

Project Briefing

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People in planning in Malawi: Lessons from the APAC Programme in Eastern and Southern Africa

Fiona Samuels, Bright Sibale and
Kerry Selvester

Key points

- Development planning should go beyond programme pragmatism to generate lasting political and social change
- Efforts to involve communities in development planning must be backed by a multi-owned, transparent and responsive institutional set-up
- Increasing the participation of marginalised groups in planning processes can only be achieved if this is an explicit part of programme strategies

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The Australian Partnerships with African Communities (APAC) programme is a five-year cooperation agreement (2004-2009) between the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) and Australian NGOs to address emerging development challenges in Eastern and Southern Africa (ESA) using community-based approaches. With the end of the five-year agreement in sight, it is time to look at the key lessons, successes and innovations of the programme. This briefing is the first of three. The second will document how the APAC programme has gone beyond provision of basic needs, to address such issues as stigma and discrimination, rights based programming and psychosocial support for vulnerable children. The third will highlight the innovative ways in which Australian and African NGOs have worked together.

Focusing on the role of people in planning (PiP) processes, this briefing provides a short overview of the rationale for decentralisation and how this works in practice in Malawi, looking at the work of three NGOs. It describes key aspects of the PiP models used by the NGOs, how these have facilitated people's involvement and how they can be sustained and replicated. It concludes with three overarching findings.

Decentralisation and PiP

Decentralisation is a process that has facilitated the involvement of people in planning.

Defined as 'the transfer of political power, decision-making capacity and resources from central to sub-national levels of government' (Walker, 2002), the last decade has witnessed a proliferation of decentralisation and local government reform around the world, including in ESA. The drive towards decentralisation has been motivated by disappointing progress in meeting national goals through the centralised, highly bureaucratic processes followed by governments in the region since independence to the mid 1990s. Globalisation, and rapid political, economic, and technological changes have also fuelled the trend towards greater reliance on lower levels of government (Smoke, 2001). There are, however, ongoing debates on the benefits of decentralisation. According to Manor, for instance, empirical evidence from more than 60 cases indicates that decentralisation at the local level – when it works well – has many virtues, but is no panacea. It also has limitations as a force for reducing poverty, on which its record is mixed (Manor, 2000, 2003).

Decentralisation in Malawi

Decentralisation is a major government policy in all countries in which the APAC has been implemented: Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, South Africa, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe. This briefing explores the decentralisation process in Malawi and three PiP models that have been developed by NGO partners in the country.

Project information



Australian Government
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An Australian Government, AusAID initiative. Written by Fiona Samuels (ODI), Bright Sibale (Centre for Development Management, Lilongwe, Malawi) and Kerry Selvester (Technical Advisor for Livelihoods and Food Security, APAC). We want to thank the full APAC team for their comments and contributions. For more information, please contact Fiona Samuels (f.samuels@odi.org.uk).

The Government of Malawi adopted its Decentralisation Policy in 1996. The aim was to decentralise political and administrative authority to the district level as a way to consolidate democracy and achieve poverty reduction. As a result, the District Assembly (DA) is the focal point for district level policy and programme development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation (Figure 1). The DA is composed of elected ward councilors and is serviced by a Secretariat, headed by a District Commissioner or a Chief Executive for rural and urban assemblies respectively. The District Executive Committee (DEC), composed of technical staff from government departments and civil society organisations, is the technical arm of the DA and is directly responsible for formulation and implementation of the District Development Plan.

The Area Development Committee (ADC), below the DA, operates as a Traditional Authority, consisting of many villages, and headed by a Chief. The lowest of the three tiers is the Village Development Committee (VDC), composed of community members.

While the structures are in place, government extension systems responsible for their mobilisation lack resources and are, as a result, weak, poorly-motivated and unable to ensure that communities can participate in planning and programme implementation. The NGOs are, therefore, filling a gap created by government inactivity.

All three of the NGOs studied in Malawi target vulnerable and marginalised populations, including the elderly, orphans and vulnerable children, female-headed households and people living with HIV (PLWH). The areas where the NGOs work are dominated by subsistence farmers, with few income generating opportunities and limited access to services. Many households are trapped in the vicious cycle of poverty, HIV and AIDS and food insecurity.

Key aspects of the PiP models

Genesis and approach. All models were developed by the NGOs in response to the disconnect between district authorities and communities, the lack of responsiveness and accountability of district authorities to communities, the exclusion of marginalised and vulnerable communities, and lack of community involvement in planning and decision-making processes. The goal was to strengthen participation of community members in development programmes and ensure effective representation of all villages in VDCs, ADCs as well as DAs. All models promote sus-

tainable development through such activities as savings schemes (CARE), food security, marketing and community institutional development.

- CARE Village Umbrella Committee Model (VUC). A participatory livelihoods assessment conducted by CARE led to the creation of village umbrella groups. The model is an umbrella organisation, made up of smaller issue-based subcommittees that are, in turn, made up of members of other committees. Within these subcommittees, people are selected for the umbrella group.
- Kumanga Umodzi (KU): The Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) SAFARI Malawi Project Community Institutional Model. Developed from lessons learned from the CARE VUC model and further studies. The model is an umbrella committee of 2-3 Community Development Committees, which operate at village level and represent the villages at the VDC level. Members of the committee are elected by the community.
- The Concern Universal Community-based Organisation (CBO) Model. The evolution of the model was a pragmatic process in response to the lack of linkages from CBOs to VDCs. The model works through CBOs instead of umbrella committees, organised at group village level.

Links to the District Assembly and participation in the planning processes. Each model provides clear communication channels between the community bodies and the district authorities. Participation of vulnerable groups has been encouraged and achieved through the systems set up by the NGOs, together with the district and traditional authorities.

- CARE: the umbrella committee reports directly to the VDC and the small sector-based subcommittees report to the umbrella committee. The sector-based subcommittees have full representation from women and the most vulnerable people in the community.
- ADRA: vulnerable people are represented on the community development committees, intermediary committees between a single village and the KU model, which report to the VDC.
- Concern: the CBOs that represent different interest groups in the villages have been formally accepted by the VDCs as interlocutors for the groups they represent.

Increased resources at village level. The KU (ADRA) and Concern CBOs are formally registered and have raised funds for their activities. The umbrella committees in the CARE model have, through the scorecard monitoring tool (see Box 1), successfully lobbied for increased resources at village level and provided the district authorities with a clear and open communication channel.

All models are recognised locally, but none are recognised as national models for the creation of institutionalised links between the formal decentralisation structure and the grassroots. The mem-

Box 1: Building dialogue through Community Score Cards (CSCs)

The Community Score Card is a community-based participatory tool for social auditing, planning, monitoring, evaluation and reporting. It is used to demand accountability, transparency, inclusion and responsibility from service providers by service users. It does so by bringing together users and providers at meetings to analyse challenges in service delivery, finding shared solutions. CARE Malawi has used the tool extensively in Dowa, Lilongwe and Ntchisi districts to start a dialogue between Government and the local community, facilitated by the VUC.

bers of these various bodies are selected or elected by community members so are part of a representational system rather than a political system.

How do models include local people?

Through participation in Village Action Planning (VAP) processes. Malawi's decentralisation policy requires all group villages to have a Village Action Plan (VAP), representing a development programme for the VDC. The VDC is mandated to facilitate the planning and implementation of the plan. However, because of the inadequate capacity of VDCs, these plans are not completed. The CARE and Concern models, in particular, have mobilised communities to develop VAPs that feed into the district development process. In the areas of Lilongwe where CARE Malawi works, the DA used VUCs to facilitate the development of VAPs, which have now been incorporated in the Lilongwe District Assembly Development Plan.

By facilitating community mobilisation in development activities. Decentralisation is not realistic when grassroots communities are not linked to official government structures. With limited resources at DA and community level, the government extension system faces serious problems in reaching the majority of the poor at grassroots level. All the NGO models fill this gap by building capacity of community-based volunteers, who mobilise fellow community members in development programmes that are then implemented by NGOs and other service providers including government.

By institutionalising dialogue between communities and decentralised structures. By establishing links with VDCs, ADC and the DA, the CARE and KU models provide an explicit opportunity for the community – through the Community Score Cards (CARE) (Box 1) and recognition at VDC of KU – to interact with the decentralisation structures, thereby incorporating community perspectives in the district development system. CARE provides this through the CSC and KU through recognition at the VDC and district levels. For example, PLWH are involved in development planning and decision-making through support groups with representatives in the PiP models. Youth, children and women participate through their own groups. The models channel the community development proposals to relevant authorities and some CBOs are now also sourcing funds from other donors. The models have also provided the government and other service providers with a legitimate channel for consultation on, and implementation of, their programmes. In Lilongwe, under CARE Malawi for instance, the Government used the VUC structures to target beneficiaries for agricultural input subsidy programmes.

By empowering people economically, especially women and PLWH. The models use community volunteers who identify markets for locally produced agricultural products (Box 3). By linking to the market, the models involve people in the economic development

of their areas and households. Under CARE Malawi, the VUC model also facilitates access to credit through Village Savings and Loan (VS&L) schemes, which target women in particular. A recent strategic impact enquiry (CARE Malawi, 2008) has shown that women who are members of such schemes have more economic power than those who are not. Improved access to economic opportunities promotes ownership and motivates women to participate in planning and implementation of other community programmes.

What makes the models work?

A number of factors contribute to the effective functioning of the PiP models, including a conducive policy and legal environment for decentralisation in Malawi. The decentralisation process has created decentralised planning systems and structures at district and community level.

There have been investments in capacity-building through NGOs for a range of stakeholders, including community-based volunteers, local leaders, government extension workers, the police and the judiciary.

Partnerships with DAs in implementing sub-programmes have helped. In the APAC programme, implementation is multi-sectoral and the DA is closely involved, alongside other relevant government departments at district level. This multi-sectoral approach has contributed to the sustainability and replicability of the models. In Malawi the DECs lead in programme implementation and monitoring for CARE Malawi, Concern Universal and ADRA.

The use of participatory approaches to identify community needs and solutions has been key to the success of the APAC programme. NGOs have used participatory methods to develop APAC proposals, and implement and monitor programme activities with stakeholders, including government representatives.

When it comes to sustaining and replicating such models, the ongoing involvement and capacity-building of the DA and the legitimisation of the models by local government at district and community level will play an important role in their functioning beyond the APAC programme.

The models fit well with decentralisation processes, systems and structures, and are likely to continue to feed into the government planning systems. There is evidence in Malawi that the models are being used by the Government, through DAs, to implement government programmes to target vulnerable groups and distribute subsidised agricultural inputs.

The PiP models are being facilitated by a cadre of trained community-based volunteers who have been selected by their communities. Their skills will, therefore, survive beyond the project. In addition, communities have been mobilised, have actively participated and have owned the processes. Inter-village learning (field trips, community sensitisation campaigns, open days, joint monitoring) has ensured that learning is institutionalised at community level. Finally, working with Traditional Authorities means that the methods are legitimised

by authorities that influence community life. All of these features are likely to encourage the continuity of the models beyond the duration of the project.

However, model sustainability is threatened by weak capacity and lack of funding by government to the DA. This could result in weak backstopping of the models once the APAC programme ends. There are questions as to whether volunteers can remain committed without training and other incentives.

Lessons learned

Community structures are critical in bridging the decentralisation gap. Most decentralisation structures are unable to facilitate real participation by all households, meaning inadequate representation. The PiP models have represented the people and enabled the voices of the vulnerable to be heard; facilitated the development of community-based programmes; been platforms for consultations at local level; and have helped to improve the responsiveness of local governments in service provision.

Capacities should be built at district and community level concurrently. Governments tend to build capacity at district level, while the APAC NGOs have built capacities at all levels. When capacities at district and community level are built together, district level authorities become more responsive, while communities become aware of the challenges faced by district level and their rights as citizens.

Collaboration in service delivery is critical to meet demand. By raising awareness and building capacity at community level, NGO programmes often create a demand for services that they cannot individually meet. Government may lack the capacity and resources to respond effectively to the increased demand for services. More collaboration in service delivery is needed and the APAC models have created the required entry points.

Transparency and accountability (T&A) are crucial for effective decentralisation. By bringing authorities closer to the people through interface meetings, the models promote T&A. Transparency is achieved because development programmes are formulated, implemented and monitored with the people; accountability is attained through joint and participatory planning and decision-making processes. CARE Malawi has used the CSC to achieve T&A, and improve understanding of the resource constraints faced by the district. The CSC is now being adopted by other NGOs, both in Malawi and beyond.

Three over-arching take-home lessons have been learned from the models in Malawi.

First, a multi-owned, transparent, responsive institutional set-up is the most effective approach to ensure that communities and individuals are involved in planning processes. Within decentralised systems of governance, there may be many institutions with competing interests working at community level, including traditional, political and government sectoral planning institutions and NGOs. Through APAC, NGOs have learned that no single institution can implement quality programmes and represent the people. A multi-stakeholder platform agreed by the community, built on the institutional framework established by the authorities, is an opportunity for development and growth. They have learned that a platform where all community groups have their views taken into consideration, and the government, traditional authorities and other interests are represented, is the most appropriate model for institutionalising participation and community involvement and thereby involving people in planning and development.

Second, programme planning should go beyond pragmatism to build social and political leverage. NGOs often focus on pragmatic approaches to identify and solve community problems. They often create or strengthen local institutions to improve programme delivery, based on agreed targets and timeframes. Greater engagement with the formal decentralised structures at district level shows that going beyond implementation to empower people to represent communities in district systems enhances efficacy and increases sustainability.

Third, raising the voice and participation of marginalised groups in planning and development is only possible if this is an explicit part of the programming strategy. By focusing on marginalised groups in the community, and increasing linkages with formal structures, the NGO programmes have created space for participation in decision-making at various levels. Initiatives such as VS&L schemes and income generating projects have promoted not only economic outcomes, but also the empowerment and participation of women, youth and PLWH. With this new found economic and social freedom, the NGOs have seen the increasing participation of marginalised people in representative planning bodies, demonstrating more confidence in expressing themselves to district officials. The models have created a platform and a political space for the participation of people whose voice is rarely considered in formal district fora.



Overseas Development
Institute

111 Westminster Bridge
Road, London SE1 7JD

Tel +44 (0)20 7922 0300

Fax +44 (0)20 7922 0399

Email
publications@odi.org.uk

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