Social Policy & Administration issn 0144–5596
Vol. 39, No. 3, June 2005, pp. 284–301

The Clash of Voices: Community-based Targeting of Safety-net Interventions in Malawi

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Abstract

Using the principle of community targeting, the 2003 Winter Targeted Input Programme was designed to extend free inputs to about 400,000 households in rural Malawi on the basis of access to dambo, and poverty status. The tendency for most communities was, however, to modify the stipulated criteria on the basis of their perceptions and interpretations of need, entitlement and equity. Strikingly, even though the resulting criteria often reflected priorities conflicting with the officially prescribed guidelines, they were nevertheless not necessarily motivated by fraudulent intentions, though there were some isolated cases of ill-intention. This article therefore advocates at least the incorporation of views from below in the design of interventions of this nature in order to ensure that they achieve the overall desired strategic impact.

Keywords

Food security; Community targeting; Safety nets; Targeted inputs programme; Starter pack; Malawi

Setting the Context

Since the turn of the 1990s, the problem of food insecurity in Malawi has become endemic rather than periodic. Most contributors to the contemporary food security crisis attribute it to two important events in the mid-1990s, namely, the total collapse of smallholder farmer credit clubs and the liberalization of agricultural markets (cf. Mann 1998; Harrigan 2001; Levy *et al.* 2004). The collapse of the smallholder farmer credit system, combined with the removal of fertilizer and hybrid maize seed subsidies, against the backdrop of a sharply devalued local currency, made farm inputs virtually unaffordable to the majority of the chronically impoverished smallholder farmers. These events, coupled with persistent adverse climatic patterns over the last decade, have had tremendous negative consequences for the food security

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status of most households in the country. The upward spiral in food insecurity eventually culminated in the 2001/2 hunger crisis, which has had a devastating impact on the already fragile livelihoods of the vast majority of Malawians, especially those living in rural areas.

The first major response to the deteriorating food security situation in the country was the Starter Pack (SP) programme. Launched in the 1998/9 growing season, the SP programme extended to all rural farming families, estimated to be 2.86 million households, and consisted of free inputs containing enough fertilizer, maize and legume seed for a 0.1 hectare field. The SP programme was repeated in the 1999/2000 growing season. However, for purposes of sustainability and as a gradual exit strategy, it was scaled down to a Targeted Input Programme (TIP) from the 2000/1 growing season, with almost half of the rural farming families as beneficiaries.

In the wake of the 2001/2 hunger crisis, however, it became apparent that the SP/TIP interventions had not fully addressed the factors which were instigating rampant deterioration in the food security status of households in rural Malawi. The Winter TIP programme, launched in 2002, was justified as the opportunity to increase the supply of maize in the country. The reasoning behind this strategy was that increasing the supply into the maize market towards the onset of the lean periods would help keep prices of maize at levels most rural inhabitants could afford. According to Levy *et al.* (2004), the 2001/2 hunger crisis had resulted from rapid rises in the price of maize, making it virtually unaffordable to most smallholder farmers. They state that "as the maize price rises above MK 15 per kg, as it did in September–October 2001, observers in the field [usually] begin to report increases in food insecurity among the rural poor, and at MK 30 or more, as was the case in January–March 2002, there is likely to be a huge crisis" (Levy *et al.* 2004: 5). According to Devereux (2002), the 2001/2 hunger crisis was triggered not merely by an increase in maize prices of 325 per cent, but by a decrease in maize production by 34 per cent, the collapse of livestock prices, the sale of the stocks of the Strategic Grain Reserves, and the failure of the maize import programme.

Existing statistics indicate that the problem of food insecurity remains rampant. Maize production per capita has fallen steadily from 163 kg in the early 1990s to less than 150 kg in the late 1990s (Orr *et al.* 2001; Owusu and N'gambi 2002). Further estimates indicate that yearly maize productivity ranges between 320 and 774 kg per household, which results in over 70–80 per cent of all rural households being short of self-produced staple foods for 4 to 5 months (Chinsinga 2004). Members of poor households in rural Malawi can only satisfy 66 per cent of their calorific requirements. These food-deficit households rely either on market purchases or on other survival strategies—such as food for work or casual labour (*ganyu*)—for the rest of the period. Preliminary figures for the 2004/5 growing season indicate that between 1.34 and 1.68 million people are experiencing significant food shortages. This is equivalent to approximately 56,030–83,550 metric tons of cereals (FEWS 2004).

The impact of the 2001/2 hunger crisis has been so severe that in some areas people have been forced even to reorient their perception of the search

for agricultural *ganyu* as an indicator of poverty. According to Chinsinga *et al.* (2003), the propensity to search for *ganyu* during the planting season can no longer be taken to be an accurate indicator. In the border districts of Dedza and Phalombe, villagers indicated that, following the 2001/2 hunger crisis, their survival strategy has been to seek *ganyu* labour across the border in Mozambique. They argued that those able to seek agricultural *ganyu* across the border cannot be characterized as the poorest of the poor. It is those unable to do so—*usually the aged, the sick and women*—who are now designated the poorest of the poor, since they cannot access this *across-the-border* livelihood strategy.

It is against this backdrop that the Winter TIP was repeated in 2003. When it was launched in 2002, this had offered about 300,000 farmers packs containing 2 kg hybrid maize, 2 kg bean seed and 5 kg top-dressing fertilizer. In 2003 there were slight variations. The packs, distributed to about 400,000 farmers, contained 2 kg Open Pollinated Variety (OPV) maize seed, 1 kg bean seed and 5 kg top-dressing fertilizer. OPV, like hybrid, is an improved seed but it has the advantage that it can be recycled for two to three consecutive growing seasons without significant reduction in its yield vigour. These inputs were distributed to the farmers using the principle of community targeting, on the basis of access to *dambo* and poverty status.[1] These eligibility criteria were prescribed by the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Food Security (MoAIFS).

The study on which this paper is based was carried out principally to assess the extent to which rural communities were successful in targeting the 2003 Winter TIP beneficiaries on the basis of the criteria prescribed by MoAIFS. The critical thrust of the findings is that the targeting criteria as prescribed by the MoAIFS were rarely adhered to in the administration of the 2003 Winter TIP. The tendency for most communities was to modify the criteria on the basis of their perceptions and interpretations of need, equity and entitlement. Strikingly, even though the resulting criteria often reflected priorities which conflicted with the officially articulated guidelines, they were not necessarily motivated by fraudulent intentions, even though there were some isolated incidences of ill-intention. Thus the results of this study demonstrate the importance of incorporating views from below in the design of interventions of this nature, in order to ensure that they achieve the desired strategic impact.

Community Targeting in Theoretical and Practical Perspective

Targeting is at the heart of most safety-net interventions geared to dealing with poverty, vulnerability and food insecurity (Hoddinott 1999; Barret and Clay 2003). It has particularly become a policy imperative for developing countries in the wake of macro-economic and structural adjustment programmes under which governments are pressured to cut back enormously on their expenditures. The primary concern in targeting is to design development interventions that would, as much as is practically possible, reach those in dire need. The ideal intervention would thus be the one that would

not only accurately identify the poor but also direct all the benefits to them without any slightest trace of leakage.

The most debated issue in targeting, however, concerns how the benefits of the proposed interventions can be delivered to the most deserving beneficiaries, in order to achieve the greatest possible reduction on poverty, vulnerability, food insecurity or, indeed, any other indicator of choice. Several targeting strategies have been identified, which, *inter alia*, include administrative targeting, indicator targeting, geographical targeting and self-targeting. However, these conventional targeting techniques present problems in terms of information to the extent that community targeting is perceived as a means of getting round the informational constraints that bedevil most targeting strategies (Adato and Haddad 2002).

The problems of information arise because most targeting techniques are designed on the assumption that there is: (1) agreement on what is meant by poverty; (2) consensus on a measure of standard of living; (3) a poverty line that distinguishes the poor from the non-poor; and (4) a poverty index that aggregates information on the standard of living of the poor (Besely and Kanbur 1988; Johnson and Start 2001). For almost all the targeting techniques to operate on the basis of these assumptions, there would need to be accurate documentation of individuals' assets and incomes. However, the maintenance of such kinds of complex data retrieval systems is clearly beyond the capabilities of most developing countries.

These informational constraints give rise to errors—of inclusion and exclusion, or Type I and Type II errors respectively (Hoddinott 1999)—that impact tremendously on the potential success of targeting. Errors of inclusion occur when an intervention reaches individuals who are not intended to be beneficiaries while errors of exclusion arise when the intended beneficiaries are missed out in an intervention. Alternatively, these errors are denoted as leakage and under-coverage respectively. A targeting intervention would be considered fairly efficient if it substantially minimizes leakage (inclusion errors) and achieves the lowest possible under-coverage (exclusion errors).

In view of the serious informational constraints and coupled with the prominence of democratization in developing countries, community targeting has become very popular in interventions dealing with poverty, vulnerability and food insecurity (Nelson and Wright 1995; Ravallion and Wodon 1998). Conning and Kevane (2000: 1) define community targeting as "a [novel] bottom–up service delivery option and poverty alleviation mechanism that actively involve the poor and their communities in programme design, implementation and monitoring". Its basic premise is that villagers are in a much better position to identify the poor among themselves than are external agents, by exploiting idiosyncratic information which is often beyond reach of outsiders. The assumption is that they would identify families or people as rich or poor on the basis of locally agreed notions of deprivation or need (Haddad and Zeller 1996; Gwatkin 2000). Thus community targeting provides a means of taking advantage of local knowledge of households' needs and capabilities that are difficult to capture in measurable indicators. Communities may, for instance, know who in their midst are very poor and who might be suffering a crisis or have the least income-earning

potential. This might, according to White and Appleton (1999), help characterize relative potentials yet to be targeted and addressed in development programmes.

Within the framework of democratization, community targeting is also perceived as integral to the notion of participation as an end rather than just a means (Nelson and Wright 1995). It is seen as part of the broader development process which is vital for rural communities in building their own skills and capacity. This is because community targeting provides them with the opportunity to wrestle with tough decisions about allocation of scarce resources. They thus learn how to manage a decision-making forum. It is further justified on the grounds that community targeting may not only harness but potentially strengthen social capital and community organizations, with enormous ripple effects for disadvantaged groups. These may, as a result, become empowered to articulate their demands more effectively.

The major criticism against community targeting, raised by Ravallion (2000), is that its purported informational advantage may well be outweighed by an accountability disadvantage. Ravallion's concerns are echoed by Conning and Kevane (2000: 1). They likewise argue that "the potential improvement in targeting criteria from incorporating local notions of deprivation must be tempered by the possibility that local preferences are not [always] propoor". This challenge is demonstrated, for instance, by examples drawn from South Africa and Malawi.

According to Adato and Haddad (2002), communities in South Africa were entrusted with the responsibility of hiring people to work on a public works project, using specially stipulated and elaborated poverty-targeting criteria. However, the communities ended up devising their own ways of employing people to work on the projects, virtually losing sight of the poverty-targeting requirement. They preferred a random selection procedure to come up with names of eligible beneficiaries. This involved community names being put in a hat, then taken out one by one by a person not looking at which name to pull, until the employment quota was met. These communities were apparently more satisfied with this random procedure, in which every member of the community had an equal chance of being hired, than with a purposively targeted selection. While a poverty perspective on equity claims that the poorest of the poor should get the jobs, the hat system implies that everyone gets an equal chance.

In some cases, in fact, preference was given to those who were considered active in community affairs (ILO 1996). This was perceived to be equitable primarily as a reward to those people who had worked hard for the development of their respective communities. In a 2001 study to simulate targeting of safety-net interventions which included cash and in-kind components, Chinsinga *et al.* encountered similar inclinations in rural Malawi. In several communities, village heads were included as beneficiaries of both the cash and in-kind transfers even though, in most instances, they were conspicuously better off than the majority of the people in the village. It was argued that village heads should be among the beneficiaries of both transfers because they spent most of their time working for the village, rather than on their own farms or on other equally important income-generating activities.

Research Design and Field Inquiry Techniques

How was the evaluation of community targeting for the 2003 Winter TIP carried out? Proceeding in two distinct phases, namely, preliminary and main phases, the study was carried out in 14 villages in 14 districts.[2] These districts were selected with the intention of having a reasonable geographical spread, especially in terms of the diversity of agro-ecological conditions in Malawi. The preliminary phase of the study, conducted in 2 of the 14 sites, was meant to test the robustness of the proposed research instruments before using them in the main phase.

The key research instrument was the social mapping exercise, which was more or less an entry point into each community. With the help of a group of 5–12 individuals drawn from all corners of a village, all households were identified and located on a social map, in addition to sketching the magnitude of either *dambo* or irrigated land.[3] Each household was given a number on the map, for which a card was also prepared. Several attributes of the households were recorded on these cards. These included the gender status of the households; whether the household had access to *dambo* or irrigated land; whether the household was cultivating *dambo* or irrigated land; the food security status of the households; and whether the households had received Winter TIP.

For the purposes of this study, three food security categories were distinguished: food-secure (FS—those households having enough to eat throughout the year from harvest to harvest); food-insecure (FI—those households that have enough to last from harvest up to Christmas but not between Christmas and the next harvest, the harvest in Malawi being in April/May); and extremely food-insecure (EFI—those households that have a longer period of not having enough to eat, which start facing food shortages before Christmas). The food security status of households was used as a proxy measure of poverty in rural Malawi.

The rationale for using food security as a proxy measure of poverty was that poverty-related data are not readily available and, if they exist at all, tend to be too crude to be useful for targeting purposes. The decision to use food security in this way was taken on the basis of the findings of a number of poverty-related studies in recent times. According to Levy (2003), these studies have found that food security is perceived as a key indicator of poverty in rural Malawi. While it is arguably not quite an ideal proxy measure, it is nevertheless the best alternative in a country where poverty data are not readily available.

The guiding principles in developing this methodology were to find something that is: (1) meaningful to participants, and means the same in every place; (2) simple, so that it is clear which category each household fits into; and (3) capable of differentiating between the different groups of interest to the study, namely the well-off, the poor and the extremely poor (Levy 2003). The social mapping exercise was concluded by a traditional focus group discussion whose aim was to understand how the 2003 Winter TIP logistics were actually organized and executed in each village. The data from the cards were entered into a specially designed Microsoft Access program and

later exported to SPSS Version 11 for analysis. Data collected through social mapping with cards were considered appropriate for statistical analysis since they constituted a full census of each community visited. As such, the data could be aggregated to show the results from the sample of 14 villages in 14 districts.

In order to cross-check the information provided by communities on the household cards, we took with us the TIP Logistics Unit (TIPLU) register which provided details about the 2003 registered Winter TIP beneficiaries. This was used to check if there were mismatches between registered beneficiaries and actual recipients, and also to check on cases of multiple recipients within households.

The TIPLU register had been compiled using submissions made by Agricultural Development Divisions (ADDs) on the basis of their estimates of the number of individual farmers with access to either *dambo* or irrigation facilities.[4] Each ADD had then been given a quota of the 2003 Winter TIP beneficiaries on the basis of their indicative capacity to engage in Winter TIP cultivation. In turn, the ADDs then subdivided their quotas between the Rural Development Projects (RDPs) under their respective jurisdictions. The RDPs were expected to facilitate the registration process of the beneficiaries working through Agricultural Extension and Development Officers (AEDOs), the foot soldiers of the agricultural extension system in Malawi. The RDPs further subdivided their respective quotas among Traditional Authorities (TAs) who, working closely with AEDOs and village heads, were to facilitate the registration process of the 2003 Winter TIP beneficiaries. The quotas at TA level in each RDP were mostly allocated on the basis of their relative potential for winter cultivation and their food security status. The lists of households registered at village levels were then forwarded to TIPLU, where a register of beneficiaries was compiled to aid the subsequent administrative logistics of the programme.

In facilitating the registration process, the TAs, AEDOs and village heads were supposed to work with communities to target primarily those households having access to either *dambo* or irrigation facilities. The guiding assumption behind this targeting criterion was that the number of households having such access was limited. This assumption was based on the indicative projections of the capacity of the ADDs to engage effectively in winter cultivation. However, in the unlikely event of the number of households having access to *dambo* or irrigation facilities being higher than their quota of the 2003 Winter TIP packs, communities were advised to give preference to poor households. However, the exact attributes of the poor households that were supposed to guide communities in their targeting, should this be necessary, were not specifically enumerated.

Results of the Study: Realities of Community Targeting

To what extent was community targeting of the 2003 Winter TIP successful on the basis of the officially prescribed criteria? The beneficiaries of TIP were supposed to be registered beneficiaries, as indicated in TIPLU register. The outcome of the analysis, however, indicates that there were significant

Table 1

Summary of individuals and households in the sample

	Number
Individuals on the cards: household head/other named individual	941
Individual registered for Winter TIP (according to household cards)	224
Individuals registered for Winter TIP (according to TIPLU register)	265
Individuals who received Winter TIP (according to household cards)	209
Individuals who were registered and received (according to household cards)	160
Households covered (total number)	915

Source: Adapted from Chinsinga *et al.* (2003).

Table 2

Access to *dambo* and receipt of Winter TIP

Access to *dambo*	Non-recipients		Recipients	
	N	%	*N*	%
No	260	35·5	16	7·7
Yes	472	64·5	193	92·3
Total	732	100·0	209	100·0

Source: Adapted from Chinsinga *et al.* (2003).

discrepancies between the number of individuals on the TIPLU list and the number that could actually be identified on the ground. The summary of the findings in terms of these discrepancies is presented in table 1.

Indeed, table 1 indicates a number of discrepancies. First, there is the question of "ghost" beneficiaries, that is, the discrepancy between the number of individuals on the TIPLU register and the number that could be identified on the ground. Second, there is the question of what happened to the 2003 Winter TIP packs that went missing before they were actually delivered to communities. Third, there is the question of who actually received the 2003 Winter TIP packs. Last but not least, there is the question of whether those receiving the Winter TIP packs had access either to *dambo* or to irrigation facilities. Expressed in percentage terms, the findings indicate that only 71 per cent of the 2003 Winter TIP recipients were registered beneficiaries; 29 per cent of those on the register did not receive a pack and 23 per cent of the packs went to non-registered individuals.

Table 2 demonstrates that community targeting was to a very great extent successful in terms of the selection of beneficiaries on the basis of *dambo* access. Of all the 2003 Winter TIP beneficiaries, only 8 per cent did not have

Table 3

Use of *dambo* compared with receipt of Winter TIP

Dambo use	Non-recipients		Recipients	
	N	%	*N*	%
No	416	56.8	46	22.0
Yes	316	43.2	163	78.0
Total	732	100.0	209	100.0

Source: Adapted from Chinsinga *et al.* (2003).

Table 4

Correlation between food security and receipt of Winter TIP

Received Winter TIP	FS (%)	FI (%)	EFI (%)	Total (%)
No	70	69	83	78
Yes	30	31	17	22
Total	100	100	100	100

Source: Adapted from Chinsinga *et al.* (2003).

access to *dambo*, which was the primary targeting criterion. This small degree of mistargeting could, as further demonstrated below, be attributed largely to the tendencies of some unscrupulous village heads to target even those without *dambo* access as long as they had good relations with them.

Table 3 indicates there were notable discrepancies between *dambo* use and the receipt of Winter TIP. This was, however, to a very great extent a result of conditions beyond the control of the beneficiaries, especially in the Lower Shire river districts of Chikwawa and Nsanje. The majority of the farmers were not using their *dambo*s in the 2003 winter cropping season, because these were so excessively waterlogged as to render them unfit for cultivation. In some cases, nevertheless, the beneficiaries' low levels of *dambo* use were more predictable. In Salima, for instance, the criteria for beneficiary selection had been changed altogether to target elderly individuals and those with physical disabilities, who for the most part were not in a position to use *dambo*.

Overall, according to table 4, some 22 per cent of the households in the villages visited were beneficiaries of the Winter TIP initiative. Strikingly, however, the percentage of the overall recipients is apparently higher than the average for food-secure (FS) and food-insecure (FI) households (at around 30 per cent) and lower than the average for the extremely food-insecure (EFI)

households (17 per cent). These results demonstrate that there was a slight preference for wealthier households over poorer households in the 2003 Winter TIP distribution. If poverty targeting had been successful—especially given that the number of households with access to either *dambo* or irrigation facilities was far greater than initially projected—there should not have been any food-secure or (merely) food-insecure beneficiaries of the 2003 Winter TIP.

Returning to table 2, however, raises a further critical question. It shows that up to 65 per cent of the non-beneficiaries of Winter TIP in 2003 had access to *dambo*. Why and how were households with *dambo* access excluded when access to *dambo* was supposed to be the primary targeting criterion? The obvious answer is that the quota of beneficiaries for the 2003 Winter TIP was limited. The number of packs distributed was well below the number of deserving beneficiaries, which blatantly exposed the weakness of "*dambo* access" as the primary eligibility criterion. *Dambo* access in rural Malawi is apparently widespread. A great number of households have access to *dambo* through either inheritance or renting from those households that have huge tracts of *dambo* land.

The results from focus group discussions are particularly illuminating in this regard. They indicate that those who ended up beneficiaries of the 2003 Winter TIP were hardly selected on the basis of the officially prescribed criteria. In practice, these criteria had been subject to wide-ranging amendments and modifications on the basis of local perceptions of need, equity and entitlement. Predictably, these practices were, *inter alia*, motivated by the idea of trimming the number of eligible beneficiaries to within the permitted quota. Much as the reinterpretation and modification of the officially prescribed criteria were not predominantly driven by fraudulent intentions there were, even so, a few instances in which the motives behind such actions were overtly malicious. It should be noted that, while the illustrations presented below use districts as a frame of reference, they should not be taken as passing a judgement on an entire district, merely on the villages that were specifically sampled for this study.

In Nsanje, the official criteria were essentially adhered to, but they decided to give priority to those households owning treadle pumps. The village head had decided to link the receipt of Winter TIP with the ownership of treadle pumps in order to encourage the adoption of the treadle pump technology. In keeping with the poverty criterion, households with treadle pumps that were resource-poor were given preference, compared to those that were better off.

The striking feature of the Nsanje beneficiary selection process was that the village head had unilaterally effected the changes in the targeting criteria. He argued that he took the decision to select beneficiaries on the basis of ownership of treadle pumps because neither the AEDO nor the TA had briefed him on how to go about selecting the beneficiaries. He was simply given a quota of beneficiaries for his village. He further indicated that he had decided to target poor households on the basis of his experience with the Summer TIP, which has been implemented for the last four years. Since, according to him, households in his village are almost indistinguishable on

the basis of well-being, he decided to target poorer households that had made sacrifices to procure treadle pumps as a primary screening criterion, on the grounds that households with treadle pumps were more likely to put the inputs to maximum productive use, since the decision to secure a treadle pump underlies a commitment to winter cultivation. He admitted, however, that his decision provoked some fierce resistance, since some households found it hard to believe that genuinely poor households could ever afford treadle pumps and took his decision as a mere pretext to leave them out of the free input scheme. But without clear guidance either from the AEDO or TA, he argued, this was—as far as he was concerned—a reasonable strategy of distributing benefits which were substantially limited.

If the overriding goal of the Winter TIP policy initiative was to increase the supply of maize during critical times, it might thus be argued that the decision of the village head to target the Winter TIP inputs the way he did was logical. If, indeed, ownership of a treadle pump underlines a household's commitment to winter cultivation, then his mode of targeting would have ensured increased maize supply, which would in turn have driven down the price of maize at vital moments, to the benefit of all in the community.

The criteria in Zomba were altered in order to encourage the adoption of the manure technology. This alteration had been influenced by an extension officer who pointed out that the village was far behind in the uptake of manure in the area. In consequence, the villagers agreed to target those households with *dambo* access and who were poorly endowed with resources, provided they had at least demonstrated willingness to adopt the manure technology.

The reactions of the people in Zomba contrasted sharply with those from Nsanje, in the sense that they had no reservations about the modifications made to the targeting criteria. This was particularly the case because the process of deciding on the targeting criteria was facilitated by an AEDO working closely with the village head. In the focus group discussions, the people emphasized that it was easier for them to appreciate the logic of targeting households that had demonstrated a degree of commitment to adopting the manure technology, mainly because the entire village had been involved in making the decision, even though it had been proposed to them by the AEDO. The people argued that "it is always difficult for anyone to accept being left out of schemes of free benefits when we are more or less identical in so far as our well being is concerned". Apparently, the AEDO was prompted to flag the proposal to target households that had at least adopted the manure technology, once he realized that *dambo* access in the village was more widespread than the quota for the Winter TIP beneficiaries allocated to the village.

In Karonga, the village we visited had been allocated only 12 people as beneficiaries of the 2003 Winter TIP. The village head indicated that he had been advised by the AEDO and TA on the targeting criteria to be followed in order to identify these beneficiaries. When he realized, however, that the quota of Winter TIP beneficiaries for his village was far more limited than the numbers of households with *dambo* access, he decided to convene an open village meeting to decide on how the 12 would-be beneficiaries should be

selected. They agreed that preference should be given to those households with an enviable track record in upland farming. According to focus group discussions, the justification for targeting beneficiaries in this way was that such households were bound to make productive use of the inputs.

Granted that the chosen households would make productive use of the inputs, the second level of their argument was that the benefits would possibly trickle down to almost every member of their community, for the simple reason that the village was composed of clans with close-knit social ties and because the practice of sharing food was reportedly widespread in their village. This is, however, difficult to believe. Recent studies in Malawi have rather shown traditional practices of food-sharing to be more or less on the verge of extinction, because of the generalized nature of the shocks that have plagued the country in recent times (cf. Devereux 1999; Chinsinga 2004). Food production has become very expensive in terms of both inputs and labour. People are therefore not willing to share out food for free. Nevertheless, just as in the case of Zomba, the Karonga targeting criterion was accepted without reservations because it was decided on in at least a consultative and transparent manner.

The case of Mzimba shows at least some demonstrable impact of the TIP intervention. One of the policy objectives of TIP was to sensitize farmers about the special attributes of OPV maize varieties—in particular that they can, unlike hybrid maize varieties, be recycled without losing their yield potential for at least three consecutive growing seasons. In Mzimba, the villagers agreed that all registered beneficiaries should be required to contribute at least 3 kg of maize seed from their harvest towards the creation of a village seed bank. The idea was to make the village at least seed-secure for the next three growing seasons. This meant that households considered less likely to fulfil this requirement were left out. According to the focus group discussions carried out in the village, some households who felt uncomfortable with this criterion had voluntarily surrendered their packs to individuals who they considered more able to fulfil the requirement of repaying the prescribed quantity of maize seed to the village seed bank.

The Mzimba encounter illustrates a case of conflict between policy goals of the TIP initiative and the poverty-targeting criterion. Since *dambo* access could not serve as a decisive targeting criterion, the poverty criterion as the second-best alternative had been traded off against the ability of households to contribute part of their harvest from Winter TIP inputs to the village seed bank. According to focus group discussions, most of those giving up their Winter TIP entitlements were admittedly relatively poorer households, who could probably not afford the labour required to produce enough for themselves as well as for the village seed bank.

The villagers were reportedly happy with the decision to target those who volunteered to contribute to the village seed bank but, in a community forum like this, the voices of the marginalized segments of society are rarely heeded. It could nevertheless be argued that the decision to target Winter TIP beneficiaries the way they did was, from the TIP policy point of view, potentially optimal, especially since the entire quota of beneficiaries for the village was quite small. If, indeed, the beneficiaries could contribute to the village seed bank as stipulated, and consequently expand access to improved seed in

subsequent growing seasons, then everybody would be better off than if the inputs had been dispensed otherwise. This is, of course, assuming that the proceeds of the village seed bank could have been accessible to all members of the village on an equitable basis. In this particular case, the long-term policy objective of the TIP policy initiative posed a significant challenge to the poverty-targeting criterion which should have been at the core of the beneficiary selection process (given the widespread extent of *dambo* access). Ironically, seen from the TIP's policy point of view, the community's decision was pretty laudable for the long term, but substantially unfair from the poverty-targeting standpoint.

The last case comes from Mangochi district. Here the alteration of the criteria was primarily meant to ensure equity among the villagers. They did not want to exclude households on the basis of their not having access to *dambo*. Up to 45 individuals were registered as beneficiaries but, when the packs were delivered to the village, a meeting facilitated by the AEDO and the village head was called. At this meeting, the people were advised that they should volunteer to cultivate portions of *dambo* to be allocated to them along one of the streams in the village.[5] It was further agreed that beneficiaries could get a Winter TIP pack if and only if they had prepared their *dambo*s and were ready to plant. This case is particularly interesting because, given that *dambo* access was the primary targeting criterion, all the Winter TIP packs should strictly have been given to the single household which owned the entire *dambo* in the village.

Both registered and non-registered farmers showed up for the *dambo* preparation exercise. However, several of the households which were initially registered failed to prepare their portions of *dambo*. Their packs were then given to those who were not registered but had managed to cultivate the *dambo* portions assigned to them. In fact, there were several households that got two packs, since they were able to cultivate twice as much *dambo* as was considered adequate for a single Winter TIP pack. At the time of this study, five packs were yet to be claimed since there was no one forthcoming to cultivate the *dambo* portions, as had been agreed. This case illustrates how, if given a chance, communities can come up with innovative solutions that are not only fair but also which do not jeopardize social harmony, especially where schemes of free benefits are concerned.

As already indicated, there were some isolated instances in which the people entrusted with the registration exercise flouted procedures with ill intent. In these cases, the entire administration of the 2003 Winter TIP logistics was almost always shrouded in immense secrecy. In the cases of Ntcheu and Machinga, for instance, the village heads said they decided against convening a village meeting to sensitize the people about the 2003 Winter TIP registration. They argued that calling for a village meeting would have been problematic because of the limited quota of beneficiaries assigned to their villages. They therefore decided to exercise their prerogative in the registration of the Winter TIP beneficiaries.

Secretive conduct on the part of other village heads enabled them to manipulate the registers. In Chikwawa, for instance, the village head replaced the initial registered beneficiary with his own daughter, who did not

even live in the village. (She stays in town and is married to a senior police officer.) Wherever the administration of Winter TIP was a secretive affair, there tended to be multiple recipients in the households of the village heads. When anomalies of this nature were exposed during the research process, communities were very bitter with those who were responsible for the registration and distribution of the 2003 Winter TIP inputs. It was possible to expose these anomalies through the use of the household cards and TIPLU register. Through this exercise, communities were thus, for the first time, provided with a clearer visual presentation of what had transpired during the administration of the 2003 Winter TIP. It was therefore hardly surprising that most communities took this as an opportunity to urge local leaders to be transparent and accountable when administering programmes of this nature. They argued that their pleas for transparency and accountability had been vindicated by the exposure of what the local leaders had thought had been effectively concealed.

In almost all villages visited there was widespread awareness that not everyone can benefit from the government's handouts, because of the resource constraints. Apparently, the overwhelming desire of the people is that the processes of deciding on the beneficiaries of schemes of free benefits should be made as transparent as possible. In short, there is a great deal of hunger on the part of the communities to be involved in the decision-making processes affecting their lives. The Mangochi case is particularly instructive in this regard. There were several cases of the registered not receiving packs, but they were not resentful because they had agreed in an open village meeting that the Winter TIP packs would only be released to those who had prepared their *dambo* portions.

Concluding Remarks: Reflections on the Way Forward

There is little doubt that interventions such as the 2003 Winter TIP, designed to reverse the upward spiral of food insecurity, are highly desirable. The pertinent question arising from the findings of this study, however, is: how should interventions of this nature be designed? The issue is particularly relevant when such interventions—as in the case of the 2003 Winter TIP—champion community-based strategies of delivery. The key finding of this study is that there are various local perceptions and interpretations of need, equity and entitlement, which may not necessarily resonate with the officially articulated positions. These findings underlie the need for the involvement of the grassroots in the design of such interventions, in order to achieve the overall desired strategic impact.

However, the study has raised a number of critical issues bearing on the desirability of the grassroots involvement in community-based targeting mechanisms. First, the question of targeting itself is perceived as an alien concept in rural Malawi and, as such, it often provokes fierce resistance and resentment. The recurrent argument against targeting, encountered in this study, is that it makes no sense to target when the welfare of most rural households is essentially the same. Second, the study exposed the failure of the policy-making process within the agricultural sector in the country. The assumption that *dambo* access was not as widespread as it eventually turned

out to be illustrates the problematic nature of this policy-making process. In all fairness, this assumption should have been based on reasonably concrete data. Third, the targeting process turned out to be problematic because those in the know did not always fully brief those who were to facilitate the registration process, especially the village heads. Last but not least, the modifications effected to the officially prescribed targeting criteria were at least acceptable in those villages where the processes of doing so were perceived to be fair, transparent and sufficiently accountable.

These findings suggest that communities ought to be involved in policy decisions of this nature right at the design stage. The major mishap in the case of the 2003 Winter TIP can be traced back to the time that the assumption was made that access to *dambo* in rural Malawi was limited. Consultations at this stage, coupled with well-informed policy simulations, would have helped ensure reasonable estimates about the capacity of ADDs to engage in winter cultivation. Additionally, these consultations could have given decision-makers a clearer idea of how people in rural Malawi access *dambo*, particularly where ownership is concentrated in the hands of few households. The findings further point to the need for adequately sensitizing communities about programmes of this nature. The illustrations presented above suggest that, while community targeting is possible, communities need to be sensitized about this, including about the underlying logic of the targeting guidelines to be used. It is no coincidence that where the process of targeting was facilitated in a seemingly fair, transparent and accountable manner, communities were reasonably satisfied with it and often harboured no ill-feelings toward those in charge, even though in most cases the criteria used tended not to be pro-poor. The poverty-targeting criterion itself should have assumed greater prominence, especially since *dambo* access turned out to be so much more widespread than initially projected. Nevertheless, even if the communities had used the poverty-targeting criterion, they would have still been at a loss because the specific attributes of poor households had not been specifically enumerated to serve as guidelines.

The dilemma in community targeting seems to be that, left to themselves, communities may be much more willing to exclude certain segments of the poor on the basis of some kind of justification of deservingness, as has been demonstrated in this study. This is, in fact, what makes the involvement of the grassroots imperative in the design of interventions of this nature. While it is essential for clear guidelines to be provided, communities must be allowed to factor into these their own, location-specific notions of need, equity and entitlement, for it is almost impossible to run a programme like the 2003 Winter TIP using one-size-fits-all yardsticks. A genuine commitment to community participation should weigh local community criteria much more heavily than the centrally decided yardsticks. Without such an allowance for the views of the grassroots, such programmes are always likely to be considered a failure by national standards, while the people who matter perceive them as successful. A uniform targeting programme would thus be ineffective, if the ultimate goal is to empower the grassroots and encourage participation. Nonetheless, every effort must be made to keep local actors entrusted with the process of community targeting accountable through

external auditing and evaluation, preferably through village-wide open meetings.

Acknowledgements

The research reported in this paper was sponsored by the Department for International Development (DFID) of Malawi, but the interpretations or conclusions presented here do not necessarily reflect DFID thinking or policy. I acknowledge with thanks the help of Sarah Levy of Calibre Consultants and Statistical Services Centre, and Carlos Barahona of the University of Reading, in designing the study's methodology.

Notes

1. *Dambo* refers to pieces of land used for winter cultivation primarily on the basis of residual moisture, often in areas bordering streams and rivers. *Dambo* is thus an agricultural asset that provides farmers with the opportunity to cultivate additional crops, either to supplement their meagre harvests from the main season or for sale. Access to *dambo* can be gained by borrowing, renting or even share-cropping, as well as by ownership.
2. Note that Malawi has 28 districts. There were until 1994 only 24 districts. The additional four were created between 1994 and 2002. These districts are spread among three administrative regions, namely, north, centre and south. Within each district, one village was randomly selected and an additional village was also chosen at random as a possible replacement in case the priority village could not be either found or accessed. The list of villages in the chosen districts from which the selection was made came from the register of beneficiaries for Winter TIP compiled by the TIP Logistics Unit (TIPLU).
3. A household was defined as a group of people eating from the same pot, that is, sharing resources like a granary but not necessarily living under the same roof. For instance, a junior wife in a polygamous set-up constitutes a household if she does not share the resources of the husband and senior wife's household.
4. Malawi is divided into eight Agricultural Development Divisions (ADDs) on the basis of the diversity of the agro-ecological conditions across the country. These ADDs are subdivided into Rural Development Projects (RDPs), whose boundaries coincide with district boundaries. These RDPs are further subdivided into Extension Planning Areas (EPAs) and then into Sections where the Agricultural Extension and Development Officers (AEDOs) are based as the foot soldiers of the agricultural extension system in the country. The decision not to distribute quotas for the 2003 Winter TIP beneficiaries on the basis of EPAs but instead on the basis of Traditional Authorities (TAs) was taken mainly because some EPAs extend beyond two or even three TAs. The TA was therefore considered as a more suitable unit for the possible effective administration of the 2003 Winter TIP logistics.
5. The entire *dambo* along this stream belongs to a single individual. He shared it out to those willing to undertake cultivation at no cost at all.

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