

Creating a dialogue to influence policy

Validated RNRRS Output.

Communities in Malawi use video as a tool to create dialogues and make their voices heard. Using video helps villagers first review their own position critically. Then, their representative can present their case at crucial meetings, reinforced by the video of statements from villagers. Through this process, communities discover new skills: researching, analysing, expressing themselves, making presentations, negotiating and team building. They become self-confident. Women speak up, even outside their communities. Spokespersons find out who to meet with, and what they need to do to become part of decision making. Villages get together to plan around common needs. And, their representatives become accustomed to reporting back. Proven in Malawi, these dialogues are now spreading to Vietnam, Ghana, and Sierra Leone.

Project Ref: **FRP48:**

Topic: **6. Promoting Success: Partnerships, Policy & Empowerment**

Lead Organisation: **Natural Resources Institute (NRI), UK**

Source: **Forestry Research Programme**

Document Contents:

[Description](#), [Validation](#), [Current Situation](#), [Environmental Impact](#),

Description

FRP48

Research into Use

NR International
Park House
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Aylesford
Kent
ME20 6SN
UK

Geographical regions included:

[Malawi, Sierra Leone,](#)

Target Audiences for this content:

[Crop farmers, Livestock farmers, Fishers, Forest-dependent poor,](#)

A. Description of the research output(s)

1. Working title of output or cluster of outputs.

In addition, you are free to suggest a shorter more imaginative working title/acronym of 20 words or less.

Empowering the rural poor to communicate with and influence government.

2. Name of relevant RNRRS Programme(s) commissioning supporting research and also indicate other funding sources, if applicable.

Forestry Research Programme

3. Provide relevant R numbers (and/or programme development/dissemination reference numbers covering supporting research) along with the institutional partners (with individual contact persons (if appropriate)) involved in the project activities. As with the question above, this is primarily to allow for the legacy of the RNRRS to be acknowledged during the RIUP activities.

R6297

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The main collaborating organisation and individuals with which the project was devised:

- The Ministry of Energy and Mining, Malawi (Lewis Mhango and Dennis Mwangonde).
- Dr Su Braden, Independent Consultant (leader of participatory approach)

Other collaborating organisations and individuals in Malawi were:

- Department of Forestry (Nyuma Mughogho, John Ngalande, Tresfore Ketulo)
- Tadeyo Shaba (Cure)
- Angela Mugore (Congoma)

4. Describe the RNRRS output or cluster of outputs being proposed and when was it produced? (**max. 400 words**).

This requires a clear and concise description of the output(s) and the problem the output(s) aimed to address.

Please incorporate and highlight (in bold) key words that would/could be used to select your output when held in a database.

Project R6297 began in 1995 with a focus on rural energy and the reasons why rural people were not adopting fuel-efficient stoves in development programmes. However, this concern with the non-adoption of fuel-efficient stoves came from the 'fuelwood crisis' thinking of the 70s and 80s and whilst fuelwood is an issue in some parts of Malawi, it was found to be only one of a number of development priorities in the villages where initial (more extractive) participatory research was conducted – before the adaptation of the project (in 1996-8) to a more powerful, empowering approach.

The methodology addressed the lack of **accessibility to/influence over Government**, and the **planning process**, for a largely illiterate rural population.

The project developed a **method** for addressing this lack of influence over governmental decision-making.

The method addressed the problem by helping rural villagers in Malawi to:

- **learn** how to access government by going through the process of communicating with and addressing government representatives at different levels; and
- **use visual literacy** - by using the audio visual tool of video with its facility for immediate replay, the approach enables rural communities first to research, and then to represent their ideas and problems to Government. This latter aspect of the process included live representation by members of local communities at a national forum, alongside their collectively produced video statements, and demonstrated the **democratic process** of dialogue to all concerned.

The **innovative methodology**, developed over several decades by Dr S Braden, involves a **cyclical** process of building **rural people's capacity to research** their diverse hardships as well as their proposed solutions and to present these to Government and policy-makers, with feedback to the rest of the village.

Capacity was built in two villages in Northern and Southern Malawi via the participatory communication research process (and rural energy issues explored in the first, more narrow participatory research exercise in Pansuwo Village, Nsanje District, Southern Malawi).

Follow-up work in Malawi and Sierra Leone with ActionAid has allowed further evolution of this methodology. The follow-up has **sustained the interaction and dialogue** between villagers and with government, NGOs, etc. It has supported the **formation of alliances among villages** focused around their needs and facilitated villagers to review their own statements and views critically - before representing them to authorities. The methodology is cyclical because it includes reporting back by village representatives who speak at the national forum, to their village alliance members.

5. *What is the type of output(s) being described here?*

Please tick one or more of the following options.

Product	Technology	Service	Process or Methodology	Policy	Other Please specify
			X		

6. *What is the main commodity (ies) upon which the output(s) focussed? Could this output be applied to other commodities, if so, please comment*

The initial focus of the project was on rural energy and trees, however, the participatory approach adopted could be applied to any aspect of empowering marginalised peoples to increase their voice and ultimately achieve improvements in their quality of life.

7. *What production system(s) does/could the output(s) focus upon?*

Please tick one or more of the following options. Leave blank if not applicable

Semi-Arid	High potential	Hillsides	Forest-Agriculture	Peri-urban	Land water	Tropical moist forest	Cross-cutting
							X

8. What farming system(s) does the output(s) focus upon?

Please tick one or more of the following options (see Annex B for definitions).

Leave blank if not applicable

Smallholder rainfed humid	Irrigated	Wetland rice based	Smallholder rainfed highland	Smallholder rainfed dry/cold	Dualistic	Coastal artisanal fishing

9. How could value be added to the output or additional constraints faced by poor people addressed by clustering this output with research outputs from other sources (RNRRS and non RNRRS)? (**max. 300 words**).

The approach employed and developed in this project, has actually been evolving over a number of years, led by Dr S. Braden. During the second half of the 1990s training projects were run with NGO personnel: Oxfam in Vietnam, Oxfam in Ghana and Uganda, as well as in Malawi (with the Ministry of Energy and Mining – R6297). The experiences of each of these projects contributed to the development of the overall methodology. It would be fruitful to explore how the different processes have progressed in practice and to analyse the barriers to the sustainable implementation and institutionalisation of such village-government dialogue. The principles underpinning the approach and the structured cyclical process itself are of the utmost importance and relevance in all spheres of international development practice, but there remain significant difficulties to overcome and resources to be acquired if such a process is to be sustainable in the long-term. The approach makes the political dimensions of development processes explicit, trying to seed and support rural social movements – something which cannot be controlled by authorities, which may not be predictable, and which suffers if not given long-term commitment. However, it is the only way to facilitate real empowerment through external intervention.

In Latin America there are examples of sustained support for community participation in regional planning processes (e.g. Porto Alegre participatory resource budgeting). Certainly new thinking on rural territorial planning emerging from Latin America fits, at least on paper, with the innovative approach outlined here – because it tries to marry real community participation with more responsive institutional landscapes at the regional level (incorporating urban-rural dynamics, territorial social and spatial identities, new partnerships to deliver interlocking, demand-led services) to achieve sustained, structured democratic citizenship and influence over decision-making by poor and marginalised communities, including rural communities.

Please specify what other outputs your output(s) could be clustered. At this point you should make reference to the circulated list of RNRRS outputs for which proformas are currently being prepared.

Validation

B. Validation of the research output(s)

10. How were the output(s) validated and who validated them?

Please provide brief description of method(s) used and consider application, replication, adaptation and/or adoption in the context of any partner organisation and user groups involved. In addressing the “who” component detail which group(s) did the validation e.g. end users, intermediary organisation, government department, aid organisation, private company etc... This section should also be used to detail, if applicable, to which social group, gender, income category the validation was applied and any increases in productivity observed during validation (max. 500 words).

The approach outlined here focuses on empowering those who do not have a voice – whether within the household, community or nationally, i.e. at whatever level of analysis.

Unlike in the development of a specific technology, a methodology or approach that empowers the rural poor to engage with government is likely to be inherently appropriate and will as a result be validated by the rural poor that participate – as long as the process is facilitated properly. It is not easy to facilitate well – the process requires investment of resources, good facilitation skills for participatory learning and action and if employing video, then technical skills in video production/editing in the field. The difficulties of managing sensitive and high quality participatory approaches have been widely documented and is evidenced by the large number of ‘participatory’ approaches that end up being extractive, mechanical and even disempowering. Moreover, in conventional policy-making ‘the problem is that the process of analysis and abstraction tends to marginalise communities on the one hand and fails to engage the policy makers on the other’ (Holland. J, with Blackburn. J, 1998 ‘Whose Voice? Participatory Research and Policy Change’. IT Publications, UK). The need to change the attitudes of staff in governments and NGOs, including policy-makers and those providing front-line services has been well-documented. They need to be able to facilitate the kind of process described here, enabling rural communities to articulate and represent their visions and crucially to be able to respond appropriately – something that requires changes in thinking, resources, organisational culture etc.

Enabling the rural poor to participate in dialogue with government provides opportunities for them to influence policies, to understand better how governmental policies are developed in reality and how rural people might be able to demand improvements and assistance – as well as to understand where this might not be forthcoming. This is why the methodology is applicable to any area of policy-making that might affect disempowered and marginalized groups – or wherever there are power imbalances (e.g. intra-household, intra-community, inter-community, between community and government or civil society or private sector etc) – i.e. where support is required for the disempowered to magnify their voice in a decision-making process.

Staff from a range of NGOs and government departments (especially the Ministry of Energy and Mining, and the Forestry Department) formed the research team, and further support was provided by NGOs active at the grassroots in the areas where fieldwork was carried out.

11. Where and when have the output(s) been validated?

Please indicate the places(s) and country(ies), any particular social group targeted and also indicate in which production system and farming system, using the options provided in questions 7 and 8 respectively, above (max 300 words).

The approach is applicable across social groups, production and farming systems and sectors – in fact it seeks to transcend such divisions aiming to support marginalised groups to articulate their priorities and solutions – without shoehorning this into categories that external researchers might use. Indeed this is one of the reasons why NGOs and governments find it difficult to respond to the more integrated perspectives and indigenous knowledge and categories of rural people.

In Malawi the R6297 project was conducted primarily in Chitimbe Village, Rumphi District in northern Malawi, and Chiling'oma Village, Thyolo District, southern Malawi. An initial participatory research exercise was also carried out in Pansuwo village, Nsanje District, southern Malawi.

The Malawi ActionAid Director in 1998, Edson Musopole, who attended the project workshop in Lilongwe, was impressed with the approach adopted and the capacity that had been built amongst the villagers presenting the village videos from Chiling'oma Village. This village fell within the operational area of ActionAid and the director decided to follow up the capacity already built there by providing further support to village plans. Following the Malawi FRP project, Dr Braden approached DFID and ActionAid who jointly supported a three-year research-training programme with ActionAid staff in Malawi and Sierra Leone.

Dr S Braden has also been developing this approach in other countries, e.g. Vietnam, Ghana, the UK, as well as in Malawi and Sierra Leone. Students she has trained in the Masters course – Television for Development (Southampton and Reading Universities) are also using this method worldwide.

Current Situation

C. Current situation

12. *How and by whom are the outputs currently being used? Please give a brief description (max. 250 words).*

As the research funding came to end there was no funding for *sustaining* the dialogue process, or systematically assessing impact. The initial responses of the policy-makers at the project workshop were positive - commitments were made to respond to the villagers' priorities. ActionAid staff valued the capacity created at the village level.

The most obvious area of 'uptake' is in the follow-on work in Malawi and Sierra Leone (ActionAid/DFID).

Individual team members are using the skills they obtained during the project and have gone on to train others. The videotapes were used in training large numbers of forestry extension staff.

Much has changed in the intervening years in Malawi government policy and organisation. The National Forestry

Programme (NFP), which formulated strategies through stakeholder consultation in 1998 under the Director of Forestry (who also attended the final project workshop), identifies the need for a move beyond 'fuelwood crisis' thinking and large donor investments in rural fuelwood programmes that largely failed because of: an inadequate understanding of household incentives and coping strategies; overemphasized rural fuelwood tree planting/fuel-saving technologies; overestimated people's willingness/ability to pay'.

(<http://www.malawi.gov.mw/Mines/Forestry/NFPStrategies%20and%20Priority%20Actions.pdf>). The NFP reflects the project approach in calling for institutional change to better meet the needs of the rural poor - two-way communication between policy-making and field action to generate the knowledge/motivation to make effective changes in government and for local level action to have a strong connection to higher levels to be in tune with and influence policy, to spread lessons and scale up success.

13. *Where* are the outputs currently being used? As with Question 11 please indicate place(s) and countries where the outputs are being used (max. 250 words).

ActionAid and local government staff (Salima District) by 2003 assisted some 20,000 rural people to engage in a process to help them understand how they could work together and access government. The previous experience in Malawi offered a useful precedent to the ActionAid Malawi team in engaging the co-operation of government. ActionAid programme workers in Sierra Leone, learnt that local people could approach government directly and discovered that in Malawi local government is elected. Fieldwork staff have documented their own learning in both cases.

David Chinyanya, Director of Planning/Development, Salima District said "There are several ways that we can bring issues onto the government agenda and one of them is exactly what this video has done to us today – it has brought issues that affect the communities onto our agenda. I believe that this is just the first stage. There should be several other stages where the issues those communities face should be brought on the agenda of government and other donors."

A similar process was developed in Sierra Leone and this still has resonances in ActionAid's work. Peter Tarawaly, DFID Community Reintegration Project, Kambia said: "...if communities are properly consulted and involved in the planning process of our interventions we will cut down on our failures and increase our successes in the implementation of our projects.. our notions about communities not being able to analyse their problems and represent themselves are wrong. If this process is taken forward I believe it will solve a lot of our planning problems."

14. *What is the scale of current use? Indicating how quickly use was established and whether usage is still spreading (max 250 words).*

Over the longer research period afforded by the second programme in Malawi and Sierra Leone it was possible to develop the cycle of village research and representation in significant ways. Thus the first stage of representation was extended laterally, as information put together by the first village, shared and amended its findings with surrounding villages, which also entered into an alliance around the findings. This process was repeated on three occasions with village clusters in the same region, until eventually a population of some 10,000 people were involved. At the second stage the cycle was also extended to include initial representation of the village alliance findings at a forum of the Executive committee of the District Assembly in Salima. This meeting and the

commitments made by local government was filmed and the video was shown back to the full membership of the village alliance. Some issues supported by the village alliance and the local assembly were too costly, or too technical (a bridge and a road to give access to local markets, hospitals and schools), for the District Assembly. These issues thus had to be taken by the village alliance, accompanied by representatives of the District Assembly, to National Government in Lilongwe. Commitments made by donors and Government were recorded as an audio-visual report back to the participating villages. Meanwhile the initial village alliance had independently extended its own membership, linking up with another similar population some distance away. By 2004 the village alliance included 20,000 people.

15. In your experience what programmes, platforms, policy, institutional structures exist that have assisted with the promotion and/or adoption of the output(s) proposed here and in terms of capacity strengthening what do you see as the key facts of success? (max 350 words).

The methodology outlined here aims to create a platform or learning alliance in rural areas – village alliances that can engage with local and national government, NGOs the private sector etc. Thus, the main project Output is this platform itself – certainly in the follow on work undertaken in Malawi and Sierra Leone, in which more funding has been available to sustain the process of interaction. In the FRP project – R6297 – a range of NGO and government staff were involved throughout the process, but the funding for follow-up was not available.

Factors in this success included the following:

- Overcoming communication barriers (reliance on written reports and of English as the dominant language) through use of video, supported community research and direct representation and new partnerships.
- Communities began planning and mobilising resources based on identified common needs across the whole constituency of Salima, rather than planning for their individual villages.
- Strengthening capacity of both staff and communities: Staff learnt to facilitate research and to record and edit video. Communities report having acquired skills in analysis, self-expression and presentation, negotiation and team building. This has led to increased community self-confidence. For example, women reported an ability to speak out even outside their communities and are represented at decision making at all levels.
- Both staff and communities reported knowing who to link up with at the district level, following links established especially with the district assembly structures- exposing them to various stakeholder fora where development issues are discussed. This has been helpful in terms of understanding how the district assembly structures operate and how decisions are made.

Environmental Impact

H. Environmental impact

24. What are the direct and indirect environmental benefits related to the output(s) and their outcome(s)? (max 300 words)

This could include direct benefits from the application of the technology or policy action with local governments or multinational agencies to create environmentally sound policies or programmes. Any supporting and appropriate evidence can be provided in the form of an annex.

This approach provides ways of empowering the rural poor to find sustainable solutions to their problems through working together and by making demands of government. New partnerships with civil society and government with local rural alliances provide all sorts of opportunities for economic development, improved planning, achieving more demand-led, interlocking public services (e.g. extension, marketing advice, education and health, more targeted and appropriate infrastructure provision etc).

25. *Are there any adverse environmental impacts related to the output(s) and their outcome(s)? (max 100 words)*

Not specifically.

26. *Do the outputs increase the capacity of poor people to cope with the effects of climate change, reduce the risks of natural disasters and increase their resilience? (max 200 words)*

The challenges posed by climate change are significant and it is already exacerbating the many difficulties faced by the rural poor. Finding ways of adapting and responding to climate change and natural disasters does not require only technical solutions, but requires the rural poor to be informed of likely changes and future problems and for them to develop coordinated responses that are integrated into the planning process.
