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Picturing Development in Malawi

Norma J. Anderson

The photograph on the cover of this issue of *Bridgewater Review* shows two men seated on a verandah, hands clasped, with a child seated in front of them. All three people are looking at the camera, engaged with the person taking the image. In discussing why they took the picture, the photographers said, “Friendship is . . . important in our community. We get along. We’re buddies.” When Americans see pictures of poor people in Africa, we usually see them depicted as objects of pity or objects of cultural interest, not as thoughtful individuals. All photographs in this article were taken by residents of a village in central Malawi, part of a project aimed not only at understanding participants’ ideas about their community’s needs and things that matter to them but at conceptualizing a way that outsiders might better “hear” poor people telling their own stories, with their own voices. As such, the pictures are deliberate and self-aware. They help us visualize a place and lives that are unfamiliar, but they can do more than that: pairing the shots with people’s reasons for taking them can shift our perspectives by contrasting our views of the images with those of the photographers.

Sociologists focus on taken-for-granted understandings of the world around us, studying not only what other people believe but examining our own beliefs simultaneously. Additionally, if we are lucky, we can transform discipline-specific learning and theories into practical action. Slowly, this is happening with my work. Fifteen years ago, soon after graduating from college, I traveled to Malawi for a year and a half, supported by a Fulbright fellowship. My research focused on the socioeconomic effects of tobacco-growing clubs on small-scale

women farmers. But a funny thing sometimes happens during research: while we set off to learn about one thing, we encounter unexpected lessons that may seem of secondary importance but which, in retrospect, often resonate the longest. This was my experience.

Armed only with a greedy desire to learn and a will to take action against global inequalities, I threw myself into studying Chichewa, a local language, and getting to know the lay of the land, participating in varied social situations and meeting as many people as

possible. After living in Malawi only a few months, the Malawi government announced that it would raise rents in the apartment complex where I lived by 250%! This enormous hike was unaffordable for most Malawian residents even though a majority had formal employment. (With my Fulbright funding, I would be just fine). Tenants organized community meetings to protest the costs and, eager to see what they would do, I attended several meetings with a Malawian friend of mine who also lived there. Our neighbors, after deliberating various potential actions, decided to create a petition, indicating both an unwillingness and inability to pay the new rents. But while everyone agreed on this tactic, they could not agree on where to send it. Many were nervous about seeming “rude” should it be delivered to the wrong government official, someone ranking too high or too low.

What I was witnessing as I listened to the group’s hesitancy to deliver this politely worded petition was a moment in Malawi’s democratic transition. Every person there that day had grown up during the country’s 30-year dictatorship, during which speech was censored and individual freedoms limited. In 2000, Malawi had been a multi-party democracy for only six years. People’s nervousness was totally reasonable and, in the end, they did not send the petition. How long would it take before that fear of government reprisal lessened? What *other* factors inhibited or encouraged political action and social change on a local scale? And what effects might outsiders have on social action? These questions have formed central themes in my research ever since.

Since 1994 there has been no shortage of foreign intervention in Malawi in the shape of development assistance and direct foreign aid. The country is poor: based on Gross Domestic Product (GDP), the World Bank currently lists

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Malawi as the poorest in the world. HIV prevalence remains above ten percent, maternal mortality is greater than 500 per 100,000 live births (the rate is 28 in the United States), and its total fertility rate is about 5.4 (data. Worldbank.org). Malawi’s population is growing quickly, its natural environment is suffering, and hunger, for many of its 14 million inhabitants, is an annual concern.

Over the last decade and a half, I have conducted 70 interviews with Malawians working in civil society organizations [CSOs]—non-governmental and parastatal groups, foundations, and charities striving to develop the country and improve people’s living standards. My goals were to investigate how much influence Malawians have on development agendas in their own country as well as some of the

unintended consequences of development work there. My findings agree with the work of numerous scholars: development agendas in poor countries are often dictated outside the country. They change rapidly and with each successive agenda, CSOs must shift their targets and missions to accommodate the changes: CSOs are almost entirely dependent on foreign funding for their continued existence. The Malawi government, too, must be mindful of the desires of donors: about 40% of the national budget is provided by overseas governments. The internalized understandings resulting from these donor/recipient relationships are troubling.

Over the course of three separate research trips, respondents’ perceptions of donors’ “main” interests changed. HIV/AIDS was the primary focus in 2008, climate change had become paramount in 2010, and in 2014 there was no consensus. But while perceived



Amabanja group: “The chief was telling the people to go and mold bricks and this is people in action now. The community, there are people who are making paste with water; others are molding bricks; others are bringing in water. It’s like working hand in hand to mold the bricks.”



Singles group: "This is showing the molding of some of the bricks for the building of the school blocks."

development agendas shifted over time, respondents were consistent in leveling two concerns: first, that power was skewed, privileging donors' wishes over Malawian needs and, second, that there was need for stronger local leadership. Respondents made it clear that they felt no true partnership existed between CSOs and foreign funders. One said, "That's [a] big problem—the attitude of most donors. They would want to see us dance to their tunes. They want us to do what they want, not what the people want on the ground ... Most donors take advantage of our vulnerability to dictate what we are going to do."

Many respondents were members of the socioeconomic elite in Malawi; many had college degrees, and some had graduate degrees. Yet they felt their voices went unheard and were frustrated by that. One woman who had worked in the CSO sector more than a decade said, "I don't believe in democracy. What has democracy brought to this country? ... Ask around, people will say we were much better under Banda [Hastings Banda, President, 1964–1994]." A social activist, well known and outspoken for decades, said, "Not being a leader, what can you do? You...

have no power to change those things. Leaders have to decide."

Rereading these interviews reveals a dismaying reality. Today, participants no longer worry about appearing "rude," but do continue to express feelings of powerlessness toward both their own government and outsiders who, ironically, seek to make Malawi

meaningful programming for social change, do non-elites, the intended beneficiaries of outside interventions, feel even less agency in shaping their own community development?

In Malawi, it is striking how rarely poor people seem to be taken into account in local development projects. That poor people are "voiceless" is a

And their photos are stunning—they make powerful statements about who people are and what they believe they need.

a more democratic, self-sustaining nation. These elites are actively working for improvement in their communities but feel helpless. This fact is particularly disheartening because many respondents see themselves and their organizations acting as "voices for the voiceless"—the poor people whom CSOs are designed to help. And if elites feel powerless and unable to create

ludicrous statement. Their voices are more than adequate; it is likely our willingness to listen that is lacking. But how can we hear better? And can I use my research to pursue methods that enable more effective listening, leading, ideally, to better outcomes for development projects? Thanks to a grant from BSU's Center for the Advancement of Research and Scholarship, I returned to

Malawi in the summer of 2015 to work with villagers I have known since 2000. I asked if they would talk about what they have observed during their own experiences with development as well as what they want the next time some well-meaning outsider comes offering to do a project. They agreed.

Over the course of a month and a half, five groups totaling about 50 villagers met with me to consider development projects that had taken place in their community, what worked or did not, what roles they played, and what they would like to do in the future. The groups were suggested by the chief and we agreed on five categories in which to organize people, hoping to get varied social understandings: the Amfumu group, consisting of the chief and elders; the Amipinga group, made up of people who identified as very religious; the Amabanja, a group of people in traditional families; the singles group, comprised of divorced or widowed women; and a group of youth, who worked directly with the Amfumu group.

Our talks indicated that most projects were generated by outsiders including religious or business groups, CSOs, and the Malawi government but a few, like building a new church, originated within the village itself. Not surprisingly, no one had complaints about the church building: they built it, it is in use. Regarding other projects, people felt that outside groups had made promises they either failed to keep or simply abandoned. As an example, the villagers have made tens of thousands of bricks for various construction projects (in development, it is believed that there will be greater project “sustainability” if local people contribute to it. Consequently, for projects such as school buildings or latrines, villagers were tasked with crafting bricks). While a school block was constructed, villagers had understood that more building would take place but the implementers did not return. Other



Amabanja group: “This is the community now gathering firewood so that we can burn the bricks, baking them.”



Amfumu group: “There is a trench, it’s really deep... So we tried to put together some trees and construct a bridge but it usually just wears out... People need to cross to access the clinic and we had an incident whereby a pregnant woman fell off the bridge and we needed to pull her out so that’s how important this bridge is. And how dangerous it can get.”



Amfumu group: "Because there is only one borehole [well] in the whole community so people would sometimes just bring their clothes and wash them right there because it gets too much to be going back and forth just to draw water so that they can wash their clothes."

projects, such as a water well, have broken and local people cannot repair them: there is now only one functioning well for the village.

At the end of our meetings and discussions, participants used cameras I brought to take pictures of their community. They photographed things that mattered to them, development projects that had happened or needed to happen, and anything else they felt like capturing. The results of this pilot project were enlightening for me and, I hope, for the people who participated. And their photos are stunning—they make powerful statements about who people are and what they believe they need. The photos accompanying this article are a small sample of the many pictures taken by villagers who agreed to participate. The captions are quotes from interviews in which they explained their pictures.

So what do they say? There was a tendency for the villagers who participated in the pilot study to rue the lack

of adequate assistance from the outside and lay blame for failed projects at the feet of others (much as CSOs lay blame at the feet of donors, government, and villagers, who are presumed to be waiting for handouts). But people also noted that the projects they started and most wanted were the projects that had had the best results, projects such as the church and latrines. They are eager to put in effort when the outcomes not only benefit them but match their own goals. And they have clear ideas for what they want. Some projects they suggested are enormous, like the construction of a clinic, with the attendant equipment, drug stocks, and staff. Others are smaller and more immediately feasible, like the construction of a sturdy bridge over a deep ravine that people must cross to get to school and the closest health facility.

At our final meeting, I told participants that I would like to return and work with them to design a plan for a project

they choose, using their photography and stories to bring in partners to support their vision and needs. They were enthusiastic for the possibility. I am too, because even if projects are small, a real partnership, in which all sides are actively engaged, might foster greater autonomy and build villagers' abilities to direct more of their own projects in the future. Outside help can be incredibly beneficial: villagers have little capital, either financial or social. Outsiders can bring both in the form of money and connections to people who can accomplish tasks (engineers to guide proper bridge construction, for example). But bringing those together in a way that is respectful of villagers' pre-existing knowledge, opinions, and needs, as well as letting them lead, is vital. Listening is essential, and giving people a chance to use pictures to frame their own stories might be one way to listen more closely. Heeding the voices and the knowledge of poor people as they strive to achieve their goals seems a genuinely just and democratic aim.

We can rarely predict where research will take us. A winding road led me to this point, where I can combine sociological theory with purpose, working with others for practical results. The study of history and economics, religion and science, statistics and visual communication have merged in ways I never anticipated and I'm excited to see what happens next.



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