

MALAWI:

How Social Accountability Improves State Responsiveness towards Enhanced Food Security

In Malawi, most smallholder farmers face extremely difficult growing conditions and rely on government subsidies to cultivate their fields. This support, however, does not always reach those who need it most. But when effective accountability mechanisms are put in place, people learn about their rights and are empowered to voice their concerns, forcing government agencies to significantly improve their services.



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Women in Mangochi District assess public services with a Community Score Card

Chronic hunger exacerbated by weak governance

Nearly 4.2 million people, or 20 percent of Malawi's total population, face chronic food and nutrition insecurity. One of them is Ibrahim Ali, a subsistence farmer living in a remote village in Mangochi district that is cut off during the rainy season, leaving children without schooling and pregnant women without access to health care. The soil on his small plot is severely depleted and his crops are constantly threatened by drought, heavy rains and natural disasters such as Cyclone Freddy, which destroyed his crops in 2023. He also struggles to afford seeds and fertilizer, all of which jeopardizes his Right to Food.

As one of the key programs to address food insecurity in the country, the Malawi government launched the Affordable Inputs Programme (AIP), which allows farmers like Ibrahim Ali to buy inputs at subsidized prices. By 2020, the program was expected to reach around 3.8 million people. However, the program has struggled to deliver on its promise due to poor targeting of farmers, delays and inadequacies in the delivery of inputs, and a shortage of agricultural extension workers. In addition, poor connectivity and glitches in the electronic system used for distribution made the operation vulnerable to corruption and bribery. This was exacerbated by the lack of mechanisms to address the grievances of communities, especially women and other vulnerable groups. All these gaps in the system were in stark contrast to the AIP guidelines.

Voice and Space for Improved Accountability

With support from Welthungerhilfe, the Community Initiative for Self-Reliance, the Center for Social Accountability and Transparency and the Civil Society Agriculture Network launched an initiative to help communities demand access to public services and influence policy decisions on their Right to Food. The project began with awareness-raising through roadshows and radio broadcasts to thousands of subsistence farmers about their rights and entitlements, with a focus on the AIP. Rights holders at the grassroots level, such as members of village and area development committees, women's and youth groups, as well as local government duty bearers and frontline government workers, were trained on key concepts of the Right to Food, including entitlements and obligations for its realization. Participatory social accountability tools, in particular community score cards and social audits, have been introduced to assess the AIP scheme. Starting in 2021, communities, government officials, and service providers began using these tools to conduct independent reviews of AIP services against agreed key indicators. As a next step, they were brought together in interface meetings to openly

The initiative in this case study is supported by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ)

CASE STUDIES ON ADVANCING THE RIGHT TO FOOD



discuss major gaps in service quality and adequacy. Together, they identified solutions and created a joint action plan to address these issues and track progress. Government officials visited the field to see first-hand how the project's community-led grievance redressal mechanism (GRM) was improving service delivery and staff conduct.

Change through Continuous Dialogue and Advocacy

Using the lessons learned from the mechanism to receive complaints about the project, the District Planning and Development Department coordinated the establishment of a district-level grievance redressal mechanism, involving relevant government departments. “The community scorecard

process will help the Department of Agriculture and Mangochi District Council to identify the real challenges faced by communities and improve our AIP services,” says Owen Kumwenda, Chief Agriculture Officer, Mangochi District. A district-level GRM committee was set up with elected community members who did not hold other leadership positions to avoid bias.

Access to inputs was improved through their delivery to agreed locations, although some challenges remain. The Ministry of Agriculture addressed connectivity and technical glitches in the central electronic registration system. The revised beneficiary identification process improved targeting of deserving vulnerable groups. Following national radio panel discussions supported by civil society partners, the government decided to adjust the timing of fertilizer distribution in 2022. Additional agriculture extension workers were assigned to assist farmers. The district GRM was operational as of January 2022 and started to receive complaints. There has been visible collaboration between stakeholders and strong community participation, as evidenced by the regular meetings of the various formations, such as village and area development committees, as well as those set up to address grievances at the community and district levels. The district government is now planning to extend the grievance redressal mechanism to the entire district.

Lessons learned

- **Initial awareness raising and sensitization as well as training** of both the farming communities on their entitlements and government officials on their responsibilities were essential to prepare the ground for effective dialogue.
- **The selection of appropriate tools and facilitation to guide the assessment and joint reflection** contributed to a better understanding of the challenges and acceptance of shared responsibilities.
- **Continuous and collaborative engagement with government officials** led to reduced resistance to the establishment and improved functioning of the grievance redressal mechanism.
- **Working with the media and referring issues to national level authorities** had the effect of broadening the conversation and extending the benefits beyond the project area.



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**Joshua Mambo,
chairman of a village development committee
in Mangochi District, Malawi:**

The government support program for agricultural inputs is very important for our fight against hunger. The accountability work has made us aware of our legal rights and the grievance mechanism we have set up gives us the opportunity to voice our concerns. This has helped us a lot to ensure that the authorities are aware of the issues and provide the necessary support.

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