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# Learning your ABCDs: Asset-Based Community Development through Education Abroad and Community Engaged Research in Rural Malawi

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# Learning your ABCDs: Asset-Based Community Development through Education Abroad and Community Engaged Research in Rural Malawi

(a Binghamton University designated Academic Service Learning Project)

## Purpose of Project

The project is a partnership with the Malawi Children's Mission (MCM), a feeding center and primary school that provides health care and emotional support services to 150 children who have been orphaned and their families in the rural villages of M'bwana, Jamali, and Mwazama.

Asset-based community development (ABCD; Kretzman & McKnight, 1996) was used in the context of **community engaged research** to establish a **sustainable university-assisted component of MCM** through education abroad.

ABCD relies upon individual and collective strengths and resources of community members to address the problems they define as needing attention, and has been used successfully in sub-Saharan Africa (Yeneabat & Butterfield, 2012).

This project demonstrates how small scale community development informed by ABCD is an ethical and empowering approach that aims to reduce dependency on formal systems by using the talents and resources of the people to build a sense of hope and promote wellbeing and social and economic health.

**Binghamton University students and faculty took initial steps in ABCD during an education abroad trip to Malawi in 2016.**

## Who we Interviewed

Individual interviews with women of the M'bwana, Jamali, and Mwazama communities who are guardians (usually grandmothers or great-grandmothers) of children who have been orphaned (n=35)

Small group meetings with the village chiefs and sub-chiefs (n=10)

MCM professional staff and teachers (n=8)

Large community meetings open to all residents (approximately 350)

## Questions Asked

- 1) What is it like to raising children in your community, both good things and challenges?
- 2) What types of skills and talents do people who live here have?
- 3) Can you tell me about your experiences with MCM? How can MCM do better?
- 4) What do you think about the international visitors that come to MCM from America or Europe? Think about benefits or problems.
- 5) If a group of students from an American university came here what could they do that would be helpful?

## Significant Findings

### Theme 1: Trauma, Loss, and the Impact on Families and the Community

Sub-themes within this area included

- Traumatic losses impacting the whole family and the community:
 

"The children sometimes have no hope... Sometimes the only food they get is what they get here [at MCM]. There is the challenge of poverty. Their basic needs are not met; there is not enough food or clothes. Their home environment not conducive to thriving: there are no beds, they have leaking roofs."
- The special needs of families headed by older great-grandparents and guardians who were in poor health:
 

The village chiefs discussed the need to support those they referred to as "old-old grannies" who live in houses that are falling apart and have no means to repair them. The chiefs noted that these women need shelter "and everything else."
- Children's behavior and the role of MCM in supporting families:
 

Many custodial grandparents talked about the value of the support they received to develop new parenting skills from talking with MCM staff and appreciated the fact that the rules and values they enforced at home would be supported by MCM.

### Theme 2: Ambivalence about Organizations from Outside the Community, including International Aid Organizations

Within this theme, there were three subthemes:

- Entrepreneurship and thoughts about developing a collective business:
 

A grandmother talked about her interest in learning how to build a business and recognized that she needed initial financing and would also need education to know how to build a business into something profitable and sustainable.
- Trust among community members:
 

A child's guardian stated that with a group of community members she "doesn't know about the other members, doesn't know their heart. There are clever people who take advantage when they distribute money; they have a bad heart."
- Past problems with outside groups coming to help:
 

A grandmother talked about a group that "promised a bore hole, maize, mosquito netting, but [the group] didn't come back." Another said simply that, "there has been so many times when outside groups come and take names but nothing happens."

## Soap-Making Project

Issues related to poverty were clear, and several community members **indicated that they would like to start a business but had no capital.**

Their previous experience with selling at the market place had involved growing additional crops and selling the excess. In this period of draught, floods, and poor harvest, they did not have enough harvest to feed their own families much less have excess to sell at market.

In addition to food, all the women interviewed expressed that they needed shelter, which they indicated they can build for themselves if they had funds, **and soap**, which they could not afford.

As the **combined need for money and soap was presented in the context of a desire to build a business**, the PI began asking people (during interviews, casual conversations, and meetings) if anyone knew how to make soap (none did) and if they thought there would be a market for soap if they could make it (all did).

By the time of the meeting with the village chiefs, the idea of starting a soap making business was taking form and **garnered support from the chiefs.**

MCM leaders and staff reacted positively to the idea. At community meetings in each village, we discussed the idea about developing a soap-making business that would be run collectively by representatives from each of the three villages.

- Each village selected five women who would be part of the collective
- The PI taught the women how to make soap
- The MCM social worker supervises the project
- The men built a building so soap can be made safely
- **BU education abroad students and faculty provide professional development and support**

## Poverty and Related Issues in Malawi

Focus on collective strengths and social capital resources is crucial in Malawi as profound poverty, environmental concerns, and a long-lasting HIV epidemic paint a picture of devastation and need.

- Malawi was ranked as the world's poorest nation in 2017 as assessed by the per capita gross domestic product, which measures the size of a country's economy (Pasquali, 2017).
- Malawi has also been subjected to climate change related drought that led to a declared state of emergency in 2016 when both food supply (Aljazeera) and access to clean water (Onishi, 2016) were jeopardized.



## Women's Community Partnership

- ❖ First steps of a business



The men in the **community** lending support and sharing the **pride**

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