

Community learning: Perspectives on the role of media in non-formal education with a case study from Mchinji District, Malawi

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The lack of learning opportunities is a barrier to development

There is a profound lack of appropriate and effective learning opportunities in remote, rural and resource-poor parts of the world. Schools, by and large, do not cater to non-formal or life-long learning needs of adults or youth. Universities and colleges have at best a limited footprint in most rural and remote areas and courses are rarely framed to meet the livelihood, health or development needs of communities or their members.

Just as it is hard to imagine universities offering non-formal educational services in developing areas, it's unlikely that community groups can fill the gap on their own. Local media, community development programmes, information and communication technology (ICT) centres, development and other localised services, even when information-based, are seldom effectively structured for engaged learning. There is however untapped potential in collaboration among these groups: educational institutions, local development agents, media/ICT groups and communities.

Open and distance learning

Open and distance learning (ODL) is best known in the context of formal education – correspondence and distance education through universities leading to qualifications. But there is also a hugely important role for ODL practice in non-formal learning; learning about health, parenting, resolving conflict; about entrepreneurship, livelihoods and life skills.

The core principles of ODL make it especially relevant in rural, remote and resource-poor areas: openness, scalability, geographic reach, flexibility for learners, and cost-effectiveness. Formal or non-formal, in areas of greatest need ODL is likely to be the only way mass learning necessary to achieve the Millenium Development Goals (MDGs) can take place.

The widening gap between the range and volume of communities' education needs and the capacity of conventional face-to-face, bricks-and-mortar institutions and approaches to meet those demands points to innovative learning programmes delivered through local media and other technologies as a solution. The key elements of ODL – media-based learning materials, structured learning curricula and objectives, and learner support – are all appropriate and feasible in these areas where non-formal learning is most needed. It is now a question of applying the right models of ODL, be they new or old, and to build the capacities of groups to carry them out.

Community-based technology and media facilities

One requirement for ODL is media that can carry the learning content. In the past decade or so there has been a dramatic expansion in ICT- and media-enabled community facilities around the globe. These include telecentres, community radio, village knowledge centres, wall newspapers, community access points, information kiosks, community TV, and community learning and education centres.

India for example has set ambitious targets in this field, initially suggesting the country would set up a knowledge centre for every village – as many as 600,000; a goal which has subsequently been scaled down to ‘only’ 100,000. Additionally, when the government allowed the establishment of community radios a few years ago, it envisioned an equally large scale: some 4,000 in five years.

There are certainly success stories in the global movement of community-based technology centres, even if many have an element of exaggeration. Ambitious words like ‘information’, ‘knowledge’, and ‘learning’ are often part of the names of the centres.

The expansion of local community-based centres with development-related mandates bodes well for ODL because access to technology *is* a prerequisite for the type of mass learning distance education makes possible. Local communication and information facilities, like the ones we see expanding so rapidly in many parts of the developing world, are potentially vital parts of new community-based learning models; however the presence of technology is a necessary but on its own insufficient condition for good things to happen.

The majority of “ICT for development” and “ICT for education” initiatives have been technology-driven rather than people-oriented in their approach and thinking. They are well intentioned but too often miss the real ingredients: people, their needs and rights, and the content that links them together.

Community radio

Community radio has a long history in the Americas but is a more recent phenomenon in the Caribbean, Africa and Asia-Pacific where it has, to a large extent, been linked to if not driven by development agendas. Although it is hard to put media like community radio in the same basket as telecentres and other types of IT centres, their development in some areas shares common characteristics of a technology-focused, top-down approach.

Community radio as a tool for participatory development is based on a logical premise, one that also supports its role in ODL, namely that in remote, rural and resource-poor areas community radio is a critical, if not the *only* mass information and communication service.

Community radios excel at actualising people’s right to speak and be heard; at realising the principle of freedom of expression; what we often refer to as ‘voice,’ enabling people to participate at many levels in society and development. In

developing areas they are as unique in enabling voice as they are in providing for local news and culture.

Where community radio faces greater challenges, and too often falls short in Africa, Asia-Pacific and Caribbean regions, is addressing the information and content needs and rights of their communities. In addition to “rights to expression,” communities also have a “right to information” and a “right to learn.”

Community radio – or any other community media or technology facility for that matter – is a vital tool for education; however educational broadcasting and learning programmes are not easy to create, manage or sustain. New models are needed.

Community learning programmes: non-formal ODL

Following the idea of the ODL course team – in which lecturers work together with instructional designers – one of the main aims (and challenges) in developing non-formal ODL is to harness the collaborative power of education, development and media/ICT groups in creating educational content and learning programmes at the community level.

Community radios not only broadcast in local languages but are firmly rooted in local contexts. They are trusted by their listeners; they work in culturally appropriate ways. They draw on local community membership as 'owners', managers, and staff. They also have limited capacity, particularly in content areas that require specialised knowledge, for example health or agriculture.

Alongside extension services and other public agencies, community development organisations often have the expertise required to meet health and livelihood needs. They share an increasing realisation that development is primarily a question of information and learning; however their coverage and reach is generally limited by face-to-face and print-based methodologies and materials.

Seldom does either of these groups make the most of what we know about how people learn and all that adult and non-formal education experts have to offer.

Principles for developing community learning programmes

1. Start with local needs
2. Know your audience; identify your learners; talk and listen to them
3. Act now; think long term
4. Bring together media/ICT, knowledge-based and education groups into win-win collaborative partnerships
5. Plan for sustainability and scalability from the start
6. Prioritise local resources, including financial
7. Establish clear learning objectives and curricula
8. Be interactive in planning and programming
9. Include face-to-face learning support
10. Monitor and evaluate on an on-going basis

Phukusi la Moyo

An example of a promising community learning process is a programme called *Phukusi la Moyo*, (literally *Bag of Life*), developed in response to a need for education about maternal and child health in Mchinji District, Malawi.

Phukusi la Moyo has been developed through collaboration between communities in Mchinji, MaiMwana Project (a community-based maternal and child health NGO), Mchinji District Health Office (Malawi Ministry of Health), Mudzi Wathu Community Radio station, Story Workshop (a Blantyre-based educational media production group), and the Commonwealth of Learning.

Phukusi la Moyo – Bag of Life

The name *Phukusi la Moyo* (Bag of life) comes from a local traditional Chewa proverb: *Phukusi la moyo umasunga wekha* (*everyone should jealously protect their own bag of life*). This proverb teaches that everyone is responsible for their own lives and health and should have a full bag of skills, knowledge and experiences, which they can use when needed. The hope is that the radio programmes will be a source from which people living in Mchinji can draw to fill their bags of life and safeguard mother and child health.

Background to the programme

Malawi's maternal and child mortality rates are amongst the highest in the world. In the past a great deal of work to address high mortality rates has been carried out at health facilities through training of staff, improving quality of services and provision of more resources. However, in Malawi only about half (57%) of women deliver in a health facility, only 57% of women attend the recommended four antenatal care sessions and only one third (31%) of women and children receive postnatal care¹. As a result, organisations are increasingly working at the local level to develop the capacities of communities to take control of their own health. It is only through a combination of facility and community-based approaches that countries will be able to achieve their MDG targets for maternal and child mortality respectively.

MaiMwana Project has been implementing this combination of approaches in collaboration with Mchinji District Health Office since 2003. Learning from these activities and, more importantly, the explicitly expressed needs of communities in Mchinji has revealed the need for a more specific behaviour change communication strategy to supplement existing activities in the district. ODL through radio has the potential to reach communities with messages that can

¹ 2004 Malawi Demographic and Health Survey. National Statistical Office and Macro International. Zomba, Malawi.

increase the awareness and change the attitudes of community members in relation to mother and child health. These changes, supported by existing community mobilisation and facility-based interventions, have a great potential to improve mother and child health and reduce mortality.

Mchinji District

Mchinji District is one of nine administrative districts in the Central Region of Malawi. Topographically, the Central Region of Malawi is mainly a plateau, over 1000 metres above sea level, and is the country's main agricultural area. Mchinji District lies to the west of Lilongwe, the capital city, and has international borders with Zambia and Mozambique. It covers an area of 3,356 square kilometres and has a population of about 380,000². The district is divided into eight Traditional Authorities: Dambe; Mavwere; Mduwa; Mkanda; Mlonyeni; Nyoka; Simpasi; and Zulu. The district centre is Mchinji Boma but about 80 percent of the population of Mchinji lives in rural areas.

Using radio

The focus of the learning programme is a weekly 30-minute mother and child health radio show, *Phukusi la Moyo*, broadcast by Mudzi Wathu Community Radio, which reaches the whole of Mchinji District. Data suggests as many as 80 percent of households have radio sets, making potential access to the learning content high. The total population of the district is approximately 380,000 people. This means that within this total population, over one year, the programme has the potential to reach 15,000 women who will become pregnant in the district and the parents of 125,000 children who will be under age five.

Programme development

In March of 2009, the partners collaborated in a five-day design and content creation workshop, facilitated by three representatives from Story Workshop. Two representatives from Mudzi Wathu Community Radio Station, two from the District Hospital, two from MaiMwana Project and three representatives from communities in Mchinji participated in the workshop which was supported financially by the Commonwealth of Learning with major in-kind contributions from all parties.

The workshop stimulated the development of

- A list of maternal and child health issues on which to focus the programme's core messages
- A message matrix listing, in relation to each issue, 1) negative behaviours/practices; 2) possible consequences of the negative behaviours; 3) positive/expected behaviours; and 4) the benefits of practicing the positive/expected behaviours.

² 1998 Population and Housing Census. National Statistics Office. Zomba, Malawi.

- A programme matrix listing each programme in the series including the theme or the issues under discussion; the communication objectives (expected outcomes); the target audience; and likely interviewees.
- A format for the programme, in this case a magazine featuring interviews, debates, vox pop, drama, listeners' letters, quizzes, poetry and human interest stories.
- A set of programme success factors, including the roles and responsibilities of each partner.
- A strategy for the role of listening groups in the programme.

Materials for the first four programmes were also recorded from nearby communities during the workshop and the pilot programme was fully developed and edited – ready for broadcast. A further 13 programmes were mapped out in detail. The programme team also decided on the name and the time of broadcast.

By the fourth day [of the workshop] the Phukusi la Moyo program was now taking shape. The format was known, the name created and the program matrix ready. It was now time for the producers to gather the materials for the first program. They went out to interview different stakeholders. The whole morning was reserved for content collection. The producers visited a nearby village which is host to one of the MaiMwana women groups to record songs and interviews for the first four programs. The signature tune of the program was created by the village women and was also recorded. The producers also interviewed some MaiMwana and district health officials as well as women group representatives. The producers were on their way to producing their first Phukusi la Moyo program. Workshop report, Charles Simbi (Story Workshop)

Face-to-face learner support

One of the partners' objectives is to move beyond "messaging" and a one-way "pushing content" approach towards more interactive and engaged models for local educational programming.

The *Phukusi la Moyo* programme is also training 200 existing women's groups in the skills necessary to become effective listening and learning clubs. The training draws on the experience of both Mudzi Wathu and MaiMwana Project. Three representatives from each of the 200 groups are being trained in the skills necessary to facilitate discussions about the programmes; facilitate the application of what women are learning to their own situations; and to facilitate group-based learning activities and skills development.

This network of groups covers approximately 350 villages and a total population of 80,000 people across the whole district. The groups were established by MaiMwana in 2005 and have been engaging in a community mobilisation action cycle in relation to mother and child health. This has involved meeting on a regular basis to: identify mother and child health problems; explore the causes of

these problems and the ways to prevent and manage them; develop locally feasible strategies to address these problems; implement these strategies; and evaluate the results of these strategies on mother and child health. The activities are facilitated by trained local women who use visual aids such as picture cards and Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) methods to stimulate discussions. The groups are now starting a second phase of this cycle where they will identify and try to solve new health problems. The radio programmes provide information to these discussions and are further supported by the visual tools that the groups are using.

Success factors

Phukusi la Moyo is in its infancy, but there are a number of reasons its potential is already evident. It draws on and integrates demonstrated models and successful practices in this case from the experience of Commonwealth of Learning, MaiMwana Project and Story Workshop.

The programme responds directly to a real, evident need. Malawi's maternal and child mortality rates are high. The decision to use the community radio came out of the lessons learned from the MaiMwana Project's first five years working in Mchinji District and the explicitly expressed needs of women in Mchinji for more information and education about mother and child health issues.

Learners participate in all aspects of the programme. They are clearly identified and are part of the planning and development process. The programmes also have a strong element of field recording and live interaction. Building on MaiMwana Project's community-based approach, there is already a sense of ownership for the programme among the communities, which arises from their engagement in the process; a critical factor for overall sustainability.

While the programme is reliant to some degree of external funding support, the prospects for financial sustainability are good. The Mchinji District Health Office has committed to budgeting for the basic costs of running the programme as part of its District Implementation Plan in coming years. This funding will come from the Malawi Ministry of Health through the Sector Wide Approach.

The programme takes a long-term approach, for example the development workshop focused on the design of a long-term programme, not on an individual show or piece of content; it is envisioned that the programme will run for at least three years.

The listening clubs will also be sustained in a number of ways: MaiMwana has received a further five years of funding, which will allow it to support the groups until at least December 2013, by which time their operations should be self-sustaining. The district women's committee has established an independent organisational structure to help them collaborate and lobby for their own resources and funding. Finally, the groups have established their own bank account to help fund group activities and have succeeded in raising money for this account.

Data suggests that there is potential for 80% of households in Mchinji District to listen to *Phukusi la Moyo*. In parallel to this coverage of individual households, MaiMwana Project aims to scale-up the number of groups/listening clubs in Mchinji gradually over the next few years with approximately 500 groups running by early 2010 (covering half the district) and approximately 1000 groups by early 2011 (covering the entire district).

The “win-win” collaboration between local subject experts, in this case, the Mchinji District Health Office and MaiMwana Project; media groups, Mudzi Wathu Community Radio and Story Workshop; and education specialists from MaiMwana Project and Story Workshop is a critical element of the approach and a proven model of community-media -institutional partnership.

A key challenge faced by the programme is the financial and technical sustainability of the radio station. Maintenance requires technical expertise and funds. Mudzi Wathu Community Radio Station has signed a memorandum of understanding with a national broadcaster to provide this assistance but the relationship will have to be carefully negotiated to ensure the radio is able to broadcast effectively for and beyond the duration of the programme.

Conclusion

Phukusi la Moyo is a promising example of what can be achieved by bringing together communities, knowledge intermediaries, media and public institutions into a community-based learning process. The programme is rooted and focused clearly in community needs and the rights of women and children. It uses media technology to deliver learning content to a geographically dispersed audience in a manner that is cost effective and pedagogically sound. The programme is participatory in design and draws on local voices together with local and national knowledge organisations for the formulation and contextualisation of learning objects. It incorporates off-air elements and complementary media for learner support and moves beyond messaging and pushing information towards engaged learning about health and building healthy communities.

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Healthy Communities (2009-12) is a wide-ranging **Commonwealth of Learning** initiative to work with health, community development, education and media and ICT groups to develop effective community-based learning for community development, including maternal and child health, HIV/AIDS treatment, conflict resolution, and the empowerment of women and youth. COL is building capacities to design, develop and run appropriate community learning programmes, ones that bring together a variety of partners and draw on local resources, human and financial.

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MaiMwana Project is funded by Saving Newborn Lives and The Wellcome Trust to explore community based approaches for improving mother and child health and reducing mortality in rural Malawi. The project has been operating in Mchinji District since 2003.

Charles Simbi is the Scriptwriting Manager for Story Workshop Education Trust.

Story Workshop's programs are *real life* and story-based; gathered in villages, translated into drama and other media formats, and used to support people in bringing about positive changes to their lives. Role modeling and peer education are important tools, for instance in farmer-to-farmer learning. Instead of yelling messages at people or erecting huge billboards – and repeating those messages a little louder or making billboards a little bigger if messages are not implemented – Story Workshop takes people's own experiences as the starting point for learning and explores alternatives and different solutions for everyday life problems. Story Workshop does not talk about teenage pregnancy, we interview pregnant teenagers. People learn best from people in the same circumstances. If another poor person in another remote village can make a difference so can the audience. There is a limited role for experts in our programs. Story Workshop approach issues in a holistic way: people dealing with HIV may also be poor, taking care of the children of their deceased brothers and sisters, and or have problems in their marriages. Story Workshop adds advocacy programs to its approach whenever there are issues in the field that require changes in policy or decision-making. Programs have a strong human rights angle with an emphasis on gender issues.



COL/MaiMwana Project