 

**Food Security/Health Program in Malawi**

Lessons Learned from the USAID Funded I-LIFE Program from 2004-2009

This report is a synthesis of lessons learned from the USAID funded I-LIFE Development Assistance Program (2004 to 2009). This report details the aspects of the food security program that were most successful in improving smallholder farmer productivity, managing community assets, encouraging savings and lending, and providing effective training, community-based health and nutrition groups.

July 2014

Centrality Consulting LLC

Contents

[EXECUTIVE SUMMARY 2](#_Toc393350270)

[IMPROVING SMALLHOLDER FARMER PRODUCTION AND PRODUCTIVITY 3](#_Toc393350271)

[CREATION AND MANAGEMENT OF COMMUNITY ASSETS 3](#_Toc393350272)

[VILLAGE SAVINGS AND LOAN GROUPS 3](#_Toc393350273)

[HIV/CHILDHOOD HEALTH AND NUTRITION 4](#_Toc393350274)

[A GROUP TO ASSIST THE GROUPS 4](#_Toc393350275)

[DATA COLLECTION, MONITORING AND EVALUATION 5](#_Toc393350276)

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

During the meta-evaluation process, the following points were found to be pervasive and critical opportunities for learning from previous experiences:

* Needs and Contextual Assessments: As part of the project design process, assessing the needs of the community and the feasibility of proposed projects is integral. Many of the projects implemented as part of this effort had limited effect on the target population due to a lack of understanding of the given context. For example, community seed banks were underutilized; none of the households surveyed used the seed banks for maize. Establishing a need for the services would be beneficial prior to implementation.
* Integrating a Planning Window: Due to given variability in the social, natural, political and organizational environments, building in a planning window in order to establish capacities of service providers prior to implementation could increase the efficiency of project implementation. For example, the program had difficulty retaining a technical expert for the agricultural production improvement projects. This might have been avoided by affording more planning time between the funding and implementation periods.
* Data Quality and Consistency: This program made great efforts to monitor the progress and impact of its projects. However, indicators and monitoring methodologies often changed from year to year, creating a discord within the collected data. Maintaining a data standard throughout the project life cycle would benefit the midterm and final evaluation processes greatly.
* Community Led Groups Hit the Mark: The use of community led groups were used extensively by these projects with marked success. Not only did community members lead the groups, but they were also trained and maintained by fellow community members, transferring and attaining skills and knowledge organically. I-LIFE’s minimal intervention and participation in these groups promoted a strong sense of ownership within the community and among the members.
* Only Implement What You Have Funded: It is common for programs to receive less funding than was promised or to realize that the programs are more costly than anticipated. When unexpected budgetary gaps occur, scaling back the scope of the program is paramount to proper implementation. A smaller, well-funded program is more effective than a larger, under-funded program.

# IMPROVING SMALLHOLDER FARMER PRODUCTION AND PRODUCTIVITY

This program began with the establishment of community seed banks and Farmer Field Schools (FFS)[[1]](#footnote-1). The impact of the program on the beneficiaries was difficult to determine, due to strong agricultural subsidy and support policies adopted by the Government of Malawi at the same time as the program. Household surveys found that both participant and non-participant households increased production past the baseline, however, participant households did exceed the progress of non-participant households. These two projects were discontinued after the recommendations made in the midterm evaluation suggested shifting from seed banks to demonstration plots and FFS to the extension outreach approach[[2]](#footnote-2). It is noted that dropping FFS may have been a lost opportunity, since the extension approach is less sustainable than a group-led approach to farmer instruction and agricultural/cultivation innovation.

The evaluation cited the lack of a consistent lead Technical Expert as a reason for the impact of this program not being greater. The program was unable to retain a Technical Expert during the life of the program. This had a marked effect on the training capacity of the program implementers.

# CREATION AND MANAGEMENT OF COMMUNITY ASSETS

This program set out to rehabilitate and create two main types of assets: roads and irrigation schemes. The report noted that very few of the asset projects used the Food for Work/Asset (FFW/A) model for all the components of the project. Participants who were compensated for their work on the development of the assets were found to feel less ownership of the asset than those who were not compensated by the program and simply given materials. Even so, the FFW/A model has constructive components. Some of the beneficiaries stated that they would not have been able to participate in the development of the asset, if food was not given. Many of the assets were only partially developed using the FFW/A model, which proved to have a better effect on ownership amongst the participants.

Management and maintenance of the road and small-scale irrigation schemes differed greatly. After one year, only 4% of the roads rehabilitated or constructed were maintained whereas 46% of the irrigation schemes were maintained. There are two possible reasons for this discrepancy. First, the irrigation scheme development plan included the training of two individuals on the maintenance of each asset, whereas the roads did not have this design component. Second, irrigation schemes have a more immediate effect on income and production for a smaller group of people, whereas roads are seen as a longer term investment for a larger group of people.

# VILLAGE SAVINGS AND LOAN GROUPS

Village Savings and Loan (VS&L) groups were established by the communities self-selecting their own groups and established their own protocols and rules. Support from the program for the groups was minimal and established consultative-type relationships with the VS&L groups. Each group operated slightly differently but was given training on networking, bookkeeping, lending practices and saving strategies by the program. The training of the groups was funneled through Community Agents (CA), which were volunteers elected by the VS&L groups. It was identified that the volunteer nature of the CAs may not be sustainable after the program ends. However, this could be solved by the establishment of a fee collected by the CAs from every VS&L group served.

Household survey reports indicated that there were over 1,000 VS&L groups by the end of the program with a total of $269,000 in total savings across all the groups. It was also stated that 38% of the households used loans or savings to buy agricultural inputs and 58% of the households used loans or savings to establish group enterprises.

As opposed to continuing to encourage group formation, the program officers focused more on increasing resiliency by adding additional training and ensuring the groups could operate without the intervention of program staff. This was essential to the program’s success. The encouragement of the groups to not “cash out” their savings at year’s end was a major improvement that could have been implemented. Instead, groups could be encouraged to continue saving and invest in larger projects such as the development of community assets.

# HIV/CHILDHOOD HEALTH AND NUTRITION

The establishment of Care Groups, similar to the Lead Farmer model, was a relative success. First, the members of a group could pick a Lead Parent who would be responsible for the training and mentoring, similar to the Community Agents and the VS&L groups. Second, I-LIFE program staff did not intervene significantly in their operations. Essentially, the Care Groups were self-sufficient, especially with the connections made to national groups with a focus on breastfeeding, child nutrition and health. At the program’s end, however, most of the parents surveyed still had a “less than ideal” understanding of the health needs of infants. While there were minimal or no gains when skills and behavior indicators were assessed, the evaluation noted that this part of the program was significantly underfunded.

Similar to the Care Groups, which were focused on children’s health and nutrition, Community Home Based Care groups (CHBC) focused on the health and nutrition of those with serious chronic diseases such as diabetes, cancer, tuberculosis, but most commonly, HIV. These groups went further than the simple Care Groups by not only providing training on nutrition but also connected them with economic opportunities, such as VS&L groups. This additional aspect, the income generation component, allowed for the members of these groups to pay more easily for their respective medications. I-LIFE guided these groups from a distance and was very effective in its efforts to connect CHBC groups with long-term partners, such as Bridge Project, the Ministry of Health and the National AIDS Commission. In fact, when fundraising efforts become very successful, appropriate administration and management support needs to accompany increasing amounts of funds.

# A GROUP TO ASSIST THE GROUPS

In addition to the many different community-based groups discussed, the I-LIFE program also supported the establishment of Umbrella Community Based Organizations (UCBOs). UCBO membership consists of the members of the groups such as VS&Ls and Care Groups. These members were trained by I-LIFE and the National Initiative on Civic Education on the topics of leadership, conflict resolution, proposal writing and advocacy. The impact of these groups was not included in the evaluation, however, the theoretical utility of a UCBO is promising and worth replicating in a pilot setting. The UCBOs, however, did have problems with traditional authority structures. If replicated, involvement of the traditional authority structures is advisable.

# DATA COLLECTION, MONITORING AND EVALUATION

A major lesson learned from this program was that an enthusiastic monitoring and data collection effort does not necessarily produce the data needed. Efforts across the program were diligent. However, the indicators and methodology of collecting the data changed throughout the life of the program. When this happens, the data cannot be compared through a multi-year analysis with sound methodologies. Thoroughly planning the data collection and monitoring models prior to implementation and keeping them consistent through the life of the program are key to methodologically sound analyses in a final evaluation.

1. FFSs are schools where groups of farmers would collaboratively work on plots to practice new approaches. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The “extension” approach is the use of lead farmers to teach others in the community about best practices. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)