

Reimagining agricultural development pathways in Malawi through participatory video

Pierre Frederick André Moorsom

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June 2020, The University of Leeds and Pierre Frederick André Moorsom

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Abstract

Hierarchical top-down approaches to agricultural development, based predominantly on neoliberal priorities, supported by materialistic philosophies and positivist evidence bases, dominate agricultural development chains, squeezing out space for alternatives to exist, let alone thrive. Participatory approaches to research and development were initially conceived as ways to break out of top-down development chains. Yet over time they have been sucked in to materialistic and neoliberal pathways and in the process have become tools for the tokenistic involvement and/or manipulation of rural Malawians, whose perspectives continue to go unseen and unheard.

This investigation took the stance that genuine participatory research is still possible if space is systematically made for participants to take control and work with researchers/facilitators in processes of reflection and open communication. Participatory video (PV) in particular can provide platforms for participants to be seen and heard as they produce a film, or films, which can be shared with diverse audiences.

A thorough mixed method approach based on 87 semi-structured interviews, followed by a five month PV process in one case study location, including 16 workshops and a further 6 weeks of editing, led to a participatory film entitled *Tigwirane Manja* (Holding Hands), which was screened 9 times to diverse audiences. This extensive process provided the means to explore the potential of genuine participatory research using PV and created space to reimagine agricultural development in Malawi.

Prologue

In many ways this project began in 2012 when I first moved to Malawi to work on an agroecology farm near the capital Lilongwe. There I met Samuel Baluti, a smallholder farmer from Chirombo village who had been practicing permaculture for several years, and with whom I subsequently set up a small NGO focused on facilitating agroecology in villages in Mangochi district, at the southern end of Lake Malawi. For three years Samuel and I worked together, helping many rural Malawians set up productive gardens on marginal land and organising trainings in permaculture design.

Though the project enjoyed some success, it always felt uncomfortable. With an aversion to hierarchies and top-down development driven by self-proclaimed western experts, my intention had been to do grassroots work with rural Malawians, making space for local perspectives to connect with the agroecology and permaculture movements. I rented a little house in a village called Nankhwali and began working predominantly in a neighbouring village called Kasankha. Yet, no matter how hard I tried, I could not seem to escape a prescriptive format. Over the course of a little over two years, the problem became increasingly clear. Despite my desire and efforts to make space for local perspectives and for rural Malawians to take control, the ideas, vision, and post-development permaculture narrative that I believed in, was my own. I was asking people to get involved in my vision and getting frustrated when people only sporadically took ownership of it. In short, I was trying to help according to my western understanding of reality, when I should really have been learning to listen.

I came to the conclusion that if rural Malawians were to adopt a path that worked better from them, then they would have to design it themselves. Perhaps I could create spaces in which they could do that, and unlock opportunities for me, and others, to help them make their visions possible. When the opportunity to undertake this PhD presented itself I was at a crossroads: either I gave up and accepted that I was powerless to help and that rural Malawi would continue

down the road of materialistic and neoliberal development (and headed off to Brazil to work on an agroecology farm), or I somehow found a way to create a space in which rural Malawians could reimagine their own pathways of development. I settled on the latter and began this PhD process, which has now lasted a little under 4 years. After initially becoming quite lost in agricultural development theories and approaches to research, I settled on attempting to facilitate a genuine participatory process with rural Malawians, working with my long-term friend Samuel Baluti as my research assistant.

Introduction

I. Background and Rationale

Participatory approaches to research and development, based on constructivist ontology, were originally conceived as radical ways to change hierarchical development chains by putting people in control of development. However, participatory development has largely come to signify the manipulative and/or tokenistic assimilation of people into preconceived materialistic and neoliberal development chains (Arnstein 1969; Chambers 1997; Cornwall 2008). This research is based on a desire to open up space for genuine participatory research and development, defined as development in which participants are in control (Arnstein 1969), may choose to self-mobilise (Pretty 1995), and may open up transformative processes of social organisation (White 1996). The following paragraphs will introduce why such a genuine participatory approach to development might be necessary briefly explore how this research was designed, before examining these topics in greater depth in Chapters 1 and 2.

Mainstream research and development chains are dominated by dogmatic materialistic philosophies and neoliberal priorities. These philosophies and priorities are so deeply ingrained in the way people see the world that many people are not even aware that they are conforming to them. Part of the effect is to constrain what can be said, done, and even thought (Sheldrake 2013, 2017; Rushton and Williams 2012). Funders such as the World Bank, western governmental development agencies, and increasingly private so called 'philanthropic' organisations, such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF), set the tone and direction of development according to their materialistic philosophies and neoliberal priorities. NGOs compete for this funding and end users, people like participants in this research, are often simplistically labelled beneficiaries of this top-down development chain (Brooks 2015, 2016).

The above process tends to be based on self-reinforcing positivist evidence and paternalistic social Darwinist narratives, in which progress and development are defined in materialistic terms. According to these narratives, backward, underdeveloped nations and their people are rescued by advanced western or westernised institutions, whose expert knowledge enables them to the promised land of economic growth and development. This widespread condescension is increasingly reliant on narrow tools such as cost benefit analysis, which tends to promote a neoliberal deregulatory agenda, to justify policies (Scoones et al. 2002; Ackerman and Heinzerling 2004). The result is the systematic marginalisation and co-option of people with alternative priorities and denial of alternative philosophies (Leach et al. 2010).

The impact of materialism and neoliberalism on agriculture, is that land is seen as matter to be utilised in order to maximise yields, productivity, and efficiency, all of which are defined in predominantly monetary terms. Social Darwinist views of progress, supported by self-reinforcing positivist evidence, have resulted in the aggressive marginalisation of diverse traditional alternatives, which tend to be seen as primitive, in favour of green revolution technologies. There is a need to create space for people to reflect on agricultural pathways and come up with reimagined forms of development, if further socio-agro-ecological marginalisation and destruction is to be avoided (Horton 1995; Shiva 1993, 2000, 2016; Mawere 2010).

This is particularly true in a country like Malawi, which is highly dependent on development assistance precisely because this extends donor influence through neoliberalism, which limits what is thinkable and doable (OECD 2017:8). International agribusinesses profit from the heavy emphasis on materialistic approaches to agriculture based on synthetic inputs and hybrid seeds of a very limited variety, with devastating socio-agro-ecological impacts (Bekunda et al. 1997; Chinsinga 2011). Thus a genuine participatory research process that made space for rural Malawians to reimagine pathways of development was deemed particularly appropriate.

Alternative social and agricultural movements that tend to favour more holistic approaches to social organisation and land management, are often articulated in terms designed to counter dominant materialistic and neoliberal narratives. Though this is understandable, this approach often leads to deadlocks in which opposing sides contradict one-another, using their own expert data. Alternative movements are thus dragged in to mainstream pathways, seeking to justify their legitimacy based on materialistic metrics within a neoliberal contexts, doing precious little to make space for already vulnerable people, whose views continue to go unheard and unheeded (Leach et al 2010).

Other alternative movement can tend to portray traditional ways of living as social and ecological post-development utopias. The idea being that if only meddling outsiders would leave local people alone, they would live in peace and harmony. This form of paternalism is a simplistic interpretation of traditional realities that ignores the impacts of colonialism and neo-colonialism, and the often-pressing need for new socio-agro-ecological processes and systems, adapted to current realities (Narby 1999:152; Pyke 2010:551). If agricultural development, and indeed development more broadly, is to be reimagined, then more value should be placed on genuine participatory processes that make space for the experiences of people in their respective contexts.

In order to conduct genuine participatory research, there is a need to do more than just listen to what participants have to say (Gaventa et al. 1998). Modern day rural Malawi is a complex hybridised mixture of traditional indigenous worldviews and practices, with colonial, materialistic, and neoliberal influences. Over the last century, western philosophies and priorities have become increasingly ingrained in rural Malawian ways of life. Many anti-colonial writers, namely Fanon (1961, 1970), Freire (1972) and Memmi, (1957) have identified the 'colonisation of the mind' as one of the main impacts of colonialism, typically characterised by a sense of inferiority among local people, as they aspire to be like their colonisers. Over time, the priorities of the dominant system have become more and more embedded in local worldviews, as new generations

internalise and embed their colonised mind-sets, reflecting colonial priorities back at each other and even holding one-another to colonial standards.

Therefore, genuine participatory research needs to make space for participants to cultivate their awareness through deep reflexivity and open communication. However, the impact of years of colonialism, dictatorship, and top-down development, is likely to have left many rural Malawians mistrustful of research and development processes. Finding ways to cultivate trust is therefore key to paving the way for participants to take control. Taking into account the hybridised nature of rural Malawian realities, this research was centred on cultivating trust through open communication and a genuine approach to participatory research that would enable participants to identify problems, design solutions, and determine their own pathways of developments (Farrington et al. 1993; Cornwall 2008).

The term 'genuine participation' draws on early work on participatory typologies, such as Arnstein (1969) and revisited by Farrington et al. (1993), Pretty (1995), White (1996), Hickey et al. (2005), and Cornwall (2008), to indicate participatory approaches that "enable people to exercise a meaningful part in making the decisions that affect their lives" (Cornwall 2008:281). In order to be genuinely participatory, researchers need to recognise and trust that local people are ideally placed to determine what is best for them. Taking a thorough approach to participatory research, based on multiple methods and a triangulation process, can help in this endeavour by building confidence in the results (see Chapter Two: Methods and Methodology).

However, even if participants choose to engage in genuine participatory research, participatory processes are often criticised for being overly local and therefore not contributing enough to wider debates on methodologies for opening up alternative forms of social organisation (Hickey et al. 2005). Without breadth participatory research might contribute to self-mobilisation leading to local transformations but there is little hope of wider transformative change. The choice of methods can go some way to alleviating these concerns. This research

used a thorough participatory action research (PAR) methodology, with participatory video (PV) as the central method.

PV is a flexible method for conducting participatory research. At its core, it enables participants to learn new skills, explore their experiences through reflection and deliberation, and enjoy themselves. The end result is a film, or films, created by participants, or co-created by participants and facilitators (Lunch and Lunch 2006). The decision to use PV was partly motivated by a desire to give participants the chance to become researchers in their own contexts, before communicating their perspectives to wider audiences through film, if they so chose. In this way, not only might PV provide a platform for rural Malawians to reflect on their experiences and reimagine their development as they saw fit, but it might also enable them to be more widely seen and heard (Harman 2019), thus partly addressing Hickey et al.'s (2005) concerns, and providing insights into methodologies for unlocking participatory forms of social organisation locally and more widely.

Finally, Cohen and Uphoff (1980:213) point out that participatory research often suffers from a lack of clarity. It is partly this fuzziness that can make it difficult to distinguish between manipulative participatory development and genuinely participatory processes in which participants are in control. Therefore, I will reiterate the intentions of this research, in the hope that this might provide clarity, combined with the above introduction and the many pages to come.

The aims and objectives of this research were to facilitate a genuine participatory process in which participants could take control reflect, deliberate, and holistically analyse their village's social, agricultural and ecological realities, identifying problems and proposing solutions. Space was made for participants to determine the narrative of their analysis, how deep it should be, and how widely the output should be shared. The process was based on thorough research and open communication, in order to actively encourage reflection and deliberation, and to cultivate trust. Depending on participants' wishes, the output of the process, a film, would open up the possibility of wide participation,

which could create new cycles of reflection and deliberation, potentially with diverse audiences in different contexts. The whole would help to answer the question:

To what extent can participatory video contribute to reimagining development in Malawi?

II. Question and Contributions to Literature

This research sought to make six interconnected contributions to knowledge. Firstly, the PV process used in this investigation yielded a holistic analysis of the agricultural and socio-ecological issues in one specific village, called Chirombo, situated at the southern end of Lake Malawi (see Section 2.3). The complex film that resulted from this analysis, entitled *Tigwirane Manja* (Holding Hands), is in itself an original contribution to knowledge, which can be seen as contributing to the holistic understanding of this specific local context and more broadly as an insight into the holistic results that can be achieved through PAR using PV, as opposed to the reductionist results that tend to characterise prescriptive positivist research. What's more, this contribution can be understood as coming directly from participants, rather than resulting from a third party analysis of data. This understanding of how knowledge is created, in itself contributes to characterising genuine participatory research.

This thesis also contributes to the understanding of what constitutes genuine participatory research by combining reflections on the work of Arnstein (1969), Pretty (1995), White (1996), Chambers (1997), Cornwall (2008), as well as critiques by Cooke and Kothari (2001), Francis (2001), and Hickey et al. (2005), in order to provide a clear approach to genuine participatory research based on open communication and deliberation to cultivate trust, awareness, self-reflection, and collective reflection. The practice of participatory research has been utilised by many others but the clarity and openness provided in this thesis, in combination with a thorough approach to PV as a central method (see below), is a valuable contribution to the understanding and practice of genuine

participatory research, which demonstrates the considerable efforts that are required.

Thirdly, the combination of all the above provides a particularly thorough example of a transformative participatory process. What's more, the conclusions that are drawn, in particular on the need to focus greater attention on reflexivity with both participants and audiences, open up possible new cycles of PV that could fit together in reimagined interconnected development chains. Thus, this research builds on the work of Pink (2001) and Harman (2019), contributing to the growing view that visual methods could be key to transforming research and development pathways.

Like participatory research more generally, PV has been used many times and the approach used here is not revolutionary. However the way PV was used in combination with an exhaustive semi-structured interview process (87 semi-structured interviews in total), contributes an example of how mixed methods and a thorough approach, can provide confidence through triangulation. 87 semi-structured interviews were followed by a five month PV process, including one month of preparation, during which time all interviews were transcribed and collated in preparation for 16 workshops, a further 6 weeks of editing based on an extensive participatory communication process, and 9 screenings of the film *Tigwirane Manja*.¹ The depth of trust and open communication necessary to conduct this research was made possible thanks to a 6-year friendship with my research assistant Samuel Baluti, a farmer from Chirombo village (see the Prologue and Section 2.4.2).

Fourthly, this investigation was partly inspired by pathways theories emanating from the STEPS centre at the University of Sussex. These theories contend that mainstream neoliberal development squeezes out alternatives, with the latter then framed in opposition to mainstream development, creating a deadlock of contradictory certainties. They contend that it may be possible to find pathways through this deadlock through the use of open qualitative methods, based on

¹ Only the 9 main screenings are referenced in this thesis

social constructivist ontology (Chambers 1997; Leach et al. 2010). With a commitment to a thorough and genuinely participatory approach and open communication, this research contributes a probing and practical example of how pathways theories function in practice, and offers some pointers to areas that may need more attention, particularly the need for deep reflexivity through open communication, in multiple settings.

Fifthly, the focus on reflexivity and a thorough PV process, combined with a commitment to social constructivist ontology, exemplified by Ghandi's (2009:xvii) definition of God as "I have my truth, even though I honour yours", opened up the possibility of transformative personal and systemic change, through the acceptance of the Anthony Paradox (Anthony 1993). The ontological grounding of the research made space for me to genuinely listen to and respect traditional vitalist and pantheist perspectives, as well as current hybridised views. In so doing, and combined with a thorough participatory process, the research offered a methodological and philosophical pathway that created space to step out of the confines of materialistic philosophies and neoliberal priorities, which Sheldrake (2017) and Rushton (2015) respectively identify as constraining people's minds.

Though people's respective contexts and communities of practice may continue to constrain the possibility to let go of materialism and neoliberalism, in order to walk a different path, by indicating how the walls around what is thinkable can be removed, some people may be able to find their own pathways out. This could contribute to shrinking the dogmatic boundaries that have been placed around knowledge, thus potentially identifying pathways to reimagined personal and societal forms of development in different contexts. What's more, the genuinely participatory methodology that was used may provide insights for those people who can find such space within themselves, to facilitate processes that make space for others to do the same. This contribution could prove valuable to those who choose to follow it.

Finally, genuine PAR using PV, contributes an approach to dealing with the social and methodological missing links that frustrate alternative socio-agro-ecological movements like agroecology and permaculture (Rosset et al. 2011; Hathaway 2015). Both of these movements have a tendency to be sucked in to a clash of contradictory certainties that can result in alternative forms of materialistic dogma, which could further marginalise already vulnerable people. Dropping predefined perspectives and framing alternative movements with open social constructivist ontologies, using PAR and PV, could offer a pathway to reimagining development and thus strengthen the underlying objectives of these movements.

III. The Case Study Location: Chirombo

Though all of the above contributions can be understood as affecting wider contexts, this thesis focuses on both agriculture and Malawi as a context that lends itself perfectly to this investigation. The research began in July 2017 and ended in June 2018, with the majority of time spent in Chirombo, at the southern end of lake Malawi (see map below for details). Screenings in the UK began in July 2018 and, though they are still on-going, for the purposes of this research, ended in November 2019. For readers, the ideal time to watch the film is between Chapters 4 and 5, with a possible second viewing running alongside Chapter 5.

Chirombo is nestled in a bay at the southern end of lake Malawi and is made up of two main villages: Chirombo and Mberesera. The bay is at the base of the Nankumba peninsula the northern most point of which is Chembe village, commonly known as Cape McClear, a popular tourist destination nestled in a bay in Cape McClear Nature reserve – a series of tree covered hills and fishing villages. The largest village in the area is Monkey Bay, one of the main ports on Lake Malawi. The nearest town is Mangochi, some 70kms away, and Chichewa is the dominant language, though there are some for whom Chiyao is the first language. Many people have a basic grasp of English but it isn't widely spoken. The area is predominantly Christian, with some Muslims, though all religions are

mixed with traditional beliefs and practices. Further details about Chirombo can be found in Section 2.3 and Chapter 3.



Figure 1: Chirombo, Monkey Bay, Mangochi District, Malawi (Courtesy of Google Maps)

IV. Thesis Outline

Chapter One: Literature Review

The purpose of this chapter is to build on the introduction, expanding on key themes, the Malawian agricultural context, and providing a thorough theoretical underpinning for this research project.

Chapter Two: Methodology and Methods

This chapter presents the methods and methodology used in this research project, including a further examination of the primary method: participatory

video (PV) and the way that it was used as part of a sequence of methods, including extensive semi-structured interviews.

Chapter Three: Understanding Chirombo

The purpose of this chapter is to provide readers with insights into life in Chirombo, drawing on testimonies from the semi-structured interviews to paint a picture of village life from past to present. The focus is on local governance, traditional philosophies, and agricultural practices. A running theme of the chapter is that village life has transitioned, and is transitioning, from connectedness and cooperation, to disconnected individualism.

Chapter Four: Participatory Video Workshops

Chapter Four is designed to provide readers with insights into the PV process and some of the key obstacles to genuine and deep participation. The chapter offers descriptions of PV exercises as well as pragmatic insights into the practice of genuine and open participatory research, exploring ways that the process cultivated open communication, trust, enjoyment, inclusivity, awareness, and a holistic analysis that lead to the making of the film *Tigwirane Manja*, which readers are encouraged to watch after reading this chapter.

Chapter Five: Behind the Scenes on *Tigwirane Manja*

This chapter provides an open behind the scenes look at how *Tigwirane Manja* was made, demonstrating the complexity of making a participatory film with over thirty participants, and the flexibility of the PV method. The chapter concludes with some reflections on lessons learned from the process, which may be of interest to people wanting to implement PV.

Chapter Six: Screenings

Focusing on screenings in Chirombo, Lilongwe, and the UK, this chapter explores how genuine and deep PV can be used for wide communication by examining audience reactions. One of the main conclusions of this chapter is that processes of reflection with audiences are needed if genuine participatory methods are to lead to wider transformative change.

Chapter Seven: Discussion

The discussion draws together findings and reflections of this research in order to respond to the question: To what extent can participatory video contribute to reimagining development in Malawi? These reflections help to answer the above question and clarify the key contributions of this investigation.

Epilogue

Finally, in the Epilogue I will explore how this process pushed me to go deep into my own social conditioning, making space for life affirming choices and a transformative pathway of my own.

Chapter One: Literature Review

Introduction

Participatory approaches to research were originally intended as radical processes that would put people in control of development (Arnstein 1969). However, over the past fifty years, and particularly since the rise of neoliberalism, participation has been assimilated into mainstream development discourse and practice, and has come to mean anything in which people are involved. A strong counter critique has emerged that exposes the ways in which this mainstreaming of participatory development reinforces the status quo (Cornwall 2008) as well as a need for researchers to think critically about the tools of participatory research and provide clarity through specificity (Cohen and Uphoff 1980; Cook and Kothari 2001). These debates continue to be recycled and reinforced in a Malawian post-colonial context, with rural Malawians often on the receiving end of ill-conceived, manipulative, and/or tokenistic participatory processes.

In the following pages I will lay out why a genuine participatory approach to research, based on deep reflection and open communication, was deemed necessary in order to reimagine development pathways. This will be done, by analysing typologies of participatory research and some common critiques in Section 1.1, before presenting the social constructivist ontology that underpins this research, and is necessary in order to conduct a genuinely participatory investigation in Section 1.2. This will be followed by a critical analysis of materialism and neoliberalism in Section 1.3, exploring how these mainstream philosophies and priorities, underpinned by positivist research, have come to dominate development discourse and practices, limiting what is thinkable.

In Section 1.4 particular attention will be paid to how the above patterns play out in Malawi, with a focus on the impact of colonialism and neo-colonialism in the form of dogmatic materialism and neoliberalism, the Fertiliser Input Subsidy Programme (FISP) and attempts to change the way government extension

services function through a process of decentralisation. Section 1.5 will begin to unpack traditional Malawian worldviews, before critically examining the agroecology and permaculture movements as existing socio-agricultural alternatives to mainstream neoliberal development. In the final Section 1.6 participatory research will be revisited, with a particular focus on participatory action research (PAR) and participatory video (PV), the methodology and methods used in this project. The conclusion will then open up to chapter two, in which the methodology and methods will be further unpacked.

1.1 Participatory Research

Conceived in the mid-20th century, the concept of participatory research infused the practice of international agricultural development, thanks to the likes of Sherry Arnstein and later Robert Chambers, whose theoretical and practical work remains hugely influential (Arnstein 1969; Chambers 1981, 1994, 1997). Participatory research was conceived as part of a wider paradigm shift in which “multiple, local and individual realities are recognised, accepted, enhanced and celebrated” (Chambers 1997:103). One of the main reasons for the emergence of participatory research, was as part of a wider reaction against prescriptive and dogmatic “positivist, reductionist, mechanistic, standardised-package, top-down models and development blueprints” (Chambers 1997:188), explored in Section 1.3, that tend to be extractive and framed by an underlying materialistic philosophy.

Rather than extracting information from research participants and constructing centralised policies based on ‘standardised packages’, Chambers and others envisaged systems in which researchers immersed themselves in local life, cultivated self-awareness and facilitated participatory processes that would enable people to take control in their respective locations (Arnstein 1969; Chambers 1981, 1994, 1997). Early pioneers envisaged participatory approaches to research that would result in flexible, collaboratively designed solutions to local problems, based on deliberative and deeply democratic processes. Flexible solutions can be re-negotiated, as people respond to the challenges of their

locally specific contexts, a marked contrast with current centralised governance structures that tend to follow ‘development blueprints’ and are often characterised by mechanistic rigidity (Chambers 1997; Leach et al. 2010).

However, the term ‘participatory research’ was soon applied to anything in which people are involved (Cornwall 2008:270). As participation was sucked in to the mainstream, it’s meaning became fuzzy and was used for anything from manipulation, to genuine citizen control. In order to help people navigate the maze of different types of participation, Sherry Arnstein created a *Ladder of Citizen Participation* (see Figure 2 below), providing a linear visual of the different ways that the participatory label can be used. On the top rungs of the ladder are citizen control, delegated power, and partnership, as the ultimate degrees of citizen power, corresponding with genuine participatory research.

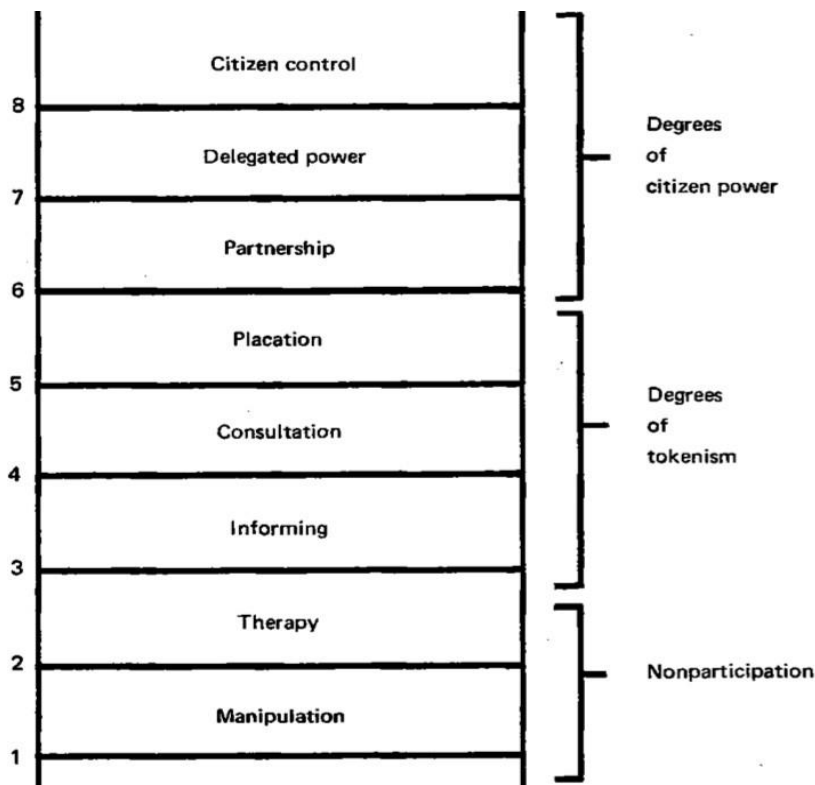


Figure 2: Arnstein’s *Ladder of Citizen Participation* (Arnstein 1969:217)

The middle section of Arnstein’s ladder indicates tokenistic tendencies, typified by processes of legitimisation of pre-conceived projects. Perhaps the most common of these is consultation, a process whereby local people are asked for

their views on an existing policy or project. As often as not such consultations lead to manipulation, as data collected from research is used to justify resulting or preconceived policies. Similarly, informing people of a particular policy or project, in order to claim that they have participated, is a twisted use of the original meaning of the word. It is an approach that tends to be born out of a blinkered belief that those higher up development chains can legitimately make decisions for others and still claim that they have taken a participatory approach (Arnstein 1969:218).

Manipulative participation takes many forms. One of its chief characteristics is the involvement of participants in order to legitimise preconceived narratives (Chambers 2014; Jerven 2014). As Robin McTaggart (1997:6) states: “community programmes that are portrayed as PAR but that in reality are little more than manipulation in the oppressive and unreflective implementation of some institutional or government policy [are common]”. This might be deliberate, as researchers seek to legitimise their pre-existing views by using participants’ voices so as to profit themselves (see Figure 2). Or, it might be accidental, as researchers are blinded by their social conditioning and unable to understand or impact the way participants view them, despite efforts to cultivate awareness. These ideas are revisited below when unpacking Francis’ (2001) critique of participatory research.



Figure 3: *French Student Poster. In English: I participate, you participate, he participates, we participate, you participate... **They profit*** (Arnstein 1969:216)

The penultimate rung of Arnstein's ladder is therapy. This typology was almost placed at the bottom of the ladder and can be seen as a consequence of social conditioning that makes some people feel so superior to others, that they feel that they can legitimately attempt to cure them of the illness of their differing perspective (Arnstein 1969:218). Arnstein's understanding of therapy was most likely based on the dominant theories of her time. Thankfully therapy has moved on considerably since then and genuine participatory work, in which everyone involved is invited to reflect and communicate openly, could be seen as a more progressive form of therapy, based on the recognition that everyone, including researchers, might benefit from exploring their experiences.

While Arnstein's ladder is still often referenced to this day, there have been several other iterations of typologies of participation that identify similar patterns but with subtle differences. Jules Pretty's (1995) table of participatory typologies is in some ways similar to Arnstein's ladder, in that it is a normative linear structure that places manipulative participation at the bottom and self-mobilisation at the top. One of the key differences in these typologies is that self-mobilisation is not considered as radical as citizen control in its relationship to existing power structures (Cornwall 2008:271).

In this research, self-mobilisation was understood as a possible consequence of citizen control, which could itself be initiated through a research partnership. However, throughout the 1980s and 1990s, self-mobilisation was often hailed as the ideal form of participation, before 'participatory governance' came into vogue (Cornwall 2008:271). Participatory governance was the idea that governance could be structured according to the decisions of people in their respective contexts, rather than centrally, as is currently the case. Sarah White's (1996) work helps to clarify where participatory governance sits in the typologies of participation. White's table differs from Arnstein's and Pretty's, in that she unpacks both why instigators might use a participatory intervention and why participants might take part (White 1996; Cornwall 2008). In doing so she demonstrates the relationship between people and state in the context of participation.

Form	What 'participation' means to the implementing agency	What 'participation' means for those on the receiving end	What 'participation' is for
Nominal	Legitimation – to show they are doing something	Inclusion – to retain some access to potential benefits	Display
Instrumental	Efficiency – to limit funders' input, draw on community contributions and make projects more cost-effective	Cost – of time spent on project-related labour and other activities	As a means to achieving cost-effectiveness and local facilities
Representative	Sustainability – to avoid creating dependency	Leverage – to influence the shape the project takes and its management	To give people a voice in determining their own development
Transformative	Empowerment – to enable people to make their own decisions, work out what to do and take action	Empowerment – to be able to decide and act for themselves	Both as a means and an end, a continuing dynamic

Figure 4: Adapted from White 1996 pp. 7-9 (Cornwall 2008:273)

For instance: “When ‘empowerment’ boils down to ‘do-it-yourself’, and where the state abnegates its responsibilities, then resistance rather than enthusiastic enrolment might well be the result of efforts to engage citizens” (Cornwall 2008:273). This example is typical of what White calls ‘nominal participation’ for ‘display’. In this case the state puts on a show of displaying their support for empowerment, without putting systems in place to facilitate that empowerment; such as funding, human resources and/or genuinely open spaces for people to take control and make change. Those on the receiving end of such policies are likely to resist, seeing little in it for them.

The next category in White’s table is ‘instrumental participation’. Staying with the above example, with an instrumental approach the state could be encouraging people in their respective places to ‘do it themselves’, in order to bring down overhead costs. This is participation with a purpose, however the purpose is not citizen control but rather a way of legitimising austerity economics and passing it off as participatory democracy. Cost-effectiveness may be a by-product of participatory processes in the long term, in that locally designed solutions might avoid protracted series of failed and costly top-down interventions, but if it used to define what participatory processes are used for,

then it is the manipulative involvement of people in a predetermined system and can result in participants bearing the cost of policies and projects themselves (White 1996).

'Representative participation' is next in the table, and is generally used to 'avoid creating dependency' under the auspice of 'sustainability'. This can be seen as similar to delegated power in Arnstein's ladder. The power remains with the implementing agency but there is recognition that giving people a voice in their own development projects and policies, might be more sustainable and less likely to create cycles of failed interventions and/or dependency. However, this form of participation is still a far cry from citizen control, as it invites people to participate in centrally constructed understandings of sustainability, which tend to be tied up in materialistic and neoliberal goals.

The final category in White's table, is 'transformative participation', used to enable reflection, cultivate awareness, design solutions, and take action. Transformative participatory processes are seen as both the means and ends of genuine participatory interventions, in that they create spaces for deep reflection, personal and collective transformation, and thus make space for transformative forms of social organisation. In this vision, people, governments, as well as other public and/or private groups or institutions, support each other to make their own decisions and act, in a fluid horizontal, non-hierarchical relationship.

This understanding of participation is key to this research, which takes the stance that societal transformations come from personal and collective reflections that can be communicated outwards in order to stimulate further personal and collective reflections. These processes can be pragmatic, as participants explore their experiences, identify problems, and propose solutions. As everyone involved cultivates their awareness through reflection and deliberation, they can come to increasingly conscious choices.

Accompanying the above typologies are a series of adjectives used to distinguish genuine participatory research from more manipulative or nominal approaches. These terms are: 'genuine' itself, 'wide' and 'deep', as opposed to 'manipulative/tokenistic', 'narrow' and 'shallow', with each term needing to be clearly defined. For the sake of clarity, definitions of how these words are understood in this thesis are offered below.

It is here understood that genuineness refers to original purpose of participation and thus requires concerted efforts to encourage participants to take control of the research and development process, as established by Arnstein (1969). A wide participatory process is here understood as one in which participants are able to engage in holistic analyses together (thereby potentially widening their gaze) and share the results of their analyses outwards, if they so choose, potentially leading to new cycles of reflection and deliberation that could culminate in action. Thus width is used to designate both the scope of the research and how far the results are shared.

Depth refers to a process of reflection that encourages everyone involved in the research to cultivate their awareness through reflection and deliberation (to varying degrees) in order to consciously reimagine pathways of development. To paraphrase Gaventa and Robinson (1998), creating spaces in which participants genuinely open up and explore the depth of their experiences, requires more than efficient ways of capturing what participants want to say. The latter would likely lead to shallow results, as participants might not engage in reflexive and deliberative processes, instead regurgitating their social conditioning. Such shallow participatory interventions are common in Malawi, where people have a tendency to say what they think they need to say, adapting their answers to suit those who are asking the questions in order to gain resources or representation (Anderson and Patterson 2017a, b).

However, defined in this way, depth is problematic because it can be seen as implying that participants *should* engage in deep research. The stance taken here was that it was important to make space for depth in case participants wanted to

go down that path. If depth is over-emphasised, researchers can run the risk of accentuating post-development conclusions as participants are encouraged to unpeel their social conditioning, rather than taking advantage of the system as it is, or defining their own form of development. Hickey et al. (2005:61) argue that such an approach is an “excellent way of denying them [participants] any agency”. However, if participants are not given space to unpeel their social conditioning then they are also being denied the space to exercise agency.

While deep and wide participation are often considered the ideal, these characteristics may not always suit the contexts in which participatory methods are being applied. It may therefore, be more practical to determine optimal characteristics of participation through open communication in each specific context (Cornwall 2008:276). This research was designed to encourage participants to take control of their pathways of development, reimagining them as they saw fit. Depth would in large part be determined by participants’ willingness to explore and communicate their experiences and which experiences they wanted to focus on. Similarly, width would be determined by participants’ desire to engage in narrow or wide analyses, and whether they chose to share their results outwards, as well as how these results could be shared.

Hickey et al. (2001) go on to warn that participatory processes tend to simplify development and thus risk embracing populist approaches to social organisation that do not engage in the “complex underlying process of political change” and cannot have a wider impact than in the local context in which they are carried out (Hickey et al. 2005:62). It is important to bear this critique in mind when conducting participatory research and make conscious methodological decisions but not be frozen into inaction.

In some contexts, it may be that local participatory processes leading to local changes are appropriate. Alternatively, methodological choices can be made that open up participatory processes to wider audiences, and thus the possibility of wider change (see Section 1.6 for details). Either way, researchers attempting to

put in place genuinely participatory processes should acknowledge that their critical orientation towards dominant forms of social organisation, makes their work inherently political (Dryzek 2000:2). In doing so researchers can consciously find space for genuinely participatory processes in the landscape of development pathways, without underestimating the complexity of the task. In order to apply this understanding, researchers should cultivate awareness and lucidity through reflexivity and discipline (see Epilogue for examples).

The importance of cultivating awareness is well established in participatory literature as a way for researchers and participants to grow their understandings of local and external forces affecting their decisions, while developing deeper understandings of their own individual and collective roles and impacts (Chambers 2014). What's more, a process of cultivating awareness can increase people's self-confidence, opening up new levels of awareness and consciousness and increasing people's capacity to support each other and propose action based solutions to local problems that they have identified (Savin-Baden et al. 2010).

However, there are those who suggest that participatory research encourages immersion and self-awareness but only shallowly practices it, leading to a subtle form of co-optation through the power of the researcher's presence and gaze (Francis 2001). This is partly based on Robert Chambers' assertion that when participatory processes are well constructed (1994:1263): "the insider's awareness of the outsider, are low". Francis contrasts this notion with Sartre's suggestion that one cannot perceive outwardly, while simultaneously being conscious of being looked at: "We cannot perceive the world and at the same time apprehend a look fastened upon us...To be looked at is to apprehend oneself as the unknown object of unknowable appraisals – in particular, value judgements" (Sartre 1972:347-358). Therefore, Francis contests that participatory approaches may lead to a form of subordination through the gaze, as people interpret the researcher constructing a participatory reality, while the researcher observes them (Francis 2001:81). Participatory researchers' belief that they are cultivating self-awareness is thus deluded, or, in the words of Cooke and Kothari, a form of 'narrow minded narcissism' (2001:15).

Critics are correct to point out that cultivating self-awareness in a research context (or indeed any context) is hard and that pre-existing value judgements and social dynamics are bound to impact the research as participants and researchers observe one-another. However, if researchers vainly attempt to hide behind spurious objectivity, they will most likely perpetuate research processes based on their own socially constructed realities and fail to even attempt to address the stalemate of reciprocal gazes. What's more, resorting to hiding behind objectivity can lead to a "fear of exposing oneself" a form of anxiety that has been so pervasive in social sciences since their conception and denies space for flexibility, treating participants as data, rather than complex people (Chambers 2014:45). However, if researchers openly discuss such issues, do not shy away from vocal self-criticism and invite participants to do the same, then everyone involved can begin to understand one-another. People get to know one-another by communicating with each other, not by refusing to communicate and expecting others to open up in return.

What's more, anyone, in any context, who considers themselves 'aware', may well be suffering from narrow-minded narcissism, as Cooke and Kothari (2001) suggest, or at least some form of delusion or misinterpretation. However, this does not mean that they should not try to cultivate awareness. Through reflexivity and open communication, researchers can share their efforts (and quite possibly struggles) to cultivate awareness and invite participants to do the same. In Buddhist tradition, letting go of distractions, often resulting from social conditioning, is the path to enlightenment, a state of heightened awareness. It is a continuous process without a final point at which people are 'aware'. Such a stasis would itself disprove any claim to awareness (Batchelor 1994:177). Thus, cultivating self-awareness should be understood as a continuous practice that fluctuates all the time. Thus open communication should be a feature of the entire process so as to make it possible to keep communicating these fluctuations.

However, while researchers should not fear being open, they should guard against their openness becoming a form of control. This can be done by developing a 'disciplined subjectivity' – whereby researchers identify their subjectivity and openly communicate it, but do not impose their own views on participants, thereby manipulating the results of the process (McTaggart 1997:7). If a sequence of methods can be used that enable researchers to know what aspects of their subjectivity already exist in the group of participants and to what degree, then they can apply their subjectivity with greater awareness and discipline (see Chapter Two for details). It may be helpful if a defining characteristic of researchers' subjectivity is a desire for participant control, in that this will remind researchers not to abuse their power, though researchers should heed Francis' warning and understand that this participatory construction of reality is a form of subjectivity. The extent to which this leads to a genuinely participatory process will depend in large part on participants' response to the researchers' invitation to openness; a response that will differ from person to person.

One of the ways in which I defined my own subjectivity can be seen in Figure 5 below. It is a Chichewa version of Figure 2 with a different last line. This reads: 'we invite you to participate', rather than 'they profit', which is so often the case with manipulative projects. In an optimal scenario participants, with the support of facilitators, would control this invitation to participate, directing it to whomever they please, possibly by means of a film or films made during a PV process, or by other means.

Nditenge nawo mbali

Mutenge nawo mbali

Aliyese atenge nawo mbali

Tonse titenge nawo mbali

Aliyense atenge nawo mbali

Mukupemphedwa kutenga nawo mbali

Figure 5: I participate, you participate, he/she participates, we participate, you participate, **We invite you to participate.**

It appears logical that by emphasising open communication and openly framing and communicating their subjectivity, researchers are more likely to encourage open research processes and results, with participants responding according to their own subjective experiences and human interests. Ultimately, this approach involves an act of trust, that participants not only have the knowledge but also have an instinct to want to change things and contribute to bettering their world. There can be no guarantees in such an act and every case will be different.

Some researchers may feel that in such a delicate scenario the only way to proceed is to avoid contact with participants altogether. However, while giving participants space may help at times, total non-intervention is equivalent to the 'do it yourself' attitude, described by White (1996), and provides people with no help in designing the world they want to see, leaving the field open to others who might take a directly manipulative approach or be constrained by prescriptive institutional norms. As Chambers (2014:25) states: "the World Bank, like Everest, is there. It exists." Ignoring it does not make it go away. A more positive stance, is to trust that genuine participatory research is possible and, if carefully designed, can give people whose views are usually marginalised, platforms to be seen and heard (Harman 2019), ideas that are explored in greater detail in Section 1.6.

The lack of clarity surrounding participatory research is a direct result of the many different ways in which the term 'participation', and associated terms such as 'depth' and 'width', are used in theory and in practice. Hopefully this Section 1.1 will have provided some clarity by exploring typologies of participation, associated language, and some common criticisms of participatory practice. With the above in place, one more way of providing clarity is by specifically reiterating what this research was designed to do (Farrington and Bebbington 1993).

In short, this research took the stance that a genuine participatory investigation is one in which concerted efforts are made to encourage participant control over the process (Arnstein 1969). The investigation should provide space for everyone involved to cultivate their awareness, and for participants to reimagine their development pathways as they see fit, making space for varying degrees of width and depth, optimised through open communication (Cornwall 2008). The whole might result in self-mobilisation (Pretty 1995), if participants so choose, and transformative forms of participatory social organisation (White 1996) that directly result from an openly reflexive process.

The above understanding of genuine participatory research was partly framed by pathways theories put forward by academics at the STEPS centre at the University of Sussex. These theories contend that mainstream pathways of development have a tendency to marginalise alternatives and that efforts should be made to create space for alternative pathways to be opened up. In order to create these spaces, emphasis is placed on the need for trust, open communication, reflection, and deliberation, if current impasses are to be overcome and alternative pathways of development opened up (Leach et al. 2010; Chambers 2014). The use of the term 'pathways' owes much to these ideas and has been adopted in this thesis as a word that evokes the idea that transformative change requires that people explore new paths within and outside of themselves. Pathways theories are based on social constructivist ontology, which will be the subject of the following section.

1.2 An open ontology

Genuine and deep participatory research is built on the ontology of social constructivism, which suggests that reality and knowledge are plural, dynamic, complex, and flexible. Like participatory research itself, social constructivism emerged in the mid 20th century as a response to the dominance of the prescriptive philosophy of materialism and ontology of positivism (see Section 1.3). As people experiment with and share their experience of existence, realities and knowledge constantly change. From a social constructivist perspective, all

philosophies and worldviews are ways of interpreting and communicating lived experiences. This non-judgemental ontology creates space for diverse interconnected realities to co-exist and be negotiated through open, non-hierarchical communication (Stirling 2003, 2005; Leach et al. 2010; Whitfield 2015; Sheldrake 2012, 2017).

Constructivism is a perspective shared by many local people in rural Malawi. As Katherine Dewu, one of the elders who took part in this research, put it: “There are as many realities as there are people in the world”. Underneath this multitude of realities, exists an understanding of universal interconnectedness. Traditional ontologies were based on pantheism, an understanding of the universe as God and relationships with many unseen entities. This was coupled with a belief in the vital energy and interconnectedness of all living things (Morris 1998). As Helen Mosamu, one of the women who took part in the participatory video workshops, put it:

“Chilichonse ndi chimodzi. Tonse ndife amodzi ndipo sitienera kulankhulana wina ndi mnzake ngati alendo kapena akunja - Everything is one. We are all one and should not talk about each other in divisive terms.”

These ideas are commonly expressed in Malawian traditions, which reflect a belief in the inseparability of physical and metaphysical existence (see Chapter Three, Section 3.3 for details).

Ideas of universal interconnectedness are commonly associated with eastern philosophies such as Taoism, which suggests that individuals exist, experience and communicate their realities as one universal being, expressing itself as a flow of life and death, light and dark. Misunderstandings arise when realities experienced by individuals are confused with universal reality. The former is a necessary abstraction of the latter, used to communicate lived experiences (Watts 1985:7). When people confuse their own subjective realities with objectivity, dogmatic behaviour tends to follow.

One of the challenges of accepting such a non-hierarchical ontology, is that without hierarchies no-one is in a position to identify bias in another and there can be no judge of right or wrong. This state of philosophical anarchy is known as the Anthony Paradox in social science (Anthony 1993) but is an issue that many people have wrestled with over the course of human history. Mahatma Gandhi approached it as follows: “...my reason and heart long ago realised the highest attribute and name of God as truth. I recognise truth by the name of Rama, not ‘this is the way’ but: ‘this is my way, even though I honour yours”” (Ghandi 2009:xvii).

Light and dark do not represent good or evil but a dance between differences, in which one invariably makes space for the other. Ghandi suggested that truth is the space in which all realities reside and that the practical process of co-constructing realities necessarily takes time and requires “the self-suffering of patience” (Ghandi 2001:6), for everyone involved. Genuine participatory processes are those in which participants have space to present their own subjective views and together patiently co-construct a pathway that suits them.

These open and flexible understandings of existence, leave space for people to open up and explore their own experiences without judgement. The work involved in integrating these philosophies into pragmatic practice, may require time and effort to self-reflect and develop self-awareness. Genuine and deep participatory methods open up the possibility for this growing self-awareness and self-reflection to grow in spaces of collective reflection and deliberation, in which people can cultivate their awareness together and reimagine pathways of development. As the German 19th century philosopher Goethe put it: “In the human spirit, as in the universe, nothing is higher or lower. Everything has equal rights to a common centre which manifests its hidden existence precisely through this harmonic relationship between every part and itself” (as quoted in Buhner 2004:78). This view is in stark contrast with the current dominant paradigms of research and development, explored in Section 1.3 below.

1.3. Materialism and Neoliberalism

The rise of materialism to pre-eminence owes a lot to events in Europe around the time of the French revolution, when a significant paradigm shift took place, away from religion and towards so called 'reason', and was institutionalised (Harpe 2010; Sheldrake 2012). This anti-religious materialist tide was closely associated with the father of positivism Auguste Comte, whose political vision was of a state run by scientists and technocrats "without the mumbo jumbo of the religion of humanity" (Harp 2010:157). Having emerged from anti-religiosity, materialism contends that the universe is material and physical, leaving no space for spirituality or metaphysics. Positivist ontology and methods of enquiry, similarly defined in opposition to metaphysics, progressively provided a self-legitimising evidence base, justifying materialistic priorities and marginalising alternatives (Carson et al. 2001; Hudson and Ozanne, 1988).

Nowadays, the perceived legitimacy of materialism has become so normalised that many people are unaware that they have internalised a philosophy that rejects metaphysics, thus denying and marginalising the philosophies that underpin many, if not most, indigenous ontologies and epistemologies (Sheldrake 2013:8; Olupona 2014). What's more, over the course of the 19th and 20th centuries materialism and positivism were increasingly allied to priorities of an increasingly powerful mercantile elite (Kovach 2015). Associated to capitalism, materialism came to be defined as a philosophy that prioritised material interests. Financial wealth, possessions, and luxuries, were increasingly used as indicators of personal and societal success. Nowadays the dogmatic adherence to 19th century materialistic ideologies underpins systemic neoliberal priorities (Escobar 2007; Harvey 2016). Both are so deeply embedded in development chains that they limit what is thinkable and have the effect of stifling what can be said, done, and even thought (Sheldrake 2013, 2017; Rushton and Williams 2012).

There is nothing wrong with the perspective that the world may be physical and material. It is one of many socially constructed ways of interpreting reality.

However, when complex systems are systematically reduced to dogmatic universal truths based on materialistic theories, positivist evidence, and the priorities of a neoliberal capitalist system, it results in policies that systematically marginalise alternative priorities and create new problems (Leach et al. 2010). Not only is this a form of ideological violence but it gets in the way of exploring the full width and depth of possible pathways of knowledge, which is profoundly unscientific (Sheldrake 2013).

Frantz Fanon observed that as western philosophies and priorities were imposed in Africa during colonial times, it led to the 'colonisation of the mind', a form of violence that has resulted in local people losing confidence in their own values and priorities and seeking to be like their materially powerful colonisers (Fanon 1970). Ngugi wa Thiongo'o (1986:3) called this colonisation process: "The biggest weapon wielded and daily unleashed by imperialism against the collective... The effect of this cultural bomb is to annihilate a people's belief in their names, in their language, in their environment, in their heritage, in their unity, in their capacities, and ultimately in themselves." As African nations gained independence in the 1960s, their new leaders were often steeped in western priorities. Thus colonialism gradually made way for a post-colonial era in which western materialistic and capitalist ideologies were prioritised by African leaders (wa Thiongo'o 1986; Vaughan 1987; McCracken 2012).

More recently, the neoliberal era of capitalist development has led to rapid market deregulation setting the stage for the accumulation of power by private self-styled *philanthropists* and public institutions, in private-public partnerships. For instance, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF), US Agency for International Development (USAID) and the United Nations often collaborate, setting the direction of development with huge inputs of capital (Brooks 2015, 2016; UN 2020). These inputs exert a gravitational pull as NGOs, INGOs, academic institutions and independent individuals, apply for funding within the frameworks that funders design. The resulting projects trickle down to villages, where local people are incentivised to follow the latest policy trends (Watkins et al. 2012).

National governments in places like Malawi are constrained by structural adjustment loans from the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF), designed to transition nations towards capitalist and materialist understandings of development. The debts that nations accrue as a result of these loans, makes it very difficult to change course (Escobar 1995, 2007; Leftwich 1995; Pena 2014). This research takes the stance that genuine democracy should involve people optimising their own development where they are local, according to their own priorities, and worldviews. The role of government and institutions should be to support processes of reflexivity so that people might analyse their experiences and imagine their own pathways of development (Schumacher 1973; Decrece et al. 2018; Manjula 2019). However, the pressure of structural adjustment loans and the walls that materialism and neoliberalism construct around people's minds, may constrain what people in national governments are able to imagine.

As materialism and neoliberalism become increasingly embedded in the way knowledge is conceived, the diversity of methods that are needed to understand our existence holistically, are systematically replaced by the proliferation of such tools as cost benefit analyses, a clear example of a positivist approach to enquiry that prioritises a materialistic and neoliberal understanding of reality (Ackerman and Heinzerling 2004). With an emphasis on "framing, naming, numbering and coding" these lines of enquiry reduce the complexity of reality to isolated parts, often expressed as statistics (Anderson and Patterson 2017:18).

In agricultural research, this system favours people who may never have farmed but have the expertise to produce positivist research (Chambers 1981). Rural Malawians, many of whom have farmed in their specific contexts for generations, are barely consulted. Yet the inferiority complex cultivated during colonial times, means that many rural Malawians still accept what they are told without question. Systematically prioritising positivist knowledge over the experiential knowledge of farmers in their respective places, in order to centrally construct policies, perpetuates colonialism and is conducive to reductionist understanding of reality that create new problems. To add insult to injury, when policies fail

local people tend to take the blame for inadequately implementing expert policies (Leach et al. 2010).

Another effect of materialism and neoliberalism permeating agricultural development chains, is that land is reduced to units of area to be utilised to produce maximum yields, as efficiently and productively as possible. Yields, efficiency, and productivity are all defined in predominantly materialistic and monetary terms and seen to result from technical optimisation, with heavy emphasis placed on synthetic inputs and hybrid seeds (Shiva 2001, 2016). Agribusinesses are seen as the most efficient paths for optimisation and local traditional systems, considered less advanced on the social-Darwinist ladder, are marginalised. The dynamic, complex, social, ecological, and spiritual importance of the land is lost, resulting in the oversimplification of food systems and what Shiva (1993:1) calls “monocultures of the mind”. If research methodologies and methods were designed to carefully take into account the dynamic complexity of systems of food production, something like true optimisation might be achieved (Leach et al. 2010).

The following section will examine how materialism and neoliberalism have spread in Malawi specifically, exploring some of the impacts that this has had, and some of the ways in which the Malawian government has attempted to resist.

1.4 Colonialism and neo-colonialism in Malawi

Over the last century, traditional Malawian social and agricultural structures have been subjected to huge pressures and change. Colonialism and thirty years of dictatorship have reshaped the physical landscape. Maize fields now dominate where once mixed indigenous crops would have grown. The colonial process emphasised ideas that were not typical of traditional social systems or perspectives: aggressive capitalism, individualism, reductionism, materialism, combined with organised religion and the notion that local people were inferior because they did not understand the world as colonisers did (Vaughan 1987;

McCracken 2012). As discussed in the previous section, a growing sense of inferiority among local people was typical of colonised nations and was often followed by a desire to be more like their colonisers. When oppressed people are systematically made to feel inferior, they often begin to believe it (Fanon 1970).

While independence could have been a time to reconnect with traditional roots and redefine what it means to be Malawian in a post-colonial era, that is not what happened. Colonialism was directly followed by the dictatorship of Dr. Kamuzu Banda, who was educated in the United Kingdom, steeped in western ideology, and intent on following a capitalist and materialistic path. Mainstream understandings of progress, defined predominantly as economic growth, thus continued largely unabated, and a new chapter of neo-colonialism began, in which Malawi developed its own landed political elite and western style social hierarchies (Vaughan 1987; Riddell 1992; McCracken 2012).

In 1994, modern democracy followed Banda's thirty-year rule. Like independence, the coming of democracy could have been an opportunity to reconceptualise social organisation by forging an African style participatory democracy, as Thomas Sankara had tried to do in Burkina Faso (Harsch 2014). Instead, structural adjustment loans from the IMF and World Bank, combined with the conscious or unconscious capitalist and materialistic priorities of countless NGOs, INGOs and international volunteers, stimulated the growth of neoliberalism and trapped Malawi in the grip of debt, constraining space to explore genuine alternative forms of development (Vaughan 1987; Riddell 1992; McCracken 2012; Wroe 2012).

In 2005, the government of President Bingu wa Mutharika decided to break from neoliberal approaches to agricultural development and introduced the Fertiliser Input Subsidy Programme (FISP), which provided government subsidies to farmers in the form of coupons that could be used to access heavily discounted fertiliser and predominantly hybrid maize seed. The logic of the FISP was to develop Malawi's agricultural systems so that the country might become self-sufficient in maize. In the early years, the Green Revolution was reportedly

successful in meeting these narrow goals, with some reports indicating large increases in the production of maize after the FISP was introduced (Minot et al. 2009; Denning et al. 2009; Chinsinga 2011; Chibwana 2012); though it is not entirely certain that this can be attributed to the programme, rather than improved rainfall or the possible manipulation of data (Chirwa et al. 2013; Jerven 2014).

However, regardless of whether the FISP did or did not boost yields, and despite receiving praise from certain sectors of the international community for choosing to break donor led neoliberal trends (Denning et al. 2009), the FISP was firmly based on materialistic green revolution approaches to land use and food production, delivered from the top down (Chinsinga 2015). This approach played directly into the hands of neoliberal agricultural priorities by further institutionalising the idea that synthetic inputs and hybrid seeds represent agricultural progress. Thus further marginalising a plethora of alternatives (Holden et al. 2012).²

Nowadays, by the government's own metrics the FISP is failing, with productivity in decline, even when measured in such narrow terms as the quantity of maize. Green revolution policies have overseen a devastating decline in soil fertility, reminiscent of their impacts in other parts of the world. Farmers are now often dependent on increasingly expensive synthetic inputs because of declining soil fertility – a situation commonly known as the fertiliser trap (Chinsinga 2011; Chibwana 2012). Social and ecological systems are in crisis with very little being done to encourage the use of organic alternatives on anything like a scale that could make up for the damage done to soils, while still providing growing

² crop diversity; nutritional quality; the appropriateness of crops to complex and diverse local contexts; potential health risks of using synthetic inputs; impacts on soil and water quality; potential displacement of local knowledge and practices; relative financial and human cost of synthetic inputs, versus locally made or gathered inputs; the risk that large scale commercialisation of a small number of crops poses to the security provided by a wider genetic diversity; the complexity of storage techniques in local contexts; ecological and spiritual impacts of simplified agricultural systems based on synthetic inputs, not to mention flavour and consistency of hybrid maize versus local varieties.

numbers of people with food in their local areas (Bekunda et al., 1997; Scherr 1999).

Rather than attempting to resolve these issues by finally listening to people and engaging in genuine participatory processes, new top-down agricultural policies, based on positivist evidence, are routinely introduced. For instance, policies like Conservation Agriculture (CA) and Climate Smart Agriculture (CSA), which put forward a variety of technical recommendations designed by mainstream institutions on the basis of positivist evidence, are being promoted in the hope of remedying the socio-ecological mistakes of earlier expressions of the green revolution. L.G. Horlings (2010:450) labels this development a: “weak ecological modernisation process... which may mitigate environmental effects to a certain extent, but also causes new negative side-effects and exposes some important social, cultural, political and spatial missing links”. These missing links remain the same: a failure to question the underlying materialistic, neoliberal, and hierarchical assumptions of the system, to make way for transformative pathways to development based on participatory social organisation and genuine citizen control.

That said, in recent times there have been some signs that the Malawian government is recognising the failures of top-down policies and attempting to decentralise agricultural development. The District Agricultural Extension Services System (DAESS) is theoretically designed to transition towards a system based on more horizontal communication and the complex needs and demands of farmers (Masangano et al. 2016). However, these policies resemble what White (1996) called nominal, instrumental, or representative forms of participation, with the state either abnegating responsibility by encouraging a ‘do it yourself’ mentality, possibly to bring down overhead costs since the FISP has been so expensive, or to be seen to be joining in a fashionable participatory movement. It seems unlikely that this approach represents an attempt to institute transformational participatory change and thus challenge ingrained hierarchical structures. Yet it is possible that opportunities exist within this

movement to plant seeds of genuine and transformative participatory forms of social organisation.

Two alternative socio-agro-ecological movements that exist in Malawi are permaculture and agroecology. Their advocates wrestle with the social and ecological issues caused by the green revolution and a mainstream development chain that prioritises materialism and neoliberalism. While agroecology and permaculture have come into vogue in Malawi over the last decade, they remain marginal. Where they have been assimilated into mainstream jargon, their deeper meaning has often been lost. Section 1.5 will critically engage with some of the ideas behind the agroecology and permaculture movements, unpacking how they fall short of their transformative potential and might benefit from integrating more genuinely participatory approaches.

1.5 Alternative pathways of development

1.5.1 Traditional Perspectives

Before examining agroecology and permaculture, movements that originated outside Malawi, it is important to acknowledge that the most radically divergent alternative to materialism and neoliberalism that still exist, are traditional Malawian philosophies and priorities. As mentioned in Section 1.2, rural Malawian traditional perspectives are based on vitalism and pantheism. According to these philosophies, dances, songs, dream states, trance states, and music offer pathways to communicating with the spirit aspect of reality. People are inseparable from the environments in which they exist and part of a universal whole. This sense of oneness and interconnectedness of all things resembled eastern philosophies like Taoism (Girardot 1983). However, many Malawian vitalist traditions, dances, and songs were unique to Malawi and in some cases unique to specific regions and even villages (Morris 1998; 2011).

Agricultural and other socio-ecological practices, were performed in the understanding that everything is vital, non-dual, spirit-matter. Traditions were

designed to communicate and otherwise interact with unseen entities for specific purposes and with pragmatic consequences. The choices that people made were informed by this holistic understanding of reality (Morris 1998; 2011), rather than limited to a materialistic understanding that discounts the unseen as non-physical and therefore not real.

Traditional perspectives are explored in much greater detail in Section 3.2, for now suffice it to say that researchers should take care when conducting participatory research not to disregard traditional perspectives, and thereby further marginalise oppressed ontologies and epistemologies. In order to do this, genuine engagement with non-materialistic ontologies and epistemologies may be necessary. However, care should be taken not to reify traditional perspectives as inviolable utopias, or to engage with them in condescending and paternalistic ways as quaint alternatives.

The view taken in this research is that looking back on traditional worldviews can help to better understand the present – a complex hybridised mixture of traditional and colonial perspectives that includes organised religion, materialism and, increasingly, neoliberalism. People in their respective places are in the best position to observe and analyse these hybridised realities, particularly if spaces are facilitated in which they might do so. Other alternative movements, such as agroecology and permaculture, take a more predefined approach to alternative pathways of development.

1.5.2 Agroecology

The word agroecology is variously used to designate a social, ecological and agricultural movement, or a particular branch of scientific enquiry that blends ecology and agronomy (Altieri 2009). The agroecology movement emphasises the complexity of local realities and draws on the experiences, experiments and knowledge of farmers in their respective locations. The movement then encourages people to share the outputs horizontally from farmer-to-farmer, as

opposed to following conventional top-down formats of extension (as in Figure 6 below).

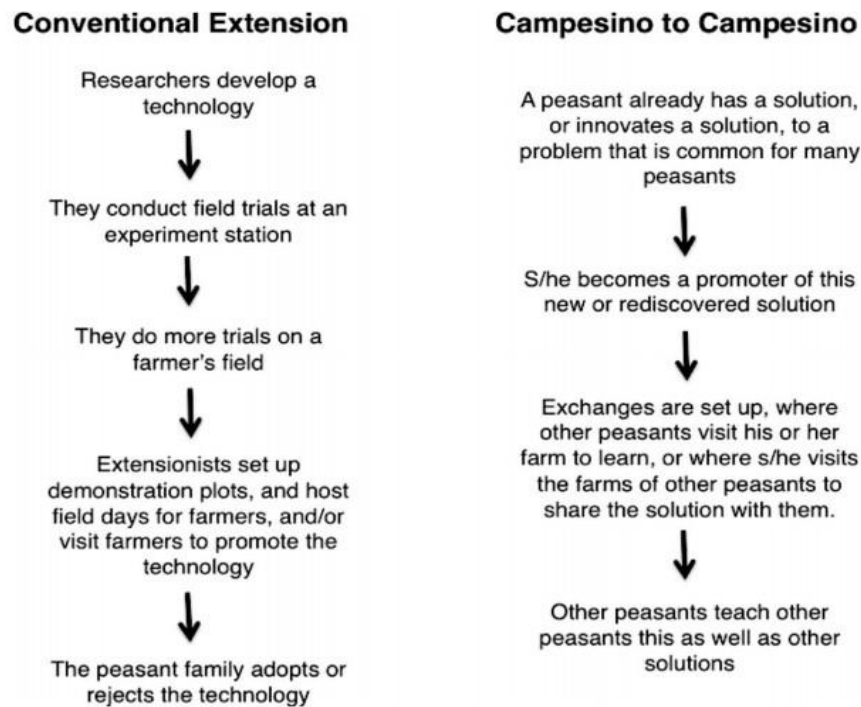


Figure 6: Campesino to Campesino (farmer to farmer) vs conventional extension work (Machín Sosa et al. 2010:38)

As well as drawing on the experiential knowledge of farmers, agroecology encourages the observation and mimicry of natural systems (Altieri 2009). For instance, forests are closed loop systems that enable a wide diversity of life to thrive. Mimicking the natural succession of forests to design food systems, can lead to diverse, thriving forests of food (Goetsch 1992). This emphasis on experience, observation of nature, and horizontal communication, is incompatible with dogmatic mainstream agricultural development, which tends to prioritise controlled positivist and reductionist studies to inform top-down policies.

Mainstream agronomic, ecological, and sociological academic knowledge is also part of the agroecology movement and can be useful in farmer-to-farmer knowledge exchanges but is not a prerequisite for action and tends to be eyed with suspicion unless someone has direct experience of it in practice (Machín

Sosa et al. 2010; Rosset et. al 2011). Whereas, for instance, mainstream research and development might narrow down a study to the effectiveness of pigeon pea in maize fields, using controlled trials that often still use synthetic inputs as a conventional baseline, as in Sherr (1999), farmers within the agroecology movement tend to be more interested in hearing what their peers experiences are with pigeon pea, discuss the finer details of pros and cons of different varieties, spacing, market value, flavour when cooked, and any number of other possible metrics. Reductionist research on pigeon pea could be useful if allied to horizontal farmer-to-farmer experiences as one form of knowledge among many, but proclaiming it as *the* evidence and marginalising everything else is rigid, dismissive and condescending. It is partly this vertical process and reductionist perspective that the agroecology movement was designed to challenge (Machín Sosa et al. 2010).

Making a shift towards an understanding that reductionist research is one approach to creating knowledge among many, all of which fit into wider constructivist reality, is complicated. People are often set in their ways and the processes of deep and open reflexivity required to unpack social conditioning, soften dogma, and make space for plurality, are not common. As Rosset et al. (2011:185) state: “agroecological practices are available but not widely adopted because of the lack of a social process that encourages and drives their adoption... the limiting factor is most often not technical but social and methodological, and the latter are most often under-addressed.” Genuine participatory methods could offer a solution.

However, one of the difficulties of using genuinely participatory methods within a predefined movement like agroecology, is that because it is defined in opposition to dogma, the movement begins from a defensive stance and makes certain value judgements. Defending these value judgements based on human interests is well and good, but advocates of green revolution paths can do the same thing based on their own constructions of reality, often leading to deadlocks (Leach et al. 2010). Genuine participatory methods can sidestep this deadlock by avoiding prescriptive value judgements and encouraging people to

engage in deep processes of self and collective reflection, in order to decide what is best for them in their respective places. This may not necessarily lead to breakthroughs but it could and when it does the links in the chain could be connected. The following section will examine the permaculture movement, which can also suffer from exclusionary predefined value judgements and might also benefit from a more participatory approach.

1.5.3 Permaculture

Permaculture is based on a pre-defined alternative philosophy, with three ethics – to care for the earth, for one another and to share surplus – as well as twelve principles of design (See Figure 7 below). Like agroecology, the permaculture movement is based on a mixture of localised experiences, traditional knowledge, scientific knowledge and observation of natural systems (Hathaway 2015). As a popular movement that deliberately avoids prescriptive definitions, permaculture is very much open to interpretation by its practitioners. As one of the founders of permaculture, David Holmgren, states: "Good design depends on a free and harmonious relationship between nature and people, in which careful observation and thoughtful interaction provide the design inspiration" (Permaculture.org.uk 23/01/2019). The framework is not intended as dogma but rather as a guide for designing the world that practitioners would like to see.

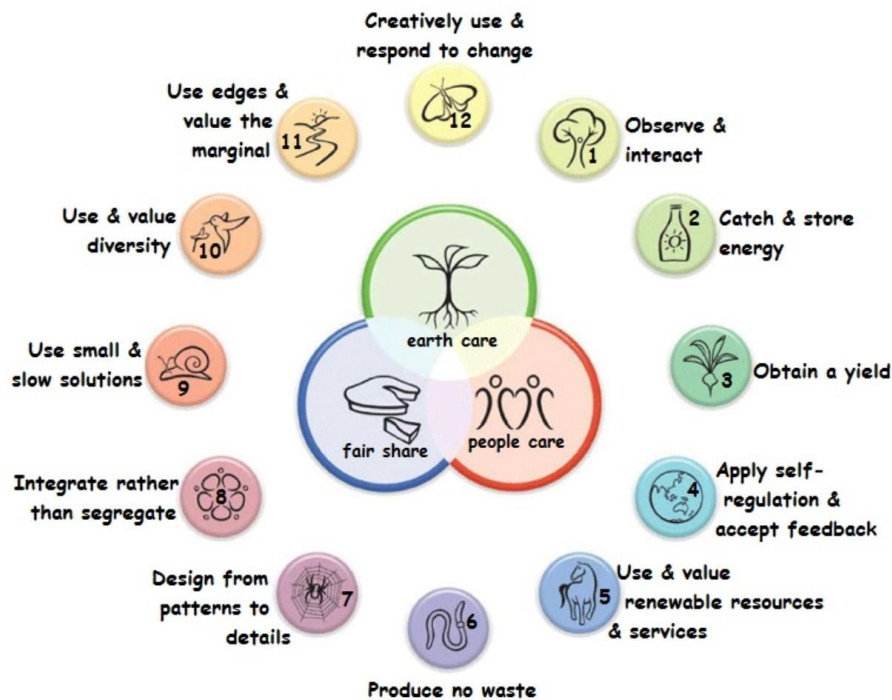


Figure 7: Permaculture ethics and principles (www.permacultureprinciples.com 14/12/2019)

In its purest form, permaculture is based on a careful deliberative process of observation and social construction. That said, permaculture practitioners tend to be united by a desire to adhere to the ethics and principles of the movement. Permaculture principles teach practitioners that actions taken without careful local observation and processes of deliberation and design, tend to create new problems that need further interventions. When the principles of permaculture design are applied, the results tend to be flexible systems in which people work together to construct their ideal socio-ecological conditions. Technical action follows personal and collective reflection, deliberation, and continuous cycles of communication and observation (Mollison 1988; Holmgren 2011).

However, despite offering the possibility of flexible and inclusive approaches, permaculture has a relatively materialistic philosophical background, having originated in Western Australia as a largely technical design system. Coupled with preconceived ethics and principles, this materialism lends the movement an alternative neo-colonial edge. When permaculture is adopted and disseminated

by people with materialistic understandings of reality, who are often unaware of their philosophical stance, it can become an inadvertently dogmatic technical design system. The result can be to marginalise alternatives that are already fragile, like traditional rural Malawian perspectives, and to legitimise materialism by giving it an alternative face. What's more, these characteristics make it very vulnerable to co-option by the mainstream.

Until recently, the tendency for permaculture practitioners to sidestep positivist and reductionist research, in favour of practice and farmer-to-farmer knowledge sharing, may have contributed to keeping it out of mainstream development circles. However, the UN now frequently refer to permaculture in their SDG reports, where it tends to be used as a synonym of sustainable agriculture, or even conservation agriculture (UNSDGs 21/01/20). If permaculture is co-opted by agricultural development in this way, it risks losing its potential for deeper more transformative meaning.

Yet there is still potential for permaculture to be the technical design wing of deeper socially constructed understandings of reality and there are many signs that, at its roots, outside of the agricultural development mainstream, permaculture is occupying that space, at least in the western contexts in which the movement originated. In rural Malawian contexts, it may be advisable to use more open and flexible processes of design that emphasise the knowledge that already exists, and do not push already vulnerable cultures into western movements and understandings of reality. Genuine and deep participatory processes in which people have control over reimagining pathways of development in their local contexts, based on their own experiences, priorities, and worldviews, may be more appropriate than predefined alternative movements.

When participatory methods are applied in ways that can be widely communicated, then these methods may connect with such movements as permaculture and agroecology, feeding in to horizontal communication, offering opportunities for transformative change and thus addressing the social and

methodological missing links identified by Rosset et al. (2011). The following section will examine participatory methodologies and methods, beginning with participatory action research (PAR) and followed by participatory video (PV).

1.6 Participatory methodologies and methods: PAR and PV

This research was based on a participatory action research (PAR) methodology. Like participatory research more generally, PAR is based on social constructivist ontology and the idea that people in their respective places are well placed to understand their own contexts and might benefit from methods of participatory engagement. Where PAR may differ from other participatory appraisals, is in its focus on methods that lead to action. In essence, it is a practical participatory approach to problem solving that is not reliant on a strict framework but tends to favour qualitative methods that leave space for openness, flexibility, reflexivity, and holistic analyses (Greenwood & Levin 1998; Baum et al. 2006; Stirling 2005).

The practice of PAR began in the mid-20th century and is based on the idea that research can be conducted with an agenda for social change, pooling existing knowledge and experiences to define problems and identify solutions (Greenwood & Levin 1998:122). While there are diverse pathways of PAR, when applied with a genuine desire to open up to citizen control (Arnstein 1969), self-mobilisation (Pretty 1995), transformative processes (White 1996), or what Lincoln called a “communitarian way” (Lincoln, 1991:127), the aims of PAR remain relatively consistent. PAR’s philosophy is based on the concept that people have a right to determine their own development (or lack of it) and recognises the need for meaningful participation in processes of analysis that might lead to problem solving (Attwood 1997:2).

One PAR approach that is increasingly gaining traction is PV. As Pink (2006:1) states: “as representations of ethnographic knowledge and as sites of cultural production, social interaction and individual expression” visual methods are growing in popularity. Historically, the lack of film as a research method can be

attributed to what Sophie Harman (2019:32) calls “epistemological boundaries”, with film tending to be seen as a way of communicating research (or research and development impacts), rather than as a method of investigation in its own right. The cost of visual methods can also be prohibitive and lead to their being captured by established gatekeepers, such as the state or private film industries. In these contexts, visual methods tend to reflect mainstream understandings of reality, rather than making space for marginalised perspectives. By taking visual methods to local levels and deliberately inviting often-marginalised people to take control, researchers create platforms for different perspectives to be seen and heard (Harman 2019).

The PV process need not be seen as producing data, so much as creating spaces for learning and generating knowledge through reflection and deliberation (Kindon 2003; Pink 2006; Savin-Baden 2010). The results can then be communicated outwards in accordance with participants’ wishes. In this way normally marginalised perspectives can be heard in their local contexts and be used to invite new audiences to see, listen, and reflect on their own outlooks (Pink 2001; Harman 2019:12). Marginalised people can thus become producers or co-producers of knowledge, rather than subjects of enquiry, all the while picking up skills that can help with future visually impactful self-mobilisation (Lunch et al. 2006; Pink 2006; Harman 2019).

While PV offers a great deal to be enthusiastic about, there is also a need for caution. For one thing, research and development trainings of any kind create winners and losers (Watkins and Swidler 2013). As mentioned above, one of the benefits of PV is that it can be used to bypass state and private sector gatekeepers of knowledge. However, in doing so, researchers effectively become gatekeepers themselves and create new ‘winners’ in the form of gatekeepers at local levels, thus potentially constructing new problems. Researchers should not deny this influence but reflect on it and talk about it openly with participants. Through open communication researchers and participants can reflect on their roles as gatekeepers and decide what their optimal roles might be, in the

understanding that these roles are flexible and open to re-negotiation at any time.

The diversity of communication exercises that are possible in a PV process and subtle ways in which these can be used to cultivate reflexivity and trust, can lead to genuine and deep participatory research. The outputs of this research can be used to share the views of normally marginalised people with wide audiences, creating opportunities to reimagine pathways of development. If the research is genuinely open and participatory, issues that arise during or as a result of a PV process can be discussed through open communication between researchers and participants, in order to identify the optimal path. Chapter Two will further unpack the methodology and methods used in this investigation and Chapters Four, Five, and Six unpack the PV process as it was used in this research.

1.7 Conclusion

There is a pressing need for genuine participatory research processes that offer opportunities for deep reflection and open communication if people are to reimagine pathways of development and avoid seemingly endless cycles of socio-ecological destruction. Mainstream international development is dominated by prescriptive worldviews based on dogmatic materialistic philosophies, framed by the priorities of neoliberalism, and legitimised by a predominantly positivist evidence base (Escobar 2007; Harvey 2017). As materialistic and neoliberal individuals and institutions champion their perspectives, supported by vast inputs of capital, it results in the systematic marginalisation of alternatives (Brooks 2015, 2016).

Colonial, post-colonial and more recently neoliberal development chains, have sucked Malawi deep into the philosophies of materialism, priorities of neoliberalism, and an obsession with positivist evidence (Vaughan 1987; McCracken 2012). Attempts to resist often mirror the materialistic social conditioning in which they are conceived (Chinsinga 2015). Some people resist this onslaught by protecting their traditional worldviews and practices but, like

everything else, these are subject to the enormous pressures of materialism and neoliberalism.

Others have formed relatively new alternative movements like agroecology and permaculture (Altieri 2009; Hathaway 2015). However, the walls that materialism and neoliberalism put up in our minds and environment, limit spaces for these alternatives to thrive and can instead lead to their inadvertently contributing to the marginalisation of already vulnerable alternatives. When these movements enter mainstream discourse, they are absorbed into materialistic knowledge frameworks and neoliberal priorities, and risk becoming part of the jargon of mainstream development, losing their radical roots, and end up being used for manipulative or tokenistic ends.

Genuine participatory action research (PAR), based on social constructivist ontology, can provide space to manoeuvre. Rather than absorbing people into the system, genuine PAR provides opportunities for researchers and participants to take a step back and construct their own realities through reflexivity and deliberation, with a growing sense of awareness, in order to make conscious choices (Greenwood & Levin 1998). PV goes further by giving participants the chance to explore their reality visually and communicate the process outwards through film, inviting scrutiny, further reflection, and deliberation. PV workshops that encourage open communication make it possible for participants to explore their experiences in greater depth, cultivate trust, and optimise their own processes. The actions that result from such processes are more likely to be flexible: having been conceived through local reflection and deliberation, they can be similarly revisited and renegotiated.

Genuine participatory processes offer plentiful opportunities to reimagine development and open up opportunities for transformative change (White 1996). Materialism and neoliberalism has not achieved anything like homogeneity, nor are its roots so deep that they cannot be pulled up by those willing to do the work (Ferguson 1994). If people take the time and space to self-reflect, collectively reflect, explore their experiences, and cultivate their

awareness through open communication, they may open up pathways to more desirable forms of existence, as defined by people in their respective places (Chambers 1997). However, the practice of genuine participatory research is complex and researchers should take care not to fall into tokenistic and manipulative patterns (Arnstein 1969; Pretty 1995; White 1996; Cornwall 2008). Starting with a more detailed outline of the methods and methodology, the following chapters will explore the experiences accrued during this investigation in the hope that these might help future researchers to engage in genuine participatory research of their own.

Chapter Two: Methodology and Methods

Introduction

The literature review set out in the previous chapter was followed by eleven months of fieldwork in Malawi between July 2017 and June 2018 that included 87 interviews and 16 PV workshops, with a focus on an in-depth case study in Chirombo village. The most tangible output of these workshops was the film *Tigwirane Manja* (Holding Hands), which was screened 9 times up until November 2019. This process provided the basis for exploring the extent to which participatory video (PV) could contribute to reimagining development in Malawi. The purpose of this chapter is to unpack the methodology and methods that were used, giving a full account of the research design. The complexity of genuine participatory methods were central to this research project and are revisited in much greater detail in Chapters Four, Five and Six.

The chapter begins by picking up on threads from Chapter One, briefly presenting the research design, which is based on social constructivist ontology and participatory action research (PAR) methodology including semi-structured interviews and PV. Section 2.2, presents the methods used during the pilot phase of research (conducted between July and August 2017). Section 2.3, unpacks why using a single case study in Chirombo was deemed the appropriate choice. Similarly, Section 2.4 details why the strengths of semi-structured interviews were suitable to this investigation and provides some insights into the results from interviews in Chirombo (a full table of results can be found in Annex 1). Section 2.5 builds on 1.6 by focusing attention on PV, before presenting the participant selection process. Finally, this chapter ends with a review of the ethical framework used during this research process.

2.1 Research Design

The project was based on social constructivist ontology and participatory action research (PAR) methodology. As explained in Chapter One, social constructivism

is centred on the idea that knowledge is plural, dynamic, complex and flexible, creating space for diverse interconnected realities to co-exist and be negotiated through open, non-hierarchical communication (Stirling 2003, 2005; Leach et al. 2010; Whitfield 2016). Basing the research on social constructivist ontology created space for local knowledge and ways of knowing to be openly explored. A PAR methodology complemented this ontology in that PAR makes space for local analyses by encouraging problem solving and blurring the line between researchers and participants, until participants become researchers, identifying problems and constructing solutions that might lead to action (Chambers 1994; Greenwood & Levin 1998; MacDougall et al. 2006).

Social constructivism and PAR favour qualitative or mixed method approaches. This research began with a pilot study, during which 17 semi-structured interviews were conducted in the central Lilongwe area, southern central region in Mangochi, further south in Zomba, and in the north in Mzuzu and Nkhata Bay, as well as 12 interviews in Chirombo (see Figure 8, the map below, in which Chirombo is indicated with a red marker). The pilot was followed by a focused case study in Chirombo, where a further 58 semi-structured interviews were conducted over a period of five months, from August to December 2017.

Semi-structured interviews in Chirombo led to a five-month PV process between January and May 2018, which included 16 full day workshops between February and March 2018, and a protracted filming and editing process that ended in May 2018. The PV process was designed to build on the interviews by creating spaces in which participants could explore their experiences together, reflecting and deliberating. The process included analytical exercises that lead to a detailed plan for the film: *Tigwirane Manja*. Once the film was finished, screenings to various audiences began, according to participant's wishes. The idea was to connect participants' analyses to different viewers and explore people's reactions. The following section will examine how the pilot research period was conducted and how it helped to frame this project.



(Figure 8: Pilot research stretched from Zomba, towards the southern region of Malawi, to Mzuzu in the North. The red marker indicates Chirombo, where this research was conducted)

2.2 Pilot

In the preliminary stages of this research project, 17 semi-structured interviews were conducted in a broad cross section of the agricultural development community. Initially, interviewees were selected from among existing contacts within the Malawian agricultural development community. This approach was then followed by a snowball method as people recommended other potential interviewees.

The interviews began with simple conversation starters to understand the various approaches to agricultural development that each organisation and/or individual took. Once interviewees had shared their perspectives, often exploring various tangents, they were asked how their interventions were designed and with what kind of local input (if appropriate). If interviewees had little to say on such matters, the issue was not forced. The idea was to encourage interviewees to open up about their experiences and views on agricultural development in order to paint a picture of common practices and understand how agricultural development chains tend to function.

Interviews with people working for large organisations with a lot of influence in the agricultural development sector, like USAID and the WFP, were designed to ascertain how interviewees frame their priorities and perspectives. The overall feeling that came out of these interviews was of people in influential positions, frustrated with the lack of material progress in rural Malawi. Several people spoke about how more needed to be done to encourage rural Malawians to 'change their mind-sets' in accordance with interviewees priorities. As far as extension practices were concerned, rural Malawians were seen as beneficiaries of top-down development chains.

This response is consistent with a hierarchical agricultural development model, in which people working for large influential organisations have been fed a narrative that they are experts. If only rural Malawians, or indeed anyone else deemed lower down the development chain, would follow evidence based policies by doing exactly what they are told, then all would be well (Leach et al. 2010). At this level, reflexivity is constrained by the walls of reductionist, dogmatically materialistic, neoliberal understandings of development.

One interviewee, a consultant researcher with the UN (though not in agriculture) was highly critical of development practices and baffled by the bubble created by communities of practice that seemed to exist in a reality that was completely disconnected from rural Malawi. However, she could not see how the

development machine could be changed and was keen to explore it from within, in order to develop her ideas. Her reflections were reminiscent of Autesserre's (2014:47) book 'Peaceland' in which she shares that: "most people belong to several overlapping communities of practice...[which are] informal and invisible to their participants." These communities of practice and their associated priorities and philosophies, tend to dictate how people behave and what they think. As this interviewee shared, unravelling the ideas planted and reinforced by these communities of practice and finding ways through them to wake up to alternative realities, like local Malawian experiences, is extremely challenging (Interview, UN Consultant Researcher, Lilongwe, 05/08/2017).

People working for small to medium sized national and international agricultural NGOs were also interviewed. The results tended to be predefined menus of technical agricultural interventions, typical of materialistic approaches to land use. Several of these interviews felt more like sales pitches than reflective exercises. For example, a representative of an NGO in Mzuzu shared their technical approach to agriculture and spent most of the interview seemingly trying to convince me that this approach was the best and that they could not keep up with demand, such was farmers' interest (Interview, Project Manager, Mzuzu, 01/08/2017). Top-down neoliberal development chains, mean that NGOs are perpetually looking for their next source of funding.

Without much space for deeper reflections in the short amount of time provided by the interviews, people rarely opened up further, meaning that deeper reflections were limited and the interviews may have been seen as shallow opportunities to be heard and thus gain access to resources. When one interviewee was pressed for deeper reflections, he appeared uncomfortable and shared that he, to paraphrase, 'did not want to get in trouble, or speak badly of his employer', potentially reflecting a lack of trust in the confidentiality of the interviews, and demonstrating a fear of his employer that kept his reflections in check (Interview, Project researcher, Lilongwe, 28/07/2017). If he could not open up in a confidential interview, it seems unlikely that he would feel comfortable sharing his reflections with his employer. The constraints that the

need for money and desire to rise up the career ladder put on people's willingness and ability to communicate critically, reflects an embedded competitive and materialistic structure that does not encourage open communication or reflexivity.

People working for small independent permaculture and agroecology projects were then interviewed, providing insights into some more holistic technical approaches, which were still lacking in open, reflective, social methodologies. These interviews were characterised by freer and more open discussions, in which people seemed willing to share their critical reflections. However, these reflections often resembled those made by others, along the lines of – 'if only people would listen to us' – and revolved around physical agricultural practices.

One interviewee opened up more than others, sharing his frustration at the constraints of dependence on funding and being held to top-down scientific standards. A prolific farmer himself, this interviewee felt that the techniques of agroecology and permaculture would flourish far more if implemented by farmers and shared horizontally with other farmers, than they do when NGOs and development funding chains are involved (Interview, Lead Agroecology Trainer, Lilongwe, 21/07/2017). His perspective is consistent with that of the agroecology movement and reflects a frustration with what are seen as constraints of social organisation within institutionalised neoliberal development chains (Machin Sosa et al. 2010; Rosset et al. 2011). However, it was still materialistic and relatively dogmatic, in that the narrative was along the lines of – 'I have my way, and more should be done to make my way spread'.

Finally, several independent Malawian citizens who used to work in agricultural development in various capacities were interviewed. Some of these interviews were by far the most open and reflective of the pilot phase, with people generally able to observe agricultural development and reflect on their experiences with more detachment. One interviewee, a former university professor, openly reflected on the dilemmas facing rural farmers in northern Malawi, particularly the fertiliser trap. A supporter of agroecological practices himself, he shared that

he works with farmers in the village of his birth, providing them with synthetic fertilisers, even though he is well aware of their negative impact on soil quality.

His decision did not sit comfortably with him but was based on many conversations with farmers, leading to the recognition that though deep change is needed in agricultural practice and social organisation, rural farmers have often-desperate immediate needs that somehow need to be met with fertiliser. Transitions to different systems would take time and require efforts beyond his current capacities (Interview, Former University Professor, Mzuzu, 02/08/2017). This interview opened up the complexity of agricultural development far more than any others before it, demonstrating both the importance of personal ties and freedom to examine the nuanced complexity that exists outside of development chains, while pointing to a lack of supportive channels for exploring socio-agricultural complexity and identifying solutions.

The last pilot study interview outside of Chirombo that will be mentioned here, took place in Zomba with an elderly Malawian man. The interviewee in question works as a guide for tourists. His knowledge of local plants was astonishing and stretched far beyond a materialistic understanding of reality. His reflections were not so much on agriculture as on the loss of the traditional practice of foraging and eating wild plants. Indicating several plants as we walked through the forest, he shared that some had edible roots like huge sweet potatoes, while others could be used to heal multiple ailments. Yet people in his village no longer listen to his knowledge, to the extent that sometimes they will go hungry, rather than harvest wild plants (Interview, Forest guide, Zomba, July 2017).

When asked why that might be, he shook his head and said that he did not know. The disdain for wild foods could be based on a materialistic idea that purchased or otherwise more monetarily valuable foods are superior, and thus bestow a sense of prestige. This trend can be observed during the maize harvest when people will pay more for white maize flour that has been fully processed, than the more nutritious, but less expensive, brown maize, largely because the former

is seen as more prestigious (based on experiences and conversations living in Malawi between 2012 and 2018).

Finally, 12 interviews were conducted in Chirombo and designed with the help of Samuel Baluti, a farmer from Chirombo who worked with me for several years on agroecology projects in the Mangochi area, and shares a similar desire to see genuine participatory processes take root. Samuel and I conducted the first 4 interviews together. However, Samuel and interviewees had a tendency to defer to me and did not speak freely. Therefore, the following 8 interviews were conducted by Samuel alone. Testing these different approaches meant that the difference in people's reactions could be observed, leading to the conclusion that people relaxed and opened up more when alone with Samuel, than when with me. The decision was made for Samuel to continue interviews without me. This process marked the beginning of research in Chirombo and as such will be examined in greater detail in Section 2.6.

The initial pilot study interviews demonstrated a need for a thorough research process that would give participants the space and time to engage in a genuine participatory process that made space for reflection and deliberation. It was clear that such processes could be helpful along the whole development chain, however it seemed appropriate to start with rural Malawians, whose voices and perspectives are so rarely seen or heard. Though several case studies along the development chain would have been ideal, this was not feasible considering the amount of time available and my own limited experience as a researcher. The following section will explore the practice of conducting case studies, considering why case studies were deemed appropriate for this participatory research project and exploring why Malawi, Mangochi, and finally Chirombo, were chosen as ideal locations.

2.3 Case Study

If this investigation was to have a chance of being genuinely participatory, then everyone involved would need to cultivate trust, a process that cannot be forced.

Time and open communication would be needed for trust to grow (Arnstein 1969; Cornwall 2008) and focusing on one case study would provide more control over timelines. What's more, while the semi-structured interviews during the pilot phase of this research provided some valuable insights, the scope for exploring issues in depth was quite limited. Ensuring that participants would have the space to explore their experiences in depth, if they so chose, meant that the research needed to be particularly flexible. Case studies are recognised as flexible spaces in which researchers have "little or no control" (Yin 1994:9). This had the additional benefit of connecting to Arnstein's (1969) definition of genuine participatory research, as a space in which participants are in control.

While in theory a case study approach fit the objectives of this investigation, it was also necessary to consider whether case studies were appropriate in rural Malawi, where this research was to be conducted, and why such research might be worthwhile. As discussed in the Introduction and Chapter One, mainstream materialist and neoliberal development priorities have marginalised alternative pathways of development in Malawi. Pilot research and the years I had spent in Malawi previously, indicated that any number of locations and contexts could have been appropriate for a case study using participatory research. However, I was particularly interested on creating a space for marginalised perspectives to be seen and heard.

Therefore, focusing on rural Malawi where local people's perspectives, ontologies, and epistemologies, have progressively been, and continue to be, pushed out, made sense. As mentioned above, in focusing on rural Malawi, this research wanted to make certain (as much as this is possible) that everyone involved in the process would have the time and space to cultivate trust and awareness. In this way participants might become researchers in their own contexts and present their results outwards. My experience working in Mangochi on agricultural projects meant that I was well aware of the need for genuinely participatory processes focusing on local people's experiences with agriculture. Mainstream agricultural development too often leads to simplistic policies that

are failing local people and there are very few spaces (if any) where they can be seen and heard. The pilot interviews in Chirombo, as well as conversations with Samuel, made it apparent that all the dynamics of mainstream development and marginalisation that have been discussed in this thesis so far, were at play. Chapter three will explore the specifics of Chirombo in more detail but suffice it to say that a case study approach seemed to fit the needs and objectives of this investigation, however the decision was not made without critical reflection.

Critics point out that case studies are based on biased samples, which make it problematic to come to wide conclusions. As a result, they are generally used to encourage reflection and put forward new ideas, rather than to poke holes in existing technical theories – though holes in associated theories might appear through the reflection process (Siggelkow 2007). What's more, basing this research on a rural case study played right into the stereotype of participatory research as a practice that tends to be so localised that it cannot be used for wider transformative change (Hickey et al. 2005).

However, this research was designed to explore whether it might be possible to reimagine pathways of development through a thorough and genuine approach to participatory video (PV) and based on the idea that genuine participatory research requires cultivating trust and awareness through open communication. The results of the process were not as important as the process itself which would make space for learning and generating knowledge through reflection and deliberation (Kindon 2003; Pink 2006; Savin-Baden 2010). If anything, the methodological process of reflection and deliberation was what might be widely applied. If participants were to make technical recommendations that resonated with audiences in other contexts, then that was also acceptable, however it was not the objective of the research to come to wide technical conclusions with which to inform policies. What's more, PV was seen as a perfect antidote to the view that participatory research tends to be so local that it cannot be used for wider change. Visual methods provide platforms for participants to be seen and heard in a wide variety of contexts, making it possible to create opportunities for

transformative change far beyond the contexts in which research is conducted (Harman 2019).

Finally, another common challenge associated with case studies is that they can lead to descriptive reports, rather than providing analytical contributions to knowledge (Rowley 2002). This pitfall has been avoided by focusing on the transformative process itself and leaving much of the description of problems to participants in *Tigwirane Manja*. That being said, several of the chapters of this thesis involve descriptions, so that readers might understand the context and the process that led to the making of the film. However, description is balanced out with analyses that connect events to the key issues identified in the literature review.

The specific choice of Chirombo as a location for this case study, was based on several factors. Seeing as agriculture was the focus of the research, it being a perfect example of how development chains extend donor influence through materialistic and neoliberal philosophies, limiting what is doable and thinkable, it was important to choose a location where farming was a common activity. Ideally farming would be part of a complex matrix of local activities that could form the basis for a holistic analysis and open PV process.

Chirombo is situated at an intersection between various complex influences. Much of the beachfront land has been privatised and sold to wealthy individuals, primarily from Blantyre and Lilongwe. The land is used for holiday homes and hotels. The result is a growing dependence on jobs in hospitality, which exists alongside traditional ways of life; notably fishing and farming. Agricultural development in the area has been heavily influenced by governmental and non-governmental programmes that have tended to encourage the use of synthetic inputs, as well as the growth of livestock farming, both of which have resulted in highly complex issues.

Farmers predominantly grow maize but routinely express a desire to diversify (Interviews and conversations, Chirombo, August 2017-June 2018). Mixed

livestock is common in the area and preliminary research suggested that livestock grazing was one of the most destructive problems that farmers faced, and one which they were keen to find a solution for (Pilot interviews, Chirombo, August 2017). On the whole, Chirombo provided an excellent location for this research, with a complex web of interconnected issues that would need to be unpacked through careful reflection and deliberation.

2.4 Semi-structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were used in the pilot, as outlined in section 2.2, and as a first method of investigation in Chirombo. This method is primarily “about listening... paying attention... being open to hear what people have to say, being non-judgmental... creating a comfortable environment for people to share... [and] being careful and systematic with the things people tell you” (Krueger et al. 2000:xi). Putting these qualities into practice helps to create a space in which people feel heard and valued. This can encourage people to open up and reflect on their experiences. While questions are prepared beforehand in order to provide some structure to the conversations (see 2.4.1 below), semi-structured interviews are generally allowed to flow and evolve (Longhurst 2003). This feature was ideal for this research, which provided participants with a framework – agriculture – but encouraged holistic analyses based on people’s experiences and priorities.

2.4.1 Structure of Chirombo Interviews

The degree to which semi-structured interviews are open will in large part depend on the nature of the questions (Cohen and Crabtree 2006). The questions chosen for this research project were deliberately open and made space for holistic analyses. The objective was to use a chronological reflection on the past, present, and future as a practical tool for identifying current problems and designing solutions. No specific timeframe was used. The questions were as follows:

1. Can you tell me what it is like to farm in Chirombo at present?
2. What did it used to be like?
3. What do you think it will be like in the future?
4. What recommendations, if any, would you make to other farmers?

The openness of the questions encouraged reflection and comparison between current farming trends and past practices. Beginning with reflections on the past opened up the possibility of wider analyses of what life used to be like in Chirombo before materialism and neoliberalism were so all pervasive. This was seen as important in that it would create space for marginalised perspectives, whereas a focus on present issues alone might have further marginalised alternatives.

What's more, it seemed appropriate to take a storytelling approach by following a linear timeline as it fit with the Malawian tradition of reflecting on the past through storytelling and song. As participants' answered the questions they created a timeline of farming practices in Chirombo, often embarking on tangents that helped to paint a holistic picture of local life; the results of these interviews are predominantly explored in Chapter Three. While many interviewees embraced the opportunity to speak, with some interviews lasting as much as two hours, others were shy or reluctant to open up. In these cases, the semi-structured interview format became a little more formulaic, with participants doing little more than answering the questions outlined above. It is partly for this reason that it was important to interview a large number of people – more interviews meant greater likelihood of a richer, holistic whole.

2.4.2 The Semi-structured Interviews

70 interviews were conducted in Chirombo between August and December 2017. If participants consented, each interview was recorded using a small tape-recorder. As previously mentioned, during the pilot phase of the research Samuel Baluti and I conducted the first 4 interviews in Chirombo together. Samuel then conducted the following 8 interviews during the pilot phase alone, and a further

58 during the following months. While my absence meant that my biases were not physically present, Samuel's own biases were. Careful and open conversations were held to prepare Samuel for the semi-structured interview process in my absence and ensure that he kept his own biases in check and allowed the interviews to flow freely. Likewise, the format of the questions was discussed in order to ascertain whether my own biases were overly present. The question on the past in order to reach back past materialism and neoliberalism, was seen as the strongest indication of my own tendency to favour traditional perspectives but was deemed sufficiently open and flexible to be acceptable.

The preparation of the interviews was made easier by virtue of Samuel and I having worked together for five years. What's more, while our very different lives and backgrounds mean that our biases are inevitably different, we do also share several. We have both been trained in permaculture and favour locally controlled social and agriculture systems, based on cooperation, and agroecological practices. However, as discussed in the prologue, our previous experiences had shown us that local control was the most important element of our biases. Without it, there can be no genuine participation or reimagining of local development. This was the key bias that bound us together and helped us to keep each other in check during the PV workshops.

Though the semi-structured interviews left ample space for participant to take control of the conversation, reflect, and share their views, there were some instances when Samuel being local was a disadvantage. People know that he has ties to a *muzungu* (white man) and therefore at times tried to appeal to what he or I might want to hear, or framed their responses in order to gain access to much needed resources. However, such instances were very easy to tell apart from the rest as their answers were broken, contradictory and would often lead to direct requests for material support.

Many people are quite desperate for help in Chirombo and it was inevitable that some would take the opportunity to ask for support rather than engage in reflective interviews. However, most people explored their experiences and their

answers flowed freely and were often full of rich and complex detail. It may be that some of these interviews were ways of garnering support, however the sheer number of interviews made it possible to identify patterns. While it is possible that people systematically gave the answers they thought Samuel would prefer, it is unlikely that they would have done so quite so freely, convincingly, and on such a scale. What's more, their answers differed a great deal and were often full of rich nuance that did not clearly favour one pathway of development over another. Some of the results of the interviews are explored in Chapter Three and are reflected in the film *Tigwriane Manja*.

2.4.3 Local Level Key Informants

The first criteria in selecting interviewees, was that the participants should all be farmers, seeing as the focus was on agriculture. Secondly, interviewees should represent a sample of the community that was not usually heard. Chasukwa (2018:114) explains that typical research and development projects tend to approach established committee heads or village leaders when conducting research. The result is to create a class of “professional respondents” fluent in the language of development, and thus predominantly neoliberalism and materialism. If this research was to make space for a deep and genuine participatory process, professional respondents needed to be actively avoided.

Therefore, interviews began with the elderly in the community in order to make space for people who are increasingly marginalised and paint a picture of the trajectory agriculture had taken over the years, potentially stretching back before materialism and neoliberalism, as previously mentioned. This was also the most culturally appropriate and respectful way to begin. Interviewees were selected by using a snowball method in order to avoid the interviewers own possible conscious or subconscious prejudices (Biernacki 1981).

The first interview was with an elderly woman who lived at the furthest end of Chirombo village. At the end of the interview, the interviewee was asked whether there were other elderly farmers near by, and so on and so forth. While

this approach was efficient and helped avoid Samuel's possible biases towards or against certain people in the village, it did make the investigation subject to interviewees' biases, as they were likely to recommend friends or relatives (Klein 2002). However, measures were taken to mix this up by occasionally visiting people randomly, so as to break possible chains of biases.

After just over twenty interviews of village elders, participants were asked to recommend a farmer nearby, rather than specifically an elderly farmer. This change opened the interviews up to wider sample. After a little over forty interviews, participants were also asked whether they knew of anyone who farms all year round. Most farming is seasonal, limited by the rain season, but some people use areas along rivers, by the lake, with wells, or with high and easily accessible water tables, to farm all year round. Interviewing these people helped to identify atypical and extreme cases, thus painting a more complete picture of the whole (Seawright 2008:298-301).

The final factor in selecting interviewees was that they should be from across the whole of Chirombo, including both Mberesera and Chirombo. As explained in the introduction to this thesis, Chirombo is divided into two villages – Chirombo and Mberesera – for which Group Village Headman (GVH) Chirombo and Village Headman (VH) Mberesera are responsible. Including both chiefdoms in the research was seen as the politically correct approach – it was important to avoid offending the chiefs or anyone else by favouring one area over another, particularly after having started by avoiding professional respondents. What's more, being inclusive made it more likely that the final output of the PV process would be relevant to people from across the bay. Finally, Samuel is from Chirombo and it was important to demonstrate that he was not showing favouritism towards his own village.

2.4.4 Breakdown of Chirombo Interview Results

Interviews in Chirombo covered a wide range of topics, with many recurring. A table of topics that were covered during the interviews can be found in Annex 1.

This table was first compiled as the interviews were transcribed and provided a baseline of information to support the facilitation of the PV workshops; it was also used to inform the selection of workshop participants, see Section 2.5.1. With the information neatly compiled, it was possible to triangulate what participants in the PV process were likely to say and what they might be missing out on, thus lending some rigor to a qualitative process that could otherwise have seemed a little anecdotal, building confidence in the results.

Triangulation is based on the principles of using a mixture of methods to produce different data, in order to reveal the same or similar results or, as the case may be, uncover new nuances (Harrison, 2001: 83). If participants in the workshops were to echo the semi-structured interviews, in a collective setting, and again in their choices for the film, then the information to emerge in this research project would have reverberated throughout the methodology. Equally, any new ideas or omissions during the PV workshops and/or film, would stand out.

This thoroughness was particularly useful during the analytical mapping exercise (detailed in Section 4.8), which formed the basis for *Tigwirane Manja*. Knowing the main topics and sub-topics in advance, meant that facilitators could ask questions that might prompt people to share their views. If they did not take up the opportunities, then perhaps they did not want to share with the group what they had said in private. The idea was to ensure that if anything were to be left out, then it would be left out by choice.

While semi-structured interviews offered the scope to open up to the complexities of village life, beginning to isolate certain recurrent problems and to consider possible solutions, they did not offer opportunities to collectively narrow down after the threads of complexity had been explored. Opening up the research to collective reflection through participatory video workshops was the next stage of the process.

2.5 Participatory Video (PV)

PV is an open, contextually defined process used to address location specific socio-ecological concerns (Ferreira 2006) and is recognised for enabling participants to discern and prioritise their own problems and find the information and resources needed to solve those problems (Shaw and Robertson, 1997:26). What's more, it is seen as an effective way of creating space for self-reflection, collective reflection and deliberation (Lunch et al. 2006) and is recognised as part of a movement of visual PAR methods that can be used as a springboard to conscious action (Pink 2001; White 2003; Lunch 2006). Thus, PV was seen as an ideal method for this research, which sought to encourage participants to collectively identify their problems and propose solutions that could lead to action.

If the research were to be genuinely participatory, then participants would need to take control (Arnstein 1969; Pretty 1995; White 1996; Cornwall 2008). Open communication between everyone involved in the process was a prerequisite for participant control, as it would allow for the growth of trust and reflection. If participants did not trust the space, each other or facilitators, then they were unlikely to open up and more likely to watch or say what they felt should be said, than actively participate or take control. PV is recognised as a method that can shift control away from conventional top-down centralised models of governance, and away from researchers, towards horizontal people-to-people processes and participant control, by using an array of flexible communication exercises (Pink 2001; White 2003; Lunch 2006; Harman 2019).

However, participant control is not everything. A participatory research process could enable participants to take control without encouraging a reflective analysis, or providing the means for wide communication of the outputs of that analysis. If this participatory process were to be true to its aims, then it would need to provide opportunities for participants to optimise the depth and width of their analysis through collective reflection and deliberation during the workshops (Cornwall 2008). Without creating spaces for deep analysis,

participants would be limited to shallow reflections, as was sometimes the case during the semi-structured interviews in the pilot phase of research.

For instance, 50 per cent of interviewees mentioned that they need to keep using fertiliser, even though it is destroying soil fertility and is very expensive. In addition, 9 per cent of interviewees said that farming with chemicals was damaging people's health. In a shallow participatory process, participants might end their analysis early and conclude that they need fertiliser, possibly in the hope that facilitators or researchers might provide it. Such simplistic analyses might result from rigid, extractive, quantitative research processes, which tend to define the purpose of agricultural systems almost entirely in terms of material yields and produce predominantly statistical data that is then used to formulate problematic centralised solutions. A deeper process would make space for participants to examine what is commonly known as 'the fertiliser trap' holistically, in order to identify solutions that demonstrate an appreciation for the interconnected complexity of village life, considering current and future needs. This might involve exploring possible alternatives that do not destroy soil and are not expensive, while connecting with people's multiple other complex interconnected priorities.

Providing a space for oft-marginalised local people to share their views is thus largely a question of method. As Sophie Harman (2019:12) says of a systematically marginalised people in rural Tanzania, in a context not dissimilar to Chirombo: "The problem... is not whether they should be seen but how to see them and get them seen." As for how to see participants, the process itself can be used to encourage active listening, trust, and deep analyses in which participants take control and become visible to each other. PV also provides the means to get people seen by others, through the power of images that can be shared with relative ease. It is both a vehicle for participants to articulate their experiences to each other and to others (Ferreira 2006) and a platform from which to share diverse perspectives outwards, as widely as participants wish (Pink 2001; White 2003; Lunch 2006). Whether people are able to see and hear participants, partly depends on their own states of awareness and abilities to self-reflect. In this

respect, and when used in this way, it can be seen as the antithesis of extractive methods.

Reopening discussion through film screenings ensures that the process remains flexible, by giving audiences opportunities to engage in the discussion and share their own perspectives, potentially impacting the framing of problems and the design of solutions. Partnerships with non-prescriptive facilitators can help to widen the reach of participants' outputs (for detailed reflections on the screening process see Chapter Six). As for the facilitators, the process of research can bring about deep personal change, help them to reimagine the pathways of their own existence, and provide valuable experience to keep facilitating deep and genuine participatory processes (see Epilogue).

2.5.1 Selecting Participants

The data presented in Annex 1 was put together while the interviews were being transcribed. As mentioned previously, one of its primary uses was to provide guidance when selecting participants for the PV workshops. With an idea of the main topics in mind, it was possible to select participants who would cover the full range of topics. This was important if the PV workshops, and its outputs, were to be at all representative of Chirombo. With a similar focus on representativeness in mind, participants of different ages were chosen to provide an inter-generational cross-section of the village. The youngest participant was 18 and eldest was 85, with every generation in between also represented. It was important that a process that aimed to be inclusive and utilise PV's unique qualities to create platforms for people to be heard, should provide a space in which oft-marginalised elderly members of the community could be heard.

The majority of participants were women, largely because more women than men are farmers in Chirombo, and four participants were illiterate. Women's voices tend to be more marginalised in Malawi (Minton et al. 2008), however participants were selected on the basis of their responses, rather than their

gender. The inclusion of four illiterate participants illustrated how visual methods can create a platform for usually marginalised people and is a common feature of PV (Lunch and Lunch 2006).

2.6 Research Ethics

This study's research ethics and principles were applied in accordance with the Faculty Research Ethics Committee of the University of Leeds. For the semi-structured interviews, ensuring that participation in the research was voluntary by obtaining consent, was relatively straightforward. The aims of the research and open semi-structured nature of the interviews were explained. It was made clear how the data would be analysed, used and safely stored. All discussions regarding consent were held in the language of the respondents, which was English for the majority of the pilot interviews, and Chichewa for all of the interviews in Chirombo.

The consent form was read out and the content explained. It included the option to be included by name or anonymously. If participants consented to take part in the research according to their chosen parameters, the consent forms were either signed, in the case of the pilot study, or verbally agreed to in the case of many interviews in Chirombo. Many people are illiterate in Chirombo and signing forms can be frightening as it entails trusting that researchers are telling the truth, rather than taking advantage of them. Thus, it was deemed preferable to give people the choice between verbal or written consent. Most of the interviews were voice recorded, according to participants' consent, transcribed, and stored on a password protected external hard drive, with no hard copies made.

Participants in the semi-structured interviews were made aware that they had the right to withdraw from the research at any point and that the data of their interviews would be deleted. Prior to their consent participants were also given an Information Sheet that included valuable information about the project and

contact details in case anyone should wish to withdraw from the study. No respondents withdrew their consent following the interviews.

During the participatory video workshops, consent was an on-going process. Participants first consented to taking part in the workshops by agreeing to the same consent form as was used for the interviews, as long as they had agreed to being filmed or photographed without anonymity and specifically named. However, as participants' understanding of the final visual output of the process grew, new discussions were held. Participants were reminded that they could withdraw their consent up to three months after the end of the PV process and could choose not to be involved or named in the film at all. No new consent forms were signed but discussions were held periodically during the process, as people developed their understanding of what they were involved in.

For instance, when choosing the audience for the film, participants' consent was revisited now that they had a better understanding of who might see the footage. When, after lengthy discussions (detailed in Chapter Four), participants chose to make their film available to national and international audiences, their consent was deemed complete, as it was made in fullest possible consciousness. Even so, they were once again reminded that they could withdraw their consent up to three months after the end of the PV process, either by contacting me by phone or by approaching Samuel in person.

When making *Tigwirane Manja* participants interviewed other people in Chirombo. They were instructed to explain what they were doing and ask whether people consented to be in their film. If they did and the footage was to be included in the final edit of the film, interviewees were approached again at a later date to ensure that they understood what they were taking part in, watched the film, signed a consent form, or gave verbal consent. Much like participants, if they changed their mind they could contact me or approach Samuel to ask to withdraw their consent up to three months after the end of the PV process. Nobody withdrew their consent.

2.7 Conclusion

The methodology used for this project involved a sequence of methods: 17 semi-structured interviews with people working in agricultural development in different capacities, in northern, central and southern Malawi, 70 semi-structured interviews with farmers in Chirombo, followed by 16 PV workshops with 18 participants. Overall, the process was designed to create spaces for participants to analyse their own experiences, identify problems and suggest solutions. The PV process in particular enabled participants to pinpoint problems and blockages, before designing and proposing solutions, which they then presented in a film. The film has since been screened 9 times up until November 2019, to different audiences, and has opened up new conversations, inviting feedback within and outside the village. The process of implementing the proposed solutions is on-going (see Chapters Six and Seven for further details).

Chapter Three: Understanding Chirombo

Introduction

As discussed in Section 2.4, semi-structured interview questions invited interviewees to reflect on the past, present and future of agriculture in Chirombo, leading to insights into the village's past, transition to the present day, as well as hopes and fears for the future. This chapter draws on the interviews to examine three specific areas of interest – local governance, traditional worldviews and agriculture – as experienced by local people. The focus on governance in Section 3.1 highlights changes in decision-making processes, drawing attention to the decline of traditional systems and the possible need for new forms of social organisation. Local worldviews, explored in Section 3.2, provide insights into vitalistic and pantheist perspectives in Chirombo, underlining how the growth of materialism has marginalised these traditional ontologies and epistemologies, much to the distress of many interviewees. Finally, the focus on agriculture, presented in Section 3.3, provides readers with insights into traditional practices, colonial and neo-colonial processes of change, and challenges that interviewees face today.

Each section is separated for ease of communication but the above topics are all interconnected. In order to not pre-empt the film and subsequent chapters, many key topics are not covered in this chapter but are unpacked in Chapter Four, the film *Tigwirane Manja*, and Chapter Five. One theme that runs throughout the chapter (and indeed throughout the film) is a transition away from a connected communitarian way, towards disconnected individualism and materialism. Conversely, some of the themes discussed in this chapter did not make it into the PV workshops or film; notably those explored in section 3.2. Possible reasons for these omissions will begin to be explored in this chapter and will be revisited in Chapter Seven: Discussion.

A disproportionate number of elders are referenced in this chapter, relative to average age of interviewees. Part of the purpose of this chapter is to paint a

picture of life in Chirombo from past to present. When reflecting on the past, younger interviewees often deferred to the elders' wisdom and used clauses like: "My grandmother tells me that..." or "Apparently people used to..." Therefore, when analysing the interviews, particular attention was paid to the elders' first hand experiences.

3.1. Cooperation, Competition, and Local Governance

One of the first and most recurrent observations that village elders made when asked about the past, is that people used to be deeply connected, particularly in times of need. "When I was a young woman people used to share everything" says Abiti Dixon, a maize farmer and great-grandmother in her late eighties who lived in Chirombo her whole life and sadly passed away a few months after the interview. "There were no fences between us. We were connected to each other" (Interviews, Chirombo, November 2017). Her sentiments were echoed by Mrs Changamire, a woman in her seventies and mother of Mike Changamire who took part in the PV workshops, who stated: "When the village faced big challenges, like an outbreak of disease, we came together. The elders would discuss the issues and find a solution. Everyone would implement the solutions together" (Interviews, Chirombo, October 2017). If work needed to be done for the benefit of the village, people did it together and if there were disagreements public meetings were held in which the elders ultimately had the last word.

Public meetings are still convened to discuss local issues but they are far less frequent and the authority of the elders has waned with the growth of centralised national government (Interview with the chief's mother, Chirombo, August 2017). Mrs Changamire, so full of praise for the way people used to work together to fix problems in the village, shared that: "Now people don't even listen to the chief" (Interviews, Chirombo, October 2017). Her words were echoed by the chief himself who spoke of his struggles to implement change, before jokingly offering me his job so that he might enjoy a respite (Interview with GVH Chirombo, Chirombo, January 2018).

This view of losing touch with a tradition of listening, cooperating, and respecting the local authorities, was shared by several other elders, notably Amai Chinchino and Mr Phande in *Tigwirane Manja*, who expressed their sadness saying: “People used to be very connected. They used to listen to the elders’ advice. While today... no” (Amai Chinchino, minutes 12:01-12:12, *Tigwirane Manja*). “The world rotates differently. Everyone doing their own thing. We don’t listen to each other. Our failure to listen has broken our world” (Mr Phande, minutes 12:13-12-28). While people used to share food freely, nowadays “these things are purchased. People don’t even share with their neighbours’ children” (Amai Chinchino, *Tigwirane Manja*, 13:20-13:27). Amai Chinchino’s view is backed up by a wider Malawian study by Devereux (1999:6), in which he points out that: “informal transfers, either between rich and poor or among the poor themselves, appear to be declining over time, partly as a general consequence of commercialisation...” The impacts of materialism and neoliberal development run deep, apparently changing the way people in Chirombo interact and socially organise.

The situation is made all the more complicated because Chirombo’s former chief was reportedly corrupt. With his power derived from central government and connections to wealthy individuals from outside the village, he is said to have taken advantage of his position to sell communal lands for his own personal gain. According to several interviewees and Samuel Baluti, the new group village headman (GVH) is showing signs that he is genuinely doing his best to serve local interests but it will take a lot to restore the bond of trust that was broken by his predecessor. As Bovaird and Loeffler (2005:143) point out: “trust is a key element in all social relationships”. Without people’s trust, it seems unlikely that the chief could restore his authority. Perhaps moving on from local hierarchical systems would be better for the village but this should be decided by local people. As things stand current governance structures appear disconnected and directionless; leading to something of a free for all that is resulting in ecological destruction and growing animosity (Interviews and conversations in Chirombo between August 2017 and April 2018), a sentiment echoed by Mr Phande in *Tigwirane Manja* (13:01-13:10).

Aness Luwiro, a woman of eighty-five who has lived in Mberesera her whole life, explains that in her youth local governance structures often led to pragmatic collective action: “The river at the back of the village was cleared of crocodiles [that were attacking people, particularly children]. We worked together further up stream to divert the water, drying out the area where the crocodiles liked to stay. That was a long time ago. People don’t work together like that these days” (Interview, Mberesera, November 2017). The result of this decline in cooperation appears to be that nowadays people cannot resolve the very same problem.

Despite frequent crocodile attacks on children and occasional deaths, according to John Alie, a twenty five year old man from Chirombo who divides his time between fishing and farming, “nothing will be done until someone pays to have the reeds [in which the crocodiles hide] removed” (Interview, Chirombo, December 2017). These days people tend to wait until there is paid work to be done before they act. Value is seen in the money rather than the work itself, which is often destructive, like felling ancient trees to make space for new private holiday cottages.

Competition for these jobs can lead to conflict. Individual financial concerns now take precedent over collective action for a locally determined greater good (Interview with John Alie, Chirombo, December 2017 and conversations with Samuel Baluti and Mr Faustino, a local gardener and chair of the village fishing committee, February-March 2018). The village has undergone a shift from a traditional cooperative system, albeit with hierarchical local governance structures, to individualistic mind-sets in which people primarily act when paid to do so, regardless of whether the actions are beneficial, a change that is typical of capitalist systems and reflects the growing influence of money (Escobar 2007; Chomsky 2016; Harvey 2017).

Yelesi Mbuto Riwilo, a woman of over eighty who shared a rich and deep analysis of Chirombo, where she has lived her whole life, explored the idea of colonialism

through the prism of knowledge: “The problem is that people used to have a natural way of thinking, now they have an educated way. Everything disconnected.” This idea speaks to some of the philosophical notions explored in Chapter One, notably that traditional approaches to gathering knowledge were based on vitalist and pantheist connections to the local environment, which gave rise to natural intuitive ways of knowing the world (Girardot 1983; Morris 1998). Mrs Riwilo’s perspective suggests that as local people have been sucked in to a rationalist way of thinking, largely based on a western curriculum, so their relationships to each other and the land have become fractured, reductionist, and disconnected.

The marginalisation of pantheism and vitalism in Chirombo cannot be discussed without at least mentioning the role of the church. According to several conversations with churchgoers and one with a local clergyman, local priests routinely berate their congregations for vitalist practices, denounced as witchcraft, and for harbouring pantheist beliefs, regularly demanding that all such practices be ceased (Conversations with several churchgoers and one priest in Chirombo, January and March 2018). At the same time at least one local priest had no qualms demanding that people should deliver portions of their harvests to the church, so as to keep the priests fed, with one priest telling me that people in his village were irreverent because they had not delivered as much maize as the previous village where he had worked (Interview, Nankhwali Parish, March 2018).

One young man shared that he had stopped going to church because he felt that all that the priest did was berate people and demand homage (Conversation my home in Chirombo, Anonymous, March 2018). However, it would appear that most people in Chirombo now identify as Christians, publicly at least, and that traditional vitalist practices and beliefs are hidden and disappearing. This trend is reflected in Malawi more broadly with 80% of the population said to now identify as Christians, while often more privately embracing a “dual religiosity” based on a mixture of Christianity and traditional beliefs (Mlenga 2016). In the following section traditional vitalism and pantheism will be further unpacked,

both in the broad context of Malawi and Chirombo more specifically, presenting evidence from semi-structured interviews to explore how these ontologies played out in practice.

3.2 Vitalist and Pantheist traditions in Chirombo

According to Morris (1998:81), rural Malawians “do not make a radical distinction between the spiritual (unseen) and the material aspects of life...” Living organisms have a great deal to teach and are thought to be both matter and spirit, with little distinction between the two. Morris (1998:98) goes on to say: “Essentially Malawians have a vitalistic and pantheistic attitude towards the world”. Vitalism and pantheism offer radically different alternatives to materialistic philosophies and positivist science, which avoids the problem of dualism by denying the existence of spirits (Sheldrake 2017). They also offer a different path to organised religion, in which anthropomorphised Gods and dualistic understandings of the self and the wider world, encouraging the growth of the ego and disconnection from pantheist oneness. Instead, rural Malawian thought can be said to resemble Taoism, in that it involves a pragmatic relationship with a vital natural world, based on an understanding of the interconnectedness of all things (Girardot 1983).

The implications of deep pantheist and vitalistic connection between people and their ecological systems can be understood in terms of the Gaia hypothesis or, more recently, Rupert Sheldrake’s theories of morphic resonance. Both of these perspectives take the view that the earth is an interconnected living organism of which humans are an integral part, with the latter emphasising that as an organism the earth may have memory which human beings, and indeed other entities, can tap into with a kind of telepathy, or heightened intuition (Lovelock and Margulis 2007; Sheldrake 2017). If researchers pay attention to natural environments and listen to traditional Malawian perspectives, then these theories, which might at first seem outlandish, can quickly make sense.

For instance, one huge pod mahogany at the southern end of Chirombo plays host to countless insects, climbing plants, tree orchids, families of squirrels, vervet monkeys, and birds, providing a food source for hornbills that fly in from neighbouring bays. It provides shade from the sweltering heat, cooling the ground and air as well as mulch that increases soil fertility and creates habitats for small mammals and soil organisms. It regularly serves as a formal and informal village meeting space, and has even been used as a location for wedding ceremonies. According to traditional perspectives, the observable material traits of this 'mahogany reality', play out on unseen levels of existence, with spiritual-ecologies in effect mirroring material ones. The material existence of the mahogany reality and unseen existence are not separate but one vital whole. Through song, dance, and an open heart, people can communicate directly to this unseen world.

It follows that the destruction of ecological systems, such as the felling of the above mahogany tree, has implications on seen and unseen levels of existence. If the mahogany tree and its spirit are one, then its destruction would lead to the death of the old whole and the birth of what might be called a necro-ecology, with decomposition the new form of being; ecologies and necro-ecologies exist in a permanent continuum of death and rebirth with implications for seen and unseen existence (Bezan 2015). These cycles of life and death are continuous and always have been. Thus, this interconnected reality is in fact one unbroken chain stretching out infinitely through space and time. The earth, or indeed the universe, can be understood as a self-regulating organism, which responds to disturbances through memories, generating feedback that human beings are a part of and can communicate with. This interconnected chain is one whole being stretching out infinitely through time and space.

When people exist in this deep interconnected state, rather than labouring under the illusion of separateness, they have a tendency to respect the ecological systems of which they are a part, with seen and unseen implications (Glasson et al. 2009; Inoue et al. 2016). When ancient ecologies are destroyed as has happened all over the world, ties with seen and unseen worlds die and new ones

are born. However, when destruction is accelerated, the implications take on bigger and bigger significance for socio-ecological and socio-spiritual connections, which are one and the same. In Chirombo this resulted in many elders saying that the connections to local spirits are broken and cannot be remade. Nor did they harbour much hope that younger generations would make new connections (Interview, Chirombo, August-December 2017). The reductionist philosophy of materialism that spreads with the growth of neoliberal development, discourages deep connections and encourages a disconnected relationship with the world, based on reductionism and rational materialism. This transition may portend the end for traditional ontologies and epistemologies in Chirombo, the significance of which is explored in practical examples below.

Vitalist and pantheist worldviews may partly explain what Mrs Mbuto Riwilo referred to as a 'natural way of thinking' (referenced in Section 3.3). An account that illustrates this is from a woman in her late seventies called Mrs Kanduweni, who explained that whenever her loved ones were sick, she would ask the vital world for help, encompassing both seen and unseen realms in a non-dual understanding. At night before bed, she would set an intention to find a cure for whoever was sick. As she slept spirits would come to her and give her detailed guidance. Mrs Kanduweni described one occasion when she walked in a dream with a spirit of a specific tree towards the back of the village, where the spirit/tree told her to gather bark from the east and west. This bark was best because it received the energy of the rising and setting sun. The spirit/tree then gave her specific instructions for how to prepare and administer the bark to her sick child.

The remedy worked and her son recovered quickly. From then on she knew that this tree, and perhaps others like it, might heal certain symptoms. These days, communication with the spirit world has been marginalised in village culture, with local priests publicly decrying such practices as witchcraft and the work of the devil, with the result that the custom is widely frowned upon and people

increasingly turn to western medicine.³ What's more, hospital staff often reject traditional knowledge out of hand as part of a modernisation process (Kerr et al. 2008). As this knowledge is increasingly marginalised and the old socio-ecological relationships are broken, connections to the spirit aspects of the natural world are seemingly harder to make. Where once anyone could walk with spirits in their dreams, now very few people can. This may lead to the disappearance of an epistemic system that contributed a great deal to traditional practices and ways of life (Interview with Mrs Kanduweni, Mberesera, November 2017).

Mrs Faife and Mr Phande, village elders in their late eighties and early nineties who both feature in *Tigwirane Manja*, described how when farmers had pest problems, they would go to the fields and sing, walking steadily over the land towards the forests, where the pests were handed over to the spirits. This, several people insisted, worked very well and can be fairly easily understood from a vitalist perspective. Singing connects to the unseen worlds. Particular songs could be used for particular purposes, much like a recipe, once again demonstrating the highly pragmatic nature of rural Malawian vitalism (Interviews, Chirombo, November-December 2017). Some songs were needed for angry spirits, of people, trees, lakes or animals, which can be detrimental to human beings. One elderly fisherman described being caught in a whirlpool by a spirit of the lake. Only by singing to it and asking it to let him go, did he get away (conversation with fishermen on the lakefront, Chirombo, March 2018). Better to keep the spirits happy and connect with them to solve problems than to anger them and have them turn against you, perhaps explaining the fear of the spirits that remains to this day.

The depth of connection that people had to local spirits (often of trees), can take the form of local stories, like that of a man who told people that if a particular baobab tree were ever to be cut down, he would die. When a wealthy Malawian chose to build a house on the beachfront, where the baobab was growing and cut

³ This is not to say that western medicine is without benefits but to emphasise the dogmatic way in which it has supplanted traditional practices

it down, true to his word, the man died. According to local views, it is understood that the man's life force was intertwined with that of the tree on an unseen level. When the tree died, he died (Conversation with Mr John, a ninety-two year old Yao man working as a carer for a British/Malawian resident in Chirombo, July 2017). People feared, respected and admired the natural world of which they were a part, knowing that it could bring them life and sustenance, just as its destruction could bring death.

Connections to trees are common among vitalist people and so are connections to animals. Many of the great dance ceremonies in Malawi (like the *gule wamkulu*) revolved around animal-human spirit connections, portrayed in the hybridised human-animal masks that traditional dancers wore (Kaspin 1993). Many animals are imbued with different meanings. For instance, hyenas are seen as animal embodiments of powerful witches, and as symbols of "the fertility that comes from the affinal aspect of the ancestral spirits". Elephants were said to be good luck and to provide protection against sorcery. These animals, and many others, were often killed for their vital benefits (Morris 1998:93-95). However, the rate of their disappearance in the days in which many of the elders interviewed for this research were young, is as nothing when compared to modern destruction, which tends to be based on the pursuit of profit.

Most of Chirombo's larger forests have been destroyed in the last twenty to thirty years. According to Katherine Dewu, elephants that once walked through the village and down to the lake to drink, have not been seen in over thirty-five years. She shares this information with a deep sense of sadness and loss (Conversations with Katherine Dewu, a woman in her mid-80s who has lived in the same house in Chirombo her whole life and used to watch the elephants walk down to the water while having breakfast from where we are having breakfast as she speaks, Chirombo, April 2018). Even once large hippo populations are dwindling, as their lake habitats are eradicated so that wealthy landowners can enjoy the lake with their motorboats. In exchange for small amounts of money, local people provide the workforce for this destruction. Over the last ten years alone, a huge area of forest at the back of the village has been cut down. The land

sold by the former chief to a man who now wants to turn the space into an airstrip to land his private plane (Conversations with Samuel Baluti and Mr Fostino, Chirombo, January 2018).

Such wanton destruction has left a feeling of sadness among many village elders. As they share that the connections to ancient local spirits have been lost they often do so with great grief. The loss of elephants and forests of towering trees can be upsetting to anyone, but for people who have grown up with connections to the natural world so deep that they could walk with the spirits of trees, it is devastating (Interviews and conversations with elders, Chirombo, September - April 2018). Current trends compound this devastation. Traditional dances are increasingly becoming ways for people to instil fear in their peers and are often gateways to extortion and even sexual abuse (Conversations in Chirombo with Samuel and Faustino, February 2018). Many people seem to care far more for money than for each other or the natural world. A case could be made that as death is precipitated and necro-ecological connections grow, people might fall in to increasingly destructive patterns of behaviour. However, with destruction comes rebirth. In such a context, facilitators of participatory communication could play important roles, creating spaces in which people can shape the nature of new beginnings.

Though most of the ancient forests have been destroyed, some sacred spaces still remain. In graveyards, for instance, forests are often left intact and are full of old trees.⁴ The connection between the living and their ancestors has been central to Malawi's culture for a very long time (Morris 1998; 2011). The spirits of ancestors are believed to reside in the forests, and particularly graveyards, where they comment on the lives of the living and assist with various village issues (Interview with Mrs Faife, an elderly lady who has never abandoned the old ways of farming and living, Chirombo, November 2017). Graveyards used to be the locations for rain dances, prime examples of rural Malawian pantheist traditions that were designed to ask the all-encompassing world, or Great Spirit,

⁴ In 2013, I was hired to help count tobacco beds while flying low over the central region of Malawi in a microlight plane. From this height it was striking to see that most of the forested areas were in fact graveyards.

for rain. Mrs Khomba, an animated woman in her early seventies, gave a detailed account of these ceremonies, having taken part in them as a young woman:

“All the young women aged no more than 20 would gather together. Taking flour and mixing it in water, they would plaster it onto their heads, and some of them would sprinkle the flour on their bodies. They wore chitenjes (long skirts) but would leave their breasts bare. They would also wear mikanda (beads) around their necks. The elders brewed kachaso (a strong alcoholic drink) and they would all wait for the sunset. Guided by one of the elders, those young women would carry the kachaso and other elders would walk behind the young women, singing songs on their way to the graveyard. In the graveyard, they would go to where there was a big tree, in which most of the ancestral spirits lived. There they would start singing:

We are gathered here to ask you for mercy! So that you will give us rain! We know for sure that you will provide it because the Great Spirit has said that if we beg for it, then it will be given, and we have brought our food and kachaso for you to eat and drink!

The young women would then empty the kachaso on the trunk of the tree and the food would be thrown down beside it. At this point some men would start beating the drum and the elders would sing a song, while younger participants danced. When these things were done the rain came, no problem. Even the pests were chased away.” (Interview, Chirombo, September 2017).

This vivid description demonstrates both the pragmatic importance of connections to unseen worlds and the very structured roles of different members of the community as they connected through drums, song, dance, and visually striking rituals. However, during a conversation with a group of young men in Monkey Bay, they mocked the old beliefs in ancestral connections (Conversations in Monkey Bay, March 2018). Such feelings, and the increasing commercialisation of wood, may be behind the emergence of tree felling in graveyards in certain areas, though this has yet to happen in Chirombo.

As traditional social, spiritual and ecological systems are abandoned, Christianity and materialism effectively replace them, leading to what is often considered an impoverished socio-ecological reality (Kaspin 1993). As one elderly woman shared when reflecting on what the village used to be like when she was a young woman and how it has changed: “The children used to run about naked or in loincloths. We didn’t have clothes for them but we were happy. Everyone was together and people were quick to share food. Now people have a lot of clothes but we are all divided and do not share” (Interviews, Chirombo, November 2017). Material possessions may be increasing but connections are disappearing. Where once priorities were communal, they are now increasingly separate and individualised. These experiences of disconnection are starkly present in people’s agricultural realities, the subject of Section 3.3 below.

3.3 Agriculture

Almost everyone in rural central and southern Malawi grows maize to make *nsima*, the country’s staple food. Fields are ploughed by hand and maize seeds are planted into narrow ridges. Where once the land might have been rested or crops rotated, now maize is planted every year. Ploughing by hand, particularly in hot countries, is gruelling, backbreaking work that is now widely understood to have negative impacts on soil fertility, by exposing soil organisms to sunlight and increasing risks of erosion (Bekunda et al., 1997; Scherr 1999); a risk compounded by a tendency in rural Malawi to ignore contour lines and actively encourage water runoff (Personal observations working in rural Malawi between 2012 and 2018). The origins of the ridge farming system can be traced to the British, who believed so fervently in the superiority of their agricultural policies, that they routinely used violence to enforce them (McCracken 2012).

During a semi-structured interview of Amai Chinchino, GVH Chirombo’s grandmother, she spoke at length about colonial times, often staring into space while she weaved a mat out of palm fronds. When I asked whether she felt that life in the village was getting better or worse, she responded: “It depends how

you look at it. The last time a white man came to my home I was a little girl. He beat my parents because they had refused to make ridges, preferring to plant into the soil without ploughing. Today you are here to listen and share my food. In that sense life is better now” (Interview, Chirombo, April 2018). The effect of such violence was that traditional systems were gradually abandoned and replaced by often misunderstood versions of colonial policies. Ridges were meant to be on contour and accompanied with bunds that would enable water to be captured, rather than cause erosion. The violent manner in which the policies were enforced, did not lead to their being well understood. Local people were not given a chance to co-construct best practice, or reflect on possible improvements. To this day bunding is still poorly understood in much of rural Malawi (McCracken 2012:12).

Even after independence rural Malawians were barely even consulted in the construction of agricultural policies. Instead, Dr Kamuzu Banda followed British colonial approaches to agriculture, supposedly using a slightly softer touch. To paraphrase McCracken (2012:14) agricultural policy went from being based on coercion, to being based on persuasion. The opportunity to address the wounds of colonialism was ignored in favour of entrenching a centralised hierarchical form of government, which continued to ignore the experiences and knowledge of rural Malawians. When democracy followed Dr Banda’s dictatorship, the opportunity to take a different path was once again spurned in favour of Green Revolution approaches to agriculture that dominated capitalist agricultural policy at the time (McCracken 2012).

In Chirombo’s recent history, ineffective top-down agricultural policies have been compounded by the introduction of fall armyworm, erratic rain seasons, the growing cost of fertiliser, and the pressures caused by growing numbers of livestock (see Chapter Four, *Tigwirane Manja* and Chapter Five for further details). As crops fail, many people are forced to leave the village to find work wherever they can. If they are lucky, they may find work in the local tourism industry, or open small businesses in one of the local towns. However, many young men and women are forced into sex tourism and prostitution. As one

young man put it: “Many of the young people here see white people as their way out of poverty and will do anything to make it happen. It’s like a business here.” (Interview, Anonymous “beach boy”, Cape Maclear, January 2018). What’s more, increasing numbers of people are selling their land for the influx of cash that it provides (Interviews, Chirombo, August 2017 – May 2018). A local story, shared by Mrs Khomba (quoted in Section 3.2), demonstrates why selling land is considered to be a very bad idea:

“One year, when the rain did not come, people decided to stop farming and sold their land. When the following year they were out of food, they went to the chief, who had not stopped farming, to ask him to sell them his maize. The chief took their money and brought them shelled maize in a plate. He mixed the money into the maize and went over to his chickens. Throwing the money and maize to the chickens, the chief asked the people:

- “Did you see what the chickens did?”

- “Yes”

- “What have you learned?”

- “We have seen that chickens eat the maize but leave the money.”

- “You see, the chickens are wiser than you. Maybe you thought that by not farming you would eat money, so take back your money and go cook it” (Interview, Chirombo, September 2017).

Despite this story and others like it being common knowledge locally, people continue to sell their land out of desperation. The sudden flush of money doesn’t last long and people soon find themselves worse off than they were.

There are some few people in the village who never abandoned traditional practices and have observed the village as it has changed. Mrs Faife, a woman in her eighties who has been farming her family’s land her whole life the way her parents taught her when she was a child, is one of these people. “The village used to be full of fruit trees and the soil in people’s fields was excellent”, she says, and she is full of useful tips for maintaining soil fertility: “People can dig holes (no more than 15cms deep but as wide as they like) add water, add a little ash,

followed by rice or maize husks and then find some goat manure, if they can find pig manure then that's even better. Then they should add some water again, cover it all with leaves and some soil. After some months, they can dig all this out and store it in a bag. This will be great for their fields. They should then make planting stations before the rain starts and add this first. When the rain comes, they should plant in those stations and will see that healthy maize germinates. Many types of plants can be combined with the maize. They can grow very healthy this way" (Interview, Chirombo, November 2017).

The depth and detail of these instructions is demonstrative of the agricultural knowledge that still exists in Chirombo. However, very little is done to give people like Mrs Faife platforms to share her knowledge. When I suggest that she might have a lot to share with others in the village during a follow-up interview as part of the PV process, she laughs hollowly and says: "Nobody listens to the elders anymore" (Conversation at Mrs Faife's home over lunch, Chirombo, April 2018). Yet, there are young people looking for this type of knowledge.

When asked how he would like to farm in an ideal world, John Alie, a young man quoted previously, stated: "I would like to farm in ways that look after the soil. I heard about it from my grandmother and on the radio. I am tired of making ridges but I don't know how to change" (Interviews, Chirombo, December 2017). The depths of knowledge enjoyed by older generations, and comparative lack of knowledge among young people, was a recurrent theme throughout the interviews. It seemed clear that an intergenerational process of communication and mutual learning could lead to solutions that made use of local knowledge to reimagine pathways of development.

Younger people, with their 'educated and disconnected minds', to reference Mrs Mbuto Rewilo, have a fractured relationship with the land based on what they have been taught at school, or told to do by extension workers and other governmental or non-governmental organisations. Typically these practices are based on green revolution approaches, coupled with weak ecological modernisation like CA and/or CSA (Horlings 2012). The failure of this top down approach has left people in a trap that is hard to escape. Mrs Kennedy, 28, shared

that as far she is concerned: “The land is not fertile like it was. It’s not possible to stop fertiliser application because if we try to stop then we will no longer even harvest the little amount we are harvesting now. I think this method of fertiliser application has been brought by foreigners and everything that is brought by foreigners, we just accept without considering future outcomes” (Interview, Mberesera, December 2017). Mrs Kennedy does not shy away from pointing out that local people share responsibility by effectively doing what they’re told but is also clearly very critical of mainstream top-down interventions that have resulted in a fertiliser trap (Chinsinga 2011; Chibwana 2012).

These feelings are echoed by Constance Maudzu Ndimba, 30: “My field needs two bags of fertiliser, so somehow I need to find MK44,000. I was lucky to be employed by someone but my wages are so low: MK16,000/month. I have to feed my two children and save money to somehow buy fertiliser. It’s hard” (Interview, Chirombo, October 2017). Yet Mrs Faife, others of her generation, and some younger people who listened to their elders, quietly keep using the same techniques that they always used, with good results. Though Mrs Faife is quick to point out that: “In some areas of the village it is not possible to do what I do. The goats and cows are eating the maize stalks [mulch] and turning the soil to dust”. Mrs Faife also points out that another problem that is important to bear in mind is the disappearance of local seed varieties, which has led to dependence on expensive hybrid varieties of maize sold in Monkey Bay for increasingly high prices, putting people who have not saved seed in an even more difficult position (Interview, Chirombo, November 2017; this topic is explored in depth in *Tigwirane Manja*).

Since the beginning of the Green Revolution in Malawi, under the reign of Dr Kamuzu Banda, farmers have been subjected to barrages of campaigns to persuade them that hybrid maize seeds, planted with synthetic inputs, are superior to traditional crops. One of the consequences was the growth in popularity of maize as the country’s staple crop, and the resulting displacement of indigenous crops (McCracken 2012). More recently, Malawi’s seed policies have been tied up in the state run Fertiliser Input Subsidy Programme (FISP), a

system that continues to encourage farmers to grow hybrid maize with synthetic fertilisers (Denning et al. 2009).

According to Mr Chikwaya, an elderly man known locally as a formidable and very successful farmer of a wide variety of crops and animals (seen from minutes 09:37 *Tigwirane Manja*), all of the seeds that people used to plant were of varieties developed locally and known to do well in the area. Mr Chikwaya is highly critical of the FISP and is one of few local farmers to have kept up the tradition of saving local seeds. His maize seed is in very high demand but he deliberately keeps his prices very low so that they are affordable to local people and hopes that one day the tradition of saving and growing local varieties will return (Interview, Chirombo, November 2017).

Similarly, Mrs Mbuto Riwilo shared her view that: “It [the FISP] is a very bad idea. There is so much corruption and only the richest people can manage to buy fertiliser when the coupons have been received. If the government does not learn to listen to farmers, then Malawi will suffer from more famine. With this new system of farming, human life is in danger. People are drinking and bathing in chemical water, breathing in and out chemical air and eating chemical food. That is affecting people’s health” (Interview, Chirombo, October 2017). Top-down policies are fast losing people’s trust, whether from government or from NGOs.

The impact of top-down interventions is very tangible in Chirombo. Helen Mosamu, a middle-aged maize farmer from Chirombo who took part in the PV workshops, describes her experience when an unnamed development organisation selected her and a few others in the village to take part in a top-down CA intervention. She was provided with large amounts of fertiliser, more than she had ever been given before, and hybrid seeds, and told to farm in a particular way: “At first I liked the method because, with so much fertiliser, the maize was doing well, but I am not doing it anymore because now the organisation say they cannot keep giving us fertiliser and I cannot afford to buy it anymore” (Interview, Chirombo, November 2017). The logic of these projects is

nominally that farmers should boost their yields and therefore increase their income, enabling them to buy fertiliser the following year.

However, the way village life works, if someone boosts their income, then the money will tend be used to support other family members or friends who were not so lucky, leaving people with nothing to buy fertiliser in the future. Even if they did save the money, farming is highly dependent on the vagaries of the weather. One bad year is enough to wipe out any potential savings. Mr Phiri, a middle-aged maize farmer based in Mchinji, pointed out that the fertiliser system often leaves people with huge debts: “Many farmers take out loans to buy fertiliser because they cannot otherwise afford it. If the rains are poor, or pests destroy the crops, then they have no way of repaying their loans and are forced to sell their land, or worse” (Interview, August 2017).

What’s more, Helen feels that the organisation that shared fertiliser with her did not do so for philanthropic reasons: “Twenty of us were selected to do this type of farming but none of us are doing it now. All of us have fields along the side of the road. I think the real reason they did it was to promote the company that was providing the seeds. We were forced to put up signposts for that type of maize along the road.” Huge efforts have been made to promote hybrid seeds in Malawi and it is difficult to separate these efforts from the interests of agribusinesses (Brooks 2013). Chinsinga (2011) points out that 95% of seeds on the market in Malawi are owned by international agribusinesses, with 50% owned by Monsanto alone. The vested interest in maintaining a top-down system is considerable, and continues to favour green revolution approaches coupled with centralised research, development and governance.

Helen goes on to say: “Now my soil is damaged and I don’t know what to do. People have to understand that fertiliser damages the soil, particularly urea”. When asked whether she would use fertiliser again, she said: “Yes, because I have no choice. My soil is not good and I need fertiliser if the maize is going to grow at all” (Interview, Chirombo, November 2017). This feeling of having been taken advantage of and being trapped into using fertiliser was a common theme.

If people do not have the money for fertiliser, then their impoverished soil and lack of quality seeds, means that their yields are often very poor. Whether this trap was intentionally set or not, huge efforts should be made to reverse these issues by listening to farmers and engaging in genuine and deep participatory research.

Aness Luwiro echoes Mrs Mbuto Riwilo and Helen Mosamu's thoughts in her own assessment of current government policies and the behaviour of researchers: "I don't trust them [governmental and non-governmental researchers]. They don't do good research to find out the needs of local people. The worst part is that they leave aside the old people in the villages and discuss local people's challenges in their offices where they make decisions. Then they wonder how we have reached this situation. They [the researchers] need to listen to the elders" (Interview, Chirombo, October 2017). This office-based expertise drives the formulation and implementation of policy and is based on the view that problems can be solved by following the non-participatory evidence bases of institutionalised experts, most of whom have never farmed (Chambers 1997).

3.4 Conclusion

Researchers often treat traditional practices and knowledge as "inviolable and incontrovertible" (Watts 1996:38). The perspective taken in this research was that traditional systems just *are* and should not be marginalised anymore than they are reified. The same can be said of western perspectives. Yet, as things stand, western perspectives tend to be reified in rural Malawi, to the point that local people are often ashamed of their traditions and only practice them in hiding (Pembamoyo 2016:71), a common consequence of colonialism (Fanon 1970). In order to strike more of a balance, this research actively made space for traditional perspectives by seeking out elders' views and asking people to reflect on the past. If researchers do not make space for traditional perspectives, they may inadvertently allow more space for continued marginalisation and reinforce the dominance of materialism and neoliberalism. This silent complicity can be a form of oppression, a process that is tragic for those who valued traditional

ways, which on the evidence of the above accounts, appears to be the case for many people in Chirombo.

One overriding theme from the interviews is that people in Chirombo are becoming increasingly disconnected from each other and from their local socio-agro-ecological systems. While, cooperation to solve village problems was normal and decisions were made through public discussions, with the final word of the chief's and village elders respected, now people do not pay the chief or elders much heed and their actions are primarily motivated by money. Those with the most considerable financial resources tend to be from outside the village and own holiday homes along the lakefront. Much of the influence to make changes happen now rests with them, leading to actions that were unthinkable when authority rested with the chiefs, elders, and public discussions.

Local vitalist and pantheist traditions are fast being replaced by organised religion, primarily Christianity, and reductionist materialist understandings of reality, framed by the priorities of neoliberalism. To paraphrase Mrs Mbuto Riwilo: people are losing their natural ways of thinking and replacing them with educated mind-sets. In other words, traditional vitalist understandings of reality that see all life as being both matter and spirit as one, are being replaced by materialism, the view that everything is disconnected matter, to be understood through reductionist interpretations of reality.

Approaches to agriculture have suffered the same fate. Where once people used to farm holistically, growing a wide variety of crops and feeding their soil, they now follow government guidelines, based on reductionist worldviews and evidence bases, and green revolution thinking. This has led to the proliferation of maize farming using colonial ridge systems and/or following green revolution guidelines and continued use of fertiliser with hybrid maize seeds. Local seed varieties have largely been lost, as have many of the pragmatic vitalist and pantheist practices that people used to depend on. If the Malawian government and/or other actors along agricultural development chains want to open up to new possibilities then they could do worse than to genuinely listen to rural

Malawians and create platforms for their voices to be heard. A genuine, open PAR methodology using PV, offers hope that such processes could be made reality.

The following chapter will explore the PV process and how it was used to open up a space in which local people could reimagine pathways of development through genuine and deep participatory processes.

Chapter Four: Participatory Video Workshops

Introduction

The semi-structured interviews explored in Chapter Three, gave wide-ranging insights into life in Chirombo and many of the changes that have taken place over time. In this chapter, the focus is on the participatory video (PV) process that followed semi-structured interviews. The overall purpose of the chapter is to examine how the PV workshops were structured, in order to make space to cultivate trust, awareness, deep reflections, and holistic analyses. With Section 4.1, the chapter begins by exploring the need to cultivate a space in which deep reflection is possible, so that participants might have the chance to peel back the layers of their perspectives. This is followed by reflections on the example of the incentive culture in Section 4.2, an issue that is built in to rural Malawian responses to top-down interventions and is presented here as getting in the way of genuine participatory research and development. The initial conversations about incentives were key to laying the foundations for open communication.

In Sections 4.3 to 4.5, exercises that encouraged open communication will be presented, before examining the importance of fun and inclusivity in PV workshops, and outlining practical ways to encourage participant control. The following Section 4.6 begins by unpacking one-on-one active listening exercises that encourage inclusivity and make space for depth of analysis. This is followed by reflections on how to structure small group filmmaking exercises in order to keep encouraging inclusivity, make space for individual needs and build people's skills with video equipment, in Section 4.7. Finally, in Section 4.8 the mapping exercise that was used to pull together the whole PV process is opened up, combining many of the above elements, to encourage a genuine and deep analysis that would form the basis for *Tigwirane Manja*. Readers are encouraged to watch *Tigwirane Manja* after having read Chapters One to Four and before reading Chapters Five to Seven.

The concept of wide participation is also touched upon as it emerged during the workshops, however width is primarily unpacked in Chapter Five, which reveals the behind the scenes process of making *Tigwirane Manja*, while in Chapter Six the idea of wide communication is revisited as part of reaching out to audiences through screenings.

4.1 Reflecting on Ingrained Patterns of Behaviour

One of the challenges to creating a genuine and deep participatory process, is that rural Malawians have a tendency to say what they think they need to say, adapting their answers to suit those who are asking the questions. Anderson and Patterson (2017a, b) explore how local people echo the official story of powerful development actors in order to gain resources or representation. Part of the result can be that local people do not take control of the space and assert what it is they want, accepting prescriptive development priorities instead. This may be a form of resistance or a way to find a space within a rigged materialistic and neoliberal system but it can also be self-destructive.

Along similar lines, several interviewees suggested that local people “just accept what we’re told, without realising that we are being taken advantage of” (Mr Phande, an elderly resident of Chirombo who shared many insights and observations of village life during an extensive interview for *Tigwirane Manja*, see minutes 12:37-12:48). This idea of ‘just doing what we’re told without thinking’ came up on several occasions, from various sources in and around Chirombo and appears consistent with Fanon’s ideas (1970) of the colonisation of the mind that result in mimicry of colonial behaviours and marginalisation of traditional systems. If participants were to take control, it was important that participants cultivated their awareness of deeply entrenched patterns and behaviours, in order to make space to reimagine their own pathways of development.

Research processes that do not make space for depth may provide justification for maintaining the status quo by merely extracting superficial information

(Gaventa et al. 1998). Such an outcome was not of interest, in that it would have represented a shallow consultation, rather than a genuinely participatory process. However, researchers should also guard against what might be called the post-development trap, in which their own prejudices against mainstream neoliberal development push participants towards anti or post-development answers (Hickey et al. 2005; Matthews 2017). The focal point of a PV researcher's disciplined subjectivity should be for participants to genuinely be in control of the narrative and make increasingly conscious choices.

If researchers want to encourage people to peel back the layers of their social conditioning through self and collective reflection without pushing them one way or another, they walk a delicate but not impossible path. By cultivating trust through open communication, researchers can create spaces in which participants reimagine their development. To paraphrase Mahatma Gandhi, God is the recognition that I have my truth and honour yours and that together we should engage in unpeeling that truth with the "self-suffering of patience" (Ghandi 2009:xvii). The following section explores one of the earliest and most difficult examples of open communication that took place during the PV workshops and helped to set the tone for the weeks to come.

4.2 The Incentive Culture

The first meeting with participants involved a lengthy open discussion about the incentive culture in Malawi. Typically, when an organisation or researcher arranges workshops to which rural Malawians are invited, the workshops are incentivised with monetary stipends, or other material enticements. The many material challenges that people now face in Chirombo, some of which are discussed in Chapter Three, make this material relationship with development organisation very important. Chasukwa (2018:114) explains that these material relationships are so deeply ingrained that "professional respondents" are common throughout rural Malawi. These professional respondents are systematically selected to take part in trainings and research projects, often because of their education levels or ability to speak English, tend to become

heads of various village committees and act as gatekeepers, bestowing favour on their own social circles, so as to maintain control over resources, putting them in positions of considerable influence.

For instance, fertiliser is a typical incentive used by many agricultural projects. As previously discussed, the deterioration of soil fertility, due in large part to the use of fertiliser, means that many farmers are now dependent on it, in order to obtain any kind of yield and feed their families. It takes a serious effort of will to refuse fertiliser when it is offered for free and people are very likely to say whatever they need to, in order to get their hands on it. To paraphrase Helen Mosamu, Mrs Kennedy, and Constance Maudzu Ndimba, quoted in Chapter Three, farmers often do not want to use fertiliser but they are forced to because without it they may fail to feed their families. If professional respondents hold the key to these resources, then their influence over others can be considerable.

When researchers make little effort to get past these professional respondents and access a wider breadth of local perspectives, they contribute to perpetuating and even strengthening these established norms. What's more, as professional respondents share the views that they have effectively been trained to give in order to gain access to resources when participating in previous workshops, research results will be shallow and will not open up the possibility of transformative change. Thus, to continue with the above example, the complexity of the fertiliser trap would be largely ignored and participants' desires to access fertiliser are taken as indicative that local people are in favour of green revolution interventions. If researchers want to open up the complexity of such issues as the fertiliser trap, rather than contribute to simplistic narratives that perpetuate existing problems, they could start by deliberately selecting people outside of the typical pool of professional respondents (Chasukwa 2018), as was done in this research (see Section 2.5.1). They can then engage in open, reflective conversations with participants in which the complexity of the incentive culture is itself discussed.

Several participants had directly criticised the incentive culture during their semi-structured interviews. Mike Changamile, a man in his fifties who is the son of Mrs Changamile quoted in Chapter Three, put it best when he said: “In Malawi, there is a big problem with most people running to workshops where money is handed out... It would be better if the government could end that programme of handouts during workshops by allowing people who have a mind-set for learning to come and learn. People don’t think that handouts are contributing to the problem. Even the people who distribute it don’t seem to realise. If they follow up after the workshops on agricultural practices, they will find out that no one is adopting their practices. They were just there for the money” (Interview, Mike Changamile, Chirombo, October 2017). Despite open criticism, some participants appeared to contradict themselves by taking part in incentivised trainings that they did not agree with. However, this should not be simplistically understood as a contradiction but rather assessed as a complex result of people’s immediate material needs, established patterns of behaviour in which local people ‘accept what they’re told’, as Mr Phande suggested, and social norms which reinforce the idea that people taking part in trainings should seek to get as much out of the organisations giving them as possible, as a form of resistance.

In order for participants to genuinely take control and have the space to engage in deep analyses, open conversations about the complexity of the incentive culture should be had early on. Researchers may want to take the stance that workshops will not be incentivised, as was done here, in order to stimulate discussions and open up a different kind of research space, in which the substance of the process itself, rather than possible material gains, are emphasised. When people are materially incentivised to take part in workshops, it becomes almost impossible to know whether they are taking part because they want to, or simply for the incentives. The results of the process are then forever in the shadow of the possibility that people are just saying what they think they need to say, in order to maintain access to resources. The PV workshops were described to participants as an opportunity to take control of the narrative, analyse their problems, identify solutions and propose their views to the village, all while learning to use video equipment. It was made clear that the workshops

were for my PhD but that my primary motivation was for participants to take control of the narrative. This was easier to demonstrate thanks to a track record of working with Samuel (as explained in Chapter Two).

From the beginning some people seemed genuinely excited and grateful to be taking part in a process framed in this manner, regardless of a lack of stipends, reiterating that workshops should not be materially incentivised, while others were more lukewarm or even opposed to the idea. As Katherine Dewu, quoted in Chapter Three talking about elephants, stated: “I have never been invited to any workshops, so I am very happy”, a feeling that was shared by several other participants. Engelina Peter, a woman in her early thirties who, during the semi-structured interviews, expressed her determination to find solutions to many village problems, went further by stating that: “I do not understand why anyone has complaints, this is an exciting opportunity to help the village”, after a couple of other participants had grumbled about the lack of stipends (PV workshops, Chirombo, February). In the end, only one person, Mr. Chikwaya, opted out on practical grounds⁵, with everyone else agreeing to take part without stipends. It is possible that the more enthusiastic participants pressured their peers into taking part anyway and seems very unlikely that everyone was happy about the agreement. However, the purpose of the process was to encourage participants to take control through reflection and deliberation, not to please everyone. No attempt was made to persuade Mr Chikwaya to stay if the terms did not suit him and he did not complain but suggested that perhaps participants could pay him a visit at some point later in the process, which they did.

The desire to please is a common trait of researchers and development organisations, who often need to make their investigations or interventions work, in order to justify their existence or access further funding. Watkins and Swidler (2013:207-208) point out that trainings or workshops are an example of an intervention that makes everyone happy. Indeed they point out that these

⁵ Mr Chikwaya farms all year round and needs to tend to his crops every day. Without stipends, he could not employ someone to look after his crops and therefore could not take part in the workshops. In private, I suggested to Samuel that we make an exception for Mr. Chikwaya who had a legitimate reason for needing a stipend but Samuel feared that this would create more trouble than it was worth. I reluctantly agreed, disappointed to be missing out on Mr. Chikwaya's participation.

trainings are so ingrained that they have become almost ritualised: “a training is not a training without allowances, flip charts and magic markers, a “bun” and a “Fanta””. They go on to speak rather disparagingly about the activities that these trainings tend to comprise “jumping about playing children’s games” while “better educated facilitators speak about familiar concepts and practices in new terminology”. This research process did not need to aim to please anyone. That said it is not necessary to displease people either.

Certain stereotypes can be challenged, in particular the notion of ‘training’ itself, which implies a top-down process. PV used for genuine participatory processes can optimise this balance in that, while people are being trained to use cameras, the way that they use them, the analyses and perspectives that they share, and the final output, is their own and does not depend on facilitators explaining concepts in ‘new terminology’. Though subtle, this difference is hugely significant in that it provides participants with an original method to become researchers in their own contexts, rather than teaching them what they “should” think. In order to strike a balance between creating a space that breaks from formulaic approaches, while still giving participants the satisfaction that they are taking part in trainings that have become culturally familiar, some aspects of typical trainings can be retained or tweaked, while others are dropped.

For instance, though the workshops were not incentivised with stipends, their length meant that they were incentivised with snacks and a hearty lunchtime meal, typical of trainings. “Buns” were not included, but one participant, who was a baker, was invited to share his local specialities. “Fanta” was replaced with teas made from local plants, according to the suggestions of elders in the group. With workshops lasting all day and spread over several weeks, having food and refreshments was a practical necessity and a common courtesy. All of the above changes were openly discussed and participants were invited not to see meals as incentives, but rather to understand them as a practical necessity and common courtesy. The workshops were held in my house and in Malawian culture it would be rude to have guests without offering them food.

What's more, as certain participants pointed out, it being my house, it would be rude of them to say what should or should not be eaten or drunk. This gave me a certain influence over decisions and meant that I could initiate certain discussions. For instance, about the possible benefits of drinking herbal teas from local plants rather than Fanta. It was also important not to abuse this power by imposing 'my house my rules'. In the end open discussions meant that participants negotiated their position against my suggestions, requesting that meat sometimes be on the menu, which I accepted despite my initial preference for vegetarian meals, sowing the seeds for partnership.

The decisions that resulted from these discussions were less important than the process and nature of the discussions themselves. The pattern that was being created was one in which researchers did not shy away from stating their preferences, hiding behind facile objectivity, and participants were encouraged to do the same. Clearly my influence as a *muzungu* (foreigner) put me in a position of great influence but though I stated my own preferences, like for herbal tea, I actively encouraged feedback and made a great show of demonstrating my joy at being challenged. While this may have come across as odd behaviour, when meat was put on the menu despite my initial resistance, participants will have experienced that they had influence over proceedings and might actually be able to take control. Some participants visibly grew into this control and, to varying degrees, participants progressively grew into their own influence, as a series of conversations and exercises made clear that there was a lot of space for their control to grow.

A more difficult issue was video cameras. One of the video cameras with which participants would be learning to make films would be staying in Chirombo, in Samuel's care, so that they might make more films in the future. Teaching people to use video cameras, partly in order to make space for self-mobilisation, but then leaving without providing people with a video camera, felt unethical. However, promising to leave a camera was clearly a material incentive and somewhat contradicted early conversations about the value of non-incentivised workshops. What's more, its remaining in Samuel's care meant that his role as a

gatekeeper was accentuated all the more and people would likely try to appeal to what he wanted from them, even more than they would have done anyway. Though PV has many strengths, this ethical/incentivising dilemma highlights one of the problems at the heart of a practice based on expensive material technology in a place like Chirombo. However, like everything else, this issue was openly discussed and participants were invited to see the decision to leave the camera as an ethical choice, rather than a material incentive. Whether participants understood the difference is unclear.

It is also unclear what impact the promise of meals and a video camera had on the outcome of this research. Without food it is unlikely that people would have agreed to take part in the way that they did but there are practical reasons for this. People would have had to go home to cook and eat, which takes a long time, particularly seeing as the women in the group would have been expected to cook for their whole families. What's more, working throughout the morning without refreshments and snacks, in a country where breakfast is often just tea, would have meant that participants would have got tired, making participation complicated. As previously mentioned, inviting people into one's home without offering them food is insulting in Malawi. Significantly inconveniencing or insulting participants did not seem in the best interest of the research. Nor did it seem likely that participants would prefer to turn up, eat and go home, rather than actively engaging in the workshops.

However, for some people this may be more or less what happened. Ultimately, how participants chose to use the time in the workshops was up to them. They would be trusted to genuinely open up and contribute, if they so wished, and they would have to trust (or not) that the process would be worth taking part in. Despite these initial open conversations, the issues surrounding stipends did not go away, and further conversations were necessary.

Thirteen workshops into the process, it was brought to my attention that participants were being mocked by many of their peers in the village, when it became known that they were not being paid stipends to take part in the

workshops. Some people outside of the group felt that I had tricked participants into doing my bidding for free. Though participants expressed that they did not feel that this was the case, they requested that I give them even a very small stipend, just so that they should not be subject to their peers' mockery. I refused, for the same reason as had been discussed when we had first convened, this caused visible tension with some participants agreeing with me and stating that everyone had agreed to take part under clear openly discussed conditions, while others were upset that they would continue to be mocked. The reaction of the wider village demonstrated that while participants might have been cultivating their awareness of issues like the stipend culture and coming to collective decisions, the wider community was not. It was an early insight into the difficulty of attempting to run a genuinely participatory process with a group of people who exist in a wider reality where people are not similarly engaged.

The timing of these events was all the more unfortunate because at this advanced stage of the process, work was progressing very well and the atmosphere in the workshops was overwhelmingly positive. Participants were deep into collective reflections on their experiences and, to varying degrees, appeared genuinely committed to the outcome of the process. Relationships between everyone involved had blossomed over the previous weeks and friendships were beginning to take root (again to varying degrees). In this context it was uncomfortable to continue to refuse to pay stipends, a decision that would result in some participants being mocked. What's more, my relative financial privilege and different cultural background, meant that I could not genuinely understand what participants were going through, nor could I justify refusing to pay stipends on material grounds. To continue to insist on not paying stipends felt forced, even needlessly cruel and uncomfortable. Nevertheless I resolved to stand firm until after the workshops were completed.

At the closing ceremony, there was an exchange of gifts between participants and I. Participants gave me several handmade reed mats, bracelets, paintings, and local fabric. In return, I presented Samuel with a painting that I had done during my time in the village and presented Mrs Faife, the senior member of the group,

with a bowl that I had carved and into which everyone placed a seed, symbolising the group's unity and a new beginning. Finally, participants were presented with handmade cards that, when pieced together, formed one painting with the title of the film *Tigwirane Manja*. Only then were participants given a gift of money, offered as an expression of gratitude and respect for their having received me in their village and done such a great job taking control of the analysis and making a film, and absolutely not as a payment for having taken part in the workshops.

Holding back on incentives till the very end and choosing to share symbolic gifts through fairly grand gestures at a closing ceremony was important, as it demonstrated a commitment to the participatory process being a relationship of equals. Whether this was understood, or whether it only served to ease my own conscience, is difficult to say. Probably both. Ultimately, everyone involved in the process, was encouraged to reflect and deliberate on the relationship between researchers and participants at length. It is likely that these discussions will have made it into the wider village, leading to reflection, deliberation, and greater consciousness when making future decisions. The conversations about incentives set the tone for the rest of workshops by encouraging communication, self-reflection, collective reflection, and thus theoretically leading to deeper and more conscious choices.

Opening up the incentive culture in a deeper and wider way, would likely require a change to the normalised incentive culture in Malawi through reflective and deliberative processes that are far beyond the scope of this research alone. The persistence of this issue demonstrated just how engrained the incentive culture is, even in a group selected to bypass normalised professional respondents and in which several participants had been critical of it during the semi-structured interviews and were again during the workshops. These early discussions were also an early demonstration of the heterogeneity of perspectives that existed in the group. This heterogeneity would manifest itself time and again over the course of the workshops, as will be made clear. The weight of open discussions about such complex issues as the incentive culture needed to be balanced out

with lighter moments, in which participants could relax, enjoy themselves, and shake off difficult conversations. PV is full of ways to make space for fun. Far from superficial, enjoyment is an important aspect of the transformative potential of PV workshops.

4.3 Making Space for Fun

When introducing the PV process, it was important to convey that, while the PV workshops were designed to address serious matters, they would also be fun, an integral aspect of PV processes (Lunch et al. 2006; Milne et al. 2012). Part of the reasoning being that if the process is boring, then people are less likely to turn up and engage. It is also felt that when people are enjoying themselves they tend to open up and interact more, potentially leading to closer relationships that can help cultivate trust and have a beneficial impact on the outcome (Garthwaite 2000).

A sense of fun was maintained throughout the process, with regular breaks for dancing, singing and games. Though typical western games were shared, more often than not local songs and dances were favoured. Games often doubled as ways for people to reflect on a particular theme. One very popular game, which was used to encourage collective reflection and deliberation on a village issue, was Grapevine – a game in which everyone sits in a circle and one by one whisper a sentence in their neighbours' ear, until it has gone all the way around. The final person to hear the sentence says it out loud, followed by the person who originally said it. Invariably the sentence changes completely, to the hilarity of everyone involved.

Grapevine is a great game to play in a Malawian village because gossip is such a big part of daily life and often the source of misunderstandings, arguments, and discord. However, because Grapevine is amusing, the discussions that followed were held in good humour. The game clearly hit a chord which resonated with everyone: the inevitability of village gossip leading to misinterpretations and the importance of regular, clear and open communication. Games like this one are an

integral part of the PV process as they keep people's energy and enthusiasm up, while encouraging reflection and open communication on important issues. It was clear that these exercises helped people to relax, express themselves, and cultivate deeper relationships with one-another (to varying degrees).

Some popular participatory workshop games do not work in a rural Malawian context. The 'knotty problem', for instance, is one of these. The basis of the game is that two participants are asked to leave the room while the others form a circle, hold hands and entangle themselves. The two are then invited back in to disentangle the group, which is usually tricky. Once disentangled, participants entangle themselves once more but this time disentangle themselves alone, which is usually much faster. The game can demonstrate that people are in a better position to solve their own problems through cooperation, rather than relying on outside help. However, participants could not grasp the idea of deliberately entangling themselves in a way that would be difficult to disentangle and instead repeated each other's actions, creating a knot that was very easy to disentangle. When pressed to make it harder some participants, particularly the elders, dropped out, seemingly confused. While the game did not work, the follow up discussions did and participants understood and were amused by its purpose.

There are many ways to interpret this but all involve speculation. People in Chirombo have a tendency to mimic each other's behaviour rather than stepping out of line, which made creating a human knot in which everyone did something different, very tricky. Alternatively, participants are not used to such games and it could be that their total lack of experience meant that they just did not understand. Finally, some participants may have disliked the physical contact, even though they had been warned that some was involved and that they were very welcome to sit it out if they did not want to take part. In the end, while the game did cause confusion, it also led to a lot of laughter and the discussions proved fruitful, so even though it didn't really work, it still contributed to the spirit of fun and reflection that was central to the PV process.

It is a lot easier to cultivate trust, encourage people to open up and engage in genuine and deep reflection, when they are enjoying themselves. Aside from games, learning to use cameras is a big part of the fun of PV workshops. The novelty and excitement of using the camera, encourages participants to forget themselves and explore their surroundings with a fresh sense of curiosity (Lunch et al. 2006). However, sometimes the novelty of the cameras can be intimidating and participants need support to overcome their fears. Efforts should be made to ensure inclusivity, so that people who might feel uncomfortable with the equipment, are shy, or are culturally marginalised, might be encouraged to grow into the process.

4.4 Inclusivity

The first exercise with video cameras involved participants introducing themselves on film. This was their first opportunity to familiarise themselves with the equipment: a video camera to record images, microphone to capture the sound and headset to listen to the recordings and make sure that the sound is good. It was also the first time participants were on camera. In this introductory exercise, one person set up the camera and recorded the footage, another listened through the headphones, and a third featured in the film. When everyone was done they watched their films on a laptop. As people learned to handle the equipment, before seeing and hearing themselves on screen, they began to enjoy themselves and visibly relax. If participants are eventually going to use the cameras to express deep and genuine feelings on important matters, they will need to develop a certain level of comfort (Lunch et al. 2006). For facilitators, this exercise is an opportunity to see who is naturally comfortable with the equipment and who might need more help to relax. It was also an opportunity to get past the heavy discussions detailed in Section 4.2 and begin the fun PV process.

This simple exercise also introduced other important aspects of PV and the spirit in which the workshops would be conducted, namely inclusivity, which can be a problem in PV workshops. The technological aspect can mean that young people

take to it with ease and older participants can be left out, a risk that was immediately evident in this research (Tremblay et al. 2014; Vallauri 2015). The more elderly members of the group, all of whom were women, were initially very reluctant to even touch the camera equipment, for fear of breaking it and in the belief that they could not possibly learn how to use it. While my research assistants focused on making sure everyone was getting on with the task at hand, I made sure that the elderly women could get past their fear. Though traditionally well respected, elderly, female, rural Malawian farmers, are increasingly seen as being less influential, particularly as their roles as village elders are undermined. Though they might be viewed with respect in many ways, elderly women (and women in general), are not afforded the same gestures of respect that are given to men, particularly white men, or men of high social standing.

For instance, in my experience, a culturally ingrained norm in rural Malawi, is that women are expected to sit on the floor while white men, or men of some social standing, are expected to sit in a chair. My willingness to sit on the floor, while elderly women sat in armchairs, and to help them learn to use video cameras, challenged established cultural norms and may have contributed to fostering inclusivity. It is possible that some participants would have viewed my actions with suspicion, or as being disrespectful of cultural norms. All researchers can do is be true to their subjectivity, in this case a desire to foster inclusivity, and observe the impact that it might have on others.

The desire to include all participants in the process was frequently vocalised, particularly during group discussions; women are not used to speaking out in front of men and frequently needed encouragement. Alternatively, some people may have been silent because they were simply not interested or had nothing to share. Regardless, over the following weeks, it was clear that many participants were internalising the respectful and inclusive approach to the workshops. For instance, on several occasions, younger participants actively encourage the more elderly participants to speak up, making sure that they were not left behind and could make their voices heard. One of the elderly women, Katherine Dewu, was a

little hard of hearing and there was always someone making sure that she could follow. Whether this inclusive behaviour was a natural characteristic of this particular group of participants or a result of the ethos of the workshops, is hard to say, probably a bit of both. Encouraging inclusivity is essential if PV is to be genuinely participatory and deep. Otherwise, it is all too easy for the strongest characters to take charge, making the process a vehicle for established voices to be legitimised by the inclusion of usually marginalised people.

4.5 One-on-one active listening

One of the ways to encourage inclusivity is to facilitate regular one-on-one active listening exercises, in which one person speaks and the other listens, before switching over. The aim is to focus attention on speaking and listening in ways that people are not accustomed to (Lunch et al. 2006). Speaking uninterrupted for two minutes to someone who is actively trying to listen, is not something that people necessarily encounter often in daily life, regardless of where they might be. There is a tendency to speak over one-another rather than give each other space to share fully. As Katherine Dewu, one of the group's elders, stated, half joking: "I am not used to people listening to me!" (PV workshops, Chirombo, February 2018). Or as Mr. Phande stated more seriously in *Tigwirane Manja*: "*Aliense ali ogawanika. Ife sitimvetserana wina ndi mzake panonso.*" – "Everyone is divided. We don't listen to each other anymore" (TM, Chirombo, 12:18-12:27, April 2018). Exercises that draw attention to listening and being heard, can encourage people to observe their relationships to others and reflect on the ways in which they communicate in their daily lives. They can also be a way to remind people to cooperate.

One-on-one active listening exercises, like every other exercise, were followed by group discussions in which people reflected on their experiences. Holding a space for group reflection is equally as important as the exercise itself, as it provides opportunities for people to relate their own experience to that of their peers. Without group discussions, some people might go away thinking that they alone have issues listening to others, potentially leading to their feeling bad

about themselves and turning inwards; which is precisely the opposite of what this PV process was designed to achieve. As Njelina Peter put it in the group discussions: “I noticed when I was not listening anymore”, to which everyone laughed and nodded in agreement (PV, Chirombo, February 2018). It is perfectly natural for people to phase out when others are speaking, or for people’s minds to wonder in anything that they are doing. Practicing listening, sharing and concentrating, draws attention to these things, making clear that it is all ok, and to encourage people to reflect together. In this way, not only did people practice active listening and become accustomed to being the centre of attention (useful skills when making a film), they were also invited to reflect on their own listening habits; all of which helped to foster a space for reflection and deliberation, essential building blocks for a genuine participatory process that sought to make space for deep holistic analyses.

Another key aspect of PV, and of genuine participatory research more generally, that has been mentioned numerous times throughout this research, is for participants to take control (Arnstein 1969). The following Section will explore how the simple act of facilitating a space in which participants define the rules for the workshops, may have an impact in fostering participant control.

4.6 Participants make the rules

After the initial film exercise, participants were invited to establish the group’s rules and values, including the frequency with which the workshops would be held and a timetable; they decided that we would meet every other day at 10am, excluding Sundays. Participants then split into small groups of 3-4 people, to discuss what they felt the group’s rules and values should be. They were then invited to come back to the whole group and share what they had come up with. Splitting people into small groups from the very beginning, increased the likelihood that those people who might have a tendency to be quiet in large groups, would be involved in setting the groups’ rules and values; contributing to the sense of inclusivity. The collective deliberation that followed the small group

reflections, led to a very smooth process in which participants established their own rules and values. These were that:

- Each workshop would start with a prayer
- People should be on time
- People should encourage each other if they struggled with the cameras, or anything else
- What happens in the workshops should stay in workshops
- Appropriate measures should be taken if people repeatedly broke the rules.

The rules participants came up with, broadly satisfied my own desire to create a kind space, in which everyone would be able to engage in self-reflection, collective reflection, and deliberation. More importantly, participants themselves were satisfied that the rules met their own values and requirements. During the ensuing weeks, everyone showed remarkable commitment to the workshops. People almost always showed up at my house (the venue for the workshops) on time, and even early. Starting times for gatherings are generally seen as being very flexible in Malawi, so disciplined punctuality was a surprise. When it came to the filming and editing stage, we started at 5am and still nobody was significantly late. One group even went on till well after dark when planning the editing sequence for their film, having been filming all morning and evening (TM, Chirombo, 02:29-02:34). Over the years working in rural Mangochi beforehand, I was part of many workshops and never witnessed such levels of commitment and enthusiasm.

It is possible that this was an exceptionally punctual and enthusiastic group but this feels like an insufficient explanation. It is likely that the fun nature of the workshops, the spirit in which they were facilitated and the wave of enthusiasm that built up among participants, played a big part. What's more, having set their own rules and timetable – with punctuality being one of them – participants held each other to account; rather than being held to account by an authoritative figure, as is so often the case. This would suggest that arriving late, might be a

form of resistance, a way of expressing displeasure at being told where to be and when, rather than deciding such things for themselves. If so, it would also suggest that subtleties such as control over group values and timetables, could play a role in helping people to reimagine their pathways of development by providing a sense of control, rather than mere involvement in predefined processes, opening up the possibility of breaking out of materialistic and neoliberal cages.

Encouraging participant control continued throughout the workshops. The following section will explore filmmaking exercises as vehicles for encouraging participant control, as well as fostering inclusivity and maintaining a sense of fun.

4.7 Small Group Filmmaking Exercises

Alongside one-on-one active listening exercises, small group film making exercises were used, to develop participants' ability to make short films, while opening up spaces for communication, reflection, and fun. It was essential for participants to be comfortable with the equipment and with each other, if they were to engage in genuine and deep analyses later on. Each exercise was designed to encourage people to reflect on their surroundings and on isolated issues. For instance, one exercise invited participants to reflect in small groups on positive and negative aspects of village life, before making short films. Such exercises were effectively practice for the analytical exercise that would form the basis for the final film. Other exercises focused more on film technique. For instance when participants made shorts film about Earth, Wind, Fire, Water – Close and Far, the aim was for them to learn wide-angle shots and how to use the zoom function.

In other exercises, participants interviewed each other, to gain experience of interviews and the different ways they can be framed, before moving on to interviewing people in the village, as their confidence grew. Thus taking the process to wider audiences and encouraging curiosity. Building up people's

confidence is another important aspect of encouraging people to take control (Lunch et al. 2006). If participants feel like they are unable to control the camera, or are unsure about the validity of their voice, then they are unlikely to take control. This is all the more important in a culture where people have been subjected to violent colonialism and been made to feel inferior for many decades.

In every exercise, participants were divided into three groups (there were three sets of film equipment), and began by planning their films on paper. For each shot their roles changed, making sure that everyone had a chance to be on camera (if interviews or acting were part of the exercise), behind the camera, checking the sound through the headphones, or directing the shot. Rotating roles are important, as they give each participant time to practice, while maintaining an inclusive atmosphere (Lunch et al. 2006). Participants reacted differently to their responsibilities as part of small film crews. The diversity of reactions gave indications of people's character traits, valuable information with which to tailor working with each individual within the group. Acknowledging people's individual needs, helps to maintain inclusivity, confidence, and a positive energy.

For instance, Moses was immediately at ease with the camera but a little impatient with others, even if just in his body language. The obvious solution was to give him the chance to take equipment home to make his own films. Of course, the offer was extended to the whole group so as not to be interpreted as favouritism and to extend the opportunity to anyone else who might have been feeling similarly frustrated, but did not openly express it, or just wanted to practice. Moses jumped at the chance and shared his footage with the group, clearly taking pride in his work. The decision to encourage participants to take film equipment home with them, doubled as a way to cultivate trust. Participants were well aware that being trusted with the equipment was a big responsibility and took the responsibility very seriously.

Another example of tailoring the process to individuals' needs, was with a woman who will remain nameless, who frequently teased or even mocked her peers when they made mistakes but was not making much progress herself, for

fear of the camera equipment. Predictably, she opted out of taking camera equipment home with her to practice. Instead, she was given some discreet one-on-one attention so that she might get to grips with the camera herself. After that, her behaviour changed. She became more involved in each exercise and mocked others far less. Detailed attention to individuals within the group, was one of the ways that trust was cultivated, as it demonstrated that participants were seen and cared for. The excitement, fear and novel responsibility that comes with directing a shot or holding a camera, should not be underestimated. Nor should facilitators underestimate how tiring it can be to manage people's different personalities and reactions.⁶

When watching the footage that resulted from small group filming exercises, participants were encouraged to give constructive feedback on technique to the whole group – camera shaking, people's heads cut out of the shot etc. – and on content. Group feedback is a form of collective reflection and can be a sensitive moment for participants who may feel criticised, or even just less praised, for their efforts (Milne et al. 2012). The process should feel encouraging for everyone involved, giving people a satisfying feeling of achievement as they learn new and exciting skills, cultivating people's confidence in their own ability to express their views and use the film equipment effectively. All of the workshops were building up towards the final mapping exercise that would provide the basis for the participatory film. The following section will examine the mapping exercise and how it was facilitated.

4.8 The Mapping Exercise

After many rounds of group filming and reflection exercises, the next stage was to begin planning for the final film. This started with a long process of collective reflection and deliberation, during which participants mapped out the village's social, agricultural, and ecological history on my living room wall (see *Tigwirane Manja* 01:29-02:03). In doing so, problems were identified and possible

⁶ Researchers should make sure that they are looking after themselves and not draining their energy in trying to look after others. Self-care can lead smoothly to care of others, while trying to do so when drained can do more harm than good.

solutions proposed. The task was designed to follow a similar structure as the questions posed during the semi-structured interviews but with a more open scope. The decision to be more open was based on the diversity of participants' priorities and interests. Rather than pigeon holing participants into focusing on agriculture, they were asked:

1. What life used to be like in Chirombo?
2. What is it like now?

Before narrowing down by asking:

3. What about agriculture specifically?
4. What could be done about the problems that you have identified?
5. What do you think might happen if these problems are not resolved?

The broad similarity to semi-structured interview questions, meant that participants had already self-reflected on these issues, and that Samuel and I were well prepared for their answers. Numerous games and film making exercises over the previous weeks, had offered further opportunities for reflection. The mapping exercise was an opportunity to draw all of these reflections together, through a process of collective deliberation. Each question began with one-on-one or small group discussions, to get people's ideas flowing and ensure that everyone would get a chance to speak, even if only in the relative privacy of their small groups, making inclusion more likely. Small group discussions were followed by sharing sessions with the whole group; sometimes in the form of presentations and sometimes simply through open conversations.

Over the space of three to four workshops, participants mapped out the village's social agricultural and ecological past and present, and identified the key problems that they face. Once problems were framed, the task moved on to possible solutions. When participants proposed solutions, it was sometimes necessary to keep asking questions. For instance, free-range livestock were identified as a problem and slaughtering them all was put forward as a possible

solution. It was necessary to probe the possible repercussions of such a step, in order to ascertain whether participants genuinely felt that this was the best solution. In the end they decided that it was not feasible and came up with a more practical proposal (see *Tigwirane Manja* 21:08-22:14).

Similarly, participants identified that rain seasons used to start at more or less the same time every year, falling fairly consistently throughout the season, but are now unpredictable and erratic. Questions were necessary to open up this issue to more detailed analysis, should participants wish to. For instance, 'why has rainfall become so unpredictable?' As people identified the reasons why rainfall patterns have changed, largely deforestation, the connection between deforestation and failing rainfall was made explicit on the wall, with an arrow indicating connection. Once the system was well understood, the next logical question was asked: 'what has caused deforestation?' This line of enquiry ignited a new round of collective reflection and deliberation, leading to new connections, the refinement of descriptions of problems, and so on and so forth.

Once everyone involved felt that the various pathways of enquiry had been fully explored, questions were asked that would narrow down discussions by focusing on specific problems, in order to open up further connections and possible solutions. For instance: 'what should be done about failing rainfall?' Logically, having identified deforestation as the problem, participants identified reforestation, forest regeneration, and protection of existing trees, as possible solutions. Participants often moved on to the next logical question without help and after a while rarely needed questions at all. Their line of enquiry continued, if reforestation is needed, then: how can this be done? What is stopping it from happening? What can be done about those blockages? As will be shown in *Tigwirane Manja*, reforestation is made almost impossible by free-ranging livestock and deforestation continues unabated, with the growing commercialisation of firewood, brick making and boat building. Each of these new pathways of enquiry was explored, just as previous ones had been.

The mapping exercise lasted several days and was quite intense and tiring. It was important to maintain people's high spirits, so games, singing and dancing breaks, simple group filming exercises and screenings of the group's films continued. However, the bulk of the time was allocated to the evolution of the mapping exercise. As solutions were identified and it became increasingly clear that their work might lead to action being taken to improve the village, participants' energy and enthusiasm visibly increased, highlighting the value of PAR and PV as energising forces for change. Participants expressed their enthusiasm in different ways. My personal favourite was Alice's typically Malawian enthusiasm as she exclaimed: "Ya! Ya !Ya !Ya! Eheh!" And clapped her hands, while doing a little wiggle dance in her chair, when she felt that the group was making progress (PV, Chirombo, March 2018).

When the mapping exercise was finished, participants divided it up into five sections and then divided themselves up into five groups. Each group would make a plan and film their respective section, with the idea being that each section would then be connected to the next, with the whole making one film. This process, and its many challenges, is described in detail in the next Chapter, which follows the making of *Tigwirane Manja* section by section.

4.9 Conclusion

Creating spaces in which participants would feel encouraged to genuinely explore and share their perspectives and experiences, was primarily done by establishing a rapport of open communication. Potentially sensitive topics were not avoided but were opened up through dialogue. The example given in Sections 4.1 and 4.2, was of the incentive culture and associated patterns of behaviour. A common challenge for participatory research is to find ways for people to open up, without pushing them in preconceived directions (Gaventa 1998; Hickey et al. 2005). Without establishing open lines of communication, it would have been impossible to cultivate trust or achieve any kind of real depth.

One of the ways that PV can help cultivate trust is by making space for fun (Garthwaite 2000; Lunch et al. 2006; Milne et al. 2012). As everyone involved in the process enjoys themselves, they relax, open up and are more likely to genuinely share. PV exercises also offer many opportunities to encourage inclusivity, another key component of creating a process in which people can open up and trust the space, knowing that their voices matter (Lunch et al. 2006; Tremblay et al. 2014; Vallauri 2015). These characteristics can help to build up a wave of enthusiasm and momentum that carries through to the deeper analytical exercises, like the mapping exercise. Aside from games, learning new skills, notably how to use video equipment, and sharing responsibilities equally, is another way in which PV encourages inclusivity, enthusiasm, and momentum (Lunch and Lunch 2006).

One of the characteristics of genuine participatory research is that it enables participants to take control (Arnstein 1969). An easy practical example of how participant control can be encouraged by creating a space for them to make the rules and set the timetable, was shared in Section 4.6. Participant control increased as they grew into their roles as filmmakers and researchers by building their confidence through filmmaking exercises and collective deliberation. These ideas were explored in Section 4.7-4.9. The entire process built up towards the mapping exercise, unpacked in Section 4.9, during which participants put their growing confidence and practice of open communication to good use, by conducting a deep, holistic analysis of their perspectives and experiences. The analysis that resulted from this lengthy process, formed the basis for the film *Tigwirane Manja*, which readers are now invited to watch before reading Chapter Five in which a behind the scenes analysis will provide valuable insights into the complexity and challenges of making a genuinely participatory film.

Chapter Five: Behind the Scenes on *Tigwirane Manja*

Introduction

This Chapter is designed to sit alongside *Tigwirane Manja*, providing insights into what is said and seen on screen, as well as unpacking some of the processes and decisions that were behind various sequences. For the most part the chapter follows the structure of the film chronologically, though there are occasional jumps along the timeline. Minutes alongside the title to each section, and alongside references to different sequences, refer to the film's timeline. The ideal time to read this chapter is after a first viewing of the film and possibly alongside a second viewing, pausing to read about each sequence. I have chosen to refer to the *chapters* in the film as numbered *sections*, so as not to confuse readers with references to chapters of this thesis. Each section mirrors the film, from the introduction, through Sections 5.2-5.7.

Part of the challenge of this PV process was to translate the depth and width of analysis that participants attained during the workshops into a coherent narrative for the film. Footage had to be pulled together and weaved into a consistent whole that might at least come close to replicating the depth and width of analysis explored in the workshops and pre-PV semi-structured interviews. Initially the film's structure was based on a linear storyline interpretation of the mapping exercise (detailed in Section 4.9). Each section of the participants' analysis was separated out and connections made clear both visually, with arrows having been placed between the different topics laid out on the map on the wall during the analysis, and orally by reiterating these connections during final pre-filming group discussions.

Participants divided themselves into five groups, taking on a different section of the map, as follows: Group One – The Old Ways, Group Two - Climate Change, Group Three – The Free-range Livestock Problem, Group Four – Agriculture and finally, Group Five - Solutions. After prolonged group discussions in which

various suggestions were put forward, participants settled on a structure in which each groups' film would be placed side by side to form one long film.

Before filming began, and after lengthy open discussions in which the merits of sharing the film with different audiences were explored, participants decided that they wanted to share the film with local audiences (i.e. their village and neighbouring villages), Malawian nationals more broadly, and international audiences, understood as audiences from different countries who reside in Malawi, as well audiences in the UK who would be shown the film by me once I returned home. Their motivations and further details of these discussions will be explored in Chapter Six.

Unsurprisingly, initially the result of five separate films made by five groups, did not easily fit together as one coherent narrative. Partly this was due to the mapping exercise (detailed in Section 4.8) having a three-dimensional structure that allowed for multiple connections to exist at the same time. For instance, in their analyses, participants had explored the destruction of local forests, a decline in cooperation, and agricultural issues. Though connected, each storyline was explored in its own right, with connections made with aforementioned arrows. The way that this analysis was presented on the wall meant that each storyline could be connected to multiple others, while a film's storyline is linear, with one topic following on chronologically from the next.

Squeezing the map into a linear structure, by way of five films made by different groups working independently of each other, was problematic. What's more, nearly eight hours of footage was condensed into 27:42 minutes, in a way that satisfied everyone involved (in the end this amounted to over thirty people). When it came to editing, scenes were reshuffled in order to create a coherent narrative, while attempting to maintain some level of three-dimensional interconnectivity that replicated the openness, width, and depth of the pre-PV interviews and PV workshops. The editing choices that were made will be explained section by section. Finally, a brief reflection on some of the key lessons learned during this filming process will be outlined in the conclusion.

5.1 Tigwirane Manja Introduction (minutes 00:00 to 03:00)

The first three minutes of the film is an introduction to the PV workshops that was designed to give viewers a sense of how the film was made, the different exercises that participants took part in and the nature of the workshops. The discussions that underpinned this section were one of the earliest of several conversations concerning consent. When participants were introduced to the idea of PV in the workshops, it was made clear that the final output would be a film that they would make, except this introductory section, which would be filmed and put together primarily by me, because participants would be engaged in the process itself at the time of filming.

When it came to editing, participants would be invited to watch the introduction and give their input, changing it as they saw fit, but would not be so actively involved in making it. Participants were asked whether they consented to being filmed during the process under these terms. They accepted and were pleased that their peers would get a glimpse of what they had been involved in.

In the end, while I shot most of the introduction, some of the opening scenes were recorded by Samuel and Olivia, while midway through there are shots by Mr. Tepeka, Moses James, Frank Chikomeni, and Alice Hollande. The narration was one of the last things to be recorded and features the voices of Katherine Kanjala and Samuel Baluti, the idea being that both a man and a woman should be heard introducing the film, underlining the balance and inclusion that ran throughout the process. The decision to ask Katherine came about because her section of the film did not make it into the final cut (see Section Five for details). Everyone, including Katherine, felt that introducing the film was fair compensation for not featuring. Once Katherine and Samuel had been recorded, the audio track was used as a background for shots filmed throughout the process.

The film begins with a close up shot of Mr Phande's hands, as he weaves a mat from palm fronds (00:00-00:12). Mr Phande was an elderly man who sadly

passed away shortly after *Tigwirane Manja* was filmed. He was well respected locally and seen as something of a wise maverick for his willingness to eloquently speak out about difficult topics and challenge what he saw as out-dated social norms. To Mr Phande, mat weaving, which is traditionally done by women, was a gentle act of defiance, as well as a pleasant activity to occupy him in his old age. In this opening shot he can be heard teasing Samuel by asking: “Are you making a film about old people?” Essentially what he was saying here was ‘you should make a film about old people!’

Though *Tigwirane Manja* is not about old people per-se, both the pre-PV interviews and the mapping exercise (see Chapter Four) began by looking back at what Chirombo used to be like. Thus, Mr Phande’s question and mat weaving, subtly introduce ideas that ran throughout the research and film: that to go forward it helps to look back and that reflection can help to consciously change ingrained behaviours by letting go of notions that no longer serve: like the idea that only women can weave mats. Though this may be lost on many viewers, it seemed like an elegant opening scene, resonated with several participants, and will potentially resonate with wider local audiences.

The following scene is a wider-angle shot of Amai Chinchino, one of the village elders and chief Chirombo’s grandmother, as she sits on the ground similarly weaving a mat from palm fronds. The images of an elderly man and woman engaged in the same activity mirrored the narration, done by a young man and woman, reflecting the intergenerational inclusiveness and gentle gender balancing of the process. The following sequence (00:20-01:14) is of participants during workshops and is designed to give viewers insights into the nature of the process, the singing, games, dancing, as well as paper and camera based design exercises that participants took part in.

Minutes 01:14-01:30 were filmed by Mr. Tepeka and Moses James, as they took cameras home to practice. These images were included to demonstrate to audiences that participants had been trusted to take film equipment home as a part of the learning process, giving people an insight into the nature of the

workshops. The quality of participants' footage and their individual styles demonstrates the potential of PV for individual expression. A little under half of the participants took cameras home and made short films about what was important to them in their daily lives, ranging from shots of children getting ready for school, to their favourite places in the nearby forest.

In all, there were several hours of home footage and it was sometimes watched during the workshops, to encourage reflection on filming technique and support the filmmakers. The home videos were shot with freedom and care, and offered insights into people's daily lives. It quickly became apparent that a PV process could lean on a home video method, with potentially fascinating results.

From 01:30-02:16 is further footage of participants as the analytical process of the workshops intensified with Samuel facilitating the mapping exercise and participants engaging in reflective exercises in small groups, before presenting their findings and plans for the main film. Minutes 02:16-02:26 shows footage of participants during the filming stage of the process to give viewers a quick view of the efforts made, the different settings and a sense of building up to the main feature.

The following shots (02:26-02:41) show different groups working on editing their sections of the film and the lengths that they went to – with one group editing by torch and candlelight till well after nightfall, demonstrating the level of their commitment to the process. The introduction ends with shots of the bay along the beach and of seeds of grass, as Katherine explains that computer editing followed the participants' paper edits and Samuel invites viewers to enjoy the main feature.

This is the only stage of the film that almost included a shot of me, taken by Olivia Pindani, as I sat at my computer editing the film. I eventually decided not to include it, as I did not want to emphasise my role. Whether this was the best decision is open to debate, some might feel that it hides my role in the process,

while others will appreciate the total focus on local people on screen. Samuel agreed with my decision and participants were happy either way.

5.2 Section One: To go forward, we should look back (03:00-05:41)

The film begins with the title. As it happened, the title was not chosen till the very end, during a group discussion involving all participants, after the film had been made, edited and accepted by everyone involved. Yet I will discuss the process here, because here is where it sits on the timeline. Initial title suggestions were focused on goats and on looking after the environment. It was Zaina Timothy who first suggested that the title focus on cooperation, proposing *Tigwirane Manja* (Holding Hands). The idea was not immediately accepted, with several people arguing that a more environmental focus would be best.

After about twenty minutes of discussion, everyone agreed on *Tigwirane Manja*, on the basis that it reflected a common theme that connected each group's films – the need for cooperation to resolve local problems. What's more, this title reflected the participants' desire to reach out to audiences beyond the village and invite them to cooperate too. The discussions demonstrated that even at this late stage, participants were still reflecting on what the film's focus was and what tied it all together, possibly pointing to the breadth of issues that were covered and the multiple perspectives of diverse participants. Zaina was visibly moved by the honour of her suggestion being accepted by the group and thanked everyone profusely.

The purpose of Section One was to highlight what local ecological systems used to be like and urge everyone to care for the environment, with the implication being that perhaps some of the area's former ecological wealth could be restored. The entire sequence was shot in a forest owned by June Walker, an elderly British woman who lives at the edge of Chirombo village and has done her best to protect her land and invite local people to do the same, while forests all around have been cut down. The location was chosen by participants as the

only place that they could think of locally where the forests were still relatively intact.

The opening section of the film features and was planned, directed, and shot by Alice Hollande, Mike Changamile, Vetelina Chimombo and Katherine Dewu – together forming ‘Group One: The Old Ways’. The idea was for responsibilities to be split between each participant equally, like during the workshops. However, when it came down to it, Mike ended up doing more filming, while Alice, Vetelina, and Katherine got more screen time. Mike’s screen time did not make it into the final film because of sound issues but he was content with his other contributions. While sharing roles evenly is an important idea to foster inclusivity, the approach taken here was to accept what came naturally to the group, as long as nobody felt left out. Katherine’s sequence was later moved to Section Five on agriculture, where it sat more comfortably in the overall narrative (see Section Five for further details).

The opening sequence of the forest is accompanied by all members of the group singing a song about nature, which they came up with, sang and recorded once they had returned to my house after filming in the woods. The song went as follows:

*Nkalango ndi ya bwino imadipa za mvula,
Nkalango ndi ya bwino imadipa za mphepo,
Nkalango ndi ya bwino mbalame dmarira,
Tiyeni tisamale nkalango ndi ya bwino*

Forests are great, bringers of rain,
Forests are great, givers of air,
Forests are great, birds sing their songs,
We should all take care of our great forests

The second verse of the film (07:39-was used later on the film to help create a sense of continuity. The second verse went as follows:

Amai tiyeni, tisamale chirengedwe,
Abambo tiyeni, tisamale chirengedwe,
Nkalango ndi ya bwino imadipa za mphepo,
Tiyeni tisamale nkalango ndi ya bwino.

Women let's go, to look after the environment
Men let's go, to look after the environment
The forest are great, bringers of air
We should all take care of our great forests.

Participants were joined by Samuel on *ng'oma* (drum) and Mr Fostino, who happened to be at the house when we were recording the song and was invited by other group members to join in. It is intended as an invitation to viewers to appreciate the beauty of nature as well as the services it provides, and urges men and women in the village to take care of the forests and wider environment. It is tempting to wonder where the idea of forests as givers of rain and givers of air came from, but there was no time to engage in open reflective conversations on every detail.

The way the song came about was one of the earliest and most striking examples of collective creativity during the filming process. The ease and speed with which it was composed, sung and recorded was incredible to watch, epitomising the connection that people have to each other and the ease with which they can express that connection through song. Nothing about it was forced or contrived but rather seemed to flow, resonating with many of the stories that village elders had shared during the semi-structured interviews and workshops (detailed in Chapter Three).

Yet, the group's ability to sing together so effortlessly, and the positive feelings that this process emitted, was quickly contrasted to their reluctance to allow any single member of the group to express their individuality, which felt oppressive and was expressed with stubbornness and a little anger by one member of the group in particular. To test the sound I asked Alice, one of the women in the

group, to sing the words of the song into the microphone. I did this because I had never recorded a song before and was sceptical as to whether the equipment would be good enough. Alice sang and her voice, alone, struck me as beautifully melancholic. In my own enthusiasm, I suggested that the film might start with the group singing together and be followed by Alice singing alone, so as to communicate the transition from cooperation to individualism that the village is undergoing and that participants wanted to communicate.

I rarely made such suggestions but was very moved by Alice's lone singing voice. However, despite Alice's enthusiasm at the idea, my suggestion was very quickly and unequivocally shut down, particularly by the senior male participant in the group. Nobody spoke up in favour of the idea and, despite Alice looking despondent, I did not press the point, having quite clearly hit a nerve. Alice later asked me whether she could listen to the recording of her singing alone, when everyone else had left. When she heard her own voice, she visibly brightened up and thanked me.

This sequence of events can be viewed in a number of ways. Firstly, my actions could be seen as meddling in the local collective equilibrium – after all, collective energy led to the composition and effortless rendition of the song in the first place. In this interpretation, the insistence that Alice could not be left to sing alone, could be seen as a desire to protect her and the group. However, while there may be some validity to this interpretation, I have known Malawian village culture long enough to feel the difference between joyful togetherness and the oppressive stifling of individual voices. Alice liked the idea of being heard alone and was clearly upset that the idea was rejected out of hand. The way in which the idea was rejected, did not involve conscious deliberation or reflection. It was done with an outburst of anger. Though not violent, the reaction was strong enough that neither Alice nor I pursued the idea further.

There may be space for individuality to be allowed to flourish a little more in rural Malawi, without threatening the collective spirit, celebrating individual uniqueness, while understanding that people, ecological systems, and indeed the

entire universe, are simultaneously a conscious whole.⁷ For people to find a connected state of being within themselves and still allow individuality, they may need to cultivate consciousness with clear intention, finding space for self-reflection, collective reflection, and open communication with their peers and surroundings, in order to let go of judgement. Such a process, may have the power to strengthen collective socio-ecological bonds by decreasing the pressure felt by individuals to constantly conform, opening up some much needed breathing space, without threatening the sanctity of the whole.

PV can be used to navigate the delicate balance between individual creative expression and collective energy, by creating spaces for reflection and deliberation. To do this without causing conflict, requires patient dialogue and there is not always time or the willingness to open up sensitive topics. Doing so requires a certain wherewithal from the part of researchers, at times when there are countless tasks to be juggled at once.

The section ends with shots of the forests and sounds of axes in the background, setting the scene for the following section. The final shot of an axe cutting wood, was synced up to the sound of axes in the forest. The farm where the axe scene was shot is on the edge of the forest and the axe that could be heard was this one. At my suggestion, participants followed the sound of the axe and asked whether they could film it. The lady cutting wood agreed to let participants film the axe chopping wood but only if they did the chopping, as she did not want to appear on camera herself. Vetelina stepped up and Mike filmed the sequence.

5.3 Section Two: Failing Rains – Deforestation and Local Climate Change (05:45-9:09)

This section of the film was made by Group Two, which was initially comprised of Helen Mosamu, Engelina Peter, Zaina Timothy, and Gertrude Lingson, however Zaina went into labour on the day of filming and Gertrude was ill. It was determined that when they were both back from hospital and felt well rested,

⁷ There is some space for creativity but it requires a great deal of confidence and a certain carefree attitude

they could contribute to the film but, without any idea of when this would be, it was best to move on with filming. Zaina was eventually given a key role in section seven but Gertrude did not get screen time, preferring to work from behind the camera instead. She had been shy and reluctant to open up throughout the process and these circumstances perhaps also gave her an excuse to avoid screen time.

Group Two was therefore reduced to Helen and Engelina. The group had planned several shots in which two people would be on screen at the same time. This meant that Samuel and I had to be more actively involved in filming than with other groups, in which Samuel or I would occasionally shoot secondary angles when everyone else was occupied with the main shot. However, Helen and Engelina decided on the location, framing, and content of each shot, with Samuel and I merely pressing the button and ensuring the sound was good enough.

The idea of this section was to explore the effects of and reasons for local deforestation. To do that, Helen and Engelina focused on two local industries – boat building and brick making – both of which require a great deal of lumber. These local industries were once designed to meet an immediate local need. As such, they did not require a great deal of wood and anything that was cut down could easily be replaced, either naturally, or by tree planting. However, nowadays these local industries try to meet the needs of regional towns and levels of lumber consumptions have increased significantly. Helen and Engelina did not set out to suggest that these local industries should stop but rather pointed out the effects, in the knowledge that other groups would talk about the difficulty of replacing trees and eventually propose a solution.

Confusion arose when Engelina and Helen began to talk about climate change. Initially they interviewed one another explaining that aeroplanes and factories contribute to climate change – choosing to film cement at a local hardware depot as an example of an output from a factory. However, it emerged that their attempts to explain climate change in this way were a direct consequence of my drawing a factory and aeroplane when I sought to visually interpret climate

change during the mapping exercise for illiterate participants. Both Helen and Engelina are illiterate, so the images had stuck without understanding what was meant by them. Discussions ensued about what climate change meant to them. This was followed by a discussion about whether their understanding reflected the group's wider understanding, which we felt that it did. The scenes were re-shot and Helen and Engelina focused on their local understanding of climate change, based on deforestation, a lack of shade, failing rainfall, and a tangible understanding of intensifying heat (06:00-06:28).

The whole episode demonstrated the precariousness of my own involvement in the process. As an external actor with influence, when my perspectives leaked out, as in the above example, they had the effect of limiting or directing what was thinkable – reminiscent of the impact of prescriptive neoliberalism on development chains more broadly (Rushton and Williams 2012). This episode was an important reminder of the need for open reflective communication, even during the filming stage.

Helen and Engelina's local understanding of climate change is much more interesting than a focus on things that are way out of their control. It makes sense for me as a westerner to consider flying and factories as elements at the heart of climate change, because I can make choices not to fly and to avoid pollutants as much as possible. I have also been conditioned to understand climate change as a result of carbon emissions. However, for Engelina and Helen, their direct experience is through deforestation and immediately tangible impacts in their lives. Their highly localised and personal focus is something that people everywhere could learn from: to work on observing and changing that which is within your own sphere of influence.

The sequence filming the bricks being made (06:36-07:11) was improvised as we passed by the brick makers at work. I filmed the first shot without much thought and suggested to Helen and Engelina that a sequence might fit nicely within their narrative. Engelina then filmed the sequence and it was all put together during editing. It is not typical of PV for facilitators to make suggestions.

However, it seemed more natural to be involved in this instance than pretending that I was not there and had not noticed an opportunity to compliment their narrative. This partnership worked well and Engelina, Helen, and all the other participants, were very happy with the brick making footage.

This sequence was followed by the second verse of Group One's song (detailed previously). The background shots of wood burning in brick kilns and felled trees, lent the song an even more melancholic feel, highlighting the pressing need for change. The fallen baobab was particularly poignant, having been cut down to make space for people from Lilongwe to build a holiday cottage. A group of young men were paid a few thousand kwacha to cut it down and the tree lies there to this day. To me, and perhaps to others, this scene was reminiscent of the story of the man who died when a baobab tree was cut down for the same reason, as was shared in Section 3.2.

The sequence from minutes 08:41-09:09 features Emily Edwin who was actually a member of Group Three but whose topic was an excellent segue between Sections Two and Three. The location that Emily and her group members chose was a large plain on the outskirts of Chirombo, which, as Emily pointed out, used to be thickly forested and full of animals (it was from this forest that the elephants that Katherine used to watch while having breakfast, see Section 3.2, would emerge). It is clear in the way that Emily spoke on camera, and from what she said off camera, that she was saddened by the destruction of the forest. Perhaps her feelings, combined with her shyness, contributed to her struggle to articulate what she wanted. Whatever the reason, it took several takes before she and her other group members were satisfied that she had said what she wanted. Her struggles are reflected in the editing in which separate takes are spliced together, leaving it a little disjointed.

5.4 Section Three: A tree-planting conundrum (09:10-11:57)

Group three was made up of Emily Edwin, Frank Chikomeni and Moses James. During the editing, this group's footage was spread over four sections of the film

in order for the narrative to flow. Emily's on screen sequence was in Section Two, as explored above, Moses' was in this Section Three, with Frank's in sections six and seven.

Much of the narrative in Sections One and Two revolved around deforestation. It followed that Section Three could explore reforestation and reasons why this was so complicated, with emphasis on goats (the group's original focus) and a lack of local cooperation to resolve pressing problems. All editing decisions like these were presented to participants individually, in their film groups and as a whole group, in order to ensure that the messages they wished to convey had not been compromised.

Section Three begins with an interview of Mr Chikwaya, renowned locally as a formidable farmer who has struggled with free-range livestock for years, going as far as setting traps on his land to kill them. As he says, the only planted trees that are visible between Mtakataka and Cape turn off (which is also where the turn off to Chirombo is), a 2-3 kilometre stretch between the two major local road junctions, are those that he planted before goats arrived. This may be an exaggeration but it isn't far from the truth.

This short excerpt of Mr Chikwaya was selected from an interview that lasted over an hour, during which he spoke almost non-stop and covered many different ways in which free-range livestock are a problem, amongst other things. The content of the interview was rich and diverse, however much of it was not directly relevant to the narrative or was repeated by someone else and so was not included in the final film. When filming the interview, participants may not have wanted to interrupt Mr Chikwaya because he is an elder and commands a great deal of respect. I did not want to interrupt him because it was not my place and I could see that he was in full flow and that the interview would be fascinating to watch afterwards.

The ambitious nature of the film, to connect the stories of five different groups and over thirty people into one succinct narrative that could be shown to local

and international audiences, meant that a lot of depth was lost in order to maintain the narrative and include different voices. There is clear value in presenting Mr Chikwaya's and other people's monologues as stand-alone films. However, the condensed and relatively quick nature of this process, meant that such side projects and reactions to them could not be explored, highlighting that participatory research interventions run by people who are not locally based over a fixed period of time, will always run the risk of missing the depth that would be possible through prolonged self-mobilisation or policies that encourage genuinely participatory processes over long periods of time.

The following sequence (10:00-11:09) features Moses being filmed by Frank in an erosion gully. Moses builds on Mr Chikwaya's words, eloquently explaining why tree-planting efforts so often fail due to free-range livestock. The result of these frequent failures is that people lose heart and eventually stop trying. If this continues, then erosion will only get worse. This sequence speaks to previous sections where the importance of trees is made clear. It ends with Moses stating that: "we must not fail to protect young trees from goats". This sentence is clearly directed at the whole community and invites cooperation.

With that in mind, Samuel felt that part of his contribution should be to highlight the importance of cooperation at this stage (11:10-11:56), as it would function as a segue between Moses' words and the following section featuring interviews of Amai Chinchino and Mr Phande, in which the focus was partly on the decline in local cooperation. One of the examples of successful cooperation that Samuel gave, was of wedding ceremonies. It so happened that a village wedding was due to take place that weekend and Samuel wanted to film the wedding as a gift to the bride and groom, who were friends of his, and to capture footage for the film.

This raised a difficult ethical question. While it was easy to ask people in one-on-one interviews or small groups whether they consented to being filmed and for the footage to be used in the final film, it was not so easy to ask the congregation at a wedding. Samuel spoke briefly at the ceremony, sharing what he was doing and asking whether anyone objected to being filmed and possibly featuring in a

film about Chirombo. By now many people in the area were aware of the PV process and nobody objected but it is unlikely that everyone knew what they were taking part in. Regardless, the short sequence of people singing at the wedding (11:29-11-38) was included and my concerns quashed by Samuel and others, on the basis that nobody would mind the inclusion of this short sequence. I remain uncertain as to the ethics of this sequence but accepted the will of the group.

The images that followed – of water lilies representing the beauty of nature, a lemon tree full of fruit as a nod to the many people’s desire to plant fruit trees, and a diverse and productive local farm – were inserted as a reminder of what could be possible through cooperation, based on the wall-map and discussions with participants during the workshops.

5.5 Section Four: From Cooperation to Competition (11:58-13:36)

This section was not initially included in the mapping exercise but was the result of further discussions and reflections between everyone involved in the process, once the first round of filming had ended. A decision was made to interview Mr Phande and Amai Chinchino, in order to add the voices of two wise and respected elders outside of the PV group, as they reflected on the difference between Chirombo’s past and present. The feeling was that this would add weight and authority to the narrative. Moses, Samuel, and Alice were chosen to interview them. I accompanied them to Mr Phande’s interview but was absent from the initial interview with Amai Chinchino, preferring to see what the result of my absence might be.

The interview with Mr Phande went without a hitch and lasted well over an hour. However, Amai Chinchino’s bashfulness on camera meant that the footage from her interview was not usable and the interview had to be re-shot or discarded. I suggested that participants set up the camera, ask Amai Chinchino the same questions but tell her that the camera was not running. Perhaps then she would relax and speak with more fluency. She could then be told that the

camera had in fact been running, shown the footage and if she liked it and approved of its use, then it could be used, if not it would be deleted.

This trick meant venturing into an ethical grey area but only to put Amai Chinchino at ease. She was not nervous because she did not want to be recorded but rather because the camera was unfamiliar. This approach worked well. She relaxed and upon viewing the footage was delighted, and sanctioned the use of the images in the film. She then relaxed for the following sequence and eventually sang the song that marks the beginning of the credits (see Section Seven for details).

Much like with Mr Chikwaya, both interviews lasted well over an hour and the width and depth of topics that were covered was remarkable. During the editing process Samuel, Moses, Alice, and I all agreed that showing audiences the full interviews uninterrupted would be very valuable. However, this did not fit with the objective of *Tigwirane Manja* and was left to a later date. As it was, the editing focused on providing more depth to the idea of cooperation, which was running throughout the previous sections without being explicitly stated until the end of section three.

Establishing a balance between depth and fluency within a relatively short film was a constant challenge. However, despite the need to cut Mr Phande and Amai Chinchino's interviews short, the fluency and depth of feeling with which they spoke was still palpable. As a result, while the interviews had originally been conceived as a way of adding value to the participants work, they came to occupy a central space, placing a great deal of emphasis on the need for people to take ownership of the issues they face and solve them through cooperation, rather than giving in to the competitive influences of materialism and neoliberalism, which are pushing Chirombo from a traditional spirit of cooperation, to one of competition. This point comes across strongly as Mr Phande's sequence ends with him stating: "Money has come between us, causing our world to deteriorate. Money" (13:26-13:36). In his nineties, Mr Phande could remember a time pre-money, when people bartered and shared what they had.

His words could have caused a stir among participants. While the introduction of money may have had negative consequences in Chirombo (and indeed everywhere), people are often desperately in need of it today. As explained in Chapter Four, at the very beginning of the PV process a considerable amount of time was dedicated to discussing issues around stipends for workshops and development projects. It was perhaps surprising then that when attention was specifically drawn to this sequence during the group editing process, no one spoke out against it and several people voiced their support or nodded gravely. It seemed that participants were in agreement that money is an unfortunate necessity and that Mr Phande's words rang true.

5.6 Section Five: Farming – from past to present (13:37-17:36)

This section began with footage of Katherine Dewu, from Group One, and was followed by footage featuring Mr. Tepeka and Mrs. Faife from Group Four. The third member of Group Four was Katherine Kanjala but she was not well on the day of filming and struggled to focus, leading to the decision to have her voice narrating the introduction instead, as mentioned previously.

The purpose of this section of the film was to mark the transition from traditional to present agricultural practices. Mrs Faife chose to focus on the way that seeds are stored using modern chemicals and the toxic impacts that this can have on people's health. Mr Tepeka likewise talked about seeds, focusing on the problems introduced by modern hybrids, notably the devastating impact of fall armyworm. The continuity of focus on seeds, traditional and modern agricultural practices, made Katherine Dewu's footage, in which she demonstrated traditional seed saving and the diversity of traditional agricultural systems, so appropriate to this section of the film. Her sequence was filmed in June Walker's garden (mentioned previously), where she uses permaculture practices, learned many years beforehand, and includes many indigenous plant types that are no longer very common. This location enabled Katherine to appear in a kind of time

warp relative to the current standard of maize fields ravaged by fall armyworm, as shown from minutes 15:02 to 15:10.

The following sequence (15:11-15:58) features Mrs Faife explaining how seeds used to be stored and how they are stored today. She is clearly aggrieved by the toxicity of modern storage chemicals and spoke out against their use during the workshops. Mrs Faife sequence is useful for discussing stylistic aspects of filming, as much as for its content. The way footage was captured throughout was to place two cameras at different angles, with one camera recording sound. This meant that during editing, the footage could switch from one angle to another while keeping the same soundtrack. This was done on numerous occasions throughout the editing process. It was a useful stylistic tool to keep images fresh and to emphasise different aspects of a scene. For instance, in this scene the close up of Mrs Faife as she is talking focuses attention on her words, while the wider shot shows viewers what she is doing, and the close up of her hands emphasises the contact with chemicals as she talks about their danger.

This approach required some relatively complex editing. However, after some time, Samuel and several participants got to grips with it and were able to put together similar sequences on their own. PV films are often characterised by more straightforward single frame films. It may be that these more simple styles are more appropriate for projects such as this and that they would have encouraged people to concentrate more on what was being said, rather than what they were seeing. However, the relative ease with which Samuel and others picked up these filming and editing skills to create more complex sequences, demonstrates that PV processes could make greater efforts to give participants more complex stylistic options.

The above was also noticeable in later sequences (see Ganizani Mdeza (19:13-19:40) Section Six, for example). Those participants who had learned to master more sophisticated editing tricks adapted their filming styles to fit with the editing process. Perhaps more time should have been dedicated to teaching editing during the workshops so that participants could make more conscious

decisions about what they were shooting and how it would fit together. However, this was the first film that participants made and did not need to be perfect. Lessons such as this one could be applied to future films.

The following sequence (15:58-17:07) of Mr Tepeka explaining the advantages and disadvantages of hybrid seeds and synthetic fertiliser, presented its own challenges. The group had chosen a fairly complex structure for their sequence, involving some acting: Mrs Faife mixing chemicals (actually flour) in with the seeds and Mr Tepeka handling seeds as he spoke, before applying pesticides (actually water) to a field. Even though they had their storyboard to fall back on, the relative complexity of their scenes meant that Mr Tepeka in particular had a lot to remember, with Katherine no longer contributing. His sequence covered a broad range of big topics: hybrid seeds, pests and diseases, chemical and organic inputs, and perhaps lacked some depth as a result.

Fall armyworm, for instance, is a problem that is devastating farmers in Chirombo and was a big topic in both the pre-PV interviews and the workshops, yet is only briefly explored in the film, with Mr Tepeka explaining that it was introduced through hybrid seeds and is difficult to eliminate, with farmers sometimes forced to turn to expensive and dangerous pesticides. According to interviews and the workshops, fall armyworm is one of the biggest problems in the village, sometimes wiping out people's entire crops, and the pest is resisting all attempts to eradicate it (Interviews, Chirombo, August-December 2018). People are left to handpick the pests off their crops, a painstaking and almost impossible job to do thoroughly, and use ash, sand and water, based on traditional pest control practices. However, overall their efforts are not working. Samuel has had some success applying *Azadirachta indica* powder (commonly known as 'neem') mixed with water, based on knowledge acquired studying permaculture, but this is not widely known and is difficult to do on a field wide scale.

Some farmers have tried to grow cassava rather than maize, in the hope that fall armyworm will not target this crop. This approach is backed up by the UNFAO

handbook, which suggests that farmers should: “grow maize with another crop like cassava or sweet potatoes; avoid planting late; handpick and destroy eggs and young caterpillars on the maize leaves; spray infected maize with botanical pesticides (based on neem or other plants); pour ash, sand, or soil into the whorl of the plant (where fall armyworm feeds); protect and encourage natural biological control agents.”

However, cassava has a much longer growing season than maize and is often destroyed once the agreement to keep livestock out of fields during the maize growing season is over. Thus, the fall armyworm problem is made much harder to resolve by the free-range livestock problem, complexity that narrow positivist studies into fall armyworm alone might miss. It was a lot to expect Mr Tepeka to cover the complexity of this issue and in the end he did not, demonstrating that PV is not always an ideal vehicle for communicating complexity in depth.

With regards to synthetic agricultural inputs, participants were particularly upset by rising costs, a topic that Mr Tepeka covers. Initially, these inputs boosted yields and were cheap, so farmers adopted them enthusiastically, simultaneously buying in to the green revolution idea that they would boost their yields and thus increase their income and standards of living. However, the cost of these inputs has gone up exponentially. While a bag of fertiliser used to cost MK500, it is now closer to MK25,000; even when adjusted for inflation this is an increase of several thousand per cent, leading one interviewee to state “Only the wealthy will be able to farm in the future. Everyone else will depend on them”, a frightening prospect (Interview of Mrs Phiri, Chirombo, November 2017).

However, cost was not the only issue that was discussed during the workshops. The perceived positive effects of agricultural inputs have stagnated as soil fertility has declined. What’s more, the perception that fertiliser is needed, is partly based on social conditioning resulting from materialistic approaches to agriculture, typified by the green revolution. School, extension workers and radio programmes have taught people that synthetic fertiliser represents

modern agriculture. Such deep indoctrination makes any transition away from synthetic inputs difficult, because it involves overcoming deeply entrenched ideas – which itself involves people facing their fear, doubts and insecurities, that without fertiliser their crops will not grow.

The idea of abandoning fertiliser altogether can be frightening, yet many people are doing it out of necessity because they cannot afford it. Sadly, as was covered in Section 3.3, many people no longer have the traditional knowledge necessary to farm without synthetic inputs. Instead, farmers who are unable to afford inputs, plough depleted soils and often plant with no fertilisers, organic or otherwise.⁸ Problems are often exacerbated by the high cost of new hybrid seeds and the virtual disappearance of local seeds, leading to people planting seeds saved from hybrid crops, which are known to do poorly. Predictably, yields are very low, increasing pressure on farmers to buy food, for which they need to find money by competing for resources. It is a vicious circle that is hard to escape.

It seemed appropriate therefore, to add a short sequence of text that explained some of the things that Mr Tepeka had missed. It might have been better to re-shoot Mr Tepeka's sequence adding in what was missing but he was away in Lilongwe during that stage of editing and the subject did not come up again. These challenges illustrate the difficulty of embracing a wide and deep analysis of the complexity of interconnected challenges that exist in Chirombo, maintaining that width and depth in a participatory filming process that involved so many people, and translating the whole into a deep, wide, and yet coherent narrative.

5.7 Section Six: Choosing a problem to focus on first (17:36-21:00)

Section six was made up of footage from Group Three, as well as re-shoots and additional scenes that were shot during the editing process. The idea of this section of the film was to hone in on one problem that would serve as a starting

⁸ When working in a neighbouring village between 2012 and 2015, I was staggered by how many farmers were not aware that manure was a resource, often finding it dumped on rubbish tips, or in the river.

point for further change. Participants had chosen to focus on free-range livestock, particularly goats, a problem that was first highlighted in Section Three.

The decision to focus on one problem first, before moving on to others, was by no means obvious to all participants. For instance, during one of the group editing meetings, Mr Tepeka vocalised his confusion as to why the focus was shifting to goats, rather than distributed equally between different problems. In response, Mr Fostino explained: “If we start by resolving the goat problem, then we can resolve the other problems, little by little” (PV workshops, Chirombo, April 2018). Mr Tepeka nodded in understanding, as did several others who clearly had not yet fully grasped how the sequence of solutions could unfold but had not spoken out. The confusion at this late stage demonstrated that participants had engaged in the process with different conceptualisations of what the final output would be. It was partly this confusion that motivated Samuel’s speech in Section Seven (25:00-25:18), in which he spelled out the logic of the process.

The first sequence of Section Six is of Frank using the ice cream cone microphone to interview Mrs Matayo as she calmly explains why goats are a problem, re-introducing the issue to viewers. Group Three’s decision to use the ice cream cone microphone provided a clear audio track to set behind several cutaways that helped illustrate what was being said. The use of cutaways was a very simple editing tool that Samuel and several participants were quick to grasp and is one that could be taught early on in a PV process, in order to help participants visualise what they might do with some of their shots.

The subsequent sequences are notable in that all the footage is of people who did not take part in the PV workshops, which presented a challenge. The goat problem is complex and participants needed to amass footage that would explain it as completely as possible. Their decision to do so by filming people outside of the PV workshops meant that they did not control what people said, making it difficult to weave together a narrative out of various unprepared sequences.

Whether or not participants consciously chose to let go of control in this way is unclear but if so this could be interpreted as demonstrating how a genuine participatory process, which is partly defined by researchers and facilitators letting go of control (Arnstein 1969), can breed further genuine participation, as participants in turn let go of their control and invite others in. The result was that it provided a lot of strength in depth, with interviewees often speaking with great natural feeling, rather than needing to rehearse what they were going to say or follow a plan, as was usually the case for participants.

Asida Mbani for instance (18:23-18:45 and 20:50-20:56), an elderly woman who has lived in the village her entire life, was visibly frustrated by the destruction caused by the growing number of free-range goats and went as far as to say that she sees no future for farming in Chirombo as a result. In the full interview it is clear that when Asida talks about the future of farming, she is not talking about maize but about everything else – farming on the edge of the lake or rivers, home gardens, fruit trees, and crops that outlast maize in the fields. She was particularly upset by the impact that goats have on fruit trees, notably papaya.

The focus on papaya may seem trivial but these trees were repeatedly mentioned as being of great importance to people, and it is easy to understand why. The fruit provides a valuable source of nutrition (particularly vitamins A and C), as well as many other health benefits, towards mid to late August, a time of year when very little other fruit is available. What's more, papayas are extremely easy and quick to propagate and do very well around people's homes. I have known one particularly high yielding papaya tree to bear close to one hundred fruit just nine months after being planted in someone's home garden. In financial terms that means a potential income of between ten and twenty thousand kwacha from a single tree in one growing season. For comparison, a goat can be sold for between eighteen and twenty-three thousand.

In the following sequence, Ganizani Mdeza (19:13-19:40) is similarly full of feeling as he pleads with goat owners to take responsibility for their animals. Ganizani is among a group of farmers who depend on lakeside farming for

income. Several of the elders in the group described that in the past, the whole lakefront was used to grow dense mixtures of fruit trees and annual crops. However, as the level of the lake rose, the space was lost. People who maintain these practices on the lakefront, are plagued by free-range livestock. Protection can be expensive, time consuming, and is often futile; it only takes a moment of inattention or deliberate ill will, for months and even years of work to be destroyed. Thus, most people are put off farming along the lakeshore and those who take it up, often quickly give up. These days the lake is receding and people are beginning to discuss the opportunities that this will provide but little will happen unless the goat problem can be resolved; a point that is later made by Frank (23:50-23:54) in Section Seven.

The footage of Ganizani, filmed and edited by Samuel, Moses, and Olivia without any assistance from me, is an indication of just how much they developed their skills. They set the scene with two shots, filming Ganizani drawing water from the lake and mulching his vegetables, before capturing him at ease in his garden. The quality of this and many other sequences, demonstrates just how adept some participants were at picking up film making skills through the PV process. Their aptitude is all the more impressive considering their lack of prior experience with technology or visual media. Once developed, these filmmaking skills can be used to stimulate or support self-mobilisation. Sharing new skills and facilitating self-mobilisation are two of the hallmarks of genuine participatory processes and of PV specifically (Pretty 1995; Chambers 1997; Lunch and Lunch 2006).

The depth of feeling shared by Asida and Ganizani goes to show that participants' decision to focus on goats was well founded, as was the decision to interview people in the village. If the film could help galvanise such feelings it might lead to action. It was in this section that part of the chief's footage was incorporated, similarly adding weight to the focus on goats, in the hope of galvanising action. Chief Chirombo first points out the importance of goats and why people value them, ideas corroborated by chief Mberesera. This reflects a widely held feeling that livestock farming could very well exist alongside agriculture, providing a

much-needed source of manure and income. However, chief Mberesera then corroborates other people's feelings in this section: while goats are a part of development, they have become highly destructive and problematic (20:15-20:49). The decision to include the chiefs is discussed in Section 6.3.1. Their strong contributions set up section seven, in which participants presented their solution to the goat problem.

5.8 Section Seven: A possible solution (26:07-26:49)

This section was made up predominantly of footage from Group Five, comprised of Olivia Pindani, Eliza Matayo and Katherine Skelo, but also included shots of Frank from Group Three, as well as additional shots filmed during the editing process, most notably of the chiefs and Samuel. The purpose of the section was to present the participants' proposed solution to the goat problem and outline possible benefits that could accrue were the solution to be implemented.

The Section begins with Zaina explaining the solution to the goat problem (21:11-22:12), shortly after having given birth to a baby boy. Shooting was a struggle, as Zaina frequently got lost in her thoughts during what was quite a long speech. Once edited her sequence lasted just over a minute but the whole speech was much longer. Despite participants splitting up their tasks so that they only needed to share certain aspects of their joint analyses, when in front of the camera some people, like Zaina, were nervous and would lead up to what they needed to say by going through their whole thought process, sometimes forgetting what they meant to say in the process.

Being filmed can be stressful, even after practicing in the PV workshops, particularly when you know that the footage will be shown publicly to your peers. Participants needed encouragement in these instances, so that they might relax, laugh, and say their bit slowly, taking time to reflect on their words. After several takes, Zaina visibly relaxed and took her time to explain the solution, which she did very well.

Zaina's sequence was followed by Katherine Skelo explaining that if the goat problem were resolved, different types of farming could be practiced, notably zero-tillage (22:12-23:05). The emphasis on zero-tillage is likely to reflect that during the mapping exercise it was cited as an example of approaches to farming that could be practiced were the goat problem to be resolved. However, the pre-PV interviews and workshop discussions did not place quite so much emphasis on this practice. It is possible, even likely, that the reliance on the map skewed some of the emphasis in the film and perhaps more time could have been given to ensure that participants carefully opened up their reflections once more when planning their films, rather than largely copying what was on the wall. Alternatively, time could be set aside during the editing process to refine the arguments and shoot new scenes.

Katherine's sequence presented its own technical challenges. The person in charge of the sound did not notice that the microphone was not switched on. This meant that while the images were there, Katherine's speech was not. To work around this problem, Katherine's voice was re-recorded and cutaway shots were used as background images, alongside footage from Katherine's original sequence in which she was not speaking (22:34-23:05). When planning a PV process it is important to set aside time for fixing such technical issues, rather than assuming that filming will go smoothly.

Katherine's sequence was followed by Eliza explaining that irrigated farming could work if goats were kept in a penned area (23:10-23:22), dovetailing with Frank explaining that as things stand, those trying to farm along the lakeshore are hampered by free-range livestock. The inference is that it is almost pointless irrigating crops because free-range livestock will eat them (23:22-23:58). This connection is invaluable. Many agricultural development projects and local people see irrigation as a kind of panacea that will solve all their problems. As one government official in Lilongwe told me: "The solution to Malawi's agricultural problems is simple: irrigation from the lake" (Conversation, Government official, Lilongwe, August 2017), an idea that I have heard repeated many times by farmers or people working in agricultural development and

academia. Yet, in Chirombo at least, the solution is evidently not so simple. This demonstrates the value of an open and deep participatory process that creates space for participants to engage in a holistic analysis, drawing connections that might otherwise be missed in narrower lines of enquiry.

In the following sequence, Mary Sapemba connects back to Asida's interview in Section Six when she says that the goat solution would enable people to grow food at home, as well as pointing out that nature would regenerate (23:58-24:10). The desire to grow home gardens was something that emerged from many conversations in Chirombo but particularly with elderly women like Asida and Mary, who had known a time when home gardens were common and valued them highly as sources of fresh produce. Mary's reference to nature regenerating connected back to the beginning of the film, in which Group One urged people to look after nature. It was connections like these that maintained the three-dimensional nature of the participants' analysis in the linear film.

During the mapping exercise, natural regeneration was discussed alongside actively planting trees. Both approaches have their advantages. The former may encourage greater diversity and a form of re-wilding, while the latter provides more control, giving people greater choice over what grows. In the following sequence, Olivia Pindani shares a number of specific trees and shrubs that could be planted to help local people (24:10-24:43). The trees that she lists are all primarily nitrogen fixers that would help improve soil quality. The group's decision to list these trees in particular emerged from the focus on agriculture and thus the prioritisation of soil fertility. Had the focus been on boat building, for instance, the choice of trees would have been different. Thus, while the workshops encouraged a holistic interpretation of agriculture, which is clear in the film, the focus still impacted the narrative with an agricultural focus that could be seen as reductionist and marginalising other important aspects. Future tree planting efforts should take this into consideration.

The subsequent sequences, featuring chief Chirombo, Samuel Baluti and chief Mberesera, were focused on encouraging people to work together, in order to

solve the goat problem, take ownership of the type of development that the village needs and look after the local environment (24:44-26:49). This sequence serves as a strong conclusion and rallying cry for everyone to cooperate to solve local problems. The film ends with a warning from chief Mberesera: “If we do not hold hands, then we will have nothing to pass on to our children” (26:32). At the end of the mapping exercise, participants were asked what might happen were the free-range livestock problem not solved. Nobody wanted to contemplate this scenario and the topic was dropped. It was fitting therefore, that without knowing it, chief Mberesera answered the question, saying what nobody else had the heart to admit.⁹

Footage of the chiefs and cut-out shots of children, trees, goats and people playing the board game *bao*, were shot by different participants at different stages of the filming process and brought together during the editing to help illustrate some of the points being made. The interviews of the chiefs were primarily shot by Olivia and initially edited by Samuel, Frank and Olivia, before being re-edited by me, primarily to equalise sound and transitions. Olivia’s place filming the chiefs put an eighteen year old young woman in a position of control, as she framed the scene by advising them on where to sit, where to look, and advised them on retakes. The chiefs having not participated in the workshops, meant that Olivia knew more about what was happening than they did, so even if they were unaware of it, she was in control of the situation.

Sandwiched between the chief’s sections, was Samuel’s interview (24:59-26:06) filmed in two stages, first by Olivia and then by me, after Samuel had carefully reflected on some final words that he wished to add to the conclusion. The length and placement of his speech reflects Samuel’s importance in this research project. His emphasis on cooperation to take control of and solve village problems, echo his shorter sequence (11:09-11:29) and reflect his strong bias towards cooperative local planning and action. Samuel is a gatekeeper for Chirombo, as discussed in Chapter Two, and as such holds power. The nature of

⁹ This was not the only serendipitous aspect of chief Mberesera’s speech. He did not know that participants had only just settled on *Holding Hands* as the title for the film, when he repeatedly emphasised the need to hold hands and thus ensured that his powerful words made for a perfect conclusion to the film.

his bias as well as the careful and measured manner in which he delivered his words, is indicative of why he was chosen as my research assistant and trusted with so much responsibility throughout the process.

The final shot before fading to black, of a girl with a baby on her back walking along the road in Chirombo village, as well as similar shots in which people appear going about their business, was ethically problematic. For the shots to appear natural, rather than acted, people could not be warned beforehand but rather were shown the footage on the camera, asked whether they would mind if it were used in the film and invited to watch the film before public release. People usually laughed and immediately assented but could not be expected to understand quite what it was that they were agreeing to, particularly children. The decision to allow the footage to be used was largely taken by everyone involved in the PV process and discussions about the ethical use of such shots were never very deep, with participants almost immediately stating that it was not a problem, seemingly leaving me as the only troubled party. Perhaps there is some reassurance that in the eighteen months since the film was first screened, with multiple local screenings having taken place since, nobody has complained about featuring in the film, or about their children featuring.

After the film has faded to black, viewers are often surprised to see and hear Amai Chinchino singing (26:54-27:01). Amai Chinchino's song used to be sung by slaves or servants of the British when they had reached the end of their tether and needed help from their friends. It was a call for local people to cooperate and support each other during one of the harshest periods in Malawi's history. This seven-second sequence was added entirely at my behest, as I was unable to shake off how moving I had found it.

Ultimately it should probably have been left out in favour of the group's own song, or whatever else participants would have chosen to end with. Ironically, by enthusiastically suggesting that a clip that called for cooperation in the face of colonialism should be included, I exerted my own influence, demonstrating that regardless of how hard I might have tried to overcome such tendencies and let

go of control, I still have work to do. At this stage of the editing process everyone was keen for the film to be finished, Samuel and I were exhausted and nobody objected. Finally, the credits reel presents everyone who was involved in the film and thanks the chiefs and the people of Chirombo for making the film possible.

5.9 Conclusion

This chapter reveals the complexity and effort behind the making of *Tigwirane Manja* and is intended as an open behind the scenes view of the process. Watching *Tigwirane Manja* people might come to the conclusion that the filming process was smooth, that participants simply took control and made their film. However, making a participatory film involving over thirty people, none of whom had ever used film equipment before, let alone planned and made a film, was never going to be smooth. Arnstein's ladder (1969) makes clear that genuine participation can take the form of partnership, delegation, and citizen, or participant, control. In order to make *Tigwirane Manja* it was necessary to fluctuate between these forms of participation. One of the strengths of PV is that it is flexible and can be used in any number of different ways (Lunch and Lunch 2006).

In any given moment facilitators can step in to make a suggestion, briefly take control, fully stand back and watch, or choose to be absent from filming entirely. It isn't easy to juggle these different roles but if facilitators keep in mind that their goal is to assist participants in the making of their own film, by being there for them in whatever way might be necessary, they can then follow their feelings and find their own unique style. I sometimes made decisions that I was not happy with but these can create tension and thus offer the best learning opportunities. Individual participants' have different needs, as does each filmed scene but there is no right or wrong approach.

Throughout the process the value of open communication has been emphasised as a way to cultivate trust, reflection, and make space for depth. Open communication should be understood as a fluid practice that arises naturally

between human beings, rather than a rigid method to apply to a concept of genuine participatory research. As such, open communication does not end when outside of the workshop context but continues into shooting. This can help ensure that participants stay on top of their objectives and that any confusion resulting from the workshops, like the mix-up around understandings of climate change highlighted in Section 5.4, can be ironed out during filming,

There are other pragmatic lessons to learn from the filming process. For instance, making time for re-shoots to explore issues in more depth, or because of technical mishaps, or if people are unwell, or are simply not in the right frame of mind. Another lesson is to ask people if they are happy with their sections of the film in low-key one-on-one conversations, so that they feel comfortable enough to share their true feelings. Another, is to have the confidence and freedom to trust in the results of the workshops and semi-structured interviews, so as to help participants say what they want to say when in front of the camera, at which point nerves and/or the artificial nature of expressing a pre-prepared idea can get the better of them.

Similarly, during the editing process, researchers, facilitators, and participants can use the triangulation of the semi-structured interviews, workshops, film plans, and films, to move scenes around and edit with some freedom. If researchers feel constrained by efforts to cling to spurious objectivity (Chambers 2014:45), or by the idea that the participants plans should be followed with rigidity, then their discomfort will seep into the film and in all likelihood make it disjointed. Plans change when it comes to editing and this honest form of partnership makes it possible to help the film's narrative to flow. If changes are made to the participants' structure, then exhaustive processes of open communication can help to ensure that the editing accentuates their chosen narrative, rather than take away from it and slip into manipulation.

Even with the flexible approach taken in this PV process, the making of *Tigwirane Manja* was as stressful and exhausting as it was enjoyable. The final output was worth it and reflects a process that embraced the fluidity of 'degrees

of citizen power' from partnership to participant control. What's more, it does justice to the depth and width of themes covered in the semi-structured interviews and PV process, or at least comes close within the parameters of what participants wanted to share on film. Some themes are missing, notably explicit reference to local spiritual practices and direct criticism of materialistic and neoliberal development pathways. Possible reasons for their omission will be explored in Chapter Six, which will focus on the screenings of *Tigwirane Manja*, both in Malawi and the UK, and participants' intentions, as well as in Chapter Seven: Discussion.

Chapter Six: Screenings

Introduction

The type of development that participants reimagined during the PV workshops and presented in their film is a holistic mixture of cooperation, reflection, open communication, and interconnected technical interventions. However, audiences often focused entirely on the latter. As this chapter will demonstrate, these reactions could have been symptoms of dominant materialistic worldviews, responses to the pragmatic nature of a film that ended on a call to action, or both.

The chapter follows chronological events, starting with screenings in Chirombo and ending with screenings in the UK. Aside from reviewing how different audiences reacted to the film, its purpose is to present participants' intentions and determine whether these were met. This process will pave the way for reflections in Chapter Seven on the potential of genuine participatory processes using PV, in creating a platform for typically marginalised people to be seen and heard, in order to open up reimagined pathways of development.

The chapter begins by outlining the participants' local, national, and international intentions for screenings of *Tigwirane Manja*. This is followed by reflections on screenings in Chirombo in 6.3, broken into two sections: screenings to the chiefs, followed by public screenings to the wider village. Section 6.4 is focused on screenings in Lilongwe and is similarly split into two parts, focusing first on private screenings, followed by a public screening. Finally, Section 6.5 details screenings in the UK, beginning with private screenings and followed by screenings at the University of Leeds.

6.1 Participant's Intentions

As mentioned at the end of Chapter Four and in Chapter Five, participants had decided that they wanted national and international audiences to see their film.

The first audiences were to be local, so that the film might encourage people in Chirombo to reflect on local problems and take action to resolve them, starting with the issue of how to manage free-range livestock. Second, they hoped that by showing the film nationally and internationally, diverse audiences would be moved to help. This was particularly important, in that to implement their solution to the goat problem, a significant amount of fence material would be needed to keep goats penned in to a communal space. Goats cannot be contained with locally sourced wooden poles, like cows can, particularly not on a large scale. Therefore, as Mrs Faife put it: “We will need wire fences if this solution is going to work” (PV workshop, Chirombo, March 2019). Wire fences are expensive and participants were aware that support from government or non-governmental organisations would be needed to pay for fence material. This need was partly behind the choice of title, *Tigwirane Manja* (Holding Hands), which was designed to encourage local, national, and international cooperation, bringing to mind Figure 9 below which was first shared in Chapter One. *Tigwirane Manja* was effectively an invitation for others to join in the participatory process:

Nditenge nawo mbali
Mutenge nawo mbali
Aliyese atenge nawo mbali
Tonse titenge nawo mbali
Aliyense atenge nawo mbali
Mukupemphedwa kutenga nawo mbali

Figure 9: I participate, you participate, he/she participates, we participate, you participate, **We invite you to participate.**

When choosing audiences, participants were asked whether the film could be shared with academic audiences, as part of my PhD, in the hope of encouraging reflection on the way that research is conducted, to which everyone assented. Participants' hope was that I would act as an ambassador, showing the film to

varied audiences and appealing for support. The enthusiasm that PV processes generate can lead to high expectations. To avoid disappointment, which can easily lead to disillusionment, it is important to manage those expectations (Lunch and Lunch 2006). This was done by emphasising that though the film might be shown to a wide variety of audiences, there were absolutely no guarantees that it would lead to support from inside or outside the village. If participants wanted action, then their best bet was to take matters into their own hands and work locally, while also sharing the film outwards. With that in mind, the first audience for the film was the chiefs, whose support would be valuable if the film was to have a local impact.

6.2 Screenings in Chirombo

6.2.1 The Chiefs

The first audience was the chiefs, their advisers and some of their family members. The film was projected onto a wall in my home, where privacy could be guaranteed. There were many reasons to show the film to the chiefs first. Cultural protocol encourages all new activities to be sanctioned by village authorities. Their blessing and support is considered invaluable when implementing new projects, or introducing new rules and/or bylaws. Participants felt that if their film was to lead to action, then it was essential that the chiefs should be on-board. What's more, their support would lend weight to the film's messages and open up dialogue with the entire village, while offering clear inroads into discussions with neighbouring villages and other traditional authorities. The entire research process was sanctioned by the chiefs, who were approached before the semi-structured interviews began, and again before the PV process took place.

After the screening, a Q&A session provided an opportunity for discussions. At first, participants were reluctant to speak, perhaps unsure of the protocol and timid about assuming their own right to speak out for the group. The majority of the group were unaccustomed to being involved in workshops, let alone to

having private audiences with the assembled chiefs in a *muzungu's* (foreigners') home. When Samuel and I made it clear that we would not be answering questions, unless specifically requested to do so and that any queries should be directed at participants, they began to open up; particularly when the chiefs also encouraged them. Discussions ensued about various aspects of the film and how it was made but very quickly focused on the importance of resolving the goat problem. It was clear that in the immediate aftermath, the chiefs viewed the goat problem as the central message of the film.

After about half an hour of discussions, GVH Chirombo and VH Mberesera made it known that they very much supported the idea of resolving the goat problem, which they interpreted as being the film's central message. They were so supportive in fact, that they wanted to be included in the film, specifically addressing the need to resolve this livestock issue. Participants' received the chiefs' reaction as a vindication of their intention to encourage cooperation. They felt that with the chiefs' on board, it was much more likely that the film would lead to action, summed up by Mrs Faife after the chiefs had left: "It is very good that the chiefs want to be in the film. Now the people will listen to us".

This view was in contrast with some of the views expressed by interviewees, and shared in Section 3.1, who did not feel that the chiefs are listened to anymore or even trusted. However, participants all appeared to agree that including the chiefs was a good idea, or perhaps they did not feel confident enough to refuse them. Unfortunately there was no time to explore this topic in depth through open communication, as I was set to leave the village shortly afterwards. As it was, the participants' decision can be seen as submissive or pragmatic. Even if the chiefs' authority is waning, they may still have more influence than other people in the village. Participants' intention was not to challenge the chiefs' authority but rather to encourage wider audiences to engage and join in the effort to resolve local problems.

Ultimately, the inclusion of the chiefs in the film may have contributed to increasing participants' influence, as they can be seen agreeing with their

conclusions (*Tigwirane Manja* 20:16-20:50), and/or it may have put some audience members off, it is difficult to say. The chiefs' decision to give the film their seal of approval by being included in it, can be seen as a way of stamping their authority on a participatory process in which they were not involved, thus perhaps bringing it into the sphere of influence of professional respondents. Alternatively, it could be seen as a genuine desire to help participants resolve a pernicious local problem.

The chiefs' interpretation of *Tigwirane Manja* as primarily focusing on the goat problem, may demonstrate that the complexity of the different interconnected issues that participants presented, is overpowered by a focus on one problem. It could also demonstrate that the chiefs have been conditioned to think in reductionist terms and to understand development in a technical materialistic sense. The way development is discussed in the film leaves space for interpretation. On the one hand it is depicted as a social process, full of emotion, and dependent on people cooperating, reflecting, and openly communicating. While these aspects of development are explicitly communicated, they are also a constant background to a series of interconnected technical recommendations, and as such can be missed by people with a tendency to focus on materialism.

However, this is not necessarily a problem for screenings in Chirombo. If the result was to encourage people to resolve one issue through reflection and cooperative action, then future screenings could always be organised to invite people to reflect further and resolve many of the other issues that were highlighted in the film, thus opening up a more holistic understanding of development. Whatever the chiefs' motives for being involved, and participants' motives for including them, their participation fit with the underlying aim of the film, to invite people to hold hands, to cooperate, in order to resolve local issues. This was an acceptable starting point for resolving local issues.

6.2.2 Chirombo

Once the chiefs' contributions had been incorporated into the film, the next screening was in Chirombo village, the central village of the area known as Chirombo. The purpose of this screening was to get the messages of *Tigwirane Manja* out into the village. Thus, unlike the screening to the chiefs, this second screening was public and attended by a large crowd of between two to three hundred people, including many children. As well as being a pragmatic event designed to communicate participants' work outward to the village, the screening revealed broader Malawian social and political dynamics.

For instance, unbeknownst to me, the owner of the projector and computer being used for the screening, first projected an afro-pop music video to attract people to the location. While the video and singer were Malawian, the performers displayed overtly sexual attitudes towards women and materialistic styles, typical of North American rap videos. The video was a reminder that Chirombo is becoming increasingly saturated with materialistic westernised media that are totally detached from local customs. Younger generations often mimic what they see in these films and turn against their own traditions (Observations and conversations, Chirombo, January-June 2018). This form of neo-colonialism makes it all the more important for local voices and visual media to hold a space. As it stands, *Tigwirane Manja* is the only local film in a sea of western or westernised visual media.

The screening of *Tigwirane Manja* began with Helen Mosamu leading the audience in prayer, mirroring participant's practice during the workshops, and demonstrating how embedded Christianity is in local life. All public events begin with prayers, where once they might have been centred on vitalist and pantheist traditions (see Section 3.2). Helen was followed by GVH Chirombo, who urged the audience to pay attention to this "very important film" (Screening, Chirombo, May 2019). The unquestioned authority that the chief gave himself to present a film in which he was barely involved, demonstrates that though his influence may be waning, he still views himself as occupying a position of authority. Nor was his authority openly questioned.

The sheer number of audience members, and particularly the presence of many children, meant that certain sections of the film were drowned out by laughter, as people enjoyed the novelty of seeing friends and family on screen. After the screening, Samuel gave a speech and so did GVH Chirombo, in which they pointed out that there had been a great deal of noise during the film and summarised the main points. Samuel also shared that the film would be screened several more times over the coming weeks and that people were also welcome to come and watch it on his laptop. If they wanted to discuss it further, they could speak to him, or approach any of the other participants, some of whom he named. Samuel's intervention reaffirmed his position as the gatekeeper for the process and for participants, a role that he was aware of, a little uncomfortable with, and worked to pass on to others by making clear that all the participants could speak for themselves.

These speeches were followed by comments from members of the audience that were largely formal expressions of gratitude made to GVH Chirombo, Samuel, the participants and I, and were made by people of some recognised social standing. This formality is typical of large meetings in Malawi where the pomp and ceremony of the speeches can overshadow the purpose of an event and serves to reaffirm who is in charge and who has a socially recognised right to speak. This rigidity did not encourage any depth of reflection or deliberation on the content of the film. However, the film itself challenged established notions of who is seen and heard by shining a light on participants. What's more, it did so in a novel way and thus may have gone unnoticed. With no precedent set for who should be seen and heard on film, there is far more scope for wider social inclusion.

The film was screened at night, so that it would be visible when projected outdoors. This meant that people were keen to get home afterwards, or on to a bar that was showing a football match; once again demonstrating the type of visual media that *Tigwirane Manja* is competing with in Chirombo. The screening effectively began with an afro-pop video and, for some at least, ended with a European football match.

While the size of the audience and conditions of the screening made it difficult to stimulate in-depth discussions or ensure that people could pay full attention, the nature of village life meant that the screening was a significant event that would be discussed in private conversations for some time. Over the coming days there were reports of conversations being held around the village that suggested that the film was eliciting reflection.

For instance, a young man came by my house to chat with Samuel and Mr Fostino about Mr Phande's words. He had understood the focus on the free-range livestock issue, as had many people, but not why Mr Phande had identified money as a problem. Samuel and Mr Fostino did their best to explain but it was suggested that perhaps he could speak to Mr Phande directly if he wanted to hear more. It is unclear whether he ever did but such potential connections offered hope that the film might help to reconnect younger people to the elders. While such conversations might not lead to action, they certainly stimulated reflection, demonstrating the value of a public screening which, while not immediately eliciting much depth, did reach a much wider audience and crept in to people's post-screening reflections.

Once the audience had left, everyone involved in the PV process held a private meeting with the chiefs, during which a strategy was discussed for spreading the film's message. It was agreed that there should be further screenings to smaller audiences, in order to foment deeper discussions, as well as meetings to collectively focus on the goat problem in order to encourage cooperative action. Participants resolved to investigate how many goats there are in Chirombo, a key factor in determining the feasibility of their plan, and the chiefs committed to investigating which areas of the village might be used to keep goats communally.

The first public screening appeared to galvanise a core group of participants to take concrete steps towards action. While my time in the village was now up, over the subsequent weeks and months, participants showed the film numerous times to smaller groups, and still do. Public meetings were held to discuss the goat problem in more depth, participants conducted research into the number of

goats in the area, and the chiefs identified land that could be used to keep goats communally. All of this was done without any direct outside incentives or further facilitation, demonstrating that this participatory process led to self-mobilisation, one of the hallmarks of a genuine participatory process (Pretty 1995; Cornwall 2008). However, while there were no direct material incentives for self-mobilisation, there was still the hope that the process would lead to funding for wire fences and a project that would bestow prestige on participants and the chiefs. As VH Mberesera put it during the post-screening meeting: “If we can implement this plan well, the village will gain recognition all over Malawi” (Chief Chirombo’s house, Chirombo, May 2018).

Unfortunately, over the two years since research ended, attempts to implement the participants’ solution to the goat problem have hit a number of stumbling blocks. First, participants discovered that there were almost eight hundred goats in Chirombo, far more than anyone had anticipated. According to participants and interviewees, the introduction of goats came from top-down development policies, based on the idea that goats would provide people with ways of ensuring that they had access to capital, by selling goats. This policy is typical of materialistic understandings of development framed by simplistic, reductionist understandings of local contexts constructed through top-down research and development narratives that create new problems (Leach et al. 2010). Had genuine participatory processes been used from the beginning, then perhaps local people could have found more appropriate solutions, which did not lead to such pernicious new problems. If their solutions had led to new problems, then they would have been locally designed and could have been locally adapted so as to nip the issues in the bud. As things stand, the huge number of goats in Chirombo need a significant area of land.

Second, the chiefs reported that the former chief had sold far more of the communal land than even they had realised and that there was now barely any left at all, and certainly not enough for such a large number of goats. The sale of communal land is typical of materialistic and capitalist process that has been ongoing since colonial and post-colonial times, creating a landed elite, stripping

local people of their communal resources (Vaughan 2007; McCracken 2012), and increasingly constraining space for participatory processes to find ways through the complex web of issues created by materialistic and neoliberal top-down governance.

What's more, despite an initial sense of consensus surrounding the participants' proposed solution to the goat problem, over the coming months certain goat owners began to protest, on the grounds that it would be more work for them to feed their goats in an enclosed space, rather than allowing them to roam freely and forage for themselves. When they protested, people who had been supportive of the solution said that they would not take part if it meant feeding other people's goats, just because they were too lazy to do it themselves, leading to arguments and a stalemate. Thereby perfectly demonstrating the break down in cooperation and communication that has resulted from the growth of competitive behaviour that so many interviewees and PV workshop participants had highlighted.

One of the impacts of these events is that the solution that participants' outlined in the film is no longer viable, making their desire to seek support from wider audiences for the funding of a wire fence redundant. As a result, participants are making a new film in which they have interviewed over twenty goat owners and farmers, and will propose a new triple pronged solution – fines for goat owners whose livestock damages people's crops, a system of keeping goats in small fenced areas around people's homes, and a phased grazing system which would enable goat owners to send their animals to particular areas for a certain number of years, while other areas recover and are replanted. The complexity of this new solution speaks volumes for the potential of genuinely participative research and development processes, and the way that can lead to flexible, adaptive self-mobilisation, as well as reimagined, transformative pathways of development. When the initial solution did not prove viable, participants were able to reflect on the setback and propose new plans. Whether these new plans will be accepted and implemented remains to be seen.

The following section will explore how *Tigwirane Manja* was shared with different audiences in Lilongwe. This will provide insights into the different ways the film was received and the socio-political lenses through which people see and hear.

6.3 Screenings in Lilongwe

6.3.1 Private Screenings

The first screenings in Lilongwe were to small groups of friends and acquaintances, with the objective of gauging reactions to the film outside Chirombo. Screenings were hosted at a friend's house, and were projected onto the wall of the living room. This intimate setting resembled the space in which the chiefs had watched the film in Chirombo and encouraged deep post-screening conversations. During the entire process I had done my utmost to create spaces in which participants were in control, however in Lilongwe I took on a more central role now that I was presenting the film without Samuel or the participants present. The film itself meant that participants' voices remained prominent but post-screening discussions now relied on an overt partnership with me. My role was still to be a facilitator of self and collective reflection but with audiences taking the place of participants.

Audience reactions to the film varied considerably, however certain trends emerged. It quickly became apparent that people's questions reflected their own experiences and priorities. For instance, one viewer, the director of a huge international organisation, shared that the film reminded them of when they had studied Robert Chambers' work during their degree, hoping to pursue participatory work thereafter. As it turned out, they did not follow that path and were sucked in to the politics of international development, which had pushed them into hierarchical structures, with very little space for the complex work that is necessary to conduct genuine participatory research. This viewer spoke of the lure of material comforts that have come with their career, expressing regret

and even shame, but did not see how the deeply bureaucratic and hierarchical structures of such huge international organisations, could ever truly make space for genuine participatory processes (Post screening conversation Lilongwe, Anonymous), reflecting some of Chambers' own conclusions (Chambers 2014).

This experience was reminiscent of Kothari's (2005) view that the professionalisation of the development industry traps people into following neoliberal agendas. As they are increasingly surrounded by communities of practice in which equally materialistic and neoliberal paths are followed, the urge to do something different and make space for critical discourses may diminish. Over time, mainstream practices become normalised in people's perspectives, if they weren't from the outset, and even what is thinkable may become limited (Rushton and Williams 2012; Forman 2016). As Autesserre (2014) argues, even if the urge to reimagine development remains, dominant behaviours and modes of operation lock people in to predetermined top-down, materialistic, and neoliberal pathways.

Another viewer, who works in farmer-to-farmer communication, saw the film as a way to facilitate communication horizontally between farmers, something that resonated with the participants' first intention – to share their work with neighbouring villages. A second viewer picked up on anarchic undertones in the film and was particularly interested to know how people in the village, other than participants, had reacted and whether there were any signs that it was helping to catalyse local cooperation. A third, was interested in discussing how PV could be used to encourage community banking, her own line of work.

Others, whose reality consists of work within mainstream development organisations, such as WFP and Concern Worldwide, saw little in the film other than technical recommendations, particularly regarding goats, perhaps reflecting the materialistic and technical focus of mainstream development pathways and the limit on what is thinkable. Their questions tended to focus on the merits of participants' conclusions, with some people clearly feeling that they knew better. Thus conforming to stereotypes of people working in westernised institutions

thinking that they know best, and casually dismissing participants' deep knowledge of their own village.

As deeper conversations ensued, some viewers processed what they had seen and heard and explored their reactions with greater nuance, reflecting on the need for cooperation. On the one hand, many people were eager to engage with the content of the film and it did not matter so much whether they immediately understood the holistic nature of genuine participatory change, rather than seeing it through the lens of their own experiences. Their interpretation opened up diverse opportunities: PV being used for farmer-to-farmer communication, for instance, clearly holds potential.

However, people's tendency to filter the film through their own materialistic perspectives also carried the risk of co-option. To use the same example, if *Tigwirane Manja* were used for farmer-to-farmer communication in partnership with an NGO, then it seems quite likely that it would be used to justify pre-defined agroecological or even permaculture pathways. This might seem positive to advocates of these pathways, which exist in opposition to mainstream development, but demonstrates how easily good intentions could lead to the manipulative use of a genuine participatory process, in order to support predefined goals, potentially resulting in further marginalisation of vulnerable people. At some point audiences must understand the deeply social side of participatory development, making space for emotion, cooperation, reflexivity, and open communication. There was a clear need to make space for deeper processes of reflection among viewers, though with the time constraints, other requirements of the PhD, and stresses that I was under making the transition from village life to more urban and institutional audiences, it was not clear how to go about it.

6.3.2 Public Screening in Lilongwe

After the intimate screenings in Lilongwe, one public screening event was organised at a local arts café. Four people – Mike and Alice (both participants in

the PV process and chosen by the group as representatives), Samuel, and one of GVH Chirombo's aids, came up from Chirombo to take part in a post-screening Q&A. Over fifty people attended the screening, the majority of whom worked for international development organisations, and many of who worked specifically in agricultural development. Some notable attendees from large institutions were the heads of USAID, Unicef, and the UNDP, as well as numerous junior UN employees, including several from the WFP and employees of other NGOs including Theatre for Change, World Vision, and the Red Cross, and government organisations, particularly GIZ. Also in attendance were Malawian private citizens, including several business people, musicians, and other artists.

The film was projected on to a large screen, in the style of an outdoor cinema. After the screening the audience was invited to ask questions to the panel. The responses were often full of praise for participants' work but questions were almost entirely focused on the technical need to resolve the goat problem, once again reflecting the materialistic way of thinking that had characterised so many people's reactions to the film. Some people simply wished to express their support for the idea, with one woman stating that keeping goats in a fenced area would also make the roads much safer. Several other viewers agreed with this remark and it brought to mind a possible alternative partnership for resolving the free-range livestock problem. It would be quite feasible to frame a crowd funding initiative to resolve the livestock issues in Chirombo, by appealing to urban Malawians who might see the benefit from their own perspectives.

Though these comments offered clues as to possible forms of cooperation, one viewers' reaction was demonstrative of the opposite. This viewer, the director of a large foreign governmental organisation heavily involved in agriculture in Malawi, shared their view that the participants' solution, focusing entirely on the livestock issue, was wrong and asked whether they had considered approaching local government officials to ask for new laws to be introduced, or at least approached the chief for new by-laws. The way the question was framed by an *azungu* (foreigner) made Alice, designated by the other participants to answer

the question, very nervous and she was uncertain what to say. After the screening she shared that she “froze and her mind went blank”.

The viewer’s question had merit. In the ensuing months participants have worked on introducing by-laws through the chiefs and such matters were already being discussed at the time. The issue was that the question was asked almost in anger and appeared to demonstrate a dogmatic top-down behaviour that did not even admit of the validity of participants trying to find solutions themselves, or acknowledge the holistic approach to development that the film put forward. This rigid adherence to top-down structures could be indicative of a mind boxed in by hierarchical forms of social organisation, in which the citizen’s role is to defer to experts higher up the development chain, in the hope that they might resolve their problems.

Like the public screening in Chirombo, the sheer size of the audience limited discussions to short Q&As that made it difficult to achieve any kind of depth of reflection. What’s more, without small group discussions, most of the reactions to the film were simply lost, as people left in silence and reflected on what they had seen in their own time, or not. In a close community like Chirombo, it was likely that people’s post screening reflections would keep circulating and might lead to action. In Lilongwe when audiences dispersed after this screening, without anyone to pursue further engagement, it was more likely that people’s memory of its content would fade. If based in Malawi, my role could have been to facilitate further discussions and partnerships that could lead to action, however it was now time for me to go back to the UK.

6.4 Screenings in the UK

6.4.1 Private Screenings

Initial screenings in the UK were to small groups from diverse backgrounds with plenty of time allotted to post-screening discussions. Reactions were similar to small group screenings in Lilongwe. Viewers tended to filter the film through

their own experiences and ask questions that reflected their own perspectives. Sometimes these perspectives were new. For instance, after lengthy discussions about what scenarios could befall people in Chirombo if alternative pathways are not opened up, one woman who works with refugees, pointed out that the film can be seen as a pre-crisis scenario, which could very easily lead to people having to abandon their homes in search of a means to survive elsewhere, effectively becoming refugees from neoliberal socio-ecological consequences. Genuine participatory action research could create opportunities to avoid such a scenario. This was not a new notion but did accentuate a different aspect of the film and PV process, widening my own reflections.

For the most part, questions were technical, typically centred around the goat problem, how it had started, how it had become so pernicious, whether there was any chance that it might actually be resolved and details of what would happen if it was not. Several viewers were struck by the simplicity of the solution – to keep goats in a fenced area – this being common practice in the UK and many parts of Europe. Discussions ensued about the difference in seasons between the UK and Malawi, which impact the way grass and other vegetation grows and therefore the way livestock grazes, as well as cultural differences which mean that Malawian smallholders have no tradition of penning their animals in together in large areas, nor have they ever (with the odd exception) seen it done. Therefore, while the solution may seem simple, participants effectively had to invent it in their context, highlighting the potential value of international farmer-to-farmer knowledge exchanges.

These conversations were interesting but once again demonstrative of a material focus that appeared to miss the point of a need for a more holistic understanding of development. Some viewers recognised the emotional pull of the loss of cooperation and increasing disconnection, with several viewers expressing their sense of sadness and loss and often becoming quiet and reflective. With small screenings it was possible to explore these feelings a little further but far more work would be needed for these reflections to open up the possibility of action. That said, some people's private reflections may have encouraged some personal

changes in perspective. Staggered screenings with the same people, followed by open discussions and reflections would have been helpful. However, I was still coming to terms with people's reactions and exploring my own understanding of the film. I too have been educated as a materialist and struggled to consistently see through the fog of my social conditioning to a more holistic understanding of development (see Epilogue for further details).

Many viewers drew parallels between the collapse in cooperation in Chirombo and what is going on globally, rather than perhaps looking at personal and local examples as participants had done. This tendency to look outwards is fairly typical of western mind-sets. Occasionally, viewers noted that participants bemoaning the lack of cooperation in Chirombo, in a culture where people still cooperate and are highly connected, relative to the UK, brought home just how individualistic western culture is. Indeed, some audiences, particularly among friends and acquaintances who are already mobilising against neoliberalism and capitalism more generally, as activists and/or in their personal socio-economic and socio-ecological choices, engaged critically with the systemic issues that have led to the current situation in Chirombo. However, even so they did not see, or at least did not express their understanding of how *Tigwirane Manja* offers a holistic reconceptualization of development.

Viewers who focused on a transition from cooperation to individualism, edged closer to the intention to encourage audiences to join in reimagining pathways of development. Had there been a clear way in which these audiences could have helped materially, then they might have been moved to. However, as it was these conversations seemed to open up the possibility that new processes of reflection and deliberation with viewers who were able to see and hear participants' underlying critical view, at least in part, could open up reimagined pathways of development, based on genuine participatory processes, in different contexts. These pathways might then be connected in mutually supportive ways.

Another aspect of the film that UK audiences were particularly keen to discuss, and could provide an indication of one of the ways that people in places like

Chirombo have perspectives that could inform western thinking, was climate change. Western definitions of climate change tend to be global, or at least regional, and to focus on a carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. As discussed in Section 5.4, people in Chirombo tend to have a much more localised worldview, demonstrated in their local definition of climate change. Defining climate change as a local phenomenon, made it easy to identify a solution – cooperate to plant trees. It also meant that any factors that might make planting trees difficult – i.e. free-ranging livestock and a lack of cooperation – should be addressed either first or simultaneously. Their solutions were practical and holistic, identifying a clear pathway of action. The feeling generated by macro-definitions of climate change and slogans such as ‘the climate crisis’, based almost entirely on materialistic metrics, are often anxiety inducing and not necessarily conducive to local action. More holistic definitions of development might offer equally holistic understandings of climate change, leading to less panic and more cooperation, reflection, open communication, and local action.

The final audiences to watch *Tigwirane Manja* were at the University of Leeds, predominantly in the School of Earth and Environment. Their responses are explored below.

6.4.2 Screenings at the University of Leeds

Initial screenings at the University of Leeds were to small groups of PhD researchers, Masters students, a small number of undergraduates, and eventually more senior academics, many of whom are involved in a major programme to make agriculture and food production in Sub-Saharan Africa more productive, sustainable, and resilient to climate change (africap.info, 13/04/2020). Reactions to the film were often very similar to previous audiences but tended to focus more on the PV method itself – how participants were selected, how the workshops were run, and how issues were discussed – as well as on topics underlying systemic questions. For instance, one viewer asked whether PV challenged the individualistic influences of capitalism in Chirombo, reflecting her counter-capitalist stance.

Despite some differences in the emphasis of people's questions, overall screenings at the University followed a similar trend to those that went previously. Questions were predominantly focused on the livestock issue and rarely strayed from technical focuses, once again reflecting a materialistic viewing of the film. The transition from cooperation to competition, the underlying reasons for this transition, and the depth of feeling expressed by several participants on this subject, was not mentioned.

A small number of viewers openly pointed at themselves, the institutions that they are a part of, and the neoliberal funding streams on which they are dependent, as contributing to the problem through top-down processes that marginalise participants' perspectives. These viewers offered glimpses into how the film could stimulate people to critically reflect on the process and engage in reflexivity. However, most viewers appeared to view the film as data to be assessed for its technical validity, or lack thereof. These reactions reflect the deeply entrenched and blinkered reductionist and materialistic views that characterise the communities of practice that exist within academic institutions. Views that are boxed in by neoliberal development structures that leave little space to think outside the box and reimagine pathways of research and development.

Many other viewers said nothing at all and may well have been reflecting on content. Some people, who had kept quiet during group discussions, approached me afterwards to express their admiration and support for the film and process. When the film was shown to small groups and time was allocated to discussing the film informally, conversations led to greater degrees of depth and reflection. For instance, when one of the earlier screenings was followed by an informal small group discussion, one viewer shared their frustration that genuine participatory research is not more common, citing neoliberal funding priorities and time constraints as restraining factors (Post-screening conversations, Anonymous, University of Leeds, March 2019).

Such comments, questions, and discussions were encouraging and indicated that pathways do exist within academic institutions, or at least the University of Leeds, for at least reflecting on reimagining development. If reflection is possible and can be supported by facilitated open communication, then there is little reason why genuinely participatory PAR using PV shouldn't take place within institutional settings, leading to an action-based approach to change that could be communicated outwards and could connect to the work done by participants in Chirombo and elsewhere.

6.5 Conclusion

The participants' intentions – to encourage reflection and action to resolve pressing problems in Chirombo, and encourage wider audiences to cooperate – did not pan out as they might have hoped. Part of the problem was that their solution to the livestock problem fell flat when further research revealed that there were too many goats, not enough available land, and resistance from some goat owners. The knock on effect was that wider audiences could not be asked to contribute materially to a solution that could not be put into practice. However, the screenings of the film in Chirombo led to a series of community meetings to discuss the goat issue, leading to new ideas for resolving the free-range livestock problems, based on cooperation, reflection, open communication, and ultimately self-mobilisation. The way that participants have self-mobilised and continue to do so in the two years since the PV workshops, is indicative of a genuine and deep participatory process.

Audiences' reactions to *Tigwirane Manja* were overwhelmingly sympathetic and demonstrated that any number of pragmatic forms of cooperation could be possible. However, as long as viewers have a tendency to unconsciously filter participants' intentions through their preconceived ideas and experiences, they will threaten to drag them in to materialistic and neoliberal development frameworks. Conversely, when viewers can see and hear the underlying message of what participants and the process itself communicates - that deep systemic change based on cooperation, reflexivity, and open communication is needed -

then pathways might be opened up for reimagined and transformative development, in a variety of contexts. Much deeper facilitated reflexive processes are needed with audiences to enable people to face their social conditioning and find their way towards holistically reimagining pathways of development. The discussion that follows will further examine these ideas, exploring ways in which different actors along development pathways might adapt to prioritise genuine and deep participatory processes.

Chapter Seven: Discussion

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to draw together findings and reflections of this research in response to the question: To what extent can participatory video contribute to reimagining development in Malawi? Not only will this help to answer the above question, but it will also help to clarify the key contributions of this investigation. The first of these contributions is perhaps the most obvious. The analysis that participants conducted during the PV workshops led to a holistic understanding of development, based on cooperation, reflection, open communication and action to resolve the problems that participants identified in Chirombo, revealing connections and subtleties that could so easily have been missed in a more rigid and narrow investigation. This point and a broad outline of these results will be explored in Section 7.1.

The following Section 7.2 revisits the dominance of materialistic and neoliberal development chains and the impacts that these have had on Chirombo and agricultural development more broadly. Building on these ideas, Section 7.3 follows by revisiting the practice of participatory research and expanding on the importance of cultivating awareness through reflexivity if tokenistic and/or manipulative practices are to be avoided. The importance of trust and open communication in particular, are laid out in Sections 7.3.2 and 7.3.3. Associations between this research and the work on pathways at the STEPS centre at the University of Sussex are revisited in the context of open communication as a requirement for opening pathways of reimagined development.

The Chapter then moves on to the specific practice of PV in Section 7.5, its strengths as a platform from which often marginalised people can be heard, critical reflections on its limitations, as well as suggestions for how its potential could be maximised, notably through association with other methods and the need for deep processes of reflection with audiences. Section 7.6 then applies the findings and reflections of this process to the possibilities of participatory social organisation using PV, exploring how development chains could be reimagined

in order to offer alternatives to current materialistic and neoliberal pathways of development. Finally, the conclusion brings all of the above together.

7.1 Participants' Analyses

The participants' analyses during the participatory video workshops were rich and complex. They explored the interconnected nature of village life holistically, identified problems and proposed pragmatic solutions, and in doing so mapped out pathways to a reimagined form of development based on cooperation, reflection, open communication, and interconnected technical interventions. These results may have been a direct consequence of a PV process in which open communication and reflection were actively encouraged, making it difficult to determine the extent to which this reimagined form of development came from the nature of the process, from participants, or both.

The most likely answer is that it came from both and this reimagined form of development is what Arnstein (1969) defined as a partnership, in which my own process of change met participants' reflections. Though the end result mirrored many of the aspects of traditional ways of life that numerous village elders spoke of with such fondness, it was neither a romanticised throwback to past, nor an acceptance of the current status quo, but a pragmatic holistic analysis of the present. That said, the holistic understanding of reality presented in *Tigwirane Manja* places equal value on matter (technical actions) and what can be understood as spirit (cooperation, open communication and reflection), opening the door to traditional worldviews in which spirit and matter are one.

Considering how much technical action has been emphasised by materialistic and neoliberal development, it could be said that greater effort should be made to open up spaces for spirit. Participants' decision to call the film *Tigwirane Manja*, an invitation for people everywhere to cooperate, shifts the emphasis towards a balanced spirit-matter understanding of development. In an elegant way it demonstrates participants' equanimity in the face of problems that have a clear source in the western, materialistic, and neoliberal world – a source that

they are aware of, to varying degrees. Their decision not to attack that source but to invite people to cooperate, is both indicative of their patience and of their pragmatic understanding that if reimagined pathways of development are to be opened up, then people will need to do it together. As Samuel put it: “We should coordinate our efforts, cooperating like we do when there is a funeral or a wedding. Nor doing things individually because that doesn’t work” (*Tigwirane Manja 11:11-11:28*).

Though participants’ equanimous approach makes sense and is admirable, there is a need to clearly present the underlying issues, so that people might understand what it is that humanity is up against.

7.2 Dogmatic Materialistic and Neoliberal Pathways

People working along development chains are often not even aware that they have embedded materialistic and neoliberal ideologies. As Sheldrake (2013:7) puts it, materialism is: “powerful, not because most scientists think about [it] critically but because they don’t.” It underpins how people see the world so profoundly that people take it for granted. In research and development, this tends to result in spurious claims to objectivity that are often based on metrics framed by materialistic and/or neoliberal understandings of reality (Sultana 2007; Sheldrake 2013; Forman 2016). Many critics of materialistic and neoliberal pathways of development will say that those people who take part in them are well aware of what they are doing. However, this seems unlikely.

To really be aware of the impact of materialism it is necessary to be aware of more holistic alternatives. If people have been socially conditioned in a world of pure matter, then there is very little space, if any, to consciously experience spirit. What’s more, this world of matter is reinforced by social systems that reward accumulation of material knowledge, both financially and through societal acclaim. Communities of practice develop, such as those described by (Autesserre 2014), and people find their views reflected back at them in their social circles. Some know, or perhaps feel, that something is not quite right,

while others are submerged in a system that feeds the ego – the notion that *I am* – rather than the understanding that we are one – *I am you* – which underpins traditional Malawian pantheist understandings of reality, leading to comparisons with Taoism (Girardot 1983; Morris 1998, 2011).

The logic of neoliberalism is totally dependent on materialistic understandings of reality in which inflated egos do away with the group and govern everything, based on unconscious philosophical fascism (Harvey 2016). It was never the objective of this thesis to alienate materialists or people who believe in neoliberalism as a righteous pathway of human development. The objective is to invite people to reflect, to pause for a minute, and entertain the idea that perhaps there have always existed other paths, along which matter and spirit are one. These paths offer personal fulfilment beyond anything that a world of pure matter can offer, in that they reconnect people to one another and to the whole of existence (Watts 1966; del Rio 2017).

If people want to let go of prejudices cultivated within their echo chambers they can begin by cooperating, learning to openly communicate, and engage in processes of reflexivity that make space for depth. The limitations that materialism and neoliberalism put on what is thinkable (Rushton and William 2012), mean that processes of change are often very slow and should be approached with humility, patience and compassion (often self-compassion). For researchers, this process creates space to engage in participatory investigations in which it is necessary to cultivate awareness. The first step is to let go of preconceptions and learn to humbly listen. The results will flow from here and can be very pragmatic.

For instance, a simple example of reflexivity leading to adaptations in this research, was the decision for Samuel to conduct most of the semi-structured interviews alone. My social conditioning suggested that I, the PhD researcher in training, was more qualified to conduct the interviews than Samuel. Once this was accepted as a form of prejudice based on materialistic epistemic hierarchy, it was possible to reflect on the complexity of colonial and neo-colonial dynamics,

and calmly come to the view that my presence as a *muzungu* (foreigner) made it less likely that Samuel and interviewees would relax and feel in control of the space.

The decision was a result of reflections and open communication with Samuel about how interviewees were likely to view me, and the impact that this was having on their desire to open up. Open reflection with interviewees on the impacts of my presence could have been another way to go but in the short amount of time afforded by interviews it is unlikely that interviewees would have trusted the space enough to reflect on their feelings and give open answers and it was extremely important that the semi-structured interviews should provide a platform of information on which to facilitate a PV process (see Section 2.4 for further details).

However, it is not always possible or desirable to respond to processes of reflexivity and open communication by removing oneself from the space. During the PV workshops, where I was present throughout, difficult issues were approached through considerate and open communication, as was explored in Section 4.2 and will be again in Section 7.3.3. My energy and desire to challenge typically hierarchical or manipulative research processes by partnering with participants in order to enable them to take control of the research, was deemed valuable in that it could open up the possibility of genuinely participatory research. My presence, as a *muzungu* persistently deferring to participants' knowledge, may have helped to heal some of the wounds inflicted by marginalising top-down development chains.

These examples are simple and should be reassuring for researchers interested in engaging in genuine participatory research, in that they involve steps that can be taken bit by bit – learning to listen with humility, reflect, communicate openly, and cooperate with others. There is no need to pursue what could be seen as spiritual abilities, such as those that were shared in Section 3.2. When approached directly, this path can cause people from egocentric cultures to fall into delusions that inadvertently invite schizophrenia (del Rio 2017). Humility is

key and without it researchers risk perpetuating colonial roles in contexts like Chirombo where the dominance of materialistic understandings of self and other, allied to neoliberal perspectives of development, and the continued presence of materialistic and dogmatic forms of Christianity, have marginalised traditional ways of relating to the land and existence.

This process of marginalisation appears to have driven a transition from cooperation and togetherness, to competition and individualism – aspects of village life that participants identified as root causes of current problems (*Tigwirane Manja* 12:00-13:34; see also Section 3.1 and 3.2). As vitalist and pantheist practices are systematically driven out, and ecological systems are increasingly seen as matter under the dominion of human beings, giant trees and entire forests are cut down for small amounts of money, and people's deep connection to the land is fading away (*Tigwirane Manja* 05:43-09:08 and 12:00-13:34; see Sections 3.1 and 3.2). Processes of reflection and deliberation are needed so that local people can at least explore their transition from past to present and make conscious choices, reimagining their pathways of development based on their own analyses.

In agriculture, materialism and neoliberalism tend to lead to research that seeks to determine how to increase yields, productivity, and efficiency of production, based on a materialistic understanding of what land is – matter to be utilised – and capitalist metrics (Shiva 2001, 2016). The spirit inherent in the land from a perspective in which *I am that*, is lost when land is seen purely as matter. Data is sought to identify best practices for achieving predefined material and neoliberal goals, thus providing evidence bases with which to legitimise existing pathways, policies, and projects. This has led to the proliferation of such tools as cost benefit analysis, which promote a deregulatory agenda and a blinkered approach to agriculture based on capitalist metrics (Ackerman and Heinzerling 2004).

In accordance with these dominant neoliberal philosophies, the private sector, in the form of agribusinesses, is seen as the most efficient vehicle for delivering green revolution technologies. In Malawi, 95% of seeds on the market are owned

by international agribusinesses, with 50% owned by Monsanto alone (Chinsinga 2011). This dominance squeezes out alternatives, to the point of making it difficult to imagine different paths, let alone revive them or ensure that they thrive.

Similarly, the main funders of agricultural development frame their notions of progress according to narrow neoliberal and materialistic metrics, a trend that has accelerated with the increasingly important role of private organisations such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF), a prime example of a system that rewards and champions egoism through neoliberal development. Agricultural NGOs and IGNOs slot into materialist and neoliberal philosophies in the way that they operate by competing for the same grants and organising the way that they operate to meet funders' priorities (Brooks et al. 2009). The impact on farmers in places like Chirombo, is that the entire development chain to which they are subjected, is framed according to materialistic and neoliberal priorities over which they have no say, bar the occasional involvement in top-down research projects.

For instance, a researcher for a project working out of Lilongwe, and mentioned in Section 2.2, sought to determine a group of farmers' needs by offering them multiple choices, all of which were framed by a typically narrow predefined understanding of the priorities of agriculture, based on a modernised form of the green revolution. The research was used to justify the NGOs interventions and apply for funding (Interview, Project researcher, Lilongwe, 28/07/2017). This predefined process left very little space for local people to determine their pathway of development. What's more, it led to a simplistic and disconnected understanding of the village based on narrow research that did not make space for farmers to engage in a holistic analysis of their experiences and conceptualisations of development.

People in Chirombo are routinely subjected to such materialistic and neoliberal research and agricultural development policies. One of the underlying assumptions of these policies is that if some community members benefit, then

the community as a whole will gain (Harvey 2016). However, this does not appear to be the case in Chirombo where it is widely accepted that overall top-down agricultural policies, based on green revolution priorities or, week ecological modernisations thereof, have been highly detrimental. As seen in *Tigwirane Manja*, some of the results were social divisiveness (12:00-13:35), pest infestations (16:12), poor and unwanted policies (25:20-26:03), often with dire implications (consider the introduction of goats and the ecological implications), and the highly destructive fertiliser trap (16:40-17:29).

Each of the above examples has deep and complex implications. For the sake of analysing one example, let us single out the fertiliser trap. This problem is widely discussed in the literature, where there is much agreement that green revolution policies have caused devastating declines in soil fertility and the diversity of crops. The result is that people are left fighting to survive and yet dependent on the synthetic inputs and seeds that have caused the problems, precisely because soil fertility has declined so much (Bekunda et al., 1997; Scherr 1999; Chinsinga 2011; Chibwana 2012; Shiva 2017).

In the semi-structured interviews, participants gave personal accounts of the impact of this fertiliser trap. In Section 3.3 Constance Maudzu Ndimba, a maize farmer in her early thirties, spoke about her own personal struggle: “My field needs two bags of fertiliser, so somehow I need to find MK44,000. I was lucky to be employed by someone but my wages are so low: MK16,000/month. I have to feed my two children and save money to somehow buy fertiliser. It’s hard.” (Interview, Chirombo, October 2017). Yet, as Mrs Dewu points out in *Tigwirane Manja*, there was a time when food was diverse and abundant (14:38-14-58).

What’s more, some synthetic inputs are considered dangerous. In *Tigwirane Manja* Mrs Faife points out that people do not always understand how to wash chemicals off the maize, leading to stomach problems, particularly in children (*Tigwirane Manja* 15:12-15:58). A view shared by Mrs Riwilo, an elderly woman with strong and critical views of top-down agricultural policies (see Section 3.3), who stated that: “With this new system of farming, human life is in danger.

People are drinking and bathing in chemical water, breathing in and out chemical air and eating chemical food. That is affecting people's health" (Interview, Chirombo, October 2017).

Even with this short chain of analysis that focuses on the fertiliser trap, it is clear that holistic research is needed to unpack the interconnected web of problems that people face. However, simplistic and reductionist research continues to be the norm. When projects fail, local people tend to take the blame (Leach et al. 2010). The experiences of people like Constance are not heard and sweeping assumptions are often made. During my conversations about village life with people as diverse as US government employees, to hotel owners, it was often suggested that women like Constance should think about their poverty (defined entirely in material terms) before having children', and that the answers lie in population control (Conversations in Lilongwe, July 2017, US government employees and employees of several international NGOs; and the Nankumba peninsula February 2018, Hotel Owners and others employed in the tourism industry).

This Malthusian stance is elitist, simplistic, dehumanising, and ignores the underlying causes. The blinkered pursuit of materialistic and neoliberal priorities imposed from the top-down by people who, for the most part, have never even farmed, and whose expertise is derived from self-legitimising systems, continues to marginalise the perspectives of local people and deny space for alternative pathways to be explored, let alone thrive (Chambers 1981; Leach et al. 2010). It is far easier to blame unknown, voiceless, and supposedly ignorant farmers, than to unpick the system itself.

The next section will explore genuine participatory research, in the understanding that local people are experts with deep experiential knowledge of their own lives and contexts. If cultivated through open communication and reflexive processes, this knowledge can be harnessed so that participants might reimagine their pathways of development, if they so choose.

7.3 Participatory Research

7.3.1 Typologies of Participation and the Importance of Reflexivity

As discussed in Chapter One, the term 'participatory research' has come to mean anything from genuine participant control over an investigation, to tokenistic involvement and outright manipulation (Cornwall 2008:270). The growth of tokenistic and/or manipulative forms of participation increased in the 1990s, as neoliberal funders increasingly required that people include participatory elements in their prescriptive, goal oriented projects (Roberts and Lurch 2015:2; Brooks 2015, 2016). The result is that participatory methods have routinely been tagged on to otherwise dogmatic, largely materialistic, and positivist methodologies, framed by neoliberal priorities. It is therefore necessary for researchers to provide clarity about their own participatory processes through specificity (Cohen and Uphoff 1980; Cornwall 2008).

This research was mobilised around a desire to conduct a genuinely participatory investigation, in which concerted efforts would be made to encourage participant control over the process (Arnstein 1969). If participants so wished, the process would result in self-mobilisation (Pretty 1995), in the pursuit of a transformative pathway of development (White 1996). The process was based on the experiences of participants and their efforts to reimagine village life through holistic analyses, optimised through open communication. The whole was motivated by a desire to find pathways through the tyranny of materialistic and neoliberal dogma, to a form of social organisation based on cultivating trust and awareness through reflexivity and open communication.

However, there are those who suggest that participatory research cannot help but be manipulative, encouraging immersion and self-awareness but only shallowly practicing it (Francis 2001). They contend that participatory researchers' belief that they are cultivating awareness is, in the words of Cooke and Kothari, a form of 'narrow minded narcissism' (2001:15). There is truth in these critiques, in as much as it is difficult to break out of materialistic social

conditioning and the constraints of neoliberal priorities, particularly in a research and development context that uses such aggressive language as ‘narrow minded narcissism’ to describe attempts to cultivate self-awareness, thereby discouraging people from engaging in what is already a difficult process.

Instead it might be worth acknowledging that reflexivity is an important and challenging process, which researchers and participants are often not accustomed to, ill prepared for, and may need support with, but should certainly not shy away from. The practice of cultivating awareness is precisely what is needed to recognise such traits as narcissism, or its twin self-hatred, so that researchers can observe their impact on participants, begin to understand how they are perceived (Sultana 2007; Rushton 2015; Forman 2016), and unlock alternative existential and relational philosophies (Watts 1966, 1985; Ghandi 2009). Indeed if researchers do not cultivate reflexivity in their research (participatory or otherwise), or encourage participants to do the same, then they run the risk of unconsciously perpetuating existing problems, an act which could be considered deeply unethical (Forman 2016), particularly considering many of the toxic impacts of the status-quo.

It is a lack of reflexivity that is behind many of the manipulative trends that are so pervasive in research and development, as became evident in this research during the screenings in Lilongwe and the UK, detailed in Chapter Six. For example, one audience member, working for USAID, could not let go of the idea that solutions to village problems could only be resolved through the rule of law and the implementation of centralised policies (USAID employee, Screening at the Story Club, Lilongwe, 25th June 2018); a view consistent with USAID’s mission to expand the United States’ markets (USAID 01/06/2020) and therefore neoliberalism. Similarly, others commented or asked questions that reflected the missions of the various organisations that they were with, seemingly struggling to look past their own communities of practice (see Section 6.4).

Academic audiences in the UK sometimes criticised what participants suggested in *Tigwirane Manja*, and, on a couple of occasions were dismissive of both participatory practices and various aspects of participants' analyses. One young researcher shared her view that the results would need to connect with expert views, in order to be more accurate. The example she gave was of how participants 'wrongly' defined climate change as being caused by local deforestation, a topic that several viewers raised on separate occasions (Screening, University of Leeds, 6th March 2019).

From a western perspective, climate change tends to be defined as a global phenomenon caused by industrialised nations and is certainly not blamed on people in places like Chirombo. Therefore, participants' definition of climate change as a local process that has resulted from deforestation, makes many western audiences uncomfortable. However, their definition is not 'wrong', in that local deforestation has had a big impact on how participants' experience their local environment. Suggesting that participants should be put right with a western definition of climate change may come from a compassionate desire to let them know that they are not to blame but is inadvertently condescending and a likely result of a socially constructed view of western knowledge as superior to the experiences of people in their respective places.

Researchers should take care not to buy in to ideas of their own expertise, or the bogus superiority of western knowledge, and instead take the time to recognise their own prejudices. The result of participants' definition of climate change is that they want to take local action by planting trees. Perhaps if western definitions were as pragmatic, people would be more inclined towards taking matters into their own hands. However, letting go of deeply ingrained preconceptions and trusting that people in places like Chirombo can be experts and researchers, despite their having long been portrayed as uneducated, poor, passive recipients of top-down policies, requires personal reflection, appropriate methodological decisions, and trust.

7.3.2 Cultivating Trust

While personal reflection is within researchers' control, participants' own desire to engage in reflexivity is not, particularly in research contexts that participants did not set in motion, like this one. Yet in order to facilitate a genuinely participatory process, it is imperative for participants to take control, reflect, and deliberate. One of the most significant impediments to encouraging reflexivity, and thus opening up space for genuinely participatory research, is distrust (Arnstein 1969:217). Therefore, one of the ways for researchers to begin conducting genuine research is to cultivate trust, which they can start to do by learning to listen. Genuinely listening requires that researchers find non-judgemental humble spaces within themselves, as discussed in Section 7.1.

The manipulative behaviour of organisations and institutions, has left many rural Malawians feeling suspicious of researchers and development organisations. As Helen Mosamu stated when sharing her views on the actions of one agricultural organisation: "I think the real reason they [intervened] was to promote the company that was providing the seeds. We were forced to put up signposts for that type of maize along the road. "Now my soil is damaged and I don't know what to do" (Interview, Chirombo, November 2017) (see Section 3.3).

This manipulation exists alongside memories of direct violence. As Amai Chinchino shared, I was only the second white man to have entered her home, the last one having come to beat her parents when she was a little girl, because they refused to adopt colonial agricultural policies (Conversation prior to a PV interview, Chirombo, April 2018). By genuinely listening to such perspectives, researchers can empathise and may even learn forgiveness, both of which can help to cultivate make space for genuine human connections, which may in turn help to cultivate trust and encourage participants to take control of the space. Engaging in such open and sensitive interactions means that the onus is on researchers not to betray the trust put in them, by remembering to adhere to open communication and make space for reflection.

The lack of trust, which can prevent genuine participatory processes from taking off, is also caused by local tensions. The prevalence of gossip, means that people are guarded and not necessarily well disposed to trusting one-another, a feeling that came to the fore when participants played grapevine and openly discussed how damaging gossip can be to people's relationships in the village (see Section 4.3). What's more, money has created new divisions within the village. To paraphrase Amai Chinchino: "People used to share food. Now these things are purchased and they don't even share with their neighbours' children" (*Tigwirane Manja* 13:14-13:23). There was both sadness and bitterness in the way that Amai Chinchino shared these views.

As mentioned in Section 3.2, divisions are also deeply ingrained as a result of colonial religious practices, increasingly characterised by a materialistic form of Christianity. As one young man confided: "People are forced to practice the old ways in hiding, or stop. Otherwise they will be mocked or worse" (Conversation, Chirombo, May 2018). This antipathy towards traditional practices is a direct result of the priests' sermons and is a cause of growing distrust within the village, with people unwilling to open up, uncertain how their peers will receive their views.

Not only does the stigmatisation of traditional knowledge create distrust, it also leads to the loss of diverse experiential knowledge, particularly when combined with the impact and mainstreaming of materialistic and neoliberal perspectives. The result can be that unless efforts are made to make space for diversity, research can very easily lack depth, reflecting predominantly materialistic and neoliberal perspectives, thus providing evidence that seems to legitimise mainstream views. If researchers want to create spaces in which participants can reimagine their own pathways of development, trust that that is what participants are doing, and trust that they are capable of doing it, then, to paraphrase Gaventa et al. (1998), this requires more than efficient ways of capturing what participants want to say. It requires approaches that encourage people to peel back the layers of their experiences and their history, creating a

deeper picture of the contexts in which they exist and the changes that have occurred.

This is particularly true in Malawi where what Chasukwa (2018:114) calls ‘professional respondents’ tend to dominate conversations with researchers and have learned the language of mainstream development. Concerted efforts are needed to break out of repetitive cycles involving the same people. In this research resolute efforts were made to include participants with a diversity of experiences, particularly the elderly, whose views meant that as a group, PV workshop participants could step out of the shadow of neoliberalism, and even come as close as possible to reaching back to early colonial times, as the elderly reflected on their parents’ experiences. This approach helped to cultivate confidence that together participants were capable of conducting a deep and nuanced analysis, and may have contributed to participants trusting in their own abilities.

However, even though professional respondents were studiously avoided, rural Malawians have often learned to act in ways that align with the dominant neoliberal models of development – for example using the jargon and performing in ways that they believe are required of them to maximise their access to benefits (See for example, Anderson and Patterson, 2017). While this behaviour is a logical way of carving out space in a system that does not value local people’s perspectives, it makes it difficult for researchers wishing to engage in genuine participatory processes to know whether participants are saying what they think they should say, or taking the opportunity to reimagine their development. One of the most important ways that researchers can overcome this challenge, is by openly discussing these difficult issues, and inviting participants to take control by changing established researcher-participant dynamics.

7.3.3 Cultivating Open Communication

The idea behind the focus on open communication was based on pathways theories from the STEPS institute at the University of Sussex. As discussed in

section 1.3, these theories contend that research and development are often based on a narrow understanding of reality, informed by the priorities of materialism and neoliberal capitalism (Stirling 2007; Leach et al. 2010). Dominant materialist and capitalist framings of reality, have embedded an evolutionary social Darwinist understanding of development: from backward traditional systems, progressing to glistening modernity, thanks to the achievement of science (Scoones et al. 2002).

Melissa Leach et al. (2010:101) suggest that highlighting and exploring marginalised narratives can *open up* alternative pathways of development. As discussed in the previous section, in order for marginalised narratives to be opened up, marginalised people would need to feel comfortable enough to trust the space, each other, facilitators/researchers, and engage in reflexive processes. Cultivating open communication was seen as critical to making that possible. To that end, open discussions were held throughout particularly on the more challenging topics.

For instance, discussions were held about the participatory objectives of the research and the challenges that participatory processes often face. Participants were actively encouraged to engage in these discussions and to air their grievances whenever necessary. Over the following weeks, participants rose to the challenge, opening up to varying degrees, and airing grievances on several occasions.

On one such occasion, Mike Changamile challenged the relatively narrow framing of the research, stating that it did not allow enough space to explore other issues, notably fishing. This early discussion provided an excellent opportunity to demonstrate how participants were in control. I shared my view that agriculture had been chosen because it unites everyone in the village, and that having a framework was preferable to not having one, because it would help to avoid getting lost. However, it was made clear that participants could explore what agriculture meant to them in whatever way they saw fit, making connections that could include fishing or anything else they considered relevant. If the framing of

agriculture was undesirable, they could also change it. Mike accepted this reasoning and voiced his approval of the flexibility of the framework. Everyone consented and *Tigwirane Manja* made space for connections between fishing and wider socio-agro-ecological issues.

Another one of the earliest open discussions with participants was about my friendship with Samuel Baluti. As a well known and, from the years I have known him, seemingly much appreciated member of the community, Samuel introducing me as his *achimwene* (brother) may have helped participants to begin lowering their guard. Samuel is not a 'professional respondent' but rather someone who is genuinely dedicated to reimagining pathways of development in Chirombo and recognises that he cannot do it alone. On many occasions, I have observed Samuel sit patiently and defer authority to others, so that they might go through the process of thinking a problem through themselves. It was because of these qualities that we first worked together and have continued to do so since 2012.

When discussing this relationship I openly shared how Samuel had helped me challenge my own social conditioning on many occasions but that I might still do and say things that would appear contrary to the genuine participatory spirit in which the workshops were framed. Samuel and participants were encouraged to speak up if and when this happened, and I promised to apologise and make amends whenever it did. For instance, when I inadvertently over-stepped in my role as facilitator by drawing climate change with aeroplanes and factories, warping participants' understanding of what they were trying to communicate, discussions were held so as to ensure that participants' own perspectives came to the fore (see Section 5.4).

It is important to understand the value of cultivating genuine and deep friendships between people who, despite hailing from very different contexts, have similar goals and can dedicate themselves to those goals according to the possibilities available to them in their own contexts. If deep changes to dominant systems of social organisation are to be made, then alliances between people

who desire citizen control, and can bring different assets to the table, across spatial and cultural divides, are essential. It should by now go without saying that neither part of these alliances should be seen as more or less important than the other. Open communication can help both parties learn from one-another and combine their experiences to find ways to open up pathways of change that utilise each other's strengths.

Secondly, recognising the value of genuine friendships highlights the importance of patience and acceptance of the time it takes to open up transformative social systems through open communication, reflection, and trust. Understanding that genuine participatory processes are transformative for the people taking part, and potentially others who may be touched by them, can help people make peace with the slow pace of change (White 1996). People who feel frustrated by this slow pace and want to push through change based on their own priorities, as just as these might seem, are falling into an egoistic trap that runs the risk of creating new cycles of marginalisation in which people in places like Chirombo are still not heard.

Genuine and deep pathways of development cannot be reimaged in the space of one research process, but are built over years of open communication and commitment; commitments that, in the case of this research, are on-going and will remain so for as long as necessary. The choice of methods has a big impact on the extent to which open communication is possible during a participatory investigation (Leach et al. 2010). The following section will revisit the methods employed in this research project and examine how they contributed to enabling participants to engage in a genuinely participatory process, reimagine their pathways of development, and share their perspectives outwards.

7.4 Participatory Video

The decision to begin this research by constructing a thorough base of information with 87 semi-structured interviews, meant that Samuel and I could facilitate the workshops with confidence and openness. The peace of mind that

such a bank of information created, made it easier to nurture spaces in which participants could enjoy themselves, open up, learn new skills, reflect, and deliberate. These qualities are key to PV processes and can help to cultivate trust and confidence (Pink 2001; White 2003; Lunch and Lunch 2006).

As participants relaxed, took ownership of the space, and learned to use the equipment, to varying degrees, they grew in confidence and opened up more and more, in a virtuous circle.¹⁰ For instance, Zaina Timothy, who began the process too shy to speak, ended up playing a pivotal role in the film, detailing the solution to the goat problem and even suggesting the film's title. However, the workshops were not smooth, and nor was the process of making the film (see Chapter Five). Open discussions meant examining difficult issues, sometimes resulting in discord, as during extended conversations about the incentive culture (see Section 4.2). Yet, overall the end result of 16 workshops that focused on open communication to cultivate trust and awareness, was a complex holistic analysis that led to an excellent short film *Tigwirane Manja*. This is not a result of PV as such, but a result of how PV was used. The method itself is not exempt from the co-option that has characterised participatory research as a whole.

Many PV processes are conducted over short periods of time (Lunch and Lunch 2006) and can be quite shallow. This has been particularly true since the 1990s when, in the words of Roberts and Lunch (2015:2): “participatory methods were co-opted by neoliberal institutions, including the World Bank, and participation was made a condition of financial support by many institutional funders.” When PV is tagged on to neoliberal pathways, or indeed any other dogmatically predefined ideas, it becomes a manipulative tool for legitimising prescriptive worldviews, often leading to the oversimplification of complex socio-ecological realities, and creating new problems.

¹⁰ Older participants, particularly women, tended to struggle with the cameras, fearing that they would break them, while younger participants generally learned quickly. When participants were struggling special efforts were made to make sure they were included, either with some one-on-one time, or by encouraging them to take cameras home

However, if used with the express intention to run a genuinely participatory process, based on a patient, committed approach, involving reflection, cooperation and open communication, and clear intentions to allow for deep holistic analyses, then the innate qualities of PV shine through. For instance, PV exercises lend themselves to fun and inclusivity, with participants getting the chance to enjoy different roles and be listened to in different sized groups. As they enjoy themselves and grow into their own influence over the process participants open up and can take control of the space (see Sections 4.3 and 4.4). When run in this way, Harman (2019) is right, visual methods are great opportunities for participants to be seen and heard.

One of the criticisms of participatory research is that it tends to be so localised that it cannot be used for wider transformative change (Hickey et al. 2005). However, the output of PV processes helps to get round this lack of width by providing opportunities to share the results of participatory processes outwards through films. At the same time, retaining a locally focused reflexive process meant that it was within participants' control. The value of keeping analyses local is demonstrated by participants' reflections on climate change, as caused by local deforestation, leading to local solutions, notably to plant trees (*Tigwirane Manja* 05:56-09:09). It is also makes participants' solution far more flexible. Having been proposed locally, they can then be probed, tested, and amended if need be, as discussed towards the end of Section 6.3.2.

However, participants' desire to receive support from outside the village to implement their solutions, led them to choose as wide an audience as possible, and meant that the film had an inviting, collaborative tone, as is highlighted in the title *Tigwirane Manja* meaning Holding Hands. However, if participants' views were to be faithfully seen and heard by different audiences, everyone involved in the process would need to collaborate to create something that would transmit what participants wanted to say, while achieving a reasonable level of production quality. This was not an easy task and required many weeks of filming, re-shoots, editing, discussions in different groups, re-editing, test screenings, and final reviews (see Chapter Five).

More complicated still, is that while PV provided a platform for participants to be seen and heard, in order to be effective viewers needed to see and listen. As discussed in Section 7.2, the social conditioning of many researchers and development professionals, who made up a large proportion of audiences in Lilongwe and the UK, meant that they saw the film through their individual prisms, often boxed in by materialistic and neoliberal perspectives, that limited what they could think and see (Rushton and Williams 2012). Perhaps for different reasons, local audiences weren't always able to see and listen either, possibly as a result of 'not listening to one-another anymore' (Mr Phande, *Tigwirane Manja*, 12:12-12:25), or because participants had gone through a thorough reflective and deliberative process to come to their conclusions, something that audiences did not have the luxury of when watching the film.

As this research demonstrates, creating spaces in which people can cultivate reflexivity, in order to better see and hear, is hard and takes time. Doing it once with participants over an extended period of time and with the benefit of 87 semi-structured interviews is one thing. Doing it in several different contexts in the short amount of time available in a PhD, is quite another, and was beyond my own capacity and confidence. However, as discussed in Chapter Six, some spaces were given to small group discussions with audiences after the screenings and led to reflective exchanges that may have helped people to see and listen. These discussions were indicative that reimagining pathways of development in transformative ways, both locally and further afield, may be possible if sufficient time is allocated to processes of reflection and open communication.

It may be researchers' role to encourage audiences to engage in reflexivity by systematically holding small group discussions, so as to help people to see and hear. Similarly as was discussed in the previous section when considering Samuel and my long term commitment, perhaps complex outputs of PV processes like *Tigwirane Manja*, should be used in a more long term, committed and targeted way with audiences, to help cultivate reflexivity in depth, and thus

potentially open up reimagined pathways of development by connecting different people in different contexts.

If these connections are to be made then trust in the output of PV processes is paramount. Despite all the efforts made in this investigation, doubts still remain as to whether the content of the film can be trusted. However, one of the many ways in which *Tigwirane Manja* encourages trust, is the depth of feeling expressed on camera by so many people; including people who did not take part in the workshops, but were willing to place their faith in their peers when presented with an opportunity to express their views on film. In this way it was possible to include the views of the likes of Mr Chikwaya (09:23), Amai Chinchino (12:02), Mr Phande (12:13), Asida Mbani (18:30) and Ganizani (19:17), amongst others, none of whom took part in the workshops, but all of whom clearly spoke from the heart and gave a convincing account of their experiences. Encouraging participants to include interviews of people outside of the workshop group is a pragmatic and reassuring way to cultivate trust in the results.

The final output of the process reinforced this trust and cultivated confidence. Mr. Tepeka, a middle-aged participant who works part-time as a baker in a local hotel, exclaimed with pride: “I didn’t think that we would be able to make such a good film!” (Post public screening conversation, Chirombo, 19/05/2018). Since the process ended, participants continue to work together and, to varying degrees, have taken on the task of finding ways to resolve the complex issues outlined in the film, demonstrating how the process has opened up self-mobilisation. As an indicator of a genuine participatory process, self-mobilisation can also help to cultivate trust in the results, as well as opening up diverse possibilities.

The skills that participants learned during the process can continue to be used for self-mobilisation, new cycles of transformative change, and to safeguard information before it is lost. Traditional practices and perspectives are particularly vulnerable, due to the influences of materialism and neoliberalism,

but also due to the passing of time and the inevitable death of village elders, gatekeepers of invaluable traditional knowledge. For instance, since *Tigwirane Manja* was made, Mr. Johan Phande, seen from minutes 12:13-13:36 of *Tigwirane Manja*, has passed away. However, participants have in their possession a two-hour interview with him, in which he shared his views on many topics. There are ideas afoot to record other village elders sharing their memories and knowledge of traditional perspectives and practices, in order to reflect upon them, revive them, and/or keep them for posterity. These banks of information fit well with the oral traditions in Malawi and could one day be used to help reimagine and transform pathways of development.

7.4.1 Reasons for Caution

PV backed up by extensive sequences of semi-structured interviews and framed by genuine and deep participatory principles has a lot of potential, however there are good reasons to be cautious. For one, research and development trainings of any kind create winners and losers (Watkins and Swidler 2013). Only a small group of people were included in the PV workshops. The skills that participants learned could make them 'professional respondents' and put them in positions of power over their peers (Chasukwa 2018). Control over video outputs could give them a sense of authority to speak for the wider community, enabling them to act as gatekeepers, and potentially taking advantage of their roles, to the detriment of others.

For instance, in *Tigwirane Manja*, participants focused on livestock issues, particularly goats. This focus made a lot of sense. It was the most repeatedly talked about problem during the semi-structured interviews, mentioned by 59% of respondents (see Annex 1), and was also a common topic of conversation in every day village life. Yet the focus on finding a solution to the goat problem put goat owners in a potentially uncomfortable position. Several of them have since shared that they do not agree with the way the problem has been framed and do not want to take part in finding a solution, though participants are working on

making space for their views to be heard, as is explained below (Conversations with Samuel Baluti and the *Tigwirane Manja* group, February 2019).

One of the ways in which participants' new power as gatekeepers can be mitigated, is through open communication about the importance of maintaining the spirit of inclusivity in which the workshops were undertaken when communicating with the wider village. Open communication and inclusivity were practiced throughout the process and shone through during the making of *Tigwirane Manja*, when participants interviewed people outside of the PV group and included them in the film. What's more, when it came to public discussions, everyone's views were welcomed as valid. In April 2020, participants began work on a new film, focused entirely on the free-range livestock issue, for which they have now interviewed over twenty people who did not feature in the original film, some goat owners and some not, thus further widening inclusion. However, even if an inclusive approach is taken it can create its own problems.

One problem is that the larger the group of people who are included in discussions, the more difficult it is to put together a coherent narrative in film form. It is not difficult to imagine scenarios in which large numbers of participants could lead to disagreements and blockages that would prevent a film from being made. For *Tigwirane Manja* this was a relatively minor issue that facilitators and participants resolved through open communication during the editing process, and it is likely that most PV processes involving large numbers of people could be similarly facilitated.

A more complex issue is that greater inclusivity of people in decision-making processes, means increased chances of discord, making any progress extremely slow and impractical. Though a slow pace is not necessarily a bad thing, providing opportunities for reflection, a lack of clear decision-making structures is problematic. Traditionally, though people engaged in public discussions, chiefs and village elders had the final say, providing clarity when it was needed. Though today the chiefs may still wield more influence than other people in the village, these days they are not listened to, leaving little clarity for local decision-

making (see Section 3.1 for further details). Thus participants are seeking to establish consensus in order to resolve the problems that they identified during the workshops, which is very difficult to achieve.

This PV process focused on agriculture rather than on decision-making processes, but there is no reason why PV processes could not be used to focus on 'decision-making' as an open theme. Perhaps consent based systems, would allow progress to be made without necessarily needing consensus. However, in order to implement a new genuinely participatory decision-making system, people would need to agree on it, or the system would run the risk of not being respected, creating a catch-22 with no clear solution. For now, participants continue to self-mobilise and pursue inclusive solutions, with new ideas put forward all the time. However, it is not difficult to imagine them giving up if the stalemate continues indefinitely.

Researchers and participants needn't be disheartened by such difficulties. Rather they should bear them in mind, learn from them, and focus on being patient and maintaining open communication when taking part in such processes, supporting one-another through frustrating times. It should be clear from previous sections of this Chapter, as well as Chapters Four, Five and Six of this thesis, that there is nothing smooth and easy about implementing genuine participatory research. However, its transformative potential is still there to be seen. As Ghandi said, the way to God, defined as "I have my truth, even though I honour yours", is through "the self-suffering of patience" (Ghandi 2009:xii).

The following section will examine how PV might be used to help reimagine social organisation in Malawi and beyond, bearing in mind the strengths and limitations explored above.

7.5 Theoretical Application of PV to Open Up Reimagined Pathways of Social Organisation

Like so many African countries, Malawi is in thrall to the structural adjustment programme and thus tied to a neoliberal pathway of development set out by the international community (Wroe 2012). In Section 1.4, it was made clear that though Malawi has at times resisted neoliberal shibboleths, the country has generally been led down pathways of mainstream development by an elite class who have received western educations and thus embedded western priorities (Vaughan 1987; McCracken 2012). In agricultural governance, one of the clearest examples of this westernisation came in a moment of resistance, with the introduction of the Farmer Input Subsidy Programme (FISP). This programme provided government subsidies to farmers in the form of coupons that could be used to access discounted fertiliser and hybrid maize seed, in defiance of neoliberal values but in total accordance with materialistic green revolution priorities (Holden et al. 2012).

Yet there have been signs of change. In 2006 the Malawian government introduced a complex, demand driven, agricultural extension system called the District Agricultural Extension Services System (DAESS), supposedly designed to transition away from top-down models of agricultural development, towards a system based on more horizontal communication and the complex needs and demands of farmers. However, this extension system is more likely to be what White (1996) called a nominal, instrumental, or representative form of participation, in which the state either abnegates responsibility by encouraging a 'do it yourself' mentality, possibly bringing down overhead costs, and/or to be seen jumping on the bandwagon of a fashionable participatory movement. This seems more likely than the DAESS being a genuine attempt to institute transformational participatory change, and thus challenge ingrained hierarchical structures.

Yet within these policies the seeds of genuine participation could be sown. For one thing, researchers at the Lilongwe University of Agriculture and Natural Resources (LUANR) appear keen to critically engage with the DAESS, as Masangano et al. (2016:6) demonstrate:

“The agricultural staff at district and field level did not have the technical know-how to guide the implementation of DAESS system [and]... continued to operate using the top-down approach... some field staff stopped working with farmers arguing that they were waiting for farmers to come and demand services from them creating a situation where extension services became less readily available to farming communities.”

If these critical reflections could be further explored, then it may be possible to edge open the door of genuine participatory change. It may be that the differences between genuinely transformative participation and more nominal forms are too subtle to be noticed by many. Careful introduction of genuinely participatory processes could open up pathways to transformative change through peaceful, stealthy means, without excessively rocking the boat of established hierarchical structures and provoking a backlash. This would be consistent with the subtle complexity of *Tigwirane Manja*, as discussed in Section 7.1.

Some of the limitations that Masangano et al. (2016) identify within the DAESS, are consistent with those expressed by Rosset et al. (2011:185), when discussing blockages in the agroecology movement: “the limiting factor is most often not technical but social and methodological, and the latter are most often under-addressed.” People have been socially conditioned to fit within top-down hierarchical models of social organisation, and it will take a lot more than largely symbolic policy changes to implement a genuinely demand driven agricultural extension system.

Training is needed in methodological approaches that unlock genuinely participatory pathways of development through deep critical reflection, so that extension workers can become true representatives of transformational participation and help transition to horizontal facilitation. The challenge of creating cohorts of extension workers able to facilitate genuinely participatory processes should not be underestimated. However, as White (1996) points out, the beauty of genuine participatory processes is that both the processes and the

outcomes can be transformative, meaning that taking part may be the best way for people to learn, as long as care is taken not to put too much pressure on rapid outcomes, which could lead to disappointment and disillusionment.

Genuine participation is not dependent on visual methods, but PV can be used in order to encourage participants to reflect, deliberate, and communicate the outputs of these processes outwards to other farmers, policy makers, development workers, and the general public. It may be wise to start slowly, aiming for quality rather than quantity, and using PV based on open communication, trust and deep reflexivity, in a targeted manner in all the above contexts, with the results carefully communicated outwards. Perhaps then pathways could be opened up that gave all those involved platforms to be seen and heard by each other and by others.

These processes should not be limited to rural communities but conducted all along development chains, including alternative chains like agroecology and permaculture. Ideally people along alternative chains could be connected to people along more mainstream ones, in order to open up channels of communication and possibly identify ways in which people working in different contexts but with similar visions, might work together to widen or open up genuinely participatory processes of development. As things stand, people working along mainstream and alternative pathways tend to clash, creating contradictory certainties (Leach et al. 2010), limiting space for people to engage in deep reflective processes and encouraging the kind of competitive behaviour that characterises western communication.

However, participants should make decisions over who they wish their audiences to be as they reflect on their own optimal pathways (Cornwall 2008). Therefore, it may be wise to begin with PV processes in people's respective communities of practice first, branching out in due course, according to participants' wishes. It may be necessary to place greater emphasis on interventions in the global north where genuine, reflexive participatory processes are uncommon and much needed, as some critics of post-development

have pointed out (Matthews 2017) and should be clear from reflections on screenings in Chapter Six, and again in Section 7.2.

That said, it would be wise to train facilitators in a diversity of settings, so as to connect up the whole chain and not fall into the trap of identifying people in places like Chirombo as mere participants. Samuel Baluti is an excellent example of a facilitator from a non-institutional background who can help to maintain self-mobilisation in the context in which he is based. Similarly, facilitators in other contexts could continue to function in their respective locations, encouraging local self-mobilisation in institutional and non-institutional settings. Efforts would continuously need to be made to encourage inclusivity, cultivate awareness, and remind facilitators to surrender their power as gatekeepers to make space for participants. This could be done in the respective contexts in which facilitators work by encouraging feedback and communication between facilitators so as to optimise their learning.

None of these processes would be quick or easy, and outcomes would be diverse and complex. A lot of patience would be required, particularly to avoid reverting to hierarchical behaviour out of desires to speed up results. Patient, slow and drawn-out time frames, do not necessarily lend themselves to the typical demands of funders, or the short-term postings and career aspirations of government officials or employees of organisations along development chains. As previously mentioned, one of the constraining factors of such transformative processes becoming rooted in existing development chains, is the time that it takes to undertake deep and genuine participatory research, and additional time that it takes for people to be ready to implement a solution.

It is important therefore, that anyone wishing to engage in such processes be forewarned and do so in the understanding that such transformative pathways take time. The sense of urgency that often characterises western views of such challenges as the 'climate emergency', should be tempered with more patient views of the world. Genuine and deep participatory processes are for those who, to quote the *Tao Te Ching*: "can wait in patience while the mud settles", a quality

that can be cultivated through Ghandi's suggestion of learning to see God as "I have my truth, even though I honour yours" (Ghandi 2009:xvii).

It may be that participatory processes in locations other than Chirombo will be much faster but it is safe to assume that if depth is desired, then processes cannot be rushed. This need for patience is all the more reason to focus on cultivating reflexivity, so that people involved in these processes are able to adapt to the demands of genuine participatory processes. Whatever the challenges that might arise, the answer can always be guided by the same principles: participant control and partnerships cultivated through reflection and open communication. A peaceful and yet radical shift in the way people socially organise is possible if people at all levels believe that it is, genuinely engage in reflexive processes, challenging their preconceived epistemic and ontological perspectives, and learn to operate within a mutually respectful horizontal system. There is so much to be learned from one-another this way and so much potential for human beings to thrive.

7.6 Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter was to draw together findings and reflections of this research in response to the question: To what extent can participatory video contribute to reimagining development in Malawi? The short answer is that if PV is used as part of a genuinely participatory methodology, which makes space for holistic analyses, cultivating trust, awareness, and reflexivity, through open communication, then it is a method that can help to transform pathways of development. The visual output of PV processes can provide a platform for often marginalised people to be seen and heard, making it possible to construct flexible actions around their holistic analyses. However, if this is to happen, then efforts must be made to cultivate reflexivity in institutional settings as well, so that people working in these contexts might learn to see and hear beyond their social conditioning, and thus learn to participate.

This chapter explored the above question through the prism of this research and the main contributions of this thesis, laid out in Section II. The output, *Tigwirane Manja* showcased the value of reflection, cooperation, open communication and participants' ability to navigate a web of technical issues to provide pragmatic solutions. If nothing else, this showcased the value of holistic participatory processes and demonstrated how PV can be used to facilitate a thorough investigation and reimagine pathways of development in the case study location of Chirombo. Their complex analysis highlighted the inadequacies of reductionist investigations, which, by virtue of ignoring complexity, too often lead to new problems (Leach et al. 2010) and invited viewers to reflect on their perspectives and open up to reimagined pathways of development.

Several other noteworthy contributions were also made. Beginning with the understanding of what constitutes genuine and deep participatory research in a world gripped by materialism and neoliberalism (explored in sections 7.1 and 7.2). In short, this research took the stance that a genuine participatory investigation is one in which concerted efforts are made to encourage participant control over the process (Arnstein 1969). This may result in self-mobilisation (Pretty 1995), and/or the emergence of transformative pathway of development (White 1996), which participants reimagine thanks to holistic research processes that make space for varying degrees of width and depth, optimised through reflection and open communication (Cornwall 2008).

In order to make this happen, researchers should respond constructively to criticisms from Francis (2001) and Cook and Kothari (2001:15), who suggest that participatory research cannot help but be manipulative and that claims that participatory investigations help cultivate awareness are little more than "narrow-minded narcissism". Avoiding manipulation is difficult, particularly in contexts where colonialism, dictatorship, and the neo-colonialism of neoliberal development have made research participants accustomed to being manipulated, leading to a form of resistance that revolves around established manipulative dynamics (Anderson and Patterson 2017 a b). However, there are ways to avoid these manipulative relationships.

First, researchers should understand that genuinely participatory investigations are demanding, and require a great deal of commitment backed up by a thorough approach to research. This project was based on 87 semi-structured interviews, followed by five months of participatory video, and a further three months of preparation and dissemination of the output. What's more, it was built on a six-year friendship between research assistant Samuel Baluti and I, as well as numerous conversations about avoiding manipulation before, during, and after the investigation.

One way that manipulation was avoided was by cultivating a space for trust and open communication, building on the well-established ideas that trust and openness are key to genuinely participatory investigations (Arnstein 1969; Leach et al. 2010). Special efforts were made to openly discuss difficult issues, like the tendency for research and development to be manipulative, throughout the project. The bank of information from the semi-structured interviews provided a way to avoid imposing any views that did not already exist in the group and for Samuel and I to maintain a disciplined subjectivity centred on participant control. Open conversations about whether the results that were emerging genuinely represented participants' views, were held throughout in different sized groups, particularly during the mapping exercise (see Section 4.8) and the filming and editing processes (see Chapter Five).

This commitment to open communication encouraged deep reflexivity. Cook and Kothari's (2001) stigmatisation of reflexivity, can discourage researchers from engaging in a process that is already extremely difficult, and for which researchers and participants alike, are often ill-prepared, in a world where globalised materialism and neoliberalism have a tendency to squeeze out what is thinkable (Rushton and Williams 2012; Sheldrake 2013). If researchers are to have a chance of opening up pathways of genuine participation, then a deep commitment to reflexivity is necessary. Rather than stigmatising processes of reflection, efforts should be made to dig up and explore the effects of our social

conditioning as much as possible, an often-messy process (see Epilogue for a summary of my own experiences).

Focusing on thoroughness and openness, in order to unlock deep reflexivity and a genuine participatory process, made it possible to contribute to the practice of PV. While PV is flexible, it is generally employed as a stand-alone method (Lunch and Lunch 2006:13). Combining it with the depth of semi-structured interviews used in this research is unusual. This approach provided insights into how PV could be used in combination with other methods in order to unlock greater thoroughness through the triangulation of results. What's more, it provided greater depth of analysis, and gave researchers and facilitators a steadier base on which to avoid manipulation when conducting their investigations.

Such an approach requires a great deal of time (all told this research took 11 months). While 11 months may seem long, it is nothing when compared to decades of materialistic colonialism, dictatorship, and the neo-colonialism of neoliberal development. If researchers and institutions want to facilitate spaces in which participants have a genuine chance to reimagine their pathways of development through PV, then an 11-month process should be considered a starting point on which to base a long-term affiliation. The results of the process can be widely shared providing platforms for marginalised people to be seen and heard (Harman 2019), and thus provide opportunities for the original process to grow organically and for new connections to form.

This outward facing, thorough and long-term perspective of PV, built on degrees of participant control, open communication, cultivating trust, deep reflexivity, and holistic analyses, can open up pathways to reimagined and transformative participatory systems of social organisation. It can do this by addressing the underlying issue of modern development – dogmatic materialism and neoliberalism – by providing pragmatic alternatives based on holistic understandings of reality, supported by participatory visual methods. As examples, this Chapter explored how Malawian social organisation and

development chains more broadly, could be adapted in order to open up genuinely participatory pathways, in Section 7.5.

However, in order to be seen and heard audiences must be willing and able to see and hear. The echo chambers typical of socially conditioned communities of practice (Autesserre 2014) and limitations that materialism and neoliberalism place on what is thinkable (Ruston and Williams 2012; Sheldrake 2013), often mean that audiences see and hear what they want and are used to, rather than what participants' intend (see Chapter Five). If PV is to be used to transform systems of social organisation, even within small development chains, then deep reflexive processes are needed in research and development institutions, as well as places like Chirombo. Unfortunately a second deep process was beyond the timeframe of this research. However, this experience can help to frame future investigations. For now, on behalf of everyone involved in this process: *Mukupemphedwa kutenga nawo mbali, zikomo* (we invite you to participate, thank you).

Epilogue

In late spring 2019 I attended a presentation at the University of Leeds during which a young woman in the audience asked, with sense of desperation: “How can we cultivate self-awareness in research?” Seeing as cultivating awareness is a key aspect of participatory research I felt as though I should be able to answer but my mind jumped around: meditation, learning to listen, cultivating humility and a sense of calm? None of these things tend to be explicitly taught within academic institutions as ways of cultivating awareness and it felt uncomfortable even thinking them. Perhaps I was experiencing first hand the effect of materialism and neoliberalism limiting what is thinkable (Rushton and Williams 2012).

In this epilogue I will attempt to answer the above question by drawing on my own experience over the past four years. To do so, I will approach the process of cultivating awareness from two angles. Firstly as an intellectual process and secondly as a more holistic practice. This approach is my own experience of cultivating awareness and should be understood as such, rather than some kind of recipe to be followed. Perhaps my experiences can be useful for those who, like me, are searching for ways to break out of materialistic social conditioning.

My process of cultivating awareness began several years prior to beginning this PhD project as I struggled with the demands of life in rural Malawi, was broken by the stress of my own self-imposed burdens and eventually, inevitably, became very ill. During the first year of this PhD I decided to do two things. Firstly, I would learn self-care and try to recover from illness. Secondly, I would use the time to cultivate my awareness intellectually, reading all manner of books and papers that might help me to better understand the world, what I had been involved in during my time in Malawi, and how I might go about this research in a healthier way than I had gone about my previous work on agroecology projects in rural Malawi. The work of Robert Chambers (1997) and Alan Watts (1966) were particularly resonant and I began to integrate what I was learning into by intentions and daily actions through regular self-reflection and irregular

meditations. In so doing, my social conditioning became increasingly clear and I steadily, and sometimes unsteadily, started to let go.

One of the most obvious results of my social conditioning was that I had internalised the social system in which I was educated. This is a system dominated by materialistic philosophies, neoliberal priorities, and patriarchal structures with clear sexist and racist undertones, built on social Darwinist notions that continue to champion the achievements of 'civilised' western, white, and predominantly male culture, above all other alternatives. My intention was to observe myself, notice how my social conditioning manifested in my behaviour, reflect, uproot undesirable traits, and cultivate philosophies, priorities and intentions that helped me cultivate a sense of peace.

When I intensified the process of pulling apart the threads of my own social conditioning many disturbing traits began to emerge. The more I learned to observe my own thoughts and behaviours, the more I noticed racist, violent, sexist thoughts emerging as if from a deep well. Accompanying these ghouls of my subconscious came spectres of my own life: resentments, an inferiority complex somehow mixed in with a white male superiority complex, and countless others. These deeply ingrained traits sometimes manifested in superior, dogmatic behaviour, and an insecure entitled sense of my own importance. As a result, I sometimes turned in on myself becoming angry, experiencing feelings of guilt, shame, and self-loathing, which manifested in the form of deep depressions. To avoid these feelings, I distracted myself in any number of ways but had resolved to face myself sooner or later.

For several years I had been practicing meditation intermittently, following the teachings of philosopher Alan Watts, and struggling. I rarely seemed to be able to let go or grasp what it was I was supposed to be doing, or not doing. With my research trip to Malawi looming, I began to intensify my practice and found it very unstable, sometimes feeling a deep sense of elation bordering on mania and at other times feeling an overwhelming sense of peace.

While in Malawi I intensified my practice further, waking up early in the morning almost every day to sit and meditate for an hour with the rising sun. This went on for six months, give or take, and some quite surprising things began to happen. The ghouls and spectres of my conditioning and life experiences would visit me during my meditations in the form of, well, ghouls and spectres. At first I fought them off, refusing to let them into my thoughts, feeling as though if I did I would go mad or somehow die. Facing my fear took many months but it became clear that if I were to uproot my social conditioning, then parts of me would have to die. As a result I began to see death as a friend and ally. Little by little I relented and as I did, was able to let go by bringing the light of the rising sun over lake Malawi into my mind, forgiving myself, and embracing the process.

All of this took place as I was facilitating the participatory workshops detailed in this thesis. Facilitating PV workshops and dedicating myself to creating spaces in which rural Malawians could take control, reflect, deliberate, and share their views outwards, was a perfect way to ensure that the personal process that I was going through was balanced with an outward gaze. While the workshops lasted I meditated before participants arrived at my home, cultivating a sense of peace and pouring it into the workshop space. I can honestly say that these were some of the happiest and most transformative months of my life. The following is a poem that I wrote during this period:

An invitation

*Silence broken by words we speak,
Knowledge shapes the world we seek.
Sluggish movement to a dull drum,
Music stops and we are done.*

*Strip the meat off the bone,
Knowledge gone, all is unknown.
Be the world with childish wonder.
Dance in that space, all asunder.*

*Sit in grass and just be,
Even the ants will laugh, you'll see.
Hail the dead and rejoice!
Eternity sings with one sweet voice.*

*Brothers and sisters, only this shall I say,
For such is our world today,
That we cannot be, for words and sound,
To which I add but these, unbound:*

*Reality exists beyond our troubled minds,
Gently whisper it and then, be kind.
There, is a world free of fear,
Where our souls finally feel clear.*

Despite the feelings expressed in the above poem, the materialistic and individualistic culture in which I was socially conditioned meant that, at best, I felt intermittently connected to the world around me. The meditations and dedication to the workshops had been transformative but after several months of intense work I felt drained. Intellectually the idea of my inseparability from everything made sense but I struggled to integrate the idea with any kind of stability. When I felt the connection and the energy flowed I felt like in the poem but when it faded dark moods and depression returned. My ability to observe my own thoughts and moods had dramatically improved but I sometimes resented this heightened awareness as it gave me little peace from myself.

Two years of reflection writing this thesis followed beginning with a nervous breakdown. To pull myself out of this hole I turned once more to the work of Alan Watts and intensified my studies of eastern philosophies, reading everything I could find by or about Mahatma Gandhi. The intensity, weight and loneliness of the PhD, pushed me to counterbalance it with daily meditations, a simple healthy diet, a budding yoga practice, and time spent in nature with

friends. Unlike the workshops, during which the energy I put in was amplified by participants' enjoyment, the thesis was like a black hole. What I put in disappeared and I had to somehow fill myself up once more to go again, relentlessly.

The wise and self-compassionate choice seemed to be to let go of the writing process, accept what I had learned with gratitude, and move on to something else. However, the pressure of the thesis kept showing me just how much I still needed to learn if I was to keep letting go of my social conditioning and open up a reimagined path of my own existence. Despite the difficulty of this task, the self-discipline of my daily life and deep reflection needed for the PhD, meant that I continued to cultivate awareness, shed my social conditioning and, little by little, consolidated a growing sense of connection. The pressure broke me many times but I began to accept it with gratitude. Every time I broke, I learned something new and got up again to keep going. This rather perverse process is not a path that I necessarily recommend but it has played a huge part in where I am now, and for that I am hugely grateful.

For many months during the writing up process, I was increasingly drawn to trying to understand animism, vitalism, and pantheism. When I had first moved to Malawi in 2012, I was only marginally aware of my deeply embedded philosophical materialism. Over the years living in rural Malawi and hearing animist, vitalist and pantheist perspectives, I began to question the nature of reality. This process accelerated as I set about uncovering my social conditioning and learned to genuinely listen to the perspectives of rural Malawians. As I wrote this thesis I had time to reflect on much of what I had heard in Malawi and widen my gaze to the perspectives of indigenous people in other parts of the world. This work led me to the writings of Jeremy Narby (1999) and his experiences with ayahuasca in the Amazon.

Narby description of having begun as a superior, cynical, materialist, before learning to listen and respect the experiences of indigenous people in the Amazon basin, resonated with my own experiences in Malawi. It seemed that

ayahuasca, affectionately referred to as *mama ayahuasca*, or simply *la medicina*, could help people face the depths of their own being and purge what was not welcome. In June 2019 I took part in a ceremony during which *mama ayahuasca* helped me face everything that I had been working on over the past few years, and showed me many of the aspects of my social conditioning that remained to be uprooted, giving me detailed instructions on how to go about it. I met my ghouls and spectres face to face, all the while experiencing the warmth and guidance of the spirit of ayahuasca. It was the hardest and most healing experience of my life.

Since the ceremony, I have worked hard to integrate what *mama ayahuasca* taught me, slipping up any number of times but persevering. As I write this in June 2020, I can say that though I have laboured under the stress of this PhD thesis, I have experienced the steady growth of peace, gratitude, love and a sense of universal oneness. The more I keep practicing what *mama ayahuasca* taught me – non-judgement, to cultivate peace and love every day through my practice, visit forests regularly, and keep cultivating awareness – the more I am able to grow a new garden full in my mind full of plants of my own choosing, and the more content I feel.

Throughout this process I have been accompanied by the work of the Sufi poet Rumi. One poem in particular stands out to me in the context of this epilogue:

*“Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing,
there is a field. I’ll meet you there.
When the soul lies down in that grass,
the world is too full to talk about.
Ideas, language, even the phrase “each other”
doesn’t make any sense.
The breeze at dawn has secrets to tell you.
Don’t go back to sleep.
You must ask for what you really want.
Don’t go back to sleep.*

People are going back and forth across the doorsill

where the two worlds touch.

The door is round and open.

Don't go back to sleep."

The first two sentences reflect the wisdom of social constructivism, Ghandi's understanding of God as Truth, pantheism, and the teaching of mama ayahuasca. The following line is reflected in Taoist teachings. The self is an abstraction, a label used for convenience, much like anything is labelled – a chair, an apple, a tree. Beyond these abstractions exists who we are, which is to say everything, inseparable from the entirety of existence. Intellectually this idea is fairly simple to grasp but people often struggle with dualistic debates - if I am everything, then do I exist? I came to the conclusion that this question was a circular result of clinging to abstractions of language, in particular 'I', and can be conducive to the type of 'narrow minded narcissism' outlined by Cooke and Kothari (2001:15). I find it more helpful to integrate a Taoist notion of self into my way of being and relating to the world, in order to make space for the simplicity of kindness, than to keep going round and round in circles.

When I apply the idea that there is no right or wrong, there is no me and other, and let go of everything else, I wake up and feel the secrets of the dawn breeze – contentment and peace. Over the last few years I have asked for peace, love, joy, lightness, clarity and contentment. The more I do, the more I feel and experience them. At first, I kept going back and forth, stepping through the doorway and back out into the darkness of the seesaw of egoism. However, as Rumi says the door is open and I now know the way through it. The result is that I am far more conscious than prior to this PhD process. Daily practice remains an essential part of maintaining this ever-fluctuating state but as time passes and I keep practicing, it is becoming the way that I experience existence.

Ayahuasquero Alonso del Rio (2017:111) says that one of the biggest missteps that someone can make on this journey of growing awareness is to forget the basics: humility and the practice of sharing with others, which is immeasurably

rewarding. Genuine participatory processes are one way in which people can keep working outwardly as well as inwardly but there are so many ways to do this. Personally I hope to have the privilege to keep working with people in Chirombo and elsewhere. At the same time I am designing a life for myself that takes me closer to the land and can help me cultivate awareness, peace and contentment. I feel confident that as I do so, I will become increasingly useful as an agent for genuine participatory change, making space for people to be seen and heard.

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Annex 1

The following table is an indication of the main topics that were covered during the semi-structured interviews. The left hand column indicates the main topics, while the one on the right shows the total percentage of interviewees who mentioned that topic. Percentages are expressed to the nearest whole number and topics are ranked according to their recurrence.

Main topics	Percentage of participants who spoke about this theme
Free-range livestock destroying crops and/or trees	59%
Climate change expressed as changing rain patterns and/or increasing heat	56%
Need to keep using fertiliser despite high financial cost and damage to soil	50%
Fall army worm is devastating our crops	47%
Increasing cost of fertiliser makes it too expensive for local farmers	47%
Alternative approaches to agriculture based on traditional knowledge and/or organic practices should be encouraged	39%
Old ways of farming maintained soil fertility	38%
Need for reforestation	35%
A good alternative to fertiliser or manure, is to mix them together	35%
Soil fertility declining due to fertiliser	34%
Climate change caused by deforestation	34%
People used to grow a much wider diversity of crops than today	28%

Problems associated with organic or traditional methods	26%
Farming is now more expensive than it is worth	25%
Hybrid seeds are problematic	24%
Old ways of farming were cheap	23%
Perhaps compost making is the way forward	22%
Stop the FISP system	20%
Government must find a solution to the fall armyworm problem	19%
People do not trust organic methods	18%
Need for by-laws to resolve free-range livestock problem	18%
Need for crop diversification to break pest cycle	16%
Local seeds are better than hybrids	15%
Cooperation needed to resolve problems together	15%
Population growth is a problem	14%
Need for irrigation schemes	14%
Resurgence of traditional/organic practices could only work with concerted effort	14%
Need to plant trees to increase soil fertility	13%
Farming with synthetic inputs has become so deeply ingrained that it would be very hard to change	13%
People should settle on their farmland to protect their crops	11%
Government/organisations introducing fertiliser was a deliberate con	10%

Need for public discussions to resolve goat problem	10%
Fences are needed to keep goats out	10%
Nobody listens to the chiefs anymore	10%
Shortage of land is a problem	9%
Farming with chemicals is bad for people's health	9%
Reduce the price of fertiliser	8%
Old ways of singing to chase of pests	8%
Other stories of spiritual connections between people and nature	8%
Organic methods cannot work because soil is too badly damaged	8%
Civic education needed to resolve free-range livestock problem	8%
No-till farming is the way forward	8%
Organic methods do not work	7%
Soil fertility declining due to erosion	7%
Old ways of farming cannot be applied now	7%
Shortage of rain the will of God	6%
There used to be fewer pests	6%
Government should create access to manure/compost	5%
Pests other than fall armyworm	5%
Goats should be killed	5%
Goat owners refuse to discuss a solution	5%
Hybrid seeds are the way forward	5%
Always struggling to find enough money to get by	5%