

# Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Participatory Development in Basic Education in Malawi

*John Makwira*  
*School of Professional Development and Leadership*  
*University of New England*

## Abstract

This article critically examines the extent to which one emerging NGO facilitates the participation of its beneficiaries and other stakeholders in the decision-making processes at the identification, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of basic education programmes in Malawi. The author argues that despite the comparative advantage of this NGO[1], the participation of their stakeholders, including local community members, is tokenistic as decisions are largely top-down. The author recommends that NGOs learn to relinquish their grip on power and develop confidence in their beneficiaries as well as other stakeholders.

## Introduction

The emergence of the concept of participatory development, that is, development that is conceived not only as society-centered (Pieterse, 2001) but also as democratic and people-centered (Burkey, 1993; Brohman, 1996; Carmen, 1996; Maser, 1997; Ife, 2002), has also led to the redefinition of the role of the state and civil society in addressing national development priorities. The unprecedented upsurge of NGOs and their role in facilitating participatory development has also invited some degree of scrutiny. Despite the importance that is increasingly attached to their facilitative role, there is very little understanding of how NGOs actually engage their beneficiaries in the decision-making processes of identification, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the projects that affect their beneficiaries' lives.

The purpose of this paper is to shed some light on the conflicting debate regarding issues of participatory development. In particular, the paper seeks to highlight how local people participate in the decision-making process of the projects that claim to support them, and the impediments these beneficiaries encounter in that process. This is done by examining one emerging non-governmental development organization called Tigali Literacy Project (TLP). As an emerging NGO, TLP is ideal in this study because of its focus on rural communities, and hence is representative of most marginalized communities in Malawi. Furthermore, the organization is typical because of its focus on two fundamental issues that affect Malawi, that is, literacy and health education (especially about HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases).

## Background to the Research Project

The research reported here was conducted in Malawi in 2000 as part of a doctoral research project. Since the multi-party political system was introduced in 1994, many policy reform processes have taken place, especially in the education sector. The new policies have two major thrusts--the provision of Free Primary Education (FPE) and poverty alleviation.

In October 1995, the government produced a policy document entitled, Policy Framework for Poverty Alleviation Programme, which advocates that poor people should be "empowered to improve their plight and contribute to national development" (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 1997, p.14), with the state providing a conducive environment for the programme's success. This success is dependent on "a strong partnership with non-governmental organizations (NGOs), donors, and the private sector" (UNDP, 1997, p.14). Not only does the policy call for the participation of the beneficiaries in the decision-making processes but also, as the Government of Malawi (GoM), (1995, 2000) observes, the participation of NGOs in all programmes aimed to alleviate poverty through the provision of basic education.

### **The Paradox of Participatory Development**

The current participatory development discourse, and how non-governmental organizations facilitate participation, has come under heavy scrutiny. Scholars are debating the efficacy of NGOs in service delivery. For example, Tendler's (1992, cited in Tvedt, 1998) claim that NGOs are flexible and effective at obtaining true meaningful participation of the intended beneficiaries, as well as achieving the correct relationship between the development process and outcomes, has recently been challenged. Cleaver (2002) contends that participatory approaches to development are largely dichotomised into means/ends classification. On the one hand, the efficiency argument sees participation as a tool for achieving better project outcomes. On the other, participation is seen as a process which enhances people's capabilities to improve their own lives and bring forth social change to the disenfranchised (Nelson and Wright, 1995).

Similarly, how to involve the beneficiaries, not only in the social, economic and cultural aspects of development, but the political processes that affect their lives is equally problematic. Brohman (1996), for example, acknowledges the complexity of participation. Brohman (1996) argues that "questions often remain over who participates (e.g., just an elite group or broader range of people), what they participate in (e.g., a more limited or broader range of decision-making), how they participate (e.g., as benefit recipients or project designers), and for what reason they participate (e.g., as a means towards other objectives or an end in itself)" (p. 251).

### **NGOs as Facilitators of Participatory Development**

Whether or not the concept of participation can or has been fully embraced by development NGOs as an instrument of social change is highly contended. White (1995, in Lewis, 2001) notes that the politics of participation on who participates, what they participate in, how they participate and for what reason may vary from nominal or "tokenistic display" to "transformative participation" (see Myers, 1999; Yamamori, et al., 1996; Lewis, 2001). According to Lewis (2001), in "transformative" participation, "people find ways to make decisions and take action, without outsider involvement and on their own terms" (p.118). White (2000) regards this form of participation as highly empowering as decisions stem from the actual recipients. In other words, development organizations can only play a facilitative role. It is common however, for participants to have very little influence and no ultimate control of projects that affect them (representative participation).

The Role of the NGO Sector in Participatory Development in Basic Education in Malawi

The role of the NGO sector in education in Malawi can be traced from the European missionaries (Banda, 1982). The early stages of the missionary NGOs were not only challenging but also lacked coordination and direction on matters of policy, particularly in terms of who participated in determining the standard and the relevance of curricula. Banda (1982) and Hauya (1993) recount that, despite the fact that missionary NGOs and government education providers managed to get organized and gave direction and support to each other, the Africans were simply passive recipients of the education chosen either by the colonial government or the missionary NGOs.

Hauya (1993) further observes that, after 1901, missionary NGOs' participation in education was reduced to that of simply assisting the government in the provision of resources, specifically the construction of school infrastructure. Given the authoritarian practice of Dr. Hastings Banda's regime, in which no differing views were entertained, the missionary NGOs had little or no role in matters of policy towards education, despite being the proprietors of those institutions (Pachai, 1973).

While a number of local and international NGOs were involved in the provision of basic education, especially pre-school and adult education, they had little involvement in issues of advocacy, capacity building and community empowerment (Faiti, 1995). The democratisation process which ensued after 1994 multi-party general elections was characterized by more openness and less restriction paving the way to the growth of new NGOs. The new president, Bakili Muluzi, pledged to "build an open society, governed by democratic rules and institutions which encouraged participation of individuals, groups and communities, in the political, economic and human development of the country" (Rogge, 1997, p. 3). The proliferation of NGOs thereafter testifies to this assertion.

### **The Problem**

While there is recognition of the proliferation of NGOs in Malawi, including those providing basic education, there is little documentation on the nature of NGOs and local community participation in education since 1994. Not only is there a dearth of evidence on what strategies NGOs use in the identification, development, implementation and evaluation of basic education programmes, but also on factors that contribute to the success or failure of participation. Further evidence suggests that:

Most of the NGOs do not understand the economic and social environment in which they operate and do not consider that the communities in which they work are part of a broader system of opposing agendas and interests. ...The staff in these NGOs lacks skills in policy analysis and advocacy, information in the form of arguments backed by empirical evidence and access to [sic] policy-making arena (Council for Non-Governmental Organizations in Malawi (CONGOMA), 2000 p. 2).

While the government's call for participation of NGOs in providing education at all levels appears to be a noble policy commitment, a number of problems are apparent. Currently, the government has no policy on how to collaborate with NGOs. The low level of NGO participation in policy identification, development and implementation has, to some extent, rendered NGOs ignorant of government development priorities.

Furthermore, while a number of basic education programmes have been undertaken by various NGOs both in rural and urban areas, documentation of the extent to which they facilitate participation of their beneficiaries in basic education is scarce. In addition, there is little literature on how the NGOs in Malawi mobilise and engage their beneficiaries in the decision-making processes of the programmes that directly affect their lives.

### **Research Methodology**

The research reported here used both qualitative and case study approaches. Using purposive or criterion-based sampling, the study participants comprised staff of the TLP, implementing a literacy project with particular emphasis on access and gender; as well as ministry of education officials, politicians, staff of the District Commissioners' offices, and members of the local communities. Various documents such as policy briefs, project proposals, and annual evaluation reports were also used as sources of data.

TLP provides an exemplary case study not only because of its focus on remote communities, but also because of its approach of combining both health and literacy education. As such, the use of in-depth interviews supplemented by documentary evidence was not intended to eliminate inconsistencies in order to arrive at a verifiable and absolute truth, but rather to facilitate the discovery of commonalities as well as contradictions, tensions, ambivalences and disruptions in the emerging issues related to participatory development. The main questions centred on how the beneficiaries were engaged in the decision-making processes. Furthermore, some of the questions focused on such issues as who initiated the meetings, what role the participating organizations play in the process, and expectations of the beneficiaries.

### **Findings and Discussion**

#### *Participation in the establishment of TLP*

A central concern of participatory development theory is that changes and enhanced resources should largely be influenced and determined by locally perceived needs (Burkey 1993). Instead of letting outside experts and other external parties determine what needs to be changed in the communities, the local people should be encouraged to examine and identify their own problems. But as noted by Brohman, (1996, p. 251) the major challenge to participatory development concerns who participates, in what do they participate, and how and why they participate.

The establishment of TLP provides a picture full of ambivalences, contradictions, claims and counter-claims regarding local community members' participation in the project establishment.

TLP is an emerging NGO which was established in 1997 in the Southern region of Malawi in response to the health and social needs of adolescent girls. The major focus of TLP is "a non-formal education programme that combines literacy and health education for adolescent girls who have missed out of school" (TLP Profile n.d, p. 1). In specific terms, the major objectives of TLP are to offer a literacy programme and a health education curriculum that addresses local health problems particularly relating to HIV/AIDS and nutrition to non-school attending girls aged between 10 and 18.

A thorough analysis of TLP's documents reveals that the organization was established after a "needs assessment" that, according to top TLP officials, engaged a number of people. We involved a number of participants in this; all our team of course, twelve supervisors, members of the village and, if you like, this was a huge data collection exercise by local people, led by consultants" (NGO Official-D).

Contrary to this claim, one of the project officers in the TLP pointed out that there was a plan in existence before the local community members were consulted:

Initially we had set our plans for a project in the area. But what we did next was to contact the District Executive Director, who referred us to the Traditional Authority, who again gave us an okay. ... So what we did was to call for a meeting with one of the Village Headmen and to discuss the development issues. The Village Headmen called for all the people in his area to come to the meeting and then we had the chance to introduce our plans. When a number of chiefs and Village Headmen agreed to the plans, we then started our program with the girls (NGO Official-A).

However, further analysis of the interviews with the majority of the officials revealed that the intended beneficiaries had little or no influence in the establishment of the organization and the project. The line of consultation was top-down. While it may be argued that access to the area has to be sought from the higher authorities, the subsequent process raises a lot of questions as to whether or not local people initiated the meeting. According to this piece of evidence, the Traditional Authorities may have asserted some degree of influence on the Village Group Heads to mobilize their people for the meeting, hence consolidating the top-down consultative processes.

The District Education and Youth Offices provided further evidence of poor participation. They pointed out that "participation is not good. There is very little sensitization of the programs to the other lots of people who could take charge in the event of their departure" (District Education Officer).

While NGOs are hailed as agents of participatory development (Chambers 1997; Fowler 1997), the findings suggest a departure from the fundamental principles of participation and consolidate not only the view that participation is predominantly instrumental but, as Kapoor (2002) argues, is also under-theorised and politicised. The interplay of power and the politics of control are ignored. Thus, the views further demonstrate the possible covert practices NGOs engage in to legitimise their existence. For example, five TLP employees provided further evidence on how participation can be subtly used. When I asked them whether they participated in the establishment and identification of the programmes, they expressed ignorance of their establishment. What was clear, from their point of view, was the top-down consultative process which the management staff initiated before meeting the beneficiaries:

I really don't know how exactly the project was started. But what I know is that there was a call by the Village Headman to tell us that he had received a letter from TLP that they would be coming to address us on the issue of a school. So

many people came to hear about this. When the day came the TLP officials outlined the importance of the school to the villagers. So that's how the school started. I understand that they visited the Traditional Authorities and the District Headquarters before they approached the Village Headman for this (NGO Official-B).

Another official expressed similar sentiments:

The program began like this: our project manager had to go to the village and meet the Village Headmen and tell them the aim of the project. Then the Village Headman accepted that the school might be opened upon seeing the facts from the manager. From there, the officials had to employ myself as Supervisor (NGO Official-C).

The excerpts above denote the degree to which the local people were alienated from participatory decision-making processes. In addition, it is also evident that there were communication gaps between the senior management and junior staff of the organization which ultimately affected the degree to which the junior staff could contribute to participatory decision-making processes.



But we really have a clash of issues here because we believe that the approach should be that of letter and then words first. There is in fact a general consensus among us that the approach should be the conventional one to introducing reading (TLP Student-4).

These remarks explain the role of expatriate or external staff in influencing local decision-making, which is not succinctly articulated in development literature. (Kapoor, 2002)

Such phrases as 'we teach them,' 'I don't think,' and 'I still don't like' are patronising and do not reflect the fundamental principles of participatory development. According to the Project Manager's views, the beneficiaries are viewed as backward because of perceived inadequacies in the indigenous mode of learning. The findings also reveal how change can be resisted if the intended beneficiaries are excluded from decision-making processes that affect them. What the NGO may consider 'relevant' may be 'irrelevant' to the locals and beneficiary population. Further, it demonstrates how expatriate staff downgrade indigenous knowledge based on pre-conceived and modernist notions of development.

Participation should result in freedom, exercised in an environment where differing views find a common platform. Such statements, as shown above, portray discourses of domination and are clear indicators of lack of freedom among the beneficiaries to make decisions on issues that affect them. Clearly, these discourses reaffirm Kapoor's (2002) critique of Chamber's (1995) PRA methodologies and call for a deeper scrutiny of who controls development and whom it benefits. Furthermore, the results strongly suggest that, despite the rhetoric, a top-down model of development thrives in impoverished contexts.

#### *Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation*

An analysis of the proposal documents made available during the research process hardly mentions how the beneficiaries and other stakeholders would be engaged in monitoring and evaluating the project. However, contrary to this piece of evidence, one of the TLP officials claimed that other stakeholders were involved in the monitoring and evaluation processes. Referring to one of the evaluation exercises that were conducted earlier, the officials reiterated: "As I said earlier, a large number of people were involved along with our team members. Also some villagers were involved. In all this exercise, the consultants took the leading role" (NGO Official-D). TLP has supervisors whose task is to collect and compile data in respective localities. Their modus operandi, as noted by one of the NGO leaders in the organization, explains the degree of participation of local community members in the monitoring and evaluation process.

From the villages, we meet our teachers every fortnight for feedback and the like. We meet the Village Committees every three months to discuss the feedback on the issues of our programmes. The supervisors usually collect data almost daily and file up everything till we meet every fortnight. We, at the office, visit the village schools every day and make sure that everything is fine. The Project

Manager comes every six weeks or two months. When she comes, we brief her on the latest developments from the programme (NGO Official-A).

Monitoring and evaluation for the organization rested heavily not on the direct beneficiaries (the students) but rather on the other members of the community who form part of the village committees. Almost all the students who were interviewed admitted having taken no part in the monitoring and evaluation, that is, actively participating in ascertaining what is going on, how the program is progressing and what needs to be done. Some of the views below highlight this argument: "Since the program started, I have not been involved in the evaluation process. I know the committee members usually meet with program officials" (TLP Students-2). Another student commented: "Yes, at the end of the week we are asked to give reports of what we have learnt. After that we are not told anything" (TLP Student-5). This pattern of response was common among students who participate as direct beneficiaries of the programme, essentially underscoring the elusiveness of transformative participatory development (Brohman, 1996) and whether or not the organization had enough capacity to carry out the tasks. Regarding the problem of poor information management: "We need to establish proper reporting procedures in which information from beneficiaries can be properly managed as we do not seem to have any at the moment" (NGO Official-C), it can be concluded that as an emerging NGO, the implementation of participatory development may be difficult due to lack of theoretical orientation (see CONGOMA, 2000).

Absence of participation in monitoring and evaluation was further revealed by some members of the District Assembly. For example, the Education Department expressed dissatisfaction with their participation in the process. According to one of the District Education Officers, there was very little interaction between his office and TLP, which he said could affect project's sustainability.

Our office is not involved in any of those programmes in terms of monitoring and evaluation. We are usually called to see what they have already done. We would have loved to be engaged in most of the activities so that we should know what is happening regardless of the financial rewards, so that when they pull out, we can smoothly take over. (District Education Officer)

Some government officers expressed similar sentiments regarding lack of joint monitoring between the NGO and government departments. Both the department of Community Development and Social Welfare Services are essential to any development activities at the district level. Their poor participation in the monitoring and evaluation is a clear indicator of how narrowly participatory development is understood by NGOs.

The views expressed by various participants do highlight that periodic judgement of action by the program rests with the NGO officials, rather than being a joint activity with local community members, especially the students themselves. While the local community members are engaged once every three months, their contribution in reflecting on the progress is minimal, demonstrating that the beneficiaries are not subjects to the monitoring and evaluation processes, hence contravening the fundamental principles of participatory monitoring and evaluation.

### **Challenges**

There are possible reasons for the failures in the discourses of participatory development. First, participation seems to be understood as mere consultation rather than a process where ordinary people are actively engaged in the decision-making processes. Second, there is the issue of theoretical knowledge, which, according to this study, is lacking not only among low ranking NGO staff but even the senior members of such NGOs. Third, the "politics" of development that is manifeste i h

Non-Governmental Organizations(NGOs) and  
Participatory Development in Basic Education in Malawi

Brohman, J. (1996). *People and development: Rethinking the theory and practice of development*.  
Oxford: Blackwell.

Burkey, S. (1993). *People first: A guide to self-reliant participatory rural development*.  
London: Zed Books.

Carmen, R. (1996). *Attitudes Development: Human rights*. L 00 45 348 0 T 096 0 T 0145 00 45 944 0 7

- Myers, B.R. (1999). *Working with the poor: Principles and practices of transformative development*. New York: Orbis Books.
- Pachai, B. (1973). *Malawi: The History of the Nation*. London: Longman.
- Pieterse, J.N. (2001). *Development theory: Deconstructions/reconstructions*. London: Sage Publications.
- Rogge, T. (1997). *A brief overview of the NGO Sector in Malawi: Options for CIDA programming*. Blantyre: Malawi.
- Tendler, J. (1982). *Using private voluntary organizations in development agencies: Questions for evaluation and program evaluation*. Discussion Paper No. 12, Washington D.C: USAID.
- Tvedt, T. (1998). *Agendas of development diplomacy? NGOs and foreign aid*. Trenton: African World Press.
- UNDP (1997). *Policy and human development in Malawi*. Lilongwe: UNDP.
- White, S.C. (2000). Depoliticising development: The uses and abuses of participation. In D. Eade (Ed.) *Development NGOs and civil society*. London: Oxford Publications.
- White, S.C. (1995). Depoliticising development: The uses and abuses of participation. *Development in Practice* 6(1), 6-15.
- Yamamori, T., Myers, B. L., Bediako, K. & Reed, L. (Eds.) (1996). *Servicing with the poor in Africa*. Monrovia, California: MARC.