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Development Aid: What Can Go Wrong and Why?

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ABSTRACT

Brokers are crucial linchpins in development aid: they are tasked with connecting the deep-pocket institutional donors with those in poor countries whose lives the donors dream of transforming. Low-level brokers are particularly important, since they implement programs and projects on the ground, and thus have an outsize influence on whether a donor goal is achieved - or not.

Much of the development community's talk of transformation is at a high level of abstraction: How can we do development differently? How do we choose the most promising theory of change? What do agencies need to get serious on changing social norms? and What about Problem-driven Iterative Adaption? These questions are formulated and discussed in the corridors of power of the vast international organizations, thousands of miles from the beneficiaries they hope to help. In the end, however, the principals will have to depend on their agents: brokers, guides, translators, fixers, or go-betweens. Here, I use the term brokers to refer to those who implement donor projects on the ground.

This paper provides a worm's eye view of brokers along the aid chain in Malawi between 1998 and 2017. I take a bottom-up view of the development aid chain that starts with donors at the top and citizens at the bottom. In the simple motels in rural Malawi where I stayed, along with various colleagues and students, we observed and talked with NGO brokers and, less frequently, government brokers (civil servants). I also worked as a consultant evaluating NGO interventions in rural Malawi. From these experiences, I learned what can go wrong when the organizations that dream of helping the poor attempt to turn donor dreams into reality. Understanding what, and why, things go wrong requires getting to know brokers along the aid chain: What are their aspirations? Their insecurities? Their familial obligations?

In Section 1, I describe the local understandings and practices of education in Malawi. In Section 2, I introduce the various layers of brokers along the development aid chain who would implement educational reforms; in Section 3, I provide examples of what can go wrong when brokers implement donor projects; in Section 4 I comment on the implications of this paper for attaining the RISE goal of improving the quality of education for all.

BACKGROUND

Figure 1: The typical hierarchy of a development aid chain



Source: Dionne, K. (Forthcoming 2017) *Doomed Interventions: The Failure of Global Responses to AIDS in Africa*. Cambridge University Press.

The international actors at the top of the aid chain are large multilateral organizations, such as the United Nations and the World Bank, and large bilateral organizations, such as USAID and Britain’s Department for International Development (DFID). These organizations take the lead in setting, and changing, global policy, as when United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan pronounced that, “AIDS has the face of a woman,” setting off a cascade of donor-funded projects to protect “vulnerable women,” or when DFID decided that a new priority would be to improve the quality of education in poor countries, under the theme “Education for All.” Multilateral organizations like the World Bank and the Global Fund and bilateral organizations like USAID and DFID provide the bulk of the money, giving them clout in influencing policy, themes, and practices. The funding that reaches the national actors in government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) flows down the aid chain through a series of subcontracts. Some of the donors’ money goes to NGOs in the capital to hire brokers and pay their salaries, to rent offices, and to buy vehicles, printers, and paper, etc. In turn, the national NGOs may delegate tasks to brokers in a smaller regional NGO in a district or a trading center and/or a local NGO nearer to the beneficiaries the donors hope to reach. These smaller NGOs also need to hire and pay brokers, rent offices, and so on. This diagram suggests the very real likelihood that aid projects fail partly because actors all along the

aid chain fail to pass along resources to the next actor down the line. There are also aspirational NGOs, as in the photo below, taken in the Mkanda trading center. In an effort to get funding, they cast a wide net: they will address AIDS, the elderly, youth, and orphans.



Each organization on the aid chain should be accountable to the citizens, as well as to the actors on the aid chain above them. In Malawi, however, the accountability chain goes upward, not downward. There are accountability structures on paper, but brokers consider themselves accountable to those higher on the aid chain, not to the citizens. For example, if students do not learn, brokers put the blame on

overcrowded schools, lack of textbooks, parents who prefer to keep their children at home in order to help with the domestic chores, and “they just can’t learn.” Moreover, although community members are aware that their children have a right to education, they lack effective channels to sanction poorly performing staff. Even were there such channels, it is likely that parents would not use them, for fear that their children would be punished. The teacher’s union does try to hold the government accountable. In June 2017, teachers who were promoted in 2013 had not yet received their back pay: the union organized a protest, which included school children blocking the roads. “The government paid after a serious shut down of schools across the country especially primary schools. Secondary schools joined in solidarity for their counter parts in primary schools.” (Email to author from Malawi broker). Protests are rare in Malawi: to my knowledge, there have been none about the conditions of schools, especially rural primary schools, such as teacher-student ratios, crowded classrooms, few textbooks, etc., nor the quality of the students’ education. The long delay in paying the teachers suggests that unions are not really able to hold the government accountable.

Malawi is a tiny country with an estimated population of about 18,600,000 in 2016 (<http://databank.worldbank.org/data/reports.aspx?source=2&country=MWI>). It has attracted many NGOs seeking to do good, perhaps because the citizens are very poor, HIV prevalence is high, the country is peaceful with reasonably good roads from the national capital, Lilongwe, to the district capitals, and the official language is English. Much of the donor money sent to Malawi through NGOs was dedicated to addressing the AIDS epidemic, but the lessons about how this aid was spent and the role brokers played in AIDS projects apply equally well to the education arena.

Between 2000 and 2014, donor aid stimulated the development of thousands of new or repurposed AIDS organizations, including 20 international NGOs (INGOs), 180 national NGOs, 337 Faith

Based Organizations, and 2,309 Community Based Organizations in villages. All of these have offices staffed by brokers, with the exception of the community-based organizations. It is fair to say that the country was awash in organizations aiming to combat AIDS. This expansion raised the aspirations of many who had previously been unable to find a job with a regular salary: they became salaried brokers in the AIDS enterprise.

To describe Malawian brokers, I draw on the fieldwork that my colleague, Ann Swidler, and I did that resulted in *A Fraught Embrace: The Romance and Reality of AIDS Altruism in Africa* (Princeton University Press, 2017), as well as a RISE paper on collective understandings of schooling in Malawi (Watkins and Kaler, 2015). The research was conducted between 1998 and 2015. In addition to our fieldwork, we draw on 20 years of research in Malawi by more than 100 graduate students and 19 years of an ethnographic study of conversations about AIDS among rural Malawians (Watkins and Swidler, 2009). For this paper, I also take advantage of several gigs as an evaluator of projects, from which I learned some of the things that can go wrong when brokers implement projects.

SECTION 1: LOCAL UNDERSTANDINGS AND PRACTICES OF EDUCATION IN MALAWI

Background:

This section draws on the many conversations that my colleagues and I participated in during our yearly visits to Malawi (1998-2017). We typically stayed for a month in simple, sometimes shabby, guest houses and motels in rural Malawi. Brokers driving through rural Malawi in 4x4's with NGO or government logos stopped there for meals or to spend the night; the motels and guesthouses also were sites for NGO interventions, such as training villagers on how to avoid HIV infection. This allowed us to chat informally with the brokers as well as the staff (cooks, cleaners, security guards, etc.).

Many brokers are civil servants, but the focus here is on the brokers who implement NGO projects. Many, perhaps most, of these projects focus on transforming sexual behavior and sexual norms, rather than providing material benefits, such as well for clean water or improving schools.

From talking with brokers and reading the newspapers, we learned that much of the implementation of NGO projects consists of a "training", a ritual in development aid. Typically, after the training, the trainees are meant to be volunteers, spreading donor messages to their communities. In Malawi, trainings are typically conducted in venues such as the motel in the photo above. A training replicates the hierarchy of power in the classroom: the educated broker acts as a teacher, the trainees are their pupils (though they may be adults and chiefs). For the donors, the trainings serve two purposes. First, it allows them to believe that by exhorting the

trainees to change their behavior, they can believe that they are doing something: thus, for example, that rude teachers who attend a training will change their behavior. Second, a training is cheap: the low-level brokers that implement trainings in villages are near the bottom of pay in the aid hierarchy. Third, the trainees are happy to receive the small allowances that are paid for participation (travel, meals, accommodations for a few days), which is the primary way that donor money reaches the pockets of poor Malawians. Those who are selected for a “training” are considered lucky. But it not just luck. Poor women actively strategize to benefit from what little donor money reaches the villages.

Of all Mudzi villagers, it is probably Venesi who best understands how to play the game of accessing external development aid. By neatly showing up on time, and performing all tasks exactly as instructed, she made a good impression on the field officer of Concern Universal (the development institute most active in Mudzi), and was selected by him for subsequent development activities too. Each time she was selected, Venesi made sure to share some of the benefits that she accessed through the project with Mudzi’s chief, because this woman also had a part in the selection process (Verheijen p.184).

Lastly, trainings for the poor are meant to the social technology of training permits donors and brokers alike to believe that their project will be sustainable, their efforts successful: for the cost of a few days of allowances, deep-seated behavioral norms and practices will be transformed. It is unlikely, however, that the norms and practices of teachers change because of a week of training at a District Education Centre.

As the aid chain in Figure 1 showed, there are several levels of these brokers. Some are civil servants, as in the education sector; others implement NGO projects. They are stratified largely by the brokers’ level of education. Formal education is an identity project as well as an instrumental tool. An important shared understanding of education is that to be educated through formal schooling is a symbol of *being*, not doing. All societies are marked by status differentiation, which may be manifested in different ways of dressing, different possessions, or other signs of entitlement. Credentials and evidence of schooling are ways of marking a social distinction between those who have the right to speak first or to speak authoritatively, and those who do not. This is evident in the way that meetings of bureaucrats are organized. In meetings of national brokers, he (or, more rarely, she) who has a PhD speaks first, whether or not he has expertise on the topic; those with only a university degree do not speak unless asked.

The school equivalent of this hierarchy is evident in the classroom. Teachers display their status by their behavior. Far from the participatory approach to children’s schooling in the west as a collaboration between teachers and students, a Malawian teacher stands in front of the classroom and lectures, and then calls on students to answer: only the best students - marked by being in the

front rows - have the nerve to raise their hand. Because of their status as more educated and wealthier than their pupils, teachers take liberties. They may ridicule a student who answers incorrectly, beat a pupil for perceived misbehavior, and leave the class for extended periods. Uneducated parents have little recourse; they are afraid to complain for fear that their child will bear the brunt of their complaints. Even in cases where parents find that a male teacher instigates a sexual relationship with a female student, he is rarely sanctioned—at worst, when parents complain, he is transferred to another school.

The hierarchy of teachers, like the hierarchy of brokers, is normative. This is illustrated by an excerpt from an ethnographic journal written in Malawi in 2006. The ethnographer is talking with a friend who is a teacher in a primary school in southern Malawi. The ethnographer wrote that her friend said:

You see a head teacher of a school is a PT4 [primary teacher Grade 4] yet there is a [higher level] PT3 or PT2 at the school, this makes the other teachers not to work hard at school. They see a Junior is heading a school yet there is a Senior within [the school], this ends up affecting the performance of pupils hence those seniors [senior teachers] do not work hard in class. It is because there is lack of motivation.

SECTION 2: GETTING TO KNOW BROKERS

If the RISE objective of improving education quality is to be achieved, much will depend on the brokers who implement projects. RISE has commissioned studies in various countries to assess rigorously various approaches to improving the quality of education: would contract teachers help? What about reducing classroom sizes? What about public-private partnerships? Typically, the study designs are done by the team leaders, some of whom are based in universities and others based in stand-alone organizations such as BRAC and RTI. The implementation of the projects on the ground, however, is delegated to brokers. Some of these are brokers for NGOs, others are civil service brokers in the education sector who are charged with achieving the goals of the Government of Malawi. If they are properly monitored by team members, all is well. In our experience, however, team members rarely observe the brokers as they are implementing. In this section of this paper, I draw on multiple years of talking with, and observing, brokers working in rural Malawi. My colleagues and I learned about their aspirations—which were often for credentials that would permit them to rise on the ladder of opportunity; we also learned about their insecurities and their family obligations (Swidler and Watkins, 2017). In Section 3, we provide examples of things that can go wrong when brokers are on their own.

Broker Aspirations:

Opportunities for those aspiring to be brokers expanded massively as a result of the arrival of NGOs, which created opportunities for modern wage employment—i.e. a regular salary—for the educated.

I: Why did you become a farmer?

R: Aaah, I became a farmer because when I sat down I realized that because I did not go to school there is nothing I can do apart from becoming a farmer with my wife. I saw that when some people become educated they get good jobs, so if they want farming they use their income from the job and pay garden workers.

I: Mmh.

R: Because of lack of any other income generating activities, I just settle on farming using my own energy.

I: Do you think education would have helped you?

R: I always think that if I were educated, my education would have helped me like the way my educated agemates are benefiting from their education. They are employed in different jobs, they are leading a better life than myself (Grant 2009).

A study of advertisements for job openings in the NGO sector between 1985 and 2005 found that between 1985 and 1989, there were 16 ads, most (25 percent) for jobs in the agriculture sector (Morfit, 2011). Between 2001-2005, there were 196 for jobs, with most in the AIDS sector (48 percent) and only 4 percent in the agriculture sector. The percentage of job ads in the education sector was never higher than 7 percent. We did not track ads for NGO brokers after 2005, but we continued to read the advertising section. We found fewer and fewer ads for a position in an NGO. Between July 25 and August 15, 2017, there were no ads for positions in any NGO sector - most were for positions in private companies.

Educational attainment has expanded faster than modern wage employment in many African countries, including Malawi (Ferguson, 2015, Filmer and Fox, 2014), where a measure of the desperation for jobs is that even short-term work as a survey interviewer is in great demand, with three to four times as many applicants as positions: unemployed secondary school graduates often resort to volunteering for an NGO, in the hopes that working for free may lead to a job with the NGO (Swidler and Watkins, 2009). Moreover, simply being someone who seeks more education confers status. In chatting with two young (late teens, early twenties) cooks at the dilapidated rural guest house where we were staying, we asked whether they were in school. One said “No”, the

other said “Yes.” When we asked the latter how he could both work and go to school, he said that he had not actually been attending classes recently, because “I don’t have money for the fees.” The status conferred by having participated in the education system indicates that schooling provides a form of *cultural capital*. These credentials mark the recipient as an enlightened person, a status that is recognized and respected by others (Frye, 2012; Frye, 2017; Watkins and Kaler, 2015).

Schooling *generates social capital*, by granting the possessor access to networks of potentially useful patrons or colleagues. Having a university degree means that the graduate has met and mingled with the most important and influential members of his or her generation, connections that may be drawn upon on in later life. This is hardly a Malawian or an African phenomenon – every society has its own versions of the “old boys’ [and girls’] clubs,” or the “old school ties,” based on shared schooling experience, but it is particularly important in countries like Malawi where there are many more seekers of jobs in the formal economy than there are positions.

Schooling also serves as a marker of *existing social capital*. Educational attainment in many African contexts is rarely an individual achievement – each successful student relies on a network of friends and family to help him or her meet the demands of education, not least the payment of school fees. Those with strong extended family networks, who already possess enough social capital to facilitate their attendance, can look forward to enhancing their status even further through the peer connections they make, as well as the learning they experience.

Some jobs, such as sweeper or night guard, require no more than a modest amount of primary education; national elites must have a university degree, and, even better, a post-graduate degree. It is not that a cleaner must have the skills associated with a primary education, or that the deputy director of UNDP must have a PhD to do her job, but rather that the degree signals moral worth. Not to have any education at all defines one as, at best, lazy and at worst backward, uncivilized and foolish, terms that are often used by elites to refer to “the rural masses.” Other jobs, such as a driver, require a secondary education and an expensive training course, and even to be selected as a volunteer for an NGO typically requires passing the rigorous exams at the end of secondary school, a sign of ambition and energy, of devotion to enlightenment (Frye, 2012).

The desperation for a credential is intense—and moving. A segment of a conversation with a survey interviewer provides an example.

Susan: What did you do with all the money you earned from working on the survey?

Ralph: I gave some of it to my mother so she could hire piece workers for the cotton she is growing while I was working. The rest will go to pay school fees for my younger sister.

Susan: But you have an MSCE [the certificate for passing the rigorous exams at the end of secondary school], and you don't have a regular job.

Ralph: But if my sister doesn't finish school, there is no hope.

And so it goes up the aid chain. Those with a primary education can aspire to a secondary education that would make them eligible for a position as a low-level job at World Vision; those in a position for which secondary education is a requirement can aspire to a further degree that would make them eligible for a higher-level staff position; someone with a university degree can aspire to a job at the head of World Vision in a rural area or, with merit and luck, a job at headquarters in Lilongwe, the national capital, or Blantyre, the commercial capital. And, the pinnacle to which one can aspire, a PhD, would make one eligible for head of a large NGO or a second in command at a donor agency in Lilongwe. At each level, acquiring the relevant credential becomes more expensive, and Malawian brokers, as soon as they land one job, start saving to invest their resources in the next credential. We were constantly asked to pay school fees for a friend's child - and even people whom we did not know asked us for school fees or whether we would sponsor them for an American university.

The national actors who work in offices in the capital (e.g., brokers for CARE or World Vision) typically are university graduates, some of them with an MA or a PhD. Their work is done far from the villages in which the expected beneficiaries live, and it is primarily paper-work: monitoring and evaluation documents, work plans, reports, and, at the end of the project, an evaluation report. The downside is that they know little about life in rural areas. Their parents are typically civil servants who lived in the capital; their children have the great advantage of being educated in the capital and thus speak fluent English. We met very few of these national actors in the rural areas where we stayed: they stay in the cities.

We had more contact with the next layer, the brokers who worked the office of a district commissioner. These brokers typically had a diploma in a field such as "development", but not a university education. They do the fieldwork of implementing a project, much of which consists of training village elites to be volunteers for a project and, again, paperwork, to be sent up the aid chain. They have many excuses for not going to their project villages, some reasonable, some not. The district office usually has only one vehicle, which may be nonfunctional or there may be no money for petrol; there are no bathrooms in the villages, only pit latrines and, perhaps worse, no cell phone connection.

Even closer to the villages than the district brokers are what we call the "interstitial elites"—young men and women who have one foot in the village and the other in a town. These are particularly sympathetic actors. They have managed what few born in a village and educated in a village school can do. From the perspective of the villagers, they are elites because, unlike most village

children who dropped out before finishing primary school, they have passed the rigorous exams at the end of secondary school. They desperately want an opportunity for further education that could qualify them for a job in a district capital, if not a city. In 2014, we asked a friend who had passed the secondary school final exams and had been repeatedly hired by an NGO, let go, then hired again, why he was going back to school for a very costly four-year degree, especially now that he had a wife and children to support. He said “for security.” If an NGO project ends (they are usually short, 3-5 years), he might not be able to get another job.

Many other factors make brokers' jobs insecure. Brokers have to hedge against a shift in donor priorities: a degree in agriculture would be of little use if a donor decided to fund the health sector rather than the agriculture sector. Another, but related, source of insecurity is malice. We heard a story of a civil servant who had been offered a fellowship abroad to get an MA. His boss, who had only a university degree refused to sign the form that would release him to go, because his boss would be jealous if he were higher on the status hierarchy than his boss.

Despite the differences between the national, district, and interstitial elites, there are three striking commonalities. First, is that although broker jobs exist to bring the benefits of donor projects to the villagers, brokers' views of villagers are a strange mixture. On the one hand, brokers try to convince western visitors that the villagers enthusiastically participate in NGO activities, even without material rewards. But brokers also contrast the identity they themselves have achieved or to which they aspire - that of being educated and modern - with village backwardness. From their point of view, villagers are ignorant, superstitious, and irrational. When visitors from the West first meet a broker, the broker often begins the conversation by telling tales about what in Malawi are called “harmful traditional practices,” such as widow inheritance and sexual cleansing. By doing this, brokers establish their status as “modern” and signal their insider cultural knowledge. Second, although all brokers consider themselves fortunate to have a job with an NGO, they constantly have to juggle competing obligations to bosses at work, families at home, and professional and personal social networks on which they depend for information about new job opportunities, and responsibilities to their patrons and their clients. The most vexing obligations, and the ones we heard most about, are not their obligations to their jobs, but those to members of their extended families.

The brokers in the aid industry are among the lucky Malawians who have a salary - and anyone with a salary is considered by his relatives, as well as himself or herself, to have a moral obligation to care for the orphans of their relatives, or to provide funds for a funeral, for a nephew's school fees, for transportation to a hospital in an emergency, and for grain during the hunger months. Brokers may have to make terrible choices: should they help a relative whose illicit business might pay school fees for some of the children in the family, or the “good” brother who has no job?

Broker Insecurity:

In Malawi, as well as in other poor countries, many men and women live insecure lives. The big divide is between those who have a regular salary vs those who depend on subsistence farming where livelihoods can be ravaged by disrupted by floods and famine. This insecurity leads them to develop strategies for buffering insecurity that may interfere with properly implementing their professional responsibilities, the topic to which I turn in Section 3.

What concerns NGO brokers most is the insecurity of their jobs. Civil service positions are currently very secure in Malawi: for example, unions make it almost impossible to fire incompetent civil service brokers such as teachers and nurses - they are simply transferred to another school or health facility. Unlike employment in the civil service, however, NGO brokers can be fired or their jobs can just vanish: an NGO's project may be completed, the NGO can pull out of a country, or a donor may withdraw funding because of outrageous corruption.

The organization of foreign aid exacerbates the sense of unpredictability and caprice in brokers' lives. From the donors' point of view, short-term demonstration projects meant to prove the value of a new approach to keeping girls in school or to agricultural development may seem like a logical way to leverage their money and influence. From the point of view of Malawian brokers, however, such short-term projects, driven by donor priorities and the latest remedy donors imagine will solve Africans' troubles, create a chaotic, unpredictable environment. Organizations arrive with ambitious agendas, but then suddenly collapse or depart for no apparent reason. Even when there is a reason - a failure to keep proper records or account for funds somewhere up the line, for example - staff find themselves out in the cold when the project is abruptly cancelled. A newspaper account tells a familiar story: "Morale at Malawi AIDS Counseling and Resource Organization, Macro, is at an all-time low following management's decision to send staff on an indefinite unpaid leave". In such a world, flexibility and resilience are virtues, while planning and a clear sense of direction may lead only to disappointment and heartbreak.

Since the 2008 financial crisis, many donors have cut their aid budgets. Donors also may stop their aid, at least temporarily, when there are major corruption scandals. The pages of Malawi's newspapers are full of stories about how to cope with the fall in donor support. Brokers are also vulnerable to global donors' quest for the next new theme. AIDS is no longer the urgent new priority. Interviews with Malawian NGO brokers found that they were frustrated that donors had not set a new post-AIDS theme so that they could begin the process of adapting to the new trend (Anderson, 2016). They believed that the government also was waiting to see what donors would do. Without a donor agenda setting out clear development priorities, neither the government nor NGO brokers can position themselves - for example by getting a credential relevant to a project on

resilience to climate change or maternal and child health - to take advantage of a new funding stream.

Lastly, brokers from the top of the aid hierarchy to the bottom have to deal with insecurity provoked by the malice of co-workers. Many told us of miracles such as a chance interaction with an American tourist who befriended him and arranged for him to go to college in the U.S. But we also heard many stories of betrayals: opaque processes in which the aspirations and careers of even elite brokers were threatened or thwarted by jealousy. When I was evaluating a project, I met a district broker for a large project who said he was studying for an MA. I was to keep this a secret, however, since his superior in the project had only a university degree, and thus might not give him lucrative opportunities, such as travel to a conference abroad that would permit the broker to save their per diems by staying with a friend. Good fortune, especially if it not shared with those to whom one is obliged, incites envy, and even witchcraft. If you are denied a promotion, or your organization is suddenly out of funds, perhaps it was a colleague or even a supposed friend who betrayed you. Thus, along with other sources of instability, people live with what Adam Ashforth, a leading Africanist, has called “spiritual insecurity”: “the condition of danger, doubt, and fear arising from exposure to the action of unseen forces bent upon causing harm” (Ashforth, 1998). In the careers of brokers, we found that the effort and talent that constitute merit or unexpected good fortune, and the actions of malicious others all jostling to shape and derail or reorient the career paths of brokers.

The degree of job security parallels the hierarchy of elite brokers. Cosmopolitan brokers with a PhD are the most secure, followed by the national-level brokers with an MA. Yet even they may not quickly find another job that provides enough money for first-world health care and education for their children. District-level brokers without exceptional skills, such as the ability to write a report in good English, may not be able to find a job at all. A friend told us that he had just seen a friend whose job at an NGO had ended; she was reduced to selling tomatoes in a market. Below those are “interstitial elites,” who live in a village but long to leave for a job in a town. Their credential is the Malawi School Leaving Examination (MSCE), awarded to the few young men and women who managed pass the exams at the end of secondary school: out of 1000 children who enter primary school, 40 graduate from secondary school. From the perspective of the villages, they are elites. Because they have an MSCE and speak English, they are able to work sporadically as interviewers for a project but they have no job security at all. Nonetheless, they remain hopeful, sometimes for years. They work, and when the gig is over, they invest their earnings in studying for a higher degree.

Broker strategies to buffer insecurity:

The primary strategy is to seek more and more educational credentials. It is hard to overestimate the importance of credentials. From the children of subsistence farmers who might get a job as an interviewer to the children of powerful bureaucrats, educational credentials not only determine access to economic opportunity and enhance the optimism that one's job will be secure, but also define social status and personal honor (Frye, 2012).

Brokers also buffer insecurity through entrepreneurship. Many attempt to supplement their salaries and meet their many obligations to their extended families and to their patrons and their clients, by engaging in a wide variety of business activities. Some buy and sell second hand clothes at a market, or establish a restaurant, a bar or a rest house. Others travel to neighboring countries to buy wholesale goods that they resell in Malawi "to make ends meet". In daily life, Malawians rely on each other for support; thus, the broker delegates the implementation of the task to a relative, under the assumption that the relative will be a more diligent and honest agent than a non-relative. Often, however, the result is disappointing.

The first story I heard was from an interviewer. He entrusted the money he earned from working with us to a cousin, to buy goods in South Africa that could be resold at a higher price in Malawi. The cousin spent the interviewer's money, returning with nothing for my interviewer. Naively, I said he should complain to the head of his family. He answered "I can't do that, he's my uncle." In another story, a high-level broker tried to grow tobacco on rented land: the agent was her nephew. He did not do his job; the crop was poor. She looked for another entrepreneurial opportunity: she opened a liquor store, staffed by two other nephews. That wasn't successful either - they stole some of the money. Relatives are also problematic for brokers in a different way: since the successful NGO broker will have access to a project vehicle, paid for by the NGO, family and neighbors may expect to get rides for themselves, animals, and goods, thus creating tension for the broker who risks being reprimanded, or even fired by the project director for unauthorized use of the vehicle.

Yet another, and probably more successful, strategy to buffer insecurity is to maintain strong networks, a mixture of professional and personal connections forged at school, at church, and at work. These connections matter at every level of the broker hierarchy. Cosmopolitan brokers maintain contacts in important government ministries and participate in churches or ethnic associations where the politically influential gather. National-level brokers, many of whom formed tight friendships at the elite Chancellor College of the University of Malawi, watch out for one another, sharing information about such vital matters as the salaries at different INGOs or NGOs, or anticipated changes in donor priorities. Someone who is concerned about his job may contact a friend who might know of an opening; similarly, someone who hears of a job that would be a

promotion for her friend will inform her. Local networks matter even more for district-level brokers. We saw this when, at the end of a large research project, the US head of the project wanted to host a celebratory lunch to thank the dozen or so district officials and others who had helped with the project. A key district official insisted that the luncheon could not go forward unless numerous other local NGO heads and other local influential were included. Since the host lacked the budget to more than double the guest list, the luncheon never happened. For the district broker, maintaining local networks was a higher priority than rewarding the particular people who had helped with the project.

A fourth broker strategy for dealing with insecurity is particularly relevant for the implementation of development aid: brokers insist on getting paid for activities, such as meetings, workshops and travel, that provide allowances or per diems. At all levels, allowances are important. Even Members of Parliament insist on “sitting allowances” when Parliament is in session. An example comes from a conversation I had over dinner with two women in high positions, one in a ministry, the other in the Malawi office of a UN agency. I commented disparagingly on the “culture of allowances,” pointing out that a recent donor study by NORAD, the Norwegian aid agency, found that on average travel-related allowances accounted for 21.9 percent of salaries and a total of 9 percent of Malawi’s budget (Sureide et al., 2012). Both of them disagreed vigorously. Although they had relatively very high salaries, they said they could not attend meetings and workshops, even those related to their jobs, without allowances, they needed the money. Another, and more shocking, example of the importance of allowances comes from a current project in Malawi to promote a new “Test and Treat” approach to reducing the prevalence of HIV. Trainings were set up to instruct health workers. When the donors failed to provide allowances for the trainings, this provoked a boycott: the health workers refused to attend.

And, of course, economic insecurity is buffered by corruption, as when a Health Surveillance Assistant (HSA, the lowest level in the health hierarchy) criticized another HSA for stealing medicine from their health facility so that he could sell the medicines. He justified the theft by saying, *“there are fewer trainings these days, I have to look for other ways to get money to support my family.”*

Brokers’ view of the donors’ expected beneficiaries:

Missionaries who came to Malawi in the late 1800’s introduced modern western ideals, such as individualism, materialism, and Christian ethics. “Both formal schooling and informal education contrasted the ‘superior’ clothes, cars, trains, airplanes, canned foods, tea, and alcohol of the white world, and the ‘inferior’ African world of ‘heathenism’ and ‘superstition.’ Thus, the educated considered going back to rural villages and kinfolk “a temporary relapse into ‘primitivity’, and have learned to ‘despise’ traditional forms of dress, cosmetics, entertainment, and etiquette.

Simultaneously, those Africans who have not acquired formal education, hence good jobs and material possessions, due to either traditionalism or lack of money and schools, are made to feel inferior and worthless." (Chainawa, 1994, p220).

Although the brokers are meant to be helping those whose behavior the donors want to transform, the villagers or slum dwellers, they deprecate them for being "lazy."

Susan, in email to a district broker: "What does lazy mean? That they didn't work hard enough to get a credential?"

Moses: "Yes. Don't work hard to liberate oneself from pangs of poverty. Don't work hard to complete given tasks on time. Don't work hard to go extra mile or do additional task or free overtime work. Don't work hard to make a change in own welfare. Running away from difficult tasks like farming and leaving women to do it instead. Staying at a market and drink tea or play bawo and not do any work but wait for piece jobs."

Subsistence farmers do, of course, work hard in the fields to ensure that they have enough grain to survive the hunger months and, if possible, to pay school fees for their children. They also strategize access as much as they can from the little allowances that are on offer from donor projects.

A villager, Rosemary, explained to the anthropologist, Janneke Verheijen, that:

... she attends the weekly tree-nursery meetings in which villagers are taught to grow trees, as well as the adult literacy classes every weekday afternoon. She does not see the benefit of either project, as trees can be found everywhere, and she has known how to read and write since primary school. Some villagers speculated, however, that those participating in the tree-planting project would in the end receive a bag of maize, and those involved in the literacy classes would later on be offered a microloan. Rosemary says she doesn't actually believe that this is true, but unwilling to run the risk of missing out in case it is true, she shows up at each meeting. (Verheijen, 2013, p233)

SECTION 3: WHAT CAN GO WRONG WHEN BROKERS IMPLEMENT A PROJECT?

To reach the beneficiaries in a village or slum depends on the smooth functioning of brokers in the aid chain. The previous section on brokers and their insecurities suggests some of the reasons *why* things go wrong when district level brokers implement an intervention while trying to buffer the insecurity with which they live, as when they disdain the villagers they are supposed to help or disrespect the chiefs, who are powerful, because they are traditional, not modern. Here I suggest

another reason projects may go wrong: the brokers know that donors who pay for them have no way of knowing whether they are successful at transforming the lives of the beneficiaries--or not. Thus, brokers and donors may agree to measure success by filling in the cells of a log frame, testimonials from carefully selected beneficiaries at an end-of-project celebration, and an evaluation report written by an independent - or not so independent - consultant who has learned to be politic.

The evaluation reports must feature the successes: little is said about the failures. Below are three examples from project evaluations I conducted in rural Malawi. I have not evaluated education projects, but the brokers' behaviors are likely to be similar. The first two examples are from NGO interventions; the third is a project funded by the World Bank and implemented by Malawi's National AIDS Commission, in conjunction with Malawi's Ministry of Health. All three were relatively sophisticated (all three had both a baseline and an endline survey; in two, the population was randomized). I do not claim that the projects were successes or failures: my agenda here is not to assess causality, and some of the "wrongs" are outside of the implementer's control. Rather, it is to alert project directors to problems they are likely to encounter when brokers implement projects.

"A pilot project of Concern Worldwide's Innovations for Maternal, Newborn and Child Health Initiative"

Background:

Health care in Malawi is accessed primarily through public health facilities, which are under-staffed and under-resourced. To address this, the Innovations project focused on the then-newly-fashionable "mHealth" approach, a general term for the use of mobile phones and other wireless technology in medical care. To implement the projects, Concern Worldwide contracted a small NGO in the US, which set up an office in a large trading center in southern Malawi and hired district-level brokers to implement a pilot study.

The research NGO for which I often consulted was selected to design and then to evaluate the impacts of their interventions. In addition to baseline and endline surveys, I conducted a process evaluation consisting of interviews with women in the community (the target population), as well as stakeholders (health facility staff, chiefs). The NGO was unusually open about what went wrong.

The first intervention was the provision of a phone hotline, such that women with problems or questions could make a free call to a Health Surveillance Assistant in the district hospital, rather than walking many miles from their village to the district hospital or one of the Health Centers. At the time the project was implemented, only 9 percent of the baseline survey sample households had a phone. Thus, the brokers provided phones to selected community members who agreed to

be volunteers. A woman who sought health advice would go to the Community Volunteer's (CV) home; the volunteer would dial the hotline.

The second intervention was providing tablets that had been programmed so that nurses could book appointments for antenatal care visits (ANC). The booking system would provide ANC clients with a specific date and time to be seen by health staff. This was expected to (1) reduce the waiting time for ANC clients, which was seen as a barrier to attending the recommended 4 ANC visits; (2) remind booked clients of the date and time of their appointment, using SMS, to increase ANC attendance; and (3) permit health center staff working on ANC days to plan for the number of clients they would see, to improve the availability and quality of ANC services.

What went wrong:

1. The NGO was to work closely with the high-level government brokers at the District Ministry of Health (DMoH). This did not happen. After the first few meetings with the District Minister and his top-level staff, the Minister put an end to the meetings. In the context, this is not surprising. *First*, the high-level brokers were not interested in research and said they did not see the point of spending time on a project that would only benefit the targeted group (the women in the intervention site) rather than all women in the district. *Second*, since the NGO was not proposing to conduct a training or a workshop for the DMoH, these brokers would not benefit from allowances (conversations with the US NGO brokers in Malawi).
2. The hotline: As early as the third month of the implementation of the hotline, CVs reported to the Malawian brokers that their phones were damaged; the phones had been bought for a promotion by a phone company and were inexpensive. By the end of the project, the NGO estimated that about 60 percent were damaged. Although the volunteers brought damaged phones to the brokers for repair, the process evaluation found that the brokers sent few for repair, and of these, not all were returned to the volunteers but were kept by the brokers.
3. The tablet intervention addressed problems that the frontline staff, the nurses, did not perceive to be problems.

A local tech company was employed, at great expense, to design a booking system for the tablets. The health staff refused to use it. In the process evaluation, staff members said the booking system was a good idea, but this was followed by reservations and complaints:

They said they "feared" because they did not have the skills to use the tablets and that they had a functioning, and familiar, paper system. But, and probably more important, they did not see that there would be any personal benefits. The benefits they expected were allowances for attending a "training", where skills are taught. Everyone loves trainings. But the NGO did not conduct a training for the staff, health staff, only an "orientation", which provides a Fanta

and a bun, but does not provide allowances. Allowances are important for enhancing the brokers' meagre income: when interviewers asked what they expected when they heard that an NGO would be working with their facility, one said that with the allowances, "We will eat meat!"

In addition, the NGO wanted the women who had been booked to be seen in the afternoon. However, health staff resisted. They typically work only until lunch time, when most of them go home to take care of their domestic duties, to work on their plots or to sell their vegetables at the market.

All the NGO's Malawian brokers would have been familiar with the workings of the health facility: they lived in the area. They thus would have known that the nurses were unlikely to use the tablets or to agree to a booking system that would force them to stay at their jobs during the afternoons. The brokers did not speak up, however, when early in the project they learned about the tablets. In an interview with a staff member of the NGO who had previously been a nurse, I asked whether he had anticipated these problems. He said yes. I then asked why he didn't tell his bosses that the tablet component not be acceptable. He said "Aah, it is difficult to speak to those above you", which I interpret as saying that he would be worried that there would be fewer days of work for him or that he might even be fired (Watkins 2013). This view was elaborated in another interview, conducted in another district by a district-level NGO financial officer. He said

"Because we have a hierarchy, we cannot talk direct to USAID, we can only talk to our bosses and our bosses send this request to donors. The bosses just said to make sure you teach the villagers good financial management so they use the budget correctly. We cannot push our bosses to talk to USAID or push the donors, we can just wait (Meegoda 2011).

Presumably, had these brokers not been so insecure about their jobs they might have felt free to speak up, and the time and money wasted would have been less.

Monitoring the implementation was done by the district brokers at monthly meetings of the volunteers at the health center, or by phone from a broker at the NGO office; the brokers rarely, if ever, went to the villages. As a result, it took some weeks before the brokers learned from the CVs at a monthly meeting that the hotline was considered by some of the villagers to be "Satanic": when a newly pregnant woman called the hotline, she was given an expected due date. But, it was said in the villages, "only Satan can know when a baby is due." Thus, women decided on their own, or were pressured by relatives and neighbors, not to use the hotline.

The process evaluation found that two powerful categories of actors were ignored by the NGO brokers: chiefs and health surveillance assistants (HSAs), who attend to minor health problems.

Although few of the chiefs have education beyond primary school, they are at the top of the village status hierarchy. They are powerful, and they expect to be respected. The HSA's are lowest level of the health facility staff, but because they have had some formal schooling, as well as a job with a regular salary, their status is well above that most villagers. They were tasked by the NGO to provide support to the community volunteers.

Both chiefs and HSAs complained that they were not "trained" by the project, so they did not benefit from allowances, and that their status had not been respected by the project.

Chief: *"How can they give a phone to a volunteer and not to the chief, that is giving something to children, it should be [given to] the parents".*

HSA: *"They did not train us, how can we help if we haven't been trained?" and "Why are you giving the phones to volunteers when it is us, HSAs that know our villages well?"*

Interviewer: *When the project was introduced, they said that the volunteers were the one to implement the project while you were working in the same areas, how did you feel because you were doing the same roles the volunteers would be doing?*

HSA: *it would have been better if at the beginning, they had trained us because the volunteers largely depend on us.... So, if they prioritize training the volunteer before us, it means if s/he finds a problem in the course of her or his work, we would be reluctant to help such an individual.....pretending that we don't know though we know such a thing because they work under another organization [the NGO rather than the Ministry of Health] which excluded us, so we may be reluctant to help them saying we don't know the subject matter. We the HSAs ...told them [the district brokers] that the project was not going on very well, and when the volunteers approached us for help, we would not help them.*

It is plausible that the western staff of the NGO did not understand the context well enough to know how important the support of chiefs and HSAs was to the project and how embedded status envy is in Malawian culture. The Malawian brokers implementing the project would know—but they, as with the tablet intervention, did not speak up.

BRIDGE: A Midterm Evaluation of the BRIDGE II Project

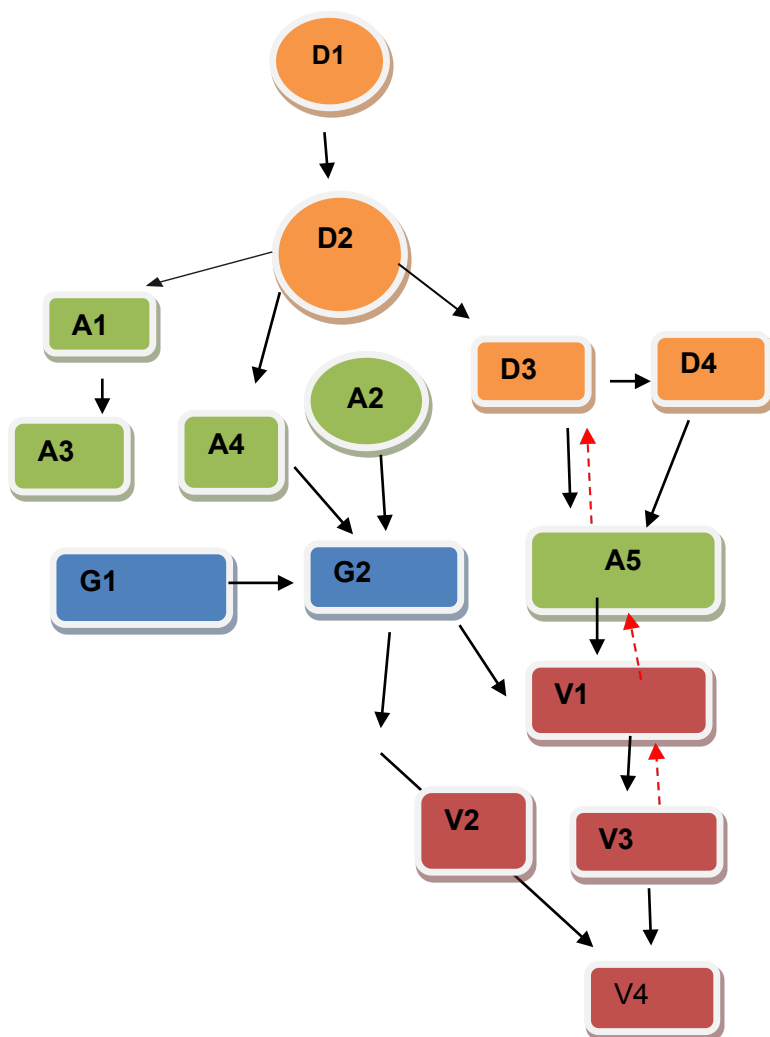
Background:

The BRIDGE II Project was an ambitious five-year USAID-funded HIV prevention program to transform Africa by mobilizing communities to adopt the best practices of HIV prevention. This was to occur through participatory activities - sessions held in the villages that would, "enable women and men to explore how gender norms and roles operate in their lives, and transform those they

determine to have a negative effect, while reinforcing those that they deem positive, particularly in terms of HIV prevention”. (<https://www.k4health.org/toolkits/bridge-ii-project-toolkit/african-transformation>). These discussions were to take place in new community structures designed by BRIDGE: Community Action Groups that would advocate for actions such as persuading chiefs to close bars before nightfall (in order to reduce drinking so that men would not go to bar girls) and Village Discussion Groups in which participants would identify problems associated with practices such as multiple concurrent sexual partnerships, and then suggest solutions to these problems.

Central to the design of the intervention in Malawi was engaging the government as a partner. Thus, BRIDGE expected the existing government structures at the district, area, and group village head levels to implement the project (Figure 2).

Figure 2: BRIDGE II Community Mobilization Chart



D1-D5 District Level

- D1. District Assembly (DA)
- D2. District AIDS Coordinating Committee (DACC)
- D3. BCI Technical Sub-Committee (BCI/TSC)
- D4. District Committee Mobilization Team (DCMT)

Area Level

- A1. Area Development Committee (ADC)
- A2. Area Executive (AE)
- A3. Traditional Leaders Forum (TLF)
- A4. CBO Network
- A5. Area Development Community Mobilization Team (ADCMT)

Group Village Head Level

- G1. Village Development Committee (VDC)
- G2. Community Based Organization (CBO)

Village Level

- V1. Community Action Group (CAG)
- V2. Discussion Circle Facilitators
- V3. Village Discussion Groups (VDGs)
- V4. Community members

Responsibility and Supervision

Direction

Downwards: Hierarchy of levels in the Community Mobilization Chart

Upwards: Direction of supervision

In addition to baseline and endline surveys, BRIDGE conducted a qualitative evaluation at midline.

What went wrong?

1. **District level:** Government brokers at the district level were expected to support and monitor the field activities. They attended a training and received allowances, but later said that they were limited by their duties in full-time salaried jobs, by lack of support for transport to meetings, and by the lack of allowances for participation in activities in the community.
2. **Group Village Head (GVH) level:** As with the evaluation of the Innovations project, field observations and interviews conducted with the GVHs suggest that they were the weakest link in the community mobilization process. Traditional authorities are powerful and influential, but when the GVHs were asked about the problems and solutions for the AIDS epidemic, their responses rarely suggested that they had been exposed to BRIDGE II. And although the Community Action Groups were central to the intervention there was little interaction between the GVHs and the Community Action Groups, such that the GVHs were largely unaware of their activities.
3. **Village level:** Key activities were assigned to volunteers in the Community Action Groups (CAG), which was composed largely of interstitial elites, the young men and women who had finished secondary school but did not have job. They were given only one to three days of training, which is far less than the two-week training for some of the district officials. Moreover, since training allowances are pegged to status, their allowances were much lower than those of the district officials. The CAG volunteers considered that their primary contribution to BRIDGE II was teaching others the themes and messages of BRIDGE II. Initially they were very enthusiastic about fulfilling their responsibilities, but in interviews and focus groups they complained about having to travel long distances on foot to accomplish their tasks, the lack of compensation, and being mocked by their peers for working for free. As with other donor projects that depend on volunteers for their project to be sustainable, attrition was substantial (Swidler and Watkins, 2009).
4. **Funding priorities:** Overall, the aims of BRIDGE II were too ambitious for the funding that was available. A disproportionate amount of funding went to the higher-level brokers - the BRIDGE staff in Malawi, Save the Children, which had been contracted to supervise the overall implementation, and the high-level government brokers in the districts, rather than to the lower level brokers and volunteers who were responsible for supporting the Community Action Groups, Discussion Circles, and Village Discussion Groups.

World Bank

Background:

In the mid-2000's, three RCTs were conducted in Africa to determine whether circumcised males were less likely to contract HIV than uncircumcised males. The studies showed that circumcision reduced the probabilities of transmission by about 40 percent to 60 percent. As a result of the pressure from UNAIDS and WHO, male circumcision became a contentious ethnic, religious, and political issue in much of central and southern Africa (male circumcision is traditional in West Africa).

In 2014, an entity at the World Bank, with funding from DFID, initiated a project in Malawi to promote Voluntary Medical Male Circumcision (VMMC). The multi-million and multi-year contract for the project was given to the National AIDS Commission (NAC), a parastatal. There were several subcontracts, including one to a local NGO to design an incentivized RCT and another to the Ministry of Health to implement the RCT in two of the 28 districts in Malawi.

At the time (2014) NAC, which had previously received a great deal of money from multiple donors had, due to charges of corruption, been left with only one donor, the World Bank (WB). Although there was little interest in - and widespread opposition to - VMMC, NAC was not in a position to refuse the money. Their subsequent actions suggested that they were desperate to keep the money (i.e., to spend as little as possible on the study). Not surprisingly, much went wrong.

In Malawi, circumcision is nearly universal among the southern ethnic group, the Yao, who are also mainly Muslim, and very rare among other ethnic groups and religions. The Yao are also among the least educated Malawians (in no small part because they resisted missionary schooling, fearing that their children would be converted to Christianity). Members of the other ethnic groups, including the educated NAC brokers or those who work at the Ministry of Health, are almost all uncircumcised. They generally feel culturally superior to the circumcising, but less-educated Yao.

Since Independence in 1964, political power has shifted back and forth between the predominantly Protestant or Catholic Chewa and the predominantly Muslim Yao. In a conversation in 2009 that I had with a former Vice-President, who was the Counselor to the grand Chewa Chief, he said circumcision "is being brought to policy, it's on its way," but that "most would not do it because circumcision has a religious aspect. The former president was a Moslem, but now we [the Chewa] have produced a leader [the then president]. The Moslems will say 'Aah, you were too proud [of being the same ethnicity as the president]; those who are circumcised might say 'we are superior.'"

Study Design:

The US consultants for the local NGO selected two districts, both primarily non-circumcising, for a school-based and incentivised RCT of males age 10-34. As an incentive, students in the intervention schools would be provided with a voucher for transportation by bike taxi to and from the District Hospital, thus avoiding potential charges of “paying” for circumcision - or, as some said - “buying foreskins.” The vouchers were to be distributed to the school heads, who would then distribute them to the male students. Once the circumcision was done, and after each of three follow-up visits, the individual would redeem the voucher.

There was concern at NAC that people would make fake vouchers: the amount was about \$10 per voucher, a lot of money in rural Malawi. Thus, to monitor the implementation of the study, the NGO’s study team developed a protocol that would ensure that only males from the intervention schools would be able to redeem the vouchers. The vouchers were distributed in packets: a voucher for the young man associated with the intervention school plus a voucher he could give to a friend in his school. The packet also included vouchers for the guardians (usually parents) of minors, and vouchers for each of three follow-up visits for those who had been circumcised. For each of the categories, the voucher was a different color, and each voucher had a unique serial number. The study team proposed including the name of the individual on the voucher: this was rejected by the WB on the grounds of confidentiality. The study team also proposed including a picture of each student, so that the district brokers who redeemed the vouchers could be certain that there were no imposters. NAC, however, was unwilling to pay for a camera.

What went wrong?

World Bank projects must be done in conjunction with a government entity in the country. In this case, the WB selected the National AIDS Commission as its partner. Thus, the WB gave a great deal of money to the National AIDS Commission to do something that the national brokers at NAC (most non-circumcising) did not want to do: promote voluntary male medical circumcision among non-circumcising groups. Although NAC could not refuse the money, their brokers could, and did, deliberately subvert the study.

The first sign of opposition to the study occurred when a representative of the WB VMMC team arrived in Malawi for a preliminary “engagement” meeting. The meeting was led by the Acting Director of NAC (the previous one had been fired for corruption), who told the WB representative that they did not want a study, “it would be of no use to us.” Things went downhill from there.

There were many meetings of NAC brokers on the study, at which little happened except foot dragging: these meetings were a cash cow for the brokers (most of whom opposed VMMC). The lead broker in charge of the Ministry of Health component of the intervention was inactive: he either

did not appear at meetings or, when he did, he stayed only long enough to register his attendance, and thus receive an allowance.

Procurement of vehicles to conduct demand generation activities in the district, procurement of supplies such as pain medications for the health facility, and the printing of the vouchers was repeatedly delayed; items such as computers for entering the data on those who were circumcised (e.g., age, color of the voucher) were not provided.

District Ministry of Health brokers were trained to conduct district-wide demand generation activities: vehicles were to go throughout the district announcing the campaign, showing videos, posters, etc. The brokers, however, implemented the demand generation activities only in the area of the district capital, not in the more distant rural villages. Nor did the brokers attempt to mobilize the chiefs, who would be key in promoting, or opposing, VMMC.

There was no supervision of the district brokers to ensure that the implementation of the RCT would follow the study protocol. The local NGO was prepared to do this, but the WB, inexplicably, did not give them permission to do so. As a result, the implementation of the study was chaotic. As news of the vouchers circulated, there was great excitement about the vouchers; they generated a great deal of demand for circumcision. Some with voucher packets sold them to those without vouchers; some presented themselves as guardians of minors several times under different names. And those who were not eligible mounted a public protest outside the health facility: “everyone should get vouchers.”

The NAC Acting Director shut down the study before all the vouchers had been redeemed. A total of 26,892 vouchers were distributed; only 7,676 were redeemed. Given the high value of vouchers, this was not due to a lack of demand. By ending the study prematurely, NAC could retain the money.

When brokers at NAC conducted a post-intervention audit, they found that money had been stolen at the district level, presumably by the District Accountant who daily provided the district broker with the money to redeem the vouchers or by the Accountant herself.

In the end, the vouchers were very effective in increasing demand: all the young men who were circumcised had their vouchers redeemed. As soon as there were no more vouchers, however, demand for circumcision plummeted.

SECTION 4: IMPLICATIONS FOR RISE PROJECTS AND THE IMPORTANCE OF UNDERSTANDING THE ASPIRATIONS AND INSECURITIES OF BROKERS

It is certainly difficult for brokers to implement donor projects in the way that donors might imagine. In part, this is due to lofty goals of the donors, and the interests of the brokers in the implementing organizations. To access funding from large bilateral and multilateral aid organizations, the INGOs or NGOs that refine the donors' policies and programs have to promise the moon: to empower vulnerable women, to end the AIDS epidemic by 2020 (a UNAIDS goal), or to "transform Africa." But the aspirations and insecurities of brokers, and their attitudes towards the donors' expected beneficiaries, make achieving donor goals unlikely.

Implications:

1. Brokers who implement projects have a great deal of power: since neither the donors nor the national elites can observe what they do, they can "interpret, bend, and negotiate" the tasks that have been assigned to them (Hilhorst, 2003, p9). The INGOs and the national-level NGOs that propose ambitious projects know little about the praxis of implementation: What do their brokers actually do? What are their aspirations? What are their insecurities? There is substantial literature on "street-level bureaucrats" in western countries (Lipsky, 1990) but only a sparse literature on low-level brokers in Africa and other developing countries. Some of the literature, however, is quite informative. For example, see the publications of Lewis and Mosse, 2006; Bebbington et al., 2007; Abbott and Luke, 2011; Bierschenk et al., 2002; for Africa, see Olivier de Sardan, 1999, 2009; Kaler and Watkins, 2001; Gibbs et al., 2010, 1999; Englund, 2006; Swidler and Watkins, 2017; Kendall and Silver, 2016) on the ways in which textual commitments are translated into a range of diverse practices. It appears, however, that the designers of development aid programs and projects in world capitals do not read this literature.
2. The well-being of the poor is not a priority of brokers. To the contrary, those who are educated enough to have a regular salary often speak deprecatingly of the villagers whom the brokers are expected to transform: they are in thrall to backward cultural practices and they are considered "lazy" - meaning that they did not strive like the educated ones.
3. Another barrier to implementation is harder for the outsider to capture or explain, but important nonetheless. Some have written of formal activities like the typical tasks of a bureaucratic organization as more "theater" or "performance," than work directed toward a practical outcome (see also Pritchett, 2012). A study in Malawi of the process of planning and formulating the budget found that:

The budget process is a theatre that masks the real distribution and spending. All the actors, from civil society, government, and donors, seem aware that many of their statements and actions have little bearing on actual distribution of resources. Yet all stakeholders ‘act’ as if the budget planning and formulation would actually have a bearing on the actual distribution. From the process of planning and formulation the budget, through its implementation and oversight, our study finds that the budget process in Malawi provides no realistic estimate of revenue or spending. The budget process is a theatre that masks the real distribution and spending. All the actors, from civil society, government, and donors seem aware that many of their statements and actions have little bearing on actual distribution of resources. Yet, all stakeholders ‘act’ as if the budget planning and formulation will actually have a bearing on the actual implementation and distribution of resources. (Rackner et al., 2004)

Our fieldwork provides another example. I was curious about what the Youth Officer in the District Commission did, and asked a friend - a Peace Corps volunteer who had been assigned to the district to find out.

We had a meeting in his office. I asked what he did, the 3rd time I have asked, he always repeats the same info. Coordinating youth activities in the district. Yet, he never appears to be doing anything but reading the paper. This is a common observation. I go to peoples’ office, or sit in my office with the DAC (District AIDS Commissioner) and I ask what they do during a day, what their job descriptions are...the job descriptions are regurgitated. When asked about daily actives, job description is said again. But what are people actually doing? I have met the youth officer 3 times. We have the same conversation!!!

Much the same chasm between rules and “rules in use” occurs when brokers are charged with monitoring front line workers. In the education sector, Primary Education Assistants (PEA) are mandated to conduct monthly visits to the primary schools to provide supervision and support. When I asked a group of civil service brokers staying at the same motel as I was whether the PEA’s actually did this, they said yes, they do this and that. But when I asked if they really did go monthly, they typically said “yes.... if there is petrol for their motorcycles.” It appears that there often is no petrol, and that some schools are not even visited yearly. Similarly, the government’s Agricultural Extension Agents are meant to work with farmers in the villages: in practice, however, they devote their attention to the wealthy farmers.

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4. The INGOs that develop themes and practices, and the donors who fund them, are likely to know little about the countries in which their projects will be implemented. Thus, governments may have little interest in the project or passively oppose it. For example, the WHO and UNAIDS policy of voluntary male medical circumcision (VMMC) for HIV prevention was announced in 2007; it was not until 2012 that Malawi adopted such a policy, and several years after that to begin to implement it in health facilities (Chilongozi, 2012). The opposition to VMMC was deep: male circumcision in Malawi, as well as other countries in southern and eastern Africa, is a matter of ethnic and religious identity, as well as political party claims to power (Parkhurst et al., 2015).

 5. Donor representatives doing business with NGOs or the government rely on the elite, educated brokers to get a sense of the context. But the high-level government brokers in Malawi do not know much about the presumed beneficiaries. Although they are citizens of the country, we found that most of those we met had never lived in a village: they were born in the city, educated in the city, and rarely went to the villages (and when they did, it was for a funeral). Moreover, in line with their self-perception as modern, they stick to the current party line. In informal settings, however, it is quite different. Thus, it is unlikely that donors can get even a rudimentary sense of whether or not their projects work, whether their method of evaluation is a conventional evaluation, relying on interviews with stakeholders and focus groups of beneficiaries, a process evaluation relying of brokers' reports, or a randomized controlled trial.

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