

Project Briefing

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Key points

- Community scorecard approaches that are adapted to local realities can lead to improved service delivery
- They are often presented as tools for citizens' empowerment and voice, but this can sell these initiatives short
- There are many ways in which scorecards can support change, including through collective problem-solving and bringing together supply and demand

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More than just 'demand': Malawi's public-service community scorecard

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Community-based monitoring instruments, such as scorecards, are used increasingly to complement and reinforce conventional mechanisms to strengthen accountability and performance in public-service delivery. While they have been backed by the international community, including the World Bank and bilateral donors such as the UK Department for International Development (DFID), there is limited evidence on how they work in practice and what conditions they need to be effective (Joshi, 2010). Research by ODI, funded by Plan UK, seeks to contribute evidence through political economy analysis of a community scorecard initiative in Malawi.

Community scorecards in Malawi

Malawi faces significant economic stress and on-going political tensions. Despite recent impressive year-on-year economic growth, in 2011 the foreign exchange crisis, combined with food and fuel crises, and falling donor support, have contributed to a bleak economic outlook. This in turn contributes to political tensions, pitting a President set on consolidating his power against an increasingly vocal civil society that challenges his style of rule.

Malawi continues to feel the effects of successive regimes in which presidents have centralised power and distributed patronage

in ways that influence the allocation of public resources. Patchy decentralisation means key functions are still overseen centrally and resources are allocated according to patronage patterns rather than need or implementation capacity. As a result, service delivery remains highly constrained. In response, a number of organisations have introduced community scorecard schemes to improve equity and performance in different sectors, the earliest dating back more than a decade.

This Project Briefing focuses on a recent initiative (2008-11), the Community-Based Monitoring Programme (CBMP). The CBMP is a pilot project in eight districts across Malawi's three main regions, led by a consortium of three national civil society organisations: Plan Malawi, Action Aid Malawi and the Council for Non-Governmental Organisations in Malawi (CONGOMA), and the Ministry of Development Planning. It is implemented by locally-based partners and has been funded by Plan UK and DFID.

The CBMP uses a facilitated community scorecard process through which communities can provide feedback on the quality of services in a particular sector, as part of a wider process of engagement with relevant stakeholders. It has a number of stages, including preparatory work, implementation, facilitated meetings and dissemination of results (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Generalised stages of a community scorecard process

Preparatory work

- Identification and training of facilitating staff
- Preliminary research on community
- Introductory engagement with community (e.g. relevant leaders)

Implementation of the community scorecard process

- Division of community into focus groups
- Development of performance indicators and scoring by groups
- Recording and consolidation of scores across groups

Interface and dissemination of results

- District level interface meetings
- Feedback and dialogue
- Development of Joint Action Plans
- Consolidation of findings across communities and sector/national level engagement

Our research finds that the CBMP has the potential to contribute to positive changes in service delivery, and that it has started to do so in different sectors. This matters, given the unfavourable context in Malawi.

Field visits highlighted improvements linked to the CBMP, including the construction of new facilities in schools, such as housing for teachers or new classrooms. New rules were being applied on the use of materials and equipment, such as ensuring that procured textbooks are put into circulation. There were examples of School Management Committees with renewed understanding of their roles and responsibilities. In agriculture, CBMP-linked contributions include the creation or modification of oversight mechanisms, such as taskforces to monitor the distribution of agricultural subsidies or Market Committees determining new policies to manage markets to reduce illicit behaviour and corruption.

More than just demand?

The CBMP has been framed as a mechanism to strengthen citizens' demand and voice in relation to service providers and other state duty-bearers. Its vision of change links citizens' empowerment and accountability and improved service delivery. This is in line with prevalent thinking about social accountability and service delivery – the World Bank's 2004 *World Development Report*, for example, called for stronger accountability relationships between service users and providers to improve outcomes (WDR, 2004).

However, framing such initiatives solely as mechanisms to strengthen the 'voice' with which citizens demand services from duty-bearers (the 'supply-side') may sell them short, underestimating the range of mechanisms that can generate changes in service-delivery practices.

This wider perspective is particularly important as the assumed link between citizen empowerment and improved service delivery may not correspond to local incentives and power dynamics. In Malawi, local level service delivery is shaped by a range of patronage relationships and the centrality of the Presidency. In practice, incentives of service providers are more focused on responding to signals from the centre than from citizens. Even actors seen as rooted within communities – such as traditional authorities and village chiefs – are under increasing pressure to respond to the imperatives of the ruling party. In sectors such as agriculture, they are also gatekeepers who determine the selection and allocation of fertiliser coupons.

Where there are pressures from below, they will not necessarily lead to improved public services. Many people, understandably, prioritise benefits for themselves, their families or immediate communities, rather than the provision of public goods and allocation of resources based on need. They can get

Box 1: Key concepts

Patron-client relationships: A powerful actor (a patron) allocates goods or services to an individual or a sub-set of the population (a client) in exchange for their support. This contrasts with public goods, which benefit everyone and cannot be withheld on the basis of individual favour.

Principal-agent relationships: One actor (the principal) relies on and must motivate another actor (the agent) to act on their behalf. Principals must signal their interests and priorities to agents, and may find it hard to monitor that agents' performance (information asymmetry problem).

Collective action problems: When the broader context and incentives stop actors producing something of value together, that they could not produce alone (Ostrom et al., 2001). These can reflect problems of motivation, free riding, or information asymmetries/imperfections.

these benefits through patronage relationships, while promises of broad-based provision of public goods on the part of politicians are rarely seen as credible. This prevalence of patron-client relationships (Box 1) shapes the nature of accountability in multiple sectors.

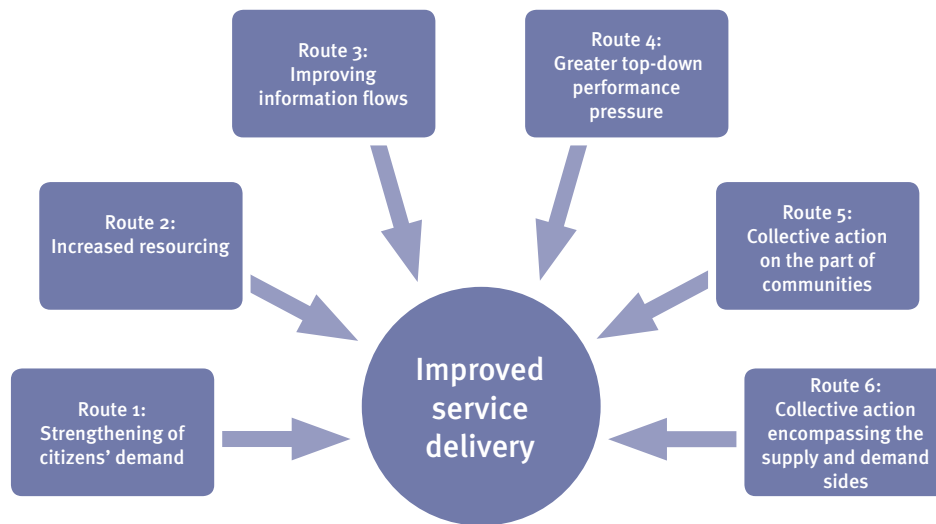
This supports the findings of multi-country evaluation studies and research: that achievements in increasing citizens' voice and accountability do not necessarily lead to better service delivery (Rocha Menocal and Sharma, 2009; CFS, 2010). Service-delivery improvements involve enhanced responsiveness to users' concerns and needs, but this requires strong top-down performance pressures and upward accountability of providers to government leaders as well as downward accountability. User demand rarely works on its own (Booth, 2011).

This does not mean that there is no link between citizens, downward accountability and service-delivery outcomes, but the roles of these actors and the form of their relationships cannot be taken as a given. A broader view is needed, grounded in a realistic model of citizen-state relations, to capture the spectrum of possible change. This can reveal a range of routes to achieve improvements in access to and quality of public services, including more incremental or intermediate improvements that may be possible without significant changes in citizen-state relations.

Routes to improved service delivery

Our Malawi research suggest a multiplicity of possible routes to improvements in service delivery to which a scorecards initiative might contribute, including options for intermediate steps. While we have drawn on the Malawian context to identify these routes, they may be relevant across other set-

Figure 2: Routes to improved service delivery



tings. However, not every route will be appropriate for all contexts.

As Figure 2 shows, community scorecards could influence service delivery through at least six channels, only one of which is strengthening citizen demand.

Route 1: Greater responsiveness to citizen demands for public goods. This entails a step-change in the relationship between citizens and the state, a transition to new behaviour whereby duty-bearers see providing public goods and services as the best way to remain in power. The scope for this type of change, however, particularly within the limited timeframe of most programming cycles, is limited in Malawi. This is not surprising – fundamental shifts in citizen-state relations take decades if not centuries and often happen incrementally. Major changes in citizens' voice and empowerment and greater responsiveness will require wider structural changes, beyond the CBMP.

Route 2: Increased resourcing and services within existing patronage networks. This involves no fundamental shift in incentives but rather an increase in funds overall, with a knock-on increase in total funds for service delivery. Actions leading to this mechanism could include more (ring-fenced) donor funding that does not displace government funds. This would not, however, address all the blockages that lead to poor service delivery in Malawi.

Route 3: Improving the flow of information between citizens/service users and decision-makers. This helps overcome one type of information asymmetry that arises in principal-agent situations (Box 1) by providing better information to decision-makers on citizen's priorities or to citizens on what to expect from service providers. Again, this may not change the fundamental relationship between citizens and the state or the incentives of actors.

Improvements may be possible, however, through better information for technocrats able to work within existing constraints to improve performance, and for politicians with incentives to improve the delivery of goods and services to reinforce patronage networks. It may also mean improved awareness of citizens on how to access services.

Route 4: Greater top-down performance pressure. This involves systemic changes to enforce sanctions on poor performance and reward good performance. It requires political leadership with a strong developmental vision, and bureaucratic incentives to deliver services effectively. Such change can be systemic, driven by key leaders at the national level and reaching downward, or more localised, with local leaders creating islands of effectiveness. These leaders may be politicians, officials or traditional leaders such as chiefs – but they must be motivated by performance issues. Where such local leaders exist in Malawi, community scorecards can play a complementary role as a performance measure for top-down processes.

Route 5: Collective action by communities to directly provide service-delivery inputs. In some cases, service delivery appears to be constrained by a problem in collective action, whereby no action is taken to address a problem because the costs per individual are seen as too high and the benefits too diffuse (Box 1). While there are tasks (e.g. moulding of bricks, some school construction) to which communities can contribute using available resources and labour, individual households may be reluctant to participate because of a free-rider problem. Solutions exist where there are leaders who can enforce participation and follow up where tasks have not been carried out. Some examples of change achieved by the CBMP took this form, and seemed to be most effective where they could tap



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into historical legacies of 'community self help'.

Route 6: Collective action encompassing the supply and demand sides. In some cases, collective action on the part of a single actor group (e.g. community members) may be the most effective way forward. In others, overcoming key service-delivery bottlenecks may require action by a wider range of actors. Some examples of change for the CBMP highlight the importance of bringing together 'coalitions' of actors, including district officials, service providers, police, traditional chiefs and community groups to develop Joint Action Plans and collective responses to service-delivery gaps. The potential importance of coalition-building suggests that conventional divisions between 'supply-side' and 'demand-side' interventions, which assume an adversarial relationship among the actors, are less helpful than a focus on collective forms of problem-solving.

Implications for policy and practice

Our research finds that community scorecards demonstrate the potential to result in improved service delivery, and there are already examples of change being realised by the CBMP. Framing such initiatives only as mechanisms to strengthen citizens' voice and demand, however, can sell them short, underestimating the range of mechanisms through which they can impact on service-delivery performance. This range offers a number of feasible mechanisms to improve access to, and the quality of, public services in the short term without requiring a paradigm shift in citizen-state relations (although this can remain a long-term goal).

The effectiveness of a scorecards initiative appears to depend on a number of local conditions including the characteristics of implementing civil society organisations and of the local community. The quality of local leadership is also particularly important for the delivery of public goods (Cammack and Kanyongolo, 2010).

In Malawi, the scorecards initiative seems to work particularly well where it has facilitated collaborative spaces or forms of collective problem-solving by actors across the supply and demand side. The provision of information (to citizens or to service providers) is one element, but more important is the process to identify the key stakeholders and bring them together to devise Joint Action Plans.

Refocusing on options for collaboration may also identify greater entry points to address more systemic change. Initiatives like scorecards can find it challenging to scale up or to address service-delivery problems that require action above the local level (for example, by a sector ministry or the government). It is key to understand where more systemic changes are needed, and identify opportunities to feed into national level processes and work with national actors.

Where the CBMP initiative has worked well, it has reignited community capacity for self help. In this way, it is an important reminder of the responsibilities and powers of citizens themselves.

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This briefing draws on a political economy analysis of a community scorecard initiative in Malawi, from July to December 2011, supported by Plan UK and Plan Malawi.

For more information, visit: www.odi.org.uk/work/projects/details.asp?id=2420&title=citizen-scorecards-malawi