



Participatory Practices: Learning From Experience^{*}

PN-ABZ-256

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PROVIDING SPACE FOR WOMEN'S POLITICAL ISSUES Democratic/Civic Institution Development Project (DECIDE) Experience from Malawi¹

The Development Problem

Women in Malawi are under-represented in the political arena with less than 2% representation in the cabinet; 6% in parliament; and 5% in local councils. Although women make up more than 52% of the country's total population, national statistics demonstrate that women are disadvantaged compared with men in virtually every social and economic sector.

After 30 years of autocratic rule, internal and external pressure on the Government of Malawi (GOM) mounted, and President Banda called for a referendum to determine whether the country would remain a one-party state or be replaced by a pluralist system. On June 14, 1993, Malawians voted overwhelmingly for a multi-party system of democracy.

The Mission's core project to support the transition from authoritarian rule to the first democratic government in Malawi is the Democratic and Civic Institution Development (DECIDE) Project, which is being implemented in part by the National Democratic Institute (NDI).

The Practice and its Results: Providing Space for Women's Political Issues

The National Democratic Institute sponsored the first "All Party Conference" in January, 1994, to assist all seven political parties contesting in the election to develop campaign strategies and techniques for the election.

USAID PARTICIPATORY PRACTICES: LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE is a series of studies of participatory approaches in USAID programs. They are intended to help staff consider similar approaches and further share experience. USAID's Participation Forum and GP-NET, an electronic conversation group, enable development practitioners worldwide to discuss problems and successes in the use of participation. For further information, please e-mail Diane La Voy (DLAVOY@USAID.GOV) or Wendy Kapustin (WKAPUSTIN@USAID.GOV).

Wendy Kapustin drafted the following summary after extensive consultation with Stephanie Funk, USAID/Malawi, and a thorough review of available project documentation.

NDI sponsored a separate women's session as part of this conference. Each party was invited to send 20 delegates to the conference and NDI requested that at least five of those party delegates be women. This conference was the country's first opportunity for female political party representatives to meet and collaborate across political lines.

With USAID facilitating the women's session, the women identified the five most important issues affecting their lives and presented those issues at the closing plenary of the conference. The five key issues included: girls' primary and secondary education; women's roles in political participation; women's economic equality in the workplace; women's legal rights, labor and family law; and HIV/AIDS prevention programs for men and women.

After the Malawian women finalized the list of key issues, USAID facilitators immediately printed their work in a "flyer" format. The women distributed the flyers to journalists reporting on the conference, members of Parliament, and representatives of the seven major political parties.

By the close of the plenary discussion, all seven political parties endorsed the issues, and agreed they should be addressed by all the parties, as well as in the new constitution.

One month after the "All Party Conference," a constitutional conference was convened to gather views from the nation for the drafting of the new constitution. At this conference, all segments of society (political parties, NGOs, church leaders, chiefs, women leaders, etc.) voiced their views as to what should and should not be included in the new constitution. The issue of one house versus two (in parliament) was a major topic and the chiefs, women, and other groups that had been excluded during the one-party state lobbied hard for the second house.

The Chairperson of the National Commission on Women in Development (NCWID)² presented a paper drawn extensively from the U.S.-funded book entitled "Women and the Law in Malawi." The book outlined the laws that affect women in Malawi and recommends reforms to those laws which are discriminatory. The Chairperson took the book one step further by calling for a separate section for women's rights in the bill of rights and equal representation for men and women in the upper house of the parliament, or the senate.

The constitution was approved in May, 1994 as a provisional document with a one-year period of review. That constitution contained the women's recommendations for the bill of rights and the senate. Towards the conclusion of the one-year review period, a second constitutional conference was convened to gather views from the public before final ratification in the house.

The NCWID is a national coordinating body with representation from government, parastatals, and NGOs and is mandated to propose strategies to address the situation of women in all sectors of development.

USAID, through NDI, financed the second constitutional conference in February, 1995 and again assisted the women, along with political parties and other interest groups, in defining their strategies in preparation for the conference.

At the second constitutional conference, the ruling party, the UDF, no longer supported a senate. Their justification was that a two-house parliament was too expensive. Defenders noted that the UDF was arguing for other things to be retained in the constitution that cost significantly more than the senate. Despite this opposition, the women spoke out vigorously and formed coalitions with village chiefs and various parties. As a result of the women's determined lobbying and vocal conviction, the conference voted to retain the senate.

Weeks later when parliament convened to consider the recommendations of the constitutional conference, however, it appeared that the members were going to disregard many of the recommendations from the conference, including the retention of the senate.

Three weeks after the second constitutional conference, USAID/Malawi supported and facilitated a workshop given by the Society for Advancement, an indigenous NGO, on Women's Empowerment. Over 100 Malawian women, representing government, NGOs, and traditional authorities (chiefs) were invited to the workshop and discussed constraints to women's empowerment. They looked at ways to address those constraints, e.g., through lobbying parliament, increasing networking among NGOs and increasing women's participation in politics. The women drafted and signed a petition calling for the senate's retention. Six women were selected to go to Parliament to distribute the petition.

The timing was vital. The following day, the Parliament voted to retain the Senate in the Constitution. Had the women not been able to mobilize their efforts at the Women's Empowerment Workshop and had the women not been present at parliament to petition and lobby the parliamentarians, there is no doubt the senate would have been abolished.

Discussion Points

- 1) The essential point for participation was not whether Malawi should have a bicameral legislature, but rather whether the views of representatives of a previously voiceless majority--Malawian women--were "brought to the table".
- 2) The approach USAID/NDI used to assist Malawi's political parties to prepare for elections constituted a participatory practice because it created political space in which issues of concern to women might be considered.
- 3) Years of interaction between the NCWID and the mission served to increase the mission's understanding of women's needs and priorities. The NCWID not only benefitted from USAID funding, but a number of USAID projects benefitted from gender recommendations made by the NCWID. This solid relationship provided the

impetus for Malawian women to look to the mission for support in the political arena and for the mission to provide it within an appropriate context.

- 4) From the women's session at the "All Party Conference" the primary lessons were that: 1) without special efforts to organize a separate women's session, women's issues would not have been included at political conferences; 2) efforts to include women can be as simple as requesting their attendance; 3) there are issues affecting women's lives that cut across party lines for which women can put aside their political differences; and 4) simple, practical efforts to facilitate dialogue among women can have far-reaching impacts in achieving equitable development.
- 5) The media was used effectively. The mission worked with the local media in publicizing the results of the women's session at the "All Party Conference", and NDI worked with the radio stations in organizing a women's roundtable in advance of the second constitutional conference in which four women discussed the women's stance. The roundtable was broadcast in three languages, allowing the voices of Malawian women to be heard throughout the country.
- 6) USAID/Malawi's development approach consists of regularly initiating consultation and dialogue in the form of meetings, political debates, surveys, and collaborative research efforts with a broad spectrum of people including national government officials, host country counterparts, local government representatives, project participants, and other donors.
- 7) Working with women in any sector often involves a redistribution of power. In the political arena, this is a more sensitive issue because of the potential appearance of taking a political stance. Aware of the delicate nature of the situation, USAID/Malawi has emphasized a supportive-- rather than a leading--role for the mission.

Resources

Successful Approaches to Integrating Gender in U.S. Development Assistance:
USAID/Malawi . (DOCID: PN-ABW-501)

Women and the Constitution: An Agenda for Fair Representation and Equal Protection
Project Identification Document (PID): Democratic/Civic Institution Development