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How Trust and Enforcement Shape Compliance with Local Parking Fees in Zomba City,Malawi

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Abstract

Local revenue mobilisation in African municipalities depends substantially on own-source revenue instruments such as parking fees, yet the behavioural and institutional conditions that shape compliance with these instruments remain underexamined, particularly in secondary cities. This article asks how motorists' perceptions, institutional practices, and local political economy conditions combine to shape compliance with parking fee requirements in Zomba City, Malawi. Drawing on a qualitative case study from a dissertation on parking fee revenue collection, it analyses evidence from fifteen semi-structured interviews, seven key informant interviews with council officials and enforcement personnel, and one focus group discussion with motorists. The analysis is organised around Fiscal Exchange Theory and Street-Level Bureaucracy Theory, linking motorists' willingness to pay to their perceptions of service return, revenue transparency, and frontline enforcement conduct, while extending both frameworks with a political economy perspective on enforcement informality in African urban settings.

The findings show that the K500 daily parking fee is widely regarded as affordable and legitimate — legitimacy rooted in its consultative introduction. However, that legitimacy is steadily eroded by poor parking infrastructure, opacity over revenue use, inconsistent enforcement, concerns about double-charging, informal payment negotiations, and inadequate public communication. Compliance in Zomba is therefore more coercive than voluntary: most motorists pay because they anticipate penalties or clamping, not because they trust the system. The article argues that sustainable compliance requires a joined-up reform agenda linking transparent revenue reporting, visible infrastructure investment, accountable enforcement, phased digital payment systems, and continuous public communication.

1. Introduction

Local governments in developing countries are expected to finance visible services and maintain urban infrastructure from revenue bases that are often narrow and uncertain (Likwelile & Assey, 2023). Structural dependence on central government transfers leaves municipalities exposed to fiscal volatility, prompting many to expand own-source instruments — market levies, business licences, and parking fees — that can be locally administered and linked to identifiable service use (Likwelile & Assey, 2023). In practice, the revenue performance of these instruments depends not only on formal rules but also on whether citizens regard payment as fair, institutionally credible, and connected to observable public benefit (Beeri et al., 2021). Parking fees are a particularly revealing case because they operate through frequent, visible, face-to-face transactions in public space (Merriman, 2019). A motorist who pays into a poorly maintained bay, receives no clear information about receipts, and observes no improvement in the parking environment has reasonable grounds to question whether the charge represents a public contribution or an administrative extraction. Compliance in such a setting reflects deterrence, convenience, service quality, trust, and the conduct of the frontline officers who mediate the system (Batrancea et al., 2019).

In African urban contexts, enforcement inconsistencies cannot be explained by bureaucratic discretion alone. Research on urban governance in Zambia and across Sub-Saharan Africa shows that informal revenue collection by frontline officials is sometimes embedded in local patronage networks and clientelist arrangements, rather than simply a product of individual coping behaviour (Hinfelaar et al., 2020). This political economy dimension matters because it reframes enforcement irregularity not as an administrative failure amenable to managerial correction, but as a structurally produced outcome that requires institutional — and in some cases political — reform (Dewey et al., 2021).

In Malawi, local revenue mobilisation remains a central governance challenge as urban centres expand and councils seek more reliable own-source revenue (Fjeldstad, 2006). Zomba City Council introduced parking fees in 2019 as part of its own-source revenue strategy (Government of Malawi, 2020). Zomba is a historically significant secondary city — Malawi's capital until 1975 and home to several major public institutions (Lewinson et al., 2003; Potts, 1985) — making it a useful site for examining how local revenue reforms are experienced beyond the largest metropolitan areas. The practical problem is that parking fee compliance in Zomba remains uneven. Motorists broadly recognise the K500 fee as affordable, yet many comply primarily because they fear penalties, clamping, or enforcement roadblocks. They also report poor parking conditions, opacity over revenue use, inconsistent enforcement, and insufficient public communication. These patterns raise the study's central question: how do motorists' perceptions, institutional practices, and local conditions shape compliance with parking fee requirements in Zomba City?

The article addresses that question through a qualitative case study of Zomba City. It argues that compliance cannot be explained by enforcement alone. Instead, it is produced by the interaction of six factors: perceived fee fairness, transparency and accountability, enforcement practices, parking infrastructure, payment system design, and civic education. The article contributes to scholarship on local government revenue by showing that a municipal fee system achieves sustainable compliance only when citizens can observe a credible exchange between payment and service, when frontline officials implement the system consistently and fairly, and when political economy conditions support rather than undermine institutional integrity.

2. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

The article draws on two complementary theoretical frameworks — Fiscal Exchange Theory and Street-Level Bureaucracy Theory — and supplements them with political economy perspectives on urban governance in Africa. Fiscal Exchange Theory explains why citizens may comply voluntarily when they perceive that payments return to them through public services (Mebratu, 2024). Street-Level Bureaucracy Theory explains how frontline officials shape citizens' everyday experience of state authority (Dubois, 2014). Together, they allow parking fee compliance to be analysed as both a motivational and an institutional phenomenon. The political economy perspective, advanced by Dewey et al. (2021) among others, addresses the limits of bureaucratic explanations in structurally weak or politically complex settings, in this context, Malawi, specifically Zomba City.

2.1 Fiscal Exchange Theory

Fiscal Exchange Theory holds that citizens are more likely to pay taxes and fees when they perceive a fair relationship between their contributions and the public goods or services they receive in return (Castañeda et al., 2019). Compliance rests on an implicit social contract: credible, visible service delivery motivates voluntary payment, while perceived fiscal failure drives evasion as a form of protest (Mpofu, 2022). Research in Sub-Saharan Africa confirms that individuals with positive experiences of state service delivery are significantly more likely to adopt pro-compliance norms (Bodea & LeBas, 2014). Tax morale, trust, perceived fairness, and belief in responsible revenue use are therefore the behavioural foundations of durable compliance (Ali et al., 2014).

Parking fees intensify this fiscal exchange logic because the link between payment and service is immediate (Ali et al., 2014). Motorists pay to use a specific urban space; if that space remains poorly marked, flooded, congested, or dirty, the breakdown of the exchange is visible every day. Under such conditions, voluntary compliance weakens, and payment becomes contingent on enforcement pressure. Experimental evidence from comparable African settings shows that reciprocity messages — explicitly linking tax payments to service improvements — can be highly effective in increasing payment rates, though not uniformly more effective than deterrence-based approaches (Collin et al., 2024).

2.2 Street-Level Bureaucracy Theory

Street-Level Bureaucracy Theory, advanced by Lipsky (1980), focuses on the discretion exercised by frontline public officials who implement policy in direct contact with citizens. Parking attendants and enforcement officers are street-level bureaucrats: they decide whom to approach, when to enforce, how to interpret rules, and how to handle disputes (Dahl, 2012). In weak institutional environments, such officials face resource scarcity and accountability gaps that encourage informal behavioural adaptations, including what Peeters and Campos (2022) call ‘information privatisation’ and ‘policy improvisation.’ When enforcement officers act predictably and professionally, they can strengthen compliance (May & Winter, 2007). When they are perceived as inconsistent, corrupt, or selectively lenient — a pattern that Shahid et al. (2022) associate with the normalisation of informal entrepreneurial conduct under weak institutional oversight — they undermine the legitimacy of the revenue system as a whole.

Research on traffic enforcement in Nairobi shows that frontline officers focus enforcement on violations that are easy to monitor rather than on those that are most frequent or most damaging — a pattern of discretionary selectivity driven by inadequate supervision (Sidha et al., 2021). This dynamic maps directly onto parking enforcement in Zomba, where attendants similarly choose whom to approach and when to enforce. Such selectivity generates perceptions of systemic unfairness (Dewey et al., 2021). When motorists believe that officials double-charge, negotiate unofficial payments, or selectively exempt certain drivers, the legitimacy problem extends beyond individual misconduct: it becomes a judgment about the council’s institutional credibility (Aman-Rana et al., 2023).

Street-level bureaucracy theory, however, may underestimate the structural forces that shape discretion (Kosar, 2011). Political economy research on urban governance in Southern and East Africa shows that enforcement informality is sometimes sanctioned by, or embedded within, local patronage networks and clientelistic arrangements (Hinfelaar et al., 2020; Jeppesen, 2022). Dewey et al. (2021) argue that law enforcement outcomes cannot be understood without accounting for the political economy context that shapes what is enforced and whose interests enforcement ultimately serves. This perspective does not displace street-level bureaucracy theory but extends its explanatory reach in politically complex urban settings.

2.3 Integrating the Frameworks

The two theories gain analytical traction when read together. Fiscal exchange explains why motorists expect a return on payment (Castañeda et al., 2019). Street-level bureaucracy explains how the system is experienced through daily encounters with officials (Pepinsky et al., 2017). A motorist who observes visible service improvements and encounters fair enforcement is more likely to comply voluntarily. One who observes no improvement and faces inconsistent enforcement — potentially shaped by patronage dynamics rather than arbitrary individual discretion — is likely to pay only when punishment appears immediate. Robinson and McNeill (2008) similarly find that compliance with formal obligations depends not only on enforcement credibility but also on whether the institutional arrangement itself is perceived as legitimate and fair. This integrated framework, attentive to both motivational and political economy dimensions (Dewey et al., 2021), guides the interpretation of the six empirical themes in the findings section.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Parking Compliance in Global Perspective

An international scholarship on parking compliance identifies three recurring determinants: system design, enforcement quality, and public legitimacy (Klein et al., 2021). Evidence from San Francisco's SFpark programme shows that demand-responsive pricing, when publicly explained and linked to local transport benefits, improves both space availability and public acceptance (Pierce & Shoup, 2013). Research using structural equation modelling in Nanjing finds that the perceived effectiveness of a parking scheme — whether it reduces congestion and improves order — and the accountability of the local authority are the most significant factors affecting public acceptability (Xiao et al., 2014). More recent work from Malang City, Indonesia, confirms that subjective norms and perceived value are stronger predictors of willingness to pay than attitudes towards the fee itself (Anggoro & Shofwah, 2025).

The broader regulatory compliance literature shows that people are more likely to obey rules they consider legitimate, not merely those they fear (Tyler, 2006). Hough et al. (2010) demonstrate that procedural fairness — consistent enforcement, proportionate penalties, and accessible appeal mechanisms — shapes whether citizens view enforcement as rightful or predatory, and that legitimacy

perceptions mediate the relationship between official conduct and public cooperation. Studies of urban parking policy in European contexts similarly emphasise that compliance improves when pricing, enforcement, and communication are integrated into a coherent public management system (Mingardo et al., 2015).

These frameworks, developed largely in high-income settings, require adaptation for the Global South (Soto et al., 2021). Scholarship on everyday urbanism in African cities argues that street-level spaces — including parking areas — are not simply administered by formal rules but are continuously negotiated among motorists, attendants, vendors, and enforcement agents (Selmeczi, 2024). In secondary cities with limited administrative capacity, Lund and Eilenberg (2016) show that formal governance is enacted through informal arrangements and ruptures rather than steady institutional application, making compliance as much a social relationship as a legal obligation.

Technology can also support compliance by reducing cash handling, simplifying payments, and limiting opportunities for discretionary enforcement. Digital tools, however, are not a substitute for institutional trust (OECD, 2017; Setor et al., 2021). Santiso (2022) finds that government digitalisation delivers integrity dividends — reducing opportunities for corruption and improving audit trails — but only where baseline institutional capacity and political will exist. Dantani (2025) similarly finds that the compliance effects of tax system digitalisation depend on citizen trust: where mistrust is entrenched, digitalisation may improve collection efficiency without building voluntary compliance. In the African context, literature on mobile money and electronic fiscal devices — rather than AI-focused or blockchain-based systems designed for high-income revenue administrations — is most instructive for low-resource settings (Hyera & Isango, 2024; Mtebe & Sausi, 2021).

3.2 Parking Compliance in Sub-Saharan Africa

Sub-Saharan African cities operate in a contested compliance environment. Rapid urbanisation has outpaced local administrative capacity, leaving many authorities reliant on numerous small fees and levies, whose collection is undermined by weak systems, fragmented responsibilities, limited transparency, and low trust (Fjeldstad & Heggstad, 2012; Programme, 2020; Smoke, 2015). Research on parking challenges in Greater Kumasi, Ghana, shows that parking difficulties stem from complex interrelationships among vehicle type, time-related pressures, and the direct and indirect costs of occupying space — factors that formal pricing systems often fail to address (Aziz et al., 2025).

Punitive enforcement alone rarely produces stable compliance in this context. Pattaro et al. (2022) show, in a comparative analysis of coercive policy instruments, that enforcement strategies become counterproductive when citizens perceive sanctions as disconnected from any positive public purpose or a fair procedural framework. Prichard (2015) argues that sustainable revenue systems require a stronger fiscal contract between citizens and government — a relationship that is as political as it is administrative. Boogaard (2020) provides evidence from Sierra Leone that informal revenue generation by non-state actors can both reinforce and complicate state authority, creating embedded social arrangements that formal compliance reform must navigate rather than simply displace. Research on

political settlement maintenance in Zambia suggests that selective enforcement and revenue leakage can reflect sanctioned arrangements within local political economies (Hinfelaar et al., 2020). Hassan and Prichard (2016), in their analysis of tax reform in Bangladesh, show that informal institutions and political settlement dynamics can decisively constrain the reach of formal revenue administration — a finding with direct relevance to African secondary cities. This distinction has significant implications for reform design, since managerial interventions such as supervision and training may be insufficient where informality is politically produced.

3.3 The Malawian Context and Research Gap

In Malawi, local revenue scholarship has focused primarily on fiscal decentralisation, property rates, market fees, and service delivery challenges, rather than on parking fee compliance (Kalondoni, 2020). Existing work identifies familiar constraints: limited administrative capacity (Jagero et al., 2014), weak enforcement, low public trust, and poor links between revenue collection and visible service outcomes (Chingamtolo et al., 2024; Martin et al., 2025) — challenges that are especially acute in secondary cities, where resources are limited but urban pressures are growing (Riley et al., 2018; Kazembe et al., 2022).

Recent evidence from Malawian cities indicates that trust in the use of public funds is a significant predictor of compliance: when taxpayers believe public finances are spent accountably, willingness to pay increases (Ebiyamu et al., 2025). Experimental work in Malawian market settings shows that community-level interventions emphasising transparency and the public benefits of taxation substantially increase compliance, and that such quasi-voluntary, bottom-up approaches outperform pure enforcement (Martin et al., 2025). Chen et al. (2025) similarly find that public service provision can generate a virtuous circle in which improved services strengthen tax morale, which in turn supports revenue generation.

The research gap is both empirical and analytical. Little is known about how parking fee compliance is experienced by motorists, attendants, and council-related actors in Zomba. More broadly, local revenue debates often frame compliance as a revenue performance problem rather than as a lived governance relationship shaped by service quality, frontline conduct, and political economy conditions (Beach, 2018). This article addresses that gap by examining how perceptions of fairness, service return, enforcement conduct, and public communication interact in one Malawian secondary city.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

The study employed a qualitative case study design, treating Zomba City as a bounded case of municipal parking fee compliance (Yin, 2018). A qualitative approach was appropriate because the research sought to understand perceptions, meanings, institutional practices, and everyday interactions rather than to measure compliance rates statistically. Qualitative methods are well suited to explaining

how actors interpret rules, justify compliance or non-compliance, and experience local institutions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Miles et al., 2014).

4.2 Study Setting

Zomba City, located in southern Malawi, has a population of approximately 105,000 (National Statistical Office, 2018). Malawi's capital until 1975, it remains an important administrative, educational, and commercial centre (Lewinson et al., 2003; Potts, 1985). Zomba City Council operates under Malawi's Local Government Act (Cap. 22:01, 1998) and introduced parking fees as part of its own-source revenue strategy (Government of Malawi, 2020). These characteristics make Zomba a relevant case for examining how a secondary urban authority manages compliance with a visible and frequently contested user charge.

4.3 Sampling and Participants

Participants were selected purposively for direct experience of parking fee payment, administration, or enforcement (Creswell, 2014). Snowball sampling supplemented recruitment where some actors were difficult to access through formal channels (Babbie, 2013). The study included motorists, commercial drivers, parking attendants, enforcement personnel, and council-related actors. In total, data were generated from fifteen semi-structured interviews with motorists and commercial drivers, seven key informant interviews with council officials, parking attendants, and enforcement personnel, and one focus group discussion with six motorists. Sample size was guided by data saturation, with no substantially new themes emerging by the final interviews within each participant category.

4.4 Data Collection

Three complementary data collection methods were employed. Semi-structured interviews (Alan, 2016) with motorists explored perceptions of fee fairness, payment experiences, enforcement encounters, and service delivery concerns. Key informant interviews (Fjeldstad, 2006; Gill et al., 2008; Marshall & Rossman, 2016) with council-related actors, parking attendants, and enforcement personnel examined administrative arrangements, enforcement practices, and revenue management challenges. A focus group discussion (Morgan, 1997) with motorists captured shared experiences and social norms that individual interviews may not fully surface. Interviews and group discussions were conducted in English or Chichewa, according to participant preference, recorded with informed consent, transcribed verbatim, and, where necessary, translated by the lead researcher.

4.5 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns across the data, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach: familiarisation with the data, generation of initial codes, development of themes, review of themes, definition of themes, and production of the final narrative. Fiscal Exchange Theory and Street-Level Bureaucracy Theory served as sensitising frameworks rather than rigid coding categories, allowing the analysis to remain open to inductive themes while interpreting findings through relevant theory

(Saldaña, 2025). Triangulation across participant categories and methods strengthened the credibility of the analysis (Miles et al., 2014).

4.6 Reflexivity and Ethical Considerations

Both researchers are affiliated with the University of Malawi and have prior professional familiarity with the Zomba urban administration. This proximity was managed by ensuring that all participants received clear written explanations of the study's academic purpose and its independence from council operations. Participants were explicitly informed that their responses would not be shared with council management and that no data would be used in ways that could expose them to professional or reputational risk. Names were not recorded. Broad participant identifiers — 'motorist participant,' 'commercial motorist,' 'enforcement officer' — protect anonymity while preserving the interpretive value of quotations (Israel & Hay, 2006). Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained before all data collection.

5. Findings and Discussion

Six themes emerged from the analysis: fee fairness and legitimacy; transparency and accountability; enforcement practices; parking infrastructure; payment systems; and civic education. These themes are analytically interdependent — a weakness in one amplifies weaknesses in others. Poor infrastructure raises the stakes for transparency; weak transparency renders enforcement more coercive; and inconsistent enforcement, whether driven by individual discretion or deeper political economy conditions, erodes the institutional credibility on which voluntary compliance depends.

5.1 Perceptions of Fee Fairness and Legitimacy

The most consistent finding is that the K500 daily parking fee is not widely rejected as unaffordable. Most motorists described the amount as reasonable, particularly because the fee was reportedly introduced after consultation between the council and motorist representatives. This consultative origin conferred an initial legitimacy that is often absent from local revenue instruments introduced without public engagement. Research in comparable African urban settings confirms that fees introduced through participatory processes are more likely to be perceived as fair and to generate voluntary compliance (Prichard, 2022).

Legitimacy, however, was not experienced uniformly. Some motorists questioned the appropriateness of paying the council when parking near private business premises. Others did not fully understand the legal basis for charging fees in specific zones. These concerns show that legitimacy depends not only on the amount charged but also on whether the obligation is clearly explained and consistently linked to public authority. Procedural justice theory holds that people are more likely to comply when rules are made and applied in ways they consider fair (Murphy et al., 2015). In Zomba, the consultation around the K500 fee created a foundation of legitimacy, but it has been insufficiently maintained through consistent communication and visible service return. Many motorists accept in principle that they should pay, yet

question what payment actually delivers — a question that connects directly to the second major finding, concerning transparency and revenue accountability.

5.2 Transparency, Revenue Accountability, and Fiscal Exchange

A second major finding is that motorists cannot readily identify improvements to roads, drainage, car parks, or urban cleanliness that they associate with parking fee revenue. This opacity weakens the fiscal exchange: motorists are asked to pay, but the return on payment is not visible. When the benefits of a fee are invisible, citizens may reasonably interpret the collection as extraction rather than a contribution. Chen et al. (2025) demonstrate, in a Malawi-specific study, that households are significantly more likely to pay local charges when they can observe visible service improvements funded by those payments. The absence of this link in Zomba is therefore not merely an administrative failure; it represents a fiscal exchange failure with direct consequences for compliance behaviour.

The problem is not only how revenue is spent, but also how its use is communicated. When motorists do not receive public reports, see notice boards, or hear explanations of what parking fees fund, they have no basis for revising negative perceptions. Transparency, in this analysis, is not a cosmetic addition to revenue collection: it is a compliance instrument that transforms payment from a forced transaction into a public contribution that citizens can evaluate and hold authorities accountable for. Martin et al. (2025), whose experimental study was conducted in Malawian market settings, show that quasi-voluntary, community-based interventions emphasising the public benefits of taxation significantly increase compliance and trust more than pure enforcement. Collin et al. (2024), in a randomised experiment on property tax in Tanzania, find that reciprocity messages — communications linking tax payments to specific service improvements — produce substantially higher payment rates than deterrence messages. Ofosu-Ampong (2024) finds, in a study of digital taxation in Ghana, that the structure of the tax instrument, social compliance norms, and citizens' perception of system innovation collectively shape e-levy compliance attitudes. Together, these regional studies provide robust evidence that public communication about fiscal exchange is a frontline compliance instrument, not an optional public relations activity.

5.3 Enforcement Practices and Street-Level Bureaucracy

Enforcement was the factor most frequently cited by participants as the immediate determinant of compliance. Many motorists stated that they pay primarily because they fear penalties, vehicle clamping, or checks at enforcement points — a pattern indicating that compliance is largely coercive rather than voluntary.

"If it were not for the enforcers who place a roadblock near YONECO and check for parking fee receipts, I would not be paying." — Commercial motorist

This finding does not argue against enforcement; any revenue system requires credible deterrence. The problem in Zomba is that enforcement is undermined by perceptions of inconsistency and misconduct.

Participants reported double-charging within a single day and informal arrangements between certain motorists and enforcement personnel that effectively exempt some drivers from penalties.

“Some attendants still ask them to pay parking fees twice, yet the agreement is once a day.” — Motorist participant

“Informal relationships between enforcers and motorists reduce compliance.” — Enforcement officer

These accounts illustrate the core proposition of Street-Level Bureaucracy Theory: frontline officers do not merely implement policy but shape what it becomes in practice (Lipsky, 1980). When enforcement officers act predictably and professionally, they strengthen compliance; when perceived as inconsistent or open to informal arrangements, they undermine the council's institutional credibility.

The evidence also points to the explanatory limits of purely bureaucratic accounts. Research on revenue authorities in Sub-Saharan Africa suggests that selective enforcement by frontline officials is not always the product of individual discretion under resource scarcity: it can reflect arrangements within local political economies, where informal revenue extraction sustains patronage networks (Hinfelaar et al., 2020; Jeppesen, 2022). The pattern of selective enforcement described by participants — some motorists consistently exempt, others double-charged — is consistent with politically mediated rather than random enforcement. If this reading is accurate, supervisory and training-based interventions alone will prove insufficient. Structural reforms that reduce the political economy incentives for informal extraction are required alongside managerial improvements.

5.4 Parking Infrastructure and Conditions

Parking infrastructure emerged as a direct determinant of willingness to comply. Participants described inadequate bays, poor drainage, absent lighting, missing waste bins, deteriorating surfaces, and seasonal congestion. During the rainy season, some spaces become effectively inaccessible. For commercial drivers who use the same bays daily, poor surfaces result in vehicle damage and routine inconvenience.

“We spend six days of the week here, but we do not even have a rubbish bin. These parking areas are insufficient, and we also end up damaging our vehicles because of the condition of the parking area.” — Focus group participant

Infrastructure matters because it is the most visible expression of fiscal exchange. Motorists do not need detailed accounting records to assess whether the system delivers: they evaluate the parking environment directly each time they park. A poorly maintained space makes the fee appear unjustified. This pattern aligns with research in Greater Kumasi, Ghana, where the physical quality of parking facilities significantly affects motorists’ behaviour and willingness to pay (Aziz et al., 2025), and with work on urban service provision in Malawian informal settlements, where inadequate services undermine residents’ confidence in responsible institutions (Manda, 2009).

The study also identified communication failures during the reorganisation of parking spaces. When changes are made without prior notice, motorists perceive the council as unresponsive. In a low-trust revenue environment, even minor signs of disorganisation reinforce the perception that the council collects fees without managing the system competently — precisely the kind of visible fiscal exchange failure that, according to Chen et al. (2025), breaks the virtuous circle between service provision and tax morale.

5.5 Payment Methods and Digital Technology

Participants expressed consistent support for digital payment systems. Motorists and attendants associated digitalisation with clearer receipts, less cash handling, traceable transactions, and fewer opportunities for informal negotiation. The preference was not only about convenience: it also reflected a desire to restore credibility to a cash-based system that some motorists believe is vulnerable to leakage and misuse.

“Introducing a digitalised collection of parking fees could increase compliance, as most people refuse to pay because they claim that we steal the money and it does not get to the council. If a digital collection method were in place, it would restore their trust in the system and compliance would increase.” — Parking attendant

Digital payments can strengthen compliance by making transactions easier to verify and harder to manipulate. Mobile money platforms, which have achieved substantial adoption across Malawi and the broader region, are particularly relevant: they reduce cash handling, generate auditable transaction records, and limit opportunities for petty corruption that characterise face-to-face cash collection (Mtebe & Sausi, 2021; Setor et al., 2021). Electronic fiscal devices have demonstrated similar effects in Tanzania, reducing leakage in local revenue collection and improving taxpayer trust (Hyera & Isango, 2024). For Zomba, a phased introduction, beginning with mobile money integration in high-traffic zones, would address both the practical barriers to digital adoption and the trust deficit that sustains resistance to the current cash system.

Technology, however, should not be treated as a standalone solution. Digitalisation is most effective when combined with public education, accessible payment options, clear receipts, functional grievance channels, and visible improvements in the services being paid for (Setor et al., 2021). Dewi et al. (2023) show, in their analysis of e-parking in Makassar, that digital systems can encounter community resistance and operational failures when introduced without addressing underlying institutional conditions. The goal is not technical modernisation in isolation but the use of digital tools to reduce cash-handling arrangements that currently sustain informal networks and to make the fiscal exchange more legible to ordinary motorists.

5.6 Civic Education and Public Awareness

The final theme is civic education. Many motorists do not understand the legal basis for parking fees, how fees are calculated, how revenue is used, or how the parking system connects to urban service

delivery (Albalate & Gragera, 2022; Kirschner & Lanzendorf, 2020). This information deficit means that compliance is often not an informed civic act but a response to enforcement pressure.

"Awareness campaigns and advocacy for the importance of parking fees can increase compliance, as most people pay out of fear of being fined and do not fully understand why they have to pay." — Motorist participant

Civic education is central to tax morale because it gives citizens a reason to link payment to public purpose (Asamoah et al., 2023). In Zomba, the absence of consistent public communication creates unnecessary space for mistrust. Evidence from Choma Municipal Council in Zambia — a comparable secondary city — shows that a majority of citizens are unfamiliar with the by-laws governing local revenue, and that low awareness correlates with low acceptance of fees (Mabhena & Chibomba, 2025). These findings are not directly generalisable to Zomba, but they point to a structural dynamic consistent with the accounts gathered in this study.

Notice boards in car parks, community radio programmes, ward meetings, SMS updates, and simplified public revenue statements would not require substantial financial investment but could substantially improve the information base for voluntary compliance. Crucially, civic education should be treated as part of revenue administration, not as a separate public relations exercise. Martin et al. (2025) find that community-level quasi-voluntary interventions significantly increase compliance and government trust in Malawian markets. Collin et al. (2024) demonstrate, from a randomised experiment in Tanzania, that reciprocity messages linking tax payment to visible service outcomes outperform deterrence-based communications in driving actual payment. Ofosu-Ampong (2024) reports similar patterns in Ghana. These converging findings provide strong regional support for embedding public communication within Zomba's core revenue management strategy.

6. Conclusion and Policy Implications

This article set out to explain why compliance with parking fees in Zomba City remains more coercive than voluntary. The findings show that motorists do not primarily reject the K500 fee as unaffordable. They question the credibility of the fee system. The charge is broadly regarded as fair and affordable, but the legitimacy built through consultation has been eroded by poor infrastructure, limited revenue transparency, inconsistent enforcement, cash-handling risks, and weak public communication. These conditions collectively undermine the fiscal exchange on which voluntary compliance depends.

The article's theoretical contribution is twofold. First, it shows how Fiscal Exchange Theory and Street-Level Bureaucracy Theory work together to explain local fee compliance. Second, it argues that this combination must be supplemented by a political economy perspective when applied to African urban settings. Fiscal exchange failures prompt motorists to question whether payment is worthwhile — a dynamic documented by Chilunjika et al. (2023) in their analysis of road tolling and revenue mobilisation in Zimbabwe. Street-level enforcement practices — potentially shaped by patronage dynamics rather than purely individual discretion — then determine whether scepticism leads to non-compliance, informal

negotiation, or reluctant payment (Toral, 2023). Sustainable compliance therefore requires both visible service return and structurally accountable enforcement, not merely improvements in individual officer conduct. Feldman (2025) argues that the contemporary state must navigate a fundamental tension between coercive and cooperative instruments of compliance — a tension this study illustrates concretely in the Zomba parking context.

Five policy implications follow for Zomba City Council. First, the council should publish regular, accessible reports on parking fee collections and expenditure, displayed in parking areas and communicated through community radio and ward meetings. Ater (2026), in a study of revenue authorities in Sub-Saharan Africa, demonstrates that accountability mechanisms and transparent revenue reporting are among the most effective instruments for building durable taxpayer compliance. This evidence, alongside findings from Malawi (Ebiyamu et al., 2025), supports transparency of this kind as a core compliance-building instrument rather than an optional reporting exercise. Second, parking infrastructure improvements should be prioritised, beginning with drainage, surface repairs, bay markings, waste bins, and clearer zonal organisation, with improvements explicitly linked to parking fee revenue so motorists can observe the fiscal exchange in their immediate environment. Third, mobile money-based digital payment systems should be introduced in phases, beginning with high-traffic areas and accompanied by public awareness, SMS receipts, and clear verification procedures. Makoza (2026) documents the expanding FinTech and digital financial services landscape in Malawi, confirming the availability of appropriate platforms; Mensah (2024) shows that public-sector-led instant payment systems can accelerate digital financial inclusion across comparable African contexts. Fourth, enforcement guidelines should be standardised, publicly communicated, and supported by supervisory mechanisms that address double-charging, harassment, and informal arrangements; where enforcement informality reflects political economy incentives rather than purely individual discretion, structural governance reforms are required alongside training. Fifth, civic education should be continuous rather than episodic, explaining the legal basis, purpose, and developmental role of parking fees, with the explicit aim of shifting payment from a coerced transaction towards an informed civic contribution.

The study has limitations. It is a qualitative, single-city case study and does not statistically measure compliance rates or generalise directly to other Malawian cities. The findings reflect a specific period in Zomba's parking fee implementation, and the political economy dimension — analytically plausible given the evidence — was inferred rather than directly confirmed by participants. Future research could compare Zomba with other secondary cities in Malawi or the region, examine the effect of mobile money adoption on compliance over time using mixed methods, or investigate the political economy of local revenue enforcement through ethnographic or network analysis. Notwithstanding these limitations, the Zomba case makes a clear practical point for local governments: fee legitimacy cannot be secured by enforcement alone. It must be built through visible, accountable, and politically credible governance.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Ethics approval

This article draws on research conducted as part of an undergraduate dissertation at the University of Malawi, which received ethical approval from the University of Malawi Research Ethics Committee (UNIMAREC), under Approval Reference P.04/26/812. The research was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines and requirements of UNIMAREC. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection, and confidentiality was maintained throughout the research process.

Consent to participate

Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and the confidentiality of their responses. No personally identifying information was recorded.

Consent to publish

Consent for publication was obtained from all participants. Participants agreed that their contributions, including anonymised quotations, could be published provided that no personally identifiable information was disclosed. Accordingly, all quotations have been anonymised and are attributed only to broad participant categories.

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Author Contribution

This manuscript is based on the undergraduate thesis of Raheem Karim, completed as part of the Bachelor of Arts in Public Administration programme at the University of Malawi. Raheem Karim conducted the data collection, funded the fieldwork, and undertook the initial data analysis. Ernest Pondani supervised the research, provided methodological and analytical guidance throughout the study, and led the restructuring and development of the thesis into the present manuscript. Both authors contributed to the interpretation of the findings, reviewed the manuscript, and approved the final version.

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During the preparation of the manuscript, the authors used Claude (Anthropic) and Grammarly solely to suggest improvements to the clarity, grammar, and readability of the text. These tools were not used to develop the research ideas or arguments, analyse the data, interpret the results, or generate the findings. The authors carefully reviewed all suggested revisions and accept full responsibility for the manuscript's content.

Data Availability

The datasets generated during and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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