

Social Funds Innovations Updates

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The Role of Information, Education and Communication in the Malawi Social Action Fund

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The Malawi Social Action Fund (MASAF) began implementation in 1996 and is now mid-way through the second phase (MASAF 2). Before MASAF, the country's experience with self-help projects and programs had not been notably successful. MASAF was designed to improve the record by promoting a change in the way all development actors – including, and perhaps especially, the government – would work with other stakeholders. With a comparatively high community contribution requirement (up to 20% of subproject costs) coupled with a weak history of such projects in Malawi, facilitating community participation was considered a key issue in project design. Public awareness-raising, information, education and communication (IEC) were the vehicles used to increase such participation and to ensure that communities and other key stakeholders understood their roles in the MASAF approach.

government – and as in the case of most developing country governments, information was a commodity to be guarded and used strategically. When the project was being designed, the government team tended to view the Information, Education and Communication (IEC) component as basically a public relations initiative.

There were, however, two exceptions: the Executive Director of MASAF, who saw both the value of this initiative and also perceived it as being distinct from public relations; and the World Bank Task Manager who, in an earlier project had seen the value of IEC in population/family planning initiatives in Zimbabwe. The presence of these champions proved to be critical to the IEC being well-financed and efficiently implemented. Another very important factor was the appointment of an IEC officer in the PMU who had been trained in participatory techniques.

MASAF at a Glance

MASAF I:	IDA Funds (\$million)
Community Subprojects	\$33.4
Public Works	\$12.8
Capacity Enhancement	\$3.7
Capacity Building/IEC	\$2.8
Total	\$52.7
MASAF II:	IDA Funds (\$million)
Community Subprojects	\$40.9
Public Works	\$11.5
Sponsored subprojects for vulnerable groups	\$5
Capacity Building/IEC	\$3.7
Total	\$56.6

Using information as an instrument of accountability, transparency and ownership has not been a feature of World Bank-assisted projects in general – nor was it accepted as such when the project was designed and began implementation in 1996. Most of the Project Management Unit (PMU) staff in those early years were from the



Pupils dancing celebrating the handing over of a footbridge to their school

Design and Implementation

- The IEC strategy was designed through a process known as Systematic Client Consultations, involving NGOs, beneficiary communities, government officials, members of the donor community, and lessons learned from

study tours to other social funds. Using this assessment, the MASAF Development Communication Unit (DCU) and a local IEC expert designed an overall strategy for the project, with inputs from the World Bank.

- The budget for IEC activities was high: the MASAF I Capacity Enhancement Component (including IEC, training, and studies) was US\$2.8 million, while MASAF II was budgeted at US\$3.7 million.
- A public awareness campaign using radio, bus advertisements, and posters was launched at the beginning of the project. In addition, visits by MASAF staff to key village and regional leaders were used to spread the word. A project launch presided over by the President of the Republic of Malawi was also held at one of the rural pilot subproject sites.
- Follow-on programs through radio and other media have reinforced the message that MASAF subprojects are for the whole community, not just the elite, and that implementation committees must remain accountable to the community.
- The main vehicle for the collection and dissemination of information proved to be the radio. Virtually all print and media materials were produced by Malawi's fledgling private sector.
- Within the microproject cycle, MASAF IEC involves two-way communication. Facilitators work intensively with the communities on "sensitization" throughout the subproject cycle, visiting villages many times to see the subproject to completion. In turn, villages and local authorities give feedback to the facilitators on identifying IEC needs and gaps, public awareness message design, and advertising materials that the MASAF is considering using.

Who implements the IEC program?

Because local capacity has proved equal to the task, international technical assistance is not used except for the end-of-project evaluations. All activities are coordinated by the MASAF (DCU), which is responsible for developing the IEC strategy, disseminating messages, managing IEC

consultants and monitoring the effectiveness of the IEC program. The DCU Head conducts quarterly field visits to speak with beneficiaries.

Within the microproject cycle, training of village Project Management Committees is conducted by the District Training Team comprised of the MASAF Zone Manager (field office manager) and officials from relevant District Assembly Officials (such as water, public works, community development, and health). The MASAF Zone Manager, District Commissioner and other district officials facilitate the public launch of the project. MASAF Zone Managers are trained in their IEC role in IEC by the Head of Development Communication Unit and their respective Directors. The IEC is reviewed by management during quarterly MASAF meetings.



A woman is interviewing villagers using a microphone

How effectiveness is measured

To establish baselines and measure impact, two Beneficiary Assessments were conducted in 1997 and 2000, along with two IEC Assessments in 1996 and 2001. In addition, the Unit conducts continuous recording and periodic analysis of information and feedback from the public through regular audits and surveys to assess the impact of messages. Information is also obtained from interactions with stakeholders at meetings, orientation workshops, field visits, letters to the editor in MASAF News and local newspapers, question and answer sessions on radio programs and other media, letters sent to MASAF, and requests to MASAF from other organizations seeking technical advice on IEC.

MASAF uses process as well as outcome indicators, looking at knowledge and attitudes, intentions to carry out project works by target audiences, actual behaviors demonstrated (such as

community participation, subproject management, sustainability of projects and how communities are using information gained to foster other development programs). Outcome indicators include: numbers of products produced and disseminated; numbers of people reached with messages/products; demand generated after message dissemination; type and amount information/knowledge have about MASAF; and feedback obtained on MASAF and/or the IEC program.

The word gets out: MASAF in the villages

Village-to-village communication is often how information gets out about MASAF activities. Some communities may have heard about MASAF but do not initially have enough information to formulate a request. A chief or other community member may then visit neighboring villages already benefiting from a MASAF funded project to see for themselves how the project works. The MASAF beneficiary village then acts as a catalyst, helping neighbors learn more with advice transmitted via radio interviews or cassette recordings.

Impact

- The most significant impacts of this free flow of information have been better working relationships between stakeholders, and a new trust between these various actors. Adversarial relationships were replaced by growing respect.
- The various waves of IEC initiatives (radio messages, posters, bus advertisements, interpersonal exchanges) established very clearly in the minds of prospective stakeholders the norms of the project, the roles they were expected to play and their attendant responsibilities. This gave very little opportunity for the concerned players to feign “ignorance” when they were called upon to participate in the project or failed to do so.
- A very clear impact of the equitable access to information was the distinct change in the attitude of poor communities towards both NGOs and the government’s district extension staff. With regard to the former, the communities made it clear that they knew that NGOs were only one of the options they could utilize to help them in choosing, designing and implementing their project - they would make the decision. Regarding the district administration, the attitude of the communities changed from passive acceptance of whatever was handed down to

active participation in demanding, however politely, that the administration’s extension staff deliver their part of the bargain. In effect, power relationships began to be reshaped.

- Within the community, where the elites had been generally unchallenged, free access to information about rights and responsibilities (for example, the role of the project sub-committee) gave rise to pointed questions about the use of funds, the quality of materials purchased, the manner in which a contractor had been selected, and so on). Members of Parliament who attempted to influence procurement or contracting issues were, for the most part, kept at bay by the communities.
- The fact that the project encouraged gender-focus was communicated widely helping women to insist that they should be part of project sub-committees and encouraged their active participation in influencing the decisions regarding the community’s priority needs.
- Anecdotally, it has been reported that the country-wide awareness of MASAF prompted other donor-assisted programs to implement IEC initiatives to promote and report on their activities.

Lessons Learned

- An IEC campaign should precede project implementation to inform and shape opinion on project features.
- It is important that field staff are committed to the IEC function for it to be a success.
- Where Government departments lack the capacity to sensitize communities to certain topics (for example, gender and environment), a social fund can take the lead in producing and disseminating messages, because it is capable of reaching more people than other institutions.
- The first wave of messages must be clear and simple, and open to as little misinterpretation as possible. For example, while MASAF sub-project eligibility was explained clearly, the messages did not specify the kinds of sub-projects that the Fund would support.
- An IEC component helps a great deal in moving from an asymmetrical information environment to a symmetrical one. In other words, when all stakeholders have more

information, and this information is available more equitably, bargaining positions become clearer and power relationships tend to reformulate themselves.

- While initially the popularly-elected Community Project Committees act as a democratic intermediary, over time many tend to claim power for themselves and become less transparent in areas such as the usage of funds. Communities need to be encouraged to insist on accountability at all times and media channels (radio interviews, etc,) should be made available to them to discuss their experiences and come up with solutions.
- It is important to have an IEC professional in the Project Management Unit (or its equivalent). The notion that “anyone can do IEC as a matter of common sense” was proven completely unfounded in the MASAF operation. However, this professional would need to undertake extensive field trips and not act as a desk-bound information broker. This helps him/her to understand the operational aspects of the project and also helps that person to be regarded by the operational people as “one of them”, and as a participant in the operational process rather than as a reporter.
- Training in IEC needs to be provided to the project’s first line of contact with communities, in this instance, the regional staff, as they play a vital role in disseminating and collecting information.

- A communication initiative needs to follow up its first information campaign with a second wave of clarification. This becomes necessary because the first wave of information about the arrival of a project, especially a Social Fund, is almost immediately distorted by power players trying to maximize their role as intermediaries and purveyors of funds.
- Never advertise if there is no confidence in delivering the product. Community faith in MASAF was high because, unlike most other donor-financed projects in Malawi, very little time elapsed between hearing about the project on the radio and their being contacted.
- Regular dissemination of project experiences helps to reinforce the politically non-partisan nature of the project, as it becomes clear that the sub-projects have responded to community demand and followed publicly-stated norms.
- Documenting and disseminating the experiences of communities, in print and on the radio, tends to restore faith in one’s capacity to contribute to a solution, and to reinforce a sense of community among people across a country.

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