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## ***WHAT MAKES CSO COALITIONS EFFECTIVE?***

***Lessons from Malawi***

**Rick James**

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INTRAC  
PO Box 563  
Oxford OX2 6RZ  
United Kingdom  
Tel +44 (0)1865 201851  
Fax +44 (0)1865 201852  
E-mail: [info@intrac.org](mailto:info@intrac.org)  
Website: <http://www.intrac.org>

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## ACRONYMS

ANCEFA	Africa Network of Coalitions for Education for All
CBNRM	Community-Based Natural Resource Management
CCJP	Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace
CERT	Centre for Education Research and Training
CISANET	Civil Society Agriculture Network
CONGOMA	Council for NGOs in Malawi
CQBE	Civil Society Coalition for Quality Basic Education
CRECCOM	Creative Centre for Community Mobilisation
CSC	Christian Service Committee
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
CURE	Co-ordination Unit for the Rehabilitation of the Environment
DANIDA	Royal Danish Foreign Ministry
DFID	Department for International Development
FAWEMA	Forum of African Women Educationalists
HIPC	Heavily-Indebted Poor Countries
IDS	Institute for Development Studies
IFI	International Financial Institutions
INGO	International NGO
IPF	International Policy Fellows
LTF	Civil Society Land Reform Task Force
MASPA	Malawi Schools Parents Association
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MEJN	Malawi Economic Justice Network
NDI	National Democratic Institute
NGO	Non-Government Organisation
ODI	Overseas Development Institute
PPE	Priority Poverty Expenditure
PRSP	Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper
TUM	Teachers Union of Malawi
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
VVP	Volgo-Vyatsky Potential
WLSA	<a href="#">Women and Law in Southern Africa</a>

# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1. CSO Coalitions

The last few years have witnessed a seismic shift in the perceived role of civil society.<sup>1</sup> Donors in particular have recognised "more pluralistic forms of governance and decision-making are seen to be more effective in developing a social consensus about structural changes in the economy and other key reforms" (Edwards and Gaventa 2001:3). The earlier focus on the state (1960s and 70s) and the market (1980s) has given way to a more interactive view of societies in which the associational realm plays more critical roles (Edwards 2001). The new orthodoxy of 'good governance' in the democratisation process has thrust CSOs onto centre-stage of development, but now with a dual role. In addition to their traditional service provision role, CSOs are also seen as pivotal actors in contributing to policy development and in holding government to account for its actions, an advocacy role. CSOs are seen as a countervailing power to the authoritarian tendencies of the state and as a site for peoples' participation in the development process (Howell 2000:4). USAID (United States Agency for International Development) even defines CSOs in these terms: "non-state organisations that can act as a catalyst for democratic reform" (Howell 2000:12).

The Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) process is a concrete example of this shift. The World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) have attempted to replace the much-maligned conditionalities of Structural Adjustment Policies by the concept of a 'country-owned' PRSPs. This 'country-ownership' explicitly requires that the PRSP is developed in co-operation with other stakeholders, particularly civil society groups who are directly affected by, or working to address, poverty.

Civil society advocacy through involvement in policy development and implementation is hoped to lead to:

- better analysis and assessment of the situation from the diverse perspectives of those directly affected;
- improved prioritisation of strategies by listening to the poor themselves;
- greater likelihood of sustained implementation through broader ownership;
- improved clarity in implementation roles between different stakeholders;
- greater awareness of government commitments enabling citizens to hold government to account; and,
- increased potential for monitoring outcomes in terms of service delivery and budgets.

It is clear that for CSOs to play an effective role in advocacy, they must work together. To have significant impact, CSOs must speak in a unified voice, rather than with lone, isolated and divided voices. As a result, CSO coalitions, alliances and networks are increasingly viewed as vehicles that are critical to CSOs' ability to play their role in good

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<sup>1</sup> Civil Society is a contentious and ill-understood term. For the purpose of this study we define it as 'arenas in which organisations and individuals play intermediary roles between the level of the family on the one hand and the state and the market on the other, but which enjoy a degree of freedom from the state and the market' (Beauchlerk and Heap 2001:2). We will use the term Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) to mean organisations that exist in these arenas.

governance. As it is realised that the co-operation of multiple stakeholders is necessary to transform social problems in development, they are also seen as important in helping CSOs learn from each other and scale-up the impact of their service delivery work. A diverse CSO coalition is able to bring together a wide range of expertise and experience, enabling them to combine competence and resources in new ways.

CSO coalitions<sup>2</sup>, however, are a very different form of organisation to 'normal' organisations. Diverse, independent organisations coming together voluntarily to achieve a specific purpose results in a 'virtual' form of organisation. Coalitions are very complex and inherently unstable, increasingly difficult to co-ordinate as they grow in size, geographic reach and functional diversity. The diversity of members, which is a source of their strength, also means that, "differences in social identities, social change ideologies, and programme strategies make it difficult to forge agreements. At the same time NGOs compete with each other for external financial resources, recognition and legitimacy" (Ashman 2001:4). Coalitions are challenging, volatile and paradoxical organisational forms.

CSO coalitions are also complex because they are very responsive to the changing environment – indeed their very existence arises from a perceived opportunity or threat from their environment. As a result of this, "boundaries between organisations and their environments are often fuzzy. Alliance agendas, structure and activities tend to change over relatively short periods of time" (Ashman 2001:14). This need for quick reaction places particular demands on how leadership is organised. On the one hand, strong central leadership is required to react quickly and decisively to a change in the environment, but on the other hand, coalitions need to work with the decentralised leadership and participative decision-making model that they are advocating for from government. For, if coalitions are "not handled with care they may reflect as much inequality as they are trying to undo" (Van Tuijl and Jordan 1999:14).

To lead, work within, or support CSO coalitions requires structures, styles and strategies that are different from what most CSOs are used to. By their nature they are relatively disorganised and unstable, but as Ashman (2001:14) points out, "perhaps if alliances are too stable they lose their effectiveness in achieving social change". What is clear, is that if CSOs are to be effective in their vital advocacy role, all involved need to understand more about this complex and unsteady organisational form.

## **1.2. This Publication**

The aim of this Occasional Paper is to highlight lessons learned by emerging CSO coalitions in Malawi in order for CSOs and donors in other countries to improve their own support for these vital, but complex entities. The publication is aimed at donors,

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<sup>2</sup> In this report we shall use the term coalition to encompass networks and alliances, rather than the acronym CAN (Coalitions, Alliances and Networks). This is an over-simplification as there are some differences between them. The literature defines networks as loosely organised groups of organisations that share values and ideologies and function primarily on the basis of information exchange; alliances are more organised groups of organisations that share common concerns, synchronise efforts and resources and have a well-defined understanding about how they will work together; coalitions are more tightly-organised groups of diverse organisations that need each other to accomplish goals beyond the capacities of individual members. Coalitions tend to produce a new organisational entity (Ashman 2001:5; Fowler 1997:112-14).

international NGOs and CSOs involved in supporting CSO coalitions either through membership or financing. We believe that despite the fact that the lessons are drawn from one particular country, many of the findings also apply to CSO coalitions in different parts of the world.

This research analysed the experience of the following civil society coalitions in Malawi: the Coalition for Quality Basic Education (CWBE); Malawi Economic Justice Network (MEJN); and the Land Reform Task Force (LTF).

A variety of data gathering methods were used including: analysis of international best practice through secondary literature review; review of documents from the coalitions; 26 semi-structured interviews with CSO/donor/government coalition stakeholders; observation of Land Task Force meeting; feedback and analysis workshops with Oxfam and coalition members.

A number of necessary qualifications should be made:

- All the coalitions involved in the research are at a very early stage of their lives – none are more than 18 months old. As such the lessons emerging may have particular relevance to young coalitions;
- This is a time-bound snapshot of a very dynamic process and, given the aforementioned fluidity of coalitions, specific issues highlighted may change even before the report is produced;
- Obviously inherent limitations of time and resources meant that not all coalition members or outside stakeholders could be interviewed and not all coalitions could be observed through meetings; and,
- Any such data gathering process is necessarily subjective – it analyses and filters different people's perceptions of their own experience.

## **2. MALAWI COALITION CASES**

### **2.1. Civil Society Coalition for Quality Basic Education (CQBE)**

The advent of multi-party democracy in Malawi in 1994 heralded the introduction of Universal Primary Education. While great strides have been made in improving the quantity of primary education, increasing concerns exist about the quality of basic education. Oxfam and ActionAid contracted a research study in January 2000 to analyse the key issues in primary education in Malawi and identify potential ways in which CSOs could address them. They then contracted a further piece of research to assess the viability of forming an NGO coalition.

The research findings were presented back to a group of 23 CSOs in July 2000. These CSOs were very keen to do something about the issues raised, but were unsure whether they should do this through the existing ActionAid-sponsored 'NGO-Government Alliance' or whether to set up their own coalition which did not involve government as a member. Eventually a separate CSO coalition was established in order for CSOs to develop a common voice on an issue before engaging government.

The goal of the CQBE is "achieving measurable change in the quality of basic education by 2002 through supporting and influencing the implementation of government and donor policy in Malawi". This is done through dual objectives of undertaking research and advocacy on specific basic education issues; and enhancing co-ordination, capacity-building and learning amongst CSO coalition members.

In its advocacy role the coalition identified the poor quality of teachers as the primary need and the coalition's prime initial focus. To improve the quality of teachers, they prioritised (using a problem tree approach) the need for more funding for teacher training centres, a greater availability of teacher learning materials and improved conditions of service for teachers.

Although the coalition started off with a preponderance of International NGO (INGO) involvement, with particular energy from Oxfam, CARE and VSO, CQBE have made efforts to ensure more local CSOs are increasingly involved. At present negotiations are taking place to integrate with the 'NGO-Government Alliance'. Provided the thorny differences of government involvement and payment of travel allowances can be resolved, then there is every likelihood of this merger occurring.

The CQBE met eight times in its first year and initially established a temporary secretariat at CARE. In April 2001, the Teachers Union of Malawi (TUM) took over the secretariat and in August 2001 secured 12 months funding (approximately \$30,000) from Oxfam to cover the cost of establishing the secretariat and operational costs of the coalition.

While TUM assumes "responsibility for overall management of the project", a steering committee of three people has "responsibility for the secretariat, giving guidance and direction and on-going support to the co-ordinator".

The main activities undertaken by the coalition include:

- meetings every two months;
- research, for example, 'Community Sensitisation and Mobilisation' by Centre for Education Research and Training (CERT) with Malawi Schools Parents Association (MASPA);
- representation on key national and international fora – made presentations at the last two Government/Donor Review meetings; now a regular member of monthly Government/Donor Co-ordination meeting;
- outreach through meetings with key stakeholders; production and distribution of briefing papers; and press releases; and,
- development of CSO coalition membership.

In its first 16 months CQBE has developed a close network of 16 CSO member organisations, representing a broad range of CSOs including trades unions, local NGOs, international NGOs and churches. It has gained recognition by the Ministry of Education and donors to such an extent that they have been invited to attend the monthly Donor/Government Co-ordination meetings and been asked to make presentations to the annual Donor/Government Review. Their recent research on Community Mobilisation has fed directly into the donor strategy on education. The CQBE has also gained recognition and worked closely with the National Assembly, in particular the Parliamentary Committees on Education as well as Budget and Finance.

The CQBE has successfully advocated for the resumption of teacher training after a gap of two years and with 300 extra students. They have also lobbied successfully for three Priority Poverty Expenditures (PPEs) for education to be included in the national budget for the first time (which TUM has struggled for unsuccessfully on its own during the last three years). They have also managed to get an increase in teacher salaries included in the 2001-02 national budget.

## **2.2. Malawi Economic Justice Network (MEJN)**

MEJN is a network of CSOs involved in issues of economic governance in Malawi. Its initial roots were in the Campaign against Debt Cancellation, which was headed by the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace (CCJP). Various meetings were held during 2000 on debt issues, but "due to organisational problems and lack of funding limited impact was achieved".

CSO interest was stimulated by the government's proposed launch of the PRSP process and CCJP's arranging of a three-day PRSP conference in November 2000 attended by 27 CSOs in Mangochi. The CSOs present decided that they had to take concerted action to extend the PRSP formulation process and increase civil society involvement. The initial focus of MEJN has been the PRSP process, but according to its own minutes, "since its inception MEJN has operated on an *ad hoc* basis without a properly laid down set of objectives". In September 2001 the steering group decided its mission would be that:

MEJN is a coalition of CSOs. We stand for poverty reduction through equitable distribution of economic opportunities, resources and income. We will achieve this by the full participation of civil society in economic governance using policy research, advocacy, dialogue, monitoring and capacity-building.

At that same meeting it was agreed that MEJN would broaden its focus from the PRSP process to the causes of poverty both internally and externally. Objectives included CSO capacity-building for advocating on economic justice; participation throughout the PRSP process (including budget monitoring); promoting fairer terms of trade and conditions for aid and advocating for debt cancellation.

After initial meetings with donors and government in December and January following the Mangochi workshop, and a further PRSP Conference in February 2001, a task force was nominated and 3 months funding was secured from Oxfam to set up the secretariat in CCJP. A co-ordinator was employed to head the MEJN secretariat. Oxfam gave a further grant of 2.7 million Kwacha [\$38,000] to cover operating costs from June to December 2001.

There are currently almost seventy CSOs who are deemed members as they have been present at least at one meeting. A more committed group of twenty are in a steering group and of these ten are members of the task force. Representatives of NGOs, churches, trades unions, professionals, students, and the media make up the taskforce. Their role is to provide direction to the MEJN secretariat, while CCJP is responsible for the day-to-day management and administration of the project.

The main activities undertaken to date include:

- network meetings;
- production of newsletters;
- production of position papers;
- workshop for church leaders on the PRSP (in collaboration with CSC and CCJP);
- research on the PRSP process in Malawi and other countries;
- meetings with government, Parliamentarians and donors; and,
- international workshops in Ethiopia, Uganda, and Honduras on the PRSP process.

MEJN has had considerable impact so far in the eyes of many. In his departure speech, the World Bank Resident Representative Robert Liebenthal asserted that one of the highlights of his tenure in Malawi was that, "Civil society groups have played a significant role in influencing the time-table and the method of consultation, as well as the evolving content of the strategy" (*Weekend Nation* 2001).

MEJN campaigned successfully for the extension of the PRSP formulation process from April to September 2001. It has ensured that civil society has been more involved in the PRSP process through their lobbying: in January 2001 just four NGOs were initially invited to participate in the PRSP, but by April there were 101 CSO representatives on the PRSP working groups. As a result, the PRSP was "among the most participatory exercises in the country's brief history of democratic policy-making. The inclusion of CSOs in the functioning of sectoral working groups allowed the process to move from simple consultation to more substantive participation" (Jenkins and Tsoka 2001:6).

As well as these 'process' changes, there have also been a number of 'developmental indicators' of capacity-building within civil society and improved relations with government. Jenkins and Tsoka (2001:38) go on to state that, "the coming together of a civil society network to engage with government and donors on economic policy is

perhaps the most promising development to have emerged from Malawi's PRSP process". Increased economic literacy has been brought to CSOs through the MEJN meetings, the workshops, the newsletters and the briefing papers. In addition, there has been increased dialogue and communication between CSOs and government as well as CSOs and donors with better sharing of information and invitations to meetings.

### **2.3. Land Task Force (LTF)**

The 1996-98 Presidential Commission on Land recommended the development of a National Land Policy. A 'consultative' exercise was carried out in 1999 and 2000 by a consultant and a draft policy produced. USAID funding for the Nature Project was made conditional of the existence of a policy and the government suddenly announced that it would finalise the land policy by March 2001.

CURE, a co-ordinating body of Environmental NGOs, approached Oxfam for support in mobilising CSOs to lobby government on this draft policy. CCJP had already been negotiating with Oxfam for funding for an advocacy programme (including the Land Policy) for some time. Oxfam themselves had already sought external analysis of the Draft Land Policy from Robin Palmer (of Oxfam) and produced a four page issues paper for the National Land Conference in October 2000. Oxfam, CURE and CCJP met and called a meeting of CSOs concerned with land issues. This was based on the existing CBNRM/Environment (Community-Based Natural Resource Management) Task Force.

Participants at a CSO meeting during the National Land Conference in October 2000 concluded that CSOs must do something in response to the draft Land Policy. Out of this the Land Task Force was born. The initial goal was to slow the government speed on the land policy and to advocate for greater civil society involvement in its development. No terms of reference for the LTF were developed.

Just as this advocacy process was getting underway, the CURE Director, who had taken the lead in the development of the LTF, resigned from his post at CURE in February 2001. No one within the existing LTF members took over and it was left to the new director at CURE to reluctantly assume leadership of the LTF. Meetings have been held in May, August, October and November 2001, but it still remains a loose network of interested parties, rather than anything more formalised. Even the name changes: from CBNRM and Land Task Force, via Civil Society Land Reform Task Force to Task Force on Land Policy Reform Advocacy.

There have been *ad hoc* initiatives undertaken such as press releases by CURE and CCJP to extend the land policy development process. Plans were made to organise a CSO consultation forum on the new land policy, but this did not get scheduled until March 2002 as LTF members did not initially produce the position papers they had agreed to. In terms of gender, one LTF member, WLSA (Women and Law in Southern Africa), took its own initiative to produce a position paper on the gender dimensions to the land policy. The LTF followed this up by setting gender targets for the Land Policy and communicating them directly to the Ministry of Lands.

So far the impact of the LTF is limited as CSO participation in the Land Policy has remained still very sparse. The LTF has not yet managed to organise its own conference to analyse the issues.

### 3. THE INFLUENCE OF THE CONTEXT IN MALAWI

CSO coalitions grow out of a specific context or environment. They are profoundly affected by this context. As Ashman points out, "important clues to CAN (Coalitions, Alliances, Networks) capacity may be found in the history and broad social contexts of the CANs" (Ashman 2001:6). Before examining the CSO coalitions that have sprouted in Malawi, we must first highlight some of the key contextual factors that affect their development.

#### 3.1. Cultural Factors

In Malawi there still exists very considerable respect, for authority and power. Experience of challenging established authority is very limited. This deference to authority was central to traditional society as, "opposition to the chief is non-existent among the Ngoni and to some extent among the Chewa as well" (Poeschke and Chirwa 1998:27). Many Chichewa proverbs in common use today illustrate this notion of not challenging authority:

*Atambala awiri salira mkhola limodzi* – Two cocks do not crow in one kraal.

*Wamkulu sawuzidwa* – He is old...therefore he is right.

*Chalaka bakha nkhuku singatole* – If a duck cannot pick it up then a chicken certainly cannot.

*Mlendo amadza ndi kalumo kakuthwa* – A stranger brings the sharper blade.

*Wamkulu salakwa amangoiwala* – The old people do not err, they just forget.

The British colonial government built on this submission and intolerance of dissent before Dr Hastings Banda, Malawi's first President, reinforced it further with his four cornerstones of "unity, obedience, discipline and loyalty". Since Banda's death and the democratic elections in 1994, even though the "political system and the leadership has changed, the actual practice of politics remains as it was under the previous government. Politics is still used as a tool for intimidating others, particularly the ones who hold different views and opinions" (Poeschke and Chirwa 1998:xi). There is still a fear of speaking out and taking responsibility, as likely punishment is greater than potential reward. It is still rare for a Malawian to openly confront authority or question poorly conceived regulations (Cammack 1999).

Another powerful cultural influence in Malawi is the fear and jealousy which exists and the consequent lack of openness. This undoubtedly undermines attempts by CSOs to work together in coalitions. As Cammack (1999:17) states, "jealousy is widely recognised by Malawians as detrimental to the smooth functioning of the community. Though destructive, it is found in most offices, villages, communities, and development projects". People are not generally very open with information. As a Malawian CSO director pointed out there is the sense that "if you tell others your plans nine time out of

ten they will sabotage them. It doesn't work here to collaborate. People use information to pre-empt you". He stated that as a result, civil society itself is very weak and disorganised.

### **3.2. Social Factors**

Other social factors which affect CSO coalitions are that education levels and analytical skills amongst CSO staff are limited (certainly when compared with NGOs in other countries – one NGO in Bangladesh, BRAC, has ten PhDs in one department alone). Few CSO staff have reached Masters level and as a result there is sometimes not a very deep understanding of the complexities of the issues they are fighting for. The best local NGO staff are often poached by international NGOs, which further decapitates the CSO sector. There are no established local policy research institutes to assist CSOs understand these issues.

There are also problems with a lack of new ideas and innovation amongst CSOs, as they tend to copy other's projects or donors wishes. This can be attributed to the Banda years when "people lost the ability to think, as people were thought for. People lost their creativity. Creative dissent is healthy for any society, but it was not tolerated here" (Cammack 1999:21).

### **3.3. Political Factors**

In the political sphere multi-party democracy is still young: "the majority of Malawians have limited knowledge about the separation between government and ruling party" (Poeschke and Chirwa 1998:vii). As a result accusations of being anti-government are very close to the surface. On the one hand, "New ideas, different solutions, dissent and non-conformity are undervalued still. The government's first instinct is to proclaim those who disagree with it, opposition and political enemies" (Cammack 1999:21). On the other hand, the present government is more open to change than both the previous regime and neighbouring countries (Zambia, Zimbabwe and Mozambique). Access to top government officials is very easy and CSO leaders often have high level personal contacts such as, for instance, people they went to school with.

### **3.4. Economic Factors**

The abject economic situation in Malawi and resource dependence on aid, makes government responsive to donor pressure and makes economic insecurity a major influence on CSO coalitions. At an organisational level this insecurity of funding promotes a sense of competition for limited resources amongst CSOs. As most CSOs exist at subsistence level, they have very little spare time and money to invest in CSO coalitions, particularly when few have managed to mainstream their advocacy work into their programme budgets. The short-term demands for individual survival often take precedence over medium-term collective success on an issue. Funding issues can often derail coalitions as may have occurred with the Church/NGO Consortium.

At an individual level, the low CSO salaries (certainly set against the economic and social demands of the extended family in the context of high HIV/AIDS prevalence) make 'allowances' very attractive incentives, particularly when foreign travel is involved. As a respondent commented, "we Malawians do not turn down travel opportunities – travel is often more important than getting the job done". This desire, combined with

donor agencies increasingly wanting local representation at international fora, mean that key NGO leaders appear to spend more time out of the country than within.

### **3.5. Implications for CSO Coalitions**

The implications for CSO coalitions in Malawi are that they operate in a context where:

- People are not used to challenging authority;
- Government is not used to being constructively challenged;
- There is limited analytical capacity in CSO sector;
- CSOs are not used to working together;
- CSOs have limited spare capacity to give to coalitions – their own survival remains paramount;
- Coalition members are very interested in daily financial allowances and foreign travel perks;
- Accusations of partisanship and politicking are very close to the surface; and,
- The potential exists for CSOs to influence government through access and donor pressure.

## **4. LEARNING FROM MALAWIAN COALITION EXPERIENCE**

### **4.1. Process of Development**

CSO coalitions appear to follow a common pattern of phases.

1. Coalescing of CSO interests triggered by a workshop (sometimes based around research like CQBE or an up-coming event). The issues and CSO interests are explored before deciding how to move forward.
2. The 'coalition' members begin to have relatively informal networking meetings and take concrete actions. At this stage it is more of a network establishing credibility than a 'coalition'.
3. As these actions require increasing time and co-ordination a secretariat is established within member and actions and coalition meetings become more formal, but the management of the secretariat is split between the secretariat host (responsible for day-to-day management of the funded project) and a coalition steering group or task force (who provide direction to the co-ordinator). This stage best describes CQBE.
4. The secretariat is registered independently and outside of the host. Other coalitions, "at the most organised stage they develop collective governance bodies that are representative and independent of any individual member" (Ashman 2001:12). Although MEJN has now registered independently of the host, as a company limited by guarantee, but is still in the process of developing a workable governance structure.

Progression through these stages may not be as linear as it appears, but it generally follows that they evolve from relatively loose informal to more structured, complex and formally organised. Formalisation does have certain advantages, but there are also very real costs in terms of loss of flexibility and membership commitment. As Nancy Foy warns, "the effectiveness of a network is inversely proportional to its formality" (quoted by Handy 1988:109) There is the real danger of going too fast through the stages. Stage 1 is particularly important and initially it was passed through too quickly by LTF so that now they are having to return to this starting point. Patience is essential. As Edwards and Gaventa (2001:9) point out,

Research has shown that NGO networks can achieve their policy goals, build capacity amongst NGOs in the South, and preserve accountability to grassroots constituencies if they consciously plan to do so from the outset and are prepared to trade some amount of speed and convenience in order to negotiate a more democratic set of outcomes.

#### **4.1.2. Longevity and Sustainability**

There appears to be general consensus in Malawi that coalitions need to be long-term. As one International NGO promoter of CSO coalitions stated, "our whole business is that they do not have a limited life". INTRAC would question this being an essential facet of

CSO coalitions. Our Executive Director, Brian Pratt, points out, "This thinking seems very restricted as it makes an assumption that organisational sustainability is a legitimate goal, rather than as issues wax and wane so should coalitions".<sup>3</sup> All organisations have a certain life-cycle and particularly unstable coalitions, which have to be very responsive to their changing environment and are based on the voluntary commitment of members. As new issues come, new coalitions should be born and it may be a mistake (as occurred with the Land Task Force) to use an existing coalition for a new purpose. Similarly it is counter-productive to keep a coalition alive, once the fire has gone out. As Ashman (2001:14) states, "A long-term perspective suggests that ebbs and breaking up of alliances are normal. It may be more important to sustain the visions, relationship and experience than alliance formations *per se*".

## **4.2 Key Variables in CSO Coalition Success or Failure**

### **4.2.1. The Issue Itself**

For CSO coalitions to develop they need to coalesce around a specific issue. The nature of this issue: its profile; complexity; CSO experience of it; attitude of government towards it; and donor interest in it, will have a profound influence on the success of the coalition. For example, because the PRSP was such a high profile and topical issue, it was relatively easy to mobilise CSOs around it, even though economic rights was a fairly new issue in Malawi. One CSO, Christian Service Committee (CSC), was already in the process of organising a workshop for churches to understand the PRSP, even before MEJN appeared.

While the land issue was certainly high profile, the LTF was hampered by the complexity of the policy. The CSO members did not really understand the technical aspects of the land issue on which they were trying to lobby. Even within LTF meetings "discussions were above the heads of most people". Few LTF members ever read and understood the Land Policy document. When tasks were set for task force members they were often not competent enough to deliver on the action point – "I was assigned by the director to write a paper on an issue which I did not understand" and as a result in terms of CSO input "we got trash or nothing at all". LTF's attempts to simplify issues (with outside support) remained too academic for most CSOs involved.

For the CQBE, the issue of basic education was an area in which many had direct first-hand experience. NGOs tend to have much more experience in the field of education than macro-economics or land law, which gives them a confidence in their own competence and enables them to speak with the authority of experience. Furthermore, the CQBE's understanding of the critical issues in the education sector was reinforced by the systematic analysis in the research project, which had been undertaken by Oxfam and ActionAid, prior to the establishment of the coalition. The issue was also easier for CQBE to deal with because they were advocating on the implementation of an existing education policy, not involvement in the development of that policy – which may be more sensitive.

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<sup>3</sup> Personal communication.

#### **4.2.2. Attitude of Government and Donors**

Closely linked to this, is the attitude of the government and the political sensitivity of the specific issue. Land ownership is a highly sensitive and politicised issue (as shown in Zimbabwe). While all development has political implications for how decisions are made and who controls resources, land is a particularly thorny issue with major vested interests at stake. The leader of the LTF at one point was receiving anonymous threatening calls and any CSOs challenging government on this issue were by implication seen as "trying to join politics". Government felt that civil society had already been consulted at least through the Presidential Commission on Land. In contrast, with the PRSP process government was more open to CSO involvement, largely because it was an explicit donor conditionality for Malawi to receive HIPC debt relief. MEJN was allowed to be very involved at various stages, particularly through the thematic working groups. This involvement has not always been comfortable as MEJN are perceived by government as being "confrontational" and have not always addressed issues "through the proper channels" choosing to send "a malicious document to the donor community". With the CQBE, government was very surprised to hear a CSO voice speaking out on education. Their reaction to this CSO involvement has been mixed (reflecting internal dynamics in the Ministry) with some welcoming CSO participation and others even ejecting CQBE representatives from the offices on one occasion. It is worth noting that there may be different perceptions within different departments and also between different parts of government. For example, parliament committees on Budget, Finance and Education have proved very positive about CSO involvement.

On the whole the Malawi government generally would prefer CSOs to work on policy by "simplifying, translating and disseminating policy", not being intimately involved in its development. Government support for CSO involvement appears to be "reluctant acquiescence". Where it is occurring, it is often more a result of donor pressure than government commitment.

As has been mentioned, the prime factor in influencing government acceptance of CSO involvement in the PRSP process was the fact that *civil society involvement was a donor conditionality* for the release of HIPC funds. MEJN built on this commitment by identifying and working with locally based bi-lateral donors, such as DFID and DANIDA, who were funding the Malawian PRSP process. Donors were also generally positive about CSO involvement in education, but it was certainly not a conditionality for their support. DFID even said that in their programme civil society engagement was so critical that "if CQBE did not exist, we would have had to create it". This is in sharp contrast to the donor position on land. It appears that donors like USAID, who had supported the Presidential Commission on Land, felt that public consultation had been done and that the priority now was to have a land policy, not an involved civil society.

#### **4.2.3. CSO Motivation and Ownership**

A prime factor affecting the success or failure of coalitions is the motivation for CSOs to get involved in the first place. This is obviously linked to their understanding of the issue and their appreciation of the benefits of working in a coalition. They must believe in the importance of working together. The different organisational incentives to be involved form the foundation of the coalition. Different members bring different needs and expectations to the coalition that need to be articulated. Few local CSO coalition members were clear about their own needs that the coalition was expected to meet. All

talked about the need for CSOs to come together to have a louder voice, but rarely mentioned what that voice would say. The International NGOs (INGOs) interviewed were clearer that the coalitions represent to them a vital means for them to achieve their strategic objectives in Malawi. It provides them with a local mouthpiece to advocate on issues important to them. Interestingly too, one INGO involved stated that "initially we went out of interest, but it threw up all sorts of ideas and opportunities" – as a result they have changed their whole strategy.

An effective CSO coalition requires that there are sufficient common threads amongst the different motivations. There needs to be like-mindedness. Too much diversity at the level of values is unproductive. It is important to *articulate and negotiate these interests at the forming stage* of a coalition. This is a critical, but sometimes by-passed, first step in coalition formation. It also requires on-going effort as illustrated by the successful Narmada Dam campaign in India, where "all agendas were repeatedly discussed among the various actors involved, and agreed upon" (Van Tuijl and Jordan 1999:9).

Another factor influencing the performance of the coalitions were the objectives and mission they developed. With MEJN and CQBE this effort to determine why they exist has been continuous and, although time-consuming, it has resulted in more focused coalitions who are able to adapt to their changing context. As CSO coalitions are looser structures with more fluid membership than 'normal' organisations, this *effort to clarify vision and objectives* cannot be a one-off achievement, but has to be an on-going theme. In contrast, the LTF has struggled to clarify what it really wants to achieve and why and has never had a terms of reference for its role.

The coalition must fulfil the *organisation mission and advocacy strategy* of the CSOs involved. If the issue is only loosely connected then a member's interest will understandably diminish. Many CSOs find it very difficult to say 'no' to joining a coalition, but easier just not to attend. Advocacy is still a relatively new role for CSOs in Malawi and many do not have advocacy as a core part of their funded programme strategy yet. If it is not core then it becomes difficult to justify the time and money required to make the coalition effective. This was particularly an issue for the LTF with one leader asking "how central is land advocacy to existing strategies of members?" and one member admitting "our organisation has not really bought into the Land Task Force". It appears that initially "organisations got involved due to good relations with CURE more than anything else". Ironically with CBQE, the confusion with the existing NGO/Government Education Alliance forced Coalition members to rigorously think through whether they really wanted a different coalition and why.

The degree to which members feel that they *own* the coalition has a major influence on its resulting effectiveness. A committed core of organisations is needed. In the CQBE there is a very high degree of ownership from the various institutions involved. Oxfam and CARE were initially very active in the CBQE, but increasingly other local CSOs like TUM, MASP, CRECCOM, and CERT are taking on more ownership and responsibility. TUM very much also see themselves as initiators of CQBE and as they take on the hosting of the secretariat, this ownership is likely to be further strengthened. Sharing the tasks amongst members has developed ownership - "members do 90% of the work". This will need to be maintained, rather than lost as the secretariat is established. The early existence of a secretariat in MEJN has perhaps undermined the development of ownership by CSOs. Having someone full-time employed - "MEJN secretariat does 90%

of the work" - may have allowed others to step back and therefore not develop their sense of ownership.

Motivation and ownership is much more than just organisational. The success of coalitions is dependent on the *commitment of individuals*. Personal interests in specific issues generate considerable energy, as illustrated by the Asian response to the draft Land Policy. For many coalition members, their time and effort may not yet be part of their job descriptions and will require voluntary time. Members need to be committed as individuals to ensure that there is consistency in turnout at meetings and that they are dedicated enough to fulfil any action plans accepted. Even before the problems with the loss of LTF leadership, members were not fulfilling commitments to write press releases and concept notes. Allowances for turning up to meetings are seen by some as a possible pollution of the value-based motivation. CQBE take issue with the NGO/Government Alliance approach to paying people to come to meetings, asserting that "no allowances keeps our motivation positive and not money-oriented". They ensure that their meetings last no longer than half a day to ensure that no accommodation is necessary. In all three coalitions, organisations have to show commitment by paying for staff time and transport costs (where possible).

#### **4.2.4. Leadership and Co-ordination**

The life force and energy of a coalition comes from key individuals, not impersonal organisations. For example, one respondent when asked by his organisation had been so involved in the coalition, replied, "well, it is my personal commitment really". Ultimately it is people that make things happen. Leaders are needed to inspire and articulate the vision for others to follow. Jennifer Chapman's analysis of international campaigns (in Edwards and Gaventa 2001:165) identifies that "individual champions play a key role in campaigning and are crucial to success at both national and the grassroots levels". In the cases she examined, these champions were "people with a flair for motivating others, who combined a social conscience with a strategic vision of how to push the issue forward". This is corroborated by research into 68 case studies from around the world which concluded that "in several of the most successful cases of citizen participation, their success can be attributed to a large measure to strong leadership" (Zonneveld 2001). Other research described this strong leadership as being a product of 'collective leadership', but that achieving collective leadership was far from easy. There is the need to balance the amount of time necessary for consensus decision-making with the needs for quick action and to moderate the tendencies for high profile NGO leaders to stand out (Ashman 2001:10).

In the Malawi coalition cases, Max Lawson, the Oxfam consultant, was a key actor particularly with MEJN and CBQE. He was "available" and "very hardworking" with "the means to do it". Furthermore, "Max had a dream" and "had the vision". Different respondents commented "he has provided the leadership"; describing him as the "prime mover", "the networker", "the driver", and "the backbone". This initiative was complemented by two or three others also playing strong leadership roles in both MEJN and CBQE. This provides these coalitions with leadership strength-in-depth and should enable both to survive his recent departure, although MEJN has also had to cope with the loss of one of its other founders, Francis Ng'ambi who "very much tirelessly drive the process forward" before his departure from CCJP.

The experiences of the coalitions demonstrate that this *leadership is essential, but that it cannot come from just one person*. In the LTF, Robert Kafakoma was initially the charismatic leader rallying the CSOs to get involved in the land policy. But when he left CURE there was a leadership vacuum. Other founder members of the coalition did not assume the leadership role, so the new CURE director reluctantly took it on. Unfortunately for the LTF, CURE had other priorities than the land policy (which did not even feature in their strategic plan) over the next few months, dealing with financial survival issues, the departure of key staff and a major external evaluation. *Effective CSO coalitions need both individual leadership combined with organisational ownership*. Indeed it is the aforementioned organisational ownership that provides the space within which individual commitment can flourish and provides continuity in the event of staff turnover. The following matrix provides an impression of the interaction of these two variables in the three coalitions.

<b>Individual Leadership</b>	<b>High</b>	<b>MEJN</b>	<b>CQBE</b>
	<b>Low</b>	<b>LTF</b>	
		<b>Low</b>	<b>High</b>
		<b>Organisational Ownership</b>	

A further dimension of this leadership variable is the transfer of leadership roles between the founders and the co-ordinator employed by the secretariat. The initial 'leadership' came from a number of key founders, but as the coalition is formalised there is a need to employ a full-time or part time co-ordinator. In both CQBE and MEJN, both co-ordinators were very involved from the beginning, but neither played the major leadership role in the early stages. As they become paid they take on more of the leadership role and the founders move into more governance of secretariat role. There are important issues to be resolved:

- How is this transfer of leadership worked through?
- Are they coordinators of membership efforts or leaders of the coalition?
- How are the co-ordinators viewed? How do they perceive themselves?
- What qualities are needed by these co-ordinators?

The leadership qualities required by the co-ordinators are considerable. Respondents identified:

- must be charismatic to "get very busy people to give their time to discuss and act on something which may not yet be a core part of their work";
- needs maturity and an ability to mediate conflict and build consensus;

- needs good analytical skills and understand the technicalities of the issue themselves;
- needs good communication skills, both verbal and written and not be scared to speak out;
- brings good personal contacts;
- dynamic, self-starter; and,
- committed to cause.

The co-ordinators in CQBE and MEJN need close supervision by the coalition steering group/task force. Both are taking on new responsibilities in a very complex and fluid organisational form of which they have no experience. Their *existence must not encourage the other leaders from reducing their involvement, but changing its form*. The coaching and mentoring that they have benefited from in the past from Max Lawson has been very effective and will need now to be sourced elsewhere.

#### **4.2.5. Secretariat and Governance Structure**

Intertwined with the issue of employing a co-ordinator is the establishment of a secretariat. As the coalitions developed in Malawi it was increasingly recognised that work cannot be done on a voluntary basis and there was a *need for some dedicated support*. In both MEJN and CQBE a co-ordinator has been employed, recruited full-time in the case of MEJN, and seconded part-time 40% with CQBE with some administrative and secretarial support. Physical resources such as computers and e-mail facilities have been purchased.

Both MEJN and CQBE secretariats are located within coalition members. MEJN had been initiated by Francis Ng'ambi at CCJP and so it made sense to house it there. TUM is an important, local and committed CQBE member, and after a hiatus over internal staffing issues, CQBE secretariat is there. Having a *physical location provides solid home, but it also inherently creates some distance from members* and coalitions; secretariats have to work hard to ensure that this distance does not undermine members' ownership. The host organisation also may bring its own baggage in terms of reputation as the coalition will be perceived through the strengths and weakness of its host. Also internal tensions within the host have the potential to adversely affect the secretariat. There may also be issues of salary levels as a coalition co-ordinator requires such strong qualities, which may not be possible within the host's salary scale. The decision to locate the secretariat with a member requires careful analysis and also careful negotiation with the host senior management, not just the individual who is part of the coalition.

The arrangement with the host organisation has initially been fairly informal, which is normal for new initiatives. This *loose structure allows flexibility, but increasingly will cause problems over time*. There is a dual accountability of the secretariat to the host (CCJP, TUM) and to the coalition task force. The arrangement that the secretariat reports to the host for management and administration issues and the task force for programme issues is blurred in reality. At present it is still not very clear whom they report to and responsibility may well fall between two stools. The host may feel they have responsibility without authority if something goes wrong. Added to this, the host is rarely paid for the necessary indirect management time being requested. On the other hand, task force members of MEJN also do not feel they are empowered to direct the

secretariat. These issues, however, are well known to both coalitions and MEJN in particular are in the process of dealing with these through the development of a constitution.

#### **4.2.6. The Membership**

A key factor in the success of coalitions is the breadth of membership that they embody, as well as having a committed core. All the three Malawi coalitions demonstrated a *broad diversity of membership*, with MEJN and LTF in particular, bringing together CSOs from the church, environment, human rights, livelihoods security, academia, student groups, trades union and media groups. The LTF has been energised recently by the involvement of more human rights NGOs. This diversity can be unproductive if it is not managed as we mentioned in the previous section and one MEJN member suggested that "we should have had team-building first". The CQBE was certainly helped by all being involved in education with an obvious common interest. Within the diversity of members some technical expertise in the field is essential, as with CBQE, but unlike the LTF.

This *building of membership* is an ongoing challenge, not a one-off activity at the beginning, particularly as members tend to drop off over time. Continuous efforts are needed to broaden the membership and keep existing members interested. The merger talks between the CQBE and NGO/Government Alliance are very important in this regard.

Analysis of average attendance at a sample of key coalition meetings in 2001 (not all meetings in coalition history) reveals some interesting dimensions of diversity:

	<b>CQBE</b>	<b>MEJN</b>	<b>LTF</b>
INGO members	55%	33% Taskforce 14% Steering Group	23%
Foreign participants	45%	33% Taskforce; 14% Steering Group	5%
Regional diversity	7% North; 10% Central; 38% South	33% North; 29% Central; 25% South	60% North; 24% Central; 10% South
Women	45%	0% Taskforce; 10% Steering Group	13%

*Involvement of INGO and foreigners in local CSO coalitions* brings both benefits and costs. INGO members often bring greater access to resources and international links and information. INGOs may also have prioritised advocacy and therefore have more staff time available to support such coalitions. Expatriates may also bring confidence to access high-level government officials and donors. They also sometimes have advocacy skills and ideas and experience from elsewhere. It is also clear that foreigners often bring high quality analysis and writing skills – in fact almost all the three coalitions' public statements, newsletters, and press releases have been written by foreigners.

On the other hand such involvement leads to the current perception from government that it is "all these white men operating behind MEJN" and the impression from some that MEJN is driven by Oxfam. Max Lawson, the Oxfam consultant paid to assist the coalitions, was branded as "someone bought by donors" and between "March-May 2001 people in MEJN started thinking that Max and Oxfam were trying to hijack the process". Even in the LTF there was a concern that they abdicated responsibility to Max for visiting key government people in Lilongwe when "we should have gone ourselves".

Both MEJN and particularly CBQE are concerned about this imbalance and resulting perceptions. CBQE has tried to involve more Malawian CSOs, base the secretariat at TUM, with a Malawian co-ordinator and ensure that Malawian CSOs make presentations at fora.

In terms of *regional diversity*, MEJN is the most balanced, CBQE local members are predominantly from the Southern region and LTF members are mostly from the Northern region. It is hard to say what influence this has had, but the dominance of northern region members in the LTF may possibly have fuelled government misperceptions of political interests.

In terms of *gender*, the CQBE is the only one "balanced" in active members perhaps reflecting greater female involvement in the education sector. The Inclusion of Women and Law in Southern Africa (WLSA) as a member of the LTF has meant that the LTF did explicitly push for incorporating gender concerns into the land policy.

Other dimensions of diversity in membership that may have affected coalition success include:

- the level of staff and the importance of contacting and communicating with heads of institutions, rather than more middle-level staff as in LTF;
- the geographic base – by being based in Blantyre, the LTF members abdicated responsibilities for meetings donor and government meetings to the two Lilongwe based members; and,
- the point of government involvement was obviously the major difference between the CQBE and the NGO-Government Alliance – the success of the former compared with the latter would point to the importance of excluding government from CSO coalitions.

#### **4.2.7. Representation**

The issue of representation is CSOs greatest asset and also their area of greatest weakness. While "NGOs claim that their access to and representation of the views of the mass of ordinary people is greatly superior to that of all governments, and especially authoritarian governments" (Cleary 1995:10), the mechanisms for achieving this representation are elusive and rarely developed. As Nyamugasira points out, "Southern NGOs can, at times, be a poor imitation of and often distort the voices of the "silent mass". All NGOs tend to be self-appointed and neither consult, nor give feedback to their constituencies". They feel more accountable to the North than to the local poor whose values and aspirations it is hard to prove they represent (1998:300). The flow of funding means that there may have been "a gradual hardening of the arteries in the NGO world as organisations become more bureaucratic and less prone to take risks or bear the costs of listening to those they seek to assist" (Edwards and Hulme 1997: 278).

There is therefore significant scepticism whether CSOs are as representative of actual civil society as they claim.

CSO coalitions must identify who they represent and on what basis. Chapman usefully identifies the different approaches to claiming legitimacy as well as the possible consequences (Edwards and Gaventa 2001:266)

Approach to Claiming Legitimacy	Possible Consequences
<b>Practice to Policy</b> – seeking to influence policy by pointing to practical experience on the ground	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Less open to dispute;</li> <li>• Works well for grassroots NGOs;</li> <li>• Complex message, difficult communication tool;</li> <li>• Can be challenged if NGOs have not genuinely consulted with people.</li> </ul>
<b>Values</b> – NGOs promote a particular value that is widely recognised in society or enshrined in international law	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Extremely powerful when combined with pictures, and stories and related to universal values;</li> <li>• Powerful when enshrined in international conventions;</li> <li>• Can lead to accusations of selecting values to attract Northern funds;</li> <li>• Can be challenged for talking, not doing;</li> <li>• Can be accused of speaking for beneficiaries rather than enabling them to express their views.</li> </ul>
<b>Knowledge and research</b> – acting as an expert on a particular issue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Works well when there is a consensus on topic or you have credible allies;</li> <li>• Good for more technically-based policy issues;</li> <li>• Open to challenge by views based on alternative research;</li> <li>• Open to question who sponsors research.</li> </ul>
<b>Grassroots and other CSOs</b> – legitimacy via adhering to and strengthening democratic principles and practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Works well at grassroots;</li> <li>• Necessary for civil society aims;</li> <li>• Long-term engagement required;</li> <li>• May mean campaigning opportunities missed;</li> <li>• Weak impact at higher policy levels.</li> </ul>
<b>Alliances and networks</b> – legitimacy gained from other members of the network who secure legitimacy from one of the above	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quickly spreads word to wide audience;</li> <li>• Gives strength of numbers;</li> <li>• Disputes over who owns work;</li> <li>• Requires significant management input.</li> </ul>

In the three coalitions examined, their breadth of membership means that they can *claim to be representative of CSOs, but perhaps not of civil society*. But all three are representative in a fairly *ad hoc* fashion and all are currently trying to address this issue. MEJN are developing membership criteria which will enable them to decide who they are speaking on behalf of; CQBE are hoping that merger talks with the Alliance will strengthen Malawian CSOs membership and LTF is organising a conference to interest a broader number of CSOs in land policy issues.

It is also important for issues of representation in the eyes of government to involve the national NGO umbrella body, CONGOMA. The Malawi government regards CONGOMA as the representative body of NGOs (though not other CSOs). CONGOMA has not been very involved in any of these three coalitions which has provoked slight resentment of coalitions "going it alone". An opportunity to broaden coalition membership and increase legitimacy has been lost, leaving the coalitions vulnerable to potential government restrictions on unregistered and illegitimate entities.

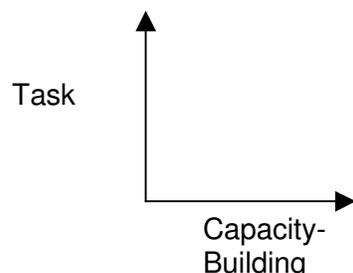
But CSO coalitions need to do more than simply have CSO members. They need to develop systems that their members can use to consult the actual beneficiaries on whose behalf they have the temerity to speak. As one respondent admitted, "we are supposed to consult beneficiaries to have the right to speak on their behalf. We assume they do, but in reality they do not". It only occurs implicitly through existing development programmes at grassroots level. As a result "we put words into their mouths". While CSO coalitions are supposed to be accountable to beneficiaries and members, but in the interviews most coalition respondents revealed that they saw their primary accountability to donors. One very useful way of consulting more with beneficiaries is through research projects, such as the recent one on community mobilisation conducted by CQBE.

CSO coalitions will always be vulnerable to such questions of representation and should be ready to respond. One coalition can never fully represent civil society's views. All they can say is that "we are not civil society, but we are a part of it". In the end, the issues they carry will probably be more important than the numbers they have with them. As Covey (1995) points out it may be that the technical merits of the argument are more important than the political base from which it comes.

#### **4.2.8. Dual Strategic Objectives**

Interestingly, both MEJN and CQBE have prioritised not just their advocacy role, but also their capacity-building role. It seems that *successful CSO coalitions in Malawi must have a dual strategy that includes building the capacity of their members* (and even wider civil society). If the capacity-building element is ignored then CSO coalitions will face the problem that they are unable to advocate effectively because their members do not really understand the issues they are advocating for.

Jane Covey (1995) identified the two criteria of task – the achievement of stated policy goals and capacity-building - strengthening the capacity of groups to advocate for their own interests as being the two axes of impact for coalitions.



To a large degree objectives of getting the advocacy task done and building CSO capacity to do it in the future are inter-related as "policy alliances must strengthen

grassroots participation if people are to develop the staying power required to build democratic societies" (Covey 1995:169). Yet having dual objectives will also necessarily involve trade-offs. In specific instances it will be important to prioritise whether it is more important to get the advocacy task done well or to build CSO capacity to do it themselves in the future. Trying to do both is necessarily more resource and time-intensive.

#### **4.2.9. The Advocacy Strategy**

Fundamental to the accomplishment of policy gains is a coherent campaign strategy coupled with adequate resources to influence decision-makers" (Covey 1995:175). Yet advocacy is a relatively new issue for Malawian CSOs to be involved in. Many NGOs feel that "advocacy is new and we do not know how to do it". Some key lessons from the early experience of these coalitions stand out and are reinforced by international experiences too:

As we saw in the section on CSO Motivation and Ownership, for civil society to participate effectively in advocacy they first need to thoroughly analyse the issues at hand. As one respondent commented, "We first have to get our own understanding and then decide what to do", which did not occur with the LTF. In addition to this coalitions need to be able to put forward well-reasoned arguments based on evidence rather than just opinion. The coalitions undertook this analysis in a number of important ways.

The starting point for the CQBE was a research project that looked at the status of primary education in Malawi and identified advocacy opportunities for CSOs. This analysis through research was the trigger to bring CSOs together and provided a very strong foundation for future work. They avoided accusations that faced the other coalitions that they, "jumped to conclusions based on hearsay". As Harper (in Edwards and Gaventa 2001:256) points out, "in a world of highly contested and contestable evidence, NGOs must ensure that their messages carry weight and authority". International experience from Central America reinforces this point, stating that "systematic and detailed research on very specific aspects of discretionary spending patterns made it possible to identify them clearly and highlighted the importance of solid research as a means to influence the actions of government (IBP 2000:31). Such systematic research is also key to CSO coalitions addressing the issue of representation. As Edwards and Gaventa (2001:283) suggest, "the use of participatory research methods to ensure a stronger link between the views and realities of local people and those being articulated by global policy actors". MEJN themselves researched the progress of the PRSP in Malawi and made recommendations for improving the rest of the formulation process. Included in this research were field trips to Uganda and Zambia in order to learn from comparative international experience. Most recently CQBE members have undertaken research into the next key issue they hope to address, namely community participation in education.

Another important way of developing an analysis of the issues used by all the coalitions, but by MEJN and CQBE in particular, was through on-going meetings with donors and government. The first two months of MEJN's existence (December 2000 and January 2001) was dedicated to learning more about the issue through systematic meetings. Similarly with the CQBE, they had a number of meetings with government and donors to find out why the Teacher Training Colleges were closed in order to then advocate

effectively. Being based in Lilongwe obviously helped both these coalitions have regular meetings with donors and government.

MEJN made good use of *international learning* through the network of international organisations analysing and advocating on PRSP processes globally such as Bretton Woods Project, EURODAD, Christian Aid, IDS, ODI and Jubilee 2000. This provided them with good analysis of the pertinent issues in any PRSP process. With the Land Task Force, international analysis of land policy was facilitated by Oxfam's contacts with Robin Palmer (though these proved very technical in nature).

It is clear from the Malawian cases that successful advocacy campaigns *focus on one issue*. This is reinforced by a different study of CSO coalitions elsewhere which stated that 'keeping objectives narrow and focused was cited in three cases as helpful in avoiding barriers of ideological conflict' (Ashman 2001:10). Getting a group of diverse CSOs to agree on which issue to start with is far from easy, but successful coalitions manage this. CQBE used the problem tree approach to cluster and prioritise key issues (highlighted by the research) before deciding on teacher training as their starting issue. MEJN was helped by the PRSP being a single issue. Within that they worked on extending the time frame for consultation and involving CSOs more in the PRSP drafting process. As it moves post-PRSP formulation stage, MEJN will face a bigger challenge in prioritising one issue within the very broad scope of its economic justice mandate, especially as it has just decided to broaden its focus to encompass a much wider set of objectives. It is important for coalition members to work out their criteria for prioritising: do you go for the most important issue? Or the most urgent? Or the one which offers the possibility of a quick victory? Or one which people know most about or are most excited about? A comparison of 68 cases of citizen participation concluded that

For an NGO to effectively engage in advocacy requires hard choices about resource allocation: which issue to take up? The risk for NGOs is to become overburdened and spread resources too thin. This in turn exposes them to superficiality, insignificance and ultimately to backfiring when targeted parties turn the table and start to question the accountability and representational aspects of the NGOs actions. (Van Tuijl and Jordan 1999:6)

Successful CSO coalitions put forward *credible policy recommendations*, rather than merely criticising which has been the tendency of CSOs to do in the past. Government is more willing to engage with CSOs who put forward constructive alternatives. Putting forward constructive alternatives was cited by many respondents as being a vital factor in MEJN and CQBE's successes. This is also reflected in experience from Russia, that "one reason that VVP has met with success...is that it has been able to offer the government practical solutions to the problem it faces and a clear plan for implementing them" (IBP 2000:42).

Successful CSO coalitions are able to *target their allies and adversaries* by analysing the forces for and against change on an issue. Although it is not always easy to identify who are the key decision-makers in government, especially with high turnover of staff, it is important to do so. Knowledge of the interests and power dynamics between major stakeholders helps CSOs target their efforts better. CQBE and MEJN have also been assisted by NDI to work closely with the chairs of key Parliamentary Committees, such

as Education and Budget and Finance. In the PRSP MEJN identified potential allies in donors who had invested financial resources in the success of the PRSP. The LTF has also made use of informal contacts to provide them with useful inside information on the policy development process. Personal ties, which overcome traditional mistrust between government and CSOs, can be very effective. International experience from Eastern Europe reinforces this point: "the personal contacts which IPF has cultivated has made it possible for the organisation to receive information in a timely manner" (IBP 2000:39).

The approaches that CSOs have used have been both confrontation and co-operation. In the context of Malawi, it is clear that government would prefer and would usually respond much more positively to a co-operative approach. In an increasingly uncertain world, CSO coalitions must beware of the temptation to advocate from a pre-determined position of confrontation. CQBE has been at pains to emphasise to government how they can be there for the government's own benefit (and yet government has still responded defensively at times to veiled criticism). Clearly the biggest mistake that MEJN made in the eyes of the government was to assert through international organisations and the internet that the "PRSP process is a joke". This confirmed government's worst suspicions that CSOs were not interested in dealing with issues constructively within the country, but had the agenda of merely bashing government in the international community. It illustrates the "temptation to leap-frog the national arena and go direct to Washington or Brussels, where it is easier to gain access to senior officials and thus achieve a response" (Edwards and Gaventa 2001:8). To effectively influence a government that is highly mistrustful of CSOs requires great tact, maturity, communication and diplomacy skills. At times it also requires confrontation, but done in a manner that enables face to be saved.

This point is mirrored internationally where, "experience has shown that confrontation has caused governments to intensify administrative control. Because they are often the only voice available to the rural poor, the challenge for NGO leaders is to speak plainly, resist co-optation and survive to negotiate another day" (Bratton 1989:584). Similarly in Asia, "authoritarian regimes, such as Indonesia's, generally respond negatively to public questioning of government decisions, especially if such criticism involves loss of face by the decision-makers.... whereas a more conciliatory approach "frequently results in fruitful co-operation between government and civil society in pursuit of common objectives" (Cleary 1995:33). As Harper (in Edwards and Gaventa 2001:256) points out, "In a context in which there are no simple answers to sustainable development dilemmas, participatory and consensual modes of policy advocacy will need to take a more central place in NGO campaigns".

A final element and future challenge of the advocacy strategy of CSOs in Malawi is that of their future role in budget monitoring. As CSOs have effectively advocated for Priority Poverty Expenditures (PPEs), they are then in a good position to monitor whether government does actually spend the money in the ways they said they would. The actual spending of money is where the greatest potential for influence may lie, though also possibly the greatest area of potential conflict. MEJN and CQBE are working with NDI to develop a strategy to shift their activities to include the budget-monitoring role. This is clearly a complex field and they intend to use key academic consultants to assist them in this process. Even with this support, such activities will require significant research and analysis skills within CSOs, which are not there at present. It is an interesting observation that CSOs are prioritising budget monitoring of government, when their monitoring of their own programmes is almost universally a major weakness.

Government may well ask how CSOs have the audacity to try and monitor others, when CSOs abjectly fail to monitor themselves.

A linked strategic dilemma for these young coalitions in Malawi will be whether they prioritise advocacy work internationally. Many argue that advocacy can only be successful when action is taken at multiple levels (grassroots – regional – national – international). The benefits of working simultaneously at different levels needs to be balanced with the local capacity available. In the last two months alone the single MEJN staff member has been asked to go to France and Honduras. A concern is that many umbrella bodies spend so much time representing their members at international fora that there is no time to do actual work in Malawi. Similarly, CQBE already being asked to host the Southern African ANCEFA (Africa Network of Coalitions for Education for All), which TUM wisely refused the first time. Before the next demand, the coalitions must work out how strategically important their work outside of Malawi is and when and how it might fit their core strategy.

#### **4.2.10. The Capacity-Building Strategy**

The second element of a successful coalition strategy is that of capacity-building of members. *Capacity-building is not a secondary, 'add-on' aspect to the strategy, but a core element.* This need is directly related to the limited educational context and consequent small human resource pool in Malawi. Capacity-building does not take place simply through one-off events, but is also an on-going participative approach to decision-making and advocacy. This capacity-building may be needed in three main areas:

1. the technical areas of the issue at hand;
2. the strategies and skills of advocacy; and,
3. the workings of coalitions, including management.

Some LTF members assert that "the LTF should have started with the capacity-building of its members on technical issues pertaining to land". With the CQBE, the research process and feedback, combined with subsequent discussions took members through this process (and as has been pointed out they were starting from a higher technical level). The CQBE has even used their research projects as means to build capacity of members through their involvement in the research. With MEJN the lack of economic literacy amongst members was highlighted early on as a key constraint and some efforts made to conduct economic literacy seminars. Yet to really contribute at an influential level requires more than simply basic literacy and MEJN continues to be hampered by lack of post-graduate qualifications in economics.

Both the MEJN and the CQBE had training sessions for members on advocacy strategies and skills. Although some members of the LTF had received advocacy training previously, the perception remained that, "none of us were capable of waging an advocacy campaign". There is still a need for CSOs to know much more about negotiation, "parliament, budgeting, working the system and working together". As one CSO respondent pointed out, this can be effectively done through, "accompanied advocacy".

CSO coalitions are a new concept in Malawi and not an easy one to manage in a context of fear and mistrust. As Ashman points out, "the vital, dynamic and seemingly messy

characteristics of NGO alliances need to be appreciated" (2001:14). There is a need for more understanding about the workings of coalitions and it is hoped that this report will be one step in this process. The secretariat co-ordinators have benefited from coaching support from Max Lawson during the initial months of their job, but such support may still be needed. Oxfam are seeking to strengthen the management of these coalitions by sponsoring the co-ordinators to take a certificate in NGO Management from London University by distance learning. Another important way in which this capacity-building took place for MEJN, was through the exposure visit that two of its leading members made to similar initiatives in Uganda and Zambia. It is unfortunate that both these people have moved on from MEJN.

Experience from elsewhere in Africa reflects the same requirement that "building capacity at various levels is essential – one of the main factors faced by GBI in Tanzania is the low capacity of many actors in civil society to analyse and critique macro and micro-economic issues" (IBP 2000:57).

#### **4.2.11. Internal Management**

A CSO coalition needs internal coherence in respect of what it is advocating with government in a number of areas.

A CSO coalition needs an *open and transparent decision-making system*. In an effort to move ahead in a fast changing environment, it is easy for the stronger CSOs to leave the weaker ones behind. Ironically, this can lead to some members being seen as too dictatorial in their pursuit of democratic participative decision-making in government. It also leads to problems of ownership as some CSOs perceive the decisions not to be theirs. Constant attention is needed to ensure that internal forms of governance are transparent and accountable.

*Time planning* is an important issue that affects coalitions. When asked why his attendance at MEJN has dropped off, one respondent commented, "MEJN initially got hold of members well in advance, but now we only hear of meetings that are happening tomorrow". In addition MEJN members and government were disappointed by the absence of the MEJN co-ordinator at the discussions of the first draft of the PRSP because he had been invited to a meeting in Honduras.

International experience shows that the *coalition's use of resources* is very sensitive and prioritising expenses can cause tension among members. Poor financial management was the major factor in the undoing of the Church/NGO Human Rights Consortium and already in the coalitions a perceived lack of financial transparency of the secretariat to members is causing some tensions in both MEJN and CQBE. Secretariats need to be open with their members about how they are using the coalition's resources.

Meetings need to be *short, well-chaired and minutes well-recorded*. One member of both CSO coalitions on education stated, "we are more involved with the CQBE because the meetings are only half a day, whereas the Alliance meetings can be for three days". It is helpful if the chairing of these meetings is not also done by the secretariat co-ordinator, otherwise there is too much concentration of tasks on one person. The CQBE has a revolving chair as has now been agreed for the LTF. The MEJN minutes and the CQBE minutes, which outline specific action points and highlight the individuals

responsible, are particularly useful. This enables follow-up to be easily done at the subsequent meeting.

#### **4.2.12. Communication**

In advocacy information is the most powerful tool. Information needs to be both timely and useful. Coalitions need to provide accessible information and be able to communicate complex issues in such a way that people can understand and yet without losing its intellectual rigour.

This information needs to be interpreted *and presented in different formats to different targets* depending on what will influence them. There is a choice between simplifying the issues for broad public campaigns or produce detailed studies to inform policy makers. For the Malawi coalitions, written communication is an essential tool of influence. Many different media have been used by all the coalitions:

- press releases;
- letters to key government officials;
- MEJN newsletters;
- MEJN briefing paper;
- CQBE briefing paper;
- LTF four page issues paper for Land Policy Conference, October 2000; and,
- research reports.

#### **4.2.13. Monitoring and Evaluation of Impact**

An impossible challenge for any advocacy programme is to be able to directly attribute impact. Benefits are often distant and diffuse and can be at various levels. A change in policy is likely to be the result of many different variables occurring at the same time leading to inevitable questions of causality. A much more realistic aim is to seek '*plausible association*' - that a change can be plausibly associated with CSO coalition efforts.

A fluid advocacy role requires a fluidity of indicators, but Morrissey (2000 quoted by McGee and Norton 2000:68) has identified a useful structure of indicators:

1. *process indicators* (who participates, at what level and with what capacity);
2. *developmental indicators* (how have different capacities and relationships been built by the participation); and,
3. *impact indicators* (how the participation has impacted the policy itself).

There are obvious and considerable changes which the MEJN and CQBE can point to as being 'plausibly associated' with their work. Yet as they seek to move into a role of monitoring government, they need to work on the monitoring of their own work more seriously. In addition, it is seen to be important that government perceives the benefits of CSO involvement and therefore it would be useful for CSO coalitions to be able to gauge government perceptions of positive impact rather than simply their own.

#### **4.2.14. Gender**

There are also challenges to CSO coalitions in the areas of gender and diversity issues. Christian Aid (2001) warn, "In the hurry to co-ordinate and appear professional to government and IFIs, civil society groups have often tried to speak with one voice. According to Geraldine Terry (quoted in Christian Aid 2001) this means that "male-dominated NGOs, trades unions or professional associations are unlikely to prioritise the gender interests of poor women. Instead it is likely that speaking with a single voice would mean subordinating women's interests to men's".

The gender and diversity balance in membership has been mentioned earlier, but also importantly gender was not a specific focus of any of these coalitions. On the land issue a group of CSOs did present a report on the Gender issues involved in the Land Policy which the LTF very much supported and followed up with a letter. MEJN too would like to be involved in gender analysis of budgets, but as yet coalition work in these areas is limited.

#### **4.2.15. Financial Resources**

As Alan Fowler (1997:114) points out, adequate financial resourcing is vital:

The costs are real and seldom sufficiently financed; which leads to weak process of consultation, consensus building resulting in fragile mandates. Due to pressures of time and resource limitations, more often than not NGO positions are glued together at the last moment by the few who are physically able to attend meetings, which tends to exclude smaller organisations.

The umbrella body for all NGOs in Malawi attributed their failure to participate in the critical final drafting of the PRSP to the lack of resources to attend. Interestingly, Ashman's study found that "At the initial stage of creating alliances, the primary material and technical resources appear to come from internal sources... external resources are noted to have been a minor contribution to the success of the alliance" (Ashman 2001:9).

In Malawi, Oxfam have been supporting all three coalitions. Initially this was done through sponsoring research and providing money for workshops. Subsequently they have financed the establishment of secretariats for MEJN and CQBE as well as their basic operating costs. Oxfam has insisted that CSOs contribute time and where at all possible transport. This may have adversely affected the involvement of some of the more financially vulnerable CSOs, but has meant that CSOs remain committed to the cause, not the allowances. Very importantly too, Oxfam has disbursed funds very quickly and flexibly with all coalitions.

As MEJN develops into more economic justice issues they may well move out of Oxfam's core strategy and programme plan. This could have major consequences and give rise to the need to diversify sources of support as the scope of MEJN work is broader than Oxfam. Yet such dependence on a single donor is normal at this early stage of any organisation's development.

## 5 IMPLICATIONS FOR CSO COALITIONS

From the previous analysis it is important to draw out and highlight the implications for CSO coalitions in Malawi. These implications may also have relevance for established umbrella groups like CONGOMA, new CSO coalitions such as CISANET and future CSO initiatives.

### 5.1. The Issue Itself

It is very difficult for CSOs to influence the complexity of an issue or the attitude of government towards it. Land policy, for example, will always be complex and acutely sensitive. But there are things that CSOs can do to improve their response to an issue:

- undertake good research to develop CSO understanding before advocating;
- raise the profile of an issue in the media to get other CSOs interested;
- ensure that they identify and recruit technical expertise into the coalition;
- develop their technical knowledge on an issue; and,
- ensure that they understand better the attitudes of government and donors, such as what the motivating and constraining forces are for change within these institutions and develop strategies accordingly.

### 5.2. Motivation and Ownership

CSOs need to take time at the beginning of a coalition to *explore why different members are involved and what their interests are*. It is tempting to leap into action without really developing a 'coalition'. At this forming stage, important questions need to be answered by individual members and the nascent coalition as a whole, such as 'Who are we? Who do we really represent? Why are we here? Is this issue really an organisational and individual priority?' CSOs do have different agendas for being involved and merely pretending that such legitimate interests do not exist, may undermine coalition effectiveness as they inevitably surface later as 'hidden agendas'. There must be an *on-going process of redefining the coalition's mission*. The nature of coalitions' instability and fluidity requires continuous work, especially in a rapidly changing environment.

For effective coalitions to exist, CSOs must be more rigorous about committing themselves only to ones where they can make a contribution. Half-hearted ownership, when full support is needed, may be worse than not being involved at all. CSOs must *prioritise advocacy in their strategies* and raise money for time and costs involved if they are to operate effectively in coalitions. This advocacy work must be linked to their mission and systems adjusted, such as job descriptions, to reflect this new priority. Experience seems to show that allowances may pollute individual motivation for involvement, and therefore organisations must cover own costs, as much as possible.

### 5.3. Leadership and Co-ordination

Strong leadership is essential for effective coalitions, but 'strong' leadership is not autocratic leadership. Strong leaders in coalitions are able to inspire and motivate; to bridge different interests into a united front; to negotiate diplomatically with government; and to communicate effectively. We have seen that coalitions must beware of locating

leadership in just one individual, as this can prove very fragile. *The driving force of a coalition must be spread over at least three or four people.*

An important leadership transition in coalitions occurs when a full-time (or even part-time) co-ordinator is employed at the secretariat. Coalitions *must manage this transition carefully* and not just relax and let it happen by default. The new co-ordinator will need direction and guidance from the coalition's steering group and may need coaching and training support in their new and complex role. For the original leaders, this does not mean they will be any less involved as before, but that the nature of their involvement will be more governance-oriented than before, but also recognising that they must remain active members and not delegate everything to the coalition secretariat. *The recruitment of the co-ordinator* is probably the most important decision the coalition will make. If the coalition gets it wrong, it is likely to be ineffective. Recruitment must be done carefully, looking at the qualities desired of the co-ordinator. This will mean that the salary level of a good co-ordinator should reflect their ability, and that areas for improvement are consciously addressed.

#### **5.4. Secretariat and Governance**

The host for the secretariat also needs to be chosen very carefully and capacity built in areas of weakness that may otherwise undermine the coalition. The coalition must maintain strong links with the management of the host organisation and not just relate to the secretariat. *Clear terms of reference* for governance of the secretariat and management of co-ordinator must be developed early to ensure that the inherent overlaps between the coalition steering group and the host management do not become a source of problems. The difficult questions such as what will happen if this occurs (who is responsible?) need to be ironed through. Someone needs to be given real power to control and govern the secretariat. In some cases it may prove productive to ensure that the host is also on governance team. Yet the structure still needs to remain flexible and informal enough to adjust to changing circumstances. Having a structure with too many layers may prove cumbersome.

#### **5.5. Membership**

When forming coalitions, CSOs should ensure that there is sufficient *breadth of membership*, but that within that diversity there are common interests. We have seen that coalitions may be perceived as more powerful if they represent a diversity of interests and included are important interests such as: church involvement ("as the traditional institution of influence in Malawi"); the national umbrella body (CONGOMA) and professional expertise as was previously mentioned.

The *building of a coalition* is not a one-off event, it needs continual maintenance of existing members' sense of 'ownership' and continued attempts to add extensions to the building from new members. There are benefits in Malawi from involving both local and international NGOs and including some foreigners on the team due to the different skills and contacts that they bring. There are dangers that the international NGOs and foreigners assume leadership of the process, but in the Malawi examples we have seen that, provided this risk is recognised, it can be mitigated. Other diversity issues, such as regional balance and gender balance are also vital in ensuring that accusations of partisanship are less easily made and important issues of gender do not get missed.

## 5.6. Representation

CSOs can address the thorny issue of representation in a number of ways:

- ensuring a broad membership base;
- having clear criteria for membership and mandate;
- developing a **clear process for consulting** with members on issues;
- instituting a systematic process for individual members to consult with beneficiaries. The coalition may need to give the members ideas and help them plan;
- undertaking **participatory research** in communities to find out what the voice of the poor is really saying; and,
- not claiming to be the voice of civil society, but merely a part of civil society.

## 5.7. Dual Objectives of Advocacy and Capacity-Building

Coalitions in Malawi need to have dual objectives of both advocacy and capacity-building of members. Given the overall weakness of the CSO sector, unless capacity-building is prioritised (especially with complex issues) then advocacy will not be effective.

Implications for CSO coalitions include:

- They benefit from *thorough analysis* of the issue, particularly research projects; on-going meetings with government and donors and international links for analysis and comparative experience;
- Focus on *one issue* – successful advocacy campaigns are able to get members to agree to prioritise a single issue at a time (even within a broader set of objectives);
- *Credible alternatives* -it is vital that CSO coalitions overcome the inherent mistrust by putting forward credible alternatives, rather than destructively criticising;
- Targeting *key people* – policy-makers will be influenced by people they know and trust. These key people must be identified;
- Operate together - go to meetings in twos and threes to combine strengths (INGO, local, expatriate, Malawian) and overcome some of the cultural constraints;
- Coalitions need to use a variety of approaches to influence policy, sometimes co-operating and sometimes confronting. They should seek to *influence government from within* the country first;
- Future budget monitoring role is a critical new area which demands new skills

CSO coalitions need to develop their own capacity-building programme that deals with:

- The technical areas of the issue at hand;
- The strategies and skills of advocacy; and,
- The workings of coalitions.

Some of the major implications for CSO coalitions arising out of these experiences are that:

- Decision-making should be as participative and transparent as possible;
- The time management and planning of co-ordinator is vital;
- Notice of meetings should be given well in advance;

- There should be improved financial transparency to members; and,
- Meetings should be short and well-chaired with minutes sent out promptly, clearly specifying action points, people responsible and time-frame.

Communication is the major tool of coalitions. Different targets need to be communicated with in different ways. CSO coalitions should develop a communications strategy within their advocacy strategy which 'segments' the market for their information. Communication also needs to be done accurately and diplomatically.

A major challenge for coalitions is to measure the impact of their work. M&E systems do need to be developed, but which aim for plausible association rather than attempting direct attribution which is impossible. Their M&E is particularly crucial when CSOs are claiming they have an important role in monitoring government's performance.

Coalitions need to make more deliberate efforts to mainstream gender into their work.

Although the current dependence of all coalitions on a single donor is normal, as they evolve, they will need to diversify their funding base. They will also need to ensure that members keep contributing as much as possible to their own costs of involvement in the coalition and keep secretariat running costs low.

## **6. IMPLICATIONS FOR DONORS**

Supporting CSO coalitions effectively is a complex task for donors. Howell (2000:3) highlights the very real risk for donors attempting to "manufacture civil society from the outside". As donors command the resources, they also consciously or unwittingly shape the priorities, promote certain values and cultivate particular institutional forms. Howell points out the danger of "imposing a normative vision of civil society which is deeply embedded in the historical context of Western Europe and North America, but also empties it of its political content and potential (Howell 2000:3). He claims that "donors not only de-ethnicise, de-class, and de-tribalise civil society, but also fail to grasp the full range of strategic actors and events affecting social and political transformation" (Howell 2000:16). One of the issues that the LTF had to struggle with was 'are traditional authorities part of civil society or government?' The first implication for donors then is to define what they really understand by civil society, why they are supporting it, how civil society is viewed within the context they are working in and what an appropriate civil society support strategy is within that context.

### **6.1. Provide Appropriate Funding Support**

In terms of supporting CSO coalitions, obviously donors should initially scan the national environment to become aware of effective alliances. If such coalitions do not yet exist, they may catalyse them into being by contracting research, and funding initial meetings of CSOs to find out if they want to work together on an issue.

Should the CSOs want to form a coalition, donors can give funding for on-going meetings (provided that this does not undermine CSOs' responsibility and ownership for investing themselves in the initiative).

Depending on the development of the coalition, further steps may be funding of physical resources to establish a secretariat and funding the secretariat's operating costs adequately, including perhaps explicit support for members consulting with their own beneficiaries and monitoring and evaluation of impact.

Coalition funding will also need to include support for CSO capacity-building in the issues outlined earlier, including coaching support to the co-ordinators, advocacy training; technical input and exposure visits.

Donors also have the legitimate right to push the M&E of the coalition's impact and development of M&E skills – this is an important area where they can bring valuable pressure to bear on the coalition.

Coalition funding must be flexible and responsive from the donor to allow the coalition to adjust rapidly to new situations. There must be a budget line that gives them this ability to respond at short notice. There is also the argument that donors should not view coalitions as short-term project 'affairs' to assist the donor achieve its own ends, but as long-term partners. As one respondent put it, "Let them not get tired". To commit itself to a long-term relationship (provided coalition impact is being achieved) may challenge the donor to shift its own strategy in response to shifts in the coalition's strategy.

## 6.2. Be a Member, but not a Leader

International NGO donors, which are locally based, may do more than simply provide funding. They can also be members of the coalitions, as Oxfam has done in these three cases. As a member, the international NGO should be active, but avoid taking on the leadership role. An active INGO member would:

- be open about its agenda;
- provide analytical skills, communication skills, and physical resources when appropriate;
- provide access to international information, analysis and links;
- use their links with donors to strengthen the credibility of coalitions;
- lobby government in its own right as an international NGO where appropriate; and,
- provide international links for information and analysis; and
- push the coalition good practice outlined in the previous section.

International NGOs must stay in the background of local CSO coalitions, however. They must avoid the pressures that will push them to the front, particularly in weak coalitions. If the INGO becomes too visible, then it dilutes the voice of the local CSOs with government. It also removes local responsibility and perpetuates dependence. In the absence of leadership, INGOs cannot provide leadership, even through the employment of a consultant. Such consultancy support is only effective if local leadership is already there. Clearly both funding the coalition and hosting the secretariat too (as ActionAid have done with the Education Alliance) removes leadership responsibility from the CSO coalition and prevents it from developing.

Being both a funder and an active member of a CSO coalition is a difficult balance for an INGO to play. Being able to play one role or the other is certainly simpler and preferable. But where other sources of support are not available an INGO may not have the luxury of choosing one role. Where the roles are combined, the inherent issues must be recognised and continually addressed. How do you fund and demand accountability of something that you are also responsible for as a member? How do you ensure that your membership role does not merely become that of being the donor present in meetings? How do you overcome the external perception that you are driving the process? Should INGO donors avoid or insist on a steering group role? In the short term, such a delicate balance may be possible and essential, but in the longer term it may become more of an issue. The INGO donor needs to strategize which role it will prioritise in the future, even if it has to play both in the meantime.

A useful list of operating principles for 'Strategic Network Catalysts' were suggested by David Korten (1990:3):

- Maintain a low public profile. Emphasise the commitment and contribution of other organisations to the networks goals. Measure your own success in making others stronger and more successful contributors to these goals.
- Recognise the differing motivations and resources of the groups engaged in the network.

- Look to those who have the most direct and compelling interest in the outcome to provide the sustained leadership.
- Continuously scan the environment for opportunities to engage new participants who bring new perspectives and may appeal to additional segments of the public.
- Do not take on any function that another group can perform. Facilitate linkages and fill temporary gaps not services by other organisations.
- Work through existing communications networks and media to reach large audiences efficiently.
- Help other groups find their own sources of funds, but do not become a funder.
- Keep staff and budget small to assure flexibility, avoid competing institutional interests and maintain dependence on the effective action of others.
- Use protest actions to position the movement to advance a proactive agenda.

## **7. CONCLUSIONS**

The new orthodoxy of 'good governance' as a key development strategy has prioritised advocacy as a key role for CSOs (civil society organisations) to play. It is clear that to be effective advocates CSOs have to work together. Support for and involvement in CSO coalitions is increasingly an important strategy of many development organisations. It is clear that when CSOs work together effectively they can achieve remarkable results through bringing together a diversity of experience and competence into a unified voice. This Occasional Paper has illustrated that CSO coalitions in Malawi are breaking new ground. Despite a highly unfavourable cultural, social, political and economic context from which they are emerging, CQBE and MEJN in particular have already had a considerable impact both on policy change and on attitudes towards civil society engagement in policy issues.

But the strength that CSO coalitions gain from their diversity of membership also makes them inherently unstable and difficult to manage. CSO coalitions are almost 'virtual' organisations, made up of many different, but autonomous organisations. In order to be involved in them more effectively and support them better, we need to understand more about how they function and the particular organisational challenges they face. This Occasional Paper has highlighted a number of lessons about good practice for CSO coalitions arising from practical experiences in Malawi.

To conclude, it is worth highlighting some of the key organisational dilemmas, which CSO coalitions always face. These dilemmas may not be always as diametrically opposed as they appear here, but some element of trade-off between the two usually exists. There are never easy or permanent answers to these dilemmas and yet a workable balance or tension between the two must continually be sought.

### **7.1. Focused Versus Opportunist Strategy**

Coalitions tend to be pulled in many different directions all at once. Their members are voluntary and therefore have a large stake in what the coalition chooses to work on. Members obviously would like the coalition to work on their own priorities and in a democratic environment all voices must be heard. All CSO coalitions therefore need a very clear strategy of what they will focus on and what they will not address to avoid the endemic temptation to try to do too much all at once. At the same time however, the turbulence of the environment in which coalitions often exist throws up unforeseen opportunities to which the coalition may be in a good position to respond. In a world of open-systems, development issues are inter-linked with others and there are always good reasons to pursue an integrated approach and address the issue from a number of angles. The danger is that coalitions, which tend to have small, relatively under-funded secretariats, increasingly operate outside their strategy and capacity and soon end up doing nothing well and achieving very little.

### **7.2. Advocacy at One Level Versus Advocacy at Multiple Levels**

The recognition of the inter-relationship between different global forces means that for effective change to occur requires changes on a number of different levels (grassroots; national; regional; international). The most effective coalitions are able to work on an

issue at different levels. This is another strategic dilemma for CSO coalitions, particularly in poorer contexts, such as Malawi, where resources are usually too limited to do this. It is possible to enter into strategic alliances with other organisations to work at these other levels, but even this has resource implications. There are still tendencies for local CSO coalitions leaders to be very frequently away travelling, pulled away from the core objectives of the coalition by the temptation of individually-lucrative foreign trips.

### **7.3. Dynamic, Charismatic Leadership Versus Democratic, Transparent Decision-making**

A successful CSO coalition needs dynamic and charismatic leaders. They must be able to inspire and mobilise a movement and challenge established structures and systems. This requires a strength of character and activism that is often not associated with submission to an overarching governance structure. The charismatic leaders must be accountable, in the same way they advocate others to be, and be prepared to be directed by the governance of the coalition. This requires a clear delineation of roles and limits to the powers of the executive leadership.

### **7.4. Representation Versus Quick Action**

Successful coalitions often need to take immediate action on an issue. They are not always pre-warned of an issue or a meeting, but must respond without delay. This need for urgency directly conflicts with the need for the coalition to be representative and legitimate, consulting both with its members on an issue and the members in turn consulting with their own constituents, the poor themselves. Listening to the voices of the poor at the grassroots takes both time and money. The necessity of quick action often severely undermines the essential representivity of a coalition.

### **7.5. Membership Diversity Versus Single Voice**

CSO coalitions are stronger if they can unite a diverse body of CSOs, such as NGOs, churches, trade unions, media, and academic bodies. A broad membership gives greater legitimacy and a louder voice as well as combining different experiences and competencies. The more diverse the members, however, the more diverse the reasons for being involved with the coalition, the more diverse their interests and opinions and the more difficult it becomes to unite them into a single voice.

### **7.6. Advocacy Task Versus Capacity-Building of Members**

Most CSO coalitions have to both build the capacity of their members as well as advocate themselves. It is sometimes a chicken and egg situation where you cannot get a strong voice before you build capacity of members, but you do not have time to build capacity when the issue has to be dealt with now. In some cases international NGOs have a tendency to do the advocacy or lead the CSO coalition on behalf of local CSOs who do not have the time, money or expertise to contribute. Many CSO coalitions have no option but to both advocate and build member capacity simultaneously. They are forced to run the risk of a trade-off in quality as resources are spread more thinly between the two key areas.

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