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A Study on the Functionality of Village Development Committees: A Case of Matupi Village Development Committee in Rumphi District in Northern Malawi

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Abstract

The Malawi Government recognises the importance of involvement and participation of local people in Community Development (CD) processes. As such, VDCs were created to offer opportunity to local people to participate in bottom – up planning and development processes at local level. VDCs as a representative body from a village or group of villages are responsible for facilitating planning and development at local level. They offer opportunity for local communities to contribute effectively to developing their area. The studies show there is value in the involvement and participation of local people in Community Development (CD). In Malawi, VDCs are focal point for planning and development because the planning cycle starts from and ends with the VDC. Therefore, this shows VDCs are at the centre of community development because they play an important role. Among key aspects, Village Development Committees (VDCs) create an enabling environment for local people to participate in the needs assessment of their community and come up with village action plans (VAPs) which contain their needs and aspirations and their actual participation in community development. VAP is a community situational analysis and action plan for the development of their area. This report is based on the study which was conducted to interrogate critical factors affecting the functionality of Village Development Committees including their role in ensuring effective and efficient coordination of development agenda. It is further aimed at identifying capacity gaps that prohibits them from functioning. In this write-up, Matupi VDC in Rumphi District in Northern Malawi has been used as a case in point. In particular, focus was to assess if the VDC functions in line with guidelines in the Malawi Development Planning Handbook for District Councils; to identify factors contributing to effectiveness of VDCs in Rumphi District; and to assess the capacity gaps of the Matupi VDC in relation to discharging its development agenda in Jumbi area.

Keywords: Community development, participation, Village development committee, capacity building and Village Action Plans.

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1. Introduction

Historically, in Malawi, Community Development can be traced back through three different political systems that Malawi as a country has gone through: Colonial era, One Party or Kamuzu era and democratic era, (Chinsinga and Kayuni, 2008) ^[1]. During colonial era community development took the form of thangata. In pre-colonial era thangata meant 'to assist'. Traditionally, thangata was a form of community development. However, the colonisers took advantage of the system to their own advantage under the

guise of community development. Eventually, thangata became the central feature of community development approach. Therefore, in colonial era, thangata meant forced labour because colonial administrators prescribed what to be done and how community development were supposed to be done and the community just followed without being actively involved in the whole processes (Chinsinga and Kayuni, 2008) ^[1]. Just like other Commonwealth Countries, Malawi was colonised by Britain from 1911 to 1964 when Malawi got her independence.

The second stage was during One Party or Kamuzu era from 1996 to 1994 (Phiri and Ross, 1998) ^[42].

During this stage, the main emphasis of community development was on the spirit of self-help and self-reliance. As self-help and self-reliance spirit was being promoted in turn it helped people to do self-help work and to be self-reliant (GoM, 2016) ^[28]. Hence, as people actively participated in different self-help projects, they learnt to be self-reliant. However, the actual participation was different from the principle of bottom-up community development because the drive towards community development was underpinned by coercive participatory measures. The third stage was Multi Party era which started from 1994 to date. However there were one major bottleneck during the transition into multiparty era which made the spirit of self-help and self-reliance not to be vibrant as it were in the multiparty era. This bottleneck was the lack of learning lessons from the immediate past regime which was One Party regime. As a result, this brought in the waning spirit of self-help and self-reliance which was at the centre of community development during one party or Kamuzu era. There was widespread of misunderstanding of Democracy because most people expected the government to responsible for every aspect of their livelihoods. This brought in the rising culture of dependency. Ironically, in a democratic era, community development is through bottom-up approaches where the spirit of self-help and self-reliance is crucial. In fact, self-help and self-responsibility is one of the principles of community development of participatory community development where the aspiration of local people is the central motivation (Mulwa, 2008) ^[34]. Hence, people's needs form the primary purpose for any development planning and intervention. It is within this realm that Malawi Government adopted democratic decentralisation as a new strategy for empowering communities to achieve community development. This process enkindles in people the spirit of self-help and self-reliance which is important in sustainable community development. Hence, the decentralisation of power and functions to lower level structures like VDCs is geared towards empowering local people to enable them identify their problems, finding ways and solutions to those problems. Therefore, Local Authorities were established to promote principles of democracy like public participation in decision-making and development processes (GoM, 1998) ^[23-24].

Malawi Government recognises the importance of involvement and participation of local people in community development (CD) processes. VDCs were created to offer opportunity to local people to participate in bottom-up planning and development processes at local level. As such, VDC are a representative body from a village or group of villages charged with the responsibility of facilitating planning and development at local level (GoM, 2020) ^[25-26]. Hence, VDCs offer opportunity for local communities to contribute effectively to developing their area.

This study interrogates critical factors affecting functionality of VDCs in Malawi- a case study of Matupi VDC in Rumphi District. There is value in the involvement and participation of the local people in Community Development (CD). As such, (GoM, 2020) ^[25-26] state that all development planning processes should start at community level to achieve bottom-up and participatory CD because VDCs are the lowest institutions on the ground. By definition, GoM, (2020) ^[25-26] VDC is a representative boy from a village or group of villages responsible for facilitating planning and development at local level. Therefore, in Malawi, local people are at the

centre of community development and mobilized through VDCs.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

The research problem was formulated after observing that most VDCs in Malawi were being hijacked by politicians and also being affected of chieftaincy succession wrangles and also observing that analysis of some studies which concluded that VDCs were weak without elaborating the reason for example, social economic analysis of Rumphi and M' mbelwa Districts (2017) ^[35] just mention in passing that VDCs are weak structures without elaborating the reasons. Above all, there are no specific studies that have been conducted and assessed the functionality of VDCs and identified their capacity gaps in promoting planning and development at local level in Malawi. Yet, VDCs are important structure because they act as the base that touches the ground while acting as the bridge between different service providers both Government Departments and Non State Actors on one side and the community members on the ground. Literature reveal that VDCs are the only lowest institutions where both local and technical knowledge meet-VDC members bring in local knowledge while AEC members bring in technical knowledge and the two are important in promoting community development. There are no studies conducted so far to provide comprehensive information on the functionality of VDCs and identified capacity gaps as they promote community development at local level.

Therefore, the researcher found a need to interrogate further the critical factors affecting the functionality of VDCs in Malawi and identify their capacity gaps as they promote community development by focussing on Matupi VDC in Rumphi District in Northern Malawi as a case. Therefore, the research problem was based on the fact that there is little evidence that VDCs as action committees touching the ground function and coordinate effectively and efficiently local development processes in line with the Development Planning System Handbook. Hence, it is important to investigate the functionality to coordinate development processes at local level.

2. Literature Review

Literature is examined in order to identify the information which is available regarding the functionality of VDCs and missing information on the same.

Phillips & Pittman (2009) ^[6] observes that Community Development aims at building capacity of local people in order to identify their problems, prioritise and find solutions to them. Hence, capacity building of people is an important aspect in community development which can be traced down the history of man. Capacity of people leads to diversified voices in identifying their problems and in finding their solutions. Therefore, participation and people's voice are important aspects in the functionality of the VDCs. In other words, VDCs function well when members talk and listen to each other's views and suggestions sharing new ideas, in identifying problems, prioritising them and implementing them-decision-making process and development. In the whole process the voice of participants is important. Finally, VDCs function through the identification of community needs and acting collectively to find solutions to them. This will bring change which is community development.

Ferguson, *et al*, (2004) ^[5] describe that community capacity building helps communities to take charge of their own learning in a way that enables them to effectively address

their needs and issues on their development agenda. Therefore social capacities are only achieved through capacity building. Ferguson, *et al*, (2004) ^[5] argues that capacity building is essential because it helps people “up-to speed” and this is change. Therefore, capacity building ensures the full engagement of communities in local initiatives. Once, people or organisations are capacitated, they are able to identify their problems, needs or challenges, prioritise them and then find solution to them. However, capacity building always involved building on the already existing skills, knowledge and talents and provide opportunities for learning through active participation in activities within their localities. Hence, capacity building underpins change as it helps to develop skills and knowledge of local people and institutions like the VDCs.

A study conducted by Waweru, (2015) ^[10] in Kenya on Community Development found that participation and ownership of development projects empower individuals and local communities. Hence, when local people are actively involved in Community Development processes, they articulate their needs and act collectively. Through participation the VDCs facilitate the identification, prioritization of needs (VAPs) and find solutions from within and from outside-donors, NGOs, Govt. This leads to empowerment.

An analysis on Community Development done by Mulwa, (2009) ^[9] found that participation in decision-making and development processes helps local people to identify their needs, prioritise them and find solutions. Therefore, people’s needs form the primary purpose of development planning and intervention. Participation in decision-making and development process is one principle of community development. Again, Mulwa, (2009) ^[9] also argues that communication helps people to influence local and even national decisions as they identify their needs, problems and issues and even find solutions. Hence, the centre of participatory development in community is the human person. Therefore, VDCs offer local people an opportunity to meaningfully participate in both decision- making and development process meant to develop their area. In the process, people build their capacities and amass social capital which is important when they identify their problems, prioritise them into Village Action Plans and find solutions thereafter.

A study done by Chiweza, (2010) ^[3] on decentralisation process in Malawi noted that VDCs are recognised and accepted by communities as key bodies facilitating planning and development decision-making processes at local level. Hence, VDCs offer local people space and opportunities for meaningful participation in decision- making and development processes of their area.

An analysis of District Development Planning System Handbook (DDPS), (2020) reveal that this is a development planning policy that guides community development planning process from local level to district level. This policy starts and ends with the VDC in its development cycle. Development planning is participatory and bottom-up process and VDCs facilitate that at local level. This policy situates VDC at the centre of community development cycle in Malawi which is bottom-up community development. At local level VDCs facilitate community development hence, the need for the VDC to be functional is important. Further, this policy state that people must be involved in identifying their needs, aspirations and problems and also find solutions to them. Therefore, VDCs function on the active participation of its

members and the community at large. This policy guide is important because it operationalize the VDCs in terms of how the elections should be done, how members should be elected like when a man is elected chair the vice should be elected among women group present. It also gives term limit which is 5 years which is in line with Malawi Electoral Cycle.

3. Significance of the Study

Democratic decentralisation devolves power and authority to lower-level institutions like VDCs to empower local people to actively participate in decision making and development processes. Hence, decentralisation is a vehicle for empowering local people to take their destiny into their own hands while on the other hand, it is a conduit for effective service delivery. Most literature focus on achievements and challenges of democratic decentralisation. However, there is little knowledge on the functionality of the VDCs in enhancing decentralisation and community participation. Democratic decentralisation gives power to local people to participate actively in community development initiatives. Therefore, this study will contribute to filling the knowledge gap that exists as far as the functionality of the VDCs are concerned in Rumphi District and in Malawi in general. There is hope that this information that has been generated is essential for government bodies for decision-making and also the academia for further research on VDCs in order to generate more information to improve the functionality of the VDCs in Malawi. Since, Matupi VDC is located in one of remotest areas of Rumphi, there is known study that was done in this Village regarding the functionality of VDCs in Malawi. This study is one of the first of its kind to be done in this VDC hence it is important.

4. Scope of the Study

The research study is on the functionality of VDCs in Malawi with a focus on Matupi VDC as an institution that promotes bottom-up approaches to community development as enshrined in the District Development Planning System Handbook a policy document guiding community development work in Malawi. Matupi VDC is one of 167 VDCs found in Rumphi District (Rumphi District, 2017). It is one of the VDCs under Paramount Chief Chikulamayembe and it is situated in the most rural areas of Rumphi District. The study will also include challenges affecting the functionality of VDCs in Malawi. The study is limited to development issues and targets VDCs with an extension to AECs members as they provide technical support to VDCs.

5. Objectives of the Study

- To assess if the VDC functions in line with the guidelines of the District Development Planning Handbook in Malawi.
- To identify factors contributing to effectiveness of Matupi VDC in Rumphi District.
- To assess the capacity gaps of Matupi VDC in relation to discharging its development agenda in Jumbi area.

5.1 Research Questions

- Is the VDC functioning in line with guidelines in the Malawi Development Planning Handbook for District Councils?
- What are the factors contributing to effectiveness of VDCs in Rumphi District?
- What are the capacity gaps of Matupi VDC in relation to discharging its development agenda in Jumbi area?

6. Research Methodology

The Study was only limited to assessing the functionality of the VDCs and identifying gaps that affects them to promote participatory community development effectively and efficiently at local level with the focus on Matupi VDC in Rumphi District in Northern Malawi. Therefore, it involved interrogating how: if Matupi VDC functions in line with the District Development Planning Handbook which is policy document guiding all local developments in Malawi; identifying factors contributing to the effectiveness of VDCs in Rumphi District including Matupi VDC; identifying capacity gaps of Matupi VDC in relation to discharging its development agenda in Jumbi area. The research design used in this research study is descriptive research design with mixed methods used. The research used combined research methods which is a combination of qualitative and quantitative data collection methods to achieve its goal.

The study targeted mainly Matupi VDCs members, their traditional leaders, Area Executive members working in Jumbi area where Matupi VDC is situated and selected District Executive members as the subject of the study. These participants were purposively selected to participate in this research study because of the knowledge and information they had on the functionality of the VDCs. The purposefully selected participants because of the important information they had to provide to this study were 60 in total. The Study collected both primary and secondary data in both qualitative and quantitative form.

The study used three techniques to collect primary data and one technique was used to collect secondary data. For primary data, questionnaires, Focus Group Discussion (FGD) and Key Informant Interviews (KII) were used. Primary data was divided into: qualitative and quantitative. Focus Group Discussion and key informants' interviews were used to collect qualitative primary data while a self-reported questionnaire was used to collect quantitative primary data. Finally, Documents Review was used to generate qualitative secondary data. Hence, data collection refers to how empirical data is obtained. The methods of data collection refer to have the researcher obtains empirical data to be used in the research study (Christensen, *et al*, 2011) [2].

In the process, Ethical issues were given prior considerations like an introductory letter was issued to the researcher by DMI-St Eugene University as proof of approval of the Study. Prior approval of the study from relevant authorities is important (Creswell, 2013) [4]. The identities of research participants were anonymous and confidential. For example the questionnaire was anonymous and this avoided undue influence on the results.

7. Results and Discussion of The Findings

The study findings show a mixed results where some are consistent with District Development Planning Systems (DDPS) policy guidelines while others are not. Election of Members in the functionality of VDCs in Malawi promotes the principle of popular participation in decision-making even at local level. The findings are discussed in line with the research questions.

7.1 Matupi VDC Functioning According to the DDPS

One of the key areas in the functionality of the VDCs at local level is the availability of the Village Action Plan (VAP) which is an analysis of the community's need, aspiration put into an action plan. The study revealed that Rumphi District Executive Committee (DEC) facilitated the formulation

process of VAP for Matupi VDC because it one of their duties to facilitate district development planning process from the grassroots. This is in reminiscent with functions of the VDC as outlined in the District Development Planning System Handbook (DDPs) (GoM, 2020) [25-26] which include: coordinating community based issues like assisting in identifying, prioritising, and preparing community needs into VAP, encouraging and mobilizing community resources for popular participation in self-help development projects amongst others. This means the process of VAP formulation adhered to the DDPS guidelines and thereby linked to the District Development Plan of Rumphi District. As such, the study revealed that there is collective participation of Matupi VDC members and Jumbi community in identifying problems, needs and aspirations for Jumbi area. Matupi VDC and Jumbi community participated in the formulation process of their VAP.

With the presence of a valid VAP, it means Matupi VDC is able to coordinate development projects from planning, implementation and monitoring process. Evidently, all development projects isolated from therein are linked district and national development agenda. For example, the study found out that Lunyina Bridge has been constructed by the Government of Malawi through National Roads Authority (NRA) because the issue was included in the DDP for Rumphi District as one of the major development issues of the district that which needed to be addressed.

In this regard, the study found that Matupi VDC has a valid VAP which runs up to 2024. This finding is consistent with the DDPS guidelines which state that the Village Action Plan is an integral part of the DDPS and involves the process of facilitating development at the grassroots level. This means that Community members of Jumbi were given an opportunity to participate in the analysis of their local situation and developed an action plan to address them. Therefore, the presence of the VAP means participatory planning approaches were employed to enable the communities to plan and decide for themselves the manner in which they intend to develop their area called Jumbi. Furthermore, the VAP process provides for the transformational perspective of inclusiveness which provides a bigger picture of both social and economic dimension of development in Jumbi area.

With the availability of copies of VAPs at local level enables members of Matupi VDC to isolate development projects implement with success. Such development projects are mostly infrastructure in nature like community roads, bridges and buildings. However, the methods of implementation differ from one project to another which includes self – help or volunteerism to fully funded projects. The study found that Jumbi community through the spirit of self-help and self-reliance rehabilitated community roads, constructed a bridges, teacher's houses, school blocks and toilets at Lunyina, Jumbi and St Peters Primary Schools. They also lobbied for some projects from stakeholders like Action Aid International which constructed a model Community Based Child Care Centre (CBCC) at Jumbi Primary School and a Satellite CBCC at Lunyina Primary School. Therefore, this means that within the promotion of participatory process innovative technologies can be tried out by local people in good faith (Mulwa, 2008) [34]. Finally, the study revealed that Matupi VDC only lobbies for materials that Jumbi Community cannot manage to purchase them on their own. Therefore, from this perspective, it can be concluded that Matupi VDC is functional, effective and efficient in promoting the

development agenda of Jumbi area. However, the study findings show that the composition of Matupi VDC is not consistent with the DDPS Policy guidelines as both the chair and the vice chair are males. This is contrary to the DDPS Guidelines state that when the male has been elected Chair of the VDC then the vice chair should be elected from among the women present (GoM, 2020) ^[25-26]. Secondly, the term of office for VDC members is (5) years in line with Malawi electoral calendar (cycle). However, the study found that last election were conducted in 2013 for Matupi VDC members. This means VDC members have overstayed without renewing their popular mandate. The major challenge the research noted was chieftaincy succession wrangle has negatively contributed to all VDCs under of Paramount Chief Chikulamayembe including Matupi VDC to not follow the electoral calendar. Due to this succession wrangle that ensued, Rumphi District Council decided to delay the election of new VDC members in this area till this wrangle is resolved.

7.2 Factors Contributing to the Effectiveness of Matupi VDC.

The study found that there are some factors contributing to the effectiveness of Matupi VDC. Firstly, the VDC's team spirit and good coordination with the traditional leadership is an important factor making the VDC effective because members are able to communicate, deliberate and make a public choice on the type of development initiative to be done. Therefore, participation occurs in a setting where a diversity of voices are heard to explore problems and test solutions (Philips & Pittman, 2009) ^[6]. Matupi VDC members are able to communicate constantly in order to get things done. The study revealed that the constant communication among members of the VDC, traditional leaders and the community at large of Jumbi area has helped to make the development projects to be done successfully. It is through communication that members acquire new skills and knowledge they need to be effective and efficient. This process helps the Community of Jumbi to build their capacities in order to take control their own learning in such a way that enables them to effectively address the needs and aspirations contained in their VAP.

The study found that Matupi VDC members have developed abilities to make group decisions, and collaborate effectively to identify problems and get the initiatives done with their own local resources or with funding from implementing partners. As a team they are able to collectively identify their needs, establish priorities, develop plans (VAP) which they own and carry out joint work because it is grounded in the principle of partnership and collaboration. Furthermore, this team spirit makes Matupi VDC as an important participating structure closest to the people of Jumbi area. VDC is the closest structure to the people at the grassroots, (Chasukwa, *et al*, 2015) ^[7]. Evidently, Matupi VDC has the ability to mobilise the communities for socio-economic development at local level. Furthermore, due to the prevalence of the team spirit among Matupi VDC and traditional leaders, different development initiatives have been successfully implemented. Agreeably, Cazorla & Midgley (2012) ^[6] describe this team as groups of people who aim to achieve a common good and participate in it.

Further, the study also found that Rumphi District Council is not only the intermediate level but also the highest decision-making body within the Local Government Authority. As a local Council, Rumphi District functions as an intermediate between local aspirations and the national policies and

guidelines just like other local councils in Malawi. As the highest decision-making body and community development policy-holder at Local level, Rumphi District Council has powers to formulate development plans and source funding for the implementation of development projects contained the DDP. Therefore, the DDP is the policy guide for all development initiatives in the district and it contains needs and aspirations (VAP) from all the VDCs including Matupi VDC of Rumphi District. In this regard, the DDP is a development policy document for the district and it is consultatively formulated using bottom-up participatory approaches. The Council has powers and authority to promote development agenda within its jurisdiction (Rumphi District Council, 2017) ^[47]. The local council has the mandate to formulate development plans from the grassroots starting at VDC level where VAPs are formulated first which form major part of the DPP at district level which is then linked to the national development agenda for decision making at national level as well. This linkage to the national development agenda is important because it is the only way the central government funds development initiatives at local level.

Therefore, DDP as a consolidated development plan emanating from all VAPs, is a tool for sourcing funding for different projects. The study noted that the priority number one on the VAP for Matupi VDC-construction of Lunyina Bridge was incorporated into DDP for Rumphi District. That is how the construction of Lunyina Bridge was funded by Central Government through National Roads Authority (NRA). Although, the Central Government was like funding the implementation of DDP for Rumphi District Council but in essence, it was funding the VAP for Matupi VDC because it is where that need was generated first and located. In this case, the district just acts as a conduit for raising the community needs to the central government. Therefore, the linkage to the district and national level is important in community development as it contributes to the effectiveness of VDCs like Matupi VDC.

The study also found that three gazetted Group Village Heads agreed to form one VDC called Matupi VDC. This is unique finding. These Group Village Heads are able to bring together human resources like labour for the effective functionality of their VDC. Rumphi District just like all other district local authorities in Malawi face the challenge of rapid increase of VDCs due to the proliferation of new villages which were being created because more chiefs were being promoted. At some point, VDCs became too many to manage as a district to effectively and efficiently manage them. Therefore, Rumphi District made a policy decision with powers invested in it by the Local Government Act of 1998. The policy decision was "to create VDCs only at Group Village Head whose history and tradition prove that their group village headship is the oldest in that area" (Rumphi District, 2017) ^[47]. The aim was to create was to create a conducive democratic environment for governance and development at local level which in turn would facilitate meaningful, effective and efficient participation of the grassroots in decision-making and development processes. As a result, this policy decision has enabled the merging of Group Village Heads around the one whose history and tradition prove that the group village headmanship is the oldest in that area. In the advent of this policy, the study observes that it has necessitated the

reorganization of the VDCs in Rumphi District. As such, Matupi VDC was also affected, hence the three Group Village Heads -Matupi, Kazguli and Chisavya forming one VDC around Matupi Group Village Head because he is the oldest to be installed in the Jumbi area. Largely, this has brought somehow sanity in terms of controlling the ever rising numbers of VDCs in the district. Hence, the reorganisation of VDCs by Rumphi District Council authorities has also contributed to making Matupi VDC effective and efficient.

7.3 Capacity Building Initiatives for Matupi VDC

It is important make sure the community has the capacity to support, sustain and improve local development initiatives. As such, capacity building of Matupi VDC and all other VDCs in Malawi as local institutions closest to the ground to support community development initiatives are important for sustainable community development efforts. Capacity building is an essential component in community development process because it enables the knowledge and abilities of individuals to identify their needs and find innovative solutions to them (Phillips & Pittman, 2009) [6]. Hence, capacity building develops the abilities to act and in the process that ability becomes social capital which enables the communities take action to improve their situation. The more members of the communities or VDC are capacitated the better because it is the only way in which social capital is built.

The study revealed that Matupi VDC received only initial capacity building session just soon after new members were elected in 2013. This particular capacity building initiative was for the new VDC members to know their roles and responsibilities. Since then there has been no other formal organised capacity building initiatives by the District Executive Committee through the AEC for Matupi VDC. Generally, VDCs are weak in Rumphi District because their capacities are not built (Rumphi District, 2017) [47]. Capacity building is an essential factor for sustainability of community development initiatives.

However, the study noted that some members of Matupi VDC especially the chair command respect even among traditional leaders and the community. This good working relationship is helping Matupi VDC to mobilise communities to implement different development initiatives in Jumbi area. As such, the study found that Matupi VDC members receive more support from the traditional leadership which comprise of Group Village Heads Matupi, Kazguli and Chisavya and other Village Heads; and this makes them to discharge their functions well.

The Area Executive Committee chair who is the secretary to the VDC has played a pivotal role in technically supporting the VDC particularly in lobbying for development initiatives. In the process, this has built the capacity of the VDC because there are notable development projects which have been implemented with the support through lobbying of the stakeholders by Matupi VDC. Matupi VDC has even lobbied from some individuals who come from Jumbi but working elsewhere. The study observed that through lobbying, one individual stakeholders supported with the purchasing of roofing materials for the Head teacher's office at Lunyina Primary School another individual also supported the construction of two classroom blocks at St. Peters' Primary School. These individuals come from Jumbi and learnt at Jumbi Primary School but now they are working in urban areas. Due to the spirit of lobbying by Matupi VDC, the individuals felt of giving back to their community and being

part and parcel of developing Jumbi area. In this case, people of Jumbi have become leading actors in their own development which has allowed them to go from being beneficiaries of external development interventions to generators of their own development (Mulwa, 2008) [34]. Therefore, the presence of the AEC members brings in the needed technical expertise to the VDC because they facilitate the isolation of development projects to be implemented, playing an important role in lobbying for financial support from other stakeholders and writing proposals.

The capacity to lobby is an important aspect in community development because it also helps the VDC members to realise they have certain resources from within which they can tap from and contribute to the fulfilment of the development agenda of their area. The other aspect of capacity the study found was the community cohesion in terms of playing their rightful roles in each of the community development initiatives being undertaken in Jumbi area. It is this spirit makes the community of Jumbi area to take part like contributing local materials such as ferrying sand, water, moulding bricks, stones and labour to almost all development projects being undertaken in Jumbi area. The use combined strategies to implement development projects because it is possible with their participation to optimise on the use of local resources, local talents, local experiences, and local technologies (Mulwa, 2008) [34]. Precisely, people's participation means employing their diverse resourcefulness to the optimal. The VDC is able to locate and use its local assets where necessary and also use external technical and financial support where they cannot manage themselves. This combination is important in community development because it enhances the spirit of ownership and sustainability of those development projects. More importantly, the study revealed that Matupi VDC realises that Jumbi community has some assets which they can contribute towards the development of their area. This is important in sustainable community development because the idea is to build the capacity within the community.

Jumbi community is able to learn, adapt and manage new skills. In this way, Jumbi communities are able to raise their standards of living because they actively participation in development initiatives. This is a new paradigm. With this paradigm shift, Matupi VDC is able to see its positive aspects like many skills its members have and local resources they have for community development. The VDC is focussing on focusing on their strengths with the view of promoting community led development activities in Jumbi area. The ability to tap from locally available resources within Jumbi area like human, materials to benefit the community is an important capacity to Matupi VDC.

However, the study noted that lack of supervision by district level actors, including AEC members affects the functionality of Matupi VDC. Lack of supervision from district actors also means limited flow of information about district processes to enable the VDCs work effectively. More importantly, the study observed that since the AEC member who was the secretary to Matupi VDC got transferred to somewhere else the District Authority has not replaced a new for continued technical support to the VDC. This means Matupi VDC is lacking technical support to function effectively and efficiently.

8. Suggestions and Recommendations

8.1 Suggestions

- Social participation has been widely emphasized as one of the most important elements in community development activities. The individuals who actively participate in community issues play an important role in decision-making which affects the life of the total community. Discovering the patterns of leadership structure is normally necessary because of the vital role played by the leaders in terms of the initiation and the success of community development initiatives. Therefore it is suggested that Rumphi District Council and all other councils should put up deliberate policies to ensure effective and meaningful participation of the communities in community development by ensuring that VDCs remain vibrant conduits of information sharing from and to the community at local level.
- The Rumphi District Council and all Local Government Authorities in Malawi should consider capacity building to local institutions like VDCs as a matter of urgent priority in order to promote and sustain the participation of the communities in development initiatives. The capacity development plans should be institutionalised. This is important because, people only participate when their capacities are built. VDC is the only structure closest to the ground offering opportunities for people to participate in both decision-making process and in development work.
- Rumphi District Council and indeed all Local Government Authorities in Malawi should also put up deliberate local policies to protect VDCs from undue negative influences from politicians and traditional leadership wrangles over succession which derail their effective and efficient functioning.

8.2 Recommendations

Besides the suggestions, the study makes the following recommendations to ensure the VDCs are effective and efficient in discharging their roles and responsibilities.

- It is also recommended that the government should ensure extension workers particularly Community Development Assistants are available in all the VDCs in Malawi because they are the only ones whose specific and main role is to promote community development work at grassroots level. This will help to regularly build the capacities of the VDCs in order to be more functional.
- The Local Government Authorities like Rumphi District Council should always work through the VDCs as local structure closest to the ground. In this process, this will necessitate to build their capacities to be able to deliver on their mandate of promoting active participation of communities in their local development hence there will be sustainability.
- The VDCs like Matupi need to have their capacity built for them to discharge their roles and responsibilities in order to function effectively and efficiently. They need also to know how they diversify their sources of resource base for community development of their area. They need skills and technical know-how in lobbying stakeholders to fund some of their development projects but also how to motivate their communities to realise the importance of giving themselves more towards community initiatives-self-help and self-reliance spirit.
- Matupi VDC has managed to promote the spirit of self-help and self-reliance among the people of Jumbi as they

actively participate in community development initiatives. However, Matupi VDC should be encouraged to continue promoting community participation of the rural masses in decision-making and in development process like planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. This is important to sustainable community development.

Conclusion

In summary, the findings of the study show mixed results. The study found that Matupi VDC has a valid Village Action Plan from which they are able to isolate development issues and implement them using different strategies like self-help, lobbying, jointly and fully funded by donors. The cordial working relationship and team work among VDC members and traditional leaders is important because it is helping to achieve many development initiatives in Jumbi.

Finally, the study has found that VDCs in Malawi are focal point for planning and development because the planning cycle starts from and ends with the VDC. Therefore, VDCs promote bottom-up popular participation in the development of their respective areas. In Summary, VDCs were established for a purpose-to promote local popular participation in decision-making and development processes. As such, they must be given all the technical and financial support they need to function effectively and efficiently for the betterment of their local areas. On overall, Matupi VDC is functional because, the committee has the ability to lobby for financial and technical support from stakeholders but also motivate members to enhance the spirit of self-help and self-reliance which is important in community development. Notwithstanding the challenges like not having the AEC member as their secretary, not holding elections, the capacity of Matupi VDC to support, sustain and improve local development initiatives is recognised.

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