

Country study

Cost-effective front-line justice services in Malawi: a case study in frugal innovation

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September 2023



Taking people-centred justice to scale: investing in what works to deliver SDG 16.3 in lower-income countries

Key messages

For the last 22 years, Malawi's Paralegal Advisory Service Institute's (PASI) frugal innovative model has provided a high-quality, cost-effective front-line service, with its paralegal services supporting both unsentenced detainees and village mediators.

PASI's paralegals and volunteer village mediators are the preferred, or the equally preferred, provider of justice in Malawi. They deliver impact in terms not only of access to justice, especially for vulnerable groups, but also more widely in terms of reducing corruption, community building and improving human rights.

PASI's local, innovative, people-centred approach has been key to its success regarding both quality and cost-effectiveness. ODI's analysis of PASI's latest figures suggest costs for over the period 2018-2022

averaged \$10–12 a case, significantly below ODI’s scalable benchmark of \$20 a case in a low-income country.

PASI also provides clear evidence of how increasing scale reduces unit costs. In districts that handle fewer than 500 cases a year, unit costs are typically \$30–60 a case. But these fall to \$7–\$8 a case in districts handling more than 2,000 cases a year.

PASI demonstrates the impact of going to scale. Its paralegals visit nearly all (96%) unsentenced detainees each month. This has enabled Malawi to consistently achieve exceptionally low rates of unsentenced detainees – below 20% for many years. This is less than half the African average of 50% and below the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s (OECD’s) average of 24%.

PASI has always been entirely reliant on external funding, receiving 10% of all donor justice aid to Malawi from 2017-2021. It receives no funding from the Government of Malawi. Insufficient funds and gaps in funding are the binding constraints on PASI’s operations and ability to scale up its operations. Despite its cost-effective model, PASI’s village mediation is currently reaching just 3–5% of service needs.



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How to cite: Manuel, M., Msiska, C., Ndalahoma, C. and Nanthambwe, H. (2023) *Cost-effective front-line justice services in Malawi: a case study in frugal innovation*. ODI Country Study. London: ODI (<https://odi.org/en/about/our-work/takingpeople-centred-justice-to-scale-investing-in-what-works-to-deliversdg-163-in-lower-income-countries/>).

Acknowledgements

The authors thank the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation for funding this paper. We are also very grateful to ODI colleagues: peer reviewer Dr Pilar Domingo, whose comments have enriched this paper; quality insurance from Dr Kathryn Nwajiaku-Dahou; drafting support from Clare Manuel and support from Maegan Rodricks and Elaine Antwi. We are also grateful to Jane Lanigan/editors4change for copyediting.

We're very grateful to interviewees named in the report, who kindly gave up their time to provide information and insights.

About this publication

This country study is part of a series of papers on 'Taking people-centred justice to scale: investing in what works to deliver SDG 16.3 in lower-income countries' (<https://odi.org/en/about/our-work/taking-people-centred-justice-to-scale-investing-in-what-works-to-deliver-sdg-163-in-lower-income-countries/>). The research project focuses on practical, cost-effective and realistic ways to deliver sustainable justice services at scale and offers lessons both for lower-income countries and donor programming. The project runs until September 2023.

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Acronyms

CSO	civil society organisation
DfID	Department for International Development
EU	European Union
NGO	non-governmental organisation
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
OECD DAC	OECD Development Assistance Committee
PAS	Paralegal Advisory Service
PASI	Paralegal Advisory Service Institute
PRI	Penal Reform International
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
VAWG	violence against women and girls
WJP	World Justice Project

Abstract

The country study reviews the operation of Malawi's Paralegal Advisory Services Institute (PASI) over the past 22 years. PASI's role in Malawi's justice system is discussed, both its legal advice and assistance to unsentenced detainees, and support to village mediators. The study considers how and why PASI was able to grow and develop, including its relationship with government. PASI's influence, including as an example for other countries, and its role in the spread of similar models to other parts of sub-Saharan Africa, is also discussed.

Latest evaluations highly commend PASI for the quality and impact of its work. PASI assists 96% of unsentenced detainees each month, resulting in a remarkably low rate of unsentenced detainees (below 20%) maintained since 2008. This is below the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD's) 24% and the African average of 50%.

PASI's work is highly cost-effective. Most recent external evaluation estimates average unit costs to be \$13–18 a case. ODI analysis of the latest data reveals \$10–12 a case. These figures are well below ODI's scalable benchmark of \$20 a case in a low-income country. PASI's local, innovative, people-centred approach has been key to its success in terms of both quality and cost-effectiveness. There is scope for further reduction in unit costs, including through increased use of bicycles, digitalisation and by scaling up. Despite its impact, cost-effective model and scope to scale up, PASI's village mediation is currently reaching only 3–5% of service needs. Funding is the binding constraint to PASI's operations.

PASI has always been entirely reliant on external funding, receiving 10% of all donor justice aid from 2017-2021. Although PASI has formal agreements with the Government of Malawi to work with all justice agencies, it does not receive any government funding. Development partner funding is increasingly targeted on specialised areas – on human rights and ending violence against women and girls, with only the European Union (EU) now providing significant funding for the core justice sector, including PASI. EU funding for PASI's work ended in the second half of 2022 and is unlikely to recommence until the second half of 2023.

1 Introduction

1.1 Background

The Malawi Paralegal Advisory Services Institute (PASI) is identified as one of 25 examples of impactful and cost-effective front-line justice services in lower-income countries¹ in ODI's paper '“Small is beautiful, but scale is necessary”²: front-line justice services in lower-income countries with the potential to scale up' (Manuel and Manuel, 2023).

PASI is of particular interest because:

- Its local, frugal, innovative model delivers unit costs of \$10–12 per case. This is one of the lowest costs of the services considered in ODI's research, below ODI's scalable benchmark for low-income countries of \$20 a case.
- Unusually, PASI provides two kinds of services: (1) legal advice, assistance and informal dispute resolution services to communities and individuals through its paralegals and village mediators; and (2) legal advice and assistance to unsentenced detainees.
- As far as providing legal advice and assistance to unsentenced detainees is concerned, PASI is the only model that ODI is aware of, that has gone to scale in a lower-income country. PASI's paralegals assist 96% of unsentenced detainees each month.
- As a result of its prison paralegals operating at scale, PASI has had extraordinary impact in reducing the level of unsentenced detainees in Malawi to below the OECD average. It has maintained that reduction since 2008. This achievement contributes directly to the Sustainable Development Goals' (SDGs') target of equal access to justice for all, in particular to indicator SDG 16.3.2 *unsentenced detainees as a percentage of overall prison population*.

¹ Lower income' refers to countries that are classified by the World Bank, as at May 2023, as being either low income or lower-middle income. Low-income economies are defined as those with a gross national income per person of \$1,085 or less in 2021; lower middle-income economies are those with a gross national income per person between \$1,086 and \$4,255. For more details, see: <https://datahelpdesk.worldbank.org/knowledgebase/articles/906519-world-bank-country-and-lending-groups>

² Sir Fazle Hasan Abed, founder of BRAC. See BRAC website www.brac.net/ and www.impactnetwork.org/latest-news/small-is-beautiful-but-scale-is-necessary

- PASI has been at the vanguard of the paralegal model internationally, operating for over 20 years, and influencing the development of similar services in other countries.

This country study provides more detail about PASI's work, and describes how these successes have been achieved.

1.2 Country study structure

Section 2 provides an overview of the 22-year history of paralegals in Malawi. Section 3 considers the quality, impact and cost-effectiveness of PASI's work. Section 4 looks at PASI's coverage: the scale of PASI's operations. Section 5 considers PASI's funding in the context of overall spending on justice in Malawi. Section 6 provides some conclusions.

2 Overview of PASI's 22 years of operations

2.1 PASI's origins and development

The Paralegal Advisory Service started operating in 2000 with the aim of supporting people caught up in the criminal justice system. In 2007, the organisation was incorporated as the Paralegal Advisory Services Institute (PASI).

2.1.1 Legal advice and assistance to unsentenced detainees

PASI originated from a 1999 study undertaken by a group of young Malawians on the status of young persons in the juvenile section of Malawi's main prison, Zomba Central Prison. The study revealed that in contravention of Malawi's law, none of the detainees had legal advice or representation.³ Flowing from this, a National Conference on Juvenile Justice in 1999 recommended the introduction of a paralegal service providing basic legal advice and assistance to detainees. International non-governmental organisation (NGO) Penal Reform International (PRI) obtained permission from the Malawi prison authorities for four national NGOs to pilot the scheme in the four main regional prisons. In 2000, with UK Department for International Development (DfID) support, the Paralegal Advisory Service (PAS) began operations with eight paralegals.

Today, in 2023, PASI employs more than 60 paralegals throughout the country, providing free legal advice and assistance in all prisons, in courts and at police stations. PASI's work is necessary because, despite a strong policy framework and some legislation to protect detainees (including the Legal Aid Act 2010 and the Child Care, Protection and Justice Act 2010), in practice most people arrested are unable to afford a private lawyer. There are also very few legal aid lawyers in the country: a total of approximately 700 lawyers overall⁴ to serve 19.6 million people⁵ and only 29 lawyers in the government's Legal Aid Bureau.

³ This is a common situation in lower-income countries.

⁴ This is the membership of the Malawi Law Society (<https://malawilawsociety.net/>)

⁵ <https://data.un.org/en/iso/mw.html>.

2.1.2 Village mediation programme

In 2008, PASI expanded its operations to include a village mediation programme, aimed at tackling people's everyday justice problems at an early stage before they escalate. PASI paralegals now combine their support to unsentenced detainees with supervision of 1,660 volunteer village mediators that PASI has trained in 11 districts across Malawi.

PASI's village mediation model draws on the Madaripur Mediation Model (MMM) from Bangladesh, following PASI's study tour in 2005 to see MMM in operation and advice from PRI (Griggs, 2016: 5, footnote 1). Following the tour and a feasibility study, PASI determined that, with certain modifications, village mediation was applicable to Malawi. Village mediation is a free service to access and aims to divert small civil and criminal cases from the formal justice systems, ensuring that only serious criminal cases go to the police and courts. It empowers communities to resolve disputes, conflicts and grievances at the village level, providing less expensive, more culturally acceptable and more approachable access to justice. The major difference between mediation services in Bangladesh and Malawi is that PASI's mediation service (also unlike formal courts) is completely confidential. In addition, village mediation in Malawi is designed to fit with Malawi's traditional village-based justice systems for dispute resolution (Griggs, 2016).

2.2 Regulatory framework and recognition of paralegals

Since 2019, PASI has had memorandums of understanding with Malawi Police Service, Malawi Prisons Service, the judiciary and the Legal Aid Bureau. These enable PASI to have effective working relationships with and access to these organisations. PASI is the only non-state actor in Malawi with this kind of arrangement. A Code of Conduct for paralegals was agreed between PASI and the authorities in 2000.

The role of paralegals has, over time, become more accepted and recognised within Malawi's justice system. For example, the University of Malawi and the Malawi Staff Development Institute run diploma courses in paralegal studies, with the government sponsoring paralegals' training. There are established paralegal posts within the Ministry of Justice and Constitutional Affairs. Paralegals are also permitted to appear in certain courts in certain limited circumstances, in line with the Legal Aid Act. However, they are currently not formally recognised as a profession, nor regulated. PASI is advocating for paralegals to be fully embraced within Malawi's justice system.

2.3 International impact

PASI has received international and regional recognition.⁶ It had a key role in the development of the 2004 Lilongwe Declaration on Accessing Legal Aid in Criminal Justice Systems in Africa (PRI, 2004), adopted by the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR, 2006) and by the United Nations Economic and Social Council (UN ECOSOC, 2007). Much of the innovative practice captured in the Lilongwe Declaration's Plan of Action was incorporated into the United Nations (UN) Principles and Guidelines on Access to Legal Aid in Criminal Justice systems (UNODC, 2013).

PASI is regularly the subject of study tours from other African countries. Its approach has been drawn on in Kenya (by the Legal Resources Foundation), Uganda (Paralegal Advisory Service) and in Bangladesh (by four NGOs). Good practices drawn on by visiting delegations include the use of paralegals to screen remand populations in South Africa, Rwanda and Sierra Leone, and the use of mobile courts in Liberia. Visual aids developed by PASI have been adapted and translated into Kiswahili and Bangla. The village mediation programme has been replicated in Sierra Leone (2009) and in Enugu State in Nigeria (2011).

PASI is a founding member of the African Centre of Excellence for Access to Justice (ACE-AJ)⁷, and hosts its Secretariat. PASI was granted Observer Status by the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights in 2019. PASI also engages extensively with the UN Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice.

The quality and impact of PASI's work in Malawi are discussed in the next section, along with analysis of PASI's highly cost-effective model.

⁶ Including a UN Habitat Best Practices Award in 2004. The award, which is given every two years, recognises and promotes outstanding initiatives in the field of human settlements. See UN Habitat, 'Best Practices' (<https://unhabitat.org/best-practices>).

⁷ The African Centre of Excellence for Access to Justice homepage (<https://accesstojustice.africa/>).

3 Quality, impact and cost-effectiveness

3.1 Quality and impact

This section considers the quality and impact of PASI's work with unsentenced detainees. It goes on to examine its broader access to justice work through village mediation.

3.1.1 Legal advice and assistance to unsentenced detainees

The remarkable impact of PASI's work in providing legal advice and assistance to unsentenced detainees can be seen in Malawi's record on unsentenced detainees as a percentage of overall prison population (SDG 16.3.2). Paralegal advisory services began operating (at a very small scale) in 2000, and PASI began to scale up operations in 2007. Unsented detention rates fell from 50% in 2000 (consistent with the average in Africa) to 18% in 2008. Rates have been maintained at below 20% since then. This is below the OECD average of 24% (Manuel et al., 2022).

PASI's work is now well appreciated by Malawi Prisons Service. During an interview for this study, a senior official⁸ noted the impact that paralegals had had on reducing remand prisoners by '*helping prisoners to apply for bail and facilitating court trials*'. He also noted there had been some problems at the beginning: '*Initially there were a lot of misunderstandings*', but that now there is '*a good working relationship*'. He cited the impact of training prisons officers to provide paralegal services themselves and recommended that '*paralegals should be allowed to represent accused persons in court because professional lawyers are so few*'.

3.1.2 Village mediation

Where PASI paralegals and village mediators operate, they are preferred or the equal preferred provider of justice (Chisala-Tempelhoff and Chijozi, 2018). A recent survey noted that 99% of village mediation users preferred village mediation to other potential avenues to justice, with 64% of female respondents saying they were '*very satisfied*' with the results of the process. The two main reasons

⁸ The Commissioner General of Malawi Prisons Service, Mr Masauko N Wiscot.

for preferring village mediation were its free service (72%) and confidential nature (46%) (Aiken and Dzimadzi, 2020).

Independent evaluations are positive. It was found that village mediation makes it easier to access justice at village level, with vulnerable groups especially women benefiting. It is credited with increasing the speed of case handling to reduce costs and alleviating poverty (Griggs, 2016). Most recently, UNDP's 2022 independent evaluation noted *'Through [the village mediation programme] the project has demonstrated that there are more viable, effective ways of resolving disputes other than the confrontational approach associated with formal justice system and arbitration at Chiefs tribunals'* (Matinde and Chingaibe, 2022).

3.1.3 Wider impact of PASI's work

Independent evaluations have noted the wider impact of PASI's work. It has been described as *'energis[ing] the criminal justice system'* (Kerrigan, 2002), providing *'indispensable, bridge building, voices of the voiceless'* (Hansen, 2004). It is also highlighted as having been *'unusually effective...[in] ... visibly changing the legal landscape'* (Pierce, 2007), and as *'transform[ing] the sociology of access to justice for the better'* (Aiken and Dzimadzi, 2022).

The courts recognise and appreciate the role paralegals play. In an interview for this study, a High Court judge noted⁹ *'paralegals play key role in people centred justice... They are the entry point for criminal justice.... they are more readily accessible, more convenient and cheaper to engage... vigorously engaging players with quick gains'*.

PASI's paralegal work in prisons has been credited with reducing the spread of disease through reducing prison over-crowding (Griggs, 2016). Its work with communities through village mediation has also been credited (Griggs, 2016; Matinde and Chingaibe, 2022) with:

- enhancing community relations, strengthening the fibres for social relations and cohesive communities, restoring culture, and building community
- increasing the pace of village development, as it frees traditional leaders from handling small disputes, allowing them to concentrate on more critical issues for development, especially land issues
- reducing corruption, as services are known to be provided free (in contrast to fee-based services)

⁹ Justice Mzonde Mvula, Judge of the High Court of Malawi, Lilongwe Registry.

- improving human rights, as villages have become more knowledgeable of and sensitive to human rights, especially regarding the rights of women
- enabling the courts and the police to work more cost-effectively, by removing the need for them to deal with petty cases, allowing them to focus on more serious cases (with some evidence that where village mediation was active, there was a reduction in the level of petty crime).

3.2 Cost-effectiveness: unit costs

To be cost-effective, justice services need to deliver good results without costing a lot of money. ODI has therefore analysed the unit costs (the cost per case) of PASI's case work.

3.2.1 Previous work on unit costs

ODI previously estimated that paralegal advisory services could be provided for \$20 a case in a low-income country context (Manuel et al., 2019, based on research in LDP, 2015). In ODI's subsequent discussions with observers, to many the \$20 figure seemed too low an estimate. And there was indeed evidence of NGO front-line justice service providers (in Sierra Leone and Uganda) with much higher unit costs (\$500 a case) (Manuel and Manuel, 2021).

3.2.2 New estimates of unit costs

It is therefore striking that this paper has surfaced evidence that PASI has consistently reported unit costs even lower than the ODI benchmark of \$20 per case.

A succession of UN Development Programme (UNDP) evaluations (Griggs, 2016; Aiken and Dzimadzi, 2020; Matinde and Chingaibe, 2022) provide data on unit costs. The latest report (Matinde and Chingaibe, 2022), provided average unit costs of \$12.60 to secure the release of a prisoner; and \$17.80 to resolve a case by community mediation. These figures include the costs of PASI's more general awareness raising and legal education activities, as well as its case work. In the line with the approach taken to unit costs in the health sector,¹⁰ ODI's methodology is to focus on case work,¹¹ and exclude this kind of more general legal empowerment work. UNDP's low figures can therefore be seen as over-estimates of PASI's cost per case.

ODI was able to extend UNDP's estimates with more detailed data from PASI's management information system. This extended data

¹⁰ See Manuel and Manuel (2023: Section 1.3) on cost analysis methodology.

¹¹ When working with detainees, this means specific advice and assistance provided to individual detainees, either individually or in groups, in relation to the charges and procedures they are facing. This includes advice on bail and by providing practical assistance, for example, helping to locate lost files and tracing family members who can act as sureties where this is a condition of bail.

coverage to all the districts PASI worked in and took the dataset up to 2022.¹² ODI's analysis of this data showed that:

- The average unit cost for prison paralegal work is \$10 for all districts. This figure is \$40 in districts with fewer than 500 cases, and \$8 in districts with more than 2,000 cases.
- For village mediation, the estimated average unit cost is \$12 for all districts. This figure is \$300 in districts with fewer than 500 cases, and \$7 in districts with more than 2,000 cases.

3.3 Unit costs depend on scale and on local, frugal innovation

3.3.1 Unit costs go down with scaling up

Legal advice and assistance to unsentenced detainees

When PASI first started, its unit costs were much higher than the latest evaluations. This is not surprising as it was not operating at the same scale. The predecessor of PASI, PAS, started in 2000 with 8 paralegals. By 2005, it had 37 paralegals in 13 prisons, reaching 84% of the prison population. It had an immediate impact, with a reduction in remand population from 50% to 30%. In 2004 and 2005, average annual numbers were 588 prisoners released; 345 juveniles diverted from the court system; and 272 juveniles granted bail and diverted from police stations. This made the average annual reduction in the number of prisoners 1,205. As PASI's annual budget was \$200,000, this implies unit costs in 2005 were \$166 per prisoner released/diverted from prison.¹³

By 2018 and 2019, PASI had secured an average annual reduction in prisoners of 30,528, a 25-fold increase over 2005, while unit costs fell by a factor of 13 (from \$166 to \$12.60).

It is possible to see the impact of scale from the disaggregated data PASI collects. PASI has been tracking the amount spent and the number of prisoner releases achieved in each of the 21 districts where it operates from the beginning of 2018. The total costs over the five-year period to end of 2022 were \$1,496,657 and the total number of releases was 149,662, so the overall average unit cost was \$10 a release.

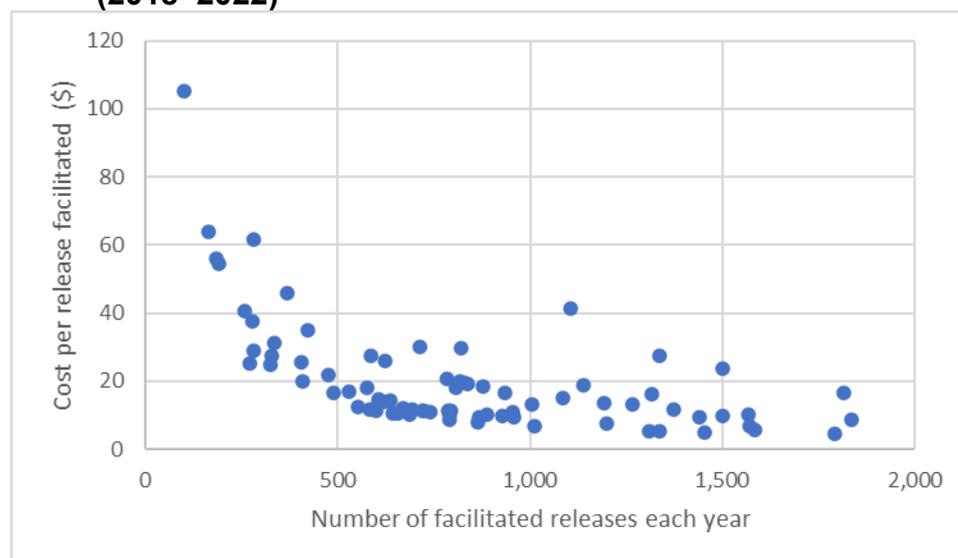
As Figure 1 shows, there was wide variation in the number of releases in each district across the years. Figure 1 also shows the correlation between the number of cases and unit costs. In districts where PASI is only handling a few hundred cases a year, the unit costs are around \$60 a case and can be as high as \$100. But in

¹² For prison paralegal work, PASI provided ODI with the latest data on costs and number of cases for 21 districts across a five-year average (2018–2022). For village mediation, PASI provided ODI with data on costs and number of cases for all 11 districts where PASI was working across a five-year average (2018–2022).

¹³ Data from PRI (2007); unit cost calculation by ODI.

districts where the number of cases handled rises above 500 a year, the unit costs come down markedly – with most districts achieving below \$20 and none more than \$40 a case. When the case load rises to more than 1,500 a year, no district reports unit costs over \$20 a case. Figure 1 does not include the very few districts with extremely high caseloads (more than 2,000 a year (17% of the total)); in all these instances, the costs were also less than \$20 and the average was just \$8 per case.

Figure 1 Prisoner paralegal services unit costs by district (2018–2022)



Source: PASI data for all districts and years for annual caseloads fewer than 2,000

Village mediation

There has also been a scale-up of village mediation. In 2008–2010, the annual average number of cases settled was 1,851. This rose in 2011–2016 to 5,681 (Griggs, 2016: 10). In 2018 and 2019, the annual average was 12,536 cases. The latest data for 2021 and the first seven months of 2022 (Matinde and Chingaibe, 2022) records an annual average of 25,000, almost a 14-fold increase over 2008–2010.¹⁴

Unfortunately, the costs of village mediation in 2009–2010 are not available, so it is not possible to see how costs fell as the number of cases rose.

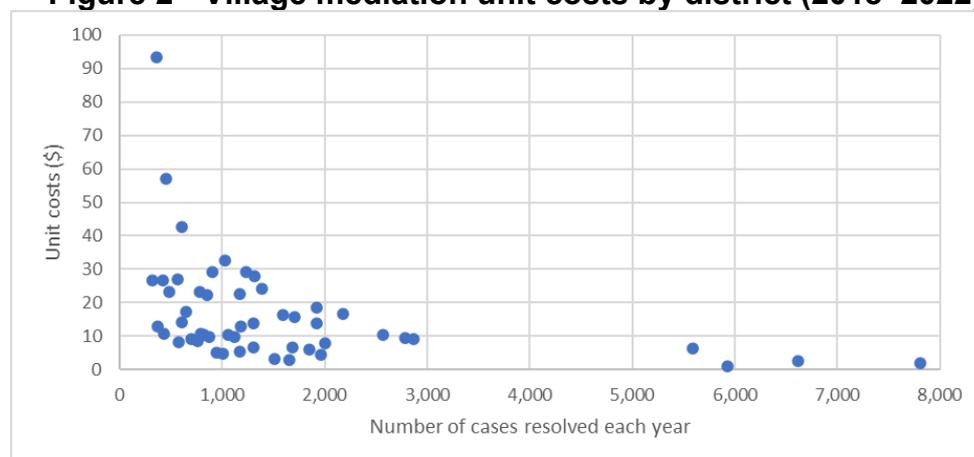
A similar correlation between scale and unit costs occurs with village mediation in the 11 districts PASI has supported over the period 2018–2022. The total costs over these five years were \$1,009,388 and the total number of cases handled was 81,747. This makes the overall average unit cost \$12.40 a case.

Figure 2, below, shows average unit costs for districts with caseloads of more than 50 over the period 2018–2022. As figure 2 shows, where

¹⁴ The precise figure is 13.8.

the annual number of cases exceeded 5,000, the unit costs averaged just \$3. For districts handling fewer than 50 cases (not included in figure 2) mediation costs per case could be as high as \$900.

Figure 2 Village mediation unit costs by district (2018–2022)



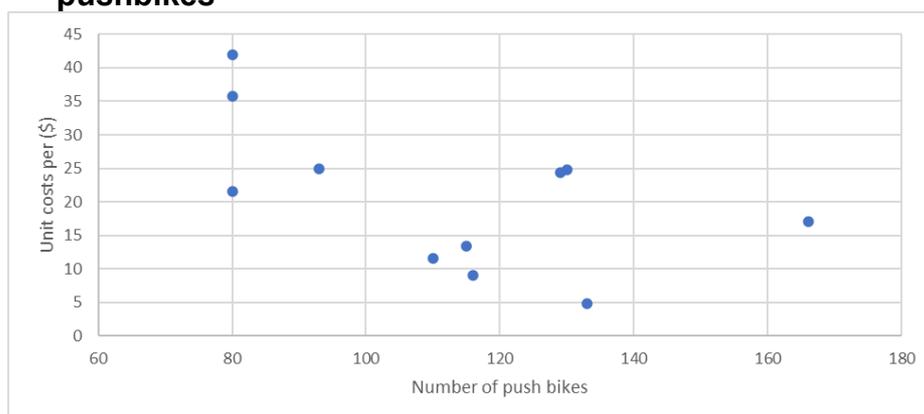
Source: PASI data for 11 districts and years where caseloads were more than 50 each year.

3.3.2 Frugal innovation

The concept of ‘frugal innovation’ is discussed in Manuel and Manuel (2023: Section 4.4, p 44). As with people-centred justice, initiatives begin with people rather than with top-down reform, while approaches are inclusive, flexible, affordable and can be scaled up. PASI provides a prime example of frugal innovation, delivering not just high-quality services, but doing so cost-effectively. This takes place through a number of strategies:

- **Efficient management of paralegal’s time:** Evaluators noted PASI paralegals were highly motivated, dynamic and proactive in going into the courts, prison and communities: ‘...*the findings illustrated a very efficient use of human resources. Paralegals were able to multi-task in conducting their work across different sites such as police stations, court and prisons...*’ (Matinde and Chingaibe, 2022: 65). PASI contrasts its approach with the fundamentally different one adopted by the government’s Legal Aid Bureau (which also employs paralegals), where staff tend to wait for cases to come to them.
- **Appropriate transport:** UNDP notes in relation to paralegals, ‘*Having a motorcycle and adequate fuel ensure the paralegals could afford to undertake tasks ...on a daily basis*’ (ibid.: 65). PASI’s village mediators use pushbikes, with greater use of these being associated with reducing unit costs. Figure 3 shows how unit costs are markedly lower in districts with greater number of pushbikes

Figure 3 Village mediation unit costs and number of pushbikes



Source: PASI data for 11 districts, where 1,232 bicycles were purchased in 2018 and 2020

There is potential to trim unit costs further by allocating bicycles to a group of village mediators, rather than providing one to each.

- **Appropriate low-cost premises:** Community-based paralegals do not require offices to carry out most of the activities, since mediation can be conducted at any place if the privacy of the parties is guaranteed. Very often community-based paralegals use the headquarters of traditional leaders for free because they are part of the communities that they serve.
- **Use of volunteer mediators:** Village mediators are unpaid and are given two weeks of training. There are initial set-up costs in recruitment and training, but the ongoing costs of village mediation are very low. This was demonstrated during 2011–2016, when village mediation continued to operate even though PASI had no funding for any of its operational costs (Griggs, 2016). Most stakeholders believed that village mediation could be self-sustained once upfront deliverables had been provided (ibid.). UNDP recently noted that where village mediation was established, it was working with minimal direct involvement by PASI (Matinde and Chingaipe, 2022).

Although volunteers, village mediators receive allowances for other activities from the National Initiative for Civic Education and other organisations. These allowances are in effect subsidising the village mediation work and limit the time that volunteers can work on village mediation. In the longer term, evaluators have noted there is a case for village mediators to receive an allowance for their mediation work or at least have a budget for maintaining their bicycles. However, paying village mediators is a live issue for debate within PASI, which has taken the approach to date that the social capital the village mediators accrue from their role is sufficient reward.

There are some concerns as to whether the current low unit cost model for village mediation is sustainable. The recent rapid scale-up has possibly led to paralegal capacity being spread too thinly. There are questions as to the level of ongoing training and monitoring and support that is needed, although village mediators have now been introduced to the use of digital data collection methods.

- **Collaborative approach:** UNDP noted the high degree of collaboration between and among the key stakeholders, highlighting in particular the value of the development of formal memoranda of understanding with all eight key government institutions, the use of social capital and cooperation with traditional courts (ibid.).
- **Potential for digitalisation:** UNDP's recent evaluation recommended that further scale-up could be achieved while keeping costs low if some services were digitalised and accessible via a simple mobile phone. This is an aspect that PASI is now actively exploring, including by drawing on the latest experience in Rwanda (ibid.).

4 Coverage: the scale of PASI's operations

4.1 Introduction

This section considers the extent to which PASI's low-cost models for assisting unsentenced detainees and village mediation have been taken to scale. In other words, the extent to which PASI's people-centred justice service is covering the needs for its services.

4.2 Legal advice and assistance services to unsentenced detainees – level of coverage

Table 1 compares the number of pre-trial detainees in Malawi's prisons with the number of detainees PASI supports. As can be seen, PASI is supporting a remarkable 96% of prisoners. This will be a slight over-estimate, as ODI is using the number of pre-trial detainees in prison¹⁵ as the baseline for assessing coverage; a more precise measure would include detainees held in police cells, but unfortunately this data is not readily available.

Table 1 PASI's level of coverage relative to number of pre-trial detainees in prison

Number of pre-trial detainees in prisons *	Number of detainees in prisons and police cells PASI supports each month**	Detainees released from prisons/police cells each month as % of pre-trial detainees in prisons
2,610	2,502	96%

* Data downloaded from: www.prisonstudies.org/

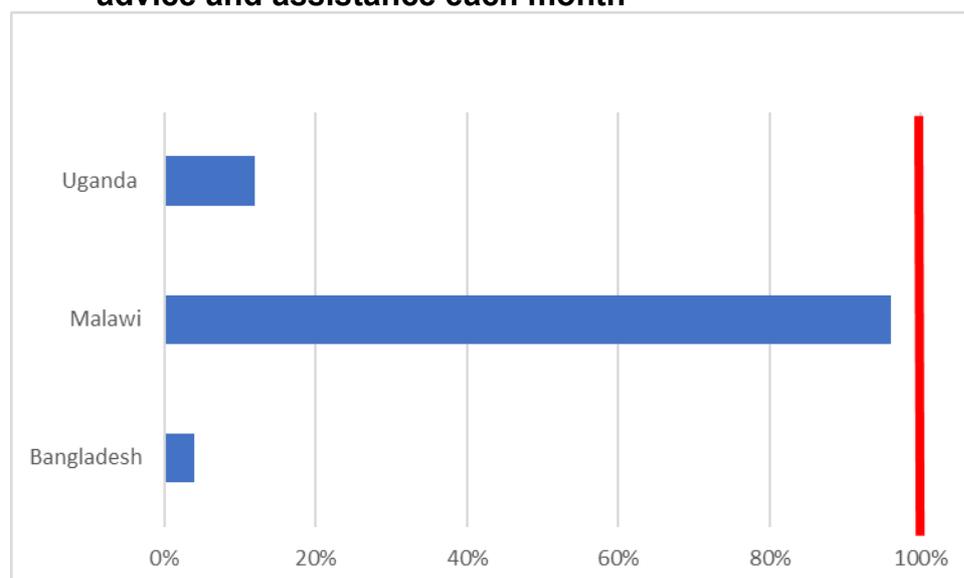
** 2018–2021: 21 out of 28 districts

Source: ODI analysis, 2023

PASI's achievement of reaching 96% of unsentenced detainees, is remarkable. ODI has undertaken similar analysis in relation to initiatives to provide paralegal support for unsentenced detainees in Bangladesh and Uganda (Manuel and Manuel 2023, Section 3.2 and Annex B). PASI's highly efficient, frugal, innovative model is out-performing these other initiatives by a long way (see Figure 4).

¹⁵ Downloaded from: www.prisonstudies.org/

Figure 4 Percentage of unsentenced detainees given legal advice and assistance each month



Source: ODI analysis, 2023 (Manuel and Manuel, 2023)

4.3 Village mediation – level of coverage

4.3.1 Estimates of number of people with justice needs, and types of needs

The key source of data on the level of everyday justice problems (conflicts, disputes and grievances) that people experience in Malawi is the World Justice Project's (WJP's) 2017 legal needs survey.¹⁶ This was a general population poll survey module on legal needs and access to justice. Data was collected using a probability sample of 1,039 respondents in the three largest cities of the country (WJP, 2017).

WJP reported that 73% of Malawi's population had experienced a legal problem in the previous two years. This is a relatively high rate. Among the 19 low-income countries included in the WJP Atlas, only 3 others have higher rates – Nepal (84%); Mali (79%); and Ethiopia (74%) (WJP, n.d.).

The most common legal problem in Malawi was consumer related (with a 39% incidence), followed by family (13%), land (11%) and housing (9%). The predominance of consumer-related legal problems is a common feature in low-income countries.¹⁷

¹⁶ According to WJP's *Atlas of Legal Needs Surveys* (<https://worldjusticeproject.org/our-work/research-and-data/atlas-legal-needs-surveys>) Malawi has two legal needs surveys: (1) Gender and Justice Unit (2019), which is women only; and (2) WJP (2017), which surveys the general population. Unfortunately, the link to the first survey is broken.

¹⁷ These are problems related to goods and services, and to the enforcement of contracts. The preponderance of this category of dispute may be related to the tendency for informal commercial

4.3.2 ODI estimates of number of unmet justice service needs

Number of cases requiring legal advice, assistance or dispute resolution services each year

As discussed in Manuel and Manuel (2023), ODI has developed a methodology for translating data from legal needs surveys that report numbers of people with justice / legal needs, into estimates of the number of justice service needs (Manuel and Manuel, 2023: Section 3.3.1, p 35). Justice service needs are the number of legal problems/cases requiring legal advice and assistance from an external body (rather than from family and friends). In summary, ODI uses WJP's data and screens out non-severe cases (that is, those that do not tend to require legal assistance). It then scales this data by the number of households in the country to derive an estimate of the number of 'cases' requiring legal advice, assistance or dispute resolution services each year.

ODI's estimates are that 13.5% of households in Malawi need legal advice and assistance every year, implying an annual demand of 537,000 cases requiring legal assistance.

Extent to which PASI meets justice service needs

The latest independent evaluation estimated that PASI was supporting 16,673 people each year through its village mediation work (Matinde and Chingaibe, 2022).¹⁸ With an estimated 537,000 cases needing legal advice, assistance or informal dispute resolution services each year, this implies a coverage of 3.1%.¹⁹ Using PASI's latest figures of the number of cases a year (25,000), the coverage increases to 4.7%. While there are other agencies and organisations providing legal assistance and advice in Malawi, none do so at a similar scale to PASI. PASI is aware there is scope for much further scaling up. In 2011–2016, village mediation was only reaching 14 of the 600 traditional authorities. This has now increased to 34.

As Figure 5 shows, Malawi's rate of coverage may seem low, but providers of front-line services in other lower-income countries are generally failing to achieve even 10% coverage (Manuel and Manuel, 2023). Only Sierra Leone's Legal Aid Board has had sufficient investment to enable it to scale up its services and achieve an estimated coverage of slightly over 50%. Sierra Leone's Legal Aid Board has an annual budget of around \$1 million a year (ibid.). If Malawi were to make the same level of investment, relative to its population, it would require an annual budget of \$2.4 million.

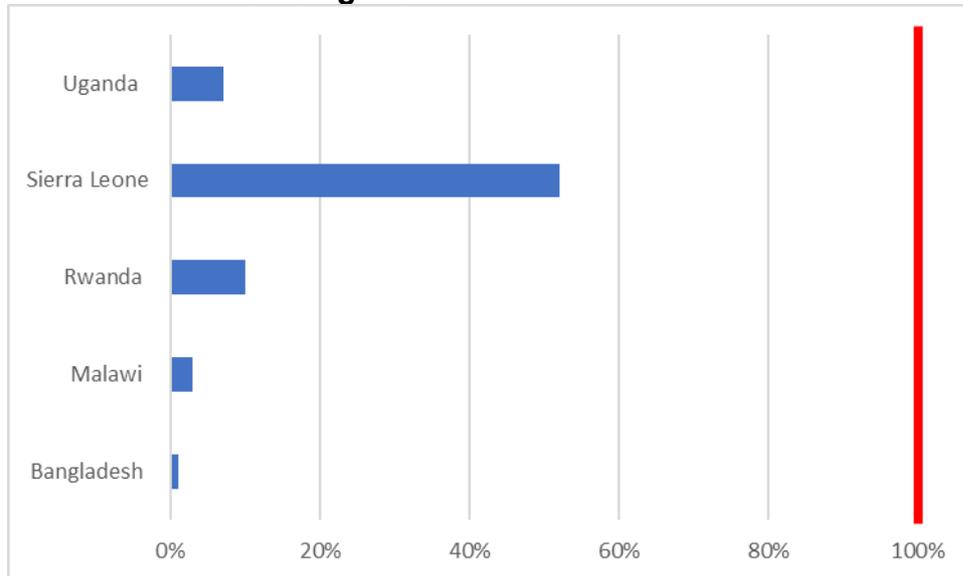
transactions in low-income countries. More research is needed on the nature of disputes in different income groups.

¹⁸ Matinde and Chingaibe (2022: 63) cited total of 66,693 cases from January 2018 – December 2021.

¹⁹ This is figure cited in Manuel and Manuel (2023), based on the latest independent evaluation.

Doubling that would enable village mediation to achieve nationwide coverage.

Figure 5 Percentage needs for legal advice, assistance and informal dispute resolution services for communities and individuals being met



Source: ODI analysis, 2023 (Manuel and Manuel, 2023)

5 Financing access to justice in Malawi

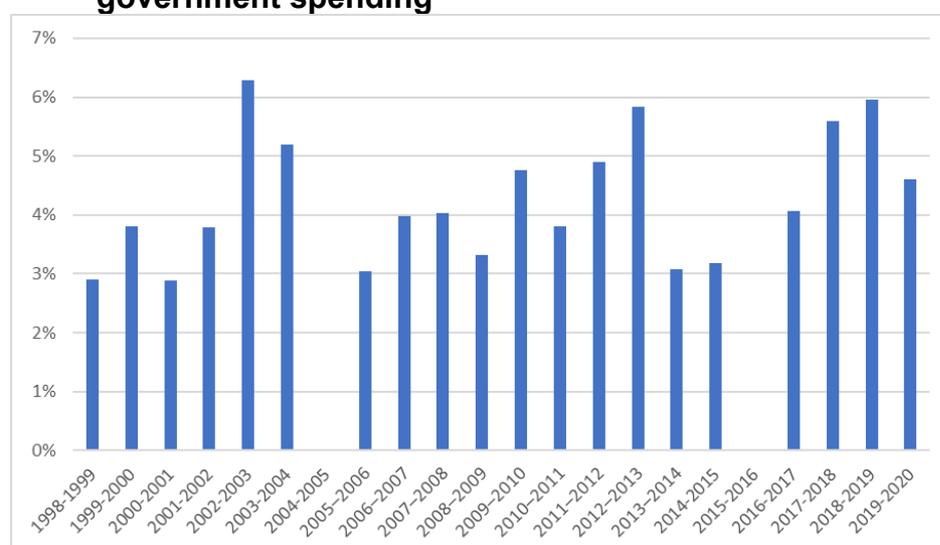
5.1 Introduction

PASI is funded by a range of external donors and has never received funding from the Government of Malawi. This section puts financing for PASI into the context of Malawi's financing of justice overall.

5.2 Government of Malawi spending on justice

Malawi's total justice budget in 2018/19 was \$116 million.²⁰ This amounted to 6% of all government spending. This is higher than the share that donor countries spend on their own justice systems (median 4.3%) and only just below the median for all low-income countries (7.4%) (Manuel et al., 2023). The average for the most recent three years (2017/2018–2019/20) is slightly lower at 5.4%, but still above the donor country average of 4.3% (see Figure 6).

Figure 6 Malawi's spending on justice as a % of all government spending



Sources: ODI estimates based on IMF (2004); Mwabutwa (2015); and data from the Collaborative Africa Budget Reform Initiative (www.cabri-sbo.org)²¹

²⁰ 85.2 billion kwacha, equivalent to \$116 million (at 732 kwachas to the US\$).

²¹ CABRI (2020) 'Malawi – Budget Framework – 2020' (www.cabri-sbo.org/en/documents/2019-2020-draft-financial-statement); Government of Malawi (2020) 'Draft 2019/20 Financial Statement' (www.cabri-sbo.org/uploads/bia/Malawi_2020_Formulation_External_BudgetFramework_MinFin_COMESASADC_English.pdf).

As far as allocations within the justice budget are concerned, Table 2 shows that in 2018/19:

- Sixty-four (64)% of the total went to the police. This is markedly higher than in other low-income countries (median 49%) and the proportion donors spend in their own countries (median 50%).
- The budget for prisons is equivalent to \$13.6 million (9.93 billion kwacha). This is \$976 per prisoner per year and \$2.7 a day (there were 13,929 prisoners in 2018).²²

Malawi seems to give a reasonable level of support for legal aid. Legal aid has received around 1% of the justice budget since 2005/06. But in recent years this figure has increased to nearly 1.6%, not far short of the average in the EU of 2%.²³ Another measure is that legal aid accounts for 8% of the total spending on the judiciary, public prosecution and legal aid. Again, this is close to the equivalent in EU countries of 11%.

PASI has never received any funding from the Government of Malawi. In 2010, the government enacted a new Legal Aid Act (Act No. 28 of 2010, Section 28), which aimed at improving the provision of legal aid services across the country. The Act provides for cooperation agreements between the Legal Aid Bureau and civil society organisations (CSOs) providing legal aid services. Unfortunately, the same Act makes it impossible for CSOs to access public funds to promote access to justice, while the Legal Aid Bureau is unable to provide financial support to those organisations itself.

Financing issues need to be understood in the context of the political economy, including the wider political system, judicial politics and the human resources situation. A detailed consideration of these issues is outside the scope of this paper. However, the relatively high level of spending on the justice sector in Malawi, as in other lower-income countries, is likely to be related to the tendency for such countries to spend more proportionately on the basic functions of the state. This means less funds are available for spending on social measures such as health, education and social protection. ODI has questioned whether such relatively high levels of spending on justice are sustainable in the longer term (Manuel et al., 2023).

²² World Prison Brief, 'Malawi' (www.prisonstudies.org/country/malawi).

²³ ODI estimate based on total justice sector spending (<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/cache/infographs/cofog>) and CEPEJ (2020: 42).

Table 2 Malawi justice budget framework 2020

	Revised budget	Revised estimates	Proposed estimates
Billions Malawi kwacha	2017-2018	2018-2019	2019-2020
Total justice expenditure	56.26	85.18	79.75
The judiciary	8.47	11.13	11.31
Malawi Police Service	35.38	58.25	51.61
Prisons services	7.77	9.93	10.12
Justice and Constitutional Affairs	1.00	1.05	1.21
Public prosecution and state advocate	1.07	1.35	1.30
Legal aid	0.73	1.14	1.25
Human Rights Commission	0.56	0.76	1.10
Ombudsman	0.51	0.62	0.62
Law Commission	0.77	0.95	1.23
Total govt spending	1,005	1,430	1,731
Justice spending as a % of govt spending	5.6%	6.0%	4.6%
Justice budget by proportion			
The judiciary	15.1%	13.1%	14.2%
Malawi Police Service	62.9%	68.4%	64.7%
Prisons services	13.8%	11.7%	12.7%
Justice and Constitutional Affairs	1.8%	1.2%	1.5%
Public prosecution and state advocate	1.9%	1.6%	1.6%
Legal aid	1.3%	1.3%	1.6%
Human Rights Commission	1.0%	0.9%	1.4%
Ombudsman	0.9%	0.7%	0.8%
Law Commission	1.4%	1.1%	1.5%

Source: Authors' calculations, based on Collaborative Africa Budget Reform Initiative²⁴

5.3 Potential for PASI's work with unsentenced detainees to deliver government budget savings

In theory, PASI's work with prisoners offers a high rate of return and substantial budget savings to the government. The full cost of keeping a detainee in prison – the total prison budget divided by number of prisoners – is \$2.7 per day. If the PASI intervention reduces average time in prison by 100 days,²⁵ the benefit-to-cost ratio of that intervention is 23:1. This is a very high ratio, classified by the Copenhagen Consensus Center²⁶ as in the top '*phenomenal*' category (Lomborg, 2014).

However, a detailed review of this issue in Malawi suggests that such savings are unlikely to be realised in practice. First, the marginal cost

²⁴ CABRI (2020) 'Malawi – Budget Framework – 2020' (www.cabri-sbo.org/en/documents/2019-2020-draft-financial-statement)
www.cabri-sbo.org/uploads/bia/Malawi_2020_Formulation_External_BudgetFramework_MinFin_COMESASADC_English.pdf.

²⁵ The 100 days figure is assumed in Griggs (2013). This may overstate the benefit. OSJI (2013) suggested that the PASI intervention lowered the average time from arrest to case conclusion by just one month.

²⁶ Copenhagen Consensus Center homepage (<https://copenhagenconsensus.com/>).

of keeping a prisoner – food, water, electricity and medication – is just \$1.22 a day, less than half the full cost. Second, and more importantly, the prison system is so overcrowded and underfunded that the likely main benefits would be reduced overcrowding and better provision, rather than any cash savings (Griggs, 2013).

5.4 External partners' spending on justice in Malawi

Justice aid to Malawi (including aid for human rights and ending violence against women and girls)²⁷ has increased in real terms from an average of \$9 million a year in 2008–2010 to \$14 million in 2021 (all figures constant US\$ 2020). Despite this increase, donor funding is small relative to the Government of Malawi's own spending and corresponds to just 12% of the government's justice budget.

The increase in donor aid since 2008 mirrors the increase in all aid to Malawi. Justice aid accounts for 1.1% of total aid to the country (three-year average to 2021). This share has remained constant since 2009. While justice's share of 1.1% is below the global average of 2.2%, this is in line with the experience in other low-income countries. Most justice aid is given to middle-income countries (Manuel and Manuel, 2023).

As Figure 7 shows, within the overall increase in justice aid, a key change is the reduction in general support to the core justice sector ('legal and judicial development') and towards targeted support to ending violence against women and girls (VAWG). This change is largely due to the largest donor, the UK, switching its support from general to targeted approaches, focusing on VAWG after 2015. The UK is the largest donor to VAWG in Malawi. Its programme works with community members and with formal and informal justice providers to prevent violence against women and girls and improve access to justice for survivors of violence.²⁸ Ireland and Norway are the other two large donors, with the three countries providing 83% of the total to support to VAWG of \$6 million a year.

Norway has consistently funded human rights since 2002. The UK and Ireland have funded human rights from 2015. The three now provide similar amounts, and account for most of the current funding to human rights of \$3 million a year.

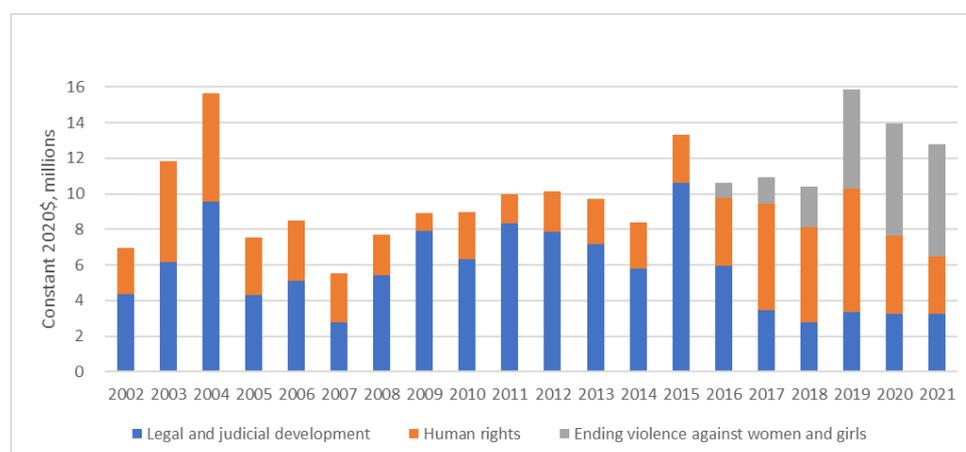
The UK and EU are the only two donors that have funded Malawi's core justice sector. They each provided \$5 million in 2015, but this has since been scaled back: the UK, to less than \$1 million and the

²⁷ OECD aid categories.

²⁸ See UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, Development Tracker (2022) 'Violence against women and girls: prevention and response (<https://devtracker.fcdo.gov.uk/projects/GB-GOV-1-300043/summary>).

EU, to \$2 million in 2021. Much of the EU funding is channelled through UNDP.²⁹

Figure 7 Justice aid by category



Source: Authors' calculations, based on OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) data

5.5 PASI's funding

PASI's work is within the OECD aid category of 'legal and judicial development'. This category includes informal justice, such as traditional, indigenous and paralegal practices that fall outside the formal legal system, as well as alternative dispute resolution. During its 22 years of operations, PASI has relied on a patchwork of donor funding, on occasions with significant gaps.

The UK's Department for International Development (DfID) was the main donor for PASI's paralegal work with prisoners from 2000 to 2015. According to DfID's review (DfID, 2018), it then successfully influenced the EU to support PASI (as DfID's successor project focused on addressing violence against women and girls).

Ireland provided the initial funding to establish village mediation in 2008. However, there was then a seven-year gap before the EU started to fund village mediation work at scale.

The most recent EU funding (through UNDP) for PASI ended in July 2022. This project provided an average of \$1.35 million a year between 2018 and 2022, corresponding to 10.2% of all donor justice aid.³⁰ EU funding is expected to restart later in 2023. This gap in funding has caused significant challenges for PASI, forcing it to cut back on some of its services such as facilitating Camp Courts.³¹

²⁹ OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) aid data is based on the original source of funding. While UNDP manages funding for some donors, it provides relatively little from its own core resources, as these are limited.

³⁰ Total justice aid from official donors averaged \$13.3 million a year between 2018 and 2021 (ODI calculations based on OECD DAC data).

³¹ These are courts held in police stations and prisons.

The number of donors interested in supporting broad-based activities that deliver access to justice in rural areas is dwindling. Currently, the only development partner in Malawi that is willing to fund PASI is the EU (through UNDP). PASI is currently relying on much smaller sources of funding, including the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, which has provided \$100,000 a year since 2021. However, reliance on smaller sources of funding involves increased transaction costs.

PASI does not consider that it would be realistic to charge for its services. Its clients are unsentenced detainees and the rural poor, who cannot afford to pay for the services.

6 Conclusions

6.1 Impact

PASI delivers impressive justice outcomes cost-effectively. For the last 22 years, PASI has shown itself to be highly cost-effective in enabling the poorest to access to justice. PASI has been a consistent and persistent innovator in providing a range of justice services to the poor and marginalised, identifying unmet needs and developing strategic responses.

The latest UNDP evaluation reports PASI unit costs at between \$13 and \$18 per case (Matinde and Chingaie, 2022). These are among the lowest unit costs that ODI has encountered in its global research on cost-effective organisations that provide access to justice. The latest PASI figures suggest costs are even lower: \$10–12 per case.

Latest evaluations also highly commend PASI for the quality and impact of its work. Its paralegals and volunteer village mediators are the preferred, or the equal preferred, providers of justice. Feedback from beneficiaries reveals impact in terms not only of access to justice, especially for vulnerable groups, but also more widely in terms of reducing disease and corruption, building community, and improving human rights.

The way that PASI paralegals are deployed and managed seems to be one of the key reasons for the low unit costs. Another reason is the frugal village mediation approach. A final factor may be the use of pushbikes: districts with more pushbikes have lower unit costs.

The reasons for PASI's success appear to include: strong local ownership and leadership; initial support and seed funding from an external donor, including for learning from other contexts; local contextualisation; engagement with – but independence from – government; and effective monitoring and evaluation, with data used as an active management tool to learn and take lessons on board.

6.2 Funding

While PASI has formal partnership agreements with all the key government justice institutions, the government has never funded PASI. Nor are its paralegals formally recognised by the courts. Donors have instead been the source of funding. In 2022, PASI received 10% of all donor justice aid in Malawi. Unfortunately, there have been gaps in donor funding. The operational costs of village mediation work were unfunded for seven years. And funding for all

PASI's work ended in the second half of 2022 and is unlikely to recommence until the second half of 2023.

There is clear scope to scale up PASI's work. ODI estimates its current coverage of legal assistance needs in Malawi is just 3–5%. If PASI were to be scaled up further, it is highly likely that its unit costs would be even lower. In districts with the highest number of cases, PASI's costs are already markedly lower. It may also be possible to reduce costs further if some services are digitalised, with PASI planning to draw on positive experiences in Rwanda.

While there would appear to be strong case for scaling up PASI's work – both in terms of cost-effectiveness and impact – there is currently no prospect for this.

Key lessons on funding that are evident from PASI's experience include the importance of focusing on low cost, affordable and therefore scalable models of service provision from the start. PASI's current funding challenges can be seen to reflect its strong reliance on external donors that have broader concerns than funding PASI, and with relatively short-term funding horizons. Funding strategies deployed by a range of front-line justice service providers in lower-income countries are discussed in Manuel and Manuel, 2023 (section 4.5). These are: domestic revenues; overseas development assistance; private sector investment; and user-pay models.

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