

MAY 2020

EVALUATION OF WORLD CONNECT PROGRAM IN MALAWI

Learning Brief

INVESTING IN LOCALLY-LED DEVELOPMENT

BY DIANA HARPER

Local community engagement has long been championed as a central factor for sustainable international development. Similarly, most donor and national development programs emphasize the need to empower local leaders, as well as strengthen local communities and institutions. However, the extent to which development programs successfully put these principles into action is frequently questioned, particularly in low-resource and donor-dependent countries such as Malawi.

A closer examination of efforts to strengthen locally-led development can offer insights for the development community in Malawi and more broadly. This evaluation highlighted issues such as:

- Comparisons between top-down and bottom-up development planning
- How to strengthen local leadership and community capacity for development
- How local leaders and communities in Malawi view locally-led development
- Practices for fundraising within communities to support development

SUMMARY

LINC conducted an independent evaluation of World Connect's locally-led grants program in Malawi through desk research and field work in 2020. Results showed that support from World Connect was highly valued, activities were responsive to local needs, and local leadership and community capacity for development were strengthened.

ABOUT THE EVALUATION

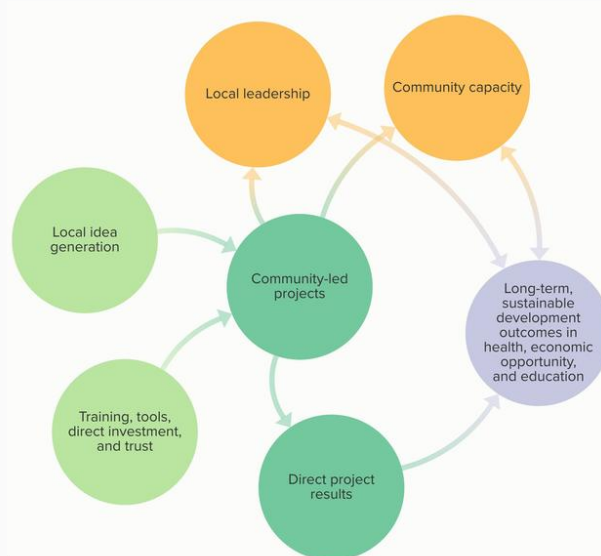
Our team conducted an independent evaluation of the World Connect Project "Investing in Locally-Led Development in Malawi." This three-year, approximately \$1.5 million activity is funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) Office of Local Sustainability. It has a life-of-activity target to conduct 100 locally-led projects through small grants. The evaluation was intended to assess progress of the program in Malawi to date, validate the theory of change in the local context, and generate recommendations for program implementation and monitoring and evaluation. Desk research and field work was conducted by LINC and researchers affiliated with the Mzuzu University from January to April 2020.



BACKGROUND

World Connect has conducted several rounds of grant-making in Malawi to project teams throughout the country, with 139 projects approved to date. Each project is sourced through a network of Established Field Partners (EFPs), who submit proposals in cooperation with local leaders and community-based organizations (CBOs). Proposals are not limited to specific technical areas nor tied to a pre-defined set of outcomes. Rather, projects are intended to reflect needs as defined by communities. Projects are implemented across a period of 6 to 9 months on average. During the design and implementation stages, World Connect provides grantees and communities with support through trainings, site visits, and virtual assistance.

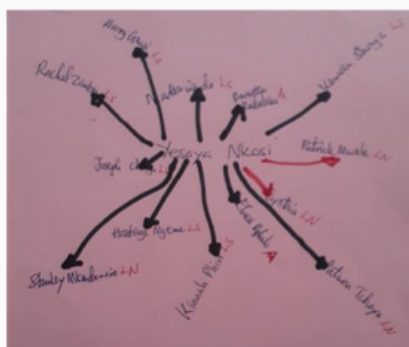
The program's theory of change posits that this process of generating and implementing community grants results in short-term benefits in terms of achieving the direct objectives of the grant, as well as longer-term benefits, including increased community capacity and local leadership. As extensive information had already been collected in the program documentation related to the relationship between specific community-led projects and their direct project results, this evaluation was designed to focus on collecting new information to understand the relationship between projects and the development of community capacity (local leadership and agency), as well as understanding the role of World Connect's design and support in advancing this process.



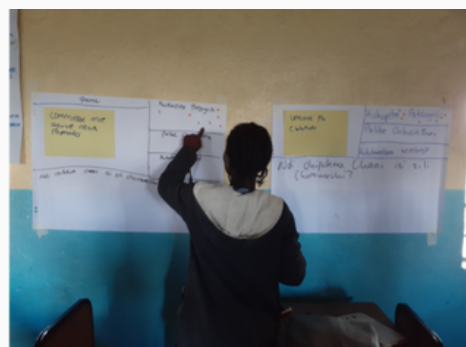
Program Theory of Change (adapted and summarized)

METHODOLOGY

The evaluation used a mixed-methods evaluation design that included secondary document review, key informant interviews (KIs), social network analysis (SNA), community workshops, and a survey of project participants. Field work collected and analyzed data to examine outcomes at both the project level (to extent to which project objectives were achieved and sustained) as well as at the community level (the extent to which community capacity had been strengthened). A total of 12 project sites were selected for field work, 4 of which were fully conducted in person and 8 of which were conducted virtually due to the emergence of COVID-19 during the evaluation period.



SNA map drawn by participant (Photo: MChimlaza)



Workshop on community capacity (Photo: CMatundu)

CONCLUSIONS

WORLD CONNECT SUPPORT IN MALAWI IS HIGHLY VALUED BY LOCAL STAKEHOLDERS

Data collected and analyzed during this evaluation lead the evaluation team to conclude that the World Connect program in Malawi has progressed very well according to its objectives. Through surveys, field work, and program reporting, grantees demonstrated extensive approval and support for the World Connect program. Grantees and partners assigned a high and positive value for the support provided by World Connect, including trainings, site visits, and virtual support.

Project teams benefited from operational support as well as technical support in their interventions. Moreover, grantees particularly valued the mentoring and encouragement they gained through engagement with the World Connect team.

ACTIVITIES FUNDED BY WORLD CONNECT IN MALAWI ARE RESPONSIVE TO THE NEEDS OF LOCAL COMMUNITIES

The lack of restrictions on World Connect grants has resulted in projects that reflect local needs, which are often multisectoral. In addition, this structure has allowed many communities to fulfill a need that has long existed and remained overlooked or unaddressed by other development efforts.

The responsiveness of World Connect grants has been supported by an efficient strategy of working through a network of field partners (EFPs), as well as providing training in the project design and community engagement process.

PROJECT TEAMS HAVE IMPROVED LEADERSHIP SKILLS AND MOMENTUM FOR LOCAL ACTION

Many local project teams reported that their leadership skills and capacity had been improved through the direct support and training of the program, as well as the practical experience of implementing activities in their communities. Follow-up with project teams after the implementation period of their grants showed that most projects were sustained. Additionally, project teams had used the skills and momentum generated through the World Connect grant activities to tackle other problems in their communities.

PARTICIPANT PERSPECTIVES

Satisfied/very satisfied with experience in program	100%
World Connect support was important/very important to achieving project goals	98%
World Connect is different from other development programs	97%
Agree/strongly agree I have improved leadership skills	98%
Community members are more confident in their ability to lead change	91%
Community members trust each other more	71%
More diverse types of community members are involved in development	89%

THE PROGRAM HAS PLAUSIBLY CONTRIBUTED TO IMPROVEMENTS IN OVERALL COMMUNITY CAPACITY

Workshops were conducted with community members who were not directly involved in the World Connect projects. In an open-ended exercise, participants identified what internal capacities are needed within the community to drive long-term development. Participants identified the same types of community capacities that are targeted in World Connect's theory of change, including local leadership, collective action, and mutual trust. Additionally, the majority of participants indicated that that internal community capacity for development had increased in the last year.

Because there was a logical pathway between the World Connect interventions and the underlying drivers of community capacity (as identified by the community members themselves), it was plausible that World Connect contributed to these changes. However, additional research is needed to fully understand this relationship, as a wide variety of contextual and other factors influence this outcome.

COMMUNITY COST-SHARING IS MORE SUCCESSFUL WHEN APPROACHED SLOWLY AND COLLABORATIVELY

Grants include a requirement of a 25% contribution from the community, 10% of which must be cash. Project teams and communities predominantly demonstrated support for the idea of a community contribution and reflected that it was important to the ownership and sustainability of local initiatives, though many participants found the process challenging.

Local project teams most frequently met the requirements for in-kind contributions through donations of local materials, unskilled labor, and land, and financial contributions through fundraising from the community, existing village and school development funds, and interest from village savings and loan funds. Projects that engaged community members collaboratively to define the method, amount, and distribution of the financial contribution were more likely to gain traction.

FUTURE LEARNING

Several topics were identified as potentially useful areas for future learning, including:

- Projects focused on policy change and governance
- The role and potential benefits of networking and sharing among grantees
- Potential for increased advocacy and partnership with other locally-led grant efforts in Malawi

EVALUATION TEAM

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The evaluation team gratefully acknowledges World Connect for support and coordination during the evaluation, and USAID for technical leadership and funding of the project in Malawi.