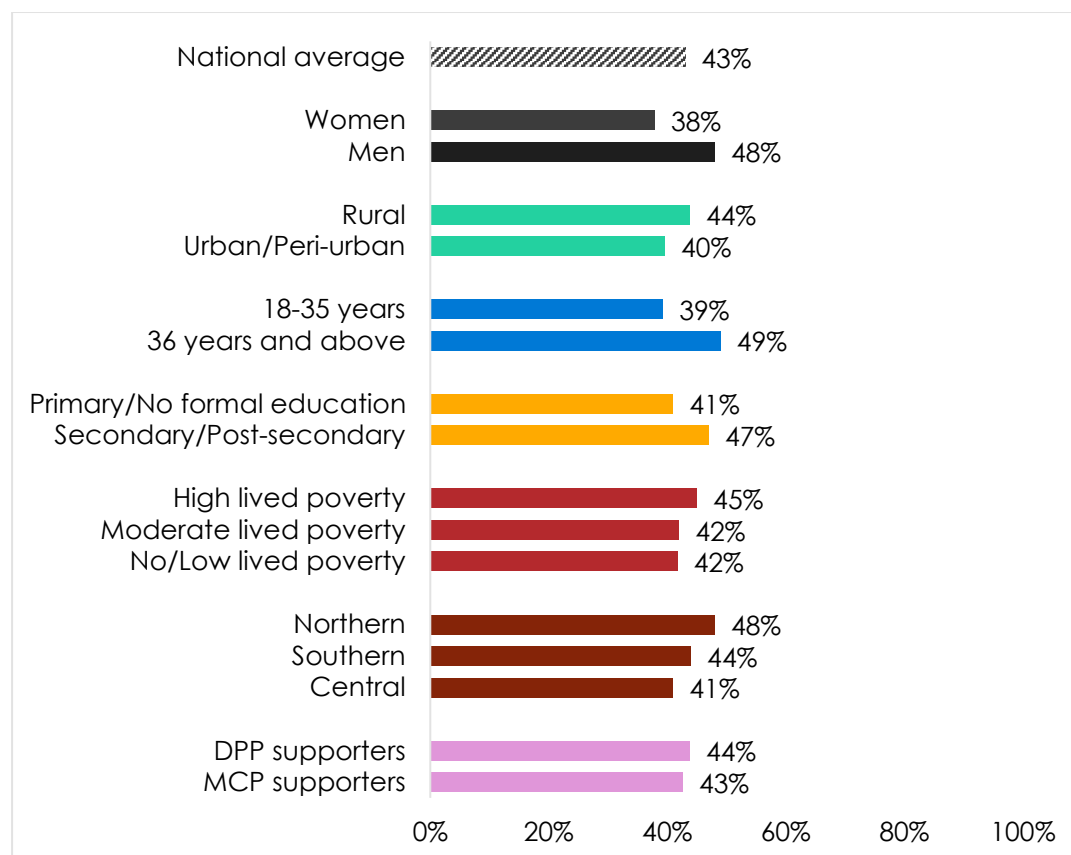
Support for local committees to manage development projects is particularly strong among men (48%), middle-aged and older respondents (49%), the most educated citizens (47%), and residents of the Northern Region (48%) (Figure 10).

**Figure 9: Views on the best group to manage development projects | Malawi | 2024**



**Respondents were asked:** In your opinion, who do you think is best placed to manage development projects in your area? Would you say: Members of Parliament? Local government councillors? Government officials? Traditional leaders? Village development committees or area development committees?

**Figure 10: Support for village/area committees as best placed to manage development projects | by demographic group | Malawi | 2024**



**Respondents were asked:** In your opinion, who do you think is best placed to manage development projects in your area? Would you say: Members of Parliament? Local government councillors? Government officials? Traditional leaders? Village development committees or area development committees? (% who say village or area development committees)

## Conclusion

Survey findings show that while the CDF is intended to enhance the development of local constituencies, a majority of Malawians are unaware of their existence. And those who do know about them think they benefit politicians more than ordinary citizens.

Overwhelmingly, Malawians want the funds to move out of the hands of political leaders and under the purview of groups of community stakeholders.

These citizens' perspectives can inform efforts to evaluate the efficiency, effectiveness, and sustainability of the CDF and the projects it supports to ensure value for money and achieve the primary objective of these expenditures.



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