

Who controls development?

NGOs, accountability and power in rural Malawi.

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Disaster Studies and Management Working Paper no. 28

September 2011²

Summary

This paper explores the impact of NGO-led interventions in local balances of power in two rural districts of Malawi. It shows the inevitable association between NGOs and power structures during vulnerability and capacity assessments (VCAs) and its implications for the quality and impartiality of the whole intervention. The strategy of international NGOs to act independently of all local structures does not avoid these risks but rather transforms the NGOs into another power player, competing with local structures.

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² This paper was originally written in 2008 and circulated privately within Christian Aid and amongst its partners and others interested in this subject.

1. Background

This paper presents the main findings of the field research done in Malawi for the mid-term review of Christian Aid's Building Disaster Resilient Communities (BDRC) project.³ It analyses key components of community resilience⁴ (Twigg 2007) and shows the implications of the selection of social communication channels during vulnerability and capacity assessment (IFRC 2006) for the quality and sustainability of the whole intervention.

Vulnerability and capacity assessment (VCA) is one of the growing set of participative methods used in disaster risk reduction (DRR) to enhance local capacities. During a VCA, NGOs work with community groups, local authorities and people at risk to gather people's experiences of disasters and articulate them into social knowledge, which is then used to prevent or, at least, reduce the impact of future disasters.

From the project management point of view, VCAs are social mobilization resources, bringing people together to reduce disaster risk and advocate for better social protection mechanisms. The community action plan – the most common output of a VCA, detailing the actions and resources needed to prevent disasters – regulates participation and guides cooperation between NGOs, local authorities and community groups all along the life cycle of the project.

To succeed, VCAs must be impartial and inclusive exercises. The information received must be complete, accurate and free of interferences from special interests. Otherwise, results might be inconclusive, misleading or biased towards certain groups, falling short of humanitarian standards such as Sphere or the Code of Conduct. Its results must reach all community members equally; constraints or distortions during the dissemination can have serious consequences for the capacity of people and institutions to make informed choices about issues affecting lives and livelihoods, seriously compromising the accountability of the whole intervention (HAP 2007).

The impartiality and inclusiveness of VCA depends critically on the social communication channel used to regulate participation. The selection of this channel is one of the most important – and difficult – decisions to make during community-based interventions. But the average participative methods do not include tools to address this issue and, sometimes, it seems that NGOs simply assume independence from local power structures and are not aware of the implications of this decision for the quality and accountability of their activities at community level.

³ Building Disaster Resilience Communities is a Christian Aid project funded by DFID with national programmes in Malawi, Honduras, Bangladesh, Philippines, El Salvador, Mali and Burkina Faso.

⁴ The case studies in Malawi were based on components 2.2 (Vulnerability and impact data assessment) and 4.4 (Social protection, including social capital) of the *Characteristics of a disaster-resilient community* (Twigg 2007).

2. Methodology

The interviews for this case study were carried out in Phalombe and Nsanje, two rural districts of Malawi producing roughly enough to feed their populations in most years, but with limited income generating opportunities. Food crops are often sold post-harvest to obtain cash and have to be replaced by purchases later in the year. Sources of cash besides sale of crops are agricultural day-labour, livestock, petty trade, fire-wood and grass sales (VAC 2005).

Christian Aid and its local partners Evangelical Lutheran Development Services (ELDS), in Phalombe, and Churches Action in Relief and Development (CARD), in Nsanje, carried out field work in 6 villages and the district capitals during two weeks in April 2008, using a mix of focus groups and semi-structured interviews with a total of 148 respondents. In each village, the team conducted one focus group with community members and a separate interview with the village head, complemented with interviews with local government officials and focus groups with members of the Village Development Committees (VDCs) and field staff of both local NGOs at the district level.

The gender breakdown was quite informative: the percentage of women was highest in the focus groups at village level (60%) and minimum (0%) at the district level. 43% of VDC members and 27% in local NGO staff were women, but there were none amongst the 6 village heads or the 13 government officials interviewed.

3. Findings

The first finding was that in rural Malawi there are two established social communication channels available for VCA at village level. The first option involves the village heads, traditional authorities with power over customary property (land, water and natural resources). Headmen hold office for life and are chosen according to traditional clan politics rather than elected with modern representative criteria. The second is the Village Development Committee (VDC), a representative structure set up by the state in the context of its new decentralisation policy.

NGO teams have to choose between these two options to regulate participation and ensure complete and accurate information during a VCA. But VCA methodology and, to an extent, the average participative techniques, seem to lack instruments to analyse the implications of such a decision: The VCA toolbox (IFRC 2006) – used here as reference – contains only one tool⁶ assessing local power issues and even this one is restricted to the planning stage of interventions in conflict-ridden areas. NGO teams using participative methods are poorly equipped to analyse the implications of their decisions in local power balances.

⁶ Better Programming Initiative (BPI)

The third finding was that social communication channels are inevitably connected with local power structures. This is hardly a surprise when we consider the importance of communication to make and enforce decisions. The absence of the modern state, mass media or other communication channels operating above the local level adds to the close association between social communication channels and local power structures. When we connect the findings, we have to accept that NGOs cannot assume their independence from local power structures but, at the same time, they are poorly equipped to ensure the impartiality of their assessments.

4. Discussion

This weakness compromises international standards of quality and accountability.⁷ Without an explicit power analysis, the impartiality of a VCA is not assured and aid might be used to further particular social or political standpoints. This is especially true in poor areas such as rural Malawi, with a high density of activities funded by international organisations and local stakeholders with a good understanding of the way NGOs work and how to use this knowledge to their particular advantage.

Let us dedicate some space to assess the kind of advantages that local power structures may get when they associate with NGOs in community-based interventions. According to respondents in Phalombe and Nsanje, there are three potential advantages in this association. First, in poor areas such as rural Malawi, NGOs often command more resources than any local power structures – including the modern state – and, therefore, association with them gives local power holders access to scarce resources such as vehicles or high-paid jobs.

Association with NGOs can be used to strengthen permanently the power base of particular structures. This is the case of projects dedicated to the creation of development infrastructure, such as irrigation systems or grain storage facilities. These projects, very common in Malawi, are especially attractive to village heads, whose power is based in control over customary property such as land, water and natural resources. The infrastructure produced by such projects directly increases their bargaining power over the 85% of smallholder farmers practising rain-fed agriculture (EIU 2007).

In this case, the incentives are for association throughout the entire life of the project, followed by a claim to ownership of the infrastructure produced on grounds of customary law. Several village heads made this claim during the interviews, often supporting it with argumentations on sustainability. The possibility to permanently enhance their power base makes it perfectly rational for a power holder to invest time and resources to transform the initial connexion during a VCA into a long-time association with the NGO.

Finally, local power holders can use community-based interventions to boost their leverage with specific segments of the population. Projects including free distribution

⁷ See for instance points 2 and 3 of the Red Cross Code of Conduct (1994)
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of goods such as food aid, seeds or fertilizers provide good opportunities for this. A local power structure can be tempted to use its control of the social communication channels during VCA to direct relief distributions towards its own constituency – or away from a rival's ones. This is probably the biggest challenge to impartiality in community-based interventions.

The humanitarian community has developed tools to tackle such problems in conflict-ridden situations⁸ but DRR projects in relatively peaceful environments do not use these tools. The absence of violence does not imply absence of incentives to use aid in local power struggles and, without an explicit assessment of the effect of NGO-led projects in local power balances, NGOs cannot assume the impartiality of their interventions, nor forget the effect that an effective control of information flows can have on vulnerability assessments, even in the absence of violence.

In conclusion, NGO interventions offer several incentives for local power holders to associate with them. The abundance of physical and financial resources, the free distribution of goods and services or the investment in development infrastructures offer incentives to local power structures to exert control over the information flows between the NGO and other local stakeholders, an action that will influence project management decisions during the whole intervention. VCA exercises, often the first activity of the project and determinant to select target groups and decide upon the nature, location and distribution of project outputs, are the best moment to start this association and exert this control.

Respondents were aware of these incentives and, when questioned about the best social communication channel to assess vulnerabilities and capacities, gave different answers according to their position in local power structures. Village headmen unanimously advised to conduct VCA assessments under customary rules, with the village head convening and chairing community meetings.⁹ They backed their cases on the grounds of their capacity to ensure bigger participation, smooth implementation and better sustainability.

Members of VDCs¹⁰ challenged this view and claimed their right to participate in the assessment as a separate entity, independent from customary village councils chaired by the village head. They based their cases on accountability arguments: in Mmembe, for instance, they mentioned repeatedly their unique role as the only representative structure at the local level, presenting VDCs as the only channel that gives a voice to ordinary women and men and can bring to account both traditional authorities and the modern state. They seemed to perceive NGOs as powerful allies in their struggle for public space and saw VCAs as opportunities to raise their profile and gain legitimacy among other community members.

NGOs in rural Malawi are confronted with a dilemma, choosing between two competing communication channels and their associated power structures to ensure

⁸ We have already mentioned the Better programming initiative (BPI) and we can add to this the Peace and Conflict Impact Assessments (PCIA), and the large set of targeting techniques, some of them including complex sampling and registering requirements

⁹ The head of Nalingula II and Mtoliro villages were good examples of this.

¹⁰ The focus group met in Mmembe, Nsanje was representative of this position.

impartial VCAs and regulate participation during the whole intervention. On one side, they have the capacity of the village headmen to ensure participation, enforce community action plans and use their unrestricted powers to smooth implementation and increase the prospects for sustainability. On the other, international NGOs have an opportunity to stand up to their international commitments for empowerment and accountability, supporting VDCs in their efforts to get a voice in local development issues, make effective their citizen rights and bring to account both traditional, unelected chiefs and distant, technocratic national authorities.

The decision is not especially easy and some international NGOs try to avoid it by setting up separate communication channels, managed by project teams recruited from outside the community and regulating participation under external criteria. At face value, NGOs gain independence over local power structures in exchange of an increase in project costs. But according to respondents' views this option does not avoid the challenges to the impartiality and accountability of community-based interventions and, more importantly, damages their potential to build the capacity of all local stakeholders, regardless of their position in the power structures. In fact, this approach seems to mislead participation, divide community structures and disempower both traditional and modern authorities.

International NGO teams acting independently from established social mechanisms are quite common in rural Malawi. During field work, ordinary community members, members of development committees, village chiefs and government officers gave abundant examples of international NGOs applying their particular criteria to define vulnerabilities, demanding the creation of beneficiary groups that revert the direction of accountability – making beneficiaries accountable to NGOs, rather than the other way round – and competing with the state and the private sector in service delivery.

In Nalingula, for instance, a focus group with a clear majority of women (81%)¹¹ commented on the multiplication of NGO-led assessments and groups and the confusion they felt with different beneficiary committees active at the same time.¹² They mostly advocate for having one single committee, preferably under customary rule, something strongly supported by their village head in a separate interview. Some of them believed that distributions of goods and services were a reward for participation in these groups and therefore, only took part in the assessments of the NGO that was currently supporting them.¹³ Others demanded a say on vulnerability criteria, raising doubts about the equity of external criteria to assess vulnerability and regulate participation.

Community members expressed concerns about the consequences of creating separate beneficiary groups with certain categories of vulnerable people, namely orphans and *chronically ill* persons – categories usually denoting HIV-AIDS affected persons in Malawi – potentially exposing them to stigma and social discrimination. Inclusiveness was contested, arguing that people such as women heading households or disabled people cannot realistically leave their houses and travel to the meeting point at a short

¹¹ Men were in the fields, protecting the incoming harvest.

¹² “They all come with their own approach”: Flore Mosse, Nalingula II focus group, Phalombe.

¹³ Fanny Buleya, Nalingula II focus group, Phalombe

notice. Other respondents, such as the head of the same village, the VDC in Phalombe and one BDRC implementing partner (ELDS) supported this view.

The overall perception was one of competition between NGO-led channels and socially established ones, with a demand on NGOs for more accountability towards community members. On empowerment issues, there was a perception of ‘beneficiary groups’ as divisive and weakening community structures. Furthermore, it seems some communities see the VCA more as a moment for negotiation than as an ‘impartial’ exercise to assess vulnerabilities, as shown by the demand of some of the community groups interviewed who asked for more time and information on the ‘agenda’ of the VCA to prepare a common position and designate adequate representatives.

Finally, the belief that distribution of goods is a reward for participation was partially supported by some district level officials, namely the Development Planning Directors (officials in charge of coordination of the development efforts between NGOs and the different departments of the District Commission) who pointed to independent interventions of international NGOs and to the frequency of relief distributions, especially food aid, as the source of the *dependency syndrome*, an attitude of passivity and conformity with social vulnerabilities that hinders local development efforts.

5. Conclusions

Participatory VCAs are critical for the impartiality and accountability of interventions at community level. The selection of the most appropriate social communication channel is a key decision that will affect the quality, impact, sustainability and equity of community-based interventions. NGO assessment teams must ensure they receive complete, accurate and impartial information on the risks affecting the community and that all local stakeholders have complete and equal access to VCA results.

Social communication channels are invariably connected with local power structures, especially in areas where channels operating above the local level, such as the modern state or mass media are mostly absent, as is the case in rural Malawi. When NGOs select one communication channel, they should be aware they are associating their interventions with a certain power structure that might use this association to its own advantage. But the average participative method does not include tools to assess and manage the implications of this situation.

Local power holders have incentives to associate with NGOs and, according to field research, local respondents are aware of them. Association with humanitarian and development interventions funded by international NGOs can lead to increased access to scarce resources such as vehicles or high-paid jobs and to permanent control of valuable development assets such as irrigation systems or grain storage facilities. If a power structure exerts control over the flows of information between the NGO and local stakeholders during the VCA, it can distort the results of the assessment, seriously affecting the impartiality and accountability of project management

decisions such as targeting free distributions of goods to certain segments of the population.

International NGOs sometimes try to avoid these risks by setting up independent communication channels but, according to respondents' views, this option does not avoid the challenges to the quality and accountability of community-based interventions and, more importantly, it damages their potential to empower vulnerable people and build local capacities. The results of the field research showed the concerns of respondents in different positions of local power structures over the consequences of this approach, including misled participation, fragmentation of community structures and competition with both traditional and modern authorities.

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