

**Who controls development?**

**NGOs, accountability and power in rural  
Malawi.**

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## ***1. Background***

This paper presents the main findings of the field research done in Malawi for the mid-project.<sup>3</sup> It analyses key components of community resilience<sup>4</sup> (Twigg 2007) and shows the implications of the selection of social communication channels during vulnerability and capacity assessment (IFRC 2006) for the quality and sustainability of the whole intervention.

Vulnerability and capacity assessment (VCA) is one of the growing set of

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The third finding was that social communication channels are inevitably connected with local power structures. This is hardly a surprise when we consider the importance of communication to make and enforce decisions. The absence of the modern state, mass media or other communication channels operating above the local level adds to the close association between social communication channels and local power structures. When we connect the findings, we have to accept that NGOs cannot assume their independence from local power structures but, at the same time, they are poorly equipped to ensure the impartiality of their assessments.

#### ***4. Discussion***

This weakness compromises international standards of quality and accountability.<sup>7</sup> Without an explicit power analysis, the impartiality of a VCA is not assured and aid might be used to further particular social or political standpoints. This is especially true in poor areas such as rural Malawi, with a high density of activities funded by international organisations and local stakeholders with a good understanding of the



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decisions such as targeting free distributions of goods to certain segments of the population.

International NGOs sometimes try to avoid these risks by setting up independent avoid the challenges to the quality and accountability of community-based interventions and, more importantly, it damages their potential to empower vulnerable people and build local capacities. The results of the field research showed the concerns of respondents in different positions of local power structures over the consequences of this approach, including misled participation, fragmentation of community structures and competition with both traditional and modern authorities.

### ***References***

Alsop, R. Heinsohn, N. (2005) *Measuring Empowerment in Practice: Structuring Analysis and Framing Indicators*. Policy Research Working Paper 5502, World Bank, Washington DC. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781107301100.001>