Development communication is effective in community driven development interventions: The experience of Malawi social action fund

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The Malawi Social Action Fund is one of the instruments employed by the Malawi government to fight poverty within existing policy frameworks. The third phase of MASAF (MASAF 3) was designed as a platform for the implementation of multi-sectoral community Driven Development (CDD) interventions in the areas of Education, Health, Water, Transport, Communication, Natural Resources, Energy, Agriculture, Irrigation and Community Services. These interventions have been placed in five Community Service Packages (CSP) such that community demands to meet local needs must be within these Service Packages in order to get funding from MASAF. Each of the Service Packages has elements that are meant to address specific Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Malawi Poverty Reduction strategy Paper (MPRSP). The five Service Packages are health, education, water and sanitation, transport and communication and household food security. The major instrument to catalyse demand of projects by communities is communication (development communication). While procedures and processes to access CDD interventions are complex, MASAF 3 has demonstrated that a focused development communication strategy can improve project uptake by communities. CDD operations are bottom up and empowering to communities. Development communication in CDD operations therefore enhances transparency and accountability.

Key words: Community, development, communication, accountability.

INTRODUCTION

The MASAF 3 programme, earmarked 240 million US dollars, was designed to support the Malawi Poverty Reduction Strategy (MPRS) and the Decentralisation framework to support the District Assemblies and communities to implement community projects. In this way, the communities help the government’s target of attaining the Millennium Development Goals by 2015. This first phase, which was worth 60 million US dollars, was for a period of 3 years (2003 to 2006).

Within the programme design, MASAF 3 has a Transparency and Accountability Programme (TAP) aimed at promoting community level transparency and accountability through development communication strategies that equip communities with skills to demand transparent resource management and high quality service delivery. Other components under TAP are Monitoring and Evaluation and the Management Information System.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Development communication is quite a recent phenomenon in development circles. Development communication is defined as integration of strategic information in development project (World Bank, 2004). Strategic information is a powerful tool that can improve the chances of success of development projects. It strives for behaviour change not just information dissemination, education or awareness rising (Mozamel and Schechter, 2005).

Development Communication has evolved from what were originally Information, Education and Communication (IEC). Various players in the development field however have reported on the positive impact of development communication. Recently the World Bank working paper (Inagaki, 2007) has chronicled quite a number of successful development communications interventions.

In Ghana, there was a project which called for the participation of private companies, local authorities and farmers to work together to balance environmental quality and economic development goals. At evaluation, Appiah (2001) reported positive impacts of co-management processes on environmental conditions and as well as on the local economy in this CDD type of project in Ghana.
This paper describes successes registered through development communication in a CDD operation – Malawi Social Action Fund (MASAF) in Malawi.

THE DEVELOPMENT COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

Key to the Transparency and Accountability framework is the implementation of the Development Communication strategy. MASAF development communication strategy utilises the radio and print material as vehicles of information for specific audiences and the general public. To a lesser extent, interpersonal communication is used by MASAF, for example, community leaders' sensitisation who in turn mobilise people in their areas.

In April 2004, following interpersonal sensitisation sessions organised by MASAF for local leaders and extension workers, who in turn, went back to sensitise their communities, the District Assembly officials distributed projects interest forms (PIF) to communities after Extended Participatory Rural Appraisal (EPRA) processes. As a result communities submitted application forms to the Assemblies in large numbers.

Some District Assemblies did not respond to this demand swiftly so much so that they failed to submit projects in time for the first MASAF board approval.

Apparently possible reasons for this are that; (a) it seems that the Assemblies were slowly getting internalised with the new roles and responsibilities stipulated in the Memorandum of Understanding between the Assemblies and MASAF signed in July 2004, (b) the capacity of some Assemblies in terms of personnel and resources was so low that they could not handle the large number of applications.

However, one could also be tempted to conclude, without substantiated facts that the reason for the delay in responding to the increase in project applications was probably due to an indifferent attitude among assembly staff.

On September 23, 2004, the first community projects were approved by the MASAF board. The list of the approved community projects and their amount in Malawi Kwacha currency was published as a Press Release in 4 papers two of which are national and the other two local. This information was also read out for almost 90 min on the national radio. The communities and the local leaders were annoyed with the staff who failed to submit the applications in time.

Thus the publishing of the information exposed the low capacity and indifferent attitude of some District Assembly staff in management of MASAF funded community projects.

Local leaders demanded an explanation to why projects were not submitted for the MASAF board approval. The local leaders exerted such pressure on the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development such that in the subsequent months staff movement between District Assemblies was effected.

There have been five approvals between September 2004 to December 2005 and each one of these approvals was published, and the list of the projects and their amount read out on the national radio (Figure 1).

MASAF implements Information, Education and Communication interventions through Consultants, the Development Communication Unit and the 3 Zone Offices. The key role of staff in the Development Communication Unit is interacting with staff from the operational directorates to articulate emerging implementation issues and feed them into the Development Communication strategy.

Briefing sessions are periodically held with Zone Managers, Information Education and Communication/Participatory Rural Appraisal (IEC/PRA) Officers and Operations Directorates so that issues are critically analysed and themes developed from which key messages are designed. A series of briefing sessions then take place with Consultants and MASAF Directors until clear messages are developed.

Since radio is the major channel of communication in the MASAF 3 Development Communication strategy, by January 2005, MASAF had two consultants with 12 months contracts to produce 1 min radio jingles, 5 min radio programmes and 20 min radio documentary programmes disseminating MASAF 3 information.

Of major importance was the dissemination of procurement procedures as communities were buying materials for their community projects. Communities heard messages on the radio about how they should procure materials and this reinforced what they had learnt at the pre-launch training session so much so that they were empowered enough not to be coaxed to follow any other procedures to the contrary.

SPREADING SUCCESS STORIES OF COMMUNITY PROJECTS

The success stories and challenges of community projects funded by MASAF are compiled and become part of the MASAF quarterly newspaper. The first quarterly paper for MASAF 3 was released in January 2005. Of particular interest were success stories of the groups saving and investing after hearing radio messages about the Community Savings and Investment Promotion (COMSIP) component of MASAF 3.

Being a new phenomenon COMSIP needed a 3 months radio message campaign to raise awareness about the programme and create demand for capacity building interventions that the Malawi Social Action Fund was offering.

The MASAF newspaper was a channel that reinforced the radio messages and the capacity building services that were offered for COMSIP. The paper is produced in Chichewa, Tumbuka and English and distributed to local leaders, Project Implementing Agencies, Community Based Organisations, Adult Literacy Classes, District Assembly staff, Libraries, Non-Governmental Organisa-
THE DAILY TIMES, Thursday, October 21, 2004

Nkhotakota, Lilongwe left out of Masaf III

N Kalanda

BY SANGWANI MIWAPULIWA

Nkhotakota and Lilongwe districts have not received any funding from the K1.3 billion Malawi Social Action Fund (Masaf III) approved on September 23.

A statement from Masaf says 35 out of 40 local authorities, however, received funding for the implementation of community development projects.

Masaf zone manager for Lilongwe, Grace Hiwa, said Lilongwe City Assembly did not submit any project proposal while Nkhotakota District Assembly submitted its proposal very late.

They submitted very late after Masaf Board had already worked on other projects to be funded. We reminded them to hand their projects on time but they did not," she said.

Hiwa said Masaf had published the names deliberately so that it should not shoulder the blame for any discrepancy arising.

The assemblies should also know that they too have a role to play in the implementation of the projects, she said.

THE THEMATIC CAMPAIGNS

The MASAF 3 IEC Strategy for Development Communication is periodically reviewed and interventions implemented accordingly.

Particularly, in October 2005 MASAF implemented a Public Works Programme - Conditional Cash Transfers (PWP-CCT) as a safety net measure to cushion the effects of hunger as a result of the drought conditions in 2004 that left over 4.2 million people facing acute food shortage.

Radio messages were also a key factor to the success of the programme as they reinforced the messages delivered during the sensitisation meetings that local leaders conducted. The actual services that were on the ground (people saw activities at village level and there-for got interested) also contributed to the reinforcement of beneficiary participation (Figure 2).

Posters were swiftly designed and distributed in the communities. The posters carried key information about the programme. These acted like points of reference to ensure everybody was doing and saying the same thing. Communities raised eyebrows if anybody would say or conduct business to the contrary.

CHALLENGES

The major challenge in implementing the Development Communication Strategy development in January 2004 was the procurement of Consultants to deliver specific services to kick start communication interventions.

Although the MASAF 3 project became effective on November 12, 2003, consultants to deliver communication interventions were not recruited until November 2005 therefore delaying the rolling out of Development Communication. This delay was due to the fact that it took almost 3 months to have Terms of Reference for services cleared before advertising for recruitment of the consultant (Figure 3).

Figure 1. This news clip is a result of the MASAF 3 Approved Projects Press Release.

Figure 2. Highly motivated men in action. A new road under construction (PWP-CCT October 2005).
Another challenge is that media institutions in the country rarely report about development issues. This is so unfortunate in a country where the need to critically analyse health and social economic problems and realign all programme to address such issues can not be over emphasised.

Towards the end of 2005 MASAF conducted media briefing sessions with the aim of encouraging development news reporting. In May 2006, MASAF facilitated a meeting where key media personnel in Malawi formed a National Task Force team to change the mind set of media institutions and journalist so that they report about community development projects being implemented throughout the country.

LESSONS LEARNT

Since timely information dissemination is a key factor to the success of community development programmes, any Community Driven Development programme requires having on board consultants to implement the Development Communication strategies. The procurement process for such services takes long to complete and therefore the processes need to commence not less than five months before the first messages are due.

The process of developing messages is very rigorous
and requires interaction at all levels to clarify key themes from which clear messages can be developed. Delivery of inaccurate information confuses everybody including the project staff.

Implementation of the Development Communication strategies needs top leadership support. Information, Education and Communication advisers cannot implement interventions without top level support and ownership.

The District Information Officers at the Assembly, who are civil servants, are the lead personnel in the implementation of Development Communication interventions. However, Development Communication interventions can be implemented at community and district levels only when the particular District Assemblies have funds specifically tagged for Information, Education and Communication.

Conclusion

The community projects design principles and procedures are so complex so that sometimes project staff takes time to internalise, let alone communities who are the implementers of the projects.

When the Information, Education and Communication messages of the design principles and the procedures are clear to the District Assemblies, Communities and the MASAF staff, implementation of community projects and service delivery improves.

Therefore a comprehensive development communication strategy needs to be implemented well before the projects start so that communities have time to internalise with the complex processes and use information about the documented best practices.

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