

Modelling Community Empowerment

By: Leida Schuringa (Quality Centre Malawi) based on an interview with Annemarie Simango-Kot and Felix Simango from the foundation *For a change* (<https://www.stichtingforachange.nl/en>).

Two Malawian-Dutch couples started a very interesting project in Kwanjana, South-Malawi. Their approach was based on the book *Community Empowerment in a developing country* (see <https://www.qcnetwerk.nl/?p=1373#more-1373>) written by Mary Sibande and Leida Schuringa. In this article Annemarie and her husband Felix tell us about the birth and growth of their project and together with Leida they evaluate the use of the book for community empowerment in other places and other countries.

The first steps

Annemarie and her friend Marianne Meeuwsen studied to become a primary school teacher in The Netherlands. They did their final research during three months in Malawi (2011/2012) and came back in 2013 to volunteer in Malawi for the Stephanos foundation (<https://www.stephanos.nl>) in the field of education (1,5 year). They were interested in the question how children and parents can become more aware of the importance of school education and how they can be motivated. By accident they met Felix, at that moment primary teacher in Malawi. Later on Marianne met another Malawian primary teacher, Constantine Sangala, and the four of them shared a strong belief in the importance of education and empowerment of the people to realise progress in Malawian local society. But how to make that concrete? At first they thought about financing school buildings, but where to start?

Annemarie and Marianne - back in Holland – did a lot of research about community development and started to build the foundation *For a change*. They

formulated a vision and a mission. Two starting points were clear from the start: the importance of education and a good connection between community, church and school. In 2014 they came across the book of Mary and Leida that they found inspiring and fit to realise their goals. They followed the stepping stones that were advised. Annemarie's father, owner of a shoe shop, helped with two other Dutch men to set up a foundation, build networks and gather funds. Later on, he proposed to donate one euro for each shoe that left his shop creating a real safe fundament for the new foundation. During the floods in Malawi in 2015 the motivation of Felix and Constantine to help their country grew and both decided to resign from their work and to dedicate all their efforts to work in the foundation. In the meantime Amor did his work and the two couples married and moved in 2016 to live in Blantyre.



The start and basis of all community empowerment work is research. So the two men were travelling by foot and public transport through the region to find a village that was open and apt for community empowerment. They talked with the village headmen and other key leaders and after some months they found two villages that had this potential. In the meantime the ladies were studying the socio- economic and cultural situation in Malawi and in the proposed villages. One of the remarkable facts was that in Kwanjana the child marriage rate was very high (influenced by the big distance to the girls' secondary school). This was seen as one indication for the need for change.

So, the foundation had an interesting task division: the two men were on the road and talked to the people, the two ladies did the research and office work. At the end Kwanjana had been chosen as the most promising community.

Kwanjana: Phase 1: getting involved and building trust

The couples chose consciously to stay to live in Blantyre for two reasons: 1. to stimulate that the villagers would learn to become independent from the start and 2. to protect themselves against too much questions and problem solving and involvement in the village. In general a certain distance works good for community workers. That also was a reason for Felix and Constantine not to do the work in their own home villages although that is a habit in Malawi.

The book *Community Empowerment in a developing country* helped because it gave concrete steps and also examples from the rural situation in Malawi. The community workers followed the steps and started with making connection with all the leaders in the village and even more important: stayed in connection. So many politicians or people from international organisations come and talk and go away. People don't trust them. Now there was also the problem that these four community workers were young and young people don't have a trusted status yet. However by staying and listening for a long period in the village, people started to trust them. And trust is the beginning of anything real.

After making contact, the second step was to realise something concrete, something people could see, a result, a solution for a problem people felt. It appeared that in Kwanjana there was a quite dangerous place to cross a river especially for children, it was a deep hole in the sandy road. The proposal by the community workers to the people was: "Let's build a bridge together: if you bring stones and each family pays 200 Kwacha and if you do the labour, we will bring all the other needed materials (like wood)". A building committee was formed and the bridge was built! That is really a milestone in the community organising process. People can see the result of cooperation (<https://www.stichtingforachange.nl/en/projecten/a-bridge-for-kwanjana>).

Now the time was ripe to form an Action Committee (AC). An AC consists of people who want to be a



kind of representative for the villagers expressing their needs and ideas and who want to support and involve them to improve the life conditions. People who had been active in the bridge building committee could apply for that position and the community workers held interviews with each of the applicants. Of course they had thought about criteria and after the interviews they chose 10 people for the AC. This is an interesting procedure: in this way you can keep control about the people who have the passion and the heart to work for the community as a whole and don't go

for their own profit. The people knew that they were asked to work voluntarily for the community without any compensation in money or goods. But they had got interested and felt trust (<https://www.stichtingforachange.nl/en/projecten/the-action-committee>).

The AC then visited each household in the village and asked the people: "What are your needs?" And the people mentioned things like: a hospital, a supermarket, but also a nursery. These needs were presented in a large meeting. At the same time the ladies continued with their research and their outcome was: let's start with a nursery because that is a basis for further education, a good foundation for every child. So the AC and the community workers came to the same conclusion: let's start with building a nursery. And they did!! Apart from a good building, the quality of the education is equally important, so a qualified teacher was hired. (see for more information <https://www.stichtingforachange.nl/en/projecten/nursery-education>).

Kwanjana: Phase 2: expanding the organisation

Annemarie and Felix: “The AC is amazing. We built trust because normally strange people not living in the village are leaving. That is the expectation, but we stayed. The AC is trustworthy for the village and for the organisation. They know the needs of the village and express those to our organisation. They also share the solutions that are expressed in the village. So to build up the fundament as we did, taking the time, proved to be fruitful!! That is the harvest of your book!”

A real good sign for the level of trust that has been created in this community so far, was the volunteers day that was organised recently. People of the village asked the AC and the foundation *For a change*: “What can we do to show our appreciation for all the work you’re doing?” As a common answer the following proposal had been formulated: “Help us to repair the road and to plant a potatoes field. You offer the labour on one Saturday, we will provide the food”. Annemarie and Felix: “We expected some volunteers but were overwhelmed by the 1000 people who came...” Another sign is that people feel responsible. Everyone is watching and if something happens (like an attempt to steal materials), people warn the AC or the organisation. The social control is strong. In the 6 years they’re working in Kwanjana they’ve had only some minor problems. So the project is in safe hands.

Nowadays every member of the AC has a specific department: a field of attention. The person who is responsible for the nursery, also helps with the kids and can stand in for if a teacher becomes ill. Their sense of responsibility is growing. Also more and more volunteers are doing tasks like the parents of the children in the nursery who cook the food and clean the space alternately. So the village as a whole is growing to more independency. Also the organisation *For a change* was growing. The four community workers chose for a more specified task division, too, and each got a special field of attention. It is also interesting to see that - in cooperation with a Dutch anthropologist - *For a change* develops new strategic paths to reach their ultimate goals (see [Theory of Change Final \(6-5-2021\).pdf](#)). At this moment the foundation has two boards: one in The Netherlands and one in Malawi. Each 2 months the workers write a report about the progress

The foundation has chosen for a holistic approach. Many ngo’s in the international development aid sector are focussing on the same issue in many villages like toilets or water pumps. But this organisation is dealing with all the important issues in **one** village like education, health care and jobs in order to break ‘the vicious circle of illiteracy, bad health and poverty’, as Mary Sibande calls it. The AC sees the need, and the foundation looks for solutions in good cooperation with the AC. Two examples: 1. in Kwanjana health facilities are too far away for disabled children to get physiotherapy. So now once a week a physiotherapist is coming to the village to treat the children. The parents pay 1000 KW or – if not possible - bring some tomatoes or maize. 2. The foundation have set up a sponsor program in The Netherlands to be able to pay the teachers in the nursery, some health care and food for the children. At this moment 120 children are supported (€ 32,50 per month). The sponsors write an email or App to ‘their’ children which is good for their self-image. They think: “I do matter” when receiving a message from a strange country.



Spreading the method

Following the way of working and the methodological steps described in the book has led to a successful project in Kwanjana. So an interesting question is: how do other villages and organisations hear about this project and do they become inspired? Of course members of both boards of *For a change* are telling about the ideas and results of the project, as is happening in the personal networks of the two couples, in Malawi and in The Netherlands. More and more people hear about the project. Especially the recent volunteering Day with so many participants, made workers of other ngo's curious. The foundation also wants to organise an Open Day in the nursery this year to inspire others and they like to give trainings about the specific educational methods used (like a weekly focus on one colour, one shape and one letter).

However, till now it appeared rather difficult to influence the governmental primary school in the village, because the management is mainly focused on money and less on quality. The foundation even has to pay for giving trainings.... Annemarie and Felix: "We are now thinking to start our own primary school, because the children get lost after they left nursery. Together with the AC we're already preparing a library and striving for a sporting field for the whole village".

If people and ngo's get inspired by the method of community empowerment, what then are important conditions needed to implement this way of working? Annemarie and Felix:

1. Have a good contact with the village chief (headman or woman)
2. Good contact with the other key leaders in the village
3. Take a lot of time to build trust in the village
4. At least a few active Malawian people who have the heart and passion to help the people to grow and take their own responsibility; who understand what is the essence of Community Empowerment; and who are not only motivated by their own ego and profit.
5. A financial basis.
6. This project also shows the importance of a 'mixed team' that combines the wisdom, values, knowledge and contacts from Africa with the entrepreneurship and more rational approach from Europe: the best of two worlds!

The book appeared to be very important to see and understand the importance of taking the time for the preparation, for getting to know the people, their culture, their values and ways of thinking. Even for Felix who is Malawian himself, this was a new insight because it appeared that people in the North have other habits than in the South of Malawi. There might also be many differences between villages in a specific district. So the good work always starts with research and listening to people!

The book is still of value after the fundament is laid. Annemarie and Felix: "We can read it again and find out which of the many models in the book we can use in trainings with the AC and other people from the village". In fact the book is based on training materials that have been used in training Roma organisations in Eastern Europe. Last but not least: Community Empowerment is only possible if the supporters/community workers have an open attitude and want to learn: "There is no need for people who want to come to 'help'".

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