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Steffie Kemp, Rob MacLennan & Rick James

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PRACTICAL NOTE



## Sustainable value for money – a glimpse of the holy grail?

Steffie Kemp, Rob MacLennan and Rick James

### ABSTRACT

This practical note presents striking findings from a research project in Malawi, comparing the cost effectiveness of a traditional project approach with a church and community mobilisation approach (CCM). The research found that CCM had the same level of positive impact on quality of life but at 4% of the cost. It also found that CCM communities were almost four times more confident in solving problems themselves, indicating a much greater likelihood of sustainability. To realise the potential advantages of faith in development means funders and faith-based organisations have to mobilise local faith communities. CCM is a challenging but cost-effective alternative to the NGO-project approach.

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### Introduction

Sustainable change is the goal of all development. Global warming, migration, and spiralling insecurities make it an even more pressing concern. At a time of shrinking aid budgets, value for money has become the mantra of funders. Combining the two, sustainability and value for money, is the holy grail of development. This article presents the striking findings from a short research project in Malawi, comparing the cost effectiveness of a high-quality traditional project approach used by NGOs worldwide, with a very different church and community mobilisation approach (CCM). The study found that CCM had the same level of positive impact on community quality of life but at less than 4% of the cost. It also found that CCM communities were almost four times more confident in solving problems for themselves in the future, indicating much greater likelihood of sustainability.

This short research project does not purport to have located this holy grail – there are too many contextual differences and methodological qualifications for this. But it does give a glimpse of the sustainable, community-owned change towards which we aspire – and at a fraction of the cost of traditional projects. International agencies and faith-based organisations (FBOs) in particular would do well to consider the radical challenge this poses to their approaches to development.

### Faith in development

People generally accept that faith communities can play a critical role in development. In both 2012 and 2017, *Development in Practice* published special issues on the topic of faith in development. The reach, influence and permanence of faith communities makes them a key actor. But to realise this added value requires international agencies, both faith based and secular, to work with, rather than on behalf of, local faith communities. This entails mobilising local faith leaders and communities – a distinct approach to traditional ways of working.

International FBOs have been experimenting with mobilising local faith groups to work with their communities both individually (Tearfund, Islamic Relief, Mothers Union; Compassion, Salvation Army,

Samaritan's Purse, Norwegian Mission Society and World Vision (Njoroge et al. 2009; James and Kwarimpa-Atim 2015; Crooks and Mouradian 2013; Tearfund 2017; World Vision 2013)) and also collectively through the Joint Learning Initiative (2014). Despite its congruence with their identity and beliefs, many international FBOs have shied away from mobilising faith communities. Putting local faith groups and their communities genuinely at the centre poses huge management challenges: it does not fit easily with their funding streams and fundraising; their grant management systems; nor their staff competencies. They fear a loss of control. Until now, the anecdotal evidence has not been compelling enough to convince many of them to make such a radical change in direction. Nonetheless, the body of evidence is growing. UNICEF's globally researched and co-created theory of change for "Faith and Positive Change for Children" affirms the importance of holistic engagement with faith leaders, noting that previous partnerships had often been "short-term and focused on a single sector" (James 2019).

### **The Eagles Malawi research study**

This research begins to fill this evidence gap. In 2019, the Eagles Relief and Development Programme (Eagles), a locally-led FBO in Malawi, commissioned research to find out how their approach of a church and community mobilisation process (CCM) compared to their more traditional project methods in terms of impact and cost-effectiveness. As a local NGO implementing both distinct approaches, Eagles offers the opportunity to keep the organisation variable constant.

Faith infuses cultural and social life in Malawi. Nearly 98% of rural Malawians affiliate with some church or mosque, and more than 60% report attending religious services at least once a week (Trinitapoli 2009). This makes Malawi an ideal study site to explore the difference and potential of taking a CCM approach.

CCM equips local churches to work with their communities to problem-solve creatively using locally available resources. A process of envisioning churches through Biblical reflection and engaging the community with asset-focused activities to identify and analyse challenges and opportunities leads to churches and communities taking action together. CCM focuses on mindset change so that churches and communities take responsibility for their own development. Almost all interventions within communities are initiated and carried out without external support.

Between 2011 and 2017 Eagles also implemented a successful programme addressing food insecurity and climate-related disasters in rural Malawi with funding from a large UK NGO and a bilateral donor. The project used a more traditional approach (TA). Activities included: forestry; fuel-efficient stoves; seeds; village savings and loans; conservation agriculture; irrigation; livestock; and training in human rights, gender justice and inclusion of stigmatised groups, such as those living with HIV. This project was selected as there had been prior well-funded and rigorous evaluation (given an A + rating by DFID) proving it had significant impact, making it a fair comparison to some of Eagles' best work (Kemp and MacLennan 2019).

With both CCM and TA approaches, Eagles works with the whole community irrespective of their faith or church involvement. The beneficiaries are from the entire community, particularly the most vulnerable, and not biased towards church members.

Key data gathering methods included participatory research in eight communities, semi-structured interviews with Eagles staff (leadership and staff of both CCM and TA projects), and document review, including financial analysis. Eagles' staff identified the three TA and five CCM communities in the Southern and Central Region that were some of best examples for both types of intervention to allow for a fair comparison.

The researchers used participatory tools to gather qualitative data from communities about their quality of life. Community evaluation experts, such as Chambers (2008), conclude that participatory methodologies often give more accurate results than alternatives like household surveys and can have the positive by-product of strengthening communities, rather than just extracting information. Participatory methods respect local knowledge and situate the participants as the experts: activities enable

participants to reflect and evaluate their own experiences. As the primary beneficiaries of the learning, they feel less pressure to give the answers they perceive as “desired” by the researchers. By using a tool during which communities debated the issue among themselves, focus groups engaged with one another instead of the researchers, increasing the likelihood of an honest, representative answer.

The research gathered qualitative data about changes in their quality of life since the beginning of CCM or TA in six key areas: food security; health; livelihoods; education; caring for the environment; and inclusion/participation. This was visualised using a 10-step scale for each area, with step 1 being the worst conceivable position a community could be in, and step 10 being the best realistic position a community could achieve. As a control measure, the first focus group defined what a community would look like and experience at steps 1, 5 and 10 for each area. Other communities used these points to decide where on the scale they had been just before Eagles’ work began and their position just before Cyclone Idai in March 2019.

## Limitations

Due to using a participatory approach and constraints of time and funding, there are important limitations and potential sources of error within the results. These include:

- Low number of communities consulted: due to time constraints, researchers were only able to conduct participatory activities in three TA and five CCM communities. To make the comparison as fair as possible, we asked facilitators to select communities that they considered to be their most successful examples. While this was the fairest approach, it meant that unsuccessful and moderately successful examples of CCM and TA were left out.
- Differences in climate and location: all three TA communities were in Chikwawa, an area of Malawi frequently hit by disasters, while the CCM communities were in areas that have a comparatively more stable climate. This limitation was imposed by the location of Eagles’ work, as there were no CCM and TA communities in the same area.
- Unrepresentative focus groups: due to constraints on communication, staff and community time, communities selected participants. Particularly in the TA communities, this led to focus groups dominated by community leaders and those who were responsible for the project, which could have inflated results due to bias towards their own work.
- Attributing change: in some of the TA communities, other NGOs had also been working, leading to some complications in attributing the causes of change. However, this was conservatively accounted for in the calculations so that any positive change in the published results can reliably be assumed to be directly as a result to Eagles’ involvement.

## Findings

The research in eight communities found that under eight years after they had started:

- (1) **CCM approach was 27 times more cost effective than TA.** CCM had the same level of positive impact on community quality of life but at less than 4% of the cost.
- (2) **CCM communities were almost four times more confident in solving problems for themselves in the future** (averaging 8.09 out of 10 certainty of taking action on new problems compared to 2.21), indicating much greater likelihood of sustainability.
- (3) **CCM communities took more deliberate and direct action to care for the most vulnerable**, in line with the Sustainable Development Goal commitment to “leave no one behind”.

CCM with Eagles in Malawi yielded startling results in terms of both value for money and sustainability. If replicated elsewhere, this has major implications for FBOs and funders.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
	Worst realistic position in which a community could be					Best realistic position in which a community could be				
	What a village at each of steps 1, 5 and 10 might typically look like <i>Defined by a community focus group in Bokosi, Central Malawi</i>									
	Step 1			Step 5			Step 10			
Food Security	No food supply for whole year. Have to do piece work on others' farms to get food. Often go 3 days with no food			2 meals a day from May-Sep Have to do piece work for food for rest of year			3 meals a day for the whole year – porridge in the morning, nsima and relish at midday and evening			
Education	No children attend school Parents do not care or see it as issue No one can read or write			Some people can read & write 80% of children complete primary school 30% of children complete secondary school			All children complete secondary school Parents value education and insist children attend 100% literacy			

**Figure 1.** Example of food security and education from quality of life tool.

### ***Finding 1: CCM is over 25 times as cost-effective as TA***

The successful examples of TA and CCM communities showed similar levels of average impact: CCM averaged + 3.50, while TA averaged + 3.53. However, while TA communities received material inputs such as livestock, treadle pumps, and seeds, as well as direct training, CCM communities used their own resources (Figure 1).

While demonstrating impressive change in areas directly impacted by TA or another NGO, TA communities showed no evidence of having taken any action outside direct project activities. When asked to describe the reasons for the progress in quality of life, everything mentioned was NGO-initiated. Conversely, CCM communities attributed their changes to interventions initiated and carried out themselves without external support, or through the mindset change brought by CCM tools and bible studies.

The difference is even more marked when taking the average cost per person into account: TA had an average impact of +3.53 across all the areas of change at a cost of £24 per person, while CM had an average impact of +3.5 across all the areas of change at 89p per person. To triangulate the qualitative evidence of the participatory tool, we compared the cost of directly implementing a specific intervention (such as in TA) with the cost of mobilising a community to use its own resources to ultimately take the same action. While the figures for TA had been previously calculated within a well-funded independent study, due to the lack of available internal data and the nature of the interventions (self-implemented), a significant number of assumptions had to be made to calculate the CCM figures. Therefore, the ratios in Table 1 should be taken as *indicative* of the relative cost-effectiveness of CCM, rather than *absolute* figures.

All the figures used for CCM were calculated using highly conservative assumptions, meaning it is likely to be even more cost-effective than the results show. Calculations suggest that interventions were at least between 5 and 24 times cheaper to achieve per beneficiary through CCM than TA. The consistency of the evidence strongly suggests that equipping communities with the skills to mobilise their own resources to solve problems rather than directly intervening is both achievable and highly cost-effective in many contexts.

### ***Finding 2: CCM communities were almost four times more confident in solving problems for themselves in the future***

The research defined sustainability as the likelihood of the impact of interventions lasting without continued external input. While sustainability is notoriously difficult to measure without a

**Table 1.** Comparative costs of interventions.

Intervention	CCM	TA	Ratio
Agroforestry/forestry	£0.38 per farmer	£9 per farmer	1:24
Fuel-efficient stoves	£0.76 per household	£17 per household	1:22
Village savings and loans	£3.70 per VSL member	£17 per VSL member	1:5
Conservation agriculture	£0.64 per farmer	£14 per farmer	1:22
Livestock	£6.05 per beneficiary	£40 per beneficiary	1:7

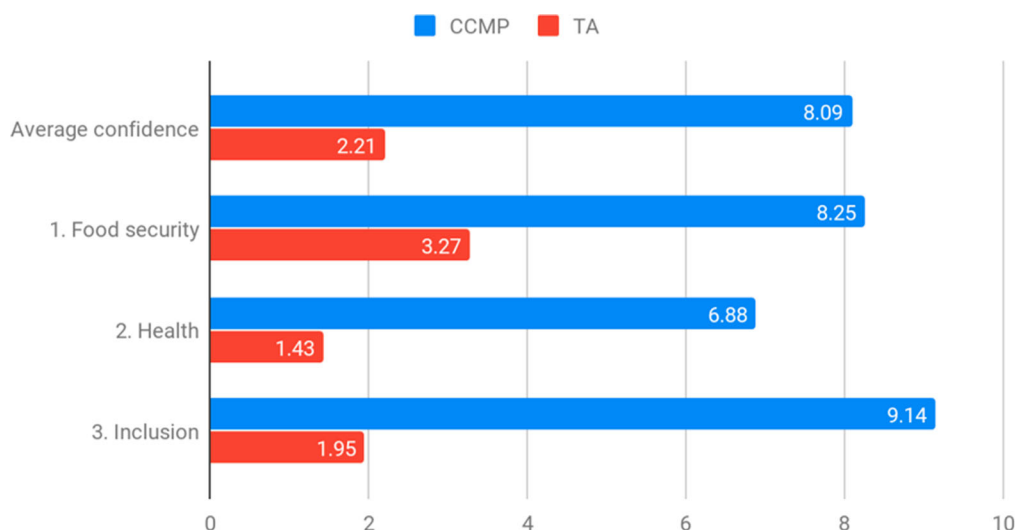
longitudinal study, the researchers used communities' confidence in solving problems themselves in the future as a proxy indicator. The factors that would contribute to communities having a high level of confidence have been identified over Eagles' 15 years of experience as key to sustainability: a belief that they are able to solve the problem; seeing the problem as their responsibility; and the ability to visualise potential solutions.

Researches posed three scenarios to the focus groups in each community in three of the areas: food security, health, and inclusion. A ten-step ladder was again used, this time with step 1 meaning "certain that the community would do nothing to solve the problem" and step 10 "entirely confident that something would be done by the community".

The average confidence for TA communities was 2.21 in comparison to 8.09 for CCM communities (Figure 2). This strongly suggests that CCM does lead to a mindset change away from dependency towards a sense of collective responsibility and collective confidence. One CCM community even discussed what they would do in each case, showing that they not only believed they could solve new problems but could very quickly come up with strategies to do it.

It is also indicative that all three TA communities asked for Eagles to come back and work with them so that they could solve other problems. This suggests dependency on Eagles and lack of belief that they can bring change on their own, supporting the evidence from the lack of activities outside the direct TA interventions. In contrast, respondents from CCM communities said things such as:

- "In the past, we used to hope that some NGO or politician would come to help us. Now we just meet as a community, decide what we need to do, and do it." (Community member)
- "In the future, our village will be so advanced! If you depend on organisations, they come and go, but if you are self-reliant, you develop yourselves." (Village Chief)

**Figure 2.** Confidence in problem solving in CCM and TA communities.

- “This process is really helping us here and changing the mindsets of the people ... we used to expect people from town to come and do things for us; now we do things for ourselves.” (Area Development Committee Chair)

### ***Finding 3: CCM prioritise caring for the most vulnerable***

CCM tools and Bible studies provoked discussion on those who are most marginalised and vulnerable within communities, while TA communities received direct training in human rights. Although TA communities showed impressive impact in the “inclusion” area of change, their description related to general attitudes and women’s role on community committees – reduced discrimination rather than active effort to support and include vulnerable people. On the other hand, CCM communities and Eagles’ reports from the last 10 years demonstrate that most churches going through the CCM Bible studies take direct action to care for vulnerable people and make significant personal sacrifices to do so. These groups include orphans, elderly, widows, those living with disabilities, and people living with HIV.

Respondents noted the link between CCM Bible studies and their churches’ actions:

- “If any pastor takes the Bible’s word about social justice seriously and shares it with his church, it will not be long until there is no one poor left there.”
- “The Bible studies empowered us to take care of the vulnerable and the needy. We now construct houses and work in the fields of the elderly and provide food and clothes for the orphans.”
- “We are poor and we used to think that it was impossible to help others. But now we use the little that we do have.”

### **Analysis – the questions that arise**

#### ***What was the most significant difference between the two approaches?***

First and foremost, CCM emphasises mindset change away from dependence and towards problem-solving using Bible studies and participatory exercises. CCM focuses on enabling churches and communities to problem solve for themselves, not just teaching one method of adapting (such as using fuel-efficient stoves). With the shift in mindset from dependency, even the poorest communities found the resources to solve many of their challenges or successfully partnered with local government.

CCM communities achieved almost identical progress in quality of life to TA, but without any of the direct training or material inputs such as treadle pumps, livestock and drought-resistant seeds. NGO expectations of communities may be prohibitively low, paternalistic and disabling of long-term development. In the words of Victor Mughogho, Eagles’ Executive Director of 15 years, “Donating solutions can be as inhibiting to sustained change as donating objects.”

In CCM the local church congregation is not just an entry point, but a catalyst and facilitator throughout and after Eagles leaves. Church leaders (and then other faith leaders) are envisioned to understand their faith mandate to seek justice, especially for the most vulnerable, and then equipped with the skills to mobilise their community to take action using their own resources. Even from a secular perspective, this has clear advantages in terms of effectiveness, although this was not explicitly explored during the research. Research participants commented that working through the church is effective because it is a permanent presence at the heart of the community (increasing sustainability); is trusted, respected and influential; has a deep understanding of the community and people; and can access resources that can be mobilised. In contrast, with TA the local church was treated simply as one of many local stakeholders. The local congregation did not play

a central role in the project design and implementation. The role of the local church was not specifically mentioned in the description of TA's project approach or reports.

### ***Is this just self-help under another name?***

This approach obviously has lots in common with many self-help methodologies. What makes this distinct with CCM is the faith element. Not only is the local congregation the community change agent, but also the focus on changing mindset through meditation on Scripture creates a more powerful motivation than simply goodwill. And this is assuming that there is no divine power that inspires and empowers such changes.

### ***How did CCM outcomes cost so much less?***

How was it possible for communities to achieve identical progress in quality of life, but at only 4% of traditional programme costs? There are three obvious sources of this:

- Communities did it more cheaply. They saved costs, for example, by collecting seeds themselves rather than NGO providing them.
- They used their own resources – for example, contributing their own labour as well as sand and bricks to build schools.
- They worked closely with local government. Advocacy in getting local government to play its part was a central element in much of the work, for example, getting the government to drill the borehole.

### ***If CCM is so great, why is it not more popular?***

Mobilising local faith communities fits the theologies of most FBOs, but it does not fit neatly into their sources of funding, such as child sponsorship or large grants from bilateral funders. CCM does not require large inputs of financial and physical resources, making it less attractive to funders who find it increasingly hard to fund smaller initiatives. It also makes it less popular for local FBOs seeking financial security through larger project funding.

Furthermore, CCM approaches cannot foresee exactly what communities will prioritise working on. It does not fit into the predictable, linear (cause and effect) frameworks that entrance many funders – though with the right tools, approaches, and attitudes we can monitor, evaluate, and learn effectively. The start-up phase of CCM, with its focus on church and community mindset change does, however, take longer. Even though the results are more sustainable, many development actors are impatient to see immediate changes.

CCM also demands skilled and able facilitators. Not only brilliant at working with communities, able to work closely with faith leaders and integrate the spiritual dimension, but they also have to have selfless attitudes. As one Eagles staff member said: "People like to be heroes and you cannot be the hero in CCM."

## **Conclusions**

The evidence from this study suggests that, if done well, mobilising local faith communities is far more cost-effective and more sustainable than traditional development approaches. Even villages in severe poverty can mobilise the resources to solve their own problems. The community confidence in problem-solving was particularly striking. Mindset change, catalysing communities to take responsibility for their own development and equipping them to problem-solve, is vital to long-term change. A CCM approach can also strengthen social security safety nets, as faith communities



tend to identify and care for the most vulnerable. This is a key element in the SDG goal of leaving no one behind.

Secular funders and international FBOs may need to radically alter their programme strategies, if such findings from CCM in Malawi are replicated elsewhere. They may need to shift from funding direct interventions to facilitating problem-solving processes (or to a combination of the two in highly fragile areas). Instead of inputs and skills training for communities, it is about challenging how people see themselves and their world.

This CCM approach is not limited to the Christian faith. It can be effective in an interfaith context. For example, when Eagles enters a community it engages with faith leaders of different religions (particularly Islam in Malawi). In other countries, Islamic Relief and World Vision have worked together in the Channels of Hope (CoH) programme (which takes a similar approach to CCM). Islamic Relief (2019) conclude that in Mali:

Since the inception of the CoH programme, faith leaders like Imam Traore have been introduced to concepts of gender-based violence and child protection. The faith sensitive methodology of the programme has allowed him to deploy his Islamic teachings to preach against child labour, physical and sexual abuse, and Islam's prohibitive stance against FGM.

UNICEF's Faith and Positive Change for Children initiative confirms both the importance and effectiveness of interfaith partnership to create lasting change (UNICEF 2019). Its foundational approaches evidence other key aspects of CCM: "mind and heart dialogue" in combination with "engaging and mobilising faith group and community", bringing mindset change through a combination of sacred text reflection, activities to engage emotions and technical information.

Mobilising local faith communities is essential to realise the potential advantages that engaging with faith in development brings. FBOs cannot simply mimic NGOs with traditional projects – they have to operate quite differently. It is a huge challenge to focus on the most cost-effective ways for communities to move out of poverty, not simply what makes for easy fundraising. A CCM approach runs counter to existing power dynamics and funding mechanisms. Secular agencies and funders also need to respond to the growing evidence about the effectiveness of faith groups in bringing about and sustaining positive change. Rising to this challenge takes leaders with vision, foresight, and courage.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributors

**Rick James** has worked in international development with INTRAC for over 25 years. He is a Senior Teaching Fellow in the Faculty of Management, CASS Business School, London, directing the NGO Management Masters pathway. Rick has published more than 50 articles and eight books.

**Steffie Kemp** is CCMP Advocacy and Learning Coordinator with Eagles Relief and Development Programme. She has lived in Malawi for 12 years. Her areas of interest include the role of faith and mindset in community-owned development. She is pursuing an MSc in human rights law from Oxford University.

**Rob MacLennan** is reading economics at the University of Cambridge. His fields of interest are behavioural and development economics.

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