

Knowledge of the MASAF

The findings of the study show that MASAF is a widely known development initiative. Up to about 97.2% of the respondents reported to have at least heard about MASAF. It is, however, important to note that a larger proportion of the respondents indicated to have heard about MASAF between 1997 and 1998. This, coincidentally, turned out to be the period during which MASAF adopted the strategic plan for a robust IEC framework to actively promote its activities to the wider clientele.

MASAF as a poverty alleviation initiative has three different programmes. It is involved in Community Sub Projects (CSP) (4); Public Works Programme (PWP)(5); and Sponsored Sub Project (SSP) (5). CSP interventions were widely known (88%); PWP (66.2%); and SSP (23%). SSP were understandably least known because they only become an integral part of the MASAF initiative during its second phase launched in 2000. The other components have been part and parcel of the MASAF initiative since its launch in July 1995.

It was, at the time of its inauguration, emphasised that the MASAF development initiative was adopted in the spirit of institutionalising a radically new approach to rural development as provided for in the 1995 liberal Constitution. This Constitution provides for good governance and development as rights (7), which inevitably calls for the empowerment of the poor people for effective popular participation and decision-making in their respective areas. The popular view is that if poverty will have to be significantly reduced, then, development interventions have to be based on the aspirations, hopes, ambitions and fears of the target groups (Chinsinga, 2000 & Chilowa et al, 2001). This means that the Poverty Alleviation Programme (PAP), which has been the operative development philosophy of the incumbent regime since 1994 thrives on participation as a launching pad for fighting the widely entrenched poverty. As part of the broad based poverty alleviation initiative, MASAF is expected to strengthen health; education and economic infrastructure for poor communities; improve access to social and economic services such as drug supplies and desks; revive the spirit of self help and increase a sense of community ownership and empowerment; create income-earning opportunities through employment; and improve food availability in food deficit areas (Chilowa et al, 2000).

It was, consequently, of great interest in the study to find out whether the target communities feel that MASAF implementation strategies are any qualitatively different from the earlier development interventions they have been exposed to. This was further motivated by the existing documentation which emphasises that prior to the adoption of the poverty alleviation policy framework, development interventions were implemented in a characteristically top-down fashion (Kishindo, 1997 & Kalemba, 1997). About 49% of the respondents indicated that MASAFs implementation strategies are different; 30% were indifferent; and about 21% felt that MASAF's strategies were essentially similar to those utilised in previous development initiatives. More detailed subsequent responses indicated that 87% felt that MASAF is different because it

involves target communities throughout all stages of the project cycle; 85% observed that MASAF responds to development needs raised by beneficiary communities; and about 9% felt that MASAF impose projects on target communities.

The MASAF IEC strategic plan identifies several channels that are used to reach out stakeholders which, *inter alia*, include radio, newspapers, posters, calendars, workshops, face to face meetings, diaries, orientation workshops, community drama, poetry, song and dance. Very few respondents reported to be familiar with the whole range of IEC channels beyond the radio and the newspaper. In fact, about 69.4% of the respondents reported to be familiar with radio compared to about 10.9% who reported to be familiar with the newspaper as MASAF IEC channels. The other channels on the menu were virtually unknown and therefore insignificant. There are, however, other channels, which, though not officially recognised, play a very significant role in MASAF's IEC activities. These, for example, include meetings with village heads (14%) and political meetings (7%). For political meetings to serve as MASAF's IEC channel is quite inevitable. The reason is that the MASAF development initiative is often largely presented as if it is the ruling party's programme and not a government one. Thus, the very same mentality of the one party era has strongly persisted in which the party and government are indistinguishable. They are more or less one and the same thing. It was thus observed that no politician, especially from the government side, can hold a rally without making any reference to MASAF's instrumental role in facilitating grass root development.

Politics threatens MASAF's efficacy

The study found out that politics presents a formidable challenge to the ultimate success of MASAF IEC interventions. The possibility of excessive political interference in the MASAF initiative had been anticipated and consequently engendered a heated debate about its appropriate institutional blueprint. On the basis of the debate, the most attractive institutional design was the one in which politicians could have absolutely no role. An institutional structure of that nature was, however, virtually inconceivable for the simple reason that MASAF operates using loan funds ratified by Parliament. This inevitably gives politicians an open invitation to exercise legislative oversight particularly in how the funds are disbursed and ultimately utilised. Moreover, it is a widely shared consensus that politics cannot practically be totally divorced from development (Gibbon, 1995; Hulme & Turner, 1996; Chinsinga, 2000).

At all levels, the respondents acknowledge that the involvement of politicians in the MASAF development initiative is inevitable but their major concern is the extent to which politicians have, in process, abused their oversight role. Instead of facilitating MASAF IEC efforts, most of them have fallen prey to using the MASAF initiative as the springboard for gaining sheer political mileage. Hence, most politicians end up, deliberately for that matter, misconstruing MASAF's objectives, principles, procedures and ideals. The ripple effects of the resultant distortions, of

to be exploited in order to achieve the envisaged maximum strategic impact among the target beneficiaries. The MASAF IEC strategic plan, for instance, identifies a whole menu of channels yet only two or three have proved viable enough. The need for prior research is further reinforced by the fact that the study identified some unofficially recognised channels and they yet enjoy remarkably significant credibility among the target beneficiaries. No IEC activities can be expected to succeed without prior thorough understanding of how the people to be affected by an initiative perceive their own problems and the innovations being proposed, what they aspire to achieve, how they obtain and exchange information, which media sources and interpersonal channels enjoy most credibility and so on (Dzimadzi et al, 2001). This information is very vital since it determines the message design, the most appropriate media sources and channels to use and how and when to use them.

The major challenge facing MASAF IEC interventions is politics. Since issues are hardly the driving force for politicking, the majority of the politicians are, inevitably, tempted to use MASAF as sheer political bait. The drawback is that this deeply and widely entrenched practice greatly distorts principles, procedures, values and ideals of MASAF. Little wonder that the grassroots expressed preference for chiefs as opposed to politicians to serve as primary facilitators of MASAF funded development interventions. The development agents themselves complicate the situation even further because they are often embroiled in the politics of identity. This adversely constrains working relationships among stakeholders, which are key to the possible institutionalisation and consolidation of a harmonised decentralised planning and governance system.

Notes

- (1) Since the attainment of independence in July 1964, Malawi was an autocratic state one party state. There was no any other party apart from the MCP, which exercised very tight control over the citizens virtually in all spheres of life. Malawi, just like the majority of countries within the Southern Africa sub-region, caught up with the waves of democratisation in the beginning of the 1990s, which culminated into the first ever post independence multiparty elections in May 1994. The UDF, which won the elections and constituted Malawi's second republic was retained into power in the subsequent 1999 general elections. Its current term is expected to run up to 2004.
- (2) See Laws of Malawi CAP 21:01. This Act has now been amended to reflect the realities of the unfolding democratic order. It regulated and controlled the exhibition of cinematograph pictures, the importation, production, dissemination of undesirable publications, pictures and records, the performance or presentation of stage plays and public entertainments in the interest of safety, and to provide for matters incidental thereto or connected therewith.

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