

Participation – A Promise unfulfilled? Building Alliance between people and government: Action Research for Participatory Representation.

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1. Introduction and Rationale

1.1 Introduction

How can communication processes and technologies overcome the barriers that prevent semi-literate and illiterate people from analysing and negotiating their own futures? How should we view the achievements of thirty years of INGO, national and international donor and government development programmes that left the supposed beneficiaries voiceless and outside the formal procedures of policy negotiation?

The promise of participation with its accent on partnership between government and people's organisations, generally termed community based organisations (CBOs), is nearly always found to be without substance or real power when examined in the micro context. It is simply not possible for resource-poor people to enter into partnership with more powerful organisations, who in this case are assumed to be governments, donors and NGOs, on any kind of equal basis, unless they are strengthened to analyse and document and to form alliances with other communities who have similar experiences and needs. The concept of partnership in development has to begin with the strengthening of analysis about needs, choices, causes and solutions at the grass roots. Power, or empowerment, comes through effective representation, as everyone who has lobbied knows. This action research looks at ways that alliances between resource poor people can be built around common concerns and priorities, and how, in turn, these alliances between villages or townships can move into partnership with local or district authorities and move towards representation at national and international government levels.

At a time when NGOs might be seen to have lost the plot and to have become no different from other bureaucracies, and just as inefficient, this research challenges development professionals. It suggests they should invest in human capital and access to information and representation by the people they serve in villages and townships.

The goals of this action research are to:

- ~~✓~~ find ways that resource-poor communities can research, analyse and represent their own needs and priorities to policy-makers and service providers and monitor responses.
- ~~✓~~ explore the use of video as a non-literacy based tool that can be shaped and produced by resource poor people
- ~~✓~~ extend participation and uses made of the methodologies by local groups;
- ~~✓~~ monitor any changes produced over the research period (three years) in the communication habits of an international NGO.
- ~~✓~~ Monitor learning and changes in local and national government policies and approaches in areas effected by the Action Research

It analyses ways that development workers can facilitate residents to engage in negotiations with policy makers for their own development. The Department for International Development (Difid) is funding the research for three years through the International NGO, Actionaid in two countries, Malawi and Sierra Leone.

This paper will concentrate on the progress of the research in Malawi, specifically in relation to grass roots representations about issues of food security. A number of important research reports have been written about the causes and effects of famine in Malawi during the period covered by this paper (2000-2002)¹, that have largely debated issues of National and International Government and Donor responses. By contrast this paper is concerned with micro-macro level representation and response.

The purpose of the methodology employed is to break through the isolation of largely illiterate resource-poor communities and to help them to move into the public sphere of representation and negotiation.

The process involves training teams of local development (Actionaid) workers to facilitate residents of villages and townships to use video recordings within their own communities, to document, analyse and problem solve, and externally, to build alliances with other communities and to negotiate with local and national government, and donors.

Actionaid is both a partner and a subject in this research. On one hand, findings are measured by the extent that all levels of the organisation, from the field through to management, at national and international level, can begin to adopt a more flexible and direct approach to communication, prioritising negotiation by people whose needs the organisation is designed to serve. The learning of staff and partners is included in this outcome. On the other hand, the success of the process must be seen in terms of the extent of participation and the uses made

¹ See, for example, Devereux,S. May 2002, **The Malawi Famine of 2002**, IDS, Sussex and Owusu, Kwesi and Ng'amba, Francis **Structural Damage, The causes and Consequences of Malawi's food famine** (2002) World Development Movement

of the methodologies by the village and township participants and the responses by governments.

Fig 1. Profile of Actionaid

Actionaid:

- ☒ Dependent for funding mainly on child sponsorship
- ☒ Highly developed system of planning and budgeting
- ☒ Reliant for all communication on sophisticated literacy skills
- ☒ Subject to pressure on spending certain levels of money within a specific time frame.
- ☒ Currently working through a structure of Regional Offices
- ☒ Highly developed system of Monitoring and Evaluation

NGOs are known by the sceptical for their slogans and their development jargon, but as someone said about a song²: You can't argue with a slogan. A famous one in Actionaid is currently "Fighting Poverty Together", the title of the Organisational Strategy (1999 -2003). Days of intense workshop discussions, that have included the articulation of nuance and doubts, arguments and counter-arguments, are finally distilled and encapsulated in a catchy phrase – a slogan. Some months later, the nuances and arguments forgotten, the slogan, too, loses most of its meaning. Questions about how 'together' we are, or even, whom we are fighting poverty together with, are no longer immediately apparent. A positive outcome of this action research would offer one way of testing the extent to which Actionaid is fighting in collaboration with their resource-poor constituencies.

For such a process of alliance building to be scaled-up and for links to be extended between resource poor people across regions and countries it is clear that the process is painstaking and that shortcuts cannot be taken if the promise of participation and true partnership in development is to be fulfilled. Good governance, when it is not confined to a definition of neo-liberal orthodoxy that embodies 'state policies that best enables markets to flourish' implies, rather, that there is a basis for genuine dialogue between people and government, and, of course, NGOs.³

Rationale

Globalisation in communication promised a new exchange not only between governments, but also between individuals and groups and those in power. Yet an examination of the practices and underlying philosophies of development in the 20th /21st Century reveal that the priorities and goals of the dominant economic powers in the developed world work to the detriment of the self-determination of the poorest peoples. As a result the practices that are often seen as the landmarks of development thinking could well be characterised as follows:

² To add: Marcel Maus reference

³ see Hersh, Good Governance for people Living in Poverty – Actionaid Policy intranet 2002

- ~~Modernisation~~ - the exploitation of third world dependency and capacity for debt;
- ~~Participation~~ - the masking of the real conflicts between the poor and those in power;
- ~~Advocacy~~ - the misrepresentation of the poor and the causes of poverty by jargonising elites.

The means by which economically powerful Governments and NGOs relate is corrosively familiar: projects designed and log-framed according to donor formats, salaries and funding for ex-patriots and elite cadres and experts whether from the North or the South; a buy-in to the ethos of economic and/or cultural globalisation; glossy publications, evaluations and reports; the branding of the poor as the advertised product of the NGO fundraising endeavour.

Fowler⁴ suggests that NGDOs are in the process of foregoing their original voluntarism and civic legitimacy in favour of public legitimacy derived from government support. The final report of the Conference 'NGOs in a global future' (convened at the University of Birmingham, Jan 1999), notes that many participants were concerned about: 'The issue of NGO "independence" at a time when they are receiving increasing amounts of donor money ... their proper role in relation to donors, governments and the private sector were recurring themes at the conference.'⁵ Tina Wallace⁶ speaks of 'the way in which financial resources are channeled to NGOs', and 'the nature of the relationships forged in the process, (that) determine NGOs' capacity' (Hudock, 2001,p2).

The changing agendas in the voluntary and community sectors is being reflected in the downgrading of micro development that has abandoned communities and local development staff to the respective roles of begging bowls and service providers. It has left village and township communities second guessing the most likely fashions in development inputs to be requested, while development staff are required to spend more and more time servicing the fund raising campaigns of their own organisations.

The danger presented by NGO collaboration in the processes of domination through globalisation, including languages, forms and media technology, has been dramatised by the events that have marked the new millennium. These events should encourage a new questioning of who is included and who is excluded from debates about how the world is governed, and should give emphasis to the importance of hearing voices from the grass roots. It is time to re-examine the concrete reality behind the slogans about empowerment.

⁴ Fowler, Alan, **NGOs in a future without aid**, paper for 'NGOs in a global future' Conference, convened at the University of Birmingham, Jan 1999

⁵ from Introduction, Final Conference Report, op cit.

⁶ Wallace T, Paper for ISST Conference, South Africa 2002

2. The literature and background

The current research has arisen from the development of practices and academic study involving communities in a number of countries in Africa, Asia and Europe. However the grounding of the research is found in a wide literature drawn from anthropology, communications and cultural studies as well as social history. The work of Paulo Freire had a seminal influence on the activism of a number of grassroots farmer and land reform groups, including Tet Kole in Haiti and Sem Terra in Brazil⁷. The use by both groups of the World Wide Web to disseminate their ideas, practices and the current state of affairs in their campaigns gives emphasis to their characteristic concern to produce a platform for negotiation and dialogue with the rest of the world. Yet their use of the Web also gives food for critical thought about who, even within such groups, has access. The issue of access to negotiation for equal contracts is clearly illustrated by the work on the ground, where negotiations are initiated by people who are acting on their own behalf with clear perceptions of their own interests. By contrast, their Web sites illustrate the failure of this electronic media to overcome the barrier presented by literacy and to extend access to the most excluded members of these groups.

Nevertheless, the importance of enabling marginalised resource-poor groups to put pressure on the state, private sector, development agencies and traditional institutions has been highlighted by groups such as Tet Kole, and Sem Terra.

Writers (Haberbas 1984⁸ Melkote 1991⁹) have analysed the development of mass media history and policy and they situate it within a long tradition of political thought about public participation. Habermas questions the boundaries that have traditionally surrounded the ideas of participation and representation that are reflected by the use made of the mass media in the professional development world. Fiske and Giroux (John Fiske (1993)¹⁰, Giroux and McLaren (1994)¹¹) raise the debate about the structure of power and how it is maintained from the point of view of the media, education and the State. Said¹² and Bhabha¹³ enlarge the debate to include issues of difference and the psychological, social and cultural perspectives of 'otherness'.

⁷ MST and Tet Kole websites

⁸ Habermas, J. (1989) The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society (T. Burger and F. Lawrence (trans.) Cambridge MA; MIT Press

⁹ Melkote, R., (1991) Communication for Development in the Third Word, Theory and Practice Sage

¹⁰ Fiske J. (1993) Power Play Power Works Routledge

¹¹ Giroux, H. and McLaren, P. (Eds) Between Borders (Routledge) 1994

¹² Said, Edward (1993) Orientalism, in Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory, a Reader. Williams, P and Chrisman, L (eds) Harvester Wheatsheaf

The introduction of the use of video as a documentary, and/or participatory tool, that can be used to support analysis, reflection and advocacy in the context of development programmes is not new. It was first introduced in under the auspices of the Canadian Film Board at the end of the 1960s and has since been used in various ways with poor and excluded communities throughout the world. In more recent times NGOs, including Oxfam, Actionaid and Cafod, as well as a number of national governments have trained personnel to use these approaches on a project, or programme basis. The term *participatory video* has been adopted and covers a broad range of work using the media with communities although it does not always address methodologies of micro-macro communication or the dominant forms of communication used by institutions concerned with development.

Fig. 2 Experience in the Field

Save the Children recently used participatory video as a *negotiating tool for quality of care*. Save worked with health care providers from the Ministry of Health in Peru to develop video socio-dramas depicting their perceptions of clients' attitudes and compliance. They also worked with community members to develop videos depicting their perceptions of health care providers' attitudes and services. Discussion on the videos was used to bring about better mutual understanding and negotiate compromises in defining and assuring quality of care.

Africare has used participatory video as a *tool for community mobilization* and as a *celebrity incentive tool*. In Mali, community members attending village assemblies learned about key behaviours related to cholera prevention and discussed how to integrate the behaviours into existing stories, fables or theatre, or to create a new socio-drama. The entire community then participated either as leads or "extras" in the story they developed, entitled "The Dirty Neighbour". The video also incorporated life-size marionettes that have belonged to the community youth groups (*tons*) for generations. Africare's child survival project in Dioro, Mali, produced a series of videos as awareness-raising and educational tools. Budget constraints led the project to use its own staff to produce and act in the dramas. An unanticipated outcome of the videos, shown in the project villages, was a dramatic increase in the popularity and credibility of the staff in these communities.

3. Elements of innovation in the current action-research

The elements of innovation introduced by the current research relate to the attempts to:

- i. integrate the participatory use of video into the day-to-day work of development workers with resource-poor people, with the objective of replacing themselves and their organizations as the principle analysts, strategic planners and negotiators for the development of these

¹³ Bhabha, H.K. (1986) **The other question: difference, discrimination and the discourse of colonialism**, in Barker, F., Hulme P., and Iverson M., Literature, Politics and Theory: Papers from the Essex Conference 1976-1984 Methuen

communities. The processes being tested in this action research aim to turn the role of NGO development workers from those of *animators, service providers, and field workers*, to facilitators of resource-poor people's own analysis and direct negotiation both within their communities and with policy makers and donors;

- ii. place communication, representation and negotiation by resource-poor communities within the strategic planning and communication policies of an International NGO.
- iii. Engage local and national government in these debates and link them into accountable alliances against poverty with resource poor communities.

In the author's experience working in other countries, there are two broad categories of communication work in which video production by resource-poor participants have proved to be useful. These are discussed in figure 3.

Fig 3. Two ways that the participatory video has been used in this Action Research:

- | | |
|-----|--|
| i. | Alliance Building and Advocacy - tapes that analyse and describe problems, issues and opportunities and lead to alliance building and advocacy around issues identified by resource-poor people. For example, the issue of access to public services, require alliances to be built between groups in similar conditions, and between groups, villages and townships and the Local Authority, in order for an advocacy campaign to be successful. |
| ii. | People to people learning - tapes about learning - "How to" "Why is this?" tapes which can be researched by one village and shown to other groups in similar contexts or conditions. For example, tapes are researched and produced by one village or township on:
?? budgeting and ordering materials and managing a banks account – and this could be used with many other similar groups in one area.
The originating village or township editorial group, or extension workers take this tape to other groups in the surrounding area. |

Participatory video productions are used to develop **alliances** between townships and villages, and between village clusters and local authorities and for **advocacy**. Viewings of tapes are carefully prepared with the group representatives and group editorial committees. Participants need to think through their objectives, so that at a showing to neighbouring villages comments can be added and alliances built. Representatives of allied groups are facilitated to attend future showings and meetings with authorities. (See Figs 4, 5 and 6.)

Fig 4. Village or Township Alliance Cluster

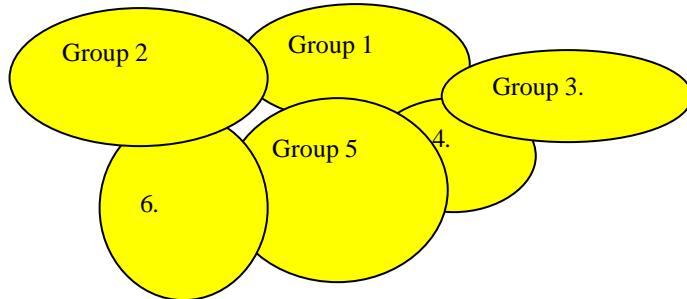
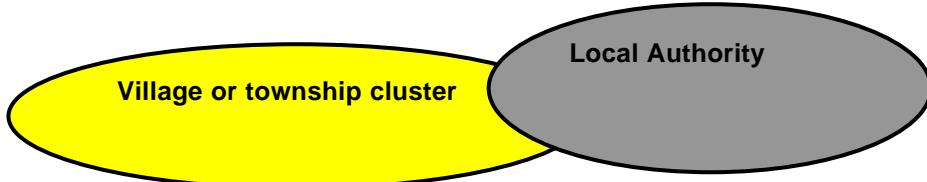


Fig 5. Village or Township cluster & District Authority Alliance:



Alliances are being formed, the public sphere of the debate is being extended, but further research about the extent of the problem is needed if a wider village alliance is to enrich the findings.. The facilitators (development worker participatory video team) cross check these issues with a second village or township by repeating the process in a neighbouring locality. Where the needs analysis is similar a second cluster can be linked with the first.

Fig 6. Second Village or Township Alliance (Increased Public Sphere)



4. Baseline research with Action aid staff

Actionaid's programme staff and partners in the participating country programmes, as well as staff in the London office, undertook the preliminary workshop stage of the research, where they examined the ways that media and language are used in day-to-day communications. They were surprised to find that even at only one step from the marginalised resource-poor communities both NGO staff and their partners use media and languages that exclude local participants from direct negotiations with service providers and government, or even from monitoring what is done on their behalf and how funding is managed.

The base-line workshops took place between the years 2000 and 2002 in Malawi, the UK and Sierra Leone. Fig 7 shows a sample of the findings from the Malawi workshop held in November 2000.

Fig 7. Findings and recommendations from Participatory Communication for Development workshop¹⁴, Malawi (Nov.2000)

Key Recommendations from the workshop discussions

- a) *The workshop examined issues of transparency that resulted from poor communication between service providers|policy-makers and “beneficiaries”.*

The workshop listed some essential aspects of knowledge that is not clarified to communities:

1. the amounts of funding available;
2. how policies are formalised, including our Long Term Plans and our Country Strategy Papers;
3. how child sponsorship is used;
4. the extent of ActionAid's contract with specific communities;
5. the existence of antiretroviral drugs for HIV/Aids

The workshop also noted that poorly developed communication between ActionAid and communities leads to blindness on the part of programme staff to local issues such as:

1. existing village coping mechanisms
2. specific culture and beliefs
3. weak analysis of field contexts by staff
4. the extent of our own influence on communities
5. community perceptions about our interventions

- b) *The workshop examined and compared existing preferred media employed by policy-makers and service-providers to communicate with, and about, ‘beneficiaries’, and the barriers presented by language, and translations between local, national and international working languages (specifically technical development jargon).*

It was agreed that the present preference demonstrated by service providers and policy-makers for non-verbal, literacy-based forms of communication, led to the exclusion of ‘beneficiaries’ from direct negotiation with, and between, service providers and policy-makers. (Fig. 8) The workshop concluded that translations through more than one language led to unnecessary distortions in communications between decision-makers and ‘beneficiaries’, and that the use of development jargon, sometimes led to misrepresentation, and made some essential debates and thinking inaccessible to communities.

- c) *The workshop examined and how ActionAid Malawi could develop a more transparent communications approach with beneficiaries.*

It was agreed that action-based research was needed to find ways that the ‘beneficiaries’ of development programmes could have direct and co-equal access to management and decision-making processes.

14 Workshop Participants

Ken Matekenya	Programme Manager DA 2
Siyileni Kumbuyo	Community Development Worker DA 1
Harry Chikandira	Community Development Worker DA 2
Dorothy Kalaya	Project Officer (Trainer) SFA
Boniface Msiska	Team Leader DA 5
Sam Chirwa	Sponsorship Coordinator DA 6
Lucy Chawinga	Community Development Worker
Eunice Zitha	Administrator, Govt
Kelvin Msampha	Health Assistant, Govt
Lindirabe Gareta	Sponsorship Coordinator DA 3
Robert Bai	Field Assistant, Govt
Charles Namikalo	Community Development Worker DA 4
William Bwanaope	Programme Learning and Development Officer

Many of the fundamental gaps in communications indicated in Figure 7. arise either from lack of transparency, or from blind assumptions, the extent of which became clearer as the action-research proceeded on the ground. In fact, looking back on the findings of this workshop, specifically in relation to development workers' descriptions of their own blindness to local custom and culture and issues such as local coping mechanisms in times of crisis, the findings show an enormous awareness by the participants of the weaknesses of the existing fieldwork process. Likewise findings about the lack of institutional transparency at the village level were presented ahead of experiments by ActionAid Kenya that took place with village communities in 2002, specifically in open-book accounting of funds raised through Child Sponsorship.¹⁵ Most relevant for the current action research were the findings around the use of language and forms of communication that create barriers at all levels between village communities and policy makers/service providers.

Figure 8 shows the analysis of the Malawi workshop participants, from their different perspectives, as Actionaid staff, or as Government extension workers, on the preferred form and language of communication used by different players at each level in the development process.

¹⁵ This was a first step in informing villages where children are sponsored about the levels of finance brought in, and establishing consultations about how the money is allocated. Child sponsorship is supported in Actionaid by a variety of fundraising and communication methods, including photographs and a bi-annual individual child letter addressed to the specific sponsor. The sponsor commits to a regular bankers order over a period of ten years. As a result villages and townships may have a certain number of children who are sponsored, while others are not. Although individual sponsors are informed that the money given in the name of a particular child will be used for development input for the benefit of the whole community, the communities have not, until now, been informed how much money is raised in this way by their children, or what proportion is actually spent in their village.

**Fig. 8 Communication diagram produced by ActionAid
Malawi Nov 2000**

From → To



	Donors	Gov.	NGOs	Churches	Private Sector	Ext. Agents	Communities
Donors	Mostly written English, little oral	Mostly written English, little oral	Mostly written English, little oral	Mostly written English, little oral	Written English only	No communication	Oral English or no communication
Gov.	Mostly written English, little oral	Mostly written English, little oral	Mostly written English, little oral	Oral English	Mostly written English, little oral	Mostly written English, little oral	Mostly written English, little oral
NGOs	Mostly written English, little oral	Mostly written English, little oral	Mostly written English, little oral	Mostly written English, little oral	Mostly written English, little oral	Mostly written English, little oral	Mostly oral – local language
Churches	Mostly written English, little oral	Mostly written English, little oral	Mostly written English, little oral	Mostly written English, little oral	Mostly written English, little oral	Little comm.-unication, oral or written	Little comm.-unication, oral or written
Private Sector	Mostly written English, little oral	Mostly written English, little oral	Mostly written English, little oral	Mostly written English, little oral	Mostly written English, little oral	Little comm.-unication, oral or written	Oral English or no communication
Ext. Agents	No communication	Mostly written English, little oral	Mostly written English, little oral	Oral English or no communication	Written English or no comm.-unication	Some written English mostly oral local language	Mostly oral – local language
Communities	No communication	Oral local language or no comm.-unication	Oral local language or no comm.-unication	Oral local language or no comm.-unication	Mostly oral – local language	Mostly oral – local language	Oral local language, signs, songs, drama, dance

The findings in Fig. 8 reveal the extent of the barriers presented by forms and languages of communication about development, and the resulting exclusion of those who are most concerned at the grassroots level. Residents of the townships and villages, the recipients, usually termed participants, of the development process are shown to have little or no access to negotiation about their own futures.

Parallel workshops held with Actionaid staff and government partners in Sierra Leone and the UK led generally to a confirmation of the Malawi findings, but the workshop with staff in the UK revealed a much keener concern with internal management and organisational politics. They discussed the issues in terms of the difficulties they found in day-to-day communication within the management and administration of Actionaid as an organisation.

5. Training and methodology

Training local development workers in the skills and methodologies to enable semi- and illiterate people to use video to record and analyse their own research and findings implies prioritising technical skills of the development staff themselves, and skills in creative facilitation and analysis. It can lead to questioning roles and structures of an NGO culture. The need to develop analytical skills amongst development workers arises from their roles within the methodology as facilitators of participant evaluation of needs, priorities and actions. This kind of analysis is regrettably not always part of their training.

While video is important as a tool than can enable communities to record and retrieve information, it is the analytical process enabled by this access to information that is the most valuable aspect of the training. Nevertheless, technical skills are required, as is technical equipment. The equipment used in both Malawi and Sierra Leone is described in Figure 9. Each country programme budgeted for the purchase of their own equipment, with advice and help from the principal researcher:

Fig. 9. Equipment base

1 x mini DV three chip camcorder including batteries and viewfinder wide angle and uv lens
1 x soft carry bag
2 x edit DVC PRO Video tape recorders
1 x edit controller
2 x monitors
1 x fluid head tripod with soft carry bag
1 x video projector
1 x rifle mike
1 x omni directional mike
2 x pairs headphones
1 x flight case for edit equipment tapes and spare sets of leads and extensions
1 x small generator
Budget as at June 2002 approx £10,500

The country programme based staff undertaking the action research joined an initial fifteen day training. This included an office-based technical workshop, involving management of production equipment (camera, tripod, microphones etc) and learning to film and to edit, and a village- or township-based practical workshop. The development team learnt to facilitate a village or township group, to enable residents to direct and use video to record and analyse local problems and issues. The use of video equipment is maximised by training development workers to act as a facilitating technical team, while local participants take the role of producers and editors of the recorded material. In this way the team and equipment remain mobile and can serve several areas in sequence and on demand.

The process developed during fieldwork training is summarised in figure 10.

Fig 10. Summary of Methodology Training

STAGES 1 - 5

Fieldwork - 10 days

1. Introductions to participants
2. Participatory observation, team members individually join in everyday activities with participants
3. Facilitating and recording village research and analysis using playback of tapes each day
4. Forming a participant editorial team and enabling them to facilitate an action and communication plan with the participants
5. checking and additional filming

STAGE 6

Rough editing – and agreeing final script with editorial team – 3/4 days

STAGE 7 – 2/3 days

Final edit and planning for participants to show their tape to a chosen audience, analysis of key action points, and training in advocacy. Some careful preparation with a chosen audience – whether local officials or policy makers is recommended, to prepare them to listen and respond to local people.

STAGE 8 – 1 day village participants show their tape to their chosen audience.

The role of the principal researcher before, during and after the training is described in Figure 11.

Fig. 11 Role of the principal researcher

The role of the principal researcher is to:

- ☒ provide an introduction to the analysis of communication between resource-poor people and service providers and governments;
- ☒ facilitate the country-programme to think through the selection of a local team of development workers for the initial technical and fieldwork training;
- ☒ advise and assist with the sourcing and purchase of equipment;
- ☒ train and supervise setting up of edit facility;
- ☒ develop facilitation, analytical and technical skills with the local teams;
- ☒ agree a research partnership and a programme of work with the team members and country programme;
- ☒ follow the progress of the team and offer support and further training when needed;
- ☒ develop team skills in facilitating advocacy between local resource poor people and service providers;
- ☒ feedback and develop networks between other levels and departments of Action aid's international organisation and the action research of the national teams.
- ☒ co-ordinate the compilation and dissemination of the research outputs.

6. The country programme sites for the Action Research study and their characteristics

The Actionaid country programmes that selected themselves for this comparative study were Malawi and Sierra Leone.

The two countries offer not only a geographical East/West African comparison, and a contrast between Malawi, one of the most resource-poor countries in Africa, and Sierra Leone which, in terms of natural resources (gold and diamonds), could be one of the most resource-rich, but also between a country which has known period of extended peace, with a country which is only just emerging from a ten-year civil war.

7. The Action Research in Malawi – failures in response

In Malawi the World Bank estimated in 1995 that 47% of the population was unable to meet its basic needs, and that by 2020 - two million people will be infected with HIV/Aids and a further two million will have already died of the disease. Globalisation has affected the poor of Malawi adversely through the depreciation of local economies, the fall in price of tobacco, the crop that represents 50% of the country's export earnings, and the high cost of fertilisers and seed. Malawi has a debt burden of 166% of GDP.

Smallholders constitute 56% of Malawi's farm families, and yet their expenditure on food can represent 63.2% of their income. A recent report on the causes of famine in Malawi (Devereux, S. 2002)¹⁶ states that: 'The famine followed a sequence of unfortunate events, production failure, information constraints, a depleted food reserve, import bottlenecks, unaffordable high food prices.' It adds that among the underlying causes of the famine the Government was instructed by the IMF to sell the Strategic Grain Reserve to repay a debt of MK 1 billion. Devereux also reflects the famine may have been further exacerbated by Government of Malawi policies that 'favour urban populations and the business sector, including the commercial estates, to the relative neglect of smallholder agriculture'.

The food crisis coincided in April 2002 with Malawi's suspension from Highly Indebted Poor Country (HIPC) interim debt relief by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, and subsequent controversy over corruption allegations against the Malawi Government and the fatal mismanagement of the country's strategic grain reserves. These events left the country tragically short of food and triggered a national crisis.

¹⁶ Devereux,S. May 2002, **The Malawi Famine of 2002**, IDS, Sussex, UK (draft for discussion) pp 1 and 2.

The decision to sell Malawi's grain reserves followed advice from the IMF to reduce operational costs and the level of buffer stocks held from 167,000 Metric Tonnes (MT) to 60,000 MT, in order to repay a South African bank for a commercial loan of US\$300 million, incurred by the National Food Reserve Agency (NFRA), when it was established as a quasi-independent agency.¹⁷

In an earlier paper, Devereux offers some more fundamental insights into the issue of food security in Malawi (Devereux 1999)¹⁸. In this paper he draws together research on informal safety nets, sometimes referred to as coping strategies, employed by the poor in times of food shortages, that involve drawing on support from other households. He points out, however, that in Malawi low urbanisation limits the abilities of rural households to cushion themselves against crop failures through remittances received from family members working in towns.

Coping strategies are adopted in a predictable sequence, determined not only by effectiveness but also by the cost and possibility afforded of reversal of each decision or action:

Fig 12 Devereux's sequence of coping strategies

- | | |
|----|---|
| ?? | Low cost strategies: drawing down savings and calling in remittances |
| ?? | Higher cost strategies with longer term implications come later, ie selling the plough |
| ?? | Finally, survival strategies (migrating off the land) reflect economic destitution and failure to cope. |

Internal networks have also been described as 'the moral economy'¹⁹ and development experts and political scientists relabelled this in the 1990s as 'social capital'²⁰, but Devereux warns that the moral economy can often prove extractive and exploitative.

Significantly, in his 1999 paper Devereux relates the problems of malnutrition in the maize growing areas not only to land shortage but also to shortage of production labour. This is an issue that does not reappear in his analysis of the 2002 famine, but it is one that is emphasised by the information arising from this action-research by the communities themselves.

¹⁷ Owusu, Kwesi and Ng'amba, Francis **Structural Damage, The causes and Consequences of Malawi's food famine** (2002) World Development Movement

¹⁸ Devereux, S., 1999, 'Making Less Last Longer': Informal Safety Nets in Malawi **IDS Discussion Paper 373**

¹⁹ Swift, J., 1989, 'Why are rural people vulnerable to famine' **IDS Bulletin**, 20(2):8-15

²⁰ Davies (1996:37)

7.1 The context of Salima District

The action research in Malawi was tested in Salima District where Actionaid has a small office in town with nine members of staff. Salima District is a flat terrain with isolated hills in what is known as a 'rain shadow'. In other words, despite being crisscrossed with streams and rivers, and including some of the lakeshore of Lake Malawi itself, it experiences frequent drought.

AA-Malawi Salima District Programme was set up at the end of 1995 to work in four of the poorest areas where 50.9% of the 8,500 households are female-headed. Population growth, according to the 1998 National Population Census is 2.9%. Actionaid Malawi's intervention has been in food security, primary healthcare, literacy, community institution building and response to emergencies such as floods and cholera.

In 2000, the Salima DA developed a new long term Strategy involving a contextual poverty analysis following thematic areas (Fig 13) that were seen as underlying the causes of poverty:

Fig 13. Thematic areas of Actionaid Malawi's work in Salima

- ☒ Low agricultural productivity
- ☒ Low educational provision
- ☒ Poor health
- ☒ Weak institutions
- ☒ High population
- ☒ Low income.

The average landholding size of subsistence farmers in the Salima DA is estimated as 0.73 hectares. Subsistence farming forms the major source of livelihoods throughout the rural communities in the District. It is said that there is not enough land to accommodate crop rotation, and that this in turn leads to soil degradation, a major cause of poor crop productivity.

Most parts of Salima District have poor access to public services due to lack of bridges across the rivers and streams. During the rainy season the rivers flood, cutting the population off from hospitals, schools and markets. This situation contributes to:

- ☒ School drop-outs as the average distance travelled to a senior primary school is 5kms. Performance of school attenders is affected by a shortage of qualified teachers willing to work in these areas.
- ☒ Poor health in the area is also the result of inconsistent and inaccessible public health resources, and even where health care is available, inadequate provision.

Actionaid's main inputs to date have been the provision of boreholes, training in sanitation and the management of boreholes, building under-five shelters, training communities about HIV/Aids, and the promotion of family planning.

A stated principle long-term strategy for the Salima DA is collaboration with stakeholders of similar interest in development at district and community level.

Concerns about food security are reflected in AA-M strategies to develop appropriate methods for advocacy in areas of food rights and building the ability of staff and the community to tackle advocacy issues. However, at the time of the current action research AA-M had contributed to Food Rights campaigns in Actionaid's Africa Regional forum and at international level but there was no evidence of a campaign at local level. In this context it is interesting to note that Salima was the hardest and first hit district in the 2002 famine.

7.2 The Action Research Area in Malawi

The pilot training in May 2001 for Actionaid Malawi's audio visual researchers began in Chitsulo, a village situated between the Rivers Lilongwe and Lithipe in what is known as Mwakhundi Island. Findings about food security, but also about lack of access to public services, which had led to nine deaths by drowning in that year, as people tried to reach the hospital by crossing the flooded river, confirmed what is described in the local programme strategy paper about the problems of draught and flood that plague the Salima District.

Within the first few days of work in the village, the process of recording and playing back the tapes to participants was interrupted by a series of deaths and funerals. There were four in three weeks, of which three were HIV/Aids related.

It was becoming clear that findings from this audio-visual research were likely to relate not only to the village participants, but also to the degree of analysis operating with the development team itself. For example, the Salima team's experience of participant observation in the village led them to reflect on the implications of four deaths in three weeks in a village of 32 households. The team confirmed that in their experiences this toll was not particularly abnormal or high. They said that they knew of a further six funerals taking place in neighbouring villages. This led them to consider the effect of loss of population on food production for the children and widows who remained. And this discussion led the team in turn to the issue of land distribution. How did the map showing the distribution of fields, many of which were owned by the elderly and infirm and remained uncultivated, relate to the supposed issue of shortage of land? What proportion of the population was physically capable of efficient cultivation, dependent mainly on hard manual labour with the hoe? Finally, the team were able to ask themselves how village residents would prioritise inputs if they could begin with a blank sheet, with information about the total funds available to a village through the sponsorship of their children at a given period.

This process of team reflection on the findings in the village tapes was an important stage in enabling them to support and deepen village reviews and reflections on the findings so far and to encourage analysis of the problems raised, their causes and possible solutions. Discussions revealed that much of the time the village participants were sensibly trying to second-guess what inputs ActionAid might be expected to provide, based on what they had learned from discussions with the development workers, and their knowledge of the agency's work in neighbouring villages.

The residents of Chitsulo had placed food security at the top of the list. Their solutions to the problems of food security echoed the known inputs supplied by Actionaid in the past, fertiliser, ox carts and ploughs and seed. However, the relation of food security to the second priority, the construction of a bridge to give access to Salima town with its hospital, market, schools, maize-mill and the cash economy required some teasing out.

The tapes recorded by the residents of Chitsulo show a village isolated from public services, dependent on agriculture, despite a workforce that is decreasingly fit and capable due to illness and deaths especially from HIV/Aids, recurring and severe food shortages and land underused and badly distributed. The village ranking of the need for a bridge, after that of food security, may indicate not only the need to reach public services, but also literally the only way that they could see a solution to staying alive by accessing the cash economy and other forms of work. In other words, it may be seen to signal their recognition of the failure of smallholder agriculture. This would echo a pattern of failure throughout Europe and the rest of the world in the current Global economic climate.

On the other hand, the significance of the ranking of the bridge, as the next most important thing to food security, has to be seen in relation to the broadening of discussions with residents, beyond the point where they simply reiterated a list of the inputs they might expect from Actionaid. A bridge to span a broad fast running river, is too large a project to fit within Actionaid's remit and it implies the involvement of government departments.

The next stage of the process involved village residents drawing up a communication plan. To move their action plan forward and raise debates around their findings, they would need to communicate their analysis both with other villages in the area, to form alliances around key issues, and to communicate with their local MP and District Assembly. Ideally this planning process could be used to deepen local analysis. Elements of findings that had already been recorded could be used for this communication, but facilitation was needed to enable villagers to crystallise key issues. The village participants were invited to elect an editorial team, representative of age groups and gender as well as relative wealth and poverty, who would undertake organising additional things that they thought should be 'shown to the camera' and recorded

for the final film. These would include showing how people were currently taken across the river to hospital at times of flood, being placed in a tin bath and pushed through the rushing water by swimmers. Linking shots explaining the research the village had undertaken to back their advocacy for food security, the bridge, and education would also be needed. As they came to understand the need for these links, so the village team became aware of a new kind of literacy. This is a form of communication nearer to story telling, but involving the selection of images of real places and situations.

The editorial team took these tasks on with enthusiasm and good planning. They organised presenters to 'show the camera' Salima market, where they would like to sell cash crops, the hospital, the only existing bridge thirty kilometres away, and they arranged for a short drama to illustrate the dangers of the river crossing for a sick child. The editorial team were able to timetable inputs and participation from other members of the communities at moments and in places that fitted conveniently with their other tasks, a feat not always achieved by development workers in their participatory endeavours.

Finally the tape was edited, and a premiere showing to the village was arranged in Chitsulo one evening so that the whole population could check the contents. The video projector was set up on the back of the AA-M pick-up and a sheet was used as a screen on the wall of one of the village houses. The team explained that people should watch carefully to see if everything that was said was correct and true, because it was still possible to make changes if they were not happy. As dusk fell, a low murmur greeted the title sequence, then, a movement backwards by the whole audience as the first speaker stepped to the front of the screen, then attentive silence. As soon as the showing was over, they asked to watch it again. Then they said it was good. They made one correction to a figure wrongly given for the distance to Salima market. Above all they said they were proud to have spoken, to have explained their problems clearly and they wanted as many people as possible to hear what they had said.

The village of Kaponda where the participatory video team worked with the community to make the next base-line tape is nearer to the existing bridge, but still some 30Km from public services.

Residents of Kaponda reviewing their situation during the period of hunger in January and February 2002, said that they felt that a new bridge would not help in the issue of food security or poverty, because it would still be too far for most people to access public services. Instead they felt they should fight for schools, markets and a health centre on their side of the river.

The time-line produced in Kaponda gives evidence that in 30 years between 1970 and 2001 the village has only three times produced sufficient food to maintain itself throughout a whole year. For the majority of the period between 1970 and 2001 the village had only produced on average 50% of what was required, and had several times experienced severe famine. In December 2001

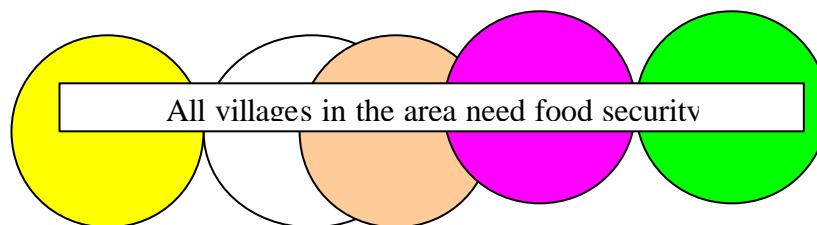
they had been hungry for almost nine months and by January 2002 they expected to be experiencing fatal famine conditions.

Finally, a third village named Mvululu, , in which Actionaid had not so far worked and situated in the forestry reserve some distance further on from the only existing bridge to the 'Island', beyond Kaponda, was chosen to compare the findings of the first two. The findings of Mvululu reflected those of Chitsulo and Kaponda and prioritised the issues of food security and access to public services, markets and education

7.3 Village Mgirizano (Alliance) Against Hunger

First Stage: The villages that neighboured these key research villages were shown the tapes by the local producers: the villages of Chitsulo, Kaponda and Mvululu now became advocates for a Mgirizano (alliance) with the villages that surrounded them.

Fig 14. The second phase involved comparing in detail the findings of the three village areas and facilitating the formation of the village alliance.



The need for food security is seen, in reviews of tapes held by fieldworkers and village participants to relate to other issues that have so far only been alluded to indirectly in the base line tapes. For example:

- ☒ the issue of land shortages that is commonly held to lead to low food production, appears to relate more to the way land is distributed in the villages than it does to the total amount of land available. The field map produced in Chitsulo village shows that many people who own land, are too old, too young, too ill or too busy because they are single headed households, to farm their land holdings. This was confirmed in discussions held in Kaponda about land holdings of the poor, elderly and sick and the need to feed people who have land but are unable to farm it.
- ☒ The failure of rains is seen as another cause of hunger and is discussed in both Chitsulo and Kaponda base-line tapes, and both villages mention the need for irrigation.
- ☒ By contrast flooding is also seen as a problem in both places
- ☒ Illness, and specifically HIV/Aids is seen to lead to lack of energy and strength for farming in both places – by implication, the current farming methods are alluded to.

- ✉ Migration of young and active people is seen to further deplete the working population
- ✉ Female headed households are seen as vulnerable at times of food shortage
- ✉ The lack of fertiliser and manure are seen as contributing to poor crop production
- ✉ The absence of public services are also seen to underpin the growing poverty in both areas, because lack of access to markets, schools and hospital mean that there is little possibility for people to develop. The request for the bridge is seen to respond to this need.

While all these topics are alluded to in the first base-line tapes produced in Chitsulo, Kaponda and Mvululu, it is clear that residents do not yet see how to address these issues, either internally or with relevant authorities.

In March 2002, as the green famine began to claim lives, the Salima AA-M team discussed the complex issue of the apparent resignation of village residents to their current fate. It seemed curious, for example, to hear and see people suffering from hunger when they were surrounded by rich green growth that had followed the recent rains, and in a context where animals, goats, pigs and so on, were a good deal fatter than the people. Yet the prices of animals had fallen in the three preceding months by as much as fifty per cent, as their owners sold them off to buy the staple food, maize. At the same time the tapes gave evidence that people were aware of some of the steps they should take to prevent famine:

- ✉ Earlier preparation of their fields
- ✉ Crop rotation and a greater variety of crops
- ✉ The preparation and use of manure
- ✉ Better hygiene to prevent the spread of diseases.

Why then, did this cycle of hunger occur? Did it reflect laziness as a senior team member believed? - this remark was greeted with incredulity and dismay by other, younger members of the team. Or was inactivity even on matters crucial to their own survival the result of hopelessness? Can it be accounted for by shortage of labour in the village caused by migration and illness and death caused by HIV/Aids and other recurring diseases such as cholera? What part is played by the absence of appropriate inputs of seeds and manure, of transport and access to markets?

It was clear from the viewings of the three tapes in the village clusters that residents are aware of the causes of hunger, but this awareness raises questions about the causes and solutions to their apparent inertia in taking preventative action. Rural people in Malawi have been subjected to confusing changes in policies and development messages over the years (for example, in the Banda era (1960s-80s) there was government insistence on the cultivation of maize and the subsidised application of fertiliser). Currently extension workers

recommend intercropping and the making of manure. It appears that the insistence of the Banda government on the production of maize has been largely responsible for the current habit of mono cropping, and the commonly held view that maize and 'food' are one and the same thing.

There is also a wider picture which includes twenty years of restructuring of the agricultural sector by the IMF and World Bank. These donors sitting in offices far distant from the realities of the Mwakhundi 'Island' villages of Chitsulo, Kaponda or Mvululu have worked on the assumption that 'markets will be able to meet social aims; to supply food at affordable prices throughout the country, and to ensure that smallholder farmers can feed their families.' (World Development Movement Oct 2002)²¹ The IMF and the World Bank have forced through agricultural reforms in the guise of reduced subsidies for small farmers, the privatization of the government marketing agency, ADMARC and the removal of price controls. 'This spirit of profiteering has fuelled corruption amongst Government officials in Malawi.'²² Within this context the views and voices of small farmers have become more and more marginalized. Mistaken policies as well as corruption are compounded by the failure of development work on the ground to place small farmers in the sphere of negotiation with their own government. Ignorance and misinformation amongst citizens gives the government a free hand in misrule. It is a cycle that spirals with few checks right through the Aid hierarchy:

'There is no doubt that Malawi needs agricultural reforms so as to enhance productivity and food security. There is no doubt either that Government parastatals, such as ADMARC, need to improve their management through reform. But, rather than ensuring that social aims are achieved through accountable government, the IMF/World Bank and other donors have pursued an agenda of austerity, deregulation and privatisation. And when, as in Malawi's case, there have been disastrous outcomes, they have denied any responsibility..... In addition to policy influence, the donors have insisted that Malawi continue to service its foreign debt at a time when there is widespread hunger. Even after debt reduction under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative, debt service still amounts to around 29 per cent of Malawi's Government spending. This heavy burden is further compounding the humanitarian crisis confronting such a poor nation. The policies that donors have proposed for dealing with the crisis include food aid, but also an IMF loan of US\$37 million to purchase maize. ..Malawi will most likely be forced to purchase grain from the US, including genetically modified grain. In its unmilled form, it will be used by desperate farmers to plant out. Malawi, as has been the case with other countries, will have GM crops introduced by the back door.'²³

²¹ Ibid., World Development Movement

²² ibid

²³ ibid

In the micro context of Salima District and this action-research, labour shortage caused by HIV/Aids and migration, which effects the most productive section of the community, leaves many villages with too few people to feed the population that is unable to cultivate. In addition poor roads, and the absence of any means of transporting produce, other than physically walking with it over long distances, means that people have little or no access to cash. Even those who manage to grow some seasonal cash crops have no means of accessing markets. Of course, in periods of hunger, people regret having not planted other crops but as a result of their global condition, they have no access to seeds.

New inputs offered by extension workers and NGOs often fail to bear fruit and do not reflect planning as a result of listening to the people they are purporting to help. For example, when asked at a show back of their tape on hunger about solutions to their problems, residents of Kaponda Village said:

- ☒ They still have diseases from lack of sanitation because earth dug pit latrines collapse in the rains;
- ☒ Ox ploughs, carts and ridgers donated by Actionaid lie idle because neither the farmers nor the oxen have received training from Action aid's government agricultural extension partners;
- ☒ They have tried using manure in maize cultivation but found that without fertilizer they still get poor results.

Development strategies are needed to enable village residents to develop and act on their own analysis. Inputs by government and NGOs should reflect and support this analysis. Developing the process of video making, reflection and representation, may offer one way to help the residents to make explicit, open and clear, what is at present only implicit in their tapes. At this stage, for example, the village analysis of the causes of famine showed that they were concerned about land shortage, while the Salima team had begun to realise as a result of the maps drawn in the villages, showing the use and ownership of fields, that the issue might instead be one of land distribution. This politically sensitive issue, involving the traditional law on inheritance, will need to be revisited, and the findings in the videotape of the field maps studied carefully with the communities. By contrast the problem of access to public services caused by the geography of the island, is well understood and explained with all its ramifications. It is shown to compound the poverty of the people as they cannot sell surplus crops when they are successfully grown and so are unable to build cash reserves that might help them during the periods of food shortages. In Mwakhundi Island they see the distance and isolation of their communities as compounded by the lack of a bridge to make access easier, or at times of flood possible, between themselves and public resources. They include in this need for access, improved roads. They are unaware however, of their rights to public services under the Malawi Constitution.

"The state shall take all necessary measures for the realisation of the right to development. Such

measures shall include, amongst other things, equality of opportunity for all in their access to basic resources, education, health services, food, shelter, employment and infrastructure.”

Source: The Constitution of the Republic of Malawi.

The development team sees the need for individual communities to come together in an alliance to bring these issues to the attention of local and national government. However, at this stage the villages have not had experience of this kind of negotiation.

The villages voice their concerns about climatic factors, drought and flood, as the need for irrigation as well as access to public services that would help them to support themselves with better health and education and alternative sources of earnings. They are concerned about the effects of migration and HIV/Aids on the labour force. The development team has not yet discussed with the communities the kind of adapted technological inputs that might practically meet this reality. Nor has the team instigated research into the advantages and disadvantages of migration on rural communities, and so are unable to facilitate people to make a clearer analysis of their own options. The village participants say that they lack both fertiliser and manure. However, while they continue to see maize as the only real ‘food’ they remain dependent on fertiliser, that neither they, nor their government can afford. Fertiliser is also known to deplete soil quality in the longer term, unless farmers practice crop rotation. The inputs of the Ministry of Agriculture and others concerned with agriculture needs to offer appropriate alternative hardy varieties of seed to enable communities to move away from mono-cropping. Thus, the village findings are in need of constant sifting, defining and structuring in order that they will be able to understand, represent and negotiate their own needs effectively, and this is the essential work of facilitation in which community workers need to be trained.

7.4 The Famine, as she was writ

On February 17th 2002 the Vice President of Malawi announced that deaths had occurred from famine in the country. President Muluzi immediately denied this pronouncement, and said there was no famine. In Kaponda village the first deaths from hunger had already occurred, as village residents had predicted two months earlier. On February 26th President Muzuli on a visit to South Africa, finally announced a State of Emergency following the worst maize shortage the country has ever experienced. (Daily Times 28.02.2002)

Newspapers critical of the President asked why, after it had been learnt from local chiefs that there was famine in the country, did he wait so long to declare the State of Emergency. Why had the maize from Kenya and South Africa promised to Malawi by the government months earlier not arrived?

In his statement the President predicted famine continuing into next year. The Malawian *Daily Times* asked 'Are there any practical steps the Government is taking to avert famine next year, since we can see it staring us in the face even before the end of the growing season?' We might ask too, had Actionaid not fought poverty together with the people of Chitsulo, Kaponda and the surrounding areas? The answer is, of course, that no one fought hard enough. Yet the ambition of this slogan 'Fighting Poverty Together' is brought home by the complexity of the analysis and claims and counter-claims about who is to blame for this famine. Who listens to the people if not NGOs and government? What do they do with what they hear?

The Rights-based campaigns have rallied to the Malawi Famine, but from the perspective of Salima district the debates in Brussels and Washington about the evil doings of the IMF, appear to be part of another world. Famines are seldom necessary. They are recognised to mark a failure of development. They are not always recognised to mark a failure of communication.

8 Building Mgwirizano (Alliance) between Villages and Government

8.1 The rehearsal

The aim behind community participants showing their tapes and addressing policy-makers and donors is to create opportunities for them to enter into communication and negotiation on equal terms with those who make decisions about their lives. The first stage, then, is to enable villages to agree on the areas around which they can develop alliances. It is important for both village communities and team members to understand that it is possible to agree to form alliances on some issues, and not on others. Bringing issues to the forefront on which the village groups are not agreed or about which they are unclear, will undermine their power to negotiate.

It is important to continue to maintain and extend this alliance at the broadest possible level amongst the villages, and to include all age and gender groups, and income levels.

In September 2002 the Salima team spent time concentrating on the nature of the Alliance that they hoped to build between the village communities and the District. The first formal meeting between Mwakhundi Mgwirizano and Salima District Assembly and ministries and NGOs was planned to take place on 10th October. The team began to prepare themselves to prepare the village participants to run this meeting. They looked at the issues that village communities had researched and presented in their tapes, and the different relationships of rights and duties that were implicated. The team planned a rehearsal day during which village representatives would meet at the same venue that had been booked for the actual meeting and would walk and talk (and

eat) their way through a rehearsal for the real day. The idea was that they should feel confident equal negotiators at this meeting.

The rehearsal day would include time for the Village Mgwirizano representatives to itemise and group issues, so that they could run working groups with the District policy makers, donors and Assembly members to brain storm ways forward. The day would include lunch in the same restaurant where two days later they would sit at tables with the members of the District Assembly and local ministry personnel.

A key issue in progressing the village alliance to include Government Departments, District authorities and others is the consideration of rights and duties. For example, a government department which that raises funds through donors on the basis that the country is poor and in need, may be seen to have a duty to ensure that the funds raised benefit the poor. However, if such a duty does not appear in writing in the constitution, or in a specific contract with a donor, it might be thought of as a moral, as opposed to a legal duty. In such a case, access to knowledge about funding and its disbursement will need to be negotiated in relation to the morality of matching its use to real need, and this may require negotiation with donors as well as government.

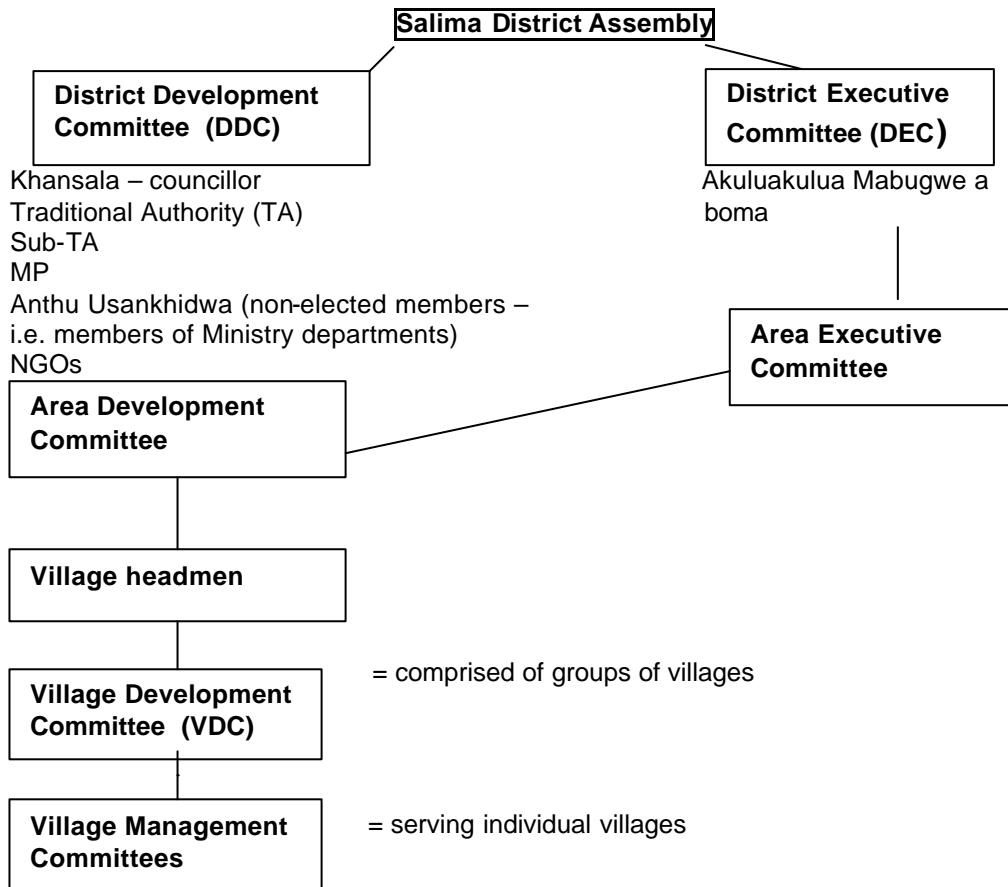
By contrast, if the right to education and to access to public services appear in the constitution, then it is the legal duty of government to ensure these services reach all the people. Poor people can negotiate their rights to both kinds of duty on the part of their government, but the basis of the claim needs to be understood and argued. This is why it is important to work through the stages of alliance building between villages and authorities and donors carefully and with good preparation. No one will feel empowered unless they understand the process of alliance forming. The process itself will take time, and trial and error to establish.

Invitation letters and an agenda were prepared, the English versions of the tapes were dubbed, transport was booked, a Chairperson was briefed, and the village teams were informed and invited. It was decided that for a meeting in which Actionaid intended only to act as a bridge between people and government, no per diems would be offered to any of the participants.

The rehearsal day itself seemed to go well. The day began with an explanation of the purpose of the Thursday meeting and the meaning of the word Mgwirizano. Mu umodzi muli mphamvu – ‘together there is power’.

The team opened a discussion on the structure of local government and the way that government works through the District Assembly and how the District is supposed to link in with Village Management Committees.

Fig.16 Local Government Structure



None of the community members had been able to give a name to the institution of the District Assembly at the beginning of the day.

There was a good debate between participants from Chitsulo and Kaponda about the relationship of the proposal for a new bridge, made in the Chitsulo tape, to the issue of hunger. Agreement was reached that while the overall problem was indeed hunger, the issue of the bridge represented the isolation from all public services, including markets, which left the whole area unable to protect itself with money from cash crops, against shortages at other times of the year.

This debate led to the nineteen community representatives discuss and select the topics for the working groups that they would convene with members of the District Assembly and local donors and NGOs on October 10th. The main topic would be hunger and the contributing factors; with addition groups discussing education, including access to schools and the recruitment of teachers; HIV/aids and the resulting depletion of the labour force as well as the need for more awareness programmes; and the access to public services, which would include the need for the District to share international donor inputs at the village level

and to provide roads, transport, markets, healthcare and schools. The Hunger workshop would discuss a number of contributing features including the root causes: the failure of agricultural methods; the debate about the application and necessity for fertiliser, which is too costly for many farmers but enables them to grow maize, as opposed manure which they can make themselves; land distribution and how this delicate issue can be approached; irrigation; access to markets; the need for labour saving tools to support the depleted workforce; accessibility to appropriate varieties of seeds; and insect control.

8.2 The Mgwirizano meeting between communities from ‘the island’ and Salima District Assembly, local ministries and donors. (10/10/2002)

The meeting began with a welcome to all seventy-five participants by the Chair, who then handed over to Mr Julius from Mvululu, (Community Participant) who told the meeting that three tapes were filmed from three villages, to give an overview of the problems and to enhance alliance building.

Viewing of the tapes began after Mataka Chiwiwi presented a brief outline of Chitsulo village problems and Dorothy Huiwya explained those of Kponda Village.

After the viewing the Village Mgwirizano invited District Assembly and Donor participants to join them in working groups. In the reports of these groups to the plenary session each working group defined the problem discussed, and then offered solutions. The plenary were invited to help draw up an action plan, timetable and a monitoring process for each item.

The Hunger working group began with a list of the problems, concentrating principally on agricultural issues including soil infertility, poor rainfall distribution, lack of farm inputs and implements, pests and diseases, and soil erosion. They reported that the solutions for soil infertility could be found in the seasonal incorporation of crop residues, which at present are commonly burnt, the application of manure, and the development of agro-forestry using appropriate species. For the problem of poor rainfall distribution they thought the only solution would be re-afforestation. They offered no solution to the problem about the lack of farm inputs and implements. For the problem of pests and diseases they saw solutions in early planting, the use of certified seed, crop rotation and spraying insecticide. For the problem of soil erosion they recommended the construction of marker ridges, planting vetiver grass, and gully reclamation. It will be noted that in this list of problems and solutions the issue of land distribution was not discussed, and this may have been because there was insufficient time, or because the issue was seen as too politically complex to tackle here.

The Hunger working group was helped by the plenary to draw up an action plan. This included forming farm clubs to support the work needed to reduce soil infertility, to persuade people to spread manure immediately, in advance of the

imminent rains and planting season. The timing for the formation of these clubs would be immediate, with monitoring to be undertaken by village residents themselves as well as the agricultural extensionist and Actionaid community development team. The plenary offered no action plan for re-afforestation but on the problem of the lack of farm inputs Finka (a local credit organisation) promised to start visiting the area by December 2002 and the Ministry of Agriculture promised potato vines and treadle pumps of irrigation by November 2002. Actionaid Salima and the community representatives will monitor these promises while the Ministry of Agriculture will check training and maintenance. The Ministry of Agriculture also responded to the problem of pests, saying they had pesticide ready for immediate distribution, and the Agricultural Extensionist said he would collect and distribute this over the coming weekend.

The working group on Education outlined the problems they had discussed, which included the fact that there are very few schools in the area and no senior primary schools at all, while there is also a problem of teacher recruitment, and no literacy schools or teachers. They added that there is also unemployment amongst school leavers. The Plenary drew up the action plan on education, which included the promotion of one of the junior primary schools to become a senior primary; the Ministry of Education undertook to discuss the criteria of school committees to include greater representation of local residents, and to offer training. Actionaid promised funding for this training. These changes would be undertaken by November 2002 and would be monitored by the Village committees and Actionaid Salima. In addition a secondary school will be constructed and funded by Actionaid/Dfid. Teacher recruitment would be undertaken for Junior Primary schools in the area and this would begin in November 2002. The plenary agreed that at least one village literacy school should be reopened and that there should be a campaign to recruit men as well as women students. The Ministry of Education agreed that school leavers in the area should be trained and employed as teachers once they have completed form 4. It is felt that this solution may help to resolve the problems of recruiting and retaining teachers for such an isolated area, as well as that of unemployment amongst school leavers.

The working group on Access to Public Services defined the difficulties of crossing the river Lilongwe to reach health care, markets, and senior Primary and secondary schools. They added that there is no transport available once the tarmac road is reached on the other side. The plenary suggested co-funding for the construction of the bridge should come from The District Development Fund, MASAF and the EU. Organising a viewing in Lilongwe of the Chitsulo village tape would be used to support lobbying the Public Office of central Government. The Island communities should support with practical labour collecting stones and sand at the site for the new bridge. A joint Village Mgwirizano/District Assembly committee will be formed to liaise on the issue of the bridge. It was estimated by MASAF that the bridge would cost in the region of 11 million Malawi Kwatcha. The Plenary action plan included the formation of Mgwirizano committee to follow up on the bridge fundraising and construction to consult with

MASAF. The committee should meet with the District Development Committee in early December. The District Assembly should forward a report on the bridge to Lilongwe by February 2003. Actionaid Salima to co-ordinate communities to present a video viewing to Public Works in Lilongwe in December 2002.

The working group on HIV/Aids reported that problems included the lack of an orphanage, poverty, the lack of healthcare, and the absence of social interest. The Plenary found that MASAF has funding for a programme for orphans, but they requested that NGOs supply clothes. Actionaid agreed to co-ordinate requests for funds from MASAF headquarters by November 2002. The plenary proposed that Village Health Committees should be formed and take responsibility for collecting drugs from Salima Hospital on a monthly basis. The Hospital (MADZI aids project) should give training to youth and the chiefs. This process should begin immediately. The Youth Clubs should have the principle role of raising social interest on the dangers of HIV/Aids and support would be sought through the local NGO, SASO for help to fund bicycles. Actionaid Salima to monitor the appointment and funding of Health Surveillance assistants to the area.

Summarising the findings of the Plenary session the Chairman of the District Assembly said that meetings between Communities and the DA should become regular events, and that the videos should be shown at all levels of Government including to the Executive Director of MASAF and to Parliament. A committee should be formed with members from the Community and from the DA to arrange these showings. The meeting ended with lunch attended by all the community members and their guests.

8.2 LESSONS LEARNT – A summary of taped interviews with a range of participants following the Alliance meeting on 10th October 2002

A number of lessons were learnt from the exercise according to the evaluation in interviews conducted with a sample of participants after the meeting.

Mr Chinyanya, how did you find this meeting?

Mr Chinyanya Chairman, Salima District Assembly

The meeting was very, very informative because it was a grand opportunity for different people to come together, discuss and analyse issues that affect the community. In particular, one thing that has interested me most is that the meeting has given us an opportunity as government and other key players in development to be accountable and responsible to their needs. I feel this is important.

It was important for them to learn from us what we have in store for them. We are able to account for whatever we are doing; why we are not doing some things and what they want us to do for them.

The other issue is that I delighted because in public policy analysis there are ways that we can bring issues on government agenda.

One of them is exactly what this video has done today i.e. bringing on our agenda the issues that effect the community and I believe that there should be other several stages where those issues which communities face should be brought on the agenda of the government and other donors so that we should begin to respond

Which platforms do you think the communities can bring their issues to after this forum we had today?

I think there should be two more platforms.

The *first stage is at assembly level* because the things that have been presented are technical and are at District level, in other words, they concern the District executive committee But I think it should still go further to those who make policies and the member of the assembly that brings together all councillors, all chiefs and MPs and then let them look at it, so that given a chance and opportunity, if funds are available, they should be able to allocate some for those communities and from there probably at *national level*, ring those issues on the agenda of the members of parliament and even the donors in general. Because we know that most of people who make decisions will have discussions. To some degree, of course, we are talking about devolution and decentralization but we haven't really reached that far. We are in transition. We are going towards that but I think at that national level where NGOs and Governmental organizations that are not represented at District level e.g. the DFID, EU and all others can be brought together and be able to see what the people need, how they cry, how they suffer right from that (video).

I heard most of the departmental leaders of NGOs leaders or representatives who were present in the meeting making promises to meet the needs of the people, how do you make sure on your part that these promises are fulfilled?

In the first place I will need a report as quickly as possible. And then through forums, DEC (District Executive Committee) meetings taking action to remind one another and at the same time looking at the dead lines. I will be able to remind them because I think it the role of the Assembly to coordinate development activities at the district. So, our role will be to make sure that all those promises will be fulfilled and making sure to be in touch with the members of the assembly in respective areas to see that all those promises are actually being kept.

Do you think the communities are really empowered in this way?

Yes, Yes! I remember somebody asked a question related to micro finance. But when you look at the tone you see that this person is not happy with the way things are and then he was able to explain why things were not happening the way they want.

I believe that that's one way of empowering them because they are able to tell the donors directly unlike those days of going through somebody else.

I think in a forum like that where they actually ask questions: When are you going to do this? We want this. I think that's empowerment.

Further to that should be issues of follow ups in monitoring and evaluation trying to evaluate what they have said as it comes to pass and (we) should succeed because (they) should be able to make follow ups saying "Remember you said this, when are you going to do it?" because I think as government /NGOs and all the players in the district one thing that we are here for is to serve the community and we are supposed to be accountable to them. Any decision we have to make we should explain if we delay. We have to give an explanation.

I understand you are the District Education Manager of Salima. How did you find the meeting to be?

Mr Chamdimba.
Ministry of Education

I found the meeting extremely powerful. The way it conveyed the food insecurity in Salima, particularly the villages in question. I was so touched. You saw that woman trying to collect grass seed for food and trying to winnow, I was so touched. I think we have to make it that the message must reach the public for assistance.

In other words you want to say that the Video for communication is a strong tool for communication?

Indeed. I am sure you bring out issues as they exist there.

Intermesh of advocacy; advocating for positive change how do you rate this project?

The project will outline and bring the communities what policies, agricultural polices what Education policies we must put in place because the people themselves are able to outline the difficulties they are facing through their day to day experiences.

How was the meeting: What is its importance?

Batwell Samson from Kasambwe village, the VMC chairman

I feel the importance of this meeting is that the development activities, which were not existent in our area, will now come, especially the bridge and food security.

I hope all the government departmental leaders and the District Assembly members will help us because we have told them our problems.

How sure are you that they are going to assist you?

I am very sure because they have promised us and assured us. After all if they do not come to our villages we have the right to follow them up

What is giving you courage to follow them for action?

Because they have promised us we have discussed our problems with them face to face and they have seen our problems through the video. I have the assurance because they have seen our problems through the video

Is video important?

It is very important because they have seen actual problems and not only reading or hearing about them.

You were one of the participants in the alliance meeting with Mgwirizano wa pa chilumba. Did the meeting seem important to you?

Shelida Hauya, Kapunda Village

The meeting was very profitable.

How?

Because we have met with the people we have desired to meet for a long time so that we can tell them our problems. These people have always been far from us but today we had the chance to meet with them and discuss our problems with them.

After you presented the problems to them how do you think are you going to benefit?

After presenting our problems I feel they are going to help us because there were different organizations and we presented different problems which concerned them.

Like what?

Hunger, Education. All of them understood our problems

How sure are you that they are going to what they have promised?

We have an assurance because they have told us to form committees which will be following up on their promises.

Are you really going to be pushing them?

Yes, because they have given us freedom, saying we have the right to go and get help

You are from different villages. How are you going to organize yourselves to get hold of these offices?

We have agreed that people from the island will meet (to discuss) how we can overcome our problems because all the problems about lack of bridge, hunger are affecting all of us from Chisamba to the Thuma forest, all the villages between Lilongwe and Linthipe river.

This brief evaluation of the Mgwirizano meeting with District Authorities and donors reveals that video provides the feel of real problems of communities on the ground and this triggers action, which may not depend on policy rule but on human grounds, which is a factor for policy change. The Alliance of communities in presenting problems builds a strong ground for credibility of the problem to donors and policy makers. Video enables the communities to analyse problems and to present them to donors and policy makers, so that they can find solutions together. Some of the hidden important issues surfaced during the meeting, such as the desire of the District Assembly to find new ways of working with communities and to use the evidence provided by the communities to influence national government.

9 Conclusions

- 9.1 Rights based campaigns that function principally at National Government and international levels can have the effect of masking the immediate survival needs and strategies of people on the ground. When Rights based campaigns fail to work from the bottom up they exclude those most effected from the process, and experience, of negotiating their own rights. They also exclude local government from understanding their roles within the democratic process.
- 9.2 The effect of NGDOs whose claims are that they work alongside the poor, colluding in their programme designs with economically powerful donors, is the exclusion of poor people as negotiators of their own futures.
- 9.3 The events of September 11th 2001 should encourage a new questioning of who is included and who is excluded from debates about how the world is governed and should give emphasis to the importance of hearing voices from the grass roots.

- 9.4 It is important to re-examine the concrete reality of the causes of under-development, behind the slogans that NGOs use about 'empowerment'.
- 9.5 The introduction of a non-literacy based tool, while not a panacea for the complex problems of how to enable the resource-poor to plan and negotiate their own futures, throws up crucial weaknesses in the analysis and planning of development work. It shows the need to prioritise a new examination of how the rural and township poor are excluded from having an active voice.
- 9.6 The action research has highlighted the need to review transparency around development funding and the management of development inputs and resources.
- 9.7 The analysis at the village or township level, that is required to produce participatory video outputs, implies training development and extension workers to observe, analyse and question the relevance of existing development inputs, and to facilitate resource poor communities not merely to participate in strategy-building, but to give the lead.
- 9.8 Analysis is not part of the existing training and practice of development workers in the field. Action Aid is not unique amongst NGOs in experiencing problems in supporting fieldworkers. One of the outcomes of this research that has been evaluated by fieldworkers involved in Salima District is their growing awareness of the relationship of observation and analysis to inputs. However, in the case of the Salima programme, demands on development workers' time, including working in upwards of twenty villages, all only accessible on motorbikes by difficult tracks, and the collection of child letters and child-sponsorship details, that they say can take up to 60% of their year, does not encourage analysis of development strategy or policy.
- 9.9 It is clear that in the past many mistakes have been made and many difficulties ignored by development NGOs and government. It might be argued that had these mistakes been made by the people themselves, there might at least have been some sustainable learning. Suffering as a result of the mistakes of others causes real disempowerment. However, learning through error requires access to the power of decision-making. At present, even in participatory-mode, resource poor people have only learned to second-guess the likely inputs that development NGOs might make available.
- 9.10 The research shows that development and extension workers are sometimes out of the loop of the strategic planning of their own organisations and departments. They are not encouraged, let alone trained, to question the approaches that are seen as tried and tested.
- 9.11 Methodologies of participation (RRA, PRA, PLA) are routinely used but the outputs are seldom debated and analysed by either participating communities or facilitating development workers. Rather they play a token role in the credo of participatory development, or, at best they offer fieldworkers some background information, and, in the case of ranking, some way of offering a semblance of democratic choice and decision-making.

- 9.12 The findings of this action research to date indicate that the role of the development worker as service provider is topsy turvey. The way NGOs work far from empowers front line workers or local people. It creates dependency. Communities should see development workers as facilitating processes of research, reflective analysis and negotiation, with those in power. To do this the development worker, in turn, has to be empowered within their organisations. The organisational employer will need to support with information about funding and networks of power, skills, time and rewards.
- 9.13 At present the strategy of rights based work and advocacy is principally in the hands of country and regional programme management. There is little connection with grassroots beneficiaries, and they are not being empowered to speak on their own behalf. The strategy of this action research is to build horizontal alliances around agreed issues and needs, between communities, and for these alliances to negotiate directly with local and national government and donors.
- 9.14 One of the risks of this action research is that it depends on the co-operation and collaboration of government, NGOs and donors to give access to, to listen and to respond to the representations resource poor communities. However, there are some indications that within the organisation of Actionaid itself, the different players are beginning to become aware of some of the possibilities. For example, the press office in London was keen to use the Kaponda tape on the famine with the BBC. The Africa Regional office is beginning to examine ways in which the material produced by villages and townships can be used instead of some of the written country reports. These changes will be slow.
- 9.15 The process of integrating the processes introduced by this action research into the day-to-day business of a country-programme involves a deep understanding of what is being attempted by many layers of management, and some real change. This is not easy, but it is being tried and tested and debated openly.

Brief biographical details

Su Braden is the author of three books on the subject of people's participation and the media. She began developing the current approach to people's representation using audiovisual tools on a large public housing estate in south London. She has worked with NGOs and Government departments in Cameroon, Uganda, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Ghana, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Vietnam. Prior to the current research, she wrote the Masters programme 'Television for Development' which she ran at Southampton and Reading Universities.