

Organisational challenges facing civil society networks in Malawi

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Introduction

Civil Society networks¹ have become a major player in global development (Miller 2005, Church 2003). Over the last decade, donors have placed greater emphasis on civil society voice in encouraging pro-poor development through their inputs in policy formulation processes and then holding government to account and implementation (Ashman 2005). Civil Society Organisation (CSO) networks have been the prime organisational form for articulating the voice. This paper discusses the findings of a research project carried out among four CSO networks in Malawi with the aim to:

- Understand the development of CSO networks in Malawi over the last four years;
- Assess their contribution to poverty reduction and economic growth issues;
- Assess their current strengths and challenges in articulating civil society voice;
- Make stakeholders aware of the individual, organisational and environmental factors that promote and constrain networks' impact;
- Disseminate this information to other CSO networks and donors in Malawi and beyond.

The research results provide a snapshot of civil society networks in Malawi today, whilst highlighting the critical organisational challenges in 2006. The project did not aim for nor did it achieve an exhaustive impact assessment of all civil society networks in the country. Interviews focussed on three networks: Malawi Economic Justice Network (MEJN), Land Task Force (LTF) and Civil Society Coalition on Basic Quality Education (CSCQBE). The findings therefore directly relate to these three networks; although they have resonance with other civil society networks in Malawi and globally.

The main elements of the research methodology included:

1. Literature review to provide an overview of current thinking (see references);
2. Semi-structured interviews with up to 25 stakeholders for Malawi Economic Justice Network (MEJN), Civil Society Coalition for Quality Basic Education (CSCQBE), Land Task Force (LTF), other CSO networks, donors, and government;
3. Analysis of consultancy work with MEJN and Civil Society Agriculture Network (CISANET);
4. Analysis and write up;
5. Publication and dissemination.

The paper will briefly discuss the development impact of the CSOs before proceeding to discuss the critical organisational capacity issues facing the networks. It closes by

discussing the key strategic choices facing the networks in their attempts to address the identified challenges.

CSO networks' performance in Malawi

Evaluating the impact of advocacy work is notoriously difficult given the variety of variables that influence a situation at any one time. Direct attribution of change to one particular variable, such as the work of a CSO network, is impossible. What is both possible and paramount is to be able to 'plausibly associate' changes with the activities of the network. This short research never intended to rigorously evaluate the impact of the CSO networks, but the findings do highlight stakeholder perceptions of the major areas of achievement (which could be validated later by an indepth study).

The study showed that CSO networks have undoubtedly made a significant and visible difference in terms of representing civil society, in developing relationships with policy-making structures and even in achieving some results in a short period. An alternative voice and opinion to government now exists and is accepted. The magnitude and sustainability of these contributions to the development process, however, is open to debate.

Some government respondents were at best ambivalent about the value of CSO networks – they question the capacity on both an organisational and individual level, which need to be surmounted before they can begin to be truly effective. Further, relationships of trust between a network and its members are often based more on respect for particular individuals than commitment to the organisation or sector as a whole. Moreover, limited expertise of staff meant that CSO networks are seen as stronger in criticising government than in offering practical alternatives. In the words of one government respondent: "*The role of CSOs in engaging with government is taken seriously, but not the CSOs itself*". All in all, CSO networks are not living up to their ascribed role due to their failure to address major and urgent organisational issues. This is a very current and increasing cause of concern for members, boards and donors to CSO networks. These issues need to be analysed and addressed if CSO network performance is to be maintained and developed.

Organisational challenges facing CSO networks

CSO networks in Malawi are facing a number of pressing organisational issues that demand urgent attention in order for the networks to survive. The literature referenced shows that these challenges are common to all CSO networks, and not unique to Malawi. What is different in Malawi is the severity of the challenges and the urgency of action required.

Identity crisis

The most striking finding of the whole research was that almost every respondent highlighted organisational identity as the biggest current challenge facing CSO networks. As CSO networks established secretariats, registered and secured project funding from donors, they found themselves working increasingly independently from

their members. It has reached the stage where the most important question that network leadership and governance needs to answer is: will we remain as an authentic CSO network or become an advocacy NGO with nominal membership?

This challenge has arisen from the process of institutionalisation that CSO networks have followed, as well as from the exigencies of the Malawian context. As network founders became over-stretched by the demands and opportunities of the network, so secretariats were established and coordinators appointed. Networks had no clear legal status at this stage. Initially, member organisations often hosted secretariats but this caused some confusions and tensions. For example, hosts sometimes felt they were over-contributing to the network, while others believed that hosts were taking advantage of network resources to pay their own organisations bills, such as telephones. In some cases hosts were very reluctant to let go of their secretariat function, though most networks have now moved on to set up an independent office.

In theory, network secretariats coordinate their members to carry out the work, but this has rarely worked out in practice in the Malawian cases examined. The far more frequent scenario is for members to give, or for the secretariat to take increasing responsibility for implementing advocacy activities. Although members do often attend network meetings (particularly those members who are easily contactable by phone or e-mail), they fail to implement their action plan commitments once they are back in maelstrom of their own organisations.

Ultimately CSO staff are not paid or appraised on time spent on network activities. The more commitment they give to the network the more their own organisation and their own work suffers. For this reason, network activities are pushed to the background.

While advocacy work may be part of job descriptions in Malawian CSOs, it is rarely part of funded projects. Members still rarely plan network activities into their strategies and proposals. This is partly because management of member CSOs still does not consider advocacy through CSO networks as a strategic priority and often hurriedly develops proposals and budgets without sufficient consultation with staff involved in the CSO networks. Most local CSOs are characterised by short-term, survival-oriented goals that focus on service delivery rather than advocacy. Even international NGO members of networks, who have funded advocacy work, have not been able to participate as much as needed in network activities; often because their work is tied to implementing their own pre-determined plans and budgets. They are not able to flexibly respond to last-minute requests from networks - yet this a critical part of advocacy networks. Local NGO members have fewer staff and less capacity than their international counterparts. The lack of technical capacity has hampered network performance in certain areas: for example, only three people in the LTF are said to really understand the 70 land laws in the country that directly affect their work. When issues are too technical, members do not respond or engage with issues, again leaving it to secretariat staff.

This situation is exacerbated by the donors who prefer to fund one network than ten different partners' time to do this – thereby strengthening the secretariat but weakening members. As a result, secretariats have raised funding independently, rather than being driven by the demands of their members, and have consequently

acquired contractual obligations to deliver outputs – for which member organisations are responsible. This is partially due to members (including board members) being too caught up in the demands of their own organisations to engage in proposal development for the network. Once the secretariat is awarded project funding it gains power in a very resource-dependent context: access to resources is closely correlated to authority. Whilst this access to resources has led to network secretariats becoming sources of contracts for members, secretariat staff rarely has any prior experience with sub-contracting arrangements and the performance management demands this places on them. They are not set up to monitor their members, and awarding contracts to one member instead of another can cause significant internal conflict. Ultimately, with secretariats providing resources to members, rather than vice versa, the network power balance turns upside down, shifting from members to secretariat.

Efforts by secretariats to involve members by sub-contracting have yielded disappointing results. Members have failed to deliver on their contracted commitments in the stipulated time. In one case, involving members delayed the project proposal finalisation by nine months; in another case, members failed in financial accountability and resources were not used for the intended purposes. When some members received resources for international network meetings, they failed to account for the resources.

CSO networks have found it difficult to make the out-sourcing approach work, contracting project work, such as research and monitoring, from the secretariat to members. Secretariats have found that it is much quicker and less risky to hire staff themselves (or contract in consultants or enumerators). This means that, as one respondent said:

Instead of secretariats 'engaging' with members, they are shifting more towards 'informing' members.

Questions concerning the quality of member contact with the community have encouraged secretariats to decentralise and set up their own regional offices and district chapters. The theory is that member NGOs run the local offices and although this works in some cases, it has often led to these being perceived as parallel structures, leading to jealousy and internal competition.

By taking on what is in fact the role of its members and by-passing them, CSO networks risk even cannibalising as donors may shift resources from network members to the network secretariat. The bigger secretariats become, the more money and resources are needed. Costs start to rise when the secretariat becomes synonymous with the network and the secretariat begins to become more and more operational, doing more of the work itself. This is where traditional core costs start to take on greater prominence with more staff and equipment being needed (Church, 2003).

In some cases, the network exists more in name than in reality – certainly the spirit and vision of some networks is under threat if not already undermined. According to one donor:

The strength of the network has become based on the strength of the secretariat, not the members. This is not what we expected or hoped for. They are contravening their purpose and compromising their vision.

Relationship and trust are the ‘connective tissue’ in networks – and once these are gone, the networking element is gone too.

What the ‘network model’ amongst CSOs exactly comprises is still very unclear. In different capacity building processes over the past few years, each of the CSO networks has highlighted the need to clarify the criteria for membership and the different roles of members/secretariat/board. But none has done anything significant to address this need. The following questions were raised by a strategic meeting of networks in 2004 aimed at improving relations between members, board and secretariat:

- Who owns the network?
- Who implements programmes?
- In what capacity is the coordinator speaking when addressing the press? As an individual, as the secretariat or as the network of members?
- How do members cope with a dual allegiance to the network and their own organisation?

These questions have still not been answered. MEJN set up a task force on membership criteria, but never delivered its recommendations as members of the task force kept changing.

Overall, we see that CSO networks lack clear membership criteria and generally charge no fees – with the exception of CSCQBE, who managed to collect only 50% of its members’ fees. This makes membership very fluid and mobile, enabling networks to claim large numbers, of whom only few are really committed. This undermines the ability of the network to claim it is speaking on behalf of civil society. Operating procedures and board policies have not been developed, let alone implemented. Board members are also network members and because of this they sometimes find themselves in a conflict of interest – requesting that the secretariat subcontracts their organisation (and in some cases themselves) for particular pieces of work.

CSO networks in Malawi are currently facing an identity crisis. They need to pause and question who they really want to be and what their focus is. This is the biggest organisational issue they face and failure to address it in the near future could lead to the demise of certain CSO networks in practice, if not in name. As one board chair pointed out: ‘The moment we say we can do it on members’ behalf we have lost the game.’

Leadership challenges

Another pressing strategic challenge for CSO networks in Malawi today is leadership. In any small organisation in its early years of life, it is difficult to disassociate organisational performance from the performance of the leader. As such, the the performance of the coordinator will be reflected in the performance of the network.

Most of the CSO networks have appointed young, dynamic activists as coordinators, often in the initial stages of network formation where there was goodwill, but no funding nor the security to lure mature CSO leaders from established positions. This 'youth policy' has been good from the perspective of raising the profile and visibility of the advocacy networks.

Often, impossible demands are placed on one person's shoulders, and the coordinator is expected to excel at everything. For example, coordinators are expected to deal with constant media attention, whereby it is often the coordinator's opinion that is solicited. However, high media visibility of an individual can often leave members feeling excluded and can encourage a coordinator to behave more independently. Does the leadership catalyse the energies of the members or absorb them like a sponge?

Few of the CSO coordinators are strong on planning and administration. They tend to react to events, rather than operate proactively as leaders. But membership participation generally does not happen spontaneously. Once a secretariat is established, performance of the network will depend strongly on its leadership, more than the members. The leadership in CSO networks is still highly dependent on a small number of key individuals, which makes them more vulnerable, especially when networks take on more of the implementing function. For example, the departure of the MEJN coordinator led to a visible drop in performance according to donors. Other networks have clearly shown that when a network has a poorly performing coordinator, the performance of the whole network is compromised.

Yet, leadership in CSO networks depends on much more than an individual coordinator. The governance structures of the networks play a key role in the leadership, and nascent organisations need active, engaged boards. The three networks explored here have some very strong board members – a major factor in their survival to date. Some efforts to develop sub-committees to support leadership in certain areas have worked well, in the CSCQBE in particular. Others have been less successful: one CSO network has been on the verge of collapse for the last few years due to a clash between the Chair and the Coordinator, which led to the latter being fired from his post, but reinstated on the 'requirement' of the donor.

When CSO networks steering groups formalise into registered entities, they have to decide how to choose and perpetuate their boards. Many are tempted towards a 'democratic' election process from amongst the membership, though this has often resulted in weak, politicised boards as members have little personal commitment and passion. Further, this leads to a potential conflict of interest between active network member and part of the governance. In most of the networks in Malawi, boards are selected based on their knowledge and experience in certain fields. Some of the networks, however, have opted for a hybrid of these two in order to get the best of both worlds.

Currently some network boards are not giving sufficient direction, not making policy and instead getting too involved in micro-managing non-policy issues (e.g. organising workshops, consultancies, deciding who should go for training). Many board members are busy in senior posts in their own NGOs and consequently are weak in following through. The relatively frequent turnover of board members has caused

delays in activity, as new board members are reluctant to implement changes until they have become better acquainted with the organisation.

All in all, it is clear that CSO networks need strong leadership both within the secretariat as within the board. Weaknesses in either area are proving very inhibiting for CSO networks in Malawi to flourish.

Strategy

CSO networks are expected to play a diversity of roles for their different stakeholders: members, government and donors. This requires a strong guiding strategy – but the research in fact highlighted lack of strategy as a pitfall facing CSO networks in Malawi today.

The media pressures CSO networks to respond and react to every issue. CSO networks are expected to be able to coordinate their members' activities, to unify them in clear advocacy campaigns, to build member capacity and to facilitate member funding. Some of these roles are inextricably linked, such as advocating and building the capacity of members to advocate. Both are key priorities, as CSO network advocacy will be undermined if members have insufficient capacity, technical understanding and even time to contribute.

The capacity building role of networks has in some degree compromised the energy and resources that networks have been able to devote to advocacy, but as one respondent questioned:

What is a network to do if members do not have the technical analytical capacity to understand the issues; no advocacy skills or experience?

Some of the networks have addressed these different demands through strategic planning processes (e.g. MEJN, CISANET, LTF, and soon CSCBQE). In reality however CSO networks have been ambivalent about implementing strategic decisions: reluctance to focus on specific activities and withdraw from others is partially fuelled by lack of time. However necessary capacity building activities are, the more difficult it seems to organise them. Change has also been inhibited by limited commitment to implementation. While on the one hand networks yearn for greater focus, they still want to retain considerable flexibility, especially in response to those activities that are resourced.

Funding

Funding sources and sizes evidently influence how CSO networks behave. Networks look almost exclusively to international funding sources for their support, rather than from members, and only CSCQBE claims to charge membership fees. Consequently, this undermines most CSO networks' sense of accountability to their members.

From 2002-2006 there has been considerable growth in the quantity of funding for CSO networks as well as an increasing diversity of donors. This may be linked to the shift in aid funding towards 'rights-based approaches'. Funding for CSO networks has therefore not been a major problem during this period, and in fact a new concern that CSO networks have been over-funded, causing laxity in accountability and encouraging secretariats to take on an implementing role on behalf of members.

The quality of the funding has also been a major issue. The Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) initially supported MEJN by coordinating a basket funding approach to support the work of the whole organisation, rather than individual projects. In general however donor coordination has been poor. For example, in one case a new donor stepped in to fund a network, just at the same time when all other donors were withholding funding in order to precipitate a crisis and force the network to address critical issues.

Some of the network funding has been for donor 'self-centred' reasons of administrative simplicity and efficiency. As one respondent noted:

We can achieve the same in advocacy and capacity building by focussing on one partner, not 20.

While it is certainly administratively simpler to fund one organisation instead of 20, in a real sense this diverts support from network members to network secretariats. As a result, advocacy work of individual members remains unfunded and therefore members cannot support the networks themselves with time or money.

Some official donors and even some international NGOs are increasingly looking to CSO advocacy coalitions to become their funding channels. Their – overly simplistic – reasoning is that if a coalition has many members, it can easily serve as a conduit for their funding to a variety of CSOs; this ignores the fact that coalitions fulfil different and often mutually exclusive purposes, and are not always equipped for project management, administration and monitoring. Some Malawian CSO coalitions do not have sufficient self-identity and financial security to say 'no'.

Today, the infatuation with CSO networks appears to be abating. Performance and reporting problems of networks has led to greater realism, and even to scepticism amongst donors. As one major donor in Malawi pointed out:

CSO network weaknesses are forcing us to find alternative ways of working... We are funding individual NGOs to do the same things - especially as networks increasingly resemble individual NGOs – what value are they adding?

As a result, funding for CSO networks has reverted to more short-term tied support. Donors have found that:

...3 month project-based funding works better with CSO networks in Malawi in terms of getting things done.

Yet this also encapsulates the short-term donor approach that has undermined development performance for years.

Challenges: the origins

Why are CSO networks facing such serious pitfalls? Are they inherent to the organisational form of networks? Are they a result of individuals and organisations involved, or are they simply due to adapting to the harsh realities of the Malawian CSO context?

Networks will evolve and adapt to suit their external context, including their membership base, as well as in response to internal dynamics. We need to examine the different influences of four key variables:

- External environment
- Network Members
- Secretariat
- Leadership

External environment

The external environment exerts a very powerful influence on network performance – particularly in resource-poor countries like Malawi. The needs of communities are overwhelming and place very high developmental demands on government and civil society. There is a sparse institutional landscape to respond, with few strong CSOs.

HIV/AIDS and migration

HIV/AIDS is exacerbating the demands on and reducing the capacity of an already very weak sector.

The mobility of the sector obviously causes significant problems for CSO networks. One of the striking findings of the research was the fluidity of the human resource environment. Since conducting this research four years ago, more than 80% of CSO network stakeholders interviewed the first time had left their organisation and (as a result) quit contact with the network. Between 2002 and 2005, of the three CSO networks, every board chair had left the country, every coordinator was new and active members, donors and government staff were largely different. In local CSOs job insecurity is very high and the expanding number of operational international NGOs in Malawi often recruit the best local NGO staff. Government transfers staff between departments and jobs with confusing regularity. Donor staff is often expatriate and moves on regularly after their 'tour of duty'. This means the networks have a completely new set of relationships both internally and externally – and are, in effect, completely different networks.

Donor influences

Resources are scarce and CSOs find themselves focusing on individual project funding. Donors however have a preference for 'big' projects, and like to see quick results in rights-based areas such as advocacy. They do not appear to have the time or inclination to invest in the capacity building of network members in advocacy and prefer to just support the network. The International Forum on Capacity Building global survey (IFCB 2001) found that even successful CSO networks were not participating in international development initiatives receiving major donor funding.

In the past, there have been some laudable efforts at encouraging greater donor coordination in their support of CSO networks, though this appears to have largely disintegrated in the past year, as donors' individual agendas have come more to the fore.

Changing policy environment

The policy environment is also changing rapidly. Accountability systems are not well developed and there are only a few societal watchdogs, whilst the work abounds. For instance, while there has been admirable work done by the Anti-Corruption Bureau, it still occurs that government appoints Cabinet Ministers who have been dismissed by previous employers for mismanagement of funds. All in all, there is ample work for CSO networks.

Government support for networks is ambivalent. The official line is increasingly supportive, but on an individual level there is still quite some resistance from government staff.

Politics are personal in Malawi. The focus is on opinion rather than issues. The media penchant for personalising news and the limited number of people it can quote, makes it difficult for coordinators to avoid making statements and being seen as co-opting the network as their personal mouthpiece.

Network members

CSO networks require members to be able to work inter-dependently with each other. But many of the network members, particularly in the young CSO sector in Malawi, are more at the dependent stage of development:

Survival first

For most CSO network members, their own survival is paramount. Local NGOs have very limited 'spare' capacity to support the work of networks as their advocacy work is still rarely funded. They have a wide diversity of interests and therefore pull the network in different directions, but few have the time or money to resource the network. In addition, most CSO members have weak contact with their constituencies – then how can we expect the network to be representative in turn?

Building relationships

Research on successful CSO networks highlights the importance of pre-existing relationships between CSO members (Ashman 2005), but in Malawi the sector is still so young that these relationships are only developing now. Many CSO members are still at an early stage of development, and few understand the responsibilities that come with being a network member, such as working inter-dependently. As such, it is too early for CSO networks to really thrive in Malawi, until the capacity of the sector is strengthened, which does not happen overnight.

Balanced leadership

The strength of CSO networks will largely reflect their membership. If they have strong, high performing members with secure funding bases, a CSO network is likely to mirror that. The reverse, however, is also true and perhaps more common.

As secretariats gain strength, members tend to slip back into a common role of sitting back and listening to the leader. On the one hand, the network coordinator is increasingly given the status of the 'boss' and members sit back waiting to be told what to do. On the other hand, international NGO (INGO) members are often frustrated by the last minute, reactive ways of networks. Many INGOs have highly developed and structured planning systems that mean that they are too busy or simply not equipped to support network activities, particularly at the last minute.

Secretariat

Limited capacities

The participation of members is the essence of networking. Facilitation is the core secretariat process. But secretariats tend to have very few staff and it is not uncommon for all responsibility to be dumped on one person's shoulders. Staff often has limited experience and expertise in the process of networking, and in the technical aspects of policy analysis, the network's core business.

Accountability

Yet with donors as opposed to members being the main funding source, secretariat attention focuses on the donor project rather than the participation of members. Accountability is directed to donors, not to members. This becomes a viscous circle: as secretariats detach themselves from the membership, so their structures grow, their costs increase, and their need for donor support increases too, spiralling them out of reach of their members and constituents.

Leadership

CSO networks are very complex organisational forms to manage. They are dependent on the individual coordinator, especially in the first phase of their development. Nascent organisations without secure financing can only attract people initially in a voluntary capacity. But once funding is secured, posts are rarely advertised and young, voluntary incumbent activists will often take on the network coordination role. However, they rarely have the networking aptitude or the management experience to make the core process work effectively.

Strategic choices for CSO networks

While the three networks are at different stages of development, this research has highlighted two core issues that must be addressed to ensure future network impact and even survival for all of them. Boards and secretariats with support from donors need to resolve first, their identity crises and next, the issue of leadership. Once these issues are addressed, the networks can go on to deal with on-going questions of strategy, structure, systems and staffing.

Recommendations to develop network identity

In terms of their identity crisis, CSO networks in Malawi have two choices:

1. Become more independent from their members and operate largely as an 'advocacy NGO' with nominal membership (thereby ceasing to be an 'authentic' network);

2. Re-assert the commitment to being a constituents' network and ensure the network model works better.

Unless there is a deliberate strategic decision, by default the aid system (short-term donor demands and deadlines) and individual interests (of secretariat staff) will push the networks towards option 1, the 'advocacy NGO' route, which is the easier option. Instead of having to build capacity in members, 'networks' can build capacity of their staff in their district branches. Moreover, in the next five years there is likely to be less donor funding for CSO networks, driven by the official aid system push for short-term measurable results and increasing disillusionment with the management and legitimacy of CSO networks.

But is this the direction that network governance and leadership want to take? Will members fight for network identity? Experience suggests that it is likely that members will make noise at AGMs to influence this decision, and then move to concentrate on their own organisational issues.

Even so, maintaining space for member participation is key to network survival and vibrancy. This will be a big challenge, requiring exceptional and concerted leadership commitment and drive, member engagement and enlightened donor support. Recommendations include:

- Developing criteria for membership and contractually agreeing to membership with the network Chair and the member organisation Director. This may mean that CSO networks see their membership numbers fall, but inviting fewer but better quality members could compensate this;
- Encouraging members to provide resources for the network. An effective secretariat is 'owned' by its members, and this means that secretariat resources must come from members, not vice versa. Particularly in a resource-scarce environment, a concerted strategy is needed to ensure that members build network activities into budget lines;
- Having a membership development strategy that involves recruiting, inducting and training new and existing members;
- Keeping members organisations accountable for their conduct in the same way that networks want to hold government accountable;
- Clarifying member, board and secretariat roles and job descriptions. Difficult questions need to be resolved: to what extent can the secretariat stretch its arms without getting board approval? On which issues should the secretariat seek the consent of the board? Who has the mandate to make public statements to the press? When secretariats request for feedback on issues from members and there is no response, secretariats often still feel obliged to say something. But does silence mean consent? How much agreement is needed to release a press statement?

Recommendations to develop network leadership

The second issue of critical importance for CSO networks in Malawi is that of leadership. Given the networks' small size and stage of development, the quality of the coordinator has a large influence on the performance of the network. CSO

networks will continue to drift away from their core purpose if they fail to attract leaders who are committed to networking principles:

1. A relational networker, who has the humility to actively listen to others, build consensus, resolve conflict and facilitate joint action;
2. A manager and planner;
3. An environmental analyst;
4. A persuasive and active advocate.

In the past, coordinators have been appointed based on their ability in the fourth criterion alone. By offering longer-term contracts with funded budgets, CSO networks will be able to attract more mature, experienced people to these positions.

But network leadership rests with much more than an individual. Collective leadership is needed – and active participation by members is the prime means for CSO networks to achieve their purpose. Moreover, supportive boards are critical for any significant change in performance and capacity of CSO networks, and to help form the identity of the organisation. First though, the governance structures of CSO networks need to be developed, clarifying roles and channels of communication between the board and the coordinator.

For reasons of legitimacy, representation from network members on the board is an advantage, with named individuals contributing to continuity. Supplementing the board with outside professionals can bring expertise and critical distance to discussions. A potential conflict of interest clause must be clearly stated within the Constitution and adhered to.

Where possible, board members and further network members should be involved in proposal development processes. The board Chair should be responsible for signing donor contracts to ensure that they fit with the organisational strategy, especially in terms of member involvement, and for monitoring coordinator work and travel plans on a regular basis.

CSO networks must develop their foundational values if they are to achieve their goals. They cannot presume to hold government to account or assist in formulating and implementing government policies, unless the same standards in accountability are applied to their own leaders and members, and their own internal policies are developed. If CSO networks compromise on their core values then they have lost; it is a leadership responsibility to ensure they walk their talk.

Recommendations to develop strategy and structure

CSO networks have to make choices in their responses to stakeholders, and this is amplified by changes in the external environment. For example, once the Land Law is passed by government, the LTF will have to rethink its role. Should it respond to broader food security issues as its donors would like? A strategy change is imminent.

CSO networks in Malawi tend to over-structure while relatively simple, informal structures would be easier to manage. The ideal is to minimise structure in order to promote effective participation of members, fitting the purpose of the network.

Conclusions

CSO networks in Malawi have clearly made a contribution over the last four years to better represent the voice of the poor in policy decisions; they have improved relationships with government and they have had measurable results in government policy development. They have been actively involved in monitoring budget implementation, which can be plausibly associated with better governance. Sustaining these changes remains a challenge and greater credibility amongst government officials needs to be developed, but CSO networks have come a long way.

Networks are inherently unstable organisational forms with strong emotional and ideological forces pulling them towards being more of a people's movement. At the same time there are strong pragmatic forces from the external environment pushing them in the direction of advocacy NGOs with nominal membership and secretariat-managed funding and resources. CSO networks in Malawi are struggling with this and increasingly drifting away from their networking function.

Already members, donors and some board members are increasingly disgruntled with their secretariats. They perceive that the performance of CSO networks is declining. Members are investing less time in the networks and the knowledgeable and committed donors are withdrawing, citing poor performance from the networks. CSO networks themselves have very limited systems for monitoring and evaluating their impact. In some cases, staff appears blissfully ignorant of the performance problems and does not realise the urgency of addressing the organisational issues.

CSO networks will exist as networks only in name and become *de facto* advocacy NGOs if the issue of membership participation is not addressed soon. Whilst this is a realistic and not necessarily negative option, a decision for such a shift of identity should be taken deliberately by the governance and leadership of the organisation, and should not happen inadvertently.

Re-asserting network identity requires significant organisational changes, for instance in terms of developing the leadership and governance of the network secretariats to ensure that they are able to deliver on their core networking process. Member contributions will need to be prioritised and systems set up to motivate, measure and track the most vital resource – the participation and commitment of members. CSO networks have focused on measuring project outputs, rather than on the difficult, but important developmental task of networking and building member capacity and ownership.

Rather than blindly following the institutional forms of others, CSO networks need to think through how they can retain as much dynamism and flexibility as possible, in order to mobilise their constituents and achieve their priority objectives together.

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Abstract

This article summarises the results of an applied research project undertaken by INTRAC. The research project aimed in particular to understand the development of civil society networks in Malawi over the last four years, assess their contribution to poverty reduction and economic growth issues, and appraise their current strengths and challenges in articulating civil society voice.

The paper emphasises that CSO networks need to make strategic choices in the areas of identity and leadership. CSO networks need to decide whether to move towards more independence from their members and operate largely as advocacy NGOs with nominal membership, or to re-assert the commitment to being a network, working more efficiently and effectively in terms of achieving network goals. Lastly, CSO networks will drift away from their core purpose unless they attract leaders who are committed to networking principles.

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¹ A civil society organisation or CSO has a constituency base and does not fall under a government or business organisational form. Whilst NGOs are part of civil society, CSO is a wider term, also encompassing more informal organisations. When CSO networks want to take on an organisational form in Malawi, they often register as NGOs under the trustees act or company limited by guarantee.