

# Enhancing community commitment: Lessons from a civil society project strengthening government-led cash transfer programme

By Ngoni Marimo, Doortje 't Hart and Michael Loevinsohn

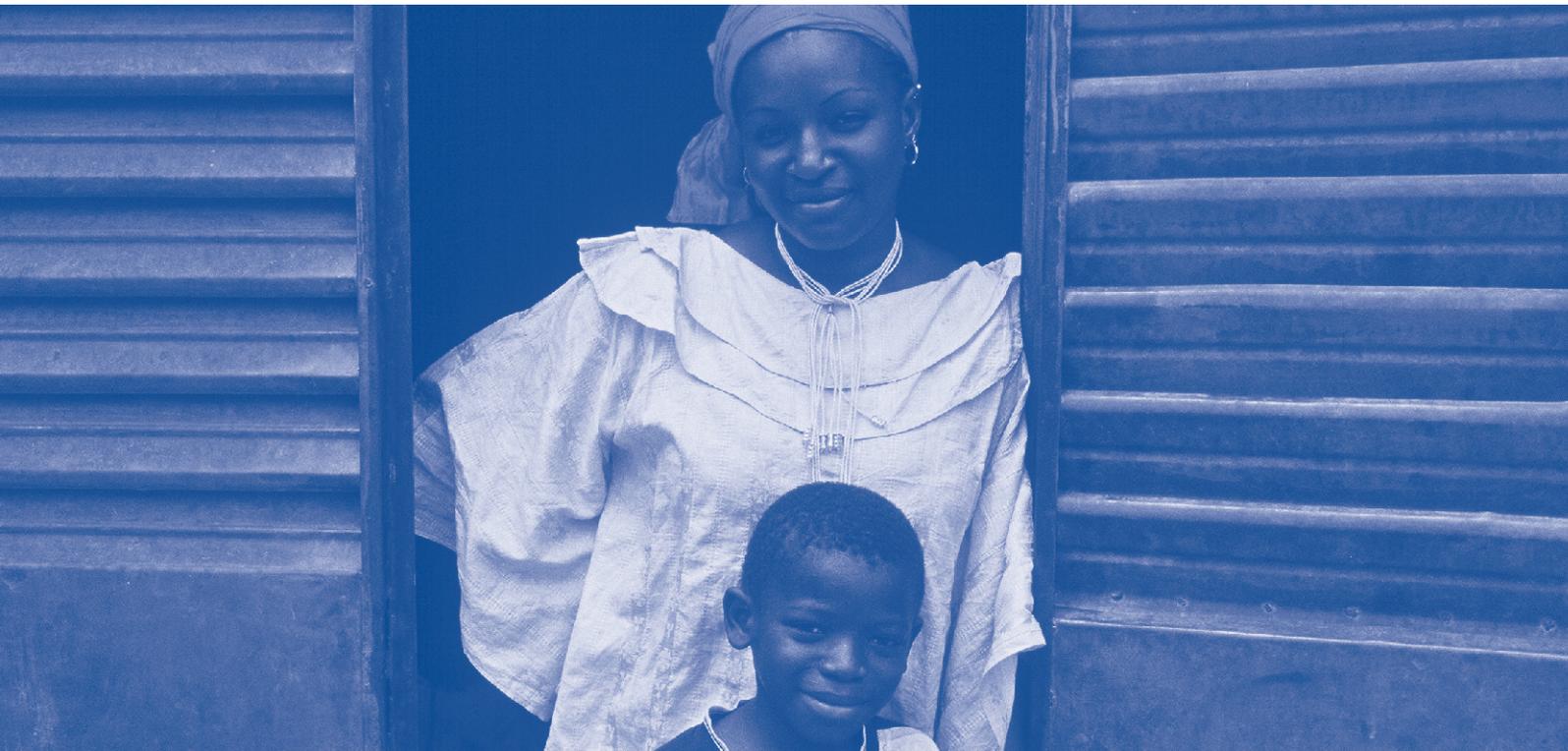


Photo courtesy of STOP AIDS NOW!

**The Government of Malawi, alongside development partners, initiated the Malawi Social Cash Transfer (SCT) Programme in 2006, as a pilot scheme in Mchinji district, to provide small grants to ultra-poor and labour-constrained households. Currently, the SCT programme covers seven districts and reaches over 26,000 households and approximately 103,000 individuals.**

Malawi's Social Cash Transfer programme (SCT) seeks to reduce poverty and hunger and increase school enrolment. Implementation is fully decentralised through district councils.

Objectives of the SCT Programme include the reduction of poverty and hunger and increased enrollment of children in school. Implementation of the SCT Programme is fully decentralised through district councils and is funded by the German government. An independent evaluation<sup>1</sup> of the pilot phase of the programme revealed several critical capacity gaps in the implementation at district level. These included weak coordination between stakeholders; inadequate skills and knowledge to manage the programme; and minimal monitoring and control of community level activities, which was hampered by the enormous workload of the responsible Desk Officer. Moreover, community level workers were inadequately trained and lacked capacity to perform their roles.

To seal some of the gaps, four civil society organisations (CSOs)<sup>2</sup> supported by STOP AIDS NOW!, designed and implemented the Strengthening Project for one year in Chitipa district (2010) and in Mangochi district (2011). The aim of the project was to improve

the management and implementation of the cash transfer programme and enhance stakeholder commitment at the national, district, and community level. The CSOs also aspired to strengthen links between programme beneficiaries and other social support services. The project accelerated changes in the management of the cash transfer programme resulting in improved benefits for participating HIV and AIDS affected households. Yet many challenges persist in district level monitoring, grievance handling, community level management and sustainability of the positive changes brought by the CSOs due to lack of sustained funding for district level coordination activities.

In March this year, STOP AIDS NOW! commissioned an independent evaluation to document lessons learnt in the Strengthening Project.<sup>3</sup>

A number of important lessons were documented in the research report. It is crucial, however, to place them in the correct methodological context. That the study was conducted about a year after the start of the project limits the ability to assess its sustainability. Furthermore, as only a few people were interviewed, particularly at the

community level, it is difficult to assess the benefits. Nevertheless, some gains have been realised in the project districts and are examples worth replicating.

The project demonstrates that partnership between the government and CSOs positively influences the implementation of a Social Cash Transfer Programme. To support implementers, policy officers, and others involved in similar initiatives, the most valuable lessons learnt are given below.

## CSO involvement amplifies community voices

The Strengthening Project facilitated community level forums, providing opportunities for beneficiaries to express experiences and ideas. The outcomes were fed into the district search conferences (review and accountability forums at district level) which brought together all stakeholders at district level and some staff from the national SCT secretariat. The search conferences were also action forums that recommended changes that were put into action by participants. Thus, through the beneficiary forums and the search conferences, beneficiaries' views could influence programme implementation. Consequently, interventions such as village savings and loan schemes were introduced in Mangochi, and extra cash distribution points were established in Chitipa to reduce walking distance. To secure sustainability of new initiatives, experience shows that there is need to create linkages between district and

community level CSOs to exchange information on the implementation of the programme. Thus, facilitating review platforms at district and community levels is vital. In areas of low civil society activity, options include working through churches and stimulating civil society.

Insufficient interest and ownership of the SCT Programme by district leaders as stakeholders, contributed to slow implementation. Exchange visits and search conferences by CSOs addressed this. Exchange visits encouraged district leaders to appreciate the successes of the cash transfer programme and adapt the programme to their situations while the conferences ensured responsibility on the part of the district leadership, thus stimulating ownership, district leaders allocated more vehicles for cash distribution, introduced changes in accounting procedures for greater transparency and introduced village savings and loan schemes at the district level. Also, 43 per cent of the beneficiaries were receiving subsidised agricultural inputs at the end of the project as opposed to none at the start of the project.

Yet, challenges persist. Firstly, changes in district council leadership after elections can undermine gains achieved with previous leadership. Secondly, the discontinuation of search conferences will negatively affect the pace of change in programme implementation. A district level champion – either from within the district councils or the CSO community – could have lobbied for continued funding for the search conferences. Lastly the implementation of the Social Support Policy is needed to further promote linkages to other social support programmes, such as the village savings and loan schemes and the input subsidy programmes. The roll-out of the National Social Support Programme that was developed to facilitate the implementation of the policy, was awaiting policy approval by parliament. The approval that came early July this year will make it easier to address issues, such as exclusion and retargeting of beneficiaries.

#### 'Trust' and 'partnership' critical for success

In Malawi, the relationship between the government and CSOs was initially marked by lack of trust, which could not nurture a valuable and open partnership. CSOs behind the Strengthening Project were not allowed to participate in the cash transfer programme. However, after it became evident that the Strengthening Project intended to improve implementation of the SCT Programme, access to the districts was granted. Now, also thanks to the good results of the project, the government considers CSOs as valuable project partners and helpful intermediaries between it, development partners and communities. CSOs involved in SCT programmes should present themselves as 'partners for change' and emphasise that they are more than watchdogs. They also need to recognise their limitations in terms of resources and scale.

#### Sustain and extend changes

STOP AIDS NOW! and its civil society partners in Malawi wish to sustain and expand the positive changes brought about by the one-year project. What do we need? More time to consolidate achievements and build more evidence. But before we embark on a follow-up, other questions need to be addressed by



Photo courtesy of STOP AIDS NOW!

STOP AIDS NOW!, the Malawi government, and potential donors. They are: How can the 'strengthening' function be governed and financed? Should we always organise it at district level? And at what point do we stop the project?

#### Conclusion

A partnership of CSOs and the government in implementing a government-led SCT programme is feasible, and might result in a large number of positive changes, such as orphans and other vulnerable children as well as HIV and AIDS affected families escaping the poverty trap. The Strengthening Project reveals that the participation of civil society in a government-led programme significantly contributes to its effectiveness. This is because CSOs can ensure that community voices are truly heard, district leaders are involved, and an effectual CSO-government partnership is built. ■

#### Lessons learnt

- Partnership between the government and CSOs positively influences the implementation of a Social Cash Transfer Programme.
- To secure sustainability of new initiatives, experience shows that there is need to create linkages between district and community level CSOs to exchange information on the implementation of the programme.
- Exchange visits encouraged district leaders to appreciate the cash transfer programme and adapt it to their situations.

#### The research report

Do you want to read more about the above lessons learnt? Are you interested in all research results? You can access the summary of the evaluation and lessons learnt report on the STOP AIDS NOW! Website at:

[www.stopaidsnow.org/document/4631](http://www.stopaidsnow.org/document/4631)

#### Ngoni Marimo

Poverty and Social Protection Consultant

#### Correspondence:

JIMAT Development Consultants  
101 Baines Avenue  
Harare  
Zimbabwe  
Tel: +263 772 128 068  
E-mail: [ngoni@jimatconsult.co.zw](mailto:ngoni@jimatconsult.co.zw)  
[www.jimatconsult.co.zw](http://www.jimatconsult.co.zw)

#### Doortje 't Hart

Senior Advisor Children Affected

#### Correspondence:

STOP AIDS NOW!  
Keizersgracht 390, 1016 GB Amsterdam,  
The Netherlands  
Tel: +31(0)206262669  
E-mail: [dthart@stopaidsnow.nl](mailto:dthart@stopaidsnow.nl)  
[www.stopaidsnow.org](http://www.stopaidsnow.org)

#### Michael Loevinsohn, PhD

Research Fellow

#### Correspondence:

Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex Brighton, United Kingdom BN1 9RE  
E-mail: [m.loevinsohn@ids.ac.uk](mailto:m.loevinsohn@ids.ac.uk)

#### References and endnotes:

1 Miller, C., Tsoka, M., Reichert, K. (2008) Operations Report: External Evaluation of the Mchinji Social Cash Transfer Pilot, Center for International Health and Development, Boston University School of Public Health Boston, Massachusetts and The Centre for Social Research, University of Malawi

2 This study was carried out by JIMAT Development Consultants (Zimbabwe) with technical support from the Institute of Development Studies (UK).

3 Network of Organisations for Vulnerable and Orphaned Children (NOVOC), Centre for Youth and Children Affairs (CEYCA), YouthNet and Counselling (YONECO), and Institute for Policy Research and Social Empowerment (IPRSE)