

Community Project Funding in Malawi under the Malawi Social Action Fund (MASAF) Demand-Driven Approach: Potential for Perpetuating Imbalances in Development

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ABSTRACT

This paper gives an overview of the kind of community development projects that the Malawi Social Action Fund (MASAF) has supported since its inception in July 1996. The MASAF has tended to subscribe to a demand-driven approach in its evaluation of projects, thereby introducing an element of competition in community development. This has led to imbalances in socio-economic infrastructure, between those districts whose communities have been unable to initiate their own projects, and those where there is more sophisticated "development-conscious" leadership. Ways in which more equitable and effective grassroots development can be implemented are presented in this paper, where the author believes that non-governmental development agencies in particular, have a positive role to play.

Introduction

The United Nations defines community development as "processes by which the efforts of the people are united with those of governmental authorities to improve the economic, social and cultural conditions of communities, to integrate these communities into the life of the nation and to enable them to contribute fully to national progress" (United Nations 1963: 4). The two essential elements in community development, according to the United Nations, are: (a) participation of the people in efforts to improve their living conditions with as much reliance as possible on their own initiatives; and (b) provision of technical and other services by governmental agencies in ways that encourage initiative, self-help and mutual help and make these more effective. The Malawi government adopted the United

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Nations' conception of community development at independence in 1964. Community development is viewed as a partnership between government institutions and local communities to improve the communities' economic, social and cultural conditions (Malawi Government 1988: 125). The emphasis in practice has been on the creation of economic and social infrastructure, based on the assumption that such infrastructure would contribute to higher living standards.

The United Nations' conception of community development adopted by the Malawi government recognises the fact that communities may not always have the resources needed to bring about improvements in their living standards and that assistance may have to be sought outside the community. This conception of community development, however, does not acknowledge the role that can be played by non-governmental agencies in helping communities improve their living standards, and makes it appear as if community development were an exclusive partnership between government institutions and local communities. In Malawi, non-governmental organisations such as ACTION AID, OXFAM and Save the Children Fund (USA) have played an important role in facilitating community projects in some parts of the country.

The Malawi government has used community development as a strategy for creating economic and social infrastructure such as rural roads, bridges, schools, health units, post offices and water schemes. The strategy has involved the mobilisation of community labour and government financial and technical resources to execute specific projects. Two types of community development projects can be identified:

- (a) community-initiated development projects requiring external assistance
- (b) national, centrally planned projects requiring local community contribution.

Examples of (a) are classroom blocks, teachers' houses and bridges where local communities may ask government to provide construction materials such as cement and iron sheets. Piped water schemes such as the Zomba Rural Piped Water Scheme, and Mpira Water Project which covers Ntcheu and Balaka districts are examples of (b). The community contribution consists essentially of unskilled and semi-skilled labour. The use of 'free' labour in these projects allows the government to reduce project costs. For the Malawi government, community development is the most feasible strategy for providing economic and social infrastructure to the largest proportion of the country's population, which is rural, given its limited financial resources.

Before 1996, community development projects were funded by the Office of the

President and Cabinet (OPC) through District Development Committees (DDCs). The DDCs were responsible for the purchase of all materials required for projects. They were accountable to OPC for the use of project funds. Since July 1996, financial assistance to community projects has been provided by the Malawi Social Action Fund (MASAF), a fund specially created for this purpose and managed by a Board of Directors. Under the new arrangement, funds go directly to communities who have requested for them. This paper argues that although the MASAF approach to community development empowers local communities and provides useful experience in project management, there is the risk that some communities are left behind in the race for development, if deliberate efforts are not made to help them.

Development Committees

At the grassroots, "development" tends to be viewed in terms of physical infrastructure. School buildings, health units, roads and bridges are visible symbols of development. This definition of development is actually promoted by the country's political leadership. It is not surprising, therefore, that the cultural aspect of community development is underplayed.

There is a hierarchy of development committees. At the lowest level, there is the Village Development Committee (VDC). The VDC comprises of elected members and is presided over by a Group Village Headman (1). In large villages, this committee is presided over by a village headman. The VDC is supposed to initiate and coordinate community projects at the village level. At the next level, there is the Area Development Committee (ADC), consisting of elected members and Group Village Headmen. It is responsible for the whole area under the jurisdiction of a Traditional Authority (TA). The TA presides over the committee. The ADC's role is essentially that of reviewing project proposals from VDCs requiring financial assistance, before they are submitted to the District Development Committee (DDC). The DDC is chaired by the District Commissioner (DC) who is the representative of the central government in the district. Other members of the committee are TAs, local Members of Parliament (MPs), the clerk of the District Council, and district officials of political parties represented in parliament. Non-governmental organisations involved in grassroots development work serve as coopted members in the districts where they operate. Unlike VDCs and ADCs, most of the DDC members do not have a legitimate mandate to represent the

(1) A Group Village Headman is responsible for a number of villages, each of which has its own village headman.

interests of grassroots communities. The DDC is essentially an administrative body (see for example, Kasmann and Chirwa 1997: 25).

The actual evaluation of project proposals submitted to the DDC is made by the District Executive Committee (DEC), which consists of officials from ministries such as those of education, health, community services and water development. The DEC reports to the DDC, which in turn submits funding requests to the MASAF Management Unit. The approvals for project funding are made by the Project Steering Committee.

The various local level development committees are, in effect, the result of efforts made by the Department of Community Development to promote local community participation in development decision-making, rather than spontaneous creations by the people themselves. Major decisions at the village level are traditionally made by the village headman, in consultation with advisers appointed by himself. The notion of elected standing development committees, therefore, appears alien to some rural communities. In these areas, the village councils rather than the VDCs, are the main players in community development work (Kasmann and Chirwa 1997: 25).

The Malawi Social Action Fund (MASAF)

The MASAF Project came into being in July 1996 with a US\$56 million credit obtained from the International Development Agency (IDA) of the World Bank in May 1995. It is part of the government's Poverty Alleviation Programme. Its specific objectives are:

- (a) to provide additional resources for programmes targetted at the poor;
- (b) to promote a new development paradigm by involving communities in all stages of the project cycle;
- (c) to promote district level programmes targetted at the poorest communities as safety net operations;
- (d) to strengthen poverty monitoring and assessment systems (MASAF Management Unit 1997: 2).

Two of MASAF's unique characteristics are:

- (a) it is demand-driven and funds are channelled directly into participating communities;
- (b) community participation is encouraged at all levels of project implementation.

MASAF has two components:

(a) Community Sub-Projects: this is designed to fund community projects in direct response to proposals submitted by communities themselves. Such projects, however, have to be within the specified sectors of education, health, water, sanitation, transport and communication, and the funding limit of K1.5 million (Malawi Social Action Fund Quarterly Report, October- December 1996: 15).

(b) Public Works Programmes: this is a safety net for vulnerable communities. Its main objective is to transfer cash incomes to poor people in return for labour in community infrastructural projects. The range of activities has included construction, rehabilitation and maintenance of rural roads, construction of small-scale irrigation dams and valley tanks, afforestation and land conservation (MASAF Management Unit 1998: 1).

Within the Community Sub-Project component, local communities identify the specific projects for which assistance is being sought, based on their own priorities. Once a project has been approved, the local community is required to contribute at least 20% of the total cost of the project, which can be in cash, labour, materials or a combination of them (Kutengule 1997: 77).

Under the Public Works Programme, the initiative rests with the MASAF. The Project Steering Committee decides on the nature and location of the public works project. They are guided in their decisions by vulnerability mapping data from the Famine Early Warning Systems (FEWS) in the Ministry of Agriculture. A Vulnerability Assessment Map (VAM) ranks agro-ecological areas in the country on the basis of vulnerability to famine. Areas prone to erratic rainfall would rank high in terms of vulnerability, and it is such areas that are targetted by the Public Works Programme. It is not clear how often, if at all, VAM is reviewed in order to take into account changing weather patterns.

A question could be raised regarding the justification for using vulnerability to famine as the sole criterion for public works projects in a country where poverty is rampant. An important point to note is that the Public Works Programme pays workers from vulnerable communities, a daily wage rate for work which previously would be performed as part of their contribution to externally initiated development projects. The current daily rate is K15.80 which is the statutory minimum for rural workers (MASAF Management Unit 1998: 6). As a safety net, the Public Works Programme seems to be having limited impact: in 1997 only 3% of potential beneficiaries had benefitted from it (Tsoka 1997: 25). It is possible that the situation may have improved since then.

Community Development Projects

The Community Sub-Project component seems to be more important as far as community development is concerned, because it reflects local needs and priorities. As MASAF funding is demand-driven, only those communities which make the effort to seek support will benefit. Seeking such support presupposes, however, that:

- (a) the community recognises the existence of a common problem needing collective effort to resolve;
- (b) the community is aware of the existence of MASAF as a funding agency;
- (c) the community is aware and understands the procedures for procuring MASAF funds.

To ensure (b) and (c), MASAF embarked upon a publicity campaign using newspapers, posters and the radio. Seminars were also held for traditional and political leaders to sensitise them to MASAF activities and procedures for securing project funding.

The major hurdle in community development is at the initial stage. Someone must recognise a problem affecting their community, or a deficiency in their living standards, and feel motivated enough to bring it to the attention of the relevant village authorities, for a possible collective solution. Collective action will occur when people are persuaded that there is indeed a shared problem and that its solution is for the common good.

The recognition of a problem or a deficiency in the living conditions of a community, often presupposes awareness or experience of a better quality of life. Given the high rate of illiteracy, which stands at more than 50%, and poor communications, exposure to the outside world and higher standards of living tends to be limited in many rural communities. The existing living conditions, therefore, may appear to be the only ones possible. Previously, front line workers of the Department of Community Development were charged with the responsibility of helping communities to recognise their needs and how best to solve them; but the emphasis on community empowerment under the MASAF project seems to have undermined this role.

Given the situation above, retired civil servants, teachers, business people and returned labour migrants have often served as initiators of ideas, as well as facilitators of technical and financial assistance for community projects, including those for which MASAF funding has been sought (Kasmann and Chirwa 1997: 25). A new situation has arisen, whereby the effectiveness of an MP is measured in

terms of what the local press refer to as "development consciousness". A "development-conscious" MP is one who initiates or facilitates local development projects (see for example, *The Nation*, 29 September 1997: 4; *UDF News*, 11-13 August 1998: 3; *Tamvani*, 12-13 September 1998: 1). The role of an MP as an initiator of development ideas, becomes critical in communities with few educated people or with experience of the world outside the confines of the village. Without other enlightened leadership, communities led by a "development-conscious" MP would benefit from MASAF, rather than those led by one who is not "development-conscious" (cf Abito 1998: 164). The uneven distribution of "development-conscious" leadership could be a major factor in the perpetuation of inequalities in development. For example, by September 1997, 45% of MASAF funded community projects were located in the Southern Region; 38% in the Central Region and 17% in the Northern Region (*Malawi Social Action Fund Monthly Digest*, September 1997: 17). Almost 80% of community projects are in the education sector and they consist of classrooms, teachers' houses and school administration blocks (Tsoka 1997: 25).

The preponderance of education projects may be a reflection of the importance that people attach to primary education in the wake of the government's free primary education policy inaugurated in October 1994; or the influence of headmasters and teachers as opinion leaders in the identification of community projects.

In a country with poor health indicators like Malawi, it may be expected for health projects such as health units to feature prominently, yet they account for about 4% of MASAF funded projects. This, however, should not be taken to mean that communities do not appreciate the need for health facilities: it has to do with government policy which stipulates that there should be no health units within 8km of one another (MASAF Management Unit 1998: 5).

In view of this policy, MASAF funds health projects for which there is prior commitment by government upon completion (*Malawi Social Action Fund Quarterly Report*, October-December 1996: 6). This policy was apparently designed to keep the number of health units within limits, so the government can afford to provide the necessary human and material resources. The effect of this policy, however, is to deny some communities access to free medical treatment available at government health facilities, when the facilities within the 8km radius charge fees (cf Kishindo 1994: 208).

District distribution of MASAF funded projects in 1996 and 1997 (2) revealed that Blantyre district in the Southern Region had the largest number of MASAF funded projects in the country, while Thyolo in the same region had the lowest (*Malawi Social Action Fund Quarterly Report*, October-December 1996: 12; *MASAF Monthly Digest*, September 1997: 17). This is attributed to two major

factors:

- (a) MPs representing rural constituencies in the area are very active in mobilising people for self-help projects;
- (b) a large proportion of the district's rural population has been exposed to better living conditions during their visits to Blantyre city, making it easy for them to appreciate the need for community improvement projects.

The low level of community projects in Thyolo is attributed to a number of factors:

- (a) community disillusionment with development agencies based on past experience when promises of funding were not honoured;
- (b) reluctance of communities to make an upfront contribution;
- (c) the non-existence of Area Development Committees;
- (d) inactive political and traditional leaders who do not seem to appreciate the importance of self-help in community improvement (*Malawi Social Action Fund Quarterly Report*, October-December 1996; cf Tsoka 1997: 22).

The fundamental problem in Thyolo could be disillusionment with development agencies, including the government, who failed to honour their promises of support for community-initiated projects. Disillusionment with the way government assistance was distributed to communities and projects, was identified in 1987 as a major contributory factor to the decline of the self-help spirit in rural Malawi (Malawi Government 1988: 126).

The feeling of having been cheated, could have made grassroots political leaders and chiefs lose interest in community development work, accounting for their reluctance to facilitate the formation of development committees. In these circumstances, MASAF appeared as one more unreliable development agency. Without the authority of chiefs, mobilisation of community resources including labour, becomes difficult if not impossible.

It is possible that the situation in Thyolo and other districts with low levels of community projects, such as Mwanza and Nkhata Bay, has changed since 1997 and that more development projects have been carried out (2). But if the 1996 and 1997 trend continues, then Thyolo and those other "inactive" districts will continue to lag behind, negatively affecting their social infrastructure and ultimately their quality of life.

(2) At the time of writing, 1998 and 1999 distribution figures were not readily available.

Concluding Remarks

MASAF's demand-driven approach to project funding introduces the element of competition in community development. A community can obtain funding for as many projects as it manages to complete. Communities with leadership that is able to initiate or support development institutions are more likely to advance in terms of infrastructural development, than those who lack such leadership. The approach effectively penalises communities with poor leadership and/or lazy members. Ultimately, imbalances in the distribution of social and economic infrastructure between geographical areas and communities will widen. If the 1996 and 1997 pattern persists, the gap between Blantyre, regarded as the most socially and economically developed district in the country and Thyolo, one of the most under-served in terms of social amenities, will continue to widen unless there is direct intervention by government or non-governmental organisations to redress the imbalance.

The Ministry of Community Services, responsible for community development, with the assistance of other ministries and government agencies, such as District Administration and National Economic Council (NEC); should map the distribution of social infrastructure such as schools, health units, post offices, and water supply systems in relation to population distribution. Such a map would reveal which areas are under-served in terms of social services and infrastructure and would form the basis of intervention by government or non-governmental organisations. It would also provide MASAF with a basis for prioritising funding requests from communities. On the basis of this map, deprived areas would receive priority consideration for project funding.

In under-served areas which are unable to initiate their own development projects, it would become the responsibility of community development agents to help these communities recognise their problems and how best to solve them. Until such a time as "development-conscious" leadership at the grassroots becomes more widely distributed, such leadership may have to come from outside. Thus, there is a role for community development agents in the context of the new demand-driven approach to community project funding, to help communities recognise their needs, articulate them to relevant authorities and potential supporters, and organise themselves to implement solutions.

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