

THE CATALYST FUND: EXPERIENCES FROM MALAWI

Shifting the Power in Practice



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Background

Calls to Revisit the Development Aid Architecture

Of late, development discourse has drawn attention to the need to focus on supporting local actors and communities to realize their aspirations and the aspirations of local people. There have been calls to deconstruct the development and humanitarian aid architecture, to put in place and follow a system and an approach that is responsive to local needs and aspiration. The call for shifting the power with its attendant components of localization, decolonization, locally-led development, local and community philanthropy have become louder, not only as opposing views and voices but as viable and feasible alternatives to the development system that has existed for a long time but with no meaningful results to change the situation of those living in poverty, predominantly domiciled in the global south.

The Situation of Local CSOs

Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in Malawi have not been spared from the challenges that CSOs are facing globally, especially those from the global south. Despite potential that local CSOs have to support local people to address the multitude of challenges they face on a day to day basis, and contribute to the development of their countries, they are faced with capacity challenges among others. These include: ineffective governance and organizational systems and structures; lack of requisite staffing in terms of numbers and with necessary skills and qualifications; limited legal persona to be entrusted with resources; ineffective programming frameworks, strategies and approaches; unstable funding and narrow funding bases; limited linkage and engagement with local communities so as to promote a popular and community owned agenda.

For a majority of local CSOs – Community Based Organizations (CBOs), movements, local NGOs, networks and coalitions, women and youth groups – what they need is a **little push** to move them up the notch and embark on the journey to achieve their mandate and meet people's needs. This **little push** should be based on their felt needs, identified by themselves, owned and driven by themselves. This justifies the need for a **catalyst** to support them reach their potential and not a **big brother** who will dictate what they should do and on what terms. The **catalyst** can take various forms such as direct capacity development support, funding, material resources, opportunities for support and partnering with other organizations.

Efforts in Shifting the Power

From December, 2022 the Tilitonse Foundation in Malawi has been implementing a *Shifting the Power Programme in Malawi* in partnership with Comic Relief and UK Aid. The programme is aimed at strengthening civil society in Malawi to be more independent, resilient and effective in delivering priorities of local people around the key thematic areas of Early Childhood Development, Gender Justice, Mental Health and Safe and Secure Shelter. The design of

the programme revolves around four pillars: Organizational Strengthening which is the main focus of the programme; and Funding Windows – Catalyst Fund Window, Civil Society Strengthening Fund Window and Community Resource Matching Fund Window. So far, the Tilitonse Foundation has rolled out parts of an Organizational Strengthening Framework and operationalized the Catalyst Fund Window.

The Catalyst Fund (CF) was rolled out in February, 2023 with grant disbursements made in July, 2023 for projects that run for 6 months up to December, 2023. It was aimed at supporting CSOs to develop effective and viable project proposals for funding through the Civil Society Strengthening Fund (CSSF) under the *Shifting the Power Programme*, and supporting them to put in place capacities that will facilitate access to support from other development partners. Access to funding from the Catalyst Fund Window was based on applications informed by evidence that was presented from a Self – Assessment Tool the Tilitonse Foundation made available to local CSOs.

Experiences from the Catalyst Fund

The Design and Theory Behind It

The Catalyst Fund was *primarily* designed to support local CSOs to access the CSSF. There was an appreciation and realization on the potential of local CSOs - movements, CBOs, networks, coalitions, women and youth groups, local NGOs - in changing the lives of their constituents and the people they work with if they are well supported. This potential has not yet been fully tapped and/or exploited in most cases because these organizations lack the means – funds, exposure, recognition, resources, assets – to effectively unleash the potential. They have the necessary attributes such as the constituency, link with the local communities, local knowledge, local leadership, local drive that are key to driving change and attain sustainable development.

The Catalyst Fund was, therefore, designed to support local CSOs that have demonstrated the potential to drive and bring about change, and that can potentially benefit from the Civil Society Strengthening Fund (CSSF). It targeted local NGOs, faith - based organizations, Community Based Organizations (CBOs), youth organizations, women and girls' organizations and groups, social movements, umbrella organizations, organizations of people living with disabilities, networks and coalitions. It was intended to facilitate the diversification of the range and breadth of local CSOs that can access funding from the CSSF, beyond the well - established and funded ones. It was designed to support *'emerging'* organizations that normally have difficulties to put up a convincing case for funding.

It targeted local CSOs with interesting and innovative concepts, that show well defined constituencies, that are well connected to communities and with ideas that are owned and driven by citizens. The support targeted organizations with the following attributes:

- Local CSOs that have no access to funding and do not have the capacity to compete for funding opportunities with well - established CSOs
- Local CSOs that have community presence and community driven agenda but lack capabilities of being recognized and supported
- Informal groupings that need support to be registered and supported to put in place structures and systems that enable them to access funding support
- Local CSOs with community resources but with no established revenue bases and are lacking funding
- Local CSOs that have potential to benefit from support from the CSSF but do not have the capacity to develop fundable proposals in line with requirements.

Its Operationalization and the Realities

The Catalyst Fund was an interesting initiative by Tilitonse Foundation and it proved its **mettle**: *precipitating access to opportunities and support for local CSOs*. The total amount spent under the Fund was **GBP103,792.18** and **23 grant partners** accessed the funding, with grants of a maximum of **GBP5,000** per organization for a period of 6 months. Access to CSSF cannot be measured currently because it is yet to be rolled out, but the Catalyst Fund has supported the successful grant partners to register remarkable achievements:

1. Registration for Legal Personality

The Catalyst Fund supported local organizations to meet statutory obligations such as registration with the Government authorities to attain legal persona. An important requirement for financial support for local CSOs is to be recognized as legal entities, and there are organizations that are doing impressive work but have not registered, and a result are not able to mobilize support externally. Under the catalyst fund support, a total of 10 local organizations were registered with institutions such as the Non - Governmental Organizations Regulatory Authority (NGORA), Council for Non – Governmental Organizations in Malawi (CONGOMA) and the Registrar General. These registrations have opened up opportunities for funding for organizations like the Community Based Natural Resource Management Forum - collective voice of local communities living around national parks and forest reserves in remote hard-to-reach areas - which has accessed 3 funding opportunities because it is now a registered organization.

'The Catalyst Fund grant was the first ever grant for the organization which we used to legally register as a community trust, put in place basic organizational policies and procedures, and operationalized our board. From the GBP3,000 grant, we managed to set ourselves up to attract a grant of USD154,000 from a SADC regional body, which is our biggest grant achievement so far. We were also able to leverage the organizational changes we experienced to attain further funding of USD25,000 because of the registration, and this was from a global funding body'.

Dr. Langa, CBNRM Forum Executive Director

2. Setting up of Structures and Systems

The fund supported local CSOs to develop and put in place governance, management and operational systems. These included development of Board Charters, and set up and orientation of Boards; financial management and procurement procedures and systems; strategic plan; anti - fraud and anti - corruption policies; proposal development and resource mobilization.

'Neno Active Youth in Development (NAYODE) has greatly benefitted from the Catalyst Fund project, which enhanced our proposal skills, trained our Board, and provided essential policies. These improvements empower us to serve our community more effectively'
Quote from Moses Chabuka, NAYODE Executive Director.

3. Community Involvement and Engagement

Through the Catalyst Fund, CSOs were supported to involve and engage local communities in collecting data and information, and design of projects. The catalyst fund projects enabled the successful applicants to interact with local people to inform the development and design of the proposals for CSSF, and its monitoring and evaluation framework – people centred and driven programming.

4. Access to Funding Opportunities

The Catalyst Fund support facilitated access to funding from other sources due to the registration and development of systems and structures by the successful applicants. A total of 6 organizations managed to get funds from various funding sources, with some getting more than 3 times the amount of funding they had previously been accessing.

'To begin with, the work on improving our financial protocols, guidelines, and enhancing our understanding of financial management enabled us to negotiate effectively with our traditional donor, Commonwealth of Learning, for more funding. This led to a substantial increase in the organisations annual grant amount from GBP 9,520 to GBP56,670). Complementing this development, we successfully secured funding from an International Non Governmental Organisation (INGO) through a 5 - year project duration with an initial GBP 13,106 marking a significant milestone for the organization. Additionally, the organization has also obtained an 18-month project grant totaling GBP 30,375 a local child-focused INGO. Furthermore, CYO has just signed an agreement with IM Swedish Development Partner for a grant amounting to GBP 56,670 for a one-year project.'
Quote from Doreen Chilole, CYO Finance and Administrative Officer

The Results and its Implications

i. Ownership and Drive

The operationalization of the Catalyst Fund and its outcomes buttress the call for flexibility on funding towards local CSOs, and brought to light the good results that come from such flexibility. The organizations that were supported were given the space to determine their areas of need both for programming and organizational development, through their assessments which were supported by a self - assessment tool. The self – assessment tool assisted them to come up with areas that need to be supported, and this formed the basis for the proposals that were submitted and eventually funded. The key attributes of these organizations were that: *they are local organizations; they are run by constituents and/or they have a community and grass root connection; they had potential to succeed and meet their mandate; they had interesting and innovative concepts for programming; on their own they lacked the capacity to be recognized and attract support from conventional donors and development partners; they rely on local resources and assets in their work (local and community philanthropy).*

ii. Catalytic Approach to Development

A key outcome from the support through the Catalyst Fund has been reasserting and confirming the fact that local CSOs *need a push* for them to realize their potential and fulfil their agenda. They need a partnership that will *catalyze* their comparative advantage: realize their niche and support its full exploitation; provide room and space for them to determine and pursue their agenda; support their capacity to deliver and meet legal and policy requirements; respond to and drive the agenda of the constituents and the people they work with. Local CSOs need a partnership of equals, that is flexible and willing to support them to pursue an agenda set by themselves and the communities.

Summing it all

The localization, decolonization, community led development and local philanthropy agendas will be fully realized when development and humanitarian aid respond to the needs of local players. We need an approach that is sensitive to community context and cultural nuances. We need to adopt the risk taking in trying new ways of doing things, create room for learning from failure among other considerations.

