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Capacity Building of Community-Based Organizations and Their Contribution to Community Development: A Case Study of Traditional Authority Ngabu-Chikwawa District, Malawi

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Abstract

Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) play a crucial role in community development. However, for these CBOs to function effectively, they require various capacity-building initiatives. Despite the acknowledged impact of CBO capacity building in the literature, many CBOs still lack sufficient capacity. One major reason for this is a lack of understanding of how CBO capacity-building initiatives can contribute to community development. Therefore, this study investigated the impact of CBO capacity-building initiatives on community development, focusing on CBOs in T/A Ngabu. The study employed mixed methods research to gain an in-depth understanding of the findings. A sample of 12 CBOs (six with extensive capacity-building initiatives and six with minimal capacity-building initiatives) was selected from Traditional Authority Ngabu using a purposive sampling procedure. Data was collected through focus group discussions, CBO record books, government documents, observations, and physical verification. The data was analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 20. The study's findings revealed that capacity building of CBOs positively impacts their service delivery to the community. Additionally, it was discovered that CBOs that receive or implement more capacity-building initiatives, with the help of partners, are better able to execute more community development initiatives. However, due to the small sample size, the findings cannot be generalized to other regions but can serve as a basis for future research on similar topics. Finally, it is recommended that future research be conducted in more Traditional Authorities and districts. Above all, the findings of this study will assist development practitioners in creating effective community development approaches that meet the needs of the community.

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1.0 Introduction

Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) are non-profit entities driven by voluntary efforts to address challenges within their communities. According to Hussain ((2024, p. 2) ^[16], CBOs function as unity-based organizations that foster collective efforts toward achieving common goals. CBOs take a leading role of mobilising the community to get involved in community development. Mostly, effective community development requires robust community involvement, empowerment, and participation. Research by Macdonald (2018) ^[21] highlighted that community participation is essential for the success of development projects.

Development programs often fail due to a lack of community involvement and consideration of their needs. Therefore, one of the major roles of CBOs is ensuring that the whole community is participating in development work.

The CBOs effectiveness largely depends on capacity-building initiatives, which provide training and resources to address local issues, improve participation, and implement development projects. Capacity building initiatives such as training, provision of productive assets, and operational tools enhance CBO effectiveness. According to Laverack (2022) ^[20], capacity building empowers CBO members to plan and implement solutions to community issues effectively,

addressing local challenges like poverty, disease, and school dropouts. York (2024) ^[31] emphasizes that capacity building fosters collaboration and productivity among CBO members. This promotes a shared understanding of challenges and opportunities, pooling resources, and learning from each other. It also provides essential leadership skills, fostering governance and enhancing overall community development. Furthermore, capacity-building initiatives focus on areas such as resource mobilization, monitoring and evaluation, legal and ethical considerations, and advocacy, making CBOs function effectively. However, for CBOs to operate more effectively, they require a combination of different capacity-building initiatives including organizational, financial, programmatic, networking, policy and advocacy capacity, and operational tools.

CBOs are particularly crucial in developing countries like Malawi, where rural areas face numerous community development problems. In accordance with IPC Malawi Chronic Food Insecurity Report (2022) ^[22], it is indicated that, over 70% of Malawi's population lives below the international poverty line of \$1.90/day. Chikwawa, one of the poorest districts, has a poverty rate of 61.2%, highlighting the urgent need for interventions. As the government struggles to support all the poor, Non-Profit Organizations (NPOs) especially CBOs are critical in addressing community-specific problems. According to Hussain (2024) ^[16], CBOs focus on enhancing economic and civil development by addressing community needs (p.2). In rural communities like Ngabu, CBOs are vital for development.

Although CBOs play a crucial role in community development, they face challenges such as inadequate resources, limited knowledge and skills, insufficient community participation, poor leadership and governance, and inadequate representation of women. Heilman (2024) ^[14] also emphasizes that CBOs lack funding, data, and technology expertise. Corruption can further undermine CBOs effectiveness, leading to failed projects and reduced donor interest. Hasan (2019) stresses the need for honest and reliable leadership to maintain donor confidence and achieve organizational goals.

Despite the vital role of CBO capacity building to community development, it is often overlooked by governments and development practitioners due to lack of sufficient evidence of its impact on community development, which is typically gathered through extensive research. To address this gap, this study explored the connection between CBO capacity building and community development outcomes (initiatives) with much focus on Traditional Authority Ngabu, Chikwawa District, Malawi. Ngabu was selected as a case study area because it is one of the poverty-stricken rural areas where CBOs are actively involved in utilizing limited resources for development.

1.1 Statement of Problem

Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) play a critical role in community development by addressing local needs and implementing development initiatives. For the CBOs to function effectively, they need various capacity building initiatives. Researchers stress the importance of CBO capacity building for functionality and sustainability (Alam, 2022 ^[1]; Porteny et al., 2020) ^[27]. Regardless of their importance, many CBOs face challenges related to capacity building. For instance, a major concern of this study was the lack of capacity building among CBOs in Traditional Authority Ngabu. Out of 31 CBOs in this area, only 6 have received

more capacity building initiatives necessary to support their operations. Lack of capacity building affects the CBOs' functionality, undermining their ability to contribute effectively to community development. Putting much effort in addressing this problem is crucial for improving the overall impact of these organizations on community development. However, there was no research that was previously conducted in T/A Ngabu to explain the link between CBO capacity building and community development, hence development practitioners or government do not show keen interest in CBO capacity building. Therefore, this study was conducted to fill this gap by providing insights into importance of CBO capacity building initiatives to community development.

1.2 Main Objective of the Research

The main objective of the study was to investigate and assess the impact of capacity building initiatives on community-based organizations within Traditional Authority Ngabu-Chikwawa District, Malawi, with a focus on understanding how these efforts contribute to the overall development of the community.

1.2.1 Specific Objectives

Here were the specific objectives in this research:

1. Conduct a comprehensive analysis of the existing skills, resources, and organizational structures of the CBOs in the target areas
2. Examine the effectiveness of ongoing or past capacity building initiatives (training) done to CBOs by other partners and how they are contributing to the organizational development of CBOs and, consequently, the overall development of the community.
3. Identify and analyse the specific capacity building needs and challenges faced by the CBOs in the study area, considering factors such as training, infrastructure, and financial resources.
4. Investigate the extent to which CBOs actively contribute to community development
5. Develop practical recommendations for improving capacity building strategies for CBOs.

1.3 Research Question

In every research, for one to be motivated to conduct a research and achieve its objectives, the research questions have to be formulated and ensure that they are answered at the end of the research. Therefore below were the research questions that were formulated in this study:

1. What are the skills, resources, and organisational structures that CBOs within T/A Ngabu have?
2. What is the impact and effectiveness of past or ongoing capacity building initiatives provided by external partners to CBOs in T/A Ngabu, and how do these initiatives contribute to the organisational development of CBOs and, subsequently, to the overall development of the community?
3. What are the areas that CBOs in T/A Ngabu need to build their capacities and challenges that they are facing when executing their duties?
4. To what extent do CBOs in T/A Ngabu actively contribute to the community development in their area?
5. What practical recommendations can be developed to enhance capacity building strategies for CBOs in T/A Ngabu and beyond this area?

1.4 Significance of the Study

Studying on connection of CBO capacity building and the community development was important because the research findings will provide practical insights to the academics, development practitioners, policy-makers, and local plus international development agencies working in Malawi and other countries for them to realise the need for capacity building of CBOs and how the community can also develop from such initiatives. Again, this will also inform the design and implementation of more and effective community development approaches. For instance, the results of this research will contribute to theoretical discourse on community-driven development, mainly in T/A Ngabu and the whole Malawi, as well as Sub-Saharan Africa. Therefore, it was very crucial to conduct this research and document the findings for future reference.

1.5 Scope of the Study

The study was conducted in Traditional Authority Ngabu, Chikwawa District, Malawi. Although this is a small area but it has assisted in examining the broader phenomenon of the impact of CBO capacity building initiatives on community development. However, the results have not been used to generalise the situation in Ngabu to other T/As or areas but still offer valuable insights that can help development practitioners outside T/A Ngabu to come up with an effective way of approaching development projects.

As stipulated above, the main aim of this research was to find out the link between CBO Capacity building and the overall development of the community in T/A Ngabu. Therefore, the CBOs that were examined are also from the same T/A. They were 12 in total.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Main Literature Review

To have a full understanding on how CBO capacity building initiatives are important to the performance of an organisation, the following literatures were reviewed.

2.1.1 The View of Capacity Building and its Contribution to the Effective Operation of an Organization

Capacity building is vital for enhancing the performance of community-based organizations (CBOs), ensuring members achieve their objectives. Junjan (2020) ^[17] defines capacity building as a wide range of techniques that enable individuals, organizations, and communities to overcome challenges and achieve development goals. It plays a crucial role in equipping staff and volunteers with necessary skills to operate effectively, highlighting the importance of capacity building initiatives.

Many authors stress the need for capacity building within organizations to improve employee performance. Wassem et al. (2019) ^[30] emphasize its positive impact, while Mangundjaya and Putri (2020) ^[28] highlight the link between organizational learning and employee empowerment. Prah et al. (2023) ^[4] further support this view, noting that tailored capacity building enhances employee empowerment, engagement, and learning.

Capacity building in research is equally important for CBOs, enabling members to conduct development research and solve their problems. Collins et al. (2023) ^[8] argue that training CBO members in research fosters a deeper understanding of their organizational challenges and solutions.

2.2 Theoretical Review

The theory of participatory development underpinned this study and is closely associated with Robert Chambers, a leading scholar in this area. Chambers introduced the concept of participatory development between 1980s and 1990s, emphasizing the importance of involving local communities in the development process (Chambers, 1997) ^[7]. This theory advocates for community members' active participation in planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluating development initiatives. Such involvement fosters sustainable development outcomes. The theory is centred on four key focus areas:

2.2.1 Community Involvement and Local Ownership

Participatory development emphasizes inclusivity, ensuring that marginalized groups are part of the decision-making process. Engaging community members ensures that development initiatives address actual community needs. Haldane (2019) ^[13] found that community involvement is crucial in prioritizing health service improvements. Kurniawan et al. (2023) ^[19] highlight the importance of leveraging local wisdom in poverty alleviation efforts, as it ensures solutions are relevant to the community's context. Local ownership of development projects promotes a sense of pride and reduces labour costs (Ngwama, 2024) ^[25]. In this regard, NGOs should collaborate with Community-Based Organizations (CBOs), offering capacity-building initiatives to empower CBOs in mobilizing and empowering their communities.

2.2.2 Empowerment

The theory also emphasizes building the capacity of community members to control their development processes. Empowering CBO members, who are local residents, equips them with the skills, knowledge, and resources to uplift their communities. Herath et al. (2021) ^[15] assert that the empowerment approach is vital for poverty reduction, as it enhances individual and community capacities to improve their socioeconomic conditions.

2.2.3 Collaboration

Participatory theory encourages partnerships between community members and external stakeholders. Such collaboration enhances the effectiveness of capacity-building efforts and fosters comprehensive community development initiatives. Ayoo (2022) ^[5] recommends collaboration among stakeholders and empowering the poor as critical strategies for poverty alleviation. NGOs and CBOs can collaborate effectively to implement development projects successfully.

2.2.4 Sustainability

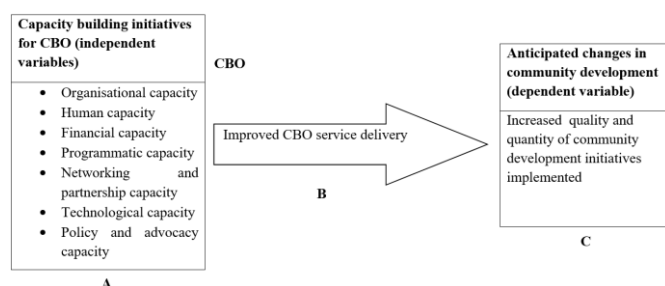
The theory promotes long-term solutions that communities can maintain. By empowering CBOs through capacity-building efforts, NGOs equip them with the necessary skills to sustain development initiatives over time. Rainboth (2023) ^[29] found that sustainable community development is achievable through collaboration, innovation, and inclusivity. Unlike external NGOs that operate for limited periods, CBOs remain in their communities indefinitely, ensuring the continuity and sustainability of development activities.

In summary, the theory of participatory development offered a valuable framework for this research. By utilizing local knowledge through CBOs, NGOs can implement relevant and sustainable projects that address community needs. When NGO projects phase out, CBOs can continue the initiatives,

ensuring long-lasting outcomes. Therefore, NGOs should focus on working closely with CBOs and providing comprehensive capacity-building support for effective project delivery.

2.3 Conceptual Review

The research has used the concept of CBO, capacity building, and community development. The main emphasis is that, the CBO works at the community level but lacks capacity building support to work effectively. Therefore, there is a need for the CBO to have different capacity building initiatives for it to deliver effectively. Once a number of capacity building initiatives are implemented, there is a high probability of enhanced development in the community. However, a CBO is limited to implement more capacity building initiatives hence they need external support from other partners. To fully understand this, the above concepts have been connected in diagrammatic relationship below:



According to this diagram, the assumption is that, if a CBO has the capacity building initiatives in A, there will be improved CBO service delivery (B) that will result in increased quality as well as the quantity of community development initiatives implemented (C).

2.4 Research GAP

From the above reviewed literatures, most of the studies that were conducted did not focus much on the connection between CBO capacity building and community development initiatives. Again, no other research has been conducted on the impact of CBO capacity building on community development in T/A Ngabu, Malawi hence it was needed to conduct this research. In additional, authors like Miriti (2009) [24] declared that there is a need to conduct further research on the link between capacity building and achievement of community development. Therefore, this research sought to fill this research gap.

3.0 Research Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative research to address the research questions and systematically investigate the problem (McCombes, 2019 [23]; George, 2023) [11]. Mixed methods enhance the breadth and scope of the investigation (Dawadi et al., 2021). The research aimed to understand the experiences and perceptions of CBO members and the community, quantify CBO resources, and analyse CBO activities related to capacity building and community development. The target population included 12 CBOs from T/A Ngabu: six with extensive capacity-building initiatives and six with minimal or partial initiatives. Purposive sampling was used to select these CBOs based on their engagement in capacity building. This deliberate selection aimed to examine the relationship between the extent of capacity-building efforts and their effects on community development.

Data collection involved both primary and secondary sources. Primary data was gathered through focus group discussions, with participants including CBO leaders, members, and community representatives. Secondary data was sourced from CBO record books and government documents. Observation method was also employed to verify CBO resources and assess community perceptions. Questionnaires, containing both open- and closed-ended questions, were utilized to collect data during focus group discussions, providing a comprehensive view of CBO activities and their impacts.

In this study, validity and reliability concepts were applied. Anggraini et al. (2023) [3] emphasize that validity ensures research items measure the intended concept, leading to valid inferences. Content validity was evaluated in this study by assessing if the instrument covered all relevant aspects of the concept, as noted by Nikolopoulou (2023) [26]. Almasreh et al. (2019) [2] indicate that content validity reflects the relevance of evaluation elements to the targeted construct. Expert opinions are crucial in determining content validity, with Yusoff (2019) [32] suggesting the involvement of six to ten experts. In this study, 7 research experts were involved and pretesting phase involved sample from targeted CBOs. The content validity index (CVI) formula was also applied yielding a CVI results of 0.968, indicating high relevance of the items (Dalawi et al., 2023) [10].

Reliability pertains to the consistency of measurement methods. Middleton (2023) defines reliability as the consistency of research measurements. To ensure reliability, this study employed data triangulation, involving focus group discussions, CBO register book checks, and physical data verification. As emphasised by Bans & Tiimub (2021) [6], researcher's utilise triangulation method to produce reliable results since they are more assured of the research findings. This study used IBM SPSS Statistics Version 20 for data analysis, as recommended by Tumiran (2023) for its data management capabilities. Data were categorized, coded, and analysed using SPSS, with qualitative data coded numerically (Crosley, 2020) [9]. Descriptive statistics, such as frequency tables and pie charts, and inferential statistics like Chi-square and Fisher's exact test were used to assess variable associations.

The study's limitations include its focus on T/A Ngabu due to funding constraints, which affects the generalizability of the results to other regions. Nonetheless, the findings provide valuable insights into capacity building. Ethical considerations were addressed by ensuring confidentiality and obtaining consent from respondents, who were informed that their information would be used solely for academic purposes and kept confidential.

4.0 Data Analysis and Discussion of the Key Findings

All the research objectives were met and the research questions formulated in this study were answered using specific objectives. Below were the key findings in this research:

4.1 Summary of CBO Skills and Capacity Building in Traditional Authority Ngabu

The study revealed that Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) in T/A Ngabu possess several critical skills, though these are displayed unevenly across the organizations. Common skills identified include organizational management, financial management, handling social issues such as child protection and gender-based violence (GBV), partial fundraising abilities, leadership, community advocacy,

monitoring and evaluation, and networking with other partners. However, only four CBOs (33.3%) demonstrated proficiency in all these skills, attributed to the higher number of capacity-building initiatives they have received. 6 CBOs (50%) have partial skills in organisation management, full skills in managing social related issues mentioned above, and good leadership skills but with some weakness. The other two CBOs (16.7%) also have all these three skills recognised in 6 CBOs including networking with partners.

According to Hains et al. (2020) ^[12], skills like program monitoring, technology use, and grant writing are essential for effective community development. The study highlighted the critical role of capacity-building initiatives, particularly those delivered by external partners, in enhancing CBOs' service delivery, leadership, and resource management abilities.

4.2 Resource Availability among CBOs

In terms of physical resources, the study found significant disparities. Only four CBOs (33.3%) have permanent offices, while the majority, eight CBOs (66.7%), operate from rented community structures. Regarding assets, four CBOs have a stock of plastic chairs, which they rent out to the community. The number of chairs ranged from 60 to 63, initially provided by NGOs, with CBOs later adding to their inventory for rental income.

Some CBOs also raise goats as productive assets. Four CBOs (33.3%) raise goats, with numbers ranging from 14 to 21, acquired initially from partner organizations and increased through reproduction. Additionally, four CBOs own sewing machines, used to make clothing and menstrual hygiene pads for the community. One CBO owns a pool table, also donated by a partner organization, which generates income through rentals.

The study revealed that, CBOs with more productive assets tend to implement more community development activities. Income from these assets is used to support community development initiatives, demonstrating the importance of resource accumulation for CBO effectiveness.

4.3 Organizational Structures and Reporting Systems

CBOs in T/A Ngabu follow structured organizational models. Six CBOs (50%) have a structure that includes group village heads, board members, an executive committee, subcommittee representatives, and general members, with a bottom-up reporting system where decisions are finalized by board members. Another six CBOs (50%) have a slightly simplified structure, where the final decision rests with the CBO chair. For instance, it starts with group village head man, CBO chair, other executive committee members, and mere/general CBO members. In both structures, the role of the group village head is advisory, ensuring that CBOs operate ethically and according to their constitution.

4.4 Impact of Capacity Building on Service Delivery and Community Development

The study found that capacity-building initiatives significantly improved CBOs' abilities to serve their communities, particularly in leadership, financial management, and networking. Out of 12 CBOs, four (33.3%) have experienced improvements in more impact areas due to extensive capacity-building support. Two CBOs (16.7%) realized few impact areas, while six CBOs (50%) noted improvements in least areas due to variation in capacity building initiatives implemented in their CBOs. These capacity building initiatives led to notable achievements in the community, such

as paying school fees for vulnerable children, forming and managing Village Savings and Loan (VSL) groups, producing menstrual hygiene pads, providing early childhood care (CBCC) services, and offering social support for people living with HIV/AIDS. The impact of these activities varied across CBOs, with four CBOs implementing all the initiatives, two providing a more limited range of services, and six only focusing on CBCC services, emergency response, and HIV/AIDS support.

The influence of CBOs has resulted in increased school attendance (up by 37%), improved social and health outcomes, and a reduction in child abuse and GBV cases. The community also values the CBOs' role in managing VSL groups, which has led to asset accumulation and improved living standards.

4.5 Capacity Building Needs and Challenges

Despite the progress, the study identified several capacity-building needs that are essential for CBOs to function effectively. These include organizational management, operational tools, partnership and networking, programmatic capacity, monitoring and evaluation (M&E) skills, human capacity training, policy advocacy, technological capacity, and proposal writing skills. Variations were noted across the CBOs, with 6 CBOs (50%) requiring all of these initiatives except office electricity due to lack of permanent offices. The other two CBOs (16.7%) also need all the capacity building initiatives except partnership and networking plus office electricity since they also don't own an office. The remaining four CBOs (33.3%) only need three capacity building initiatives like technological capacity, excellent proposal writing skills and office electricity to help them in running other tasks that need electricity. All 12 CBOs recognized the importance of technological capacity for managing data and streamlining work processes, as well as the need for better proposal writing skills to enhance fundraising efforts.

The main challenges faced by CBOs include lack of transport, insufficient funding, limited capacity-building initiatives, inadequate coordination with local leaders, and lack of permanent office space. Eight CBOs (66.7%) specifically noted issues related to coordination and office space. Addressing these challenges through partnerships with NGOs and government bodies was suggested as a potential solution. Similar to this findings, Kishani (2023) also emphasise that, the major challenges that can hinder effective operation of CBOs are based on restricted capacity or skills in fund fundraising, as well as monitoring and evaluation.

Basically, the study also used inferential statistics to have a thorough analysis on the association of capacity building and improvement in service delivery to the community. The study found out that, there is a statistically significant relationship between capacity building and improvement in the service delivery of CBO members to the community. This conclusion was based on results from Chi-square and Fischer's exact test which were all at 0.002, thereby rejecting the null hypothesis. It was also noted that more capacity-building initiatives implemented in CBOs lead to more development initiatives being implemented in the community.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study focused on assessing the impact of capacity-building initiatives on Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) in Traditional Authority Ngabu, Chikwawa District, Malawi. It explored how these initiatives contribute to community development. The findings

highlighted the significant role CBOs play in mobilizing local resources and implementing development initiatives, often supported by external partners. Despite their impact, CBOs face challenges such as lack of transportation, insufficient funding, inadequate capacity-building initiatives, poor coordination with local leaders, and the absence of permanent offices.

The study emphasized that CBO partners are crucial in strengthening CBOs by providing various capacity-building initiatives, leading to improved service delivery and increased development activities within the community. It also contributed to existing literature by identifying specific capacity-building needs and challenges faced by CBOs. However, the study's focus on a single traditional authority limited the generalizability of its findings, calling for future research to explore similar dynamics across multiple Traditional Authorities and districts for a more comprehensive understanding. More importantly, the research underscores the importance of supporting CBOs as key agents in community development, with a strong emphasis on notifying policymakers and development practitioners on how they can approach community development effectively to impact the community. The study has also contributed to the existing literature by highlighting the essential capacity building initiatives that CBOs need for the development of their community and the challenges they face in the activity implementation. CBOs need support from community development practitioners for effective implementation of development activities.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were made based on study findings:

1. Community Development Practitioners or NGOs should design and support CBOs with different capacity building initiatives that cover all essential areas necessary for CBOs to function efficiently and address community needs
2. There is a need to encourage coordination between CBOs and local leaders, as well as other stakeholders by using collaborative platforms, regular joint meetings, traditional authorities, and government officers to ensure that community development efforts are coordinated.
3. Development practitioners should ensure that capacity building initiatives are informed by evidence and feedback from CBOs. This can be achieved by conducting community development research in CBOs or community and using research findings in the implementation of project or programme to meet the specific needs of people in the community.
4. Community Development Policymakers should formulate policies that encourage community development practitioners to actively support CBOs with essential operational resources, such as transportation and office space. Through advocating for this support, policymakers can help ensure that CBOs operate more efficiently and effectively in implementing their activities.
5. Future research on the same topic should be conducted in multiple districts and traditional authorities to gain a broader understanding of CBO dynamics across different regions.

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