

# **THE ICEIDA-SUPPORTED REFLECT PROGRAMME IN MONKEY BAY, MALAWI: A PROCESS REVIEW, SEPTEMBER 2008.**

**Compiled by ALAN ROGERS from field work conducted in Malawi in 2008, from notes of field work provided by Dr Foster Kholowa and his colleagues Zelina Sarah Mvula and Virinhu Dzimbiri; and from documentation provided by ICEIDA and the Ministry of Women and Child Development.**



Note: The views expressed in this report are those of the main consultant, Alan Rogers, and not necessarily those of the other consultants or of ICEIDA .

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## **ABBREVIATIONS**

ACDO: Assistant Community Development Officer  
ADC: Area Development Committee  
CDA: Community Development Assistant  
CMC/VRC: Circle Management Committee (or VRC)  
DCDO: District Community Development Officer  
DPP: Democratic Progressive Party?  
FLIRD: Functional Literacy and Integrated Rural Development Programme  
GH: Gudrun Haralddottir  
GoM: Government of Malawi  
int: interview  
LLC: literacy learning circle  
MAREFO: Malawi REFLECT Forum  
MBRP: Monkey Bay REFLECT Programme  
MDDP: Mangochi District Development Plan  
MDPD: Mangochi Director of Planning and Development  
MWCD: Ministry of Women and Community Development  
NALP: National Adult Literacy Programme  
NCLAE: National Centre for Literacy and Adult Education  
PC : Programme Co-ordinator  
PIT: Project Implementation Team  
PRA: Participatory Rural/Rapid Appraisal  
SDIG: Social Development and Income Generation Programme  
SSEEP: Socio-Economic Empowerment Programme for Poverty Reduction  
VDC: Village Development Committee  
VM: Village Meeting  
VRC: Village REFLECT Committee

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY – MALAWI

### 1. INTRODUCTION

**1.1 Case study approach:** This is a process review, not an evaluation, of the ICEIDA-supported REFLECT Programme in Monkey Bay. The team used ethnographic approaches, developing intensive case studies of a limited number of randomly chosen circles. I do not claim these case studies are typical or examples of good practice, simply that they tell us a number of things.

**1.2 Adult learning:** My main concerns were to see how modern understandings of

- adult learning and teaching (particularly using the experience and knowledge of the REFLECT circle members as resources for learning); and
- adult literacy (the New Literacy Studies which see literacy as multiple social practices rather than a universal and neutral basic skills)

are being reflected in the Monkey Bay REFLECT Programme (MBRP).

**1.3 REFLECT:** In particular, I was looking to see how far the basic principles of REFLECT are being fulfilled in the programme. REFLECT sets out to be different from formal schooling and from functional adult literacy programmes; it bases its literacy learning on development projects chosen and implemented by the learners, and uses graphics produced by PRA methods and generative words chosen by the participants instead of primers. It acknowledges the additional tasks for the facilitators by providing much fuller training and on-going support.

**1.4 Tensions:** The nature of REFLECT and its location in Malawi in the NALP of the MWCD reveal three internal tensions:

- a) REFLECT is a radical transformative programme, while MWCD is a part of government; in the compromise, MWCD accepted REFLECT because of the lack of government resources (see discussion below), and REFLECT abandoned its radical element, working through the Ministry CDAs
- b) REFLECT is a *process*-oriented programme involving people in a process of development where the outcomes are not prescribed, while NALP is a *product*-oriented programme, focusing on the numbers of people ‘made literate’ through formal teaching processes. Again compromises have been made on both sides with REFLECT now including tests and certificates and measuring success in terms of statistics as well as projects completed.
- c) REFLECT is meant to be a long-term (five to ten years or even more) programme of development groups; NALP is planned to be a short-term (one or two years) learning programme for the learning of literacy skills. MBRP circles continue – those who have learned enough literacy skills to satisfy themselves leave; those who remain have learned very little literacy skills and continue to learn literacy, even after four or five years.

### 2. PURPOSE OF MBRP

#### 2.1 Lack of clarity

**2.1.1 Priority of literacy or development:** MBRP seeks to combine the teaching of adult literacy with development. But there are a number of uncertainties here. First, the relationship between these two elements in the programme is uncertain; the measures of success are not clear. We found uncertainty whether the priority is literacy or development; is it literacy **through** development or literacy **for** development? can development without literacy or literacy without development be acceptable?

**2.1.2 What is Development?** And secondly there is lack of clarity about what is meant by development –

- a) social/community development through developmental messages (health, sanitation, nutrition etc) and infrastructure development;
  - b) group formation;
  - c) economic development (individualised, family or group income-generation activities/livelihoods)
- and/or d) community participation.

The programme speaks of the 'empowerment of women' but again the measures of this empowerment have not been clarified.

**2.2 Other models:** We found other models of REFLECT in Malawi than the MBRP run in association with the CDAs. Some like SDIG are closer to NALP and have textbooks and tests; others like the UNDP SSEEP/FLIRD programme are like functional adult literacy programmes, focusing their programme round livelihood training. MBRP is moving in both directions.

### 3. PARTICIPANTS

**3.1 Circles:** We found a large number of groups meeting more or less regularly. They were attended mainly by women although some had a small number of men as well. They each had a committee (Circle Management Committee, sometimes called Village REFLECT Committee: CMC/VRC or VRC). In every case, these circles were regarded highly by the communities in which they met and were given at least nominal support by village leaders.

**3.1 What is a circle?** However, we found a good deal of confusion about what is a circle; some talked about 'inner and outer circles'. In the field, we found three levels of circle operating: the literacy learning circle (LLC) which at times can be supplemented by the 'past graduates' from the circle who can be called upon at short notice; the Circle Management Committee (CMC/VRC or VRC); and the village meeting (VM). This lack of clarity and the floating 'membership' of the circle which could in principle be all the population of the village does not help the programme - e.g. external funding; e.g. training provision etc. In most cases, the term 'circle' is restricted to the literacy learning circle.

**3.2 Membership:** There is no fixed membership of any of these, even the LLC. Enrolments of the LLC are taken every month and sought out by the facilitator; attendances are always well below the level of enrolments. Past graduates are thought to be still members of the LLC but are not active. The embodiment of the 'circle' are the facilitator and (where active) the CMC/VRC/VRC.

**3.3 Men:** Men are very largely absent from most of the circles – one or two have been able to recruit significant numbers of men but this seems to be rare.

**3.4 Educated and not-so-poor:** In that part of the programme we saw, the participants are mostly the partly educated and 'not-so-poor'; they are less frequently the illiterate or very poor.

**3.5 Religion:** We noticed a strong element of religion (Christian) in the recruitment and programme implementation which may be divisive and exclusory.

### 4. PROCESS

#### 4.1 GENERAL

**4.1.1 Who decides and implements?** We found in our case studies and in some other cases that it was the village meeting which discussed the problems, decided on the action points,

drew up the graphic and chose the generative words for the literacy learning circle to learn, not the learners themselves. Again it was the village meeting and the CMC/VRC/VRC which implemented the action points, not the learners. This is contrary to the REFLECT methodology.

**4.1.2 Like school:** Despite the REFLECT ideology, the programme is now run to look as much like school as possible. Terms are kept, times of meeting are set by the CDAs, the venue and arrangements are like school, the language of school/class/instructor/ lessons etc is used. Whole class teaching rather than the use of sub-groups, teacher- and blackboard-centred learning, individual rather than collaborative learning, tests and certificates, and a vertical hierarchy of power in the classroom rather than the more horizontal learning of adult learning groups (especially REFLECT circles) are all features of the circles we saw. There is no peer learning, no sharing between circle participants and facilitators, no open discussion in the circle meetings we attended or in others reported to us.

**4.1.3 Venue:** in some of the circles we saw, the venue of the meetings was inappropriate, for example, in a church or in the open air. Circles are encouraged to provide a ‘learning shelter’ largely at their own cost as a permanent home to the circle. Some have done so, some have not. The seating arrangements were school-like, often in desks and almost always in forward-facing rows, rather than a circle.

## 4.2 LITERACY LEARNING

**4.2.1 Lack of literacy expertise:** Despite the growing appreciation of the “plurality of literacy” (formal and informal) of the New Literacy Studies and the importance of the literacy environment (UNESCO), the literacy being taught here is a formal school literacy. Teaching is based on an autonomous understanding of literacy which will bring with it automatic benefits in thinking and acting. This goes against contemporary understandings of literacy as social practice. With its rules of right and wrong, of grammar and spelling, schooled literacy contrasts with the informal literacies used and seen in the communities. The participants see literacy as something that belongs to the classroom, and it is difficult for them to see the relevance of this literacy to their everyday activities. The programme aims to take the formal literacy learned in the circle out into their everyday lives rather than to bring the informal literacies of the community into the circle. It is vital that the new understandings of literacy and the new expertise needed for teaching literacy to adults be brought into this programme. It is unlike ICEIDA not to employ a programme specialist on one of its sectors but to expect a general social development worker to bring in the specialist knowledge of literacy and numeracy is unrealistic.

**4.2.2 Teaching methods:** We saw only passive learning. The experience which the participants brought to the circles was not utilised; they contributed nothing to the learning. Nor was there any attempt to discover the views of the learners about literacy or development. The teaching was simply technical and instrumental. More training of those facilitators we saw in **the difference between teaching adults and children** is needed.

**4.2.3 Materials:** All teaching we saw was dominated by the key words approach. These words are chosen by the village meeting, the CMC/VRC or the facilitator, not the circle participants. They are based on the topic taken each month for discussion in the village meeting and on the graphic produced (not every topic had a graphic and these graphics were rarely used in the LLC meeting). The topics come from the twenty units of the Malawi REFLECT Manual or from other topics introduced to the facilitator by the CDAs or other extension workers (health or fisheries or legal etc). Occasionally they are specifically local topics. But on the whole, the manual has become the primer which the facilitator uses.

**4.2.4 Generative words:** The key words (which have only a very loose connection with the graphics) are broken up into syllables and these are then made up into new words. We saw only words being learned, not sentences., despite the large majority of participants having been in the circle for two years or more. The words are almost all abstract terms rather than concrete; most of them are nouns, so it is impossible to build up sentences. There is no connection in meaning between those used in any one session; it has become a word game. There is no creative writing (writing using the learners' own words) in the circles.

**4.2.5 Graphics:** No texts other than the graphics were used in the classes we saw. There are plenty available in the local community, but they are not collected and used either for reading or for creative writing. The learners never handle a book until the 'post-literacy' stage. The programme does not seek to draw on and build up the literacy environment of the villages.

**4.2.6 Multigrade teaching:** There are circle members who have been in the circle for up to four years or even more, as well as new beginners. Multigrade teaching which characterises every class we saw or heard about can become a major problem as well as a resource for learning for which the facilitators have not been adequately trained.

**4.2.7 The pace of learning** was much too slow in all the classes. Adults can move much quicker when they are using their own existing funds of knowledge.

**4.2.8: Hindrances:** The presence of children was seen as a problem, not a literacy opportunity. Participants came and left at any time, and attendance was irregular – which makes teaching very difficult.

**4.2.9 Certificates and tests:** We noticed a demand for certification through the formal tests of MWCD. These are valued when obtained – and many do obtain them, although the facilitators have to abandon the REFLECT developmental approach and use more formal teaching approaches, using textbooks in some cases and for short periods.

**4.2.10 Graduates:** The graduates we found were not using the formal classroom literacy they had learned in their everyday lives. Literacy to them was something they did in the learning centre; thus many stayed on, fearing that they would lose their literacy if they did not continue to attend the circle and hoping for further provision. Others left the circle and did not use their new literacy skills in their daily lives.

**4.2.11 Progression:** There is a growing sense of progression in MBRP which is missing from REFLECT. Many participants do not see the circles in terms of on-going developmental groups but as classes leading to further stages of learning. They ask, 'what next?'

**4.2.11 Further 'courses':** Because of the tests and certificates which mark end points in the learning process, the participants see REFLECT now in terms of courses. There is a strong demand for further courses in English and in Small Business development. English is demanded everywhere, not only by the REFLECT participants but by others.

**4.2.12 'Post-literacy':** The organisers of this programme have provided a number of what they call 'post-literacy' books in tin trunks, thus adding to the resemblance of MBRP to the school or formal adult literacy learning programme rather than on-going REFLECT circles. These use the formal literacy of the classroom and bear little relationship to the informal literacies of the development action points. These do not seem to have been any more successful than other experiments in the provision of easy readers. In all the instances where we saw them, the tin trunks are treated as the private possession of the facilitators and we did not see their use being supervised by the CDAs. Occasionally they are used well; but even when used, they do not lead to the permanent and independent use of schooled literacy in everyday life. Without on-going commercial literacy in the area (newspapers, magazines, etc)

or library provision, reading will not flourish; and the only permanent uses of literacy will be writing in the embedded literacies of the developmental activities.

**4.2.13 Numeracy:** Judging by our case studies, numeracy is the weakest part of the whole programme. Levels of numeracy in the circles we saw are extremely low, despite the inaccurate figures given on the quarterly report forms. It needs urgent attention from experts such as the 'Adults Learning Maths' (ALM) group.

**4.2.14 Achievements:** We are aware of reports of considerable literacy achievements in the programme, as measured in terms of certificates and in post-class uses of literacy. But our experience did not reflect this. The fact that our case studies show that there are groups which do not enjoy these achievements, who do not use literacy in their daily lives, indicates a need to pay greater attention to some aspects of this programme to increase its effectiveness.

### **4.3 DEVELOPMENTAL ACTIVITIES**

**4.3.1 Narrow concept of development:** A narrow view of development is taken in REFLECT – a community/social development approach rather than an economic (poverty eradication) or radical/transformational approach (although the language of freedom/empowerment is being used).

**4.3.2 Projects and District Development Plans:** The developmental activities chosen by the village meetings do not tie in with the District Development Plans or changes in the context. For example, the substantial changes taking place in fishing, or the growth of tourism in the region do not feature in the REFLECT circles we saw.

**4.3.3 A narrow range of developmental activities** (action points) is undertaken in the circles we saw and heard about, mainly building learning centres/shelters (often called 'a school'). Encouraged by the CDAs, they are drawn from community social development (pit latrines; road infrastructure etc) rather than economic development. Many consist only in exhortations (e.g. malaria) rather than action; others are talked about but not acted upon. Some action points originate in other sectoral development programmes, especially health.

**4.3.4 Training for action points:** We saw no training for the developmental activities. Training for the action points (if any) is only technical, and there is little of that. The projects rely on what the learners already know, what the facilitators have been taught in their refresher training, and on booklets in the 'post-literacy' provision. The CDAs do what they can across a wide range of subjects. Because of the allowance system, the classes we saw rarely if ever were able to bring in a technical expert for training the group.

**4.3.5 Other development sectors:** Some of the circles saw a few unsolicited visits from other sectoral development staff. There are some signs of REFLECT circles and facilitators being used as the entry point by some sectoral development programme staff but there is no literacy built into these initiatives. Other sectoral development projects rarely impacted on the circles, and there was no provision for literacy inside these other sectoral development programmes in the region (e.g. village health teams; e.g. irrigation and fresh water provision; e.g. fishery enhancement).

**4.3.6 Wider issues:** There is no discussion in any of the circles we saw about other issues related to the action points, no focus on inequalities and poverty, on gender, on marketing and exploitation by middle men, on social transformation. The organisers indicated that there has been no discussion in the REFLECT circles of local issues such as the land issues or the reasons for and impact of the decline of fishing. Critical reflection is not a feature of the REFLECT circles we saw. Despite the use of graphics and generative words, Freire would see no 'reading the world' alongside the reading the word in these circles.

**4.3.7 Other resources:** We saw very limited access to funding for the action points. The circles are rarely able to access the other resources they need for making a successful project such as credit (loans and savings) or training.

**4.3.8 Livelihoods:** There is a strong and growing demand for (individual and group) livelihood activities such as are in the UNDP REFLECT programme with MWCD. The income-generation activities so far mentioned are chosen from a very limited range of possible livelihoods – very little fishing, a good deal of small crop cultivation, some poultry and other livestock. The choice seems to be limited by the available technical resources of the CDAs.

**4.3.9 Action points and the circle:** In most of the cases we saw, there was no discussion inside the literacy learning circles about village problems or the actions needed to address these; that took place in the village meeting. The action points were usually decided upon and implemented outside the literacy learning circles, by the CMC/VRC or the village meeting.

**4.3.10 Literacy and projects:** None of the action points we saw kept any written records or used any literacy in them. This needs to be made a requirement of the livelihoods programme.

#### **4.4 FACILITATORS**

**4.4.1 Commitment:** Most of the facilitators we met were highly committed and work hard.

**4.4.2 Facilitators and literacy use:** However, the facilitators we met did not use literacy in their everyday lives; the literacy activities they did were related to the REFLECT programme (registers, reports etc).

**4.4.3 Training:** The training and ongoing support of the facilitators we met are inadequate to help them cope with the wide range of tasks they are expected to fulfil. Instead of the extended training programme of REFLECT, they now receive the same amount of training as the NALP training programme. Their incentives are inadequate to make the programme sustainable.

**4.4.4 Facilitator association:** There is an embryonic association of facilitators but it has no resources and therefore is almost entirely inactive. It needs to be resourced and empowered.

**4.4.5 Supervision and support:** This is provided by the CDAs – although they do not have practical experience of teaching literacy to adults and their approach to training is a very top-down one, cascading knowledge from above to the villagers. Some of the facilitators have developed informal networks of assistance. Some look to formal schools for assistance (e.g. textbooks) which does not help with the specifically **adult** form of learning programme needed for REFLECT.

**4.4.6 Report forms and statistics:** The monthly report forms we saw, although regularly collected, are very inadequate and inadequately completed. They contain inaccurate figures which have led to the MIS statistics maintained by the local and central programme staff being inaccurate. The facilitators and the circles could with profit be requested to write creatively about their activities, not to tick boxes; and obvious inaccuracies should be followed up by the CDAs.

**4.4.7 CMCs:** Some CMCs/VRCs seem to be more active than others; many members are reluctant to serve. However some could clearly profitably use additional resources and responsibilities.

## 4.5 Summary

It is difficult to see the value of these REFLECT circles to the participants, for most of those we saw did not engage in any action points (they were done by the village meeting or CMC/VRC) and little literacy was learned through them; several of the participants possessed some literacy skills before they joined the class. But the circles have survived and (with their ownership of the learning shelter) they could become permanent. What the circle seemingly gave them was a sense of group identity, demonstrated by competitive games against each other (mainly netball) and the demand for uniforms. They may have given some women a space for discussion but that was not much in evidence. Certainly potentially they could do both of these much more effectively.

## 5. PROPOSALS

**5.1 Bilateral aid:** I am conscious that ICEIDA is a bi-lateral agency working with the GoM and seeking to strengthen the country's capabilities to continue the programme more effectively. It is vital that ICEIDA – on its own or with its partners – clarifies its objectives and determines its measures of success. It is important for ICEIDA to be clear whether this is a literacy programme or a developmental project. It is possible to have literacy without development and development without literacy. If the primary aim is development, ICEIDA needs to decide whether it has primarily social/community development goals or economic goals. What are its main measures of success?

**5.2** Some detailed suggestions concerning venue, pace of learning, training of facilitators and CDAs, and the use of other materials etc are listed in the report and will not be repeated.

### 5.3 Key proposals:

**5.3.1 Smaller programme:** I would urge that a smaller programme is offered and that the resources thereby freed up be used for providing the proper amount of training instead of inadequate training, and a suitable venue for all circles.

**5.3.2 Return to REFLECT:** The MBRP should take steps to return to the basic principles of REFLECT – that is, the **circle learners** (not the village meeting) with a more fixed membership, together with or without the CMC/VRC, should debate the issue(s) they choose (using PRA graphics if they so wish), and select and implement the action point or some long term project. The project can be a group livelihood project. All the learning of the circle should be around the action point. The literacy that is learned should be the embedded literacy activities of the project.

**5.3.3 Adult teaching methods:** Those facilitators who do not at present use them must be assisted to use more appropriate adult learning methods, involving the learners in discussion, using sub-groups, freeing the learners to bring their existing knowledge and experience into the class, so that the facilitator learns from the learners. The facilitator must cease being the sole source of learning; peer learning must be encouraged.

### Literacy enhancement:

**5.3.4 Literacy expertise:** It is vital for any adult literacy learning programme to build on up-to-date understandings of adult literacy and how it is taught, especially literacy as social practice. The MBRP project can play a significant part in strengthening the national capacity for adult literacy through strengthening some institutions both in the Ministry and in civil society (NCLAE; Chancellor College; at local level the ACDO, the Programme Coordinator, the CDAs) by training either out of country or brought in from (for example) South Africa or

Uganda. In addition, while such training is being undertaken, I strongly urge that a specialist in adult literacy as social practice be brought in to advise the programme – from Uganda, South Africa or abroad.

**5.3.5 Literacy learning methods:** The learning of literacy should be upgraded. The system of breaking down words into syllables and building new words should become only a small part of the learning programme; instead whole word recognition and the language experience approach should be used on the basis of the embedded literacies of the action point chosen for implementation.

**5.3.6 Literacy promotion:** Literacy (especially creative writing) should be promoted both inside the circle and in the village community; a list of some thirty possible activities is included in the report. The aim of the literacy part of all the literacy learning circles must be creative writings, using materials from the environment and the literacy tasks of the project/action point.

**5.3.7 Learning literacy for tests:** Those who wish to take the formal NCLAE test can be provided with formal teaching in short courses as is done at the moment but these could be made more explicit, using some of the appropriate textbooks, and perhaps opened to other persons in the village.

**5.3.8 Numeracy:** The weakness of numeracy in this programme must be addressed. Expert assistance should be brought in.

**5.3.9 Upgrading all parts:** This will involve developing the roles of the circles, the facilitators, the CMCs/VRCs and the CDAs further – they are all ripe for further development. The understanding of literacy and adult learning among the CDAs in particular needs to be developed further. And they must be encouraged to surrender control of the programme to empower the CMCs/VRCs, the facilitators and the circles.

## **5.4 Development enhancement**

**5.4.1 Widening action points:** The range of circle developmental projects should be widened to include both economic development (livelihoods) and radical transformational development as well as community/social development, as the participants so wish.

**5.4.2 Group projects:** They should be whole group activities and spread over a long period of time, not short-term action points. Thus each circle will have its own group project and much of the learning will be focused on this project. The circles should become economically self-sustaining within a reasonable period of time.

**5.4.3 Literacy in projects:** The development project and the learning of literacy should be integrated, not separated as at present. The embedded literacy of the project will form the core of the literacy learning and this will be seen as immediately relevant and applicable to the learners.

**5.4.4 Targeted REFLECT:** REFLECT circles can be launched for specific target groups such as fishermen, shopkeepers, mothers with children at school or TBAs etc. These will be aimed at learning literacy through the embedded literacies of the target group and at the same time enhancing the activities of the target group.

**5.4.5 Sectors:** Other sectors can be facilitated to come into REFLECT circles; and literacy activities can be included in the activities of these other sectors.

**5.4.6 Training:** The further training of the facilitators and the CDAs should be focused on a) **adult** learning and teaching and b) models of **literacy and literacy learning**. These are very weak at the moment.

**5.4.7 Further courses:** For those who seek progression, courses on English and Small Business training and Access to Education (A2E) can be developed and provided if MWCD agree. These would have their own processes of assessment and award their own certificates. The Access courses would give access to formal schools at an appropriate level.

**5.4.8 Facilitators:** I would like to see them being encouraged to read and write more, especially creative writing.

**5.4.9 Facilitator association:** The association of facilitators should be sponsored for a period of years.

**5.4.10 Drop-in centres:** There is a place even in REFLECT for some strategically sited drop-in centres to help adults with their literacy practices.

## **INTRODUCTION**

I was asked by ICEIDA to conduct a process review of two adult literacy programmes being supported by ICEIDA, the REFLECT-NALP programme in Malawi and the Functional Adult Literacy (FAL) programme in Uganda and to make recommendations. I am grateful for the opportunity to conduct this review – I have learned a great deal and clarified many of my own insights.

It is important to stress that this is not an evaluation – it is a process review. It does not look in any detail at the level of achievement of the objectives of the programme, nor at the overall impact of the programme on the region, but at the processes involved to see if they can be enhanced. A concentration on the possibility of improvement may however lead to an impression of continual criticism; this is not intended.

It seemed important to me to comment on each programme first before making a comparison between them. This is my report on the Malawi REFLECT programme.

I cannot vouch for the accuracy of everything in this report; but I can vouch that everything reported here was either told to us or what we saw. We know that on some occasions, what we were told was not always true or only partially true.

The Report falls into five parts:

**Preface**

**Purpose**

**Participants**

**Process**

**Proposals**

## **PREFACE**

### **The review process**

I conducted the process review in Malawi between 1 and 15 April 2008. I had a small **team**. I could not have wished for a better colleague than Dr Foster Kholowa. He worked very hard indeed and was more than fully committed. He grasped the concepts to be explored quickly and fully and helped me in training the two translators. Both the translators worked hard and helped us in some data collection. The logistics could not have been better; the staff of ICEIDA in country helped well beyond the call of duty. I am very grateful to all these persons.

This was followed by several months working in the UK on the documentation and the findings of the field work. Dr Kholowa and Levi Soko supplied me with the answers to many queries during this period. A visit to Iceland in September allowed me to run the findings past some of the staff of ICEIDA and to finalise the text of all the reports. This final version is being released in November 2008.

### **THE REFLECT APPROACH**

Since I shall be suggesting that the REFLECT programme in Monkey Bay as currently implemented is in practice a denial of many of the key aspects of REFLECT, some introductory remarks about REFLECT will be necessary.

First, I regard REFLECT as probably the most significant new initiative in adult literacy learning for many years – certainly since Freire in the 1970s. Where it is fully implemented, it will make a major difference. I have hesitations about one particular aspect of it which will become clear later but in principle, I fully support REFLECT as created initially.

It is very difficult to critique REFLECT, for those who promote REFLECT say that it is not one thing or another, that it is infinitely flexible, it can be anything that any particular circle determines. But that in itself is to say something significant about what REFLECT is and what it is not – for example, decisions are made by the circle members, not by the organisers.

The key elements of REFLECT can be identified in part by seeing it as a reaction to two existing adult literacy programmes:

- a) it would be different from *formal adult literacy programmes*. These are based on a schooling model of learning with common textbooks (primers) expressing a pre-

determined school-related literacy, not a daily life-related literacy; this model is a one-size-fits-all programme of classes, where the learning is controlled by the providers and the teachers, leading to examinations and statistics of the numbers of men and women 'made literate'. REFLECT however was to be as different from school as possible – the group meetings were called 'circles', not classes; there would be no textbook but literacy would be learned through discussion of local development issues leading to projects called 'action points'; teachers were to be 'facilitators', the learners (called 'participants') would control the learning and even create the teaching-learning materials (see *Malawi REFLECT Facilitators' Manual*, especially Note on Terminology). Every circle would do its own thing, and the measures of success would be the action points, not the numbers made literate.

- b) secondly, it would be distinct from the *functional adult literacy learning programmes* by which literacy learning is combined with getting over messages (such as health) and/or with income-generation skill training. These programmes are top-down; in them, the literacy learning and the functional training are run in parallel. Both teach the participants to fit into the existing socio-economic structures – they do not challenge these structures except in some limited dimensions (e.g. gender). They seek the inclusion of excluded groups, not structural transformation as did Freire. REFLECT would be different from this: literacy would be learned from a radical development model of awareness raising, community decision-making and social action leading to structural change.

So REFLECT was not to be school and it was not to be narrowly functional.

More positively REFLECT was to bring in two elements:

- a) it was to use Freire's approach of critical reflection on oppressive social structures and transformation; participant control of the programme; examination of the participants' own situation (to read the world as well as to read the word); and group discussion leading to conscientization, decision-making and action (*praxis*) – which is why the concentration in the developmental projects is on community development rather than income generation. Freire's methods of graphics used to express this discussion for illiterates, and key (generative) words which were to come out of these graphics with the use of syllable-making to create new words were the main methods of learning literacy.
- b) but secondly, in an imaginative connection, PRA methods were to be adopted to produce the graphics and express the key points of the discussion. In this way, REFLECT linked literacy with mainstream development.

The recognition of the much wider functions which such an approach would imply for the facilitators was ensured by giving the facilitators extensive training – three, four or even five

weeks, with extensive follow-up training, three days every quarter - and much direct support from the programme organisers.

So I was looking for the following in the REFLECT circles we examined:

- unlike school
- learner control
- group discussion of issues relating to equity, equality, empowerment and justice
- learner action in (hopefully transformative) development
- extensive and on-going facilitator training and support

### **The ideological compromises**

Before I come to the findings, there is a major aspect of the situation of REFLECT in Monkey Bay which needs examination.

REFLECT in Malawi, as in other countries, was adapted to local circumstances. It is located in the Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD) at both central and local levels under the decentralisation policy of the government of Malawi. In particular, it is focused on the National Adult Literacy Programme (NALP) which is a formal textbook-led literacy course leading to an examination and a certificate, thus providing the Ministry with statistics of those 'made literate' to meet its Education for All goals. NALP is a functional literacy programme, seeking to link literacy learning to some form of economic or social advancement such as skill learning for livelihoods, citizenship or social development (e.g. health). It is a state-run programme seeking to bring the marginalised into the existing society but without transforming that society.

At first sight, then, REFLECT and NALP are mutually hostile to each other – NALP is exactly the kind of programme REFLECT with its radical overtones was opposing. But the two made an accommodation to each other in various ways. The Ministry agreed to replace the one-size-fits-all textbook (primer) approach with diversified key words chosen by the local community. They agreed with a (limited) community development role for the circles but not for any social transformative role. The action points would be what they called 'safe development' and they did not believe that any transformative actions would occur. The fact that the programme would be implemented and supervised by the Ministry's local staff, the CDAs, made the latter easier; this form of REFLECT lay well within the roles of the current CDAs' terms of reference. REFLECT in Malawi thus sacrificed its radical transformative agenda for the softer agenda of community development (sanitation, infrastructure development, roads and bridges): "If REFLECT had been introduced in the way the first people wanted, it would be more radical. But we adopt a useful form of development" (interview NCLAE 14 April).

The Ministry's acceptance of REFLECT was motivated by resources. The Ministry on several occasions told us that they agreed to adopt REFLECT because the agencies wishing to use it had resources while MWCD-NALP had very few. This was one way to achieve Ministry goals without increasing government expenditure. As the former head of the National Centre (NCLAE) put it in a paper, "We adopted it because of lack of funding", since government-provided funding "is inadequate and erratic" (Jeke p17). "The advantage of NGOs doing REFLECT was that they had resources" (Jeke int 4 April 2008). "Why did the Ministry adopt a Freirean approach? We chose the Freirean approach because the resources were low and because of the action points" (int MWCD 3 April). "The good thing about REFLECT is that it is not expensive because of the lack of [text]books" (int NCLAE 14 April).

### **Process versus Product**

But there is at the heart of the relationship between REFLECT and the NALP a deeper divide; they are anomalous. Basically REFLECT is a **process project** – that is, it believes in exposing the participants to a process (group discussion and development action with literacy combined) without specifying the exact outcomes. It is similar to the '*process-oriented curriculum development approach*' which is advocated in some schools. REFLECT recognises that it is a process approach. It does not specify in advance the outcomes of any circle. If the circle decides it does not wish to learn literacy, that is acceptable. Each circle decides its own outcomes.

This is different from a *product-oriented curriculum development approach*, where the objectives and outcomes are specified and the measures of success are pre-set. The NALP is a **product-oriented** agency – it has set goals, the numbers of illiterate men and women to be 'made literate'. It looks for statistics and identifies these by setting an examination with pre-determined levels of achievement.

So from the start, REFLECT in Monkey Bay is compromised. It needs to create statistics to satisfy MWCD. And such statistics are generated, although they may not always stand up to scrutiny. This accounts for the increasing pressure of examinations on the REFLECT literacy learning circles in Monkey Bay.

### **Short-term versus long-term visions**

There is a third anomaly in the REFLECT-NALP link-up. NALP is meant to be a time-bound programme, lasting nine months or two years at the most in any one location; its aim is to teach literacy skills, and once taught, the class moves to new fields or new learners. REFLECT is an on-going programme: the circles have no time limit; they can last for ever,

engaging in new developmental activities all the time, become self-sustaining. Again compromises have been made. Those circle participants who feel they have learned enough literacy to satisfy themselves have simply left the programme. Those who remain year after year have not learned literacy.

Despite these inherent tensions, relationships at central level are warm and close but only by hiding the nature of REFLECT in the field. The tensions come in Monkey Bay. The CDAs see the circles as NALP literacy learning classes designed to produce figures of learners rather than radical social change. The Programme Co-ordinator (PC) finds himself at odds with the CDAs who on occasion openly resist his vision of what REFLECT is. They press the facilitators for statistics in their monthly reports, however unreliable those statistics are. At the very least, the relationship is uncomfortable.

## **THE CHANGING CONTEXT**

It is important to remember that the social and economic context of the Monkey Bay region of Malawi is changing. We cannot go into this in depth here but fishing is certainly changing; for example, larger boats which use engines and employ crew are replacing smaller family fishing boats. Tourism is growing; improved infrastructure is opening up areas formerly more inaccessible; IT and mobile phones are making communications easier; declining traditional cultures such as *nyau* are being replaced with more 'modern' (mainly Westernised) cultures. Several of these changes are already creating demand for various forms of literacy practices and educational qualifications.

### **Positioning the Researcher**

It is very important that the position adopted by the researcher is set out before starting the journey. I come with expertise and experience in two related fields, adult learning and teaching, and adult literacy.

#### **a) Adult Learning and Teaching**

The major principles of adult learning programmes have been the subject of much research and writing in recent years, and a number of general approaches to adult education are widely accepted (Rogers 2003; Rogers 2004; Barton and Tusting 2006). I see these principles as five – four of which are generally held and one has within it a built-in tension.

1. **Adults come to learning programmes for a purpose** and (since most learning is voluntary) that purpose must form the basis of all learning activities. That purpose may be different from the goals set by the providers of the programme. The purpose may not be clear in the mind of the learner, and the purpose may well change as the learning

programme proceeds. But the aspirations, goals and expectations which the adult learner brings to the learning programme (in this case the REFLECT circles) are the foundation for all adult education, including literacy and numeracy learning.

2. **All adults come with prior learning**, and all new learning builds on prior learning. There have been many recent studies especially of informal learning and the implications for adult teaching programmes of this kind of learning. Adults do not learn only in class; they learn everyday and in every context through informal learning. That learning builds up huge “funds of knowledge” and banks of skills. Much of this is unconscious and yet much of it is being used every day for the process of living. Adults have already learned much about literacy from observation and encounter. They have skills of learning. All adult education (including REFLECT circles) need to help the adult learners to identify their existing knowledge and build on it, not treat the learners as ignorant and unskilful.
3. **Adults – being adults – are accustomed in some measure to control** their own lives and indeed those of others. They need to control the learning process, not leave the control to the instructor or provider. They should decide what they are to learn, when and where and how. A horizontal relationship rather than a vertical relationship should characterise all adult education; a hierarchy of power may be appropriate to teaching children but not to helping adults to learn.
4. The fourth element is that **adults learn best when they engage in the activity itself for real** rather than learn *in preparation for* some task. In their daily life through informal experiential learning, adults learn how to be mothers by being mothers, not by attending lectures; they learn how to cook by cooking for real, how to fish and farm informally from others. It is a process, not of learning **for** possible future doing (which is the normal approach of schooling) but of learning **by** doing (which is the approach of informal learning in everyday life).
5. The problem with this fourth principle is that it can at times run counter to the others, especially the third. Many (but not all) adults come to adult learning programmes with an expectation that it will be like school, using the approach of ‘learn first, practise later’. Many (but again not all) of them want to be treated like school pupils, not like adults, to be taught rather than to learn. If we are to give adults control of their learning, then we need to take this desire seriously and not impose our ideology of adult learning on them. The most effective strategy to cope with this would seem to be the fifth general principle: to **‘start where they are’**, with their agenda and their desired approach but without sacrificing our agenda. It is usually possible to encourage adult learners to move from a top-down approach with which many will come to a more bottom-up approach after some time, from vertical learning from a teacher to horizontal learning from each other. Teaching adults takes time and a great deal of concern for their aspirations.

In this process review, then, I am looking to see in the REFLECT circles

- how far the existing knowledge and skills of the participants are used in the circles, what the participants contribute to each session;
- how far the participants control the programme;
- how far the participants are learning literacy and numeracy through the experience of the action points;
- and how far the literacy learning programmes are starting where the participants are.

## **b) Adult literacy**

Adult literacy studies have undergone a major revolution in the last twenty years. The traditional approach has been based on a view of literacy as a neutral set of skills which a person either possesses or does not possess: the literate and the illiterate can be easily distinguished. Once these basic skills have been grasped, the literate can read and write everything. This view believes that learning literacy brings with it new ways of thinking, new understandings, new capabilities. Without literacy, there can be no modernisation, no development.

This view has been widely and increasingly challenged by a view of literacy as social practices, the so-called New Literacy Studies (Street 1984; Papen 2005; Barton 1994). This view points out that there are multiple literacies, not just one; to learn to read the Qu'ran in Arabic does not help one to be able to read a local newspaper. The key text in this field, Brian Street's *Literacy in Theory and Practice* (1984) points out three main sets of literacy – what he calls 'commercial' literacies (the literacies of the shop and the market), religious literacies (e.g. reading the Qu'ran or Bible), and 'schooled' literacy (the literacy taught in the classroom). Other studies have developed this further (e.g. Baynham 1995); 'occupational' literacies (the different literacies found in different occupations such as tailoring, carpentering, and other workplaces), 'bureaucratic' literacies (such as forms etc) and so on have been identified. Different people can become expert in one or other of these and yet still be 'illiterate' in the other literacies. The literacy practices of a taxi driver (Prinsloo and Breier 1996) and of a hospital porter, of a hairdresser and a fisherman are very different, and their learning approaches will be different. The formal literacy and especially the numeracy practices that are being taught in schools and adult literacy classes are not the same as the informal literacy and numeracy practices which are being engaged in in everyday life. Formal literacy has rules of spelling and grammar which the informal, sometimes called local (Barton and Hamilton 1988), vernacular or indigenous literacies, do not possess. Each literacy is bound up within a context of power and practice; the schooled literacy is all-powerful (Crowther and Tett 2001) and dominant, the others are subaltern. Each literacy has its own functionality.

What is more, non-literate persons engage in literacy practices. They may do this by mediation, or they may adopt other strategies. And they all have experience of literacy in some form or other, especially of literacy as an excluding activity. It is therefore not possible to distinguish starkly between literate and illiterate; many recent studies have shown how many non-literate persons have acquired through informal learning some understanding of literacy and its power and some informal skills, while still regarding themselves as 'illiterate' (e.g. Rogers and Uddin 2005; Uddin 2005). Today, much (ethnographic) research is being directed towards understanding the everyday literacy practices of all sectors of the population. This is even more true of numeracy, for everybody engages in some form of counting and calculating in their everyday life, using their own (often very local) practices in the process. Unless we understand and build on these existing practices, our teaching of numeracy will be ineffective.

Such views have become increasingly influential in adult literacy programmes in developing countries (Prinsloo and Breier 1996). UNESCO now talks about the plurality of literacy (UNESCO 2007). This is the position that I hold.

I am therefore looking to see in this REFLECT literacy programme

- what kind of literacy practices are being taught
- and how these literacy practices relate to the more informal literacy practices of the community.

My view is that unless the literacy teaching of the REFLECT circles relates to the informal literacies of the development action points, the work of the literacy learning circle will be seen by the learners as irrelevant.

### **c) Adult literacy policies and practices today**

Looking at the policy and practice of providing literacy learning programmes for adults, I see a number of trends

**Literacy for poverty relief:** First, such programmes have been influenced by the concentration on poverty relief, so that other functionalities for literacy such as citizenship (participation in existing political structures) and literacy for social transformation, although they still remain, are less prominent. Literacy for economic development is the order of the day. The rights-based approach to literacy is now focussing its attention on economic outcomes. REFLECT remains on the whole true to its rights-based approach but still concentrates on community development and civic involvement rather than economic development.

The relationship between literacy and poverty is however no longer seen as a simplistic one – that a man or woman is illiterate because they are poor. As Agneta Lind and others have pointed out, “poverty causes illiteracy”. The relationship between illiteracy and poverty are symbiotic, not causal. Learning literacy skills will not automatically reduce poverty; but using literacy skills in economic activities will enhance those activities and their productivity.

**Literacy for livelihoods:** But literacy for poverty relief too has seen changes. There is less concentration on literacy for employment in the formal sector of the economy, for it has become evident that literacy (and education) cannot create jobs. Rather the concentration has recently been on literacy for livelihoods.

**Literacy for SMEs:** And from there, the justification for providing literacy learning is focussed on literacy for small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs). This is very strong in western Africa.

**Literacy for groups:** This coincides with a move from literacy seen as a purely individual skill to literacy as a means of group communication. The emphasis is now on group formation and capability strengthening. REFLECT is an example of this.

**Literacy as an on-going activity:** Finally there is a growing appreciation that literacy learning is not simply a one-off imparting of a skill once and for all but supporting an on-going activity, partly and especially by building up the literacy environment but also in other ways.

**Literacy as part of (adult) education:** There is however a contradictory tendency in process at the same time. In many parts of the world, adult literacy is moving towards what I would wish to call a wider ‘adult school movement’, from literacy alone to Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET). Education for All (EFA) lays stress on a wider adult lifelong learning (the learning needs of youth and adults), and in various different contexts, there is a good deal of demand for this from the field; certificates (and their equivalencies with the formal system) and progression into new forms of formal and non-formal learning programmes are features of almost all adult literacy classes today. This aspect REFLECT does not yet have.

**A mission statement for adult literacy today:** The aim is to ensure self-sustaining groups which use literacy to advance their economic well-being. Government and donor provision in adult literacy today needs to focus its attention on working with existing or new

groups of adults engaged in a livelihood activity and using the literacy skills of the group members to enhance that activity, not just 'injecting' skills in a one-off programme. This should go alongside the provision of a progressive wider programme of learning opportunities.

**Paying for literacy and other learning assistance:** There is also a growing perception that most groups of adults can afford to pay very small sums for such provision; what is now needed is a safety net for those who really cannot afford such sums to ensure they are not excluded. Some self-formed adult groups in very poor countries (e.g. Nepal) are already contributing towards paying their own 'teacher'. Nevertheless, there is a powerful lobby for adult education (especially literacy) as a state obligation and benchmarks have been developed recently urging governments to take it seriously (Benchmarks 2005)

## **METHODOLOGIES OF THE PROCESS REVIEW**

I adopted **an ethnographic approach** to my survey. The plan was to take a small number of circles and examine them in depth rather than try to look at a wider number of circles on a purposive sample basis. We thus took 'telling' case studies to see what lessons they can tell us. I do not claim these are typical but they raise major issues (Brice Heath and Street 2008)

We took two circles chosen by Levi Soko and the CDAs, Balamanja and Chilimba, and attended each circle for the whole week. We interviewed the participants, the facilitator, the CMC/VRC, the village head, some past graduates and some non-participants from that village. We made video recordings of the work of the circle. We aimed to look at the past reports of these two circles and obtain reports from the relevant supervisors.

In addition, we arranged to spend one whole day in one village site, orienting ourselves to the location. We also planned to visit some eight to ten other circles in focus group discussions, meet a group of facilitators, meet the CDAs, the ACDO and Levi Soko as project coordinator; interview the District Commissioner and the Director of Planning and Development in Mangochi District, the ICEIDA staff at Monkey Bay and in Lilongwe, the Ministry and the NCLAE, MAREFO and other REFLECT users (especially UNDP). We managed to do most of this and also had the good fortune to attend a meeting of the Project Implementation Team which was almost more informative than all the rest put together.

However, I must record that we were at times given inaccurate information, and some information was withheld from us either consciously or unconsciously. To give one example,

in one of our detailed case studies, we talked with the facilitator who introduced us to the CMC/VRC; we had a long talk with the CMC/VRC; we received a written account of the circle's history from the CDA. It was only at the PIT meeting at the very end of my time in Malawi that I learned that the CMC/VRC had in fact collapsed in that village; the CMC/VRC we met was a very new CMC/VRC which had only just received training. When I asked the CDA why that information had not been included in the report on the circle, I was informed, "I did not think you would be interested in that".

We received a number of informative reports from Balamanja (they came fairly late and we were not able to use them during the field work because they had to be translated into English) but fewer from the newer circle at Chilimba, and in both cases no reports after 2007. When we asked about action points, we were told of very few but these written reports informed us of several others which were not mentioned.

## **PURPOSE**

### **Lack of clarity**

It is not very clear what the primary purpose of the MBRP is, but most assume that REFLECT sets out to help adults to learn **literacy through self-determined and self-implemented development** programmes. A local group of men or women, in their community, choose to engage in some aspect of development relevant to their own community; they decide everything, even whether they will learn literacy at all. Thus, several REFLECT circles in other countries have followed a path to development without including formal literacy within the programme; that is their choice. So the primacy of *literacy* learning in REFLECT is not clear, especially as the recent publications of REFLECT have moved away from literacy to stress wider modes of communication .

But Malawi REFLECT is committed to learning literacy through community development. The Malawi REFLECT programme, like many other REFLECT programmes, consists of two parts – literacy learning and development. But even in Malawi, there is a good deal of uncertainty about the relationship between these two elements. We found the lack of clarity about the *primary* purpose of the programme to be acknowledged widely. "The concept of REFLECT has not been presented to the community very clearly ... There is a lack of clarity, not just in ICEIDA but in all REFLECT including Action Aid" (DCDO).

We tried to clarify this by asking our respondents what were their 'measures of success'. When asked what were their measures of success, some of the Ministry staff replied, "We are not certain" (int MWCD 3 April). Talking of the learning shelters and their ownership, members of the senior staff of the programme said, "It has not been thought through"; similarly for the new livelihood programme, "it has not been thought through". "We need a common and clear understanding of the basic concepts, especially REFLECT – it is not clearly understood" (PC).

### **The adapting nature of REFLECT**

The view of the CDAs about REFLECT are clearly at variance with those of some other agencies. To them, it is a variant form of NALP and subject to the same regulations as NALP. This may be the reason why so many circles are asking for textbooks and other teaching-learning materials; why so many facilitators are teaching formally to the NALP examination; and why the demand for livelihoods and for English is so strong. REFLECT initially rejected both examinations and income generation, but in both cases it is having to adapt.

There are other models of REFLECT and NALP which have been developed and which we looked at. UNDP has created a different model in its FLIRD (originally SSEEP). This focuses on livelihood training in the villages. Livelihood circles are formed consisting of both literate and non-literate community members; the 'illiterate' are then sent off to separate literacy learning circles where they use the REFLECT training manual as the basis for their learning. "It is not true REFLECT – REFLECT is not supposed to administer a test but we do. ... We use the REFLECT manual for this [literacy] learning – we do not use [livelihood] material for literacy" (int UNDP 15 April).

In this, UNDP are yielding to popular demand. And if REFLECT means anything by its statements that the participants of each circle can take control and demand their own learning programme, then the REFLECT programme in Monkey Bay too will change as the participants demand things which do not fit into the pure REFLECT ideology – textbooks, participation in examinations and certificates, English lessons, livelihood training.

### **The priority of literacy**

Some of those we met at all levels (organisers, CMCs/VRCs and literacy learning circles) gave **literacy** achievements as the primary measure of success. Among the *organisers*, some of the Ministry staff answered in reply to our query, "the acquisition and application of literacy skills; we test that by the assessment we administer" (MWCD). The Monkey Bay REFLECT programme is "part and parcel of NALP", and "the goal of NALP is to make illiterate youths and adults functionally literate by 2020" (Jeke paper p8). "Our main measure of success is literacy but also how they sustain literacy and how many are active in development action points" (Jeke int). The measures of success are "participation in circle activities – we look at average attendance; the literacy tests – more than half should pass the exam; and whether the facilitator is committed" (ACDO). ICEIDA expressed it in wider terms but still basically literacy: "Our measures are empowerment, can they read the newspaper, read and write; and to enable them to be active in their community" (int ICEIDA Malawi). The CDAs said their measures are "how many can read, write and calculate". They assess this formally by the literacy tests, and informally by "testimonies of participants" of the use of literacy in the community ("reading scriptures in church and writing verses from the Bible") and examples of increase of confidence (preaching, speaking in public, taking leadership roles); they cite a circle which wrote a letter to the CDA asking for assistance (CDAs). "We want to see more people becoming literate in the various circles within the context of their livelihood in the community ... The primary purpose is literacy with livelihoods, not just literacy but also empowerment" (int ICEIDA Malawi). "This is primarily a literacy learning programme" (PC). "All the REFLECT circles visited have a facilitator who facilitates functional literacy" (UNDP).

The *CMCs/VRCs* see much the same. The Katole<sup>1</sup> CMC/VRC put it clearly:

“We look for improvement of literacy and numeracy skills. We get the evidence from the participants themselves: they tell us what they are able to do: ‘I know how to write alphabet letters’, and from statistics of those who are able to read and write. We know because when we started the circle, there were some participants who literally did not know how to read and write but have improved greatly. We also look for change of behaviour as a result of attending circle activities. For instance, some of the women are our wives and have changed their general perception.”

The village chief in Njoga said that the village needed a circle because there are so many illiterates in the village. For them, REFLECT is above all an adult *literacy* programme like the pre-REFLECT NALP and APPLE literacy classes.

When the *literacy learning circles* were asked to indicate their measures of success, these were naturally mostly in terms of literacy achievements. At Katole, the facilitator saw the goals solely in terms of the attendance by LLC participants and the statistics on how many know how to read and write. It is therefore not surprising that a considerable number of the participants measured their achievements in terms of literacy. At Madzedze, one participant said she wrote a letter to her husband and another letter to her sister; “We read the Bible and magazines” (but she could not name any magazines). “I was an ignorant person but now I can read and sing hymns in church. I know all the alphabet letters”. “These days we are able to read the instructions [of medicine]”; “When the children come from school, I am able to read what they have done in school and sometimes help them ...”. “These days I can see the difference because I am able to read and calculate while selling and buying fish”. For some, the goal was simply to sign their name: the Village Headman of Chigonere said he could now sign District Assembly documents; at Madzedze, we were told, “I was a nobody, now I can sign my name”; at Katole, “I once attended NALP but still could not write my name. However after attending the REFLECT Circle, I am able to write my name” (female participant).

### **Literacy with development**

Some saw the purpose of the REFLECT circle solely in terms of literacy but a number balanced this with development projects – mostly with development coming a clear second. The DPD said that he looked for circles where “the learners see their objectives met, for example, the three ‘r’s , where the action points are arrived at by the whole community, not by one individual, and where the members of the [wider] circle are active in other development programmes outside of REFLECT” (MDPD). MAREFO suggested that a successful village circle was one “where they are doing both the literacy as well as implementing action points. We will be looking for both literacy and action points”. Even the

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<sup>1</sup> All quotations come from our field notes of interviews.

CDAs had this hierarchy, although they started off by saying that the “circles are there to spearhead development in the area”. They go on to say,

“We believe that if communities are literate, then they can actively get involved in development. Literacy is also a form of development but not a visible determinant of development. What we mean is that although all people (both literate and non-literate) can take part in development activities, if you give them or enhance their literacy skills, they can follow development concepts better. For instance, they can follow farming instructions, business activities, hospital advice or prescriptions, etc.”,

a view which suggests that literacy is useful mainly to get messages across to poor ignorant villagers.

The CMC/VRC at Simon village saw as their measures of success that “the participants should know how to read and write, the CMC/VRC committee members should supervise the circle’s activities frequently, and development should be taking place in the village”. The circle in the same village said there were two measures of success: first, reading and writing skills and numeracy (reading the Bible and writing letters), and secondly, the development activities taking place in the community. Katole saw three measures: the development of reading and writing and numeracy skills; the relationship between inner circle and outer circle; and the activities of the literate compared with the non-literate (“We observe that those who are literate are more interested in development than the non-literate, because the literate ones understand issues faster and better”). At Mbinda 2 (which is a church group), the measures they were looking for were whether they are now able to read (which can be seen if they can sing hymns in church), whether the women easily understand development issues, and whether the participants can calculate change. The Chigonere CMC/VRC said, “We look at the number of participants who frequently attend circle activities; [and] we consider how many of these members are improving their skills of reading, writing and numeracy.... Another measure of success concerns development projects being brought to the area as a result of circle activities”.

### **Development**

But there are others who see development as the priority. The view of one senior organiser was that “You should also take note of the fact that NGOs generally introduce REFLECT circles to enhance development activities and not really for just learning literacy and numeracy”.

These development projects are seen in strictly limited terms. First, they are not meant (at present) to include **functional or livelihoods training**. There is growing demand from the circles for livelihood training and growing pressure from other forces for such training; but

MBRP as it is at present constructed does not admit of this<sup>2</sup>. It is community rather than economic development projects which form the basis of the REFLECT action points. Community development is one of the prime tasks of the Ministry and of its staff, especially the local staff.

As we have seen, the kind of development which REFLECT was initially intended to promote was a radical transformative kind, challenging society at many points, identifying through conscientization the local centres of oppression and taking social action together to promote liberation. “The goals of the project lay in part in political action ... to lobby, to get the local communities connected to services and resources including money, but this did not happen ... The people were shy of national politics, although the government speaks of ‘self-help’ and self-sufficiency” (int GH).

The only vestige of this we found in any discussion we had was with ICEIDA who spoke in terms of the empowerment of women. But we found in the organisers or in the circles little overt concern for gender issues or for any other transformative programme, no critical examination of existing structures, no development of alternative programmes of action. Instead, development meant here participating in the existing developmental programmes, not challenging them. The MDPD said explicitly that he saw the purpose of REFLECT as being to mobilise the villagers to participate in the national and regional development programmes. Like schooling, MBRP appears to be a co-option programme, not a transformative one.

Behind this is a strong deficit concept of development – the ‘illiterate’ are seen to be lacking, outside the community. The aim of REFLECT, according to the CDAs, is to “help illiterates to join in the rest of community and engage in development activities. They are not full members. This is what we feel, this is our perception; they can contribute better when literate” (int CDAs). If the ‘illiterates’ can change by becoming literate and working hard on local development projects, they will become full members and can contribute to the national good and local prosperity. It is they who need to change, not society. And insofar as ICEIDA is a bi-lateral agency working to support the national government agenda, it is hard to see how REFLECT in Monkey Bay can fulfil its radical objectives.

## **Conclusion**

There is then lack of clarity in relation to the purpose of the programme and the measures of success. It is not adequate to say that it is a bi-polar project, both literacy and development.

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<sup>2</sup> This was approved in principle at a meeting of the PIT in May 2008 and modalities are being worked out.

Is a circle which undertakes many action points successfully but has no literacy (we saw several such circles) really fulfilling the purpose of the programme? Can a woman be empowered economically if she is not empowered in literacy terms? It will be important for entering on the next phase of the ICEIDA-MWCD partnership for it to be clarified once for all whether this is a 'literacy-through-development' project or a 'development-with-some-literacy' project; for the measures of success will be different in each case.

## PARTICIPANTS

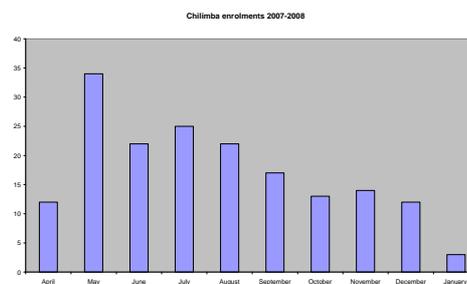
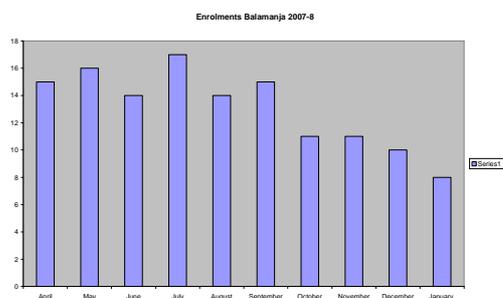
We found a healthy programme of group meetings in a large number of villages; we found some local community support – at least overtly – to these circles. We found a number of local committees working with the circles. We found a significant band of facilitators, keen and committed, keeping the circles together. We found many women and a small number of men actively engaged in learning and in action points. But we also found a certain amount of understandable confusion.

### The Three Levels of REFLECT circle

What is a circle? Our two case studies and our other visits showed the 'circle' operating at three different levels. As a DCDO said, "When we are talking of a circle, we are not only talking of the classroom circle" (DCDO int 11 April).

Level 1 is the **literacy learning ('classroom') circle** with a facilitator. As the register provided requires the facilitator to re-register members each month, the numbers of the classroom circle varies each month. For our case studies, in the year 2007-8, the registered figures for **enrolments** of members were as follows:

	Balamanja	Chilimba
April	15	12
May	16	34
June	14	22
July	17	25
August	14	22
September	15	17
October	11	13
November	11	14
December	10	12
January	8	3



Attendance, as the monthly reports show, was lower but these were the **enrolled** members of the literacy learning circle. The fluctuating numbers are of course understandable but they do make difficulties both for determining exactly what is the REFLECT circle in Balamanja and Chilimba as well as for the learning programme. Many of these members attended for more than one year – some for as many as four years at Balamanja.

Beyond this, there is a wider group, all the people who have attended the literacy learning circle. As our experience at the first meeting we attended in Chilimba shows, this can be substantial. Eight persons had enrolled at Chilimba in the literacy learning circle, but a total of nearly 50 persons came into our first session at one time or another. Most of these had ceased to attend the circle, and some had certificates, this (in their minds) closing their period of membership-study. This group of 'past graduates' can be called upon but in neither village were they active. They did not meet, either with or without the facilitator. One or two borrowed books from the circle library (tin trunk) but not many of them did this. It is not clear if they are still members of the REFLECT circle.

The CDAs told us that these people can now join in the village activities. Certainly we found some who said they now found it easier to speak in public and presumably some of them may have participated in the third level of circle activity, the Village Meeting. But those we met were not engaged with the circles or other development programme in their village.

Level 2 is the **Circle Management Committee (CMC)** often called Village REFLECT Committee (VRC). Some ten persons are on the committee (REFLECT issues a template for the committees although some flexibility is allowed; and it is rare for all members to be active). The activity level of the CMC/VRC varies greatly from village to village, some members being very active, others reluctant. In part, this results from the mode of the appointment of members: "The village meeting co-opts even those who are absent from the meeting rather than calls for volunteers for the CMC/VRC, so many are reluctant and do not understand" (PC). There appear to be more men than women on the CMCs despite a policy of gender balance. Several members of the CMC/VRC are 'illiterate': "Choosing the committee for the CMC/VRC is based on commitment displayed by the potential leaders. We also ensure that they should not come from one compound to ensure that both the literate and non-literate participants are involved. Those who are literate are encouraged not to discourage those who are not" (Katole); some CMC/VRC members join the literacy learning circle as participants as at Mbeya. Their training is very brief – 3-5 days and some members have had no training. They meet irregularly (at Kasankha and Chilimba, "twice a month" but the record of their meetings do not show this frequency); only a few keep written minutes of these meetings.

The third level of REFLECT is **the Village Meeting**. In both Balamanja and Chilimba, the development activities of the REFLECT circle take place, not in the literacy learning circle but in the third level of REFLECT, the Village Meeting; in some other places (as at Simon), the literacy learning circle is said to "take the lead".

The figures for this level of circle activity varies greatly, even in one village. In Balamanja, the facilitator told us that the last village meeting (the Monday of our visit) was attended by "about 46" villagers, whereas the previous meeting had been "about 100". Elsewhere, we heard of a village meeting of about 40 at Namgoma, of 85 at Mbeya, and at Chilembwe about 100. In both Balamanja and Chilimba, this meeting, convened by the facilitator, discussed a particular development need of the village chosen by the facilitator, drew up a 'graphic', planned the action points, and in many cases chose the key words for the literacy learning circle. We were told that some of the literacy learning circle members attended those meetings but "they don't speak" (Balamanja).

### **Lack of clarity**

This lack of clarity as to what exactly is a REFLECT circle is regarded by the promoters of REFLECT (Action Aid and in Malawi MAREFO) as a strength – each village can determine for itself the model it wishes to choose. But in fact there was no such choice. The organisation of the REFLECT circles is undertaken by the CDAs and it reflects a more general lack of clarity about what is a REFLECT circle. It has led several of our respondents to talk about an inner circle and an outer circle. The Ministry said: "There is an inner circle of the illiterates and an outer circle with a wider group" (int MWCD 3 April). MAREFO talked to us about "both the outer and inner circles working together" (int MAREFO). Others take a different view: "The REFLECT circle is the literacy learners; the outer circle is anybody in the village who comes to the village meeting for PRA" (PC int 12 April). At Katole, we were told, "Within the inner circle we do work together but we also want to do so with the outer circle, which includes the whole community (circle and non-circle members), especially where there are special tasks to be done". At Simon, "both the inner and outer circles are involved in [development activities]". In some discussions, the REFLECT (outer) circle means the whole village.

Because of the uncertain nature of the level three circle (the whole village can turn up if they wish), when talking about the 'participants' of the REFLECT circles, we are talking about levels one and two. When we visited a village to meet 'the circle', it was always levels one and two we met. As one circle told us, "the Outer Circle is regarded as the main REFLECT Committee *and consists of both circle and non-circle members*, both literates and non-literates. Action points (APs) are ideally supposed to be generated in this circle but this does

not usually work and hence they have found the Inner circle to be useful on this (generation of Action Point APs). The Outer Circle is generally regarded as supervisory and policy making Committee" (my emphasis). The fact of a REFLECT circle including 'non-circle members' shows the lack of clarity.

**Young:** Unlike some parts of the NALP (int MWCD) where children sometimes attend adult classes as a supplement or alternative to their schooling, there are few signs of young people wishing to join the circles. The CDAs told us that "in some cases they [the circles] do have younger people and encourage them to go into formal schools", and at Simon village, "If they are too young for the circle, we encourage them to go to the primary school nearby".

**Gender balance:** Most are women. Indeed, originally "the programme was mainly aimed at women" (int GH). All the learners at Chilimba were women and all except one at Balamanja were women. The young man who joined Balamanja this session (the only new member to enrol) was clearly exceptional. Most of the other learning circles consisted of women only.

There was much concern about the failure of the circles to recruit and keep men participants. It has been pointed out that at the start of the programme, "membership was good except for the all-male circles which died out" (int GH). In an extended discussion with a group of men in Liganga as to why they did not attend, they said:

"... it is shameful to be among women especially when there are only a handful of you against many of them. When you fail in class, they will tell others outside the circle about your inabilities and then the whole women fraternity will talk about you and hence you lose your respect as a man. So, the best way is to stay away from the circle activities and leave it to women. Perhaps the best way is for men to learn together with other men rather than having a mixed group."

As the researcher reported,

"Although some of the men felt that they were also pressed for time with the need to look for money to feed their families, and hence were unable to go for circle activities, all of them were of the view that if there was a provision for an all-men circle, then they would definitely create some time to attend the sessions as they were in need of the literacy skills for their daily lives in small scale businesses, counting money, giving change, reading bus directions when they go to Monkey Bay and Mangochi town, among other things. ... the men greatly appreciated the need for literacy and numeracy skills development and expressed a strong desire for adult classes, especially if attempts were made to separate men from women" (Liganga).

Unlike other circles in the Monkey Bay area, there were relatively more males involved in the circle activities in the Katole REFLECT circle. They told us,

"At first we were shy, but when it was well explained to us during a Village Meeting, we welcomed the idea of attending circle activities. In fact, we later realised that there was nothing to be shy about. Furthermore, we have

noticed that we have lost a lot of development opportunities as a result of ignorance [i.e. not knowing how to read and write]”.

But even here there were problems:

“Misconceptions on gender relations during circle activities occurred. ‘Some people think that when a male and female participant sit together to work, then they are in some intimate relationship (*Chibwenzi*), which is not the case in a ‘classroom’ setting. There is therefore the need for people to understand that two people of opposite sex can work together without necessarily being sexually intimate’. We were told that some women have been accused by their husbands of being in intimacy with some of the men at the circle and this has caused some problems at community level” (Katole).

In Simon circle,

“As in other circles, male participation is very low due to a number of factors:

- Laughing at each other during circle activities, especially when one fails to read and write. The men feel their ‘power’ is threatened.
- Most men head families and have to address household survival as head. So they prefer to look for money and other resources for survival rather than spend most of such time at the circle
- Most of the few male attenders stopped coming to the circle”.

At Mbinda 2, the CMC/VRC Committee “reported that male attendance was generally very low: currently only 5 men are actively involved. Men are also said to be too shy to learn in the company of women. The Committee says that the fact that overall there are few men against many women participants means that they feel threatened. The suggestion is that where there is a reasonable number of them, the men will continue to attend”.

Such a situation is not unique to REFLECT. The NALP livelihoods programme reports low attendance of men generally, but “Men will attend if they see some immediate advantage” (NCLAE). UNDP also has identified the need for separate circles for men: “The participation of women ... is higher than men, and yet the men would want to take a leading role in livelihood activities because of the economic benefits derived from such activities” (UNDP). But even in livelihood programmes, it is hard to get men to enrol, as the ACDO in Dedza points out.

“There are two major reasons for the low numbers. Men often claim that they do not see the future of learning to read and write. What they need is English, and if English was taught most men would enrol into circles. ... The majority are not literate but they argue that they need English in order to listen more meaningfully to relevant radio programmes on development, to speak at various places with different types of people including foreigners. ... The low attendance of men is also due to shyness – they do not want to learn with women to avoid being laughed at. ...

Generally we find that women rather than men are the ones who are utilising this facility by doing small-scale businesses, livestock farming, irrigation farming and afforestation. Men perhaps have a different perception and they often think “*Sukulu ya kwacha ilibe tsogold*” (Adult Literacy Education has no future). Thus for them, learning and furthering of their education is more crucial than involvement in developmental issues through adult education”.

**Poor or not so poor:** The programme is seen as part of Malawi's anti-poverty strategy, so it is aimed primarily at the very poor. But it is recognised that it mainly recruits "the not-so-poor... Some are poor, others not really" (CDAs). Concerns about dress is clearly one factor, but above all the priority of the very poor is immediate economic relief, not long-term community development. And with the prevailing attitude that the cause of poverty is the poor themselves and they need to change, it is not surprising that the very poor are not enrolled. "The poorest of the poor marginalise themselves including the disabled" was the view of some in the Ministry. Negative attitudes towards the 'illiterate' are very strong: "They know who they are, they will tell us who are the illiterate. They know they are not intelligent" (int Jeke).

**Illiterates:** Recruitment to the literacy circle is meant for the *unschooled* – and that is sometimes the case; at Chilembwe, all the participants present had not attended school. Elsewhere, it was aimed at 'illiterates' - which is not the same thing; attendance at school for two or even more years may still leave the participant 'illiterate'. Speaking of the whole field of REFLECT-NALP, NCLAE said, "When we use REFLECT, it is not only for illiterates – it is livelihoods for the literate and literacy for the illiterate". For the Ministry, "the target group are the illiterates, this is our main and prime objective" (int Jeke 4 April). In Simon village, "We [the CMC/VRC] only accept those that are purely illiterate to avoid confusion during circle activities because those that are a bit literate usually laugh at the ignorance of the others and therefore discourage many potential participants". There are those who hold that "membership [of the circle] is open to all non-literates only ... They should be illiterate ... Other members of the village can join in the livelihoods" (Stella).

But this would seem to be unusual according to our case studies and survey. We were able to test all the recruits in Nangoma on their first day in a new circle, and it appears that a considerable number already had some literacy skills. "Generally the circles are dominated by women participants who are 'illiterate', although circle participation is open to anyone: we don't ask them whether they are literate or not. Sometimes the problem is that the facilitator faces a wider range of participants, some of whom can read while others may not" (CDAs). "The programme was mainly aimed at women, those who are illiterate or semi-literate in the villages. But beyond this, the target group was not specifically defined: the circles would be open to everyone. Some literate persons participated for the other benefits and activities such as child care, food, vegetable gardens etc" (int GH).

Some pressure is brought to bear on the illiterate to attend. As we have seen, the CDAs regard the 'illiterate' as not full members of their own communities, even those who are

members of the CMCs/VRCs. "Those in the CMC/VRC who are non-literate still perform but we pressure them to attend circles in order to lead better. Similarly, the Malawi government is encouraging people to be literate so that they can perform better. ... Such non-literate committee members as a result work hard to learn how to read and write because they are afraid to lose their positions. As CDAs, we encourage them to know how to read and write in order to access loans<sup>3</sup> – this is our CDA principle" (CDAs). "The local chiefs advocate that only those who are literate should be allowed to sit on village development committees" (UNDP). Some focus is given to raising individual or family loans for which literate status is required.

There are no targeted programmes in the Monkey Bay REFLECT programme. The CDAs told us that "there is no literacy for fisheries. We met fishermen and they asked for literacy, can REFLECT provide it? We said, no. We cannot just start a circle for fishermen because it is demand driven. We have not thought about this and its implications. There have to be clear reasons why we should specifically target fishermen. Of course the Swedish agency specifically targets farmers in Monkey Bay. We do not know whether it is working as well. We have also heard of fishermen from Namgoma village demanding a literacy programme; we heard that they want to do literacy" (CDAs).

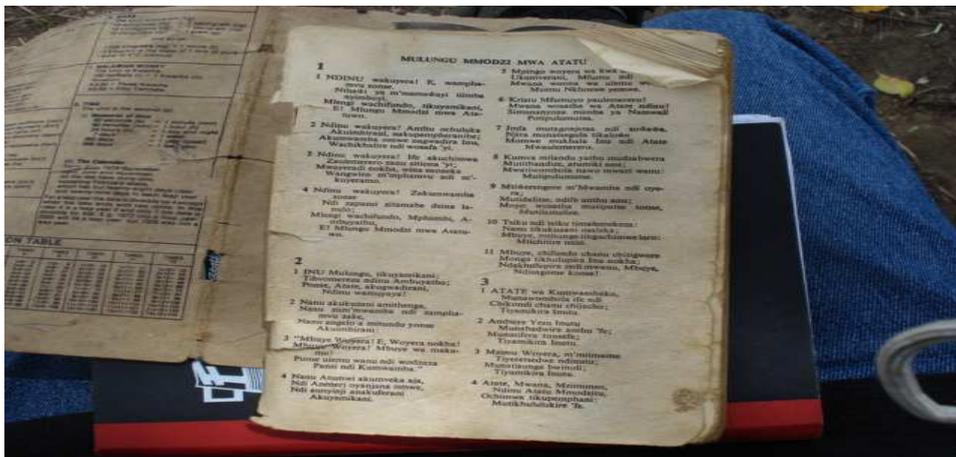
**Withdrawals** (what are usually called in many parts of Malawi 'drop-outs') are common, sometimes for a short time and sometimes fully. "Membership remains open throughout the circle period in that if a member withdraws, they may come back and rejoin at any time" (int ICEIDA). Initially withdrawals are very high: "Generally in the first three months, the circle has so many participants (60-70 on average). The largest number that was registered is 130 participants. In such cases, problems of classroom space arise. Additionally the large class sizes create more problems for one facilitator – it is difficult to handle such a large class with a wide range of needs. However, we have observed that after three months, the numbers go down mainly due to the fact that participants have certain expectations for attending the circle (e.g. loans, etc), and that once these have not been fulfilled, they drop out" (CDAs). The facilitators are asked to give reasons for the "drop-outs" as the reports put it. The reasons for withdrawal which have been given are illness, moving away from the village, marriage, shyness, poor vision due to ageing, seeking employment outside the village, unmet expectations from the circle, busy with farming, especially harvesting, with construction work etc. (monthly reports; UNDP).

**Religion:** I was very struck with the amount of evidence of religious (Christian) affiliation in the REFLECT circles, especially as the Mangochi District Development Plan says that the

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<sup>3</sup> None of the participants we met had in fact had a loan for loans are not easily come by in this region.

majority of the population of Monkey Bay area is Muslim (MDDP). Mbeya2 met in a church. The second Balamanja session opened and closed with prayer and the facilitator apologised for having forgotten this in the first session we attended. (He forgot again in the third session). A prayer also opened and closed all sessions at the Chilimba circle. The CDAs said that, in looking for their measures of success, “We look for testimonies of participants, e.g. from the churches, they should be able to read scripture and write verses from the Bible. Sometimes they tell us: ‘I preached today. ... I read scriptures in church today’.” We found several such statements from the circle members: “I know now how to read the Bible as a result of the Circle”; “concrete examples of reading were given, e.g. reading the Bible” (Simon village circle). In Mbinda 2 circle, the CMC/VRC reported that “They can sing hymns: ..., the only man in the group, sang a song in church the previous Sunday. Previously, he did not know how to read and sing hymns at church”. This circle member himself reported that “he is now able to read and write and calculate and this helps him in his daily life when he engages in situations that demand such skills, such as in Church.. He says he can now sing comfortably using a hymn book unlike in the past. He can also read the Bible.” At Katole, one of the women said: “I was an ignorant person but now I can read and sing hymns in church. ... Last Sunday for instance, I was able to do this in church, something which I could not dream of before I joined the circle”. Although the CDAs said, “we have both Moslems and Christians” in the circles, it is not clear how much Moslems participate in the circles or how comfortable they feel in this climate – we heard no mention of reading the Qu’ran or the suras.



## Conclusion

The general conclusion is that in our case studies, REFLECT recruits mainly Christian women who have had some schooling and are poor but not very poor; and that the membership of the circles is not fixed but floating. It is not clear who is a member of any particular circle and who is not – which will make resourcing the group for livelihoods activities a problem.

## PROCESS

### 1. INTRODUCTION

This section is based not just on the interviews and papers which we had but on the two in-depth case studies, Balamanja and Chilimba. We visited both centres for all the teaching sessions of that week and made extensive video recordings of the circle activities. We also met and held conversation with many people in these villages, connected or not connected with the REFLECT circle. The case studies were chosen for us by Levi Soko and his colleagues, the CDAs. We are not regarding these as 'typical' case studies, nor as examples of good practice, but as 'telling' case studies.

We also met with members of several other REFLECT circles and other persons connected with the programme. We video-recorded the teaching programme at Mbinda 2 circle. What follows is not only what we heard and read but what we saw.

### THE REFLECT PROCESS

The so-called *Mother Manual* (Archer and Cottingham 1996) which stressed literacy more than later REFLECT manuals states that REFLECT programmes

"emphasise writing rather than passive reading of fixed text, emphasise creative and active involvement of participants, build on existing knowledge of participants, focus on learner-generated materials (not pre-packaged text), ensure the process is responsive and relevant to the local context, address the literacy events in the wider environment rather than regard literacy as a classroom activity".

We set out to see how far any of this characterised the Monkey Bay REFLECT programme.

**REFLECT circles:** In both case study villages, we saw a programme operating at a number of levels. First, we found a **circle of literacy learners** which we (like them) will call 'the circle'. We met the **facilitator** whose responsibilities ranged much wider than the circle. We met the **CMC/VRC** in each village. We heard about a **village meeting** which met from time to time. These four levels seem to operate in most villages, so far as we understood.

The confusion between these different levels and the language of REFLECT can be seen in the reply given by the respondents in Katole to the question, *What words have you used for learning during circle activities?* "Mame (dew), madzi (water), Mangochi (Mangochi district, in order to know our area), seko (circle), udzudzu (mosquito). We developed a map first and then out of it these words are generated". The word 'we' here is misleading, for it refers to the village meeting. In this context, 'the circle' means the village meeting, not the literacy learning circle.

**The village meeting:** The village meeting on occasion was thus called 'the REFLECT circle'; sometimes 'the outer circle'; in Liganga it went under the title of 'the village-circle'. It talked about the chosen development issue and the action point(s).

Some villages had a regular time for such meetings but our case studies did not. As we have noticed, attendance at that meeting varied greatly but its functions were common to all. At Chilembwe: "We had our village meeting last Monday; about 100 came; we did a problem tree for HIV/AIDS – we chose the key words". "Our village meeting meets once or twice a month; it is called by the Village Headman" (int Mbeya). The village meeting in Balamanja was convened (with the permission of the village headman) at short notice by the facilitator and he chose the agenda. The meeting discussed village resources from the manual section on that topic (called in the Manual a 'unit'), and the facilitator as usual (though not every time, according to the monthly reports) produced a 'graphic' (a map) at that meeting. Every month or so, the facilitator selected a topic for the village meeting. He, like other facilitators, chose this from the units listed in the Malawi REFLECT manual – topics such as natural resources, health, population, food care etc (int Facs). "A unit is a graphic in the manual. All must be done but in any order; the group chooses" (facilitator, Mbeya; it is not clear what is the 'group' in this instance). After four years, the Balamanja facilitator had covered all the topics listed in the Malawi REFLECT Manual, some of them several times. Occasionally a topic outside the manual arose, normally from the visit of an extension worker or a change in legislation, as occurred in new laws about fishing or the property of those who had died. What is clear is that only very occasionally did a topic chosen for discussion in a village meeting come from a burning issue of that village – they were chosen from a list imported into the village.

To this extent, then, the facilitator's manual has become to all intents and purposes a 'primer' which the facilitator uses to structure his/her teaching.

A distinction is drawn between the 'problems' (issues) which the village meeting discusses and the 'action points' which they decide to implement; the two do not always go together. The village meeting often discussed the 'action points' as well as the problems. These could be related to the topic but often were quite different. In one case in Balamanja, the village meeting discussed the need to conserve natural resources but the action point was rebuilding a bridge (for other examples, see below p60).

What has been discussed and decided in the village meeting is then taken into the literacy learning circle. As MAREFO told us, "The issues discussed at a village meeting, the facilitator

picks up; he records the issues which are then taught to the participants. He then uses those issues as key words for teaching in the circles" (int MAREFO).

**The graphics:** REFLECT makes a great point of the graphics, although we found that in practice these were felt to be less important than in rhetoric. Often in our interviews, as for instance with the CDAs and MAREFO, graphics were not mentioned until we raised the subject. NCLAE said that "Most of the facilitators don't do PRA; I know, I am one of the trainers" (NCLAE). When we raised the subject with the CDAs, they said most of the graphics were with the village headman. We found in the field that they were often written into the lesson book of the facilitator or (if on large sheets) were kept by the facilitator in the tin trunk which he held. Several circles reported a shortage of the large sheets of paper on which to produce the graphics.



*Kasankha circle graphic about schooling and the need for early child care and key (note the English used).*

In the Balamanja (literacy learning) circle, the graphic (a village map) drawn up at the village meeting was displayed with its key; it was well drawn. But it was only up for one day and was not referred to once during the lesson; indeed, it soon fell off the wall, and I am not sure if it was not put up there for our benefit. No graphic was displayed at Chilimba. At Mbinda 2, where we saw and videoed a circle meeting, the graphic (a problem tree) was displayed and used in the teaching, and I am sure that in other circles this would have been the case. But in some circles, the graphic is only used in the village meeting.

**Key words for learning:** From the graphic, the facilitator (or the CMC/VRC) chose three or four key or generative words which he wrote on the blackboard. The literacy learners chose one of these (in our case studies, we had the suspicion that they were words which had been used in previous meetings of the circle, but we could not be sure of this. No past exercise books or lesson plan books were available to us). The lesson then proceeded by breaking these down into syllables, then attaching different vowels to each consonant, and then

making new words. This, it is insisted, is the right way to teach literacy to adults, for it is the method used by Freire.

This in brief is what we saw. More details can be found in the full case studies. What follows is an analysis of the REFLECT programme as we saw it in three sections – first a general comment, then the literacy learning component, then the development component.

## **2. GENERAL COMMENTS**

### **LIKE SCHOOL**

REFLECT sets out to be unlike other adult literacy learning programmes. It is a learning-through-action programme, not just a learning programme. The first instruction to the facilitator in the Malawi REFLECT Manual is: "A facilitator is there just to guide participants and not to teach or instruct".

In particular, (as we noted above p 37) it seeks to distance itself from a schooling model of literacy learning "as a classroom activity". For example, it uses different language for the literacy learning circles, and it does not use textbooks. Each circle is meant to be different - this is not a one-size-fits-all approach. Literacy is to be firmly tied to local and immediate needs; development is not prescribed in advance. Everything is to be decided by the learners themselves - unlike school, control is intended to lie with the learners. It works on the principle that the adults who come to the circle bring with them a great deal of experience, knowledge, skills and beliefs which will be utilised in the learning programme. There are no tests in REFLECT, for every circle will be learning different things, and thus, as we have seen, the measures of success are to be the development tasks completed and the use of literacy within those tasks. It does not seek to turn 'illiterates' into 'literate' but to turn villagers into more knowledgeable and skilful development workers who use literacy. This is the ideology of REFLECT.

But the circles we saw and most of those whose members we met were trying as hard as they could to turn the circle into a formal school class. The evidence is hard to refute.

First, they all kept the same term times – all starting roughly about the same time and finishing at the same time; they all met in the afternoons for two hours. These conditions were set by the CDAs who told us: "They all start at about the same day and time; always Monday to Thursday. We set the same dates for starting and finishing because we want to control the classes" (note the term used by the CDAs for the circles). They used a formal register, similar to that of the NALP; and the exercise books used by the literacy circle

participants were the standard government issue school exercise books. They all looked exactly the same.

Some circles, like Chilimba and Liganga, met in a school room and sat in formal desks facing the blackboard and teacher. Those circles which had built their own learning centre, like Kasankha, had made it look like a school with formal desks all facing the front - and they called it 'a school'. When they met in more informal settings, even in the open air as at the UNDP circle at Dedza, they still arranged themselves in forward-facing rows rather than a circle. During our visit, only Chigonere sat in a circle. At Balamanja, when the group of circle participants met in their nearly completed learning centre/shelter without desks ("we would like to get desks but we cannot afford them"), they all sat on the floor in a rough circle while waiting for the session to begin (this is, after all, a normal arrangement for adults); but once the session began, they re-arranged themselves into rows facing the facilitator. Although the church setting of Mbeya 2 suited the formal nature of the literacy learning circle exactly – everything was focused on the facilitator and the blackboard - the participants still felt that it was not the real thing, they wanted their own formal building: "We need a good learning environment. The church building is not conducive to learning".

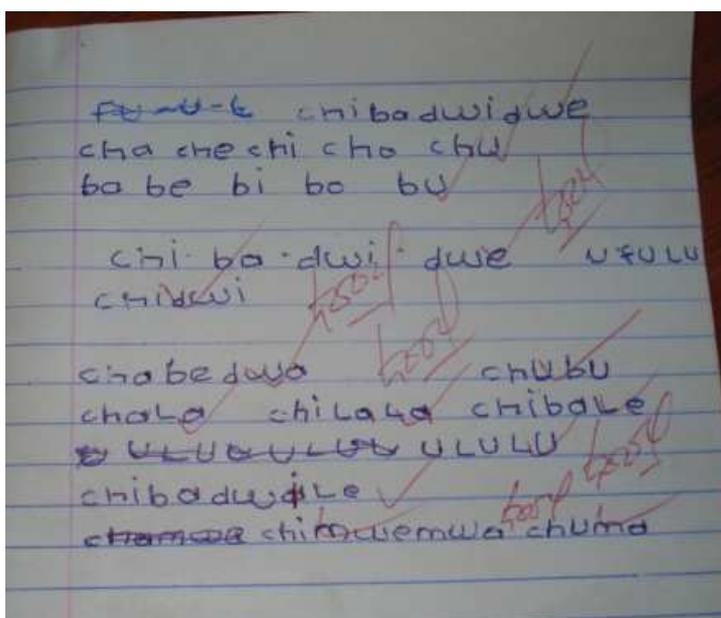
The language used was one of school. In most of the circles we met, such as Katole and Balamanja, the learning centre/shelter was called 'a school' and on occasion, the participants were called 'learners'. "As a teacher, I encourage my students to come to school every day until the end of term", wrote the facilitator in English in January 2006. Even the CDAs spoke of 'classes' and of lessons, and the facilitator was expected to keep a 'lesson plan book'. The facilitator at Kasankha apologised that he could not show us his lesson plan book – "a new facilitator had borrowed it" (Kasankha 1). The participants at Chilimba spoke of 'holidays' between the classes.

Again despite the protestations of the CDAs and the examples given to the facilitators during their training, we saw no sign of the **adult learning methods** claimed for the programme - "group discussions, buzz sessions (breaking the participants into small groups), ... brainstorming, and role playing" (int CDAs). Instead, the teaching methods were teacher-centred whole class teaching. Although some of the organisers and some of the facilitators asserted the opposite (CDAs; Facs), we saw no signs of the use of plenary discussion or of sub-groups, and one well-informed provider said, "There is no discussion in the literacy circles". There was a difference between the facilitator at Chilimba and the facilitator at Balamanja (and Mbinda 2), in that the latter asked individual learners to come up to the blackboard and either read words on it or write some words of their own, whereas in the former circle, the participants did no activity except sit in their desks and copy into their

notebooks. Without exception, learning was seen as the passive reception of the teacher's knowledge. It was clear that the facilitator and the participants themselves felt that the literacy learners had nothing to learn from each other, only from the facilitator as instructor, and (despite the REFLECT Manual) the facilitator had nothing to learn from the participants. In Balamanja, the facilitator said to all the participants, "When you have difficulty with sums, it is better that you call on me rather than your friends, because your friends may make a mistake." The exhortation of the REFLECT Mother Manual (1996 p14) that the learning in the circles would be "rooted in a faith in people's existing knowledge and beliefs as a starting point" is not a feature in practice in this programme as we saw it, whatever the rhetoric may be.

The literacy participants did on occasion take some measure of control of their own learning. At Chigonere, there came a crisis: "Last year (2007) the participants complained that they were not learning at all and we [the CMC/VRC] took some measures to talk to the facilitator, who of course was not happy with this and decided to drop out". The keenness to learn, the empowerment of the circle members and the commitment of this CMC/VRC are all in evidence here. What this group wanted was formal teaching by the facilitator.

Inside the circle meetings, the school-like atmosphere continued. During the meetings of the circle at Chilimba, members of the CMC/VRC often attended; during one of the sessions, one of the CMC/VRC members spoke to two of the learners: "I told them not to talk", she told us. Collaborative learning was not to be allowed. The learners, if asked a question, put up their hands to answer and in some circles, stood up when they were called upon to answer. They called the (male) facilitator 'Sir'. The facilitator marked their exercise books with ticks and crosses in red biro, even using the (English) word 'Good' when appropriate.



Chilimba marking like a school exercise book: note English word 'Good' used.

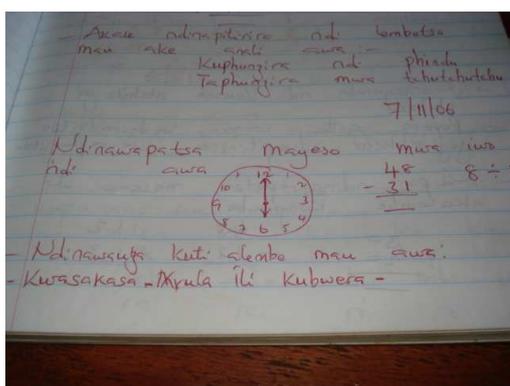
This pressure to make the REFLECT circles into formal schools is a genuine move on the part of the field-level programme. The facilitators clearly want it and the literacy learners also call for it. The Balamanja facilitator saw each annual session of the circle as a new 'circle' - like adult education courses, for he spoke of "some of the graduates of the *last* circle" who have now left.

This trend does not come from the direct influence of formal schooling: "The primary school is not involved except to provide a room and some equipment at times; some teachers are involved individually but this is very rare" (PC). Rather the pressure comes from all parts of the programme – from CDAs, from the facilitators and from the literacy learners themselves. At Katole, where there was a primary school teacher as facilitator, he commented, "Having to teach both adults and children at the circle and primary school respectively puts me in some dilemma in terms of my methodology. ... Of course, I do use the adult learning techniques I learnt through ICEIDA and MWCD, though sometimes it proves difficult" (int Katole facilitator). At Simon, the circle participants reported that "two male participants *had asked for permission* to stop attending the circle for some time because they had found temporary employment which they could not afford to lose" (Simon, my italics). Some participants in the same circle complained about the lack of teaching-learning materials: "There are no books in the circles, unlike in NALP. However, we feel it is important for a learner to have books. We need books to enhance what we learn from class" (Katole). "The majority of Districts also stated that there is insufficient learning and teaching materials for REFLECT circle learning activities" (UNDP).

### **Tests and certificates**

There is pressure from two sources, the Ministry and the participants, for the participants to take the formal NALP examinations and obtain certificates. The issue of the tests is a difficult one. It is generally agreed that originally "The [REFLECT] project did not plan to have any literacy tests of achievement ... the mid-term review team criticised it because there were no tests to see the achievements". The reason is clear: if there is no common textbook, if every literacy learning circle chooses the literacy it will learn, there can be no common test. So that it could be asserted confidently on several occasions that "there are no tests in REFLECT" (int GH; int Jeke; so also MAREFO). UNDP, commenting on its approach to REFLECT, says, "It is not true REFLECT. REFLECT is not supposed to administer a test but we do" (int UNDP). The tests are the Ministry's tests: as the Ministry said, "The National Centre is mandated to certify the literates and develop the assessment tools" (MWCD).

The CDAs explored this with us. At first, pressure came from the Ministry to change the no-test policy and so they developed their own test: "While the NALP examination makes reference to the textbook they use, which is generally directed towards functional literacy, REFLECT does not have an examination because there is no textbook to act as a reference. This has both advantages and disadvantages. ... The facilitators are being asked to develop their own tests in order to deal with [the call from the Ministry for statistics of literacy learning], although this is very difficult as REFLECT does not need an examination. In some ways therefore REFLECT is being influenced by NALP". "The facilitators do some progressive tests" (MWCD). But under pressure from the circle participants, this informal testing has given way to using the government examinations. "We use the NCLAE test because the government wants to measure. ... Therefore some of the facilitators have begun to teach directly to the government tests without having access to the government textbook. They adapted their learning programme to the test. For example, the NCLAE test included a watch, therefore the circle were taught a watch" (CDAs).



Lesson plan book

Now the system has been formalised: as the Programme Coordinator says: "The government sends me the test papers – I have them up to 2010. I print them. There is no [formal] preparation for the tests in the circles. The exam is not compulsory" (PC).

The circle members we saw often talked about the test and the certificates. In many of the circles we saw, the facilitator spent some time teaching the more experienced participants to take the test. At Madzedze, "In 2006, we took the test but there were no certificates [awarded] – we were not used to taking tests. So last November we took it again, and 9 out of 12 passed; some were absent as they did not want to take the test" (Madzedze). "We want exams to help us measure our progress. This is school and not the traditional dance group<sup>4</sup> where you just join and may have no concern for individual progress" (Simon), while the CMC/VRC for the same circle said, "The participants feel that there is a need for

<sup>4</sup> the *nyau* initiation ceremonies

examinations to be administered in order to act as the criteria for progression". "We need ICEIDA certificates", said the participants at Mbinda 2. We saw the handing out of certificates at Chilimba and the exhortation of the participants to work hard to pass the test. This of course added to the feeling of REFLECT being like a school with clearly marked stages rather than a development circle.



Teaching at Mbinda: the graphic in this circle was used during teaching.

There are other signs of this move towards formal schooling in REFLECT. At Chigonere, a bell is rung before the circle meets, as with school. There is a call for more formal teaching-learning materials. In the UNDP programme which does have teaching-learning material relating to livelihoods, these are called 'primers' (UNDP). It is clear the participants and the facilitators want the formal school approach rather than the more informal REFLECT circle approach. Here (as with the livelihoods demand), there is a participant reaction against the approach to REFLECT which was first proposed for Malawi.

**The curriculum:** The Malawi REFLECT Manual says: "There is no pre-determined curriculum in REFLECT approach. This means that learning is not based on pre-prepared material such as a book called Primer, as is the case in the functional literacy approach. Participants develop their own learning materials". We saw and heard of no examples where the participants developed their own learning materials or indeed where any of the literacy learning circles chose their own subjects for learning; most of these topics came from the

Malawi REFLECT Manual and all were selected by the facilitator. The circle members chose the word to learn from a list given to them by the facilitator but that was all.

The manual takes twenty topics (units) and gives for each of them an appropriate graphic and a literacy activity. The facilitator chooses one such unit each month (occasionally, according to the monthly reports, more than one a month), so the topic chosen by the facilitator for teaching changes each month.

List of 'units' in Malawi REFLECT manual:

<b>Unit theme</b>	<b>PRA graphic</b>	<b>Literacy activity</b>
1. deforestation	(map);	words
2. land degradation	(transect walk);	words
3. landholding size	(map);	words
4. food availability	(calendar);	words
5. hygiene/sanitation	(map);	words
6. water	(matrix);	words
7. drug and alcohol abuse	(calendar and pie graph);	words
8. mortality	(calendar);	words
9. income and expenditure budgets	(tree);	words
10. farm input costs	(spider web);	words
11. unemployment	(map);	words
12. child labour	(tree and matrix);	words
13. illiteracy	(map);	sentences
14. access to information	(map);	paragraph
15. overpopulation	(map);	writing
16. gender roles	(calendar);	letter writing
17. access to social services	(map);	articles
18. traditional beliefs	(flow chart);	sentences
19. leadership	(chapatti diagram);	poems, stories
20. "unfulfilled promises by development agencies"	(role play and matrix).	compositions and stories

The facilitators we met told us they needed to cover all the manual topics and any others which had been taught to them in their training such as malaria (problem tree) etc. In theory, they may be chosen in any order but the manual in fact has a sequence to it. As can be seen from the table above, the first 12 units have only words being learned; from unit 13, the literacy element in the manual progresses to sentences, paragraphs, letter writing,

articles, poems, stories and compositions. While these are intended to be *indications* of how to go about the programme, we found the manual being treated as a primer for the facilitator. The sequence of units taken did change but the literacy activities that went with the unit were followed in most cases. Some units were done several times as the list from Balamanja (below) shows. And the rubrics of the manual were followed closely to the extent of only making words where the manual said so, whatever stage the literacy learners were at. At Balamanja, the word '*malo*' [place or centre] was chosen by the facilitator, a word given in the manual.

Units taken at Balamanja over four years drawn from monthly reports (those marked with \* are in manual; those with + are listed in the reports as coming from an outside source; those with ^ are local to Balamanja). As can be seen, topics changed month by month and some kept coming back: the stretcher was talked about many times but nothing was done about it, it had still not been obtained. Topics like malaria and dysentery in this circle were points for discussion rather than action.

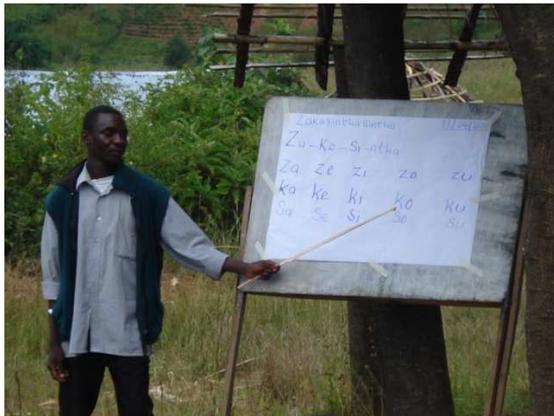
<b>topic</b>
motherhood
dysentery
bridge ^
natural resources *
tree planting *+
maintaining bridge ^
tree planting *+
sanitation *+
dysentery
natural resources *
lack of classroom ^
sanitation *+
hunger *
hunger *
stretcher ^
stretcher ^
cholera
stretcher ^
cholera
hunger *
roads^
importance of participating in development projects
diarrhoea +
deceased estates +
fishing +
malaria +
roads ^
learning centre ^
learning centre ^
malaria +

The curriculum being used in the literacy learning circles we saw is not demand-driven; it is selected by the facilitator from a pre-set list provided by the Malawi REFLECT manual or other outside sources.

### 3. LITERACY TEACHING

The formalisation of REFLECT can be seen particularly in its literacy learning. As has been found elsewhere, the connection between literacy and schooling is very strong in Monkey Bay.

**Lack of specialist expertise in adult literacy learning:** The most notable feature of our visit was the fact that we saw the facilitators using only one method, the mechanical division of words into syllables, the creation of new syllables from consonants and vowels, and the creation of new words from the new syllables. When asked why no other methods were in use, we were told that this was how they were trained; this was the only method taught to them and in the manual; they knew no other method. This was after all how they had been told Freire advocated that literacy should be taught (although he built other methods on this basic approach). As the Balamanja facilitator said, "This is how we have been trained, to make up other words from syllables. This is the policy of the project". What we saw was a mechanical form of playing word games.



I am not saying this occurs throughout the whole of REFLECT in Monkey Bay; but it happened in every circle we saw, and UNDP indicated to us that this was "the REFLECT way". It seems to spring from a very limited approach to adult literacy learning which betrays ignorance of any other methodology. When asked about aspects of teaching literacy such as the whole language approach or the language experience approach or other ways of promoting adult literacy such as family literacy, community literacies, workplace literacy, embedded literacy, or literacy as social practice, all of which are contemporary understandings of adult literacy, or especially the 'plurality of literacy' (as UNESCO calls it) or building up the literacy environment, a key plank in UNESCO's programme today, those responsible for the organising of the programme and for the training of the facilitators admitted ignorance. No recent publications in this field had been read or consulted. In no other sector of development would such a lack of specialism be tolerated. It is this which

causes so many opportunities to develop effective literacy (and numeracy) learning programmes to be missed (see below Appendix).

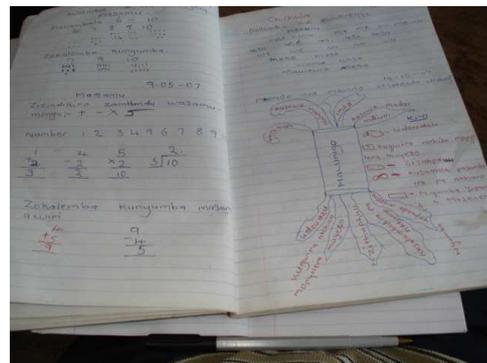
**The choice of teaching-learning materials for literacy:** "REFLECT's opposition to the use of literacy primers ensures that every literacy circle develops its own literacy materials that are relevant to the local social and economic context of the learners" (Openjuru 2004 p422). But despite the REFLECT principle that the learners should control their own learning and prepare their own learning materials on the basis of local development projects chosen and implemented by the learners, in the Monkey Bay REFLECT Programme, the learning materials and the development projects are clearly separated. As we have seen, the topics (units) used for learning are chosen by the facilitator: they come from the manual, from other training given by the CDAs, from local discussion in the village meeting or from outside interventions from other extension staff or agencies. They are discussed in the village meeting where a graphic is produced, and from this the key (generative) words used for learning literacy are created and taken into the literacy learning circle.

While it is true that the words chosen come from discussion of some of the community's developmental problems, the three or four key words offered to the literacy learners by the facilitator are not chosen by the learners but by the village meeting or by the facilitator with the CMC/VRC (int Facilitatorss). When asked, "*Why did the participants not choose the words?*", the Balamanja facilitator responded, "Because we have been told that the words are to come from the village meeting. The participants do not feel able to talk in the village meeting". In Mbeya, "the words are chosen by the [Circle Management] Committee and the village meeting, not by the participants". "We do not use manuals [textbooks], in fact our 'manual' is the Village Meeting which generates the content for circle activities, including words (and later sentences) to be learnt, and action points to be done in the community" (Katole facilitator). "Village meetings are held every month and they focus on action points. Frequent words that come up during the meeting are then used to draw graphics. Some of the words are related to discussions on health and nutritional issues which have been the emphases in the previous village meetings, such as *Kasumbu, thanzi, masamba, kasinthasinth'a*" (Dedza). According to some of the providers, this practice is undesirable: "Words should come from the learners, not from the village meeting or the facilitator".

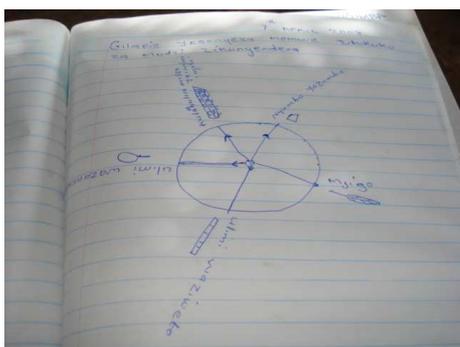
**Key words:** We noticed that most of the key words were nouns – there were few verbs and even fewer adjectives or adverbs, so that sentences could not be constructed by the literacy learners. Secondly, most of them were abstract words – rights, democracy, problem, natural resources etc. At Simon, the words learned were "ignorance (*Umbuli*), Village Health Committee (VAC), bore hole (*dilawo*), vegetables (*masamba*), prevention of HIV and AIDS

(*kapewedwe ka AIDS*), *Nchande ndi nchancha* (names of characters in one of the booklets they have read). They learn these words through the usual procedure of writing down the word and breaking it into syllables as is done in other circles" (Simon). And thirdly, there was no connection between the words used in any one 'lesson' except their syllabic construction: in one session at Chilimba, the following words (in Chewa) were constructed: stolen, tube, drought, pain, after birth, frog, dead, recovered. Reading and writing involves making sense of written words in context, and one would be hard put to make some sense out of such a jumble of words. They are learning 'detached' words connected only by syllables (phonics).

**Graphics:** Some graphics were only produced in the lesson book of the facilitator (Chigonere), others on large sheets (manilla or flip chart sheets) and used in the village meeting. In Balamanja, the graphic was put on the wall for the first meeting but it fell off and was thrown away; it was not used in the circle meeting. In Chilimba, we did not see any graphic except in the notebook of the facilitator. But in Mbinda, we saw a graphic being used for reference from time to time.



Graphics in notebooks of facilitators



**Other texts:** There was no 'reading' in the literacy learning circle, for there were no texts in the meetings. The participants never handled a book during the learning sessions. None of the informal texts to be found in the village was brought into the circle, although in all the villages we visited, we saw several texts written on walls and notices which could have been used for both literacy learning (writing as well as reading) and for discussion (see photos below). The facilitators did not create any texts, only decontextualised words. There were

many missed opportunities for the facilitators to create texts which the learners could use for learning. For example, at Balamanja as elsewhere, the participants on several occasions sang songs as an energiser. The words of those songs, written down, could have been used for learning to read. When asked why he had not done this, the facilitator (and other facilitators) said that they had not been trained to do this, or that they did not “have permission” to do this. They felt they had been trained to teach words, not to teach literacy, or rather, that creating single words **was** literacy. “I am still teaching them new words”, said the Mbeya facilitator for a circle which started in 2003 (Mbeya). In a brainstorm during our visit, we identified thirty different opportunities in the community where the facilitators could create texts for learning (see Appendix) – but they have not been trained to identify and use such opportunities for themselves and there is no literacy expertise available to them to help them see such opportunities.



We found this poster along the road during a walk to our meeting in Liganga Village. It seems to have been erected a few days before our coming by one of the villagers known as a Mr Kananji. It says “*I Kananji [name] would like to inform all those whose fishing nets of any type are no longer helping them to catch fish to come to me and get “chidima” (concoction/medicine) for catching fish. This is serious, I do have the medicine, please come.*” A marvellous opportunity for the participants of the literacy learning

circle to learn to read some really relevant texts and to play with producing their own posters (“What would you write if you wanted to put up your own sign?”), as well as discuss the issues arising from this such as the decline of fishing and the use of traditional remedies.



This saying was written on a door in Namgoma village. “*Munthu sakhala wabwino kwa anthu onse*” means a person cannot be good in the eyes of all the people (there will still be some who will perceive you otherwise, no matter how good you may try to be). Local sayings like this form a valuable resource for learning both reading and writing; participants can collect other sayings and/or make up their own slogan for their own walls or the walls of the learning centre.

There was no consecutive writing which we saw. Some facilitators claimed they moved on from words to sentences: "We do writing of sentences and these come from the participants" (Madzedze). We saw one exercise book from Chilembwe circle which contained some dictation, we gather taken by the facilitator from a school textbook. One or two facilitators said they gave out titles for participants to write stories (for example, 'Wedding Day') and that one or two participants did write such stories and that these were read out to the circle or displayed for others to read (int Facilitators) but we saw none in our visit. We saw in no circle at all any reading or writing in connection with any of the action points or village developmental problems. One of the weaknesses of REFLECT which has been identified in a number of countries is that it does not have the facility for introducing the circle participants to printed material, to books, newspapers, magazines etc. At least the learners in NALP do have contact with a printed book in the primer. But in the Monkey Bay REFLECT programme, as we were told, "There is a concentration on *learning*, not *using* literacy".

**Multigrade:** One striking feature of the circles is that several of the members had been in the circle for several years. As the CDAs told us, "The literacy circles continue – some new [participants] come in, some leave. Many stay for three years" (CDAs). This loyalty to the circle is an indication of the value of this programme to some women in these villages. All the members at Balamanja, except one who had just enrolled, had been in the circle for two, three or four years. Yet they were still doing basic work, dividing words into syllables and making new words. The facilitator there – and indeed every facilitator we met – said that teaching people at different levels was very difficult. "All [the facilitators] found teaching multigrade classes very difficult" (int Facilitators). At Madzedze, where the circle was reported as having started in 2004 with about 32 participants, and where the current enrolment was 23, "Out of these 23, 7 of them are basic learners – they have difficulty to cope with both reading and writing". The remaining 16 enrolled members had more advanced skills – which may help to account for the fact that attendance was only 8 (Madzedze). At Liganga after three years, where there are only six circle participants, "there are as yet no graduates; they are still attending" (Liganga). The Mbeya circle was "founded in 2003 with 27 originally, now there are 5; several of these are certificated but have continued. ... Three quarters have attended for 2-3 years. 15 participants have certificates" and have ceased attending.

The facilitators suggested that they could only cope with this problem by teaching at the basic level. "We were told in training to focus on those who don't know rather than those who know already. I handle all of them at the same level. They have to do some things and I don't worry about discouraging either of them. In the past, we used to receive a complaint

that those who are advanced are not learning; that they have learned these things before. We have been advised by the CDAs to give the advanced students work but without having all the participants know this. But the participants share notes. And even if they know they do not understand" (Chilimba facilitator). Our discussion of sub-groups provoked one facilitator into saying, "I would like to make an advanced group in the morning and the basic group in the afternoon" (Mbeya) but he felt that they are not allowed to do this.

The CDAs are aware of this issue and even encourage multigrade circles. They point out that this is a recurring theme in their regular discussions with the facilitators. "Some participants go away but sometimes we retain them depending on whether they are still willing to continue attending circle activities and perhaps they feel they have not yet reached the level they want in terms of literacy and numeracy. In fact, REFLECT is open; we don't say you are now literate and can go, but rather if you feel you want to continue, please do so" (CDAs). The primary objective of the CDAs is to get as many persons into the 'classes' as possible.

**Pace of learning:** Teaching at the basic level inevitably means that for most of the literacy learning group – as the video recording shows very clearly - the pace of learning throughout the circles for the whole week was very slow, to the extent of boring several of the literacy learners. We noticed this in every teaching session we observed. It must have a damaging effect on the motivation of the participants and on the effectiveness of the teaching-learning of literacy.



Perhaps a sign of boredom? Chilimba

Other problems clearly exist, such as are common to most adult learning programmes in developing countries. The lack of an enclosed **meeting room** is slowly being met, but some circles meet in churches or in a local school or in the open air – and this inappropriate accommodation is deterring some from attending, especially men: As we were told, "men ... need a more private place rather than the open place that is currently being used, as other people sometimes come to watch circle activities and such people often laugh at them when they fail" (DCDO). Normally the argument against long-term investment in adult

literacy class venues is that they are (unlike primary schools) only temporary; but in the case of the REFLECT circles, these are seen as long-term, if not indeed permanent groups. Certainly all learning groups of whatever kind need secure, private and sheltered (but on occasion temporary) accommodation; the cost of that needs to be viewed in exactly the same way as the cost of teaching-learning materials, facilitator costs and training costs, and not regarded as a charge which the learners should bear.

The presence of **children** who disturb the learning routine is mentioned several times; but the provision of a crèche during circle meeting times seems to be difficult. The participants at Mbeya "complained that in other circles, their friends have nursery schools where they send their little children during classes so that they should not be disturbed - but we do not have this" (Mbeya). Mbinda reported that there was a great need for children's centre "as there are too many children in the village. Some of the children ... beat each other. During class, the children disturb, holding pens when the women want to write, crying, etc" (Mbinda). In fact, as in Nepal, the presence of the children could be made into an asset, in that the mothers could be encouraged to start keeping a book recording their children's careers and thus learn their literacy through this (see below Appendix). A start can be made with writing the children's names, their dates of birth, their weights, their height (regularly recorded), their food, their clothes etc etc.

The irregular attendance (**absenteeism**) and the irregular times (**lateness**) at which adult literacy participants arrive at the circle and leave the circle which are reported regularly by the facilitators in their monthly reports make sequential teaching difficult. This will be reduced substantially when the learning becomes interesting and relevant.

Despite these difficulties, clearly some learners have been able to cope and have learned to write at least detached words. And several had left the circle, having achieved what they came for. "I am not going because of lack of time", said a past 'graduate' from the Balamanja circle. "It was a waste of time repeating what I have learned in the past years. I can write my name", and she wrote her name and the name of the village. "I learned to read and sing songs. I read children's textbooks - a e i o u and the Bible - I don't do any public reading. And I can read the bus signs. Recently I went to Monkey Bay to buy a bed and mattress by bus" (int past graduate, Balamanja).

**Graduates:** Others however continue to attend the circle meetings: exactly why it is not easy to determine. There is something of a social life within the group and it adds to a sense of identity. In Madzedze, "we discuss cooking but we do no writing - we do not use [written] recipes" (Madzedze). We noticed at Chilimba the participants arriving early and

talking among themselves on the veranda outside the school meeting room until the circle meeting started, when they filed in and ceased to interact at all. Nevertheless, the group did not cohere because it undertook no joint project. The learners saw themselves as individuals enhancing their own life chances. And in continuing to attend, there is clearly some expectation that something concrete will materialise from their continued presence. We were told by one person who had eventually given up and left, "I was disappointed – I was so long in the class. The resources for business [apparently credit or loans or training] did not arrive" (Balamanja case study). She was waiting for some concrete resources to move her forward. And those who felt they wished to maintain their literacy skills, felt it was necessary to continue to attend the circle, for there is little in the way of the formal literacy in their own daily lives. A graduate from the Balamanja circle said she needed to keep a book from the tin trunk because otherwise she would "lose her literacy". Others spoke of their skills fading unless they continued in the circle. Literacy to them was something done in or through the circle, not in their everyday life.

**Progression:** But they do not continue to attend to learn more literacy, for there is no more on offer. There is in REFLECT in general no sense of progression, of different 'levels'. But in MBRP, several of the participants have a strong sense of progression: "They are asking 'what next?' ... They are asking: 'what are the benefits of reading/writing/calculation?'" (CDAs). For many participants, the certificate marks the end of one stage. But there is no Stage 2 – only more words and more action points without literacy. " There is no continuity in REFLECT circles: you are not sure whether you can progress to the next level or not because the opportunity is not there. Some participants who were there last year are still continuing out of interest, and not because there is room for progression .... There should be clear progression from one level to the other, so that after finishing the first level, I move on to the next and so on. For instance, from A to B to C, where C will be the highest level" (circle participant, Simon). This is of course tied up with the learners' sense of the literacy learning circle being a 'school' with one 'course' leading to another.

**New learning programmes:** This demand for progression takes the form of calls for two new programmes – livelihood training and English. We found a good deal of demand for livelihood training and a small amount of demand for a general small business training programme. The facilitators we met placed it first on their agenda, so it is clearly something which the circles themselves value highly. I discuss livelihood training below.

**English:** There is a very clear demand to move on to English learning. This is acknowledged by the Ministry: "There is English demand all over the country but what can we do?" (MWCD). The CDAs confirm this: "Some circles want to learn English in order to

give them some advantage in the future such as employment. ICEIDA learnt about this and indicated that they would want to talk to government on this and we are waiting to hear from the government". The circles too made their case. Chilembwe told us, "The participants have made rapid progress – they are very eager to have English", and the facilitator at Mbeya (who does know English and showed us some of her English books) said, "They want English – I have a school textbook. I cannot teach English – I am afraid – the office does not allow me". English is seen as a gatekeeper to many jobs, as her husband's example indicates. He is learning English at night school so as to go to South Africa: "I cannot go to South Africa without English – I will get a job there, perhaps as a cook" (Mbeya). Another pressure is the growing tourism to the Monkey Bay area: "The participants want to learn English to attract tourists who frequent the area, especially to purchase their items" (Simon), and at Mbinda,

"We should learn English so that we can talk to tourists who often come to this area. Whenever they ask for the prices of our goods which we display along the road, we should be able to respond confidently. Currently, whenever they stop and ask something, we just remain dumb because we cannot communicate in English. Sometimes we call the facilitator to help us, which in some ways is not good, as he will one day not be available for this service. We need to follow up our children in their progress at school - even in their performance in English at school, where they learn English. If we are good in English, we shall not only be able to speak to the white tourists, but also follow up progress of our children at primary school level. We sell mats and brooms along the road. One day when white tourists came to buy some of our stuff, they asked for the price of the goods and we all were just dumb because we did not know English. If it were not for the facilitator who was nearby, we were going to be in trouble and could have lost the money" (int Mbinda).

Others have noted the same: talking of the failure of REFLECT to enrol men as circle participants, the Dedza ACDO said, "What they need is English and if English was taught most men would enrol into circles. The majority are not literate but they argue that they need English in order to listen more meaningfully to relevant radio programmes on development, and to speak at various places with different types of people including foreigners" (Dedza ACDO). ICEIDA has not yet been able to make an arrangement with the District authorities under decentralisation for the teaching of English. This would be within the REFLECT remit, for REFLECT helps the circle members to learn what they feel they need.

**'Post-literacy' provision:** The providers of the programme have responded to this sense of progression by breaking with the REFLECT ideology in the provision of a 'post-literacy' collection of reading materials in each circle. I note the use of this term although recent studies have suggested the term be abandoned because it implies that all literacy learning has come to an end (DFID 1994; DFID 1999). I do not intend to assess this provision in depth but what we saw raised questions. The Ministry saw it like the rest of NALP, "In year 2, the circles are given booklets prepared locally in the district by Ministry staff at central and district level using issues from the circles and from the National Library Services and other well wishers – these are for the whole circle" (MWCD). As usual in such programmes, the

themes chosen are all of the 'improving' kind, designed to get messages from people who see themselves as knowing so much across to ignorant and primitive villagers<sup>5</sup>. I wonder how many of these topics would have been included in a list drawn up by the circle participants if they were not guided. It is frankly not surprising that Mbinda 2 reported: "A Tin Trunk is now available, but the booklets are not relevant: we need more relevant stuff for our village, so that people can see real examples. Books should be more specific to Mbinda 2 context". Despite the tin trunk, the members of the same REFLECT circle lamented, "We do not have books to read at home, we have not one single book" (Mbinda 2). Others have found the provision of special books patronising; they want to read what the rest of the world reads.



Tin trunk as used at Chilimba

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<sup>5</sup> The subjects are HIV/AIDS, orphanhood, environment, population growth, early marriage, gender-based violence, child abuse, drug and alcohol abuse, literacy and development, community participation, business management, leadership decentralisation, education for children, democracy, nutrition, hygiene and sanitation, child care, early childhood, fishing

The control of what booklets are provided (the themes, the format and number) is kept by the organisers of the programme. There is here no writing by any participant, no 'learner-generated materials'. They are seen as "ICEIDA's materials"; they were sent down from on high in elaborately named Rural Information Centres which are in fact merely "a trunk with books etc which is usually kept by the facilitator; it contains ICEIDA materials" (CDAs; Facs).

At field level, the control of distribution is with the facilitator. It is usually kept in the house of the facilitator (as we saw in Liganga, Balamanja and Chilimba) and on first sight it is little used and of limited long-term use. Chilimba did use the trunk in class and it seems to be appreciated there, which suggests it could be elsewhere; and such facilities are regretted if they are not acquired: Katole reported, "We need books to enhance what we learn from class and for 'post-literacy' activities ... They explained that they do not have a tin trunk at their circle and would appreciate if they had one" (Katole). But those who have them find they have problems: Mbeya reported, "We need books – they have read all the books" (Mbeya).

Most of the facilitators kept the programme documents along with the library (Balamanja, Chilimba, Namgoma, Liganga). The CMC/VRC at Simon village complained about the facilitator keeping the books to himself: "The facilitator needs library orientation. Currently he is just keeping the books that were made available to him. He sometimes lends them out despite his lack of knowledge and skills in administering the library books". Few loans registers were available to us. We found one past graduate who had borrowed a book and refused to return it: "I used it [the library] last year; reading papers about the badness of HIV/AIDS and the importance of child spacing." She still has a book from the library, *Zengelezu Anayenda kwawu kwawu*. She said she had told the facilitator that this book "will be with me so that I should be reading it, so that my brain should not be dull" (Balamanja case study). The trunk contains "one copy of *Bomolathu* [a government NALP newspaper] for the participants but it does not reach the participants, only the facilitator sees it; sometimes the CMC/VRC may see it. We have no REFLECT newsletter although we have talked about using participant-written stories – the idea of a participant-written book never materialised". It is recognised that, despite the statement that REFLECT places more emphasis on writing than on reading, there is no encouragement of writing, only reading, within the 'post-literacy' offerings of the REFLECT programme (Stella).

**Numeracy:** There is growing understanding in most adult literacy learning programmes that the systems of counting and calculation used outside the classroom (in the home and in the markets, for example) are different from those being taught in the classroom, and that the teaching of numeracy to adults is best facilitated if the home and community numeracy

practices are taken into consideration. That the circle members engage in calculations before they join REFLECT is of course common knowledge; they buy and sell in the market; they cook with all that is implied in calculating amounts and times, they keep calendars, they use measures of length, time and weight all the time. Many of them have cell phones and some acknowledge that they use the public phones. They adopt many different strategies for such activities.

Special attention needs to be given to numeracy which in our case studies was very weak indeed. It consists solely of simple sums all decontextualised; and the levels of competence we saw were all very low, despite the unrealistic figures given in the monthly report forms. No consideration is given to the difference between the taught numeracy and the existing processes of counting and calculating and measuring which the participants use every day in the home and market. Applied numeracy – the keeping of accounts, for example, or the recording of the action points – is missing. As is now clear in the field of 'Adults Learning Maths' (see their website), understanding how counting and measuring is done in the local community forms the basis for teaching new standardised forms of mathematics. This area needs urgent attention.

**Supervision and support:** I will deal with the issues around supervision and support for literacy learning, including the roles of the CMC/VRC and the CDAs, after I have discussed the development programme.

**Achievements:** The above analysis is intended to indicate areas where MBRP is not achieving as much as it could. There undoubtedly are achievements in terms of literacy although they are few and far between. Some women have learned to sign their names and move on to loans and other activities; some are reading some new texts. This is a base which can be built upon, provided the literacy being promoted is relevant to the daily lives of the individual women and/or to the life of the group/circle. The potential for developing a viable group project and inserting into it the relevant 'embedded literacy' is clearly here in village after village in Monkey Bay.

## 4 THE DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME

The Mother Manual for REFLECT indicates that “the purpose of the programme is to improve the conditions of life in the community through a careful analysis of local community resources for use in generating locally initiated community development activity”. The ambiguity of the development goal and the literacy goal can be seen in this statement which omits any mention of literacy.

It must be recognised that the REFLECT programme has created in many villages in the Monkey Bay area groups of local residents who meet regularly to discuss issues relating to their local community and seek ways to address these. Although Area and Village Development Committees have existed for many years, the REFLECT meetings involve a wider range of community members and their meetings are more regular and the issues more systematically addressed. And such groups form a useful entry point into the villages for other development programmes. This must be regarded as among the main achievements of this programme.

**Narrow view of development:** The key feature of the development component of the MBRP, as far as I can see, is well summed up by a statement from the Magochi Director of Planning and Development: “REFLECT is a narrow approach to development. ... they have limited livelihoods” (DPD). The Monkey Bay REFLECT programme takes a **community** development approach as against an economic or regional approach or a livelihoods approach (although the latter is coming into the programme now).

**Action points:** The main focus of this part of the programme is the action points which each REFLECT circle is urged to undertake. A distinction is drawn between the identification of village problems and the action points of the circle – the two may be related but often are not. In Chilembwe, the CMC/VRC said, “We list problems of the community: the school is a long way away; we need a village borehole – we get water from the lake; we need a nursery school; the hospital is very far”. But the action point was none of these but the building of a learning shelter for the REFLECT circle (Chilembwe).

**District Development Plans:** It has been suggested that the action points of the REFLECT circles in MBRP bear no relation to the District Development Plan, with its emphasis on tourism, forestry and water, agriculture and fisheries. Equally, it is not clear that the action points of the REFLECT circles contribute to the District Development Plan, despite the plea that “the REFLECT approach should be integrated in the village action planning process, considering that most of the issues emerging from the circles are almost the same as those

articulated in the district development plans”, and “the problems identified in the REFLECT circles [should be] consolidated into the District work plans” (UNDP). Although several of the circles mentioned the importance of tourism to them, nothing related to tourism is offered by the circles. Some afforestation however was provided, not by the CDAs but by the agricultural extension staff, and some tree nurseries were begun. However, the staff of the DDP use the REFLECT circles from time to time to promote their own form of regional development.

**Narrow range of action points:** The action points are a very limited range of community development projects. “The activities, that is, the so-called action points, were limited; the circles were expected to do things without funding, expected to raise their own funds” (int GH). In our case studies, the frequency with which the same action points occur in each village, such as building a learning centre and road maintenance, would suggest there is no real local determination of what that particular village feels it needs. Most action points came from the manual or from the CDAs (mainly the latter), and they were often copied from other circles. And they were limited to what was in the mainstream of CDA activities, for the circles “cannot do anything unless it is approved, even if it costs nothing (for example, a vegetable garden). It must be supervised by a specialist from the Ministry of Agriculture and this means paying allowances” (CDAs).

In one circle, we were told the circle wanted to start a vegetable garden. We were shown the plot of land but it had not been dug. When we asked why not, we were told they “had not been allowed” to start work on it. We explored why. It turned out that the CDAs and the agricultural extension staff could not agree who should supervise the project because of fear of losing allowances. So nothing had been done: and the REFLECT circle did not feel able to go ahead without such approval. Far from being empowered, this village group was oppressed by the staff of the various Ministries by being prevented from doing what it wanted to do.

The CDAs drew a distinction between *visible and invisible action points*: “It is important to take note of the fact that there are two types of Action Points: *Visible ones* - those that can be seen by ICEIDA, for example, big ones funded by ICEIDA. In other words, action points reported to ICEIDA are funded and can easily be seen. *Invisible action points* – these are not documented or publicised. Thus ICEIDA may not even know about these because they are too numerous to be formally reported. However, we do encourage documentation of these activities at community level and the facilitators help us on this” (CDAs). Examples of this given were pit latrines (of which we were told nine existed in Balamanja) but how far this

was the result of health workers rather than REFLECT is by no means certain. We found no such documentation.

**List of action points:** The list of action points we found being talked about (fewer were implemented) is as follows:

a learning shelter, bridges and road repairs, lake shore cleaning, toilets, water supply/pump/borehole/ irrigation, vegetable gardens, tree nursery, primary school, child nursery, school meals, traditional birth attendants, police station, stretcher, bus stand.

These are all to be done by the community as a whole rather than the REFLECT circle – and most of them are more talked about than implemented.

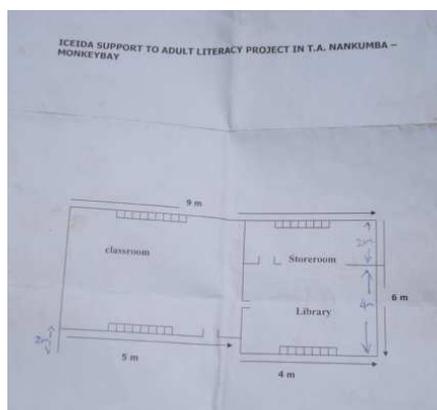


Borehole at Chigonere



Nursery garden Chigonere

The main action point is of course the learning shelter – most of them (but not all) to a standard design produced by the CDA office. It is usually called a 'school' and the room for the circle is called 'a classroom', despite the REFLECT approach. Bricks are made locally for this. I understand that the ownership of this building is given to the literacy learning circle which makes the circle a permanent feature of village life.



Bricks at Katole



Building the learning shelter at Chigonere

### **Resources for action points**

The choice of action points is also limited by the resources available to the village community. There is a widespread lack of resources for implementing the action points; this includes training. We were told that the problem with community development projects such as building learning shelters is funding - the circles cannot become self-sustaining groups without some form of economic activity and thus will always be reliant on donor or government funding.

**Training material:** On several occasions, we were made aware that there is very little literature available to the circles relating to their action points. They had to rely on the CDAs for special expertise; they could not read it up for themselves. For example, the manuals attached to the pumps at boreholes which were put in by several circles do not seem to have been used in the circles. The CMCs/VRCs are expected to arrange some training for the action points and some have developed the experience, contacts or resources to do this, especially when this lies within their own resources: "The committee said that they organise sessions for women to learn better ways of preparing different types of food stuffs in the home. For instance, in January 2008 all the female participants went to Mrs Kapire's home to learn how to prepare soya meat, which the women now easily prepare for their families in the community" (Mbinda 2). How widely this is done is not clear, but it was not done elsewhere in our case study villages. This example shows what can be done.

**Other sectors:** The aim of the REFLECT programme is that the circle should connect up with other government developmental programmes, raising resources from other sectors. "Our aim is for the circle to link with other resources – the churches, NGOs, government resources etc – but there are no reports of links but they may come out now" (int MWCD). Unlike the SSEE (now FLIRD), there are few links with the work of other developmental sectors. The CDAs are charged with working "in collaboration with sector specific extension workers in areas such as agriculture, veterinary services and forestry to support the REFLECT circle facilitators in their ... activities" (UNDP). But "there is a lack of linkages between ICEIDA sectors and ... the Ministries because of allowances. For example, I had the idea of a series

of workshops for facilitators to [train them to] give basic knowledge on family planning, the environment, HIV/AIDS, democracy etc but we cannot do it because of allowances – the CDAs fear that if the facilitators give this knowledge, they will lose some of their allowances”; the CDAs feel they could easily give all this information themselves if they were paid allowances to do so (Levi Soko).

Discussions with ICEIDA staff at Monkey Bay revealed there were no links between the work of the other ICEIDA-supported sector development programmes such as irrigation or fisheries and the REFLECT programme, even when being undertaken in the same village. In Chilimba, one of our case study centres, ICEIDA was engaged in an irrigation scheme, and there seems to have been one informal link between that and the REFLECT circle, but it did not lead to any irrigation-related literacy learning in the circle and no promotion of literacy in the irrigation project. I noticed that on the collage of photographs used to display the work of ICEIDA in the Monkey Bay offices, there was only one photograph which showed any texts at all. All the other sectors appear to believe that literacy is not necessary in their work.

It was also hoped that the circles will make “working relationships with the private sector”, for example in fish selling and poultry marketing (UNDP), but this did not happen in the circles we met.

Very rarely, facilitators brought in other extension workers to the circle meetings – they do not have the financial resources to do so. “We don’t have visiting lecturers”, said the CDAs. The facilitators confirmed this: “No speakers at all” (int Facilitators). Levi Soko explained: “No speakers are invited. It used to happen but stopped because it was not cost-effective” (Levi Soko). But some come without invitation – especially from the health, agricultural extension and legal information services, and they sometimes come into the village through the REFLECT circle. An interesting case was the establishment of a programme in Chilimba and other circles to deal with the problems of the estates of deceased persons following legislation by the Government. In this, we found some evidence that the REFLECT circles have become the focal point for other programmes to enter the village. “Extension workers also stated that it is now easier to send and focus their extension messages directly to REFLECT circles as most ADCs and VDCs are dysfunctional. The facilitator is being used as a useful point of contact. This is rather limited but it undoubtedly exists” (UNDP).

**Other factors and development:** REFLECT takes a simplistic view of development. In their view, a village group meets, talks about its situation, decides on a course of action, and then takes it – and the problem is solved. But development, even local community development, depends on far more than this – for example, on identifying resources including

expertise as well as material resources; on infrastructure being in place; on markets being accessible; on willing linkages. The cost of inputs must be reasonable, credit and micro-finance available, water and storage if needed. The exploitation of local resources by outside agents (such as the middlemen who buy fish cheap and sell it very dear in the main cities, thus keeping many fishing communities in relative poverty) is a key element in this equation. We noted in Namgoma and other places that people making mats complained that they could not sell their products. Many of the barriers to development lie outside the immediate control of the village. None of this appears in the development plans of the REFLECT circles; none of this is discussed in the circles, let alone acted upon.

**Funding:** Funds for the 'visible' action points come largely from ICEIDA. But the community in some cases contributed funds and other resources for the projects (UNDP). The circle or the community is expected to "raise funds and other support" (int GH; UNDP). "Some villages have raised money – for example, one village set out to provide a community-based child care centre; they asked the District Assembly and got some funds from the MASAS programme. ICEIDA funded another for building materials to construct [a learning centre] and the community provided a bricklayer. [In another case], ICEIDA gave part and the community provided the rest for a bridge and for a learning shelter" (CDAs). Chilembwe collected and sold maize to help pay for their learning centre (Chilembwe).

In the UNDP livelihood REFLECT programme, some action points led on to other developmental activities in the villages not planned by the programme.

"A key finding in this regard is the way in which the programme has assisted communities to develop new livelihood activities outside of the funding received .... For instance, ... a circle which started with irrigation has now learnt cloth weaving from another village, and is now able to produce its own weaving yarn to sell for income. ... participants are now able to generate income from their irrigated maize produce. Incomes ranging from K1,400.00 to K3, 200.00 were raised and the money was used to purchase fertiliser. In another circle in Mangochi, irrigation has meant that maize is now grown twice a year, and some participants stated that they can now generate incomes to the amount of K6,000.00 per irrigation season" (UNDP 59).

There was no sign of this in our case study circles but it may occur elsewhere. In our case, each action point stood alone and made no coherent development programme, nor any economic impact on the community.

**Livelihoods:** One reason for what appears to be half-hearted commitment to such community development projects is that there is clear evidence that the real motivation of the circle participants is in the field of livelihoods. The demand for livelihoods in the Monkey Bay REFLECT programme is very considerable: "livelihoods are the concern of the moment" (int ICEIDA Malawi). "The communities themselves demand livelihood activities. ...

livelihoods can coax the people to come into the circle and boost attendance. Furthermore, livelihood activities are critical for providing a grand opportunity for participants to practise the skills they develop through the circle even after graduating from the circle" (int CDAs: we noted the terms being used – 'coax' and 'boost attendance' at a circle; and 'graduating from a circle'). At Mbeya, circle members said that there is a need to encourage small-scale business ventures for circle members. "It was indicated that members have waited for a long time for livelihood activities" (Mbeya). One ACDO was convinced that "Generally livelihood activities are critical in the motivation of participants (especially men) to attend circles and get involved in development activities" (ACDO Dedza).

The inherent opposition in REFLECT to economic development (individual or small group) means that livelihoods are only now beginning to be included among the action points in the Monkey Bay REFLECT circles. At the heart seems to be the issue about whether development is seen in economic terms of alleviating individual and family poverty or about community development. There is a dispute inside REFLECT on this issue; while most take the Mother Manual view– with its emphasis on Empowering **Community** Techniques – that "the purpose of the programme is to improve conditions of life in the community through a careful analysis of local community resources for use in generating locally initiated community development activity", others argue that "the REFLECT learning process seeks to cause socio-economic change/ development in the *livelihoods* of the socially and economically disadvantaged communities" (Archer and Cottingham 1996; Nandago 2002, my italics; see also Openjuru 2004). The approach taken by the Monkey Bay REFLECT programme until now has been that of the community development worker; it is at odds with the demand from the participants for training in livelihood activities which will bring profit to those who engage in them. As MAREFO acknowledged, this demand is very strong: here again, the participants in REFLECT are reacting against the community development approach which Malawi has taken - which may indicate that some people have become empowered through REFLECT.

For livelihoods and income are what the participants want, as both SDIG and UNDP found. As with livelihoods, the demand for small business training is growing. The Mbeya circle members "said they need some more learning in business doing so that they could upgrade their families but due to lack of capital, they just learn how to read and write. 'We want to start a vegetable garden'" (Mbeya). The facilitators in our meeting with them placed the demand for small business training first on the agenda of issues they wished to discuss. They listed some of the group projects they claimed were under discussion in their circles – goat rearing, vegetable growing and selling, chicken rearing, fish selling – but it would appear that these are still at the 'wish' state: "The group has not yet met. We need booklets on these different topics" (int Facilitators). REFLECT is supposed to empower the participants to

obtain what they feel they need for their own development. The particular approach to REFLECT adopted in the Monkey Bay project would seem to be hindering the full participation of the people in the programme and the full development of the area.

One issue which will have to be faced with the various action points which lead to income generation is whether such activities are intended for individual and family practice, small groups such as co-operatives and partnerships (UNDP), or the whole of the REFLECT circle. Different models have been adopted but the most common are the small partnership groups or co-operatives (UNDP). On the other hand, a community model, with a village committee set up for the purpose, has also been advocated (Levi Soko). Few have suggested an economic project run by the whole circle. The proposal that every livelihood activity needs the approval of some Ministry and must be supervised by a government specialist is probably the surest way to kill any such movement.

### **The literacy learning circle and action points**

In determining and implementing the action points, in most of the cases we saw, the literacy learning circles played little or no part. The picture is mixed. We saw no discussion of any development action point or indeed of any developmental topic in any of the circles we visited. We were told that it used to take place but does so no longer: the Balamanja graduate said, speaking of the time when she attended in previous years, "in the literacy class, people are free to discuss family issues, how to become healthy", but this no longer took place. "From the visits I've made, development aspects and issues are discussed *outside* the circle meetings" (int MWCD, my italics). "At first, our literacy circles discussed issues like gender etc but now they are a normal literacy class" (int UNDP). "There is no discussion in the literacy circles" (PC). In Balamanja, the facilitator told us, "I chose the word *mavuto* [problem] from the village discussion. We did not discuss the meaning of the word [in the circle meeting], I did not give any example, e.g. illness; this is how we have been trained .... This is the policy of the project". However, some of the facilitators said that they held discussions on developmental subjects in their circles (int Facilitators), and at Mbeya, the participants said that "they do not meet just to learn literacy but to discuss how they can develop their village - for example, they need bridges - how and where they could get materials" (Mbeya).

**Choice of action points:** But even when they did discuss village problems in the literacy learning circle, these circles seem to have had little to do with decision-making about the action points. In REFLECT, it is intended that "the learner leads, not only the acquisition of literacy and numeracy skills but also decisions on what the participants need to do to improve their situations" (Malawi RELECT Manual page v). The action points are to be decided on by

the literacy learners. But this did not happen in our case studies. "A list of possible activities is drawn up by the supervisors, the CDAs ... – it is not a written list, it is informal" (int MWCD). As one senior organiser said, "The action points come from the village meeting, mainly the facilitator, not from the participants. Some are suggested by the CDAs. My personal view is that they do not reflect the problems of that community; they copy each other". "We have action points which are generated by a circle committee and other leaders such as chiefs and reputed individuals in the community", not by the literacy learners (int ICEIDA Malawi). UNDP, commenting on other REFLECT circles, spoke of action points being "imposed on the community. Some initiatives have been parachuted into the District" (UNDP). Again, the literacy learning circles are not empowered.

And only very rarely did we see the implementation of the action points by the literacy learners. In REFLECT, it is intended that the literacy learners should **implement** the action points and these would be related to their literacy learning. But in our case studies and visits, the literacy learning and action points were separated. The action points were almost always implemented (if at all) by the community, the CMC/VRC or sometimes by appointing a special committee to do the work. For example, at Balamanja, "the committee, the village head and the facilitator thought of constructing their own learning shelter. They held a village meeting" (Balamanja). At Mbinda 2, the CMC/VRC said that part of its role was to "facilitate and develop the action points" (Mbinda).

**Literacy practices in action points:** Finally, perhaps the most regrettable feature of the programme is that there are no literacy activities in the action points or elsewhere in the programme. The members of the literacy learning circle have no opportunity to use their new skills in these projects, as REFLECT intended. In Balamanja, the bridge and the building of the learning centre produced no literacy activities at all. Elsewhere, written accounts drawn up during the process of building the learning centres are rarely kept. Most CMCs/VRCs "do not keep written minutes" or agendas – where they do, as at Liganga, this is because an already literate member of the committee keeps them. In some circles, the CMC/VRC prepared written statements to be read out to us of all their needs, and some of the completed learning shelters had a number of texts on their walls – which shows some increase of formal literacy activities in those villages. The purpose of the action points in REFLECT was that they should become the focus for learning literacy; in our case studies, they have to a large extent failed in this.

The reason for this is the widespread belief that the literacy learners must first learn a basic (school) literacy before they can apply it. This view is out-dated, especially for adults – they learn literacy by using literacy. And this view results in the failure of REFLECT to transfer the

literacy being learned in the circle into everyday life. Those who (like the Balamanja graduate) felt they had achieved what they were looking for (to be able to sign their name, for example) sometimes thought that they needed to maintain some links with the circle if they were to retain their skills, for they saw nothing in the environment which would enable them to continue to use literacy on a daily basis. In one sense, this can be seen as having empowered these women; they had achieved their goal. But in terms of the promotion of literacy practices in the community, it had done very little.

## 6. PERSONNEL

### THE FACILITATORS

At the heart of this programme lie the facilitators. A village meeting identified three local residents capable of undertaking the work of facilitator and of these the CDAs or ACDO chose one; the other two often joined the CMC/VRC.

We saw a group of very committed persons who have been inadequately trained and are inadequately resourced and supported in all their efforts. They work hard and their obligations involve considerable travel for which some of them feel they are poorly reimbursed: the facilitator at Chilimba consistently pleaded (unsuccessfully) over a long period for better financial support to cover his travel costs. They have very little in the way of incentives: the Balamanja facilitator said that "he is not paid enough for his work so that he can no longer adequately care for his family; it is difficult for him to take other work because of the interest he has to develop his village; he fails to make enough money to pay [school] fees for his children because of his full time teaching the circle; he receives an allowance which is not enough to maintain his family". Even the primary school teacher-cum-facilitator said, "There is need for ICEIDA to review the honorarium it gives to us volunteers, so that it can reasonably help us to survive". MAREFO was very clear that the facilitators needed more in the way of incentives such as bicycles and especially "recognition ... they need an identity" (MAREFO).

There is some attrition of facilitators as at Namgoma (where a new circle was opened after the collapse of the first circle) and Chigonere circle 1 where the facilitator left after being criticised by the literacy learners. The Monkey Bay programme may have less "difficulty in retaining skilled REFLECT facilitators" than elsewhere but it occurs: "The attrition of facilitators is mostly attributed to ill-health, employment opportunities outside the villages, and personal commitment" (UNDP). We were told by one REFLECT organiser (although this may not apply to the ICEIDA-supported programme in Monkey Bay) that

"Many male facilitators drop out leading to frequent changes in facilitators for circles. Many facilitators trek to South Africa for jobs or business and they never come back. Additionally, this being a Ngoni area, there is a lot of beer drinking and facilitators are actively involved, and hence less concentration on circle activities. ... When a facilitator drops out, we encourage the village through a village meeting to choose another facilitator for replacement. Once chosen, they undergo a quick orientation/briefing session (normally in less than a day) while awaiting training. Either the CDA for the area or the ACDO will do the briefing to the new facilitator. Furthermore, overall there is a feeling that it is better to recruit female facilitators as they will always stay in their villages since this is an area using the matrilineal system in which men have to come and marry in the village (men often move to other locations due to work or marriage)."

Most of the facilitators we met had some other occupation such as farming or fishing but not all of them did. At Chilimba, the facilitator told us that “before he became a volunteer, he used to do small-scale fishing but he said he had to stop doing this after becoming facilitator. He is also an electrician and says people contact him during weekends to do some work for them” (Chilimba). A few of those we met ran a small-scale enterprise/business: at Chilembwe, the facilitator told us: “Now I buy and sell fish on the lake” (Chilembwe).

**The use of literacy by facilitators:** The same facilitator told us, “I do not keep any written accounts; I keep it in my head. Because my business is small, there is no need to keep written accounts but I tell the women to keep written accounts” (Chilembwe). Not keeping written accounts, or indeed doing any form of reading and writing, was common to almost all the facilitators we met. The facilitator at Balamanja admitted this when we looked round his home. At Madzedze, the participants, when talking about their own daily lives, said: “Do we use literacy in our daily lives? no – not even the facilitator uses literacy daily” (Madzedze), though this may be an exaggeration. As the Balamanja facilitator said, when agreeing that in his fishing, he kept no written records of the fish caught – “it is not our culture” . They are not good role models in this respect – the only systematic writing they do is for the REFLECT programme (reports; register; lesson book; graphics) and they read very little in any context.

The **tasks** of the facilitator are many and varied – calling a village meeting; choosing topics for discussion and briefing him/herself on that topic; producing a graphic; ensuring that the village head and the CMC/VRC remain supportive; recruiting members for the literacy learning circle and teaching, with all that that involves; chasing up the action points; dealing with CDAs and other visitors; writing monthly reports for the CDAs; managing the village library which, as the Simon CMC/VRC indicated, calls for specialist skills which their facilitator at least lacked and so on.

### **Training of facilitators**

All these activities are required with minimum training. As MAREFO pointed out, when REFLECT was started, it was acknowledged that the tasks of a REFLECT facilitator were different qualitatively from those of a formal adult literacy instructor. They were thus given extensive training and much more supervision by knowledgeable, well trained and highly committed supervisors. But with the scaling up of the REFLECT programme, the level of resources devoted to training and supervision has declined. Training in all REFLECT programmes in Malawi, including Monkey Bay, has persistently been pared back, until it is

now no more than that given to NALP instructors – which leads some facilitators to believe their task is simply to be a NALP adult literacy teacher but without the help of a textbook.

As elsewhere, the training programme in Monkey Bay for facilitators at the moment is ten days, for CMCs/VRCs is 3-4 days. The same is true of the UNDP programme: “Then they undergo a ten-day training, which is normally not enough due to too much content”. Both the Ministry and the CDAs admit it is not enough: “ten days is not enough but there is nothing we can do because the period of training is dictated by the available resources. Ideally training is supposed to take two complete weeks”. It is not clear to me who decides how much will be spent on training but the allocation of resources between training and provision is clearly out of kilter. It would be better to have a smaller programme using better trained and better supported facilitators.

But not more of the same training but of a higher quality. The Monkey Bay training programme contains a large element of micro-teaching, showing the facilitators how to teach literacy – words divided into syllables, leading the facilitators to believe that this is all that is needed to teach literacy skills to adults. Most of the training is provided by the CDAs whose understanding of REFLECT (and of literacy) and experience of teaching (they have never taught a class) are limited. Some training is provided by central staff from the Ministry, some of whom as we have seen hold negative attitudes towards the adult non-literate population.

And much of the training was a long time ago. The Balamanja facilitator told us that he had had two weeks training in 2001 in NALP, two weeks in 2003 in REFLECT, and refresher training in 2007. And it was rushed. The facilitator at Chigonere complained that “the training period was too short for us to cope with the content. We were even failing to copy notes because there was too much content. Worse still, there were no handouts for us to take home” (Facilitator, Chigonere)

Despite this, this training is valued, and every facilitator we met asked for more training (int Facilitators). Some of it carried a certificate: the Balamanja facilitator told us, “I was trained as a teacher with ICEIDA and have the certificate.” But the new facilitator at Namgoma who had just completed her ten days training reported that she did not get any certificate.

So that it is not surprising that the facilitators have developed their own informal support networks: “They get their support from other facilitators, not from the supervisors; facilitators often share with other facilitators” (Levi Soko). We found several cases where facilitator met with facilitator to share information, problems and experiences, and to ask advice; this sense of a shared identity needs to be encouraged. Sometimes this network

draws upon the two other persons from the same village who were interviewed but not selected as facilitator: "The other two were not included in the committee but the current facilitator explained that they still help him in circle activities when he needs their services" (Dedza). New facilitators take advice from more experienced facilitators; they lend their circle records to others as examples of what should be done. At Kasankha, there was "no lesson book; a new facilitator has borrowed it" (Kasankha).

Nor is it surprising that the facilitators look to formal school for their models. In Balamanja, "Some of the participants put their numbers [sums] at the back of their notebook. When we asked why, they told us that they had asked the facilitator and he told them to keep sums separate from words. I asked him why; and he answered that this was because of his own schooling. Because I had reminded him of this, he now reminded all the participants that this is what they should do. They are not allowed to decide matters like that for themselves" (Balamanja). The new facilitator at Namgoma said that she had a friend who was a primary school teacher and she would take her advice. A short session was devoted in the training programme to how adults learn and how to teach adults [presumably differently from teaching children], but it clearly made little impact on the facilitators we met – they still took school as their model.

The facilitators meet monthly with the CDAs, potentially to discuss with them the practical problems of teaching adults, but again little of this seems to have been done according to the reports we received. The opportunity is taken mostly to pump new information into the facilitators, not listen to their concerns.

The facilitators have created an association with a membership, committee and officers "to pass on their concerns to the Programme Coordinator or ACDO; but while the facilitators meet monthly at the CDA office, the committee of the facilitators' association never meets and there is no AGM; it exists on paper only" (PC).

## **SUPERVISION AND SUPPORT OF FACILITATORS IN LITERACY LEARNING CIRCLES**

We looked carefully at the supervision of these circles. The CDAs are charged with this.

The Balamanja reports give a picture of the supervision of that circle. We found the CDA attendance at the circles to be somewhat spasmodic, and it was suggested to us that it took the form of an inspection rather than a mentoring visit. "Supervision is not structured – the visit may last 10-15minutes – they check the register; talk to the participants and motivate them; may look at Rural Information Centre [tin trunk library]. Training in supervision is

inadequate". Most months saw at least one visit from a CDA and some saw several such visits. But there was a tendency for different CDAs to go for different purposes. Their primary concern was with the development projects – they have little expertise in teaching and especially adult literacy and numeracy teaching, so that although they could help with the logistics of the classes (rooms, materials etc), they were unable to help with issues about effective learning. And judging by the names of the CDAs listed, there was a lack of continuity in support. At Mbeya, between June and December 2007 (the last months available to us), a CDA visited in June, July, August and November; July saw a team visit from ICEIDA with ACDO, and ICEIDA came again in November. No visit was recorded in September, October or December (Mbeya register). In Chilimba, the monthly reports record frequent pleas for more supervision. There are many references to lack of supervision from the CDAs. The CMC/VRC at Chilimba (the membership of which seems to have been relatively stable) was exemplary in attending the circle meetings – 6 times in May 2006, 20 times in July 2007, 33 times in August 2007, 16 times in October 2007. But no CDAs visited the circle in May and July 2006, in March, July, October 2007 and February 2008. Only four CDA visits are recorded in eight months. This is commented on: "The supervisor should be coming as often as he can to encourage the participants" (August 2006). "The CDAs rarely visit the circle which therefore do not get much encouragement and guidance" (Mbeya facilitator). "There is not enough interaction between the CDAs and the villages – they just accept the village meeting; they do not test if the concept of REFLECT has been understood". Several circles in their reports asked for supervisory visits to be more frequent and more regular (e.g. Simon).

**Report forms and statistics:** We noted in the monthly reports figures given for the numbers of persons said to be able to read, write and to calculate. We understand that these figures vary every month according to the enrolment of that month, and that the facilitators are asked to develop their own forms of assessment whether the participants can read, write and calculate. Exactly what form these assessments take and how these numbers are arrived at, we could not discern but it is clear that they are not reliable figures and cannot be used for any comparative purpose. In Balamanja, even after three or four years of attendance, we saw that many of the participants struggled even to copy from the blackboard, and the facilitator admitted this – but they were still recorded as being able to read, to write and to calculate – the facilitator simply made his own judgment. What is more, on the reports we saw, the numbers able to write exceeded those able to read, and (more surprisingly) the number identified as 'numerate' always exceeded those who were literate, a finding which contradicts all other known research. Any statistics based on these figures must surely be notional at best.

**CMC/VRC and supervision:** As we have seen at Chilimba, in some circles more supervision of the literacy learning circle is provided by the CMC/VRC, as the monthly reports and the registers both show. Some of the committee members take their accepted duties in this respect seriously. At Simon village, the CMC/VRC told us, "There is a schedule for supervision: at least every month every committee member has a turn to supervise circle activities" (Simon). At Chilimba, the CMC/VRC set out its duties as follows: "Our role during the circle time is to supervise and bring about discipline among participants if need be. We normally check how the teacher is teaching. If there is something wrong, then we correct them. For instance, we check that the teacher does not shout at students. We also check whether the teacher dresses properly for teaching: we want to see him to be smart and should not put on short trousers. We stop participants from peeping at each other's work. One of them recalls yesterday's scenario in which she had to caution two women who were sharing individual work tasks. The committee members have divided its membership into pairs and they share the four days to supervise circle activities. There is clear indication [in the register] that the committee supervises the circle on a daily basis. There is however no space in the register of such visits for comments except for an indication of "udindo" (leadership position)". A typical page in the supervision book has the following headings:

**Tsiku (Date)                      Dzina (Name)                      Udindo (Position)**

Tsiku	DZINA	UDINDO
25/6/07	Agness mkaipirara	Secretary
28/6/07	Beaty - Samuel	Member.
28/6/07	Agness mkaipirara	Secretary.
28/6/07	Edina Nkhoma	Wapamban
28/6/07	Uaombe	member.
28/6/07	Francis Benjamin	member
28/6/07	Mfwa Mcheleche	Member.
1/07	Hezelio Uaombe	member

Chilimba circle Supervision Book (page from). Note use of English alongside Chewa.

Some CMCs are clearly very effective in this respect. At Chigonere, "Generally we supervise/monitor circle activities including attendance. We also check whether the facilitator is doing his or her job well, and this includes whether he/she comes to the class in good time; how she is teaching; how the learners are responding to his/her teaching. If we notice a problem, we sit down with the facilitator and express our concern and eventually resolve

the problem" (Chigonere). In this case, the CMC/VRC arranged for a new facilitator because of a problem (see above page 36).

And the CMCs go beyond the literacy learning circle in their activities. They are responsible for directing the action points, and at times for trying to find resources for these. The CMC/VRC at Namgoma set out its perceived roles and responsibilities as being to facilitate the construction and maintenance of a shelter for circle meetings and activities, to supervise the circle activities (on a rotational basis by the committee – two committee members per day), to make initial financial contributions to assist in the preparations for the start of the circle (each committee member contributed K100 towards the hiring of a structure they had identified in the village for circle activities and the purchase of notebooks for the participants in order to encourage them initially), and to encourage people to attend circle activities.

The CMCs are however very varied in their response to these duties. Some are very active indeed, others are notable for their unwillingness to engage with REFLECT. At Balamanja, the CMC/VRC was very inactive. It had ceased to exist for a whole year before a new one was chosen, and I got the impression that these members were reluctant to undertake this role. Unlike Chilimba where (at least during our visit) two or three CMC/VRC members were in attendance at each session, only one member paid a very short visit to any of the teaching sessions we visited.

## **THE CIRCLES**

It would be easy to dismiss the whole programme as a waste of time and money, were it not for the continued existence of the circles after three, four or five years. The facilitators, despite many problems and discouragements, continue to convene the village meetings and produce their graphics. Some participants still come to the literacy learning sessions in varying numbers; Mbeya circle kept a careful record which showed that in 2003, 18 enrolled, 2004 -13, 2005 -17, 2006 - only 7 (they admitted that they had no explanation for this), 2007-15 and currently 15 members. A large number of these enrolments were the same persons.

In several circles, there is a coherence about the group which leads to a demand for a uniform (T-shirt or some such item) and a sense that they are part of something bigger expressed through competitive sports between the circles. Mbeya CMC/VRC told us that the participants "compete in sports with other circles, but the problem they have is that they do not have a ball [for netball]; they need T shirts or something like a uniform so that they can be identified" (Mbeya). "We need a uniform so that we are distinguished from non-circle

members. We think this can also motivate non-attenders to join the circle. A uniform would give us a sense of belonging to the circle within our community. ... The circle members need T-shirts to act as a uniform. We hear other circles were given T-shirts by ICEIDA. Perhaps this can motivate non-participants to join us" (Katole). "We need a uniform; this could be in the form of T-shirts so that people can identify circle members. Any type of uniform can encourage us and non-attenders including the male members in the community. ... There is need for a circle uniform, which will also motivate participants" (Simon). The facilitator at Mbinda 2 wondered whether motivational activities can be developed to encourage more people to come to the circle, such as T-shirts as a uniform for circle members. In this way members will automatically advertise the circle at different meetings. Similarly, "introducing sporting activities to compete among circles such as football and netball can encourage others to come for physical development (good health), and hence increase circle attendance. ... We need a uniform for identity and to motivate others to attend circle activities" (Mbinda 2).

It is not clear how widespread this is or whether it is a spontaneous movement or something encouraged by the CDAs, for the facilitators we met in a focus group discussion reported that none of their circles asked for uniforms or played sports against neighbouring circles.

**A permanent group?** This sense that REFLECT has established a more or less permanent grouping of some members of the village community is enhanced by the fact that the legal ownership of the newly built learning shelters is (so we were informed) vested in the literacy learning circle which alone is seen as the REFLECT circle. The village meeting has no settled membership, no coherence. The CMC/VRC is regarded as one among many village committees, in existence only as long as REFLECT is operative in the village. In some villages, the literacy learning circle participants are active with the CMC/VRC and others in the village in action points; but in our case studies and in other circles, they form a changing group of literacy learners alone. In these cases, these circles have no purpose other than to teach literacy through breaking up words chosen by the facilitator, CMC/VRC or village meeting into syllables and trying to form new words from them – but they are now regarded as permanent features of the village landscape unlike NALP classes.

## 7. PROPOSALS

### Introduction

**ICEIDA and the REFLECT Programme:** In drafting the proposals for the enhancement of the Monkey Bay REFLECT programme, I have borne in mind two things. First, that ICEIDA is a bi-lateral aid agency and works closely with the GoM, especially the MWCD at both central and local levels. Part of its concern is to strengthen capacity so as to leave behind stronger agencies for sustaining any work initiated. Secondly, that the Monkey Bay REFLECT Programme is a high profile programme, one which attracts considerable interest among visitors and internally; the valuable radio programme *Chitukuko kwa a Namkumba* (Dzimwe Community Radio) made regularly on various aspects of the programme reveals something of its significance. Critiques of it may be met with defensiveness, and proposed changes with some resistance.

However, the purpose of this process review is to assess if there are ways in which the work of the Monkey Bay REFLECT Programme can be enhanced. Whatever its achievements to date, there are ways in which far more could be achieved in terms of literacy learning, community development and women's empowerment. In some villages, there have been some significant changes – but as our two case studies show, not everywhere. In other villages, as Balamanja shows, it must be admitted that, after a programme lasting several years, the results in terms of increased literacy have been very small, the developmental changes in the community have been insignificant, and the empowerment of women hard to measure. The aim of these proposals then is to enhance the Monkey Bay REFLECT Programme – to *widen* its appeal and to *deepen* its impact.

The recommendations fall into two parts – those which relate to major issues, and smaller changes designed to improve the functioning of various elements of the programme.

### MAJOR PROPOSALS:

**Clarity of objectives:** We have seen that one of the factors commonly acknowledged throughout the programme is its lack of clarity. This needs to be addressed as a start. Its aims and objectives, its structures and processes need to be set out clearly and made plain to all stakeholders. The vision set out here is one attempt to do this but ICEIDA must take the initiative to clarify for itself and its partners its own vision. Is the programme primarily one for development or primarily one for literacy? It cannot be *primarily* for both. And is the development part of the programme primarily community development with its reliance on

external funding or economic development which will be more sustainable and will lead to poverty reduction?

**Smaller better resourced programme:** We have seen that inadequate training and inappropriate and unsuitable venues are major problems with this programme. I would urge that a smaller programme is offered and that the resources thereby free should be used for providing more and better training and proper accommodation for the circles to meet in.

### **THE RESTORATION OF REFLECT.**

The main cause of any shortfall in achievements seem to me to be the fact that REFLECT is not being fully implemented in the area. The compromises made to fit the demands of NALP have affected the learning programmes, and the limited nature of development adopted to accommodate the CDA approach to development has restricted the empowerment of the participants to decide what form of development they wish to pursue.

The foundation of REFLECT is that those who learn literacy shall decide their own learning and developmental activity. This has in some places been broken in the Monkey Bay REFLECT Programme. The discussion of community problems and decisions about action points are in most cases taken by an amorphous village meeting with no fixed membership, and the implementation is taken either by the CMC/VRC or by a specially appointed village committee. In these cases, the learners in the literacy learning circle decide nothing, implement nothing; and apart from the fact that the isolated words they learn which are not chosen by them relate vaguely to some aspect of development (rights, problem, centre, etc), there is no relationship between the literacy practices they learn and the development of their community.

**Literacy learning and action points:** My proposal in this respect is to restore REFLECT to its original intention, focusing on the CMC/VRC and the literacy learning circle. **The participants of the literacy learning circle should discuss and debate the issues relating to the community (preparing a graphic if it is felt to be appropriate) and decide the development project they wish to pursue;** and in this they will be supported by the facilitator and the CMC/VRC. They will then themselves **implement that action point.** The literacy they learn shall be the embedded literacy of that development project. The village meeting can then be used occasionally to add support to the project, but not to discuss, debate and decide – the project belongs to the literacy learning circle, not to the village meeting.

The biggest obstacle to this proposal is not any structural factor but the attitude which we have seen pervades from the Ministry to the CDAs, that poor illiterate women are not able to take and implement such decisions. If that is accepted by ICEIDA, then any advance in the Monkey Bay REFLECT Programme is impossible. I personally do not believe it. Experience elsewhere shows that unschooled women and men are fully capable of managing their lives successfully and contributing to the development of their local community. This after all is what REFLECT believes: REFLECT is "rooted in a faith in people's existing knowledge and beliefs as a starting point" (Archer and Cottingham 1996 p14); it uses PRA tools "based on the belief that rural communities are able to initiate and manage their own development process" (Openjuru 2004 p420). Non-literate men and women can decide what they want to do to improve the quality of their lives, and they can implement this when given assistance, bringing to the process all their existing experience, funds of knowledge and skills accumulated over many years. In the process they can learn literacy and numeracy skills relevant to the tasks they have themselves decided to undertake. We must take REFLECT in full, not in part, and at its face value.

This will not mean a major change: simply the encouragement of the participants in any literacy learning circle to decide on a long-term development project for themselves and to implement it, instead of leaving it to the village meeting or committee. Livelihoods will clearly feature substantially but not to the complete exclusion of other forms of development. Such projects will normally be long term, not changing every month according to the whim of the facilitator or the suggestion of the CDA. And instead of the facilitator leading the group, he/she will become the assistant to the group's project; the learning group will decide what it wants to do and what it wants to learn – just as REFLECT insists.

If this proposal to concentrate on one project alone without dealing with the other 'units' in the facilitators' manual does not meet with approval, it may be possible to run the two in parallel sessions – for example, two meetings each week devoted to learning breaking down words through the manual and its graphics and two to the circle's specific project – provided that the embedded literacy of the project is taught in the project sessions. The pace of learning in all the circles we saw is at present much too slow, and there is ample time for the participants to **act** as well as to learn word breaking.

**Adult teaching methods:** And this will mean helping those facilitators who do not at present use them to adopt and use more appropriate adult methods of teaching and learning, helping the participants to take control of their own learning as well as the project – not instructing as at present but assisting learning, encouraging the learners in discussion, using sub-groups to share views and ideas, freeing the learners to bring their existing knowledge

and experience into the class, so that the facilitator and other participants learn from other learners. None of this was done in any of the circles we saw. The facilitator must cease being the sole source of learning; peer learning must be encouraged.

The use of small groups within the circle will be a major feature, for that is key to adult learning. Adult learners bring a great deal of knowledge and experience to the class and this must be used for effective learning – and that is best done through small group work. The pace of learning – which at the moment is dictated by the facilitator and is much too slow - will be set by the learners.

## **LITERACY ENHANCEMENT**

How can we enhance the effectiveness of the existing literacy element in the Monkey Bay REFLECT Programme?

**The development of specialist assistance in adult literacy:** It is vital for any adult literacy learning programme to develop up-to-date understandings of adult literacy and how it is taught, especially literacy as social practice. The first thing therefore which is essential is to obtain the services of someone who knows something about adult literacy. I am quite clear that without this, there will be no progress. Adult literacy is not an easy subject which anyone can tackle without specialist expertise. Like water aid or health aid or fisheries aid, literacy aid calls for qualified specialist attention, not the services of a general social development worker. The concepts of literacy as social practice, of multiple literacies, of embedded literacies, of family literacy, of proximal literacy, of literacy mediation, of workplace literacy – all of these are part of today's lexicon of adult literacy and have major implications for the Monkey Bay REFLECT Programme. The range of teaching approaches in adult literacy is wide, and word-breaking is only a very small part of it; whole word recognition, the whole language approach, the language experience approach are among the more effective ways of helping adults to learn literacy. All these are unknown in this programme – which is like saying that recent developments in nutrition or in malaria are ignored in ICEIDA-supported health programmes.

This expertise does not yet exist in Malawi as in Uganda.

There are two possible solutions.

a) **Training in adult literacy:** One is to develop new expertise within the country. I note that ICEIDA funds extended training programmes for personnel in their various assisted

programmes. I have not been able to identify any of that training as being specifically in adult literacy and numeracy.

Where can such expertise be built up in Malawi? The obvious place would be within the Ministry and especially within NCLAE. One problem here, as the Ministry themselves indicated, is that changes in personnel in the Ministry are very frequent. Nor is it clear that staff at the Ministry feel the need for such training in new approaches to adult literacy.

My preferred solution is that one or more of the staff of the Monkey Bay REFLECT Programme should be sent away for an extended period (six to ten months) of training in modern understandings of adult literacy. Specific suggestions have been made to ICEIDA in a memorandum attached to this report.

While such staff are away on training, it will be necessary to fill the gap with a short-term consultancy. This can be filled either by bringing in an international consultant for the months needed (which would assist with the re-orientation of the Monkey Bay REFLECT Programme proposed here) or by using the resources of a local institution such as Chancellor College as indicated below.

This is my strong recommendation.

**b) Using a local institution such as Chancellor College:** If it is decided not to offer specialist training in adult literacy, then a part-time consultancy should be offered to someone from a regional or local institution which is in a position to develop such skills and expertise. Chancellor College (and especially Dr Foster Kholowa of the Department of Curriculum and Teaching Studies) already possess some knowledge and experience of newer approaches to adult literacy and is developing a further interest in this field. Training programmes in adult literacy however can be brought in from outside Malawi, for example from Kwa-Zulu Natal University or from Makerere University Institute of Adult and Continuing Education. It may be possible to bring these two institutions together with Chancellor College. The strengthening of a national institution in adult literacy in Malawi would be a major contribution to the national capacity in this field.

Doing nothing does not seem to me to be an option. If ICEIDA wishes to enhance the literacy learning component of the Monkey Bay REFLECT Programme, some specialist advice is needed. ICEIDA would never consider mounting any other sector of development without bringing in a specialist – why adult literacy should be treated differently is not at all clear. Without some clear guidance as to how to teach literacy to adults (different from school

teaching), there will be no progress. The existing teaching that we saw is very inadequate. The MBRP project can play a significant part in strengthening the national capacity for adult literacy through strengthening some institutions both in the Ministry and in civil society (Chancellor College) and at local level (the ACDO, the Programme Coordinator, and the CDAs) by training either out of country or brought in from (for example) South Africa or Uganda. This is the first and essential step for making the programme effective.

**New adult literacy teaching-learning methods:**

With specialist advice, I see new adult literacy teaching-learning methods coming in. It will mean further training for the facilitators but that is needed in any case – and training by experts in **adult literacy** learning. As originally envisaged by REFLECT, the literacy activities embedded within the development project undertaken by the circle will form the focus of the literacy learning, not artificial and decontextualised key words broken down into syllables. This process of word deconstruction and assembly is only a very small part of the process of learning literacy (some experts feel it is particularly inappropriate for adults in all circumstances; adults learn mostly by whole word recognition and sentence construction, not by letters and syllables based on phonics – see McCaffery, Merrifield and Millican 2007).

**A new vision of literacy promotion:** The important thing is that the specialist in adult literacy will be able to help the programme to refocus itself so that the circles become the means to promote literacy activities throughout the area, building up the literacy environment and encouraging men and women in the area to read and write more and more relevant materials. Creative writing, collecting other written material, distributing what texts can be collected and produced to the circles and more widely in the villages – this will be part of the role of the CDAs working with the new literacy expert. For with this appointment will come a new attitude towards adult literacy. There will be a strong desire to promote all kinds of literacy activities, formal and informal, throughout the learning programme. Other literacy practices should be incorporated into the existing programme.

While in Malawi, I had a brainstorming session with a number of practitioners and we identified thirty different literacy activities which have been done in other contexts and which can be done in and through a REFLECT literacy learning circle. I have listed them in an Appendix to show something of the new vision I propose. These are all best done in small groups rather than as lone exercises. Adults learn best co-operatively by asking the help of others, not individually as at school.

Many more such activities can be designed to get the women (and men) writing. But very little of this is done in the Monkey Bay REFLECT circles – there is simply a concentration on learning words, not literacy. I see part of the role of CDAs as being to collect and distribute

such literacy materials found in real life to the learning groups. With this specialist advice and new vision of literacy as something done in everyday life at home and in the community, it will be possible to bring back REFLECT in Monkey Bay to its initial vision of learning literacy through local development projects which it is not doing at present.

**Formal literacy teaching:** The literacy being taught in the various group projects will be what is called 'embedded literacy practices' of the project, often very informal literacies; it will thus vary from group to group. To help those participants who wish to take and pass the Ministry test, some more formal teaching of literacy will need to take place. This is being done now informally, without any teaching-learning material. I suggest this informal process now be formalised and assisted. The facilitator will teach a formal short course called 'Access to NALP' designed to help those circle participants who wish to pass the Ministry test and obtain the Ministry certificate. I suggest this course should be open to anyone who wishes to take it, not just the circle members, not all of whom may wish to join this course. Some teaching-learning material can be developed for this purpose.

**Numeracy:** The weakness of numeracy learning in the REFLECT circles does need to be addressed; expert assistance needs to be brought in, preferably through using the Adults Learning Maths network (see website).

**Changing the role of the circle:** The separation of decision-making about community problems and action points currently done by the Village Meeting and CMC/VRC from the literacy learning can be overcome. The role of the literacy learning circle can be changed to become what it is meant to be in REFLECT, a deciding and implementing group. As REFLECT intended, the literacy learners can be empowered to discuss the problems, to decide on an action point, and to implement it – and to learn literacy **through** the implementation of the action point. The control of the REFLECT programme can now lie with the literacy learning circle, not with an amorphous village meeting. They will be development groups, not schools for adults, tied to terms, strict times of meeting and aimed at examinations.

**Changing the role of the facilitator:** The facilitator will not be a 'teacher' of literacy as he/she is at present in all the classes we saw but a facilitator of a group engaged on a group development project. The facilitator will help the project and bring in specialist training when needed; he/she will teach the literacy embedded in the project, not just individual words but the actual records and other documents relating to the project.

I would like to see all the facilitators being encouraged to read and write more, especially creative writing. Facilitators can be encouraged to form local and regional networks.

**Facilitator association:** The association of facilitators should be sponsored for a period of years.

**Changing the role of the CMC/VRC:** I see the key to this change as lying in the CMC/VRC which too can be empowered. At the moment, they have responsibilities which many of them are shouldering gallantly without any resources. I would see them as being *enabled with resources* to assist the circle activity by providing the training and other resources such as books etc – in other words, doing some of the work that the CDAs do or should do at the moment. The CMCs/VRCs need to be funded to do this and given the power to approach anyone they need to help the circle.

**Changing the roles of the CDAs:** Fewer changes will be needed in the roles of the CDAs but they will now be called upon to support the circles in their chosen long-term projects as far as they are able. They will not seek to control the circles as at present but free them to do their own thing. They will not stop things happening as occurs sometimes at the moment but encourage and enable the circles to undertake and complete tasks. In association with other agencies, the CDAs need to be encouraged and enabled to support the group livelihood and community projects by the supply of relevant materials relating to the project and the identification and provision of training for the projects; they will collect and distribute materials for these projects. Their visits will not be monitoring to see if the facilitators are “doing things right” as at present, but supportive, to see what needs to be supplied and done to make the group project more effective.

#### **Development:**

**Widen development:** I see the aim of REFLECT as being to help participants to learn literacy through development activities. By giving control of the kind of development to the learning circle, all kinds of development will become available to those circles. They will not be confined to community development role. They can be empowered to choose economic development (livelihoods or income generation) or radical transformative development if they so wish, not be restricted as at present. Full discussion of the issues concerned must take place in the circle, not outside it – with the support of the CMC/VRC if so wished.

**Allowances:** The issue of extension staff allowances does need to be addressed and not ignored as it is restricting the activities of the circles.

**Livelihood projects:** The development activity chosen by the circle will be implemented by the whole group rather than individual livelihoods; it will continue for a long time rather than be a short-term action point as at present. Each circle will have its own development project undertaken by the whole circle

**The project and literacy:** The development project and the learning of literacy should be integrated, not kept separated as at present. The embedded literacy of the project will form the core of the literacy learning and this will be seen as immediately relevant and applicable to the learners. This is what REFLECT set out to achieve but in the Monkey Bay REFLECT Programme, this integration has been broken. We must stop treating the literacy learners as ignorant, incapable of taking decisions and implementing their own project.

**Targeted circles:** To widen the Monkey Bay REFLECT Programme, I propose that new circles targeted towards certain groups can be formed – for example, occupational groups like fishing communities, shopkeepers, mothers with children at school, or traditional birth attendants and village health workers. Apart from being aimed at certain groups within the community, they will operate exactly as the other circles – they will each have a CMC/VRC and will learn the literacy related to their occupation. There is a demand certainly for such courses from fishing groups. These can be shorter programmes than the current on-going programme, aimed at learning literacy through the embedded literacies of the target group and at the same time enhancing the activities of the target group.

#### **Training:**

**Training facilitators:** There is a great need for the existing training programme of facilitators to be enhanced, especially in the understanding of literacy and numeracy and in appropriate ways of teaching adults. More resources need to be devoted to this aspect of the programme. The plea of lack of resources for training cannot justify the existing failed model of training; it is far better to run a smaller programme with more effective facilitators than a large programme with facilitators who because of lack of training simply cannot do the job, as at present. Numbers of circles and participants never compensate for low quality work. And such training needs to be continuing, not one-off injection events; and it must be tied to on-going support offered throughout the life of the project until the circle is self-sustaining.

**Training CDAs:** The CDAs too need to be retrained in two aspects of the programme, adult literacy as social practice and adult learning. The key role here will go to the literacy expert. At the moment, there is no-one the CDAs respect as having expertise and experience in literacy (and especially numeracy), and this needs to be remedied. The CDAs' strong desire for training can be accepted for this, both as a reward for their work as well as a desire for

increased professionalism. At the moment, they see training as strengthening their power over the circles, for they have increased their knowledge base which they pass down to the facilitators in a cascade model of knowledge transfer. But they now need to learn about adult learning and about new ways of thinking about literacy. I suggest trainers be brought in from Chancellor College or from Makerere University in Uganda.

**Other sectors:** I would wish to see that all other sectors supported by ICEIDA find ways of including literacy within their projects – not by sending non-literate participants off to literacy learning circles but by incorporating an appropriate literacy within the skills they will be developing through their sector activities. Literacy should be a cross-cutting theme of development like gender and the environment, not a ghettoised activity. It can (and indeed should) come into irrigation schemes, health programmes, fishery development etc. And these other sectors should be brought into the circles as and when it is relevant (e.g. water supply for a farming project).

**New programmes:** There is a demand for progression beyond the existing circle activities. It should be possible to negotiate with MWCD at central or particularly at local level under decentralisation for the provision of two new programmes – English and small business training. These would have their own processes of assessment and award their own certificates. I also see the possible development of an Access to Education (A2E) course for those who wish to progress into formal schooling at upper primary or secondary level - this would give access to formal schools at an appropriate level. All this can be done under the rubric of 'post-literacy' – although in the case of English, I strongly advocate English *literacy* classes which I feel will attract a significant number of learners, men and women. It will need to be properly resourced with good facilitators, and will be more formal than the REFLECT programme. But there are several good models for such work these days.

**Drop-in centres:** I would hope the programme could now include one or two drop-in centres where adults can get help with their literacy activities as and when they need it. At village level, I hope the facilitators and other 'literate' persons in the community can be encouraged and facilitated to form such a centre, but there is also a need for two or three more formal drop-in centres in central locations. They may be staffed by volunteers or by students and are very low cost centres; but experience elsewhere suggests they are very effective indeed [In Nigeria, a drop-in centre called a 'literacy shop' opened in Abuja market attracted over 3900 persons to call in during a nine months' period to get immediate help with their literacy activities].

## **EXAMPLES OF HOW THESE CHANGES WOULD WORK**

To show how this set of proposals would work, I set out a vision of this plan in action in Balamanja and Chilimba.

**Balamanja:** the circle members will be registered not every month as now but at the beginning of the year, and a firm membership of the circle established. It is true one or two may withdraw and a few may wish to join. I suggest a very small subscription should be collected to indicate membership. It will be necessary to register membership, for some of the existing resources will go directly to this group and any profits from the development project will be shared among the members. The membership of the CMC/VRC too will be registered since the committee too will be given some resources. These two together will form the REFLECT circle. The village meeting can be called upon if necessary by the CMC/VRC but is no longer directly involved.

The circle – after discussion, which can use PRA if they so wish and produce graphics – will decide on a project. In the case of Balamanja, I will cite as an example a vegetable garden. A site will be needed from the village chief (perhaps through a village meeting) and that will be the task of the CMC/VRC in association with the learners. This project will not last for one month but will be a permanent project.

The CMC/VRC will have resources to call upon anyone (not just the CDAs) for expertise necessary for such a venture – including specialist training. At the moment, one or two CMCs/VRCs arrange further training for the members of the literacy learning circle, but this is not universal and they say that they have no resources for such training. The CMC/VRC will be able to buy books and booklets and magazines for vegetable gardening. In other words, some resources (including funding) will be given to the circle (at literacy learning circle and CMC/VRC levels) to run its own project.

The CMC/VRC will have the resources to call upon the appropriate (agricultural) extension staff for some short courses on vegetable growing and for some necessary advice and information. Texts about vegetables will be acquired and/or prepared. The facilitator will be supported to teach the **literacy of vegetable gardens** – the names of vegetables; the calendar of growth; the names of diseases, pesticides, fertilisers, seeds and varieties etc. The materials in the tin trunk can be utilised here. It is important to remember that the circle participants will already know a good deal about growing vegetables; what they need is some form of group coherence and the immediate resources to start. The facilitator will also teach how to keep records of the garden (a weekly journal will be kept by the circle members). The key words will come from the vegetable garden but the literacy learning from

the start will go beyond word breakdown and syllable build-up. The literacy being learned will be the embedded literacy of the project. The funder will require regular reports on the project written by the participants, not the facilitator.

The responsible CDA will call from time to time as part of their normal duties, but their role will be more responsive than directive. They will collect material relating to vegetable gardening from newspapers, magazines etc and photocopy these and supply them to the circle. Other extension staff can be drawn upon as needed.

Personally, I would wish to see a critical element included within this project – for example, a discussion of gender issues around vegetable growing (why do women and not men grow vegetables? or if both are involved, what sort of work do men do and what sort do women do? etc); discussions of current marketing of vegetables and exploitation, of small and big businesses, of transport and marketing etc. Left to themselves, the circles are unlikely to include such areas of discussion; it can be the role of the CDAs to encourage such critical and transformative discussion. But even without that element (which may arise over time), such projects will be valuable both for development and for literacy learning.

The project can be an on-going one and after a time be self-sustaining from sales of the vegetables. The group can become a permanent group.

In **Chilimba**, exactly the same model can be followed but with the choice of project this time being poultry. Again the CMC/VRC, using resources given to it, will bring in training and other resources for the project; for example, it can buy books and booklets relating to poultry. Instead of someone else controlling what goes into the village library 'tin trunk', the CMC/VRC will control this. The facilitator will teach the embedded literacy of poultry rearing rather than general words like 'rights'. The existing texts in the tin trunk can be used. This too can be self-sustaining after a time.

It may be argued that this is too ambitious for the CMCs/VRCs and literacy learning circles. We saw some CMCs/VRCs which are quite capable of managing this range of activities - for example at Chilimba and Chigonere, Simon and Katole, but not perhaps at Balamanja. But the resourcing and empowering of the CMC/VRC in this way is likely to attract a rather better membership than the reluctant nominees in parts of the present system.

The biggest obstacle to this new approach is the attitude of many within Malawi to the literacy learning circles - that illiterate women cannot make decisions and implement them. If we can get over this barrier, this REFLECT project can work.

For these will be true REFLECT projects. REFLECT insists that instead of other people choosing what development should be undertaken locally and what literacy the learners should learn, the learners should learn through keywords drawn from a development project which they have themselves chosen and are implementing. This is not being done at the moment in the Monkey Bay REFLECT Programme. Development is limited to community development (excluding both radical elements and livelihoods) and the action points are chosen and implemented by people who are not the literacy learners. The demand for livelihoods, so insistent now, is a call for the empowerment of the REFLECT circles, allowing them to make their own decisions about what form of development they wish to pursue. REFLECT should be reinstated: the circle members should be empowered to choose their own development project, assisted to implement it, and helped to learn the **literacy that goes with that project**, not decontextualised words. Unless that is done, the programme will continue as it is, barely effective enough to leave any lasting impression on the villages in which it operates.

## **OTHER PROPOSALS**

**Religious recruitment:** Care needs to be taken to ensure a balance of religious adherents are included in the circles.

**Written records and written accounts of the action points** should be required as well as reports on the literacy learning circles.

**Post-literacy:** I suggest that the term 'post-literacy' be replaced with some such phrase as 'community literacy centre' or 'reading centre'; and that writing be included in future plans for the promotion of literacy in the community.

**Other texts:** Every literacy learning circle should use a wide range of texts relating to the action point being undertaken by the circle.

**Mediation:** The non-literate circle members should be encouraged to engage in literacy activities relating to the action points through the mediation of others – e.g. offspring, other more skilled circle members, or others; they should not be excluded from such activities

**Children:** children in the circle meetings should not be regarded as a distraction but as a resource for learning literacy through the use of children's record notebooks.

**Credit and savings :** the provision of a credit and savings scheme should be considered and the circle members be encouraged to write the texts associated with such schemes.

**Incentives for facilitators** should be reconsidered and enhanced.

**Monthly report forms:** these need revision to ensure that the figures provided are accurate; a narrative report from the facilitator and/or circle participants would be more useful.

**Facilitator identity** should be enhanced in various ways and networks encouraged.

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## APPENDIX

### THIRTY POSSIBLE LITERACY ACTIVITIES FOR REFLECT CIRCLES IN MALAWI:

derived from a brainstorm with practitioners in Malawi ; many of these have been undertaken in groups in other countries.

1. writing involved in the programme itself – we found one or two CMCs/VRCs which kept agendas and minutes but most did not. We did not find any written record of the village meetings; we did not find any written records of the literacy circles except the register and the facilitator’s lesson book (not every facilitator kept one). What writing is done is done by the facilitator or the CMC/VRC secretary, not the literacy learners – this can be shared.
2. all the groups sang songs – but we did not find any facilitator writing down the words of these songs for the learners to read.
3. most of the circles started and finished with prayers – but again the opportunity to write these on the blackboard for the participants to learn was not taken
4. some circles played netball against other circles – written team lists, and written reports of the games can be done
5. some groups elsewhere have designed their own motto, badge or T-shirt logo with words: in the Monkey Bay REFLECT Programme, the CDAs are doing that for them. The participants can write their own.
6. elsewhere, literacy learning groups get the learners to talk about their life histories. These are then written up by the facilitator and the learners read their own words – which is what REFLECT is all about.
7. many groups write and read local histories of their own village – stories from the past
8. some groups get the learners to make up stories which are told and used for learning literacy.

**Stories:** One of the most exciting lessons I have ever attended took place in a coastal village in Tamil Nadu in the late 1970s. I planned to spend ten minutes in that circle before moving on to another – but I stopped for two hours. When I arrived, there were small groups all talking excitedly with lots of laughter. The facilitator told me that in their area, it was customary for women to tell each other stories they made up each evening, so she had asked them in four small groups to make up a story – “I simply told them, ‘Imagine you are a fish...’”, she said. The participants told their stories out loud: one was about avoiding being eaten by a big fish; another about being nearly caught by some men in a boat with a net; another about a big storm and diving down deep to get into calmer water; the fourth told about the coral the fish saw upon the bottom of the sea. Everyone was interested in every other story. As they told their stories, the facilitator wrote lots of key words on the blackboard – I noticed she spread them all over the board, she did not keep the words from one story in one part of the board. At the end of the stories and after discussion, she asked them in their groups to write down into their notebooks only the words from the board which related to their own stories – again there was much discussion about which words belonged to which stories as they were scattered across the blackboard. As she said to me while they were writing, “When they are at home, the words will remind them of their story and their story will remind them of the words”. This was true adult literacy learning in the REFLECT mould – using their own words to help them learn literacy. No moving from simple words to complex words, no breaking down into syllables, just learning to read their own words as they spoke them.

9. collecting the public texts which appear in the village and discussing them in the class (e.g. writings on house walls, notices, etc). They can be rewritten or new notices written.
10. in Yemen, the women make up and learn to write their own poems
11. books of recipes have been compiled by women's groups
12. in Sierra Leone, the groups have collected and written up local proverbs and sayings
13. many of these items have been produced in a small newsletter which the group writes and circulates round the village
14. in India, many villages have a blackboard newspaper outside the learning centre with members of the group writing up some item of news every day
15. in Nepal, mothers with small children keep a baby book in which they write the name, date of birth, weight, height, food etc of their children and show off with great pride
16. some women bring their children's school books into the literacy learning circle for others to share.
17. in Pakistan, every participant keeps a literacy corner in their homes in which they keep every bit of reading and writing material they can find, even scraps of newspapers used to wrap vegetables; each week they bring something into the class
18. some groups keep a journal of what they read, especially what they read to their children. In it, they also write what the children read out loud to them.
19. some groups have a group outing, say to Mangochi or even to Monkey Bay – and after talking about it, they write words from that visit which they choose
20. in Bangladesh, some groups run a small stationery shop, one of the group going into town once a month to buy notebooks, pencils, envelopes etc and selling these in the village; the group keeps a written record of the purchases, stock and sales.
21. in other groups, the women are helped to write the literacy associated with the birth of their child (registration), with marriage (every women is encouraged to get a certificate) and with a funeral.
22. some write about village ceremonies
23. many write real or imaginary letters
24. many take real bills into the class for examination, sometimes even rewriting them in simple language.
25. local politics often forms the basis for some writing – e.g. getting the women to design a poster for some election or other (for example, to a village committee); if there is a general election, the election material can be collected and discussed

26. in one programme in Pakistan, every learner has to have a 'buddy' who is not a group member and the participant teaches to the buddy what they have learned in the class session
27. many groups write about health matters, especially visits to hospitals.

*While I was in Malawi, the following article appeared in a local newspaper: if it also appeared in Chewa, it would form a great basis for discussion and reading, and then some writing:*

## 'Illiterate patients need help'

**BY AGNES MIZERE**

ILLITERATE patients and visitors are facing difficulties finding wards and treatment areas at Queen Elizabeth Central Hospital (QECH) in Blantyre unlike in the past.

The hospital used to use different colour lines to guide illiterate patients to their exact destination, but this changed 14 years ago.

QECH officials disclosed this last Friday when they received donated signs from Limbe Lions Club.

The hospital has been experiencing a high number of lost patients and visitors wandering about because they lacked clear directions.

"It is now easier for our clients to move around and identify where to be attended to. But illiterate patients also

need guidance," said Andrew Ngatane-Banda, the hospital's human resource management officer.

In reaction, Limbe Lions Club vice president John Kachitsa promised to look into the problem and revealed plans to have a colour map with directions on the premises.

"We noticed there weren't adequate signs in corridors.

So far, we have put up 46 out of a targeted 126. It's phase one of an on-going project," he said.

The club is one of 13 Lions clubs dedicated to helping the less privileged.

Besides visiting hospitals and making donations, the club has also participated in tree planting exercises, painting clinics and sponsoring some children in schools.

*Daily Times Mon. 14 April*

28. in India, one women's group learned reading (and writing) through a water pump manual which the village had been provided with along with the pump. Finding similar material in the village and bringing it into the learning circle can both motivate the learners and be an effective tool for learning.
29. The literacy learning circle itself can provide some occasions for writing – e.g. a written report of each meeting, of the discussions which (ought to) take place.
30. Even the facilitator's monthly report to the CDAs could be jointly written by the participants, not the facilitator.

*Note: It may be argued that 'illiterate' learners cannot do any of this. Experience proves that those who are non-literate can engage with all of these orally and that others will write down their words and then the learners can learn to read their own words. It can be done – because in every case it has been done.*