

3. Building for the Future

Fostering local accountability in Malawi



Communities mobilise to demand their right to health care on World Health Day, organised by the Malawi Health Equity Network. The Malawi Economic Justice Network was one of the partners involved in the day.

President Hastings Banda held office in Malawi from 1964 to 1994. He discouraged any kind of participation in political decision-making, often under pain of death or imprisonment. Today, 15 years later, people in Malawi are still afraid to speak out. They do not have the experience or the structures to engage effectively in local advocacy work. This paper shows how the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace (CCJP), supported by Oxfam, set about building confidence and economic literacy in local communities. Through learning about budget monitoring, ordinary men and women were able to begin to engage with those in power in order to improve their communities. If elections happen as proposed in 2009, these people will be in a good position to bring about real change on the ground.

Introduction

Malawi is a poor country. It ranks 164th out of 177 countries in the United Nations Human Development Index. Adult literacy between 1995 and 2005 was 64 per cent. Between 1990 and 2005, 20.8 per cent of people lived on less than \$1 a day and 62.9 per cent on less than \$2 a day.

From 1964, when Malawi gained its independence from the British, until 1994, when President Hastings Banda was ousted by a referendum, the country was a one-party state. Although President Banda came to power after defeating other parties, in 1971 he imposed a one-party system in Parliament, using his Malawi Congress Party majority. The constitution was then amended to recognise only one party, and he was made President for life.

President Banda not only banned other political parties, he discouraged and punished dissent or any form of political participation. People who tried to voice their opinions were punished through detention without trial, forfeiture of property, or exile.¹ Many chose to be passive as one way of keeping out of political trouble.

In May 1994, there was a general election which saw Banda being ousted and a new president, Bakili Muluzi, elected. The new constitution provided for democratic governance and limited presidential terms of office to five years. It also enshrined the rights of every individual to be heard. The 1994 general elections were followed with others in 1999 and 2004.

In 1998, a decentralisation policy enhanced local governance and gave local government more power. Local councillors were made accountable for prioritising development initiatives in the wards they represented, and for ensuring that resources channelled to local government were used appropriately.

However, the decentralisation policy was never fully applied, because local elections were not held as expected in 2004. There were many theories but no official explanation for this. Since then, Malawi has had no local councillors.² This has had an impact on the development of local democracy and on people's participation, as there are effectively no local representatives for decisions made at local level.

The Economic Literacy project

Recent studies have shown that it is still not easy for poor and vulnerable communities in Malawi to demand their rights.³ They have little experience in speaking out and lack the knowledge and the confidence to know how to bring about change. It was for this reason

that the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace in Malawi (CCJP), and the Malawi Economic Justice Network (MEJN), with Oxfam providing financial and technical support, set up the Economic Literacy project, which ran between 2005 and 2007.⁴

The Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace (CCJP) and the Malawi Economic Justice Network (MEJN)

The Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace (CCJP) was established in 1996. The objective of the Commission is to create awareness and knowledge on social justice and human-rights issues in order to provide a breeding ground for integrated development and peace in the country. For example, CCJP has recently translated the Malawian Constitution into two local languages, and educated local trainers who distribute the constitution in villages and educate communities on human rights. CCJP also focuses on creating networks with the government and other organisations working to improve justice, human rights, democracy, and good governance.⁵

The Malawi Economic Justice Network (MEJN) is a coalition of more than 100 civil-society organisations with activities in the field of economic governance. MEJN's membership includes non-government organisations, community-based organisations, trade unions, representatives of the media, and academics, among others.⁶

MEJN worked on the project at national level, carrying out budget analysis and expenditure tracking and organising meetings with civil society to lobby MPs on specific commitments. CCJP worked locally to empower communities with the relevant knowledge and skills to hold their local councils accountable for their budgets.

The idea was to promote participation in order to enhance accountability and foster economic literacy, which would then lead to more active participation. People would then have the confidence to be able to demand their rights for the provision of basic social services such as water, or medical care, at local assembly and other levels, in the absence of local councillors.

MEJN would promote broad demands for health, education, and agriculture, for example, at national level, while CCJP would ensure that local communities were able to make similar demands at local level in three districts. CCJP built on the work it had already undertaken with the communities in these districts. It was important that trust had already been established and the groundwork done. CCJP was able to work both with formally recognised government structures and informal social networks. Through their structures, and in consultation with the district assembly, they identified the target communities where the project was to be carried out.

How the project worked

The project involved the participation of local people right from the design and planning stages. Gender, HIV, and AIDS were themes that ran through the whole project. There were three main stages:

- 1 A survey of social-service delivery in three districts
- 2 Consultation with opinion leaders and district executive committees
- 3 Organising communities for action

A survey of social-service delivery

Before the project began, CCJP carried out a social survey⁷ of the areas where the project was intending to work, including Mayaka, Liwonde, Mlombozi, St. Lwanga in Zomba, Zomba Cathedral, Malemia, and Magomero. This was to assess the different social groupings in the survey area, identify which villages should be prioritised, and provide a map of the social services that people were currently using.

In the survey, communities raised a number of key concerns affecting their participation in society. These included the negative impact that HIV and AIDS had on many households; gender injustice, such as violence against women, due to deeply held cultural beliefs; and access to essential services such as water, health, and education. In addition, participants talked about the non-responsiveness of leaders and local government staff, and the dysfunctional state of local government structures resulting from the fact that local elections had not taken place in 2004.⁸

Ideas from the consultations on economic literacy

The consultations identified a range of problems and needs including access to drinking water, a health clinic, roads and bridges, schools, teachers and teaching aids, electricity, an irrigation scheme, market sanitation and security, and loans.

'We feel the national budget has nothing to do with us. We do not see how it benefits us. We have lost interest because we do not see the benefits trickle down to us', said village headman John Allabi Msosa who wants the government to build a school in his area and a bridge over the river on the Msosa–Mapanje road.

'We are thankful that CCJP has opened our minds. We now have an idea how we can get our needs to the attention of government through existing structures. Now we can meet and discuss development. We can discuss at village level, area level, traditional authority level, and then the assembly. In the absence of councillors, we know what to do', said senior group village head Mwembele.

For people from Jali, life would have been more bearable were schools built at Kholomana, Likoko, Jalitu, and Lamiteje, where pupils currently have to travel a long distance to go to school in Musheka. 'The result has been that the youngest of pupils have been disadvantaged. They either cannot make it to the school on foot or get there when classes are halfway through. In Mwambo, the classroom blocks are inadequate.'

'We also require a toilet at Jali market, a health clinic at Mpsa and at least one more ambulance', Hilda Kalinde, a hospital ward attendant, said.

At Magomero, unemployment, drinking water, access roads, and bridges came top on their needs list. 'Our children have problems when it rains as the bridge is in bad shape.'

Participants in Liwonde talked about health clinics being needed in Naungu, Kalonjele, and Nlyiwo; school blocks at Liwamba, Naungu, and Mombe; and boreholes at Kumbani, Nliwo, and Naungu, where people travel 20km to the nearest source of drinking water.

CCJP Economic Literacy Project Newsletter, February 2007, from and article by Gabriel Kamlomo

Consultation with leaders and district executive committees

The next stage consisted of a consultative process that brought together key opinion leaders including chiefs, religious leaders, and other leaders. Through a series of trainings, they were taken through basic concepts of budgeting at family level, and the importance of participating in local assembly budgets.⁹

Organising communities for action

CCJP facilitated a process of mobilising communities to ensure that as many people as possible were participating. This was mainly done through village discussion groups. From the initial stages, the targeted communities were involved in prioritising and shaping the project. A typical discussion group comprised 10–15 households (40–100 people). Each group had a small steering committee, which was responsible for collating issues and following them up in liaison with the CCJP co-ordinators.¹⁰ The steering committees, which had up to ten members, were comprised of equal numbers of men and women.

Each steering committee was trained for three weeks, using participatory methodologies, in the basics of economic literacy and how budgets work.¹¹ This meant that over the period of the project there were increasing numbers of people in the communities willing to add their voices on issues affecting them, such as lack of support to orphans and vulnerable children, or the unavailability of health workers.¹²

Changing minds through economic literacy lessons

The gathering on this humid February Thursday did not appear unlike any other at Mayaka Catholic Parish grounds in Zomba save for the fact that this group of 84 men and women drawn from different religious denominations, the business community, and traditional leaders sitting under a tree shed had come on a unique mission: an Economic Literacy class.

Members of the gathering raise hands and periodically take to their feet to contribute to a discussion on how a family would ensure the availability, all year round, of its everyday needs such as food, shelter, and clothes. During such discussions, the participants, largely people with low levels of literacy, get enlightened on issues of economic rights, governance, and justice.

For example, Magret Chidima, 36, of Mlima village in traditional authority Malemia at Domasi in Zomba, had no idea that the money government announces as national budget included her own monetary contributions until this Thursday. 'I could hardly connect the tablet of soap that I buy every day for home use to the national budget. I am actually amazed to learn that the roads and bridges are built using our own money', said Chidima.

'With this project, we want to build the capacity of rural communities...to promote socio-economic justice. CCJP is trying to make people see the importance of taking part and influencing budgeting at family, community, and national levels', said CCJP Co-ordinator for Zomba Diocese, Clemence Alfazema.

CCJP Economic Literacy Project Newsletter, February 2007, from an article by Gabriel Kamlomo

In the course of the project, community representatives made a number of visits to their district assemblies to follow up on issues, and to put forward their demands. They also began monitoring development activities in their respective areas, and made quarterly reports in the local language. As a result of increasing community confidence, communities in the project areas were able to take traditional leaders to task over allegations of corruption, for example, during the distribution of fertiliser coupons.^{13,14} Issues of bias in allocating district assembly resources were also raised.

Mainstreaming gender, HIV, and AIDS

In carrying out the project, efforts were made to see how lack of access to basic services affected men and women differently, with a view to addressing any gender challenges that women faced.¹⁵

CCJP felt that participation could not be complete and effective if women, who make up the majority of the population in the rural areas, were left out. CCJP undertook training on gender and put theory into practice by inviting equal numbers of men and women to the various trainings. This built on previous workshops on gender justice and human rights, which meant that there was less opposition than there might otherwise have been. Gender guidelines were drawn up by the community groups to ensure equality - for example, if the chairperson was a man, the deputy would be a woman.

Over the course of the project, women became more confident in speaking out, and some even had leadership roles. There was also a change in attitude towards women's voice and participation. Changing perceptions and gender attitudes is not an easy or a short intervention. It requires sustained efforts over a period of time. In a small way, however, this project started a process to show that both women and men have the right to speak out on issues affecting them.

Another issue on which CCJP felt it was important to train, in the context of economic literacy, was HIV and AIDS. In Malawi, more than 14.4 per cent of people aged 15 to 49 are infected with HIV.

Those who fall ill or die are often the most productive members of the community. The Economic Literacy project therefore included a session on the impact of HIV and AIDS on the community, in which participants are taught how an individual's illness would affect the economic welfare of a single home or family, the community they live in, and eventually the country.¹⁶ 'When someone is taken ill, people tend to dedicate most of their time to caring for that person. That way, work in the field suffers. Eventually, a family's yearly incomes are negatively affected. People will need money for drugs for the patient, travel to places for medical help', explained Yusuf Stefano of Namahiya village in Chikowi traditional authority.

Successes, challenges, and lessons learned

The fact that local elections had not been held and that there were no local councillors was a big challenge for the project. It meant that in order to work on local budget accountability there also had to be a parallel focus on advocacy work, trying to get the national government to reinstate councillors at local government level and to put in place village development committees. Despite this challenge, the project succeeded in motivating ordinary citizens to participate and exercise their right to be heard on local budgets.

The project achieved two key successes:

- CCJP is now working on advocacy to ensure that local elections take place in 2009. The project built a good foundation for this work to take place. The fact that CCJP had already worked with and mobilised the target communities beforehand meant that it was not difficult to engage with these communities, since initial contacts and ways of working had been established.
- As a result of the project, many communities were able demand their rights and take local authorities to task. For example, initially, district assembly officials were reluctant to meet up with community representatives. Over time, however, and through a number of interactive meetings, there was more dialogue, and power relationships tipped in favour of the targeted communities. Local bureaucrats received delegations, and even visited local communities. The project also enhanced general participation, and allowed people confidently to voice their concerns about resource allocation to the local assembly administration.

One of the factors that helped achieve some of these successes was the fact that CCJP co-ordinators in the field used participatory methodologies in interacting with communities. Participation was therefore built into the project from the start. The surveys helped to unearth underlying factors impeding people's participation, such as lack of local government structures, gender biases, and the need for sustained facilitation and provision of knowledge – such as education

on health rights, democracy, and HIV and AIDS – as well as skills to communities. These, and peoples’ interest, led to increasing consciousness about basic entitlement to social-economic rights such as water and health.¹⁷

Village communities in Malawi have lots of energy and know what issues are most important for them. What they lack are the mechanisms to engage effectively with local government and hold their representatives accountable. Despite experiencing some constraints, the project managed to build capacity for advocacy, especially on economic justice issues. It promoted the mobilisation of communities around common issues in the targeted areas. And it began a process of empowering communities to enable them to participate and demand accountability from local authorities. When the elections do finally happen, hopefully in 2009, local people will be in a good position to know how to carry out effective advocacy work with the newly elected representatives.

Notes

¹ There were a number of laws such as the Forfeiture Act, Penal Code, and others which were used to punish those who opposed President Banda. It should be noted that most of these were amended when Malawi adopted a multi-party system of government and put in place a new constitution in 1994. The 1994 constitution established the National Compensation Tribunal to compensate victims of the one-party rule.

² The constitution requires that local government elections should be held every five years in accordance with the Local Government Act, 1998.

³ For instance, the 'Malawi Annual Human Rights Report' (2006) and 'Human Rights Needs Assessment' (2004), Malawi Human Rights Resources Centre.

⁴ This rationale was based on CCJP's own experience in working with rural communities in Malawi generally, but also in the areas where the project was implemented. CCJP included this reason as part of the background and justification for their interventions.

⁵ Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace, www.ccjp-lilongwe.org; DanChurchAid Malawi 'Human Rights Organisations in Malawi', www.danchurchaid.org/sider_paa_hjemmesiden/where_we_work/africa/malawi__1/read_more/human_rights_organisations_in_malawi (last accessed September 2008).

⁶ Malawi Economic Justice Network, www.mejn.mw/ (last accessed September 2008).

⁷ CCJP (2006) 'Progress Report', April.

⁸ CCJP completed another survey in January 2008 where this issue also came out clearly.

⁹ CCJP (2005) 'Project document'.

¹⁰ This information comes from project visits and progress project reports from CCJP.

¹¹ CCJP (2006), *op.cit.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ See for instance the Ministry of Agriculture's 'Input Subsidy Programme 2007/08'.

¹⁵ Several studies have documented the fact that women face more gender injustices than men. See for example WILSA (Malawi) (2000) *In Search of Justice: Women and Administration of Justice in Malawi*, Blantyre: Dzuka Publishing Company.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ See sections 25 and 30 of the Malawi constitution, respectively.

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