

What do communities feel about community-driven development?

Learning from investigations in rural Malawi

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Abstract

Calls for bottom-up or community-driven development initiatives are justified on the grounds that, compared to outsiders, rural communities are in better positions to determine their own priorities, utilize resources more effectively, and underwrite benefits more sustainably. But are poor rural communities in poorer parts of the world able and willing to take on these responsibilities – or is the project of community-driven development itself an outsider’s aspiration? We, a mixed team of scholars and practitioners, inquire about these questions within nine rural Malawi communities. We find that rural communities’ understandings on the subject have evolved independently, and instead of being behind those of academics and aid organizations, are slightly ahead of them in every respect. Experience has taught these communities that community-driven development is the only viable mode; initiatives have to be owned and managed principally by communities (and not by any external agency). To do the job well communities need to build up specific capacities corresponding to particular dimensions of self-developing communities. External agencies help best when they recognize the centrality of local communities in these enterprises (and thus, their own, necessarily subordinate, positions) and when they direct their efforts to making available customized packages of capacity-building assistance.

Keywords – community-driven development, local institutions, Sub-Saharan Africa, foreign assistance

Community-driven development is regarded by many as both morally and practically superior to traditional forms of development assistance, but what do communities themselves feel about community-driven development? Are they willing and able to take on the related responsibilities? How do they assess success and what elements are responsible? How should outsiders assist such efforts?

To explore these questions, we go into nine communities in Central Malawi, holding day-long discussions in each community with focus groups and key informants. Section 2 reviews, all too briefly, the gist of the academic literature on community-based (alternatively, community-centered or bottom-up) development. Section 3 presents the four steps of our research methodology and introduces the institutional context of rural central Malawi. Section 4 develops communities' understandings of development and their shared goal of becoming a self-developing community. Sections 5 and 6 probe the different dimensions that communities regard to be important for this goal. Rather than being a matter just of fellowship and good intentions, community-driven development is a methodical enterprise guided by distinct design principles. Section 7 summarizes this evidence, drawing together the main findings, while Section 8 examines how external assistance can be most effectively designed within similar contexts.

2. Community-driven development – a brief review and some unanswered questions

A distinguished literature, including the Nobel-winning work of Elinor Ostrom, emphasizes the utility and advantages of community-driven development for diverse tasks of local provisioning, such as roads, schools, health care, agriculture, and small business development. Compared to programs and projects managed by outside agencies, community-led development is better for both shorter-term objectives, such as effectiveness and efficiency, and for longer-term ones, such as sustainability and diversification. The foundational belief is that seemingly beaten-down and impoverished communities

have talents and energies that tend to lie latent until they are activated. Treating community organizations as active partners rather than passive beneficiaries is, in and of itself, more democratic and more respectful. In addition, a process is more productive that helps generate confidence-building experiences and engenders longer-term mechanisms and capacities while nurturing grassroots leadership and helping construct strong local organizations.¹ Such a process rarely self-ignites. “Assisted self-reliance” is the more useful and more accurate conception, conveying, at the same time, both the importance of assistance and the centrality of self-reliance. This conception lies at the heart of community-driven development. The ultimate goal is—or should be—self-reliance. But to get there, communities need diverse forms of assistance.

The elusive but illuminating end goal is that of a *self-developing community*—a community never really gets to this end state, but as it comes progressively closer, locally driven development becomes more natural, more organic, more a part and parcel of everyday existence. The shift, when it occurs, is subtle but real. Instead of outsiders driving what they call community-driven development, communities progressively take charge of crucial development processes, in the process, gaining certain capacities and instituting certain internal processes.

These capacities and these processes represent different dimensions of self-development. Four dimensions are recognized in the academic literature, including:

- 1) Local institutional development: Stronger local organizations, indicated by:
 - a) Social capital—the propensity a community has for undertaking mutually beneficial collective actions based on trust, solidarity, and reciprocity;²

¹ See, for instance, Chambers (1990); Esman and Uphoff (1984); Ostrom (1990); and Ostrom, Schroeder and Wynne (1993).

² Defined as “features of social organization such as networks, norms and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” (Putnam et al., 1993). See also Woolcock and Narayan (2000).

- b) Managerial and technical capacity; and helpful external connections.³
- 2) Grassroots leadership: A diverse and representative pool of local leaders, capable and experienced, rooted in and accountable to the local community;⁴
- 3) Sustainability: Evidence that the benefits of prior initiatives are being sustained and that the processes that give rise to these benefits remain vital;⁵ and
- 4) Multiplication: Generating new initiatives internally, new partnerships, and new resource mobilization.⁶

These four dimensions are related, no doubt, but they don't always rise and fall together. A given community might have a great deal of social capital, with people regularly cooperating and coordinating their efforts for mutual gain; yet lacking effective leaders who forge useful connections with state and market actors the community could very well miss out on important opportunities.⁷ Similarly, sustainability is not a pre-condition for social capital or multiplication. There can be instances where the gains from an earlier project have petered out, perhaps because of adverse changes in the external environment (low sustainability), but the practices of cooperation that were learned in earlier projects have helped support other collective endeavors (high multiplication).⁸

³ Ostrom, Schroeder, and Wynne (1993) make the case that scientific knowledge (at the hands often of outside experts) matters alongside time-and-place information (at the hands of locals), and technical inputs can come from varied sources. Uphoff, Esman, and Krishna (1998) note how external connections of different kinds—including horizontal ones (across community organizations), vertical ones (with federations and groups of community organizations and with external actors), and lateral ones (with local governments and other locally organized actors) can each contribute to greater development effectiveness.

⁴ See, for instance, Bansfield (1958); Buur and Kyed (2006); Platteau and Gaspart (2003).

⁵ See, for example, Chambers (1999, 2008); Mitlin (1992); and Ostrom (1996).

⁶ See, for instance, Grindle (2007); Kidjie (2018); and Wade (1994).

⁷ Krishna (2002) provides empirical illustrations of communities with high and low levels, respectively, of social capital and leadership capacity.

⁸ Hirschmann's (1984) observations of community development initiatives undertaken in the past in different Latin American contexts led him to suggest the possibility of conservation of community energies, which—like grasses in the desert—can lie dormant for a long time, coming back to flower when more favorable environmental conditions arise.

Though they do not overlap, there is synergy among the different dimensions. As they gain diverse skills and take on additional initiatives, communities acquire greater confidence in their own capacities, and a greater share of the development dynamic is controlled from within the community, leading to more and newer skills and capacities, which are used in turn to energize new enterprises... a virtuous cycle of self-development.⁹

Such is the hope of community-driven development, but the reality has been contested. Evaluations of community-driven development projects have uncovered a mixed bag of results.¹⁰

But mixed verdicts should have been expected: portmanteau evaluations have tended to lump together a congeries of projects, commonly categorized as “community-driven” simply because the communities concerned had some role, however small or large, in one or more aspect of design, implementation, or evaluation. How superficial or how encompassing the community’s role was in any particular case is not considered, and how that might have affected the outcome is not separately examined. Its worst exemplars become the basis for rejecting an entire suite of practices. Portmanteau evaluations, looking for an up-or-down verdict on all shades of community-driven development, are neither meaningful nor do they have much practical utility.

The rub lies not in whether, but in *how*, community-driven development is given effect in some particular instance: How should outsiders assist community-driven development without it becoming, in effect, outsider-driven? What should external supporters do that will leverage (and not displace) the bottom-up effort? How should communities’ capacities be grown without stifling local initiative? How should leaders be identified and nurtured without producing co-optation and subordination? This kind of practical knowledge is missing and is urgently worth acquiring.

⁹ See, for instance, Esman and Uphoff (1984); Hirschmann (1984); Ostrom (1990; 1996); and Uphoff (1992).

¹⁰ See, for instance, Casey (2018); Kidjie (2018); Mansoori and Rao (2004); and Platteau and Abraham (2002).

If one investigates community-driven development as one should—from the perspective, and with the values and priorities, of the communities concerned—then the first step requires involving communities in concept definition and process specification. How communities define development and how *they* assess progress needs to be understood and what they feel about the notions of a self-developing community and community-driven development.

We address these questions in the next two sections. The authors bring to bear a diverse set of perspectives and include a North American researcher; two Malawian researchers; and two staff of World Connect, an aid agency that exclusively supports community-driven local development in different countries. We undertook these inquiries in close association with local communities and their elected Village Development Committees (VDC).

3. Methodology and context

In order to involve local communities actively in defining the terms and the questions that underlie this inquiry, the methodology we employed was developed in a multistage process. After querying the academic and policy literature in the first stage, we discussed these concepts and relationships in the second stage, with the leadership and field staff of World Connect and with three central Malawian communities—Nkhusu, Kalumbu, and Kauma. These initial discussions were guided by three principal questions: What do people here regard as “the community” for development purposes? How do they understand development and how do they define progress? What agencies and what processes are most beneficial in their opinion for managing development enterprises in their area?

We found that the “community” is consistently defined in this context as “the group of people who live in the same geographical area and who are governed by one person, a chief; a place they call home and where they share services such as water points, clinics, schools with the same group of

people who live in the same area.” In general, communities understand development as activities that people in the community engage in to “improve their livelihoods and produce changes from a poorer to a better state.” Commonly, people stressed the centrality that communities should have for planning and undertaking development, and external aid agencies should play secondary roles, arranging for complementary resources.

With the benefit of these initial exercises, we designed a protocol for a larger inquiry within nine communities. Once again, to make sure the protocol was designed to address issues of value to communities and incorporated their priorities—while translating potentially complex terms (such as social capital) into their everyday equivalents in Chichewa—we tested the research instruments in another two pilot communities.

After another round of revisions based on these experiences, we developed the final protocol that we implemented in the nine study communities, all of which are located in central Malawi (and thus comparable in terms of institutional context and historical background). Three criteria helped select the nine study communities—population size, distance from the nearest urban center, and relative level of infrastructure development. We picked communities to have a range of variation corresponding to each of these criteria.¹¹ Mostly agrarian in terms of occupations, these nine rural communities are by no means homogeneous or interchangeable. Differences in wealth and status are large and visible.

Within each community, the Village Development Committee (VDC), was the focal point of our investigations. This institution, which has become central to local development initiatives, merits

¹¹ Six of the nine communities have participated earlier in World Connect projects—including Huwa in Dedza district, Chunga in Nkhosakota district, Mtika in Salima district, Mpalale in Dedza district, Khwema in Dowa district, and Mvugo in Lilongwe district – but three communities have no prior World Connect association (Lobi in Dedza district, Mkoko in Lilongwe district, and Mangwale in Mchinji district).

a detailed introduction. The process of decentralization that began in Malawi in 1998, led first in 2001 to the creation of ADCs (Area Development Committees), and then to the creation of VDCs, which sit below ADCs in this hierarchy of local governance institutions. A VDC is composed of elected representatives, one from each village within its jurisdiction, but also includes the ward councilors of the area, women representatives nominated by elected members of the VDC, and an elected extension worker representative (Chinsinga 2008; GoM 1998 a and b).

With the passage of time, VDCs have come to constitute the main agency for local development. “The main functions of a VDC are to identify, organize and seek funding for development-based activities... VDC members are overwhelmingly voted into their positions ... [and] considered active, with committees finishing at least one project within a six-month period. Village members rate VDCs highly. Women make up almost half of all VDC members... contributing to accountable and responsive governance at the local level” (Maiden et al., 2020: 857-9).

Within each community, we followed a two-step process of discussions. First, focus group discussions (FGD) were held with a group of between 10 and 20 community members, including all available VDC members, a few members of the larger Area Development Committee (ADC), the local Chief, and leaders of other village groups (generally, youth groups and village savings and loans groups). These discussions lasted between 2–4 hours. Next, we had separate discussions with a smaller group of 5-7 people composed of a selection of ADC and VDC members and other well-informed leaders, lasting 1–2 hours. While the FGDs were useful for discovering a range of perspectives, these small-group or key informant interviews (KIIs) helped go deeper within particular issues. Both discussions, the FGD and the KII, were concluded within the same day in each community and captured on digital voice recorders after seeking informed consent from the participants. This number of FGDs and KIIs is more than adequate for unearthing the information sought in a qualitative

investigation of this nature (Hennink and Kaiser 2022); and qualitative data are, in general, more useful for addressing questions of process and examining interlocking changes occurring over longer periods (Creswell 2014). These research tools and checklists were vetted for ethical clearance and approved by the National Commission of Science and Technology in Malawi.¹²

4. *Chitukuko chopanga tokha*: self-developing community—the shared aspiration

Despite their varied experiences, communities’ understandings of development are very similar to each other. More than any other agency, communities regard themselves as the appropriate drivers of local development. Their experiences have demonstrated to them the necessity of having community ownership of development projects, referred to by the Chichewa term, *umwini*. “Ownership comes when people have sweated for development. It is a key driver of sustainability of development, as it brings a sense of responsibility to the community” (Huwa).¹³

When communities have not “owned” development projects—when they did not control and manage the project from the inception and did not feel responsible continuously—these projects have failed to deliver any lasting benefits. One community gave an example of a skills center. “It was built from funds provided by an international NGO. But the structure is now in ruins and the youth do not have a place to learn skills for self-employment. The project ended soon after [this NGO] withdrew its support. The main reason is that people did not own it” (Mangwale). Another community recalled:

A borehole that a government agency had constructed with minimal involvement of the community. They did everything and handed over the complete borehole to the community. This borehole broke down, and the community did not have the know-how to fix it, the government agency was not

¹² Research Ethics and Regulatory Approval and Permit for Protocol No. P.05/22/646: Investigating Processes Leading to Self-developing Communities in Malawi, dated June 27, 2022.

¹³ Here and later, the name, within parentheses, is of the community to which the quoted extract is attributed.

responsive, and this forced the people to draw water from unprotected shallow wells. Incidences of water-borne diseases resurfaced (Chunga).

Each community we consulted expressed unequivocally and matter-of-factly the need for communities to “own” development projects. “Orphan projects” (*Chitukuko cha masiye*) – those to which communities have not given birth and for which they do not take responsibility—have not delivered any lasting benefits, in their experience. Communities emphasized the importance of ownership and of factors such as unity and leadership. Rather than a concept introduced by outsiders, community-driven development represents the only viable way forward in this context, the only modality people will accept and which they regard as appropriate and effective.

A change of mindset is a precondition, the communities told us, for cultivating ownership and inculcating responsibility.

In fact, this mindset change is development, which starts with the mind. If the mind is not changed, no development can take place. Mindset change is actually the reason why communities do development activities without expecting pay or handouts (Mpalale).

Ownership and mindset change result from a long drawn-out and iterative process. As they realize benefits from the initial projects they implement, people become more willing and more able to take up additional initiatives.

The community wants to do more projects when they realize projects are solving their problem. People see benefits of having roads, bridges, schools, electricity. The perceived benefits make people take responsibility and start new projects (Mvugo).

Ownership develops when everyone in the village benefits, when people have perceived the benefits, and when projects are aligned to good existing practices in the community. At this point, development becomes a ‘culture of the people’ (Khwema).

Such a culture of development, with local ownership as its defining feature, is firmly entwined with the shared goal these communities have of becoming self-developing communities.

When development is initiated by the community itself, supports the needs of the community, and is led by leaders from the community itself. When the community is able to identify and analyze their own problems, make plans, and mobilize resources locally to start implementation. That is self-development. External organizations can come in but only to support the community in areas where it lacks capacity” (Chunga).

Five of the nine communities used the same Chichewa term, *chitukuko chopanga tokba*, for self-developing community, and others used terms that are closely similar.

Together, they described eight characteristics of development as experienced by self-developing communities:

1. Addresses the needs of the people.
2. Initiated by community members.
3. Implemented by members of the community.
4. Supported by the rest of the community (local leaders, men, women, and youth).
5. Benefits and processes are sustained (continuity).
6. Helps grow local people’s capacities.
7. External support where locals lack capacity.
8. Leads to new development initiatives by the community.

In pursuit of their shared goal, communities have initiated development projects, though the type and number of such initiatives vary widely. Table 1 presents a rough summary of what community groups reported about the project initiatives each of them had taken up in the preceding ten years.

- Table 1 about here -

The most active self-developers, Khwema and Mvugo, took up, respectively, 12 and 10 projects of self-development, while the least active communities, Mangwale and Chunga, took up comparatively fewer, respectively, four and five projects. Investigating the causes behind this variation can be an interesting and worthwhile exploration. Going into communities' formative experiences and assessing the progress they have made on different dimensions of self-development will help generate practical guidelines for external assistance. Sadly, this examination is outside the scope of the present research. We explore below the dimensions of self-developing community as narrated by these communities.

5. *Malamulo ndi athu omwe ndiye sitingaswe*—“The rules are our own, so we can't break them”—Unity, rules, and trust

Community groups highlighted unity (*umodzi*) as the first essential dimension of a self-developing community. Without unity, the community does not constitute an entity capable of taking on collaborative actions for collective benefit. Ownership and self-development are predicated upon the existence of unity.

Differences of wealth and status can become divisive and need to be overcome. “Unity in the form of cooperation can occur in different forms but the one that leads to a community doing development has to be close to that of the bees, who each play different roles but work together to produce honey” (Mtika). When people unite to work together, “like *chimvano cha mamvu* (wasps who agreed to all be thin at the abdomen)” they become stronger and can achieve a lot” (Mpalale).

Unity is an outcome of complex processes. It requires that rules, norms, and enforcement structures are put in place that steer individual behaviors toward mutually beneficial collective actions.

Unity means coming together or bonding. Among the factors that unify people in this community are rules and bylaws. These rules help the people come together and perform development activities in their area (Lobi).

Different kinds of rules are in operation. There are rules related to resource mobilization, rules related to desired behaviors, and rules that require every community member to contribute. In each case, the rules are locally formulated.

In 2010, the community constructed a school block at Mpachika primary school. Chiefs put in place rules that made people cooperate. Everyone made bricks and provided sand for construction. In the same year, this community constructed two community roads, and again people contributed (Mangwale).

In 2002, the community built a community hall and school block at Mauni Community Day Secondary School to support unemployed youth in the area. The Chief ordered each of the sixty-three village headmen (VH) to provide 2,000 bricks, sand, and quarry stone for construction. This work took only two years because the community worked together. If a VH failed to provide materials, he and his village were barred from any activities that took place in the area of the Chief. As a result of this bylaw, communities worked together and finished constructing the tele center in two years (Khwema).

Many of the development initiatives that VDCs have taken up were aimed not at building infrastructure, but at changing attitudes and behaviors.

We noted the rise in cases of child marriages. We thought of intervening by setting up a bylaw to curb this vice. We formed a mothers' group to monitor implementation. Any case [rule violation] that is identified is reported to the Group Village Headman and other leaders. The parents of the girl have to pay a fine, usually a goat, and the Village Headman under whose village the case has been identified also pays a goat. The girl is withdrawn from marriage and sent back to school (Mpalale).

In 2018, community and its leadership established a bylaw that any woman who delivers at home as opposed to the hospital must be fined 13,000 MWK [about 15 USD]. As a result of this bylaw, the number of pregnant women delivering at the hospital has increased. Maternal deaths have reduced (Lobi).

Rules and norms are essential, but instituting rules is rarely enough, according to these communities. Focus groups and key informants spoke commonly of the need for sanctions against those who break the rules and mechanisms for reporting and punishing offenders.

The rules are not only established but they are accompanied with strong penalties, for example, exclusion from important social activities. The community member is barred from attending funeral services if found not adhering to the bylaw of having, say, a backyard garden. Likewise, when an individual who breaks the rule has lost a family member, the community does not provide support for the funeral (Mkoko).

Rules introduced from the outside are likely to be less effective; rules and sanctions work best, communities believe, when they are established and owned by the people themselves.

Community members feel they cannot breach the same rules they took part in establishing. This makes the process of enforcing the bylaws easy for the community (Khwema).

In addition to rules and sanctions and enforcement mechanisms, unity is predicated upon trust. Among community members and between leaders and members, there must be trustful relations.

Development activities take place because of high trust between members and their leaders. In 2021, when Livizi bridge was washed away, community members contributed money for cement, sand, and poles. The money was kept by VDC leaders, and it was not misappropriated. Leaders made allocation of resources transparently in an open space. They reported to members how the resources were used, such that everyone was aware of where the money went (Mpalale).

6. *Atsogoleri ochita, otakataka ndi akuthekera* - Skills, leaders and networks

In addition to ownership and unity, communities consider specific skills sets as the next important dimension of development. Technical skills are at the top of communities' lists, including skills related to the building trade, while among managerial skills, the next highest priority, those related to problem

assessment, proposal writing, and financial administration are highly appreciated. In two communities, people made mention of other kinds of skills, such as drama and football.¹⁴

Communities identified different modes of skills formation. Some have gained skills through formal training programs.

Youth from this community go to Chongoni Technical College which trains youth in various skills, including baking, tailoring, welding, and building. It is located close by (Lobi).

Hands-on training provided by trained locals has been the dominant mode of skills development.

People who learn different skills outside are motivated to use them in their community. Youth teach each other skills such as sewing and chicken rearing. There is transfer of skills within the community, which has led to increase in skilled people (Chunga).

Training of individuals for leadership positions requires paying attention both to skills and to leadership qualities and patterns of behavior. “Leaders must have a set of qualities that help them to work with other people and discharge their duties better” (Mvugo). Leadership qualities emphasized by communities include honesty, hard work, trustworthiness, dedication, naturally intelligent and wise, visionary, openness to criticism – and humility. They should in no way consider themselves above other community members.

We do not fear leaders. We demand accountability from them because we elected them to serve us. There was one time when the village required their chief to account for his actions (cutting down trees in the communal graveyard for personal use). The community exerted pressure on the chief by boycotting funerals, by not volunteering their services for preparing food and digging the grave and burying the dead. After these sanctions by the community, the chief completely stopped cutting down the trees illegally (Lobi).

¹⁴ “Football keeps the youth busy, so that they do not indulge in bad habits like alcohol and drugs. We formed a team and have a makeshift stadium and people pay to watch soccer. We generate small income to support vulnerable groups like orphans and the elderly” (Mvugo).

The relationship within a community among different types of leaders is also important for the results. New leaders have arisen, but older ones still remain salient, albeit as part of a different and more egalitarian dynamic at the grassroots level.

In the past, Chiefs and politicians were the only leaders. They did not allow other individuals to take up leadership roles apart from themselves because the Chiefs did not want to share their authority with individuals other than their kinsmen (Mtika).

Now, however, Chiefs exist alongside a variety of newly arisen local leaders who obtain their positions in open elections. Democratization at the grassroots level and the advent of elected VDCs and ADCs have had important effects in terms of which set of local leaders does what for local development.

In the past ten years there has been a shift in the involvement of Chiefs in development. At first, Chiefs were in charge, but they were perceived to be unfair and not transparent. Elected committees were introduced that are better (Mpalale).

VDCs have become the primary local development actor, but Chiefs are hardly irrelevant. They still have control over land, the principal source of wealth, and they remain central figures in enforcing local rules and allocating contributions.¹⁵ A shifting dynamic has resulted between Chiefs and locally elected committees. On the one hand, Chiefs and other leaders are more often called upon to account for their actions than they had been earlier, and they are increasingly required to submit themselves to the same rules that govern others. “Rules also apply to leaders the same way as ordinary community members, for example, leaders in the committee also pay 100 MKw when they are late to a meeting” (Chunga). At the same time, rule observance and enforcing sanctions still hinges to a great extent upon the Chief’s moral authority. “People listen to the Chief. When he tells everyone to participate in

¹⁵ Chiefs “are vested with the guardianship of the land in their respective areas” (Chinsinga, 2008: 89). They “remain influential among their subjects. Their word is trusted and respected” (Chinsinga, 2012: 11).

development work, they do so without hesitation, because they fear the sanction by the Chief” (Mkoko). This continuing interplay between the Chief and the VDC has repercussions for trust and unity and the ability consequently to act together for mutual advantage.

Another complication is caused by the explosion of local committee structures in recent years, each handmaiden to a particular development project (Archambaut and Erhard, 2022). “It is a requirement by organizations working in the area to establish committees which require leaders. It is for this reason that there are leaders for VSL, VDC, Youth Club, Forest Committee, Mother Care Group, etc.” (Mpalale). As the number of local committees and organizations has exploded, the need for coordination among local groups has never been greater. These committees, structures, and institutions work best when they “do not compete but actually share plans with each other, when there is open communication and room for constructive criticism” (Mtika).

Different means for coordination have been brought into existence within these communities. Some rely on their Chiefs for effecting coordination. In some other communities, the VDC performs the coordinating function by serving as a central hub connected with spokes to the different committees. “VDC members gather information from various committees and share it in the VDC meeting. The nutrition project is an example, where VDC members interfaced with care groups and nutrition promoters and school committees” (Huwa).

A third group of communities has innovated new kinds of coordinating mechanisms, for instance, Mkoko, which has erected a new structure called *Nthematewa*, a sort of super-committee.

It was established on 15th January 2021 to coordinate the activities of the different groups operating in Mkoko. The idea was advanced by the locals themselves after observing that the individual committees were not performing, and it was necessary to have a structure that would monitor the performance of the individual committees. *Nthematewa* was established to provide space to committees to share plans, lessons, and experiences. This is expected to enhance unity and to help the community work toward shared goals (Mkoko).

Leaders and groups liaise with one another and also with outside agencies. Networks with the outside world are important, for they enable communities to tap into opportunities for information, funding, and economic development, another set of capabilities emphasized by these communities.

7. Moving things in the right direction

Overall, bringing together findings from the previous two sections, community groups in Malawi identified the following dimensions of self-development:

- Community ownership of local development enterprises
- Unity maintained through rules and sanctions locally made and routinely upheld
- Trust among community members and between members and leaders
- Skills—managerial, technical, vocational
- Leaders—multiple, effective, and accountable
- Coordinating networks.

In order to make progress toward becoming a self-developing community, the acquisition of capacities is required along each of these dimensions. Resources by way of funds are additionally necessary. These are all relatively poor communities. But financial assistance is rarely enough to be effective. Agencies supporting community-driven development need to attend as well to these other dimensions.

The experiences that communities in Malawi have derived from different enterprises of local development, many self-initiated, have helped grow these communities' capacities along these different dimensions. Unity has been practiced, rules rehearsed, skills acquired, and new leaders have emerged in the process of implementing diverse initiatives of local development. Without being actively immersed in a succession of projects, it is hard to imagine how this progress could have been

sustained by these communities. Without projects, the need for skills may not have been felt so acutely. Leaders would have no stage for their performances.

Projects have served as the practice ground for leaders and as the vehicles whereby trust has grown, and organizational rules and structures refined and made more effective. At the same time, projects, when poorly designed and implemented, can damage rather than build community capacities.

A key question, therefore, is when do projects help, and when do they hinder the growth of longer-term community capacities, and closely related, how should aid agencies intervene in ways that assist (and not smother) local initiatives? In this section, we bring together the related lessons that emerged from community discussions.

Local ownership, mentioned earlier, is the critical pre-condition for success and sustainability. All communities provided examples of projects that still function and deliver benefits years after being put into operation (Table 2). Physical structures (e.g., school blocks) were well maintained and in use; the scope of operations had expanded (scaling up); and new technologies were being utilized by larger numbers (e.g., incubators for a poultry project, income from aquaculture).

Projects that were started by these communities produced additional learning and added to the community's confidence and capacity to take on new and related initiatives. Several new initiatives have been taken up by these communities that are directly the result of institutions built and learning acquired in earlier community-driven projects (Table 3).

- Tables 2 and 3 about here -

Local ownership of projects is, thus, of fundamental importance for effectiveness and efficiency and for sustainability and multiplication. Projects managed by outsiders do little to build confidence or grow capacity.

While ceding control to communities, external agencies can nevertheless support the enterprise in multiple helpful ways, each related to a particular dimension of self-development. In respect of some of these dimensions, external support agencies can provide assistance more directly; in respect of some other dimensions, external assistance will work indirectly. Outsiders can do little directly to build unity, for instance; norms and rules and trust are better generated internally. But outside agencies can help indirectly, for example, by arranging visits and by organizing the exchange of experiences among communities. Communities observing one another gain new ideas and learn new tactics. One community, Mpalale, spoke of “good envy—*kusilira kwa bwino*—healthy competition that drives one to become like the successful person.” Mindset change—*kusintha kaganizidwe*—the precondition, according to communities, for ownership and unity (and thus, for community-driven development, in general) is another largely internally generated attribute, though external agencies can serve as catalysts, hastening and precipitating its development.

Other dimensions of capacity, particularly technical and managerial skills, can be built more directly. Building these capacities is important, however. Even if it takes longer and even if it is costlier, local residents should be trained to acquire the skills associated with a project. Tasks requiring skills should not be simply handed over to skilled outsiders, these communities mentioned, for that would mean losing the downstream benefits of building skills locally and having them for use in future endeavors. Communities identified related practices that are also counter-productive, such as when skills development is considered a one-off exercise and not an ongoing process.

8. Conclusion

The four-way partnership that carried out these investigations helped uncover different dimensions of self-developing communities. As important, it produced learning of a practical nature for each of

the stakeholders. For the academics on the research team, it was a humbling experience to uncover the sophisticated understandings these rural communities have about the purposes and processes of local development. Community-driven development is not merely, in this region, an academic notion or an imposition by outside experts. A cherished goal shared by rural communities, it is central to their conception of what is appropriate and legitimate for local-area development.

To gain the capacities and to institute the processes that take one closer to becoming a self-developing community is the shared aspiration of these communities. The dimensions of self-development that communities emphasize are intriguingly close to the key dimensions of community-driven development that academic examinations have highlighted. The difference is mostly one of language; the conception and the desired end-state are nearly identical. In some respects, communities' conceptions go beyond academics' formulations, for instance, the importance of mindset change has not been recognized as well in academic literature.

Communities in central Malawi are staunch in the belief that ownership of development enterprises by communities is essential for building capacity and inculcating responsibility. Effectiveness, sustainability, and multiplication are all premised upon communities being in the driver's seat of local development.

For external support agencies, there are important lessons about how to provide assistance effectively to communities without stifling or displacing the local initiative. Essentially, aid to community-driven development requires a holistic approach, focusing simultaneously on multiple dimensions. Financial assistance is direly needed; these are, after all, poor communities. But it is rarely enough to just give them money (Hanlon 2004). Capacities of different kinds need to be strengthened concomitantly, starting with a capacity for collective action (unity). It requires rules and sanctions, trust and networks, and effective and accountable leaders. It is helped by acquiring technical skills

appropriate to the enterprise—such as masonry and roadbuilding—and managerial skills, such as proposal writing and accounting and conducting meetings. These capacities, especially collective ones, such as unity and trust and rules and sanctions, are usually acquired on-the-job and in the process of acquiring experience.

Helping communities gain along each of these dimensions represents different ways of extending outside assistance to community-driven development. As communities acquire these different capacities, they become progressively better able to take on more and bigger development responsibilities. This virtuous cycle, where it is set off, culminates in self-developing communities requiring minimal outside assistance.

In order to be long-term effective, agencies supporting community-driven development should take stock of each of the different dimensions of self-developing communities. Support to a particular community has to be customized in relation to where that community is located in relation to each dimension. Some communities may have achieved a great deal of unity and others less; some may have effective and accountable leaders while others may need help on this dimension.

Focusing one-by-one on each of the dimensions of self-development serves as a useful diagnostic tool for developing a package of assistance for a particular community. While “best practices” may be useful as a general reference, the one-size-fits-all approach is ineffective for community development.

How widely can we expect these findings to hold across countries, or are there reasons to believe that Malawi is special in this connection? In this era of retreating states and advancing markets, with a “critical lack of implementation capacity” in government agencies at the local level (Mdee et al., 2020: 1271), rural communities are increasingly faced with situations where they have no choice but to take over the reins of area development. How far advanced they are in this direction varies, with

communities realizing more clearly in some countries and less clearly in other countries that the onus has been thrust upon them, that no one else is going to do it, and that they must, therefore, become the main doers of their own development. In Malawi, the highest in the government have clearly signaled that this is how things will be in the future. The country's president, speaking of the Malawi Vision 2063, emphasized the need for "a national consciousness built around belief in our own capabilities, home-grown solutions, and a positive value system. A system that recognizes unity of purpose, hard work, self-reliance, patriotism, integrity and hate for hand-outs" (NPC, 2020). Other communities and other national leaders may not have sensed the need as clearly, and other countries' decentralization laws may not be as enabling as Malawi's, though VDCs of similar kinds have been formed in many other African countries (Maiden et al., 2021).

Context-specific investigations are necessary to ascertain how communities in other places understand development, how they define its goals, whether the goal of self-developing community is as basic to their self-conceptions, and how far they have progressed in developing the related structures and mindsets and processes. Such ground-up investigations will help garner additional knowledge about how assistance to community-driven development is best designed for different contexts and diverse communities.

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Table 1. Type and number of self-development activities

Activities	Communities								
	Huwa	Chunga	Mtika	Mpalale	Mkoko	Mangwale	Khwema	Lobi	Mvugo
Roads	X	X	X	X			X	X	X
Bridges (makeshift and concrete)				X			X		X
Nursery, primary, secondary, and technical school blocks	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X
Protected wells and boreholes	X	X							
Health (toilets, hospital, health care)	X		X				X	X	X
Farming (crops rain-fed)	X			X	X	X	X	X	X
Farming (crops irrigation)			X		X		X		
Farming (livestock and fisheries)			X	X	X		X		X
Bakery	X		X						
Markets		X		X			X	X	
Processing and value addition		X							
Small-scale businesses			X			X	X		X

(groceries, maize mills)									
Houses with iron sheet roofs				X	X	X	X	X	X
Food and nutrition promotion activities				X	X	X	X		X
Timber (selling)					X				
Savings and loans groups					X				X
Planting trees					X		X		
Total	6	5	6	8	9	4	12	6	10

Table 2. Sustainability

LOCATION	Community involvement in early stages of project	Community contribution	Continuing benefits
Huwa	The community identified and prioritized problems, reaching out to an external organization for support on the road, borehole, and nursery school projects.	Mobilizing bricks, cement, and labor for constructing nursery school block and borehole.	Road maintained annually, and nursery school continues to enroll pupils.
Chunga	The community agreed to establish a marketplace. They also agreed on a road project to make the market accessible.	Labor for constructing the road.	The market has expanded and is now serving fifteen surrounding villages. The community continues to maintain the road every year.
Mtika	The youth group wrote a proposal to mobilize funds for a poultry project.	The chief contributed 2-acre land, and the youth group contributed start-up capital.	Modern chicken house built with solar system (200 wats) and an incubator for 600 eggs.
Mpalale	The youth group wrote a proposal requesting funds to start an aquaculture project.	Group members contributed money to buy land and provided labor for making fishponds.	The aquaculture project continues. In 2021, they harvested 105 kg of fish and earned 390,000 MWK.
Mkoko	Bunda college established a group in 2011 to conduct research on orphan crops (Bambara and	Land, labor, and seeds for backyard gardens.	The chief established a rule that every household must own a backyard garden to reduce incidences of poisoning from

	sorghum) and indigenous vegetables in backyard gardens.		consuming vegetables applied with toxic pesticides (sold by vendors). The group has added savings and loan activities.
Mangwale	Leaders of a community-based organization (CBO) agreed in 2011 to build a structure where the youth (i.e., orphaned and school dropouts, jobless) would acquire vocational skills.	Labor and building materials (sand and bricks).	The vocational school continues, and it has been recognized by a national vocational institution (TEVETA).
Khwema	Chiefs noted that attendance in local primary schools was low. In 2015, they decided to use traditional dancers (<i>Gule Wamkulu</i>) to coax children out of their homes to go to school every morning.	Local institution (<i>Gule Wamkulu</i>). Chiefs worked with school committees to monitor school enrollment and attendance.	Attendance in schools continues to increase (189 children sent back to school).
Lobi	Community participated in awareness campaigns on the equality of men and women organized by a prominent rights activist in the country.	People attending meetings and training sessions on gender.	Community leaders and local structures have continued to sensitize fellow community members about gender equality.
Mvugo	A CBO was established in 2009 to support people living with HIV and AIDS. The chief and the CBO members (women) participated in a nutrition-training program supported by Concern Universal. They received rabbits.	Bricks and sand to build a CBO structure. Constructing good animal houses, feeding animals, and participating in meetings.	Activities of the CBO continue, and men are now also participating in lessons on nutrition. The group upgraded the livestock enterprise from rabbits in 2009 to goats in 2010 and later to pigs in 2011. They plan to start dairy farming.

Table 3. Multiplication

LOCATION	New practices	New project initiatives
Huwa	The nutrition project brought feeding practices (six food groups), under-five services-scale, cooking skills, improved marital relationships.	Road project added water harvesting and management project (tree planting and swale) in catchments areas to reduce water run-off that destroyed roads.
Chunga	Moringa-processing project has introduced moringa soap, which is sold in Nkhotakota district and Lilongwe city.	Local market set up and services at the local market have expanded, including mobile financial services, such as Airtel Money and Mpamba, solar service to charge phones, and batteries for lighting houses.
Mtika	Irrigation farming is now practiced at large scale (from one farmer it has expanded to around 800 farmers; from one village to three villages). The irrigation system changed from watering cane (water drawn from shallow wells) to surface irrigation (dam water running in a canal using gravity).	The youth poultry project has expanded to beekeeping (apiculture), irrigation farming (vegetables), and running grocery and barber shops.
Mpalale	Energy saving stove project: almost all households in the community have made a stove (1,300 were trained and 1,130 made their own stoves).	The aquaculture youth group has diversified to Village Saving and Loan group and invested in groceries, private nursery school, secondhand clothes business, and selling potatoes.
Mkoko	Culture of saving and investment is enhanced in the community, both among men and women. The number of savings and loans groups has increased to seven, each with ten members.	To support the backyard garden project, a borehole was constructed to supply water for irrigating the gardens. A rabbit project was introduced to complement the backyard garden. People eat vegetables and animal protein to diversify their diet.
Mangwale	Village Saving and Loan group have spread across the community, with each group of ten to twenty-five members. Each village has about five	Some graduate youths from the vocational center have teamed up to form tailoring firms and operating local trading centers.

	such groups. Men and chiefs are now joining what was previously considered to be an activity for women.	
Khwema	The youth group is advocating for children to go to school, a role previously played by traditional <i>Gule Wamkulu</i> dancers. Chiefs have also introduced fines for families that fail to send children to school.	The youth group is giving prizes (notebooks and pens) to the best-performing pupils to encourage them to remain in school. The youth group grows soya beans to raise money to support school-attending children with fees and procuring prizes.
Lobi	Gender equality mainstreamed into local organizations, with women occupying leadership positions. For example, the chairperson for the youth group is a woman and the treasurer of the agricultural stakeholder panel is a woman. The youth group has gender equality as one of its key topics.	Women are not just in committees or leadership positions but are also running own businesses.
Mvugo	The livestock pass-on program enabled members in the group to gain access to nutritious foods. While livestock started as a nutrition program, members also sell the livestock to generate cash for use in the households.	The CBO started several projects in the community, including irrigation farming to grow vegetables; rain-fed maize, and soy production; support for orphans whose parents died of HIV; maize mills; a pig pass-on program; savings and loan program. After learning from small livestock (rabbits, goats), the group wants to start a dairy (cow) project to generate income and improve nutrition. They have secured a loan through a government commercialization project called AGCOM to invest in a dairy project.