Exploring the opportunities and limitations for artificial intelligence to reduce legal aid backlogs in Malawi

DISCOVERY REPORT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Malawi, a low-income country with a population of over 20 million and a GDP per capita of approximately $635, is facing a significant legal aid crisis. The Legal Aid Bureau is burdened with over 25,000 active cases, managed by fewer than 50 lawyers, while the judiciary struggles with severe staffing shortages and outdated systems. This Discovery research project, supported by the Frontier Technologies Hub and FUMBA, explores how artificial intelligence (AI) could support justice sector reform by addressing legal aid backlogs. Using a combination of desk research and six focus groups with over 50 stakeholders including private sector lawyers, legal aid lawyers, judicial office holders, law students, and academics, the study identifies promising AI use cases such as legal research assistants, document automation, public-facing chatbots, and case triage systems. Stakeholder demand for these solutions is strong, but implementation must address key concerns around localisation, legal ethics, data security, and sustainability. The report recommends a staged approach: starting with a focused pilot in a legal aid or court setting, backed by policy development, capacity-building, and long-term funding strategies. With the right partnerships, Malawi

could pioneer an inclusive model for AI-enabled justice reform in resource-constrained settings.

INTRODUCTION: AN OVERVIEW OF LEGAL AID SERVICES IN MALAWI

Malawi's legal aid system plays a crucial role in providing justice for those who cannot afford private advice. The Legal Aid Bureau (LAB) is the primary agency mandated to offer free legal representation to Malawians with low incomes, helping provide legal services to vulnerable people at their point of need. However, the system has been strained by an overwhelming volume of cases and limited resources. As of October 2024, the LAB was grappling with over 25,000 active cases (accumulated since 2015) being handled by only 48 lawyers, illustrating the severity of the backlog[1]. This caseload vastly outstrips the Bureau's capacity and reflects a justice system under pressure. Despite these constraints, the LAB continues to serve over 300 new clients each week, across four locations, demonstrating the dedication of its staff to ensure access to justice for those in need.

Addressing the backlog is critically important for improving access to justice in Malawi. Swift resolution of cases is not just an administrative goal but a human rights imperative[2]. Reducing backlogs would lead to fewer people awaiting trial for extended time periods, improved compliance with legal detention limits, and increased greater public trust in the judicial system. It would also help ensure that the protections enshrined in Malawi's Constitution (e.g. the right to a fair and timely trial)[3] are realized in practice. In this context, stakeholders are exploring innovative solutions, including technology-driven approaches, to strengthen the capacity of the legal aid system and judiciary[4].

The opportunities and limitations for artificial intelligence to reduce legal aid backlogs in Malawi will be explored through three Research Questions:

1. **Research Question 1:** What are some of the key challenges within the justice sector in Malawi, especially the key drivers of the backlog of legal aid cases?
2. **Research Question 2:** What are the most promising use cases for artificial intelligence across the justice sector, and who would be the primary and secondary users of such tools?

3. **Research Question 3:** Is there demand from specific groups for such a solution (e.g. legal aid, judiciary, law students, etc.), and how might this be tested with potential users in the future?

METHODOLOGY

In early 2025, the Frontier Technologies Hub[5] initiated a Discovery research project exploring how emerging technologies might strengthen access to justice in Malawi. Frontier Tech Discovery projects are short, focused research sprints aimed at testing early-stage ideas for technical interventions, while deepening contextual understanding of the challenges such solutions seek to address. This project, supported by FUMBA, a Malawian start-up who are in the early stages of developing a digital tool to support the justice sector, focused on identifying pain points in the justice delivery system and exploring the feasibility of deploying a digital solution to alleviate them.

The research began with desk-based analysis to map the justice sector landscape, identify key stakeholders, and shape the workshop design. Fieldwork was conducted over five days in Malawi and involved six focus group discussions with over 50 participants, including representatives from the judiciary, legal aid bureau staff from across four regions, law students, academics from the University of Malawi, and practicing lawyers. The sessions were held in both Lilongwe and Zomba with logistical and technical support provided by the FUMBA team. All focus groups were recorded and transcribed, and the data was analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clark, 2006[6]) enabling the research team to identify patterns and emerging themes in participant responses. This iterative, human-centred approach was designed to surface practical insights into the barriers, opportunities, and appetite for digital innovation within Malawi's justice system.

RESEARCH QUESTION 1: What are some of the key challenges within the justice sector in Malawi, especially the key drivers of the backlog of legal aid cases?

Several key challenges within Malawi's justice sector contribute to the accumulation of legal aid case backlogs. These challenges range from systemic inefficiencies and resource shortages to policy and infrastructure issues. The focus groups and desk-based research revealed the following critical themes:

Resource and Funding Constraints: The Legal Aid Bureau has historically been under-resourced relative to its needs. Budget allocations have fallen short of requests – for instance, in the 2020/21 fiscal year the LAB requested MWK 2.2 billion (approximately £980,000) for operations but was only allocated about MWK 689 million (£300,000) leaving a funding gap of K1.6 billion[7] (£700,000). Such funding shortfalls hinder the Bureau's ability to hire more staff, expand services, and effectively manage cases. The Bureau's director noted that government hesitancy to fully fund legal aid persists despite its important role in helping Malawians access justice[8]. In short, limited financial resources translate into limited capacity to handle cases.

Human Resource Shortages: A severe shortage of lawyers and legal personnel is a core issue. By 2020 the LAB had only 24 lawyers when it ideally needed 50+ to service the whole country[9]; by 2024 it had around 48 lawyers, still handling an enormous caseload of more than 25,000.[10] Each legal aid attorney is responsible for hundreds of cases, an unsustainable ratio that delays progress on files[11]. The judiciary faces similar constraints, with only 100 judges serving the entire country

and fewer than 60 professional magistrates, supported by around 395 non-professional magistrates, leaving each judicial officer with an overwhelming caseload[12]. This shortage of personnel at both the legal aid and court levels slows down case processing and directly contributes to growing backlogs.

Systemic Inefficiencies in Case Management: Beyond sheer numbers, how cases move through the system also contributes to delays. Court proceedings in Malawi often suffer frequent adjournments and delays. Cases may be postponed because one side (defence or prosecution) is not ready, key witnesses fail to appear, or necessary documents are missing.[13] These routine delays accumulate to elongate the lifespan of cases. Administrative bottlenecks such as slow preparation of case files and judgments add to the problem. The responsibility for delays is shared across the system – from police and prison services (e.g. delays in bringing detainees to court) to prosecutors, defenders, and court clerks.[14] In sum, inefficiencies and lack of coordination among justice system actors result in protracted case timelines.

Infrastructure and Technological Limitations: Until recently, Malawi's courts and legal offices relied heavily on paper-based processes, leading to issues like missing files, storage problems, and slow information retrieval—all of which delayed case handling. Limited use of technology also made coordination between institutions such as courts, police, prisons, and legal aid cumbersome. In April 2024, the judiciary, with support from UNDP and other partners, launched an ambitious e-Court initiative introducing electronic filing, video conferencing, and digital record-keeping.[15]. While this marks a major step forward, rollout is still ongoing, and many courts and legal aid offices lack the necessary infrastructure or training to take advantage of it, and many court officers have now reverted to the old paper-based system as they find it easier. Until digital systems are fully implemented and working effectively the efficiency gains will remain limited.

Policy and Structural Challenges: Certain policy and historical factors have also contributed to the backlog situation. One notable example is the abolition of traditional courts in the mid-1990s, which were not immediately replaced with equivalent structures. This reform meant that many cases that might have been handled by local traditional courts were suddenly pushed into the formal court system, creating a surge of cases and strain on judicial resources.[16] The judiciary, with already limited capacity, struggled to absorb this influx, resulting in lingering backlogs that have persisted. Additionally, procedural rules and limited use of alternative dispute resolution in the past meant that even minor or straightforward disputes ended up in court queues. On the access side, Malawi's largely rural population (over 80% rural) often lives far from courthouses,[17] which

can make attending hearings difficult and lead to cases stalling when parties fail to appear. All these structural issues have compounded the backlog crisis over time.

Conclusion: Malawi's justice sector is grappling with a complex web of challenges, ranging from chronic underfunding and staff shortages to outdated infrastructure and limited use of technology. Findings from both desk research and stakeholder workshops illustrate that these constraints directly fuel growing case backlogs and hinder access to timely justice, particularly for vulnerable populations.

Recent reforms signal a strong recognition of these problems and a collective commitment to address them. Legal measures, such as reinforcing pre-trial detention limits[18] and expanding plea bargaining[19], are designed to ease the pressure on courts. Meanwhile, the judiciary's advocacy for increased funding and staffing[20], alongside the phased introduction of e-court systems, demonstrates a growing focus on sustainable, system-wide change[21]. These interventions reflect a multi-pronged approach including legal, administrative, and technological, that is critical for long-term impact.

However, discussions with focus group participants highlighted that many of these reforms are still at an early stage, and their effectiveness will depend on sustained investment, cross-sector coordination, and the capacity to implement them at scale. In particular, legal aid providers expressed concern that without parallel improvements in their own resources and digital readiness, efficiency gains may remain concentrated within the formal court system, leaving the broader justice ecosystem behind.

While funding and staffing shortages are deeply interlinked, they must be addressed through targeted strategies. Expanding the workforce without adequate resources or investing in infrastructure without the people to use it, risks limiting the impact of reform efforts. A coordinated, well-funded approach that balances capacity building with smart use of technology is essential to unlock progress. Continued engagement with stakeholders, including frontline justice actors, will be key to ensuring that reforms are not only implemented but also meet the needs of those they are designed to serve.

RESEARCH QUESTION 2: What are the most promising use cases for artificial intelligence across the justice sector, and who would be the primary and secondary users of such tools?

Artificial Intelligence (AI) in the justice sector refers to using computer systems that can perform tasks traditionally requiring human intelligence, such as understanding language, answering questions, analysing data, or making rule-based decisions, to assist with legal processes. Around the world and in Africa, AI is beginning to transform legal services by automating repetitive tasks, improving legal research, and providing virtual assistance.[22] In the context of Malawi's justice system, which is stretched thin, AI offers opportunities to augment human capacity and streamline workflows[23]. Below are some of the most promising AI use cases across the justice sector, along with a summary of who the primary and secondary users of such tools would be:

AI-Powered Legal Research and Case Law Retrieval: One of the clearest applications of AI in the justice sector is the automation of legal research and case law retrieval. An AI tool could be trained on Malawian laws, judicial precedents, and statutes to retrieve relevant information quickly in response to natural language queries. This would drastically reduce the time legal professionals spend manually searching through books, PDFs, or online repositories to identify applicable cases or legal provisions.

However, for this solution to be viable in Malawi, several key conditions would need to be met. First and foremost, there must be access to a comprehensive, digitised, and well-structured dataset of case law, legislation, and regulations. Currently, much of Malawi's case law and legal documentation is not systematically digitised or centralised, despite the recent introduction of MalawiLII. To make an AI tool effective, past judgments would need to be

consistently recorded, tagged, and structured in a format that supports machine learning - ideally through partnerships with the Judiciary, the Law Commission, and legal publishers.

Secondly, the accuracy and reliability of AI-generated outputs are especially critical in legal contexts. While AI can suggest relevant cases or legal principles, it cannot replace legal reasoning. Therefore, a layer of human oversight is essential. The tool would function as an aid, not a decision-maker, assisting lawyers, judges, clerks, and legal aid officers to conduct faster, more targeted research, while ensuring that trained professionals interpret, verify, and apply the findings. For example, an AI tool might retrieve 10 potentially relevant bail decisions, but the lawyer would still need to assess which are most applicable to the case at hand.

Similar tools have shown significant impact elsewhere in Africa. Platforms like Nigeria's CaseRadar and South Africa's LegalFundi have demonstrated how AI can cut legal research time by up to 70%[24], provided that the underlying data infrastructure is robust and continually updated. For example, by integrating such a tool, a Malawian legal aid lawyer could enter a query (for instance, "precedents on bail for theft cases") and get instant results, rather than spending days in a law library. If these conditions were replicated in Malawi, with proper digitisation, quality control, and legal expert oversight, an AI-powered research assistant could become a transformative tool for justice delivery.

The primary users of such tools would be legal professionals: legal aid lawyers, prosecutors, judges, and law students. The secondary beneficiaries would be the clients and defendants, who would benefit from faster case preparation, stronger legal arguments, and potentially shorter time to resolution. However, until Malawi's legal corpus is systematically digitised and annotated, and until professional users are trained in using such tools, the promise of AI-driven legal research will be limited.

Document Automation and Analysis: A significant portion of legal work involves drafting and reviewing documents, from routine court pleadings and legal aid forms to contracts and evidence bundles. AI can streamline this process by automatically generating first drafts of standard documents and analysing large volumes of text to extract key facts, dates, or inconsistencies. In Kenya[25], for example, AI-enabled tools are already helping lawyers' draft contracts and summarise lengthy legal texts, significantly reducing administrative burdens and improving turnaround times.

In the Malawian context, a similar tool could assist legal aid lawyers, court clerks, and paralegals by auto-generating documents such as bail applications, affidavits,

or basic letters, drawing from pre-approved templates and user-inputted case data. AI could also be used to highlight important facts in evidence bundles, tag documents by theme, or check whether standard information (e.g., names, dates, jurisdiction) is complete before a filing is submitted. This would allow legal professionals to spend less time on paperwork and more time developing case strategy or supporting clients.

For such tools to be feasible and effective, several technical and operational conditions must be met. First, document automation systems require access to well-structured legal templates and filing formats, ideally provided by the judiciary, the Legal Aid Bureau, or legal professional bodies. These templates need to be embedded in the tool and updated regularly to reflect current legal standards and procedural changes. Second, the tool would need a training dataset composed of anonymised, high-quality legal documents (e.g., previous filings, affidavits, or court forms) from the Malawian justice system. This is essential for the AI to learn local legal phrasing, procedural norms, and formatting expectations.

Unlike AI tools focused on precedent or legal reasoning, document automation does not require access to case law databases, but it does need consistent and structured input data. Moreover, human oversight remains crucial: any AI-generated draft should be reviewed by a lawyer or paralegal before submission to ensure legal accuracy, appropriateness, and ethical compliance—especially where rights or liberty are at stake.

Technically, such tools could be developed using existing natural language generation (NLG) frameworks and fine-tuned on local legal content. They could be delivered via a simple web-based dashboard or integrated into existing case management systems, enabling legal professionals to quickly select templates, enter client information, and generate drafts. For more advanced use cases—such as summarising large volumes of evidence—tools would require optical character recognition (OCR) to process scanned PDFs or handwritten forms, and natural language understanding (NLU) to interpret the legal context.

The primary users of document automation would be frontline legal staff—lawyers, paralegals, and court clerks—who are responsible for drafting legal materials. Secondary users and beneficiaries include judges (who receive more consistent and complete filings) and clients (who benefit from quicker and potentially more accurate paperwork). Ultimately, for document automation to deliver real value in Malawi, it will require a combination of well-maintained templates, strong institutional support, and user training to ensure both trust and usability.

Virtual Legal Assistants and Chatbots for Public Legal Information: AI-driven chatbots can simulate a conversation with users and present a promising opportunity to expand access to basic legal information in Malawi, particularly for underserved communities with limited access to lawyers. A well-designed chatbot can simulate a conversation with users, answer frequently asked questions, and guide people through routine legal processes, such as applying for bail, filing for child maintenance, or understanding tenant rights after eviction. It might answer common legal queries such as "How can I apply for bail after an arrest?", "What are my rights if I'm evicted by a landlord?", "How do I file a child maintenance claim?" or "Where is the nearest Legal Aid office and how do I get help from them?".

This is especially relevant in Malawi, where legal literacy is low, legal aid resources are stretched thin, and many rural areas lack proximity to trained legal professionals. However, for such a solution to be feasible and impactful, several enabling factors must be in place. First, while chatbots do not require the same depth of case law data as AI legal research tools, they do depend on well-structured, accurate, and locally relevant legal content, such as statutes, procedures, rights-based FAQs, and administrative guidance. This content must be translated into clear, accessible language, and reviewed regularly to remain up to date with legal reforms. For maximum accessibility in Malawi, the tool should operate in both English and Chichewa, which requires the integration of natural language processing (NLP) models capable of handling local languages. This may require custom training data drawn from real-life interactions, legal scripts, and user-testing in Malawi's linguistic and cultural context.

Technically, such a tool would require access to a mobile-friendly interface (e.g., SMS, USSD, WhatsApp, and basic browser support) and could be powered by existing conversational AI frameworks like Rasa, Google Dialogflow, or Meta's Wit.ai. These platforms allow for flexible integrations via APIs and support multilingual workflows, but they still require strong local data, domain-specific training, and reliable telecom partnerships to enable low-cost access for end users. Examples from across the African continent[26] demonstrate the real potential of such tools. Uganda's JusticeBot[27] responds to legal questions via web, SMS, social media, and even voice, and can draft simple legal documents or refer users to lawyers when needed. A localized version for Malawi, co-developed with legal aid institutions and tested with communities, could serve as a powerful first line of support, particularly for detainees' families, women navigating civil claims, or front-line paralegals handling a high volume of inquiries.

While many queries to a chatbot may be routine, the system must be designed with escalation protocols for complex or urgent cases. This means integrating the

tool with referral mechanisms, such as directories for the nearest Legal Aid office, or options to escalate the user to a human paralegal, hotline, or legal aid lawyer. Human oversight remains critical, especially in ensuring that users are not misled by incorrect or overly generic advice. Periodic audits of the chatbot's responses and user experience data would help maintain quality and trust. Although chatbot solutions do not require precedent databases, they do depend on high-quality, context-specific content, reliable infrastructure, and clear human fallback pathways. With the right partnerships and investment in local data and language support, such a tool could meaningfully extend legal information services across Malawi, offloading routine work from legal aid lawyers and improving legal literacy at scale.

Case Management and Triage Systems: AI can also operate behind the scenes to improve how cases are prioritised, scheduled, and assigned, addressing one of the justice system's most persistent bottlenecks: inefficient case flow. By analysing case characteristics such as charge type, length of time pending, detention status, and complexity, an AI-based case management system could help court administrators and Legal Aid Bureau flag urgent matters and route cases more strategically. For instance, the system might highlight defendants nearing the 90-day pre-trial detention limit or identify simple civil disputes suitable for fast-tracking or mediation.

To be feasible in Malawi, such a system would require access to structured, digitised case data, ideally from court registries, Legal Aid Bureau, and prisons. This includes not only basic metadata (e.g., date filed, case type, parties involved) but also information on status updates, hearing dates, and detention conditions. Without such data in a standardised digital format, AI cannot effectively learn patterns or generate meaningful prioritisation insights. Most courts currently rely on paper or unstructured digital records, so investments in digitisation and data integration would be a critical precondition for AI-based triage to function effectively.

Unlike conventional rule-based systems (which follow fixed, pre-programmed logic), AI tools can detect complex, evolving patterns in large datasets, enabling more adaptive and nuanced decision-making. For example, AI can learn over time which case features predict high dropout rates, long delays, or successful diversions. It can also balance multiple factors (e.g., time in remand, case complexity and court capacity) to generate smarter scheduling recommendations. These dynamic, data-driven insights go beyond what static case tracking tools or spreadsheets can offer.

That said, human oversight remains essential. AI-generated insights should be used to inform, not automate, resource allocation and scheduling decisions. Legal Aid Directors, court registrars, and case management officers would still determine final assignments, but with better visibility into case urgency, workload trends, and bottlenecks. With this support, staff could allocate limited personnel more effectively, ensuring that high-priority or low-complexity cases do not fall through the cracks.

The primary users of AI-driven case triage systems would be justice administrators: court clerks, Legal Aid managers, and registrars. Secondary beneficiaries include judges and lawyers (through reduced overload), prisons (through more timely hearings and releases), and ultimately the public, who will experience faster, fairer access to justice. However, to realise this potential, Malawi would need not only digital infrastructure and data-sharing protocols, but also careful governance around transparency, data ethics, and non-discrimination to ensure AI supports equitable access to justice.

Predictive Analytics for Decision Support: In the longer term, AI's ability to detect patterns in large datasets can be used for predictive analytics in the justice sector. This means using data from past cases to forecast outcomes or identify trends. For instance, a predictive model could estimate the likelihood of success for certain types of appeals, or predict which defendants are good candidates for bail or diversion programs based on historical data. In theory, such a tool could aid prosecutors and defence lawyers in plea bargaining by indicating what sentence might result if a case went to full trial (though of course each case is unique). Across Africa, there is growing interest in these applications; a report by Lawyers Hub[28] noted that AI can potentially assess the likely outcomes of legal cases based on historical data, providing valuable insights to legal practitioners.[29] However, it's important to stress that predictive tools would need a large amount of Malawian case data and careful oversight to avoid bias. If implemented responsibly, judges and senior legal officers could use these insights as a secondary aid (not as a primary decision-maker) to inform strategies for reducing backlog – for example, identifying case types that typically consume a lot of time and finding alternative resolution mechanisms for them.

Conclusions: In all cases, successful deployment of AI in Malawi's justice sector will require careful attention to user needs. The tools must be user-friendly, locally relevant, and available in local languages to ensure uptake. Lawyers and judges (especially those not already tech-savvy) would need training and assurance of the tool's reliability. Likewise, citizens using a legal chatbot must trust the information provided. Thus, identifying the right use cases and users is

pivotal, so that AI solutions are designed for the real-world context of Malawi's legal system and can effectively help reduce the case backlog.

RESEARCH QUESTION 3: Is there demand from specific groups for such a solution (e.g. legal aid, judiciary, law students, etc.), and how might this be tested with potential users in the future?

The potential of AI in addressing legal aid backlogs has generated interest among various groups in Malawi's justice sector. Demand from specific stakeholder groups is evident, given the urgent need to improve efficiency and access to justice. Key stakeholders such as the Legal Aid Bureau, the judiciary, academia, and civil society, have signalled recognition that new solutions are needed and are open to innovation. This is illustrated by this exploratory research supported by the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) which is actively engaging a range of stakeholders (lawyers, judiciary, LAB staff, University professors and law students) to assess the needs and receptiveness to an AI legal assistant. This research indicates a top-down and bottom-up demand: Malawi's government and partners are looking for tech solutions, and on-the-ground practitioners are voicing the challenges that such solutions might address. Focus groups with the following stakeholder groups generated rich insights into user demand and opportunities for pilot testing.

Legal Aid Bureau: Findings from the focus group with Legal Aid Bureau (LAB) staff indicate strong and specific demand for AI-driven tools that could help address overwhelming caseloads and systemic inefficiencies. Participants described the current environment as unsustainable, with some advocates managing upwards of 170 cases within their first few months on the job[30]. This workload, combined with infrastructure constraints and staffing shortages, contributes directly to delays and diminished quality of legal services.

Several concrete use cases emerged from the discussion. Participants expressed clear interest in a virtual assistant tool that could support case management by tracking deadlines, sending reminders, and helping with document organisation. They also highlighted the value of an AI-powered legal research tool, which could speed up access to relevant case law and statutes, currently a time-consuming process due to limited resources and reliance on manual methods. Importantly, these tools were not viewed as replacements for legal professionals but as support systems that could automate routine tasks and free up staff for more strategic and human-centred work. There was also recognition of the potential for AI to improve data management and reduce reliance on paper-based systems. Concerns were raised about case continuity when staff leave or transfer, with inadequate systems for tracking case histories or workload distribution. Staff saw clear value in AI tools that could centralise and streamline case information, reducing errors and ensuring accountability.

While enthusiasm for AI was evident, participants also flagged important preconditions: tools must be secure (particularly when dealing with sensitive or non-public legal matters), intuitive to use, and available in local languages. There was also a strong call for improved digital infrastructure (including reliable internet and access to laptops) and basic training for staff to confidently adopt new systems[31]. The findings suggest not only latent demand but a readiness among legal aid staff to pilot such tools, particularly if they are well-targeted and developed in consultation with end-users. Future testing could include co-design workshops with LAB lawyers, pilot deployments of virtual assistants in high-volume offices, and structured feedback loops to refine tools based on frontline experience. Given the Bureau's mandate to serve vulnerable populations, AI solutions that help deliver faster and more efficient support are likely to be welcomed and championed.

Judges and Court Personnel: Focus group discussions with judicial officers revealed clear and growing demand for AI solutions that could alleviate administrative burdens and improve the speed and quality of court processes. Judges and magistrates described a justice system under immense pressure, with

fewer than 100 judges and just over 300 magistrates serving a population of 20 million. Backlogs were primarily attributed to high case volumes, limited staffing, and a lack of functional digital systems to support daily work.

Participants expressed particular interest in AI tools for legal research, noting that delays in drafting judgments often stem from the absence of research clerks and the time-consuming nature of locating relevant precedents. An AI assistant capable of retrieving and summarising verified case law would be especially valuable—provided it delivers accurate, jurisdiction-specific information and avoids the "hallucinations" seen in generic AI tools. Judges also described the need for an electronic case management system with AI features to track deadlines, flag delays, and automate workflow steps, such as scheduling or mediation timelines.

Crucially, demand is conditional on AI functioning as a decision-support tool, not a decision-maker. Judicial discretion remains central, and any system that undermines this would face resistance. However, there is clear openness to innovation, particularly if it is locally developed and addresses real-world constraints. Participants cited the failure of a past foreign-built system as a cautionary tale, reinforcing the need for homegrown, adaptable tools that reflect local workflows and can be updated without external dependencies.

The broader policy environment is favourable. The judiciary has already embraced virtual hearings under COVID-19, and the Chief Justice has publicly championed digital reform, signalling strong institutional appetite for tech-enabled justice solutions. To harness this momentum, future pilots should involve judges and court staff from the design stage—ensuring AI tools are trusted, relevant, and capable of lightening the judicial workload without compromising independence or procedural fairness.

Law Students and Academia: Law students in Malawi, particularly those engaged in university legal clinics or internships with the Legal Aid Bureau, demonstrate strong potential as early adopters and advocates for AI solutions in the justice sector. Insights from the focus group show that students are not only tech-savvy and open to innovation, but also acutely aware of the structural challenges in accessing justice, particularly for low-income and rural populations. They cited issues such as limited legal literacy, high legal fees, long delays in judgment, and the physical inaccessibility of legal institutions as barriers to justice. There was a clear belief that technology, especially AI, could bridge these gaps by offering faster, lower-cost access to information and support.

Students expressed strong interest in tools that could assist with legal research, case management, and public legal education. They were particularly enthusiastic

about regionally tailored AI systems that focus on Malawian law, noting that existing databases are often incomplete or contain irrelevant content from other jurisdictions. The idea of a chatbot or digital assistant embedded in university legal clinics—providing basic legal guidance to the public and research support to students—was well received. Importantly, students recognised that while AI could enhance legal work, it must be used responsibly and remain subject to human oversight, especially in matters requiring legal interpretation.

Engaging law students in the design, testing, and refinement of AI tools would serve dual purposes: it taps into their digital fluency and curiosity, while also building capacity among the next generation of lawyers to use technology ethically and effectively. Piloting AI tools within law faculties, such as incorporating them into moot courts, research exercises, or clinic operations, would provide a controlled environment to test usability and impact. Overall, demand from this group is marked by both eagerness to innovate and a strong sense of justice-focused purpose.

Civil Society and Paralegals: Malawi has several civil society organizations and NGOs involved in legal empowerment, prisoners' rights, and paralegal services (for example, the Paralegal Advisory Service, CHREAA, and others). These groups might not be "demanding AI" in a vocal way yet, but they have a clear demand for anything that helps them extend legal assistance more broadly. A chatbot that guides people on basic legal issues or an AI that helps track cases of pre-trial detainees could be extremely valuable to them. Paralegals, who often have legal knowledge but are not full lawyers, could use AI as a force multiplier, for instance, using a mobile app to get quick legal info for a client in a village. This could be tested in fieldwork with NGO clinics. If there is early adoption by these groups, it could demonstrate grassroots demand. Additionally, since civil society often acts as a bridge between the community and formal justice system, their endorsement of an AI solution (and feedback on its design) would be crucial for community uptake and trust.

Conclusion: Across all key stakeholder groups - Legal Aid Bureau staff, judicial officers, and law students/ academia, there is clear and context-specific demand for AI tools that can help address Malawi's access to justice challenges. While their priorities vary, all groups identified pain points that AI could help alleviate, from unmanageable caseloads and delayed judgments to gaps in legal research and public legal education. Crucially, participants emphasised the importance of designing tools that are accurate, secure, locally relevant, and human centred. Demand is not only present, it is active, thoughtful, and conditioned on inclusive,

ethical implementation. These insights provide a strong foundation for future co-design, piloting, and testing of AI solutions in Malawi's justice sector.

CONCLUSION: ENABLING CONDITIONS FOR FUTURE ADOPTION

Sustainability of Technology: For AI to have a lasting impact on Malawi's legal aid and justice system, sustainability must be built into its design and implementation. One pathway is government integration, where the Ministry of Justice or Judiciary formally adopts the tool, budgets for its maintenance, and assigns staff to oversee it. This ensures continuity and public ownership but relies on political will and budget prioritisation. Demonstrating early impact, such as backlog reduction, will be essential to securing long-term government support. Donor backing is another realistic route, particularly from development partners already investing in justice reform, such as those behind the e-Court initiative. A phased funding model, such as initial donor investment followed by local ownership, could help transition the AI tool into permanent use.

Hybrid funding models could also contribute to sustainability. While access should remain free for legal aid and low-income users, premium versions for private firms could generate revenue to subsidise public use. Partnerships with telecom or tech companies, like those seen in the e-Court project, may also reduce costs. Crucially,

sustainability also depends on local capacity and ownership. Training legal professionals, building local tech expertise, and fostering collaboration with universities or tech hubs can ensure the tool evolves with Malawi's legal landscape. Open-source development or public licensing could further reduce reliance on foreign vendors and enable community-led maintenance. Together, these strategies offer a roadmap to ensure AI tools are not only impactful but enduring.

Strategies for integrating AI tools into Malawi's justice system: Integrating AI into Malawi's justice system should begin with targeted pilot projects focused on high-impact use cases, such as AI-assisted legal research for Legal Aid Bureau attorneys. Pilots should run in controlled environments with clear metrics to track impact (e.g., case resolution time, user satisfaction), allowing for iteration before national rollout. Success depends on early and ongoing stakeholder engagement, including legal aid lawyers, judges, clerks, and students, through co-design, user testing, and collaborative working groups. These groups can guide ethical standards, knowledge content, and local adoption. Partnerships with international legal tech initiatives and regional experts (e.g., JusticeBot in Uganda, or Dada Wakili in Tanzania) can offer valuable insight and technical support.

To ensure uptake, AI tools must be localized, reflecting Malawian law, languages (such as Chichewa), and cultural communication norms. Ethical and legal considerations must also be addressed early, including data privacy, transparency, and ensuring the AI's supportive, not advisory, role is clearly defined. Long-term sustainability requires planning for scale, budgeting for infrastructure and training, and building local capacity to maintain and evolve the system. Integration with existing digital platforms, like the e-Court system, will enhance efficiency. Finally, success depends on ongoing monitoring and adaptation, with performance data guiding refinement and helping to secure continued funding and institutional backing.

Next steps: To move from research to real-world impact, Malawi should now take coordinated steps to operationalise the insights from this exploratory study. The first priority should be to leverage this discovery research and select the most viable AI use case, whether that is a legal research assistant, document automation tool, or public-facing legal advice chatbot. This decision should be grounded in user feedback, feasibility, and the potential for measurable impact on case management and access to justice. Following this, a targeted pilot project should be designed and implemented. This pilot should operate within a controlled environment, such as a regional Legal Aid Bureau office or a specific court division and include clear monitoring indicators to track outcomes like time saved, cases

closed, and user satisfaction. The results of the pilot can be used to build a compelling business case for wider adoption, engaging both national policymakers and international donors.

To support scale and future sustainability, Malawi could develop a national strategy on ICT and AI in the justice sector. This policy document should outline regulatory standards, data-sharing protocols, and ethical guidelines, and define the role of AI within the broader justice reform agenda. Embedding the initiative within formal policy frameworks will enhance institutional buy-in and long-term legitimacy.

Finally, Malawi should invest in capacity building and local ownership. Training programs for legal professionals, partnerships with universities, and support for local developers will be essential to maintain, improve, and adapt AI tools over time. Strategic partnerships with the judiciary, the Ministry of Justice, international experts, and private sector actors will be key to ensuring the AI tools evolve in alignment with Malawi's justice needs. If approached collaboratively and responsibly, Malawi can set a powerful precedent for how technology can support justice reform in low-resource settings.