HOW PARTICIPATORY IS PARTICIPATION IN SOCIAL FUNDS? AN ANALYSIS OF THREE CASE STUDIES FROM THE MALAWI SOCIAL ACTION FUND, (MASAF).

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"Elite is used here to describe those rural people who are less poor and more influential. They typically include progressive farmers, village leaders, headmen, traders, religious leaders, teachers, and paraprofessionals…It is they who receive and speak to the visitors; they who articulate "the village's interests and wishes; their concerns which emerge as 'the village's' priorities for development." Robert Chambers, Rural Development, Putting the Last First*, (1983:18)*

*"The poor are often inconspicuous, inarticulate and unorganised. Their voices may not be heard at public meetings in communities where it is customary for only the big men to put their views. It is rare to find a body or institution that adequately represents the poor in a certain community or area. Outsiders and government officials invariably find it more profitable and congenial to converse with local influentials than with the uncommunicative poor." Paul Devitt, '*Notes on Poverty Oriented Rural Development*', (1977:23)*

Introduction.

Community participation in development projects has recently emerged as one of the dominant approaches to poverty reduction strategies[2]. One of the increasingly popular anti-poverty instruments to emerge in recent years which prides itself for embracing the virtues of community participation has been Social Funds (SFs). In one most recent review of this new anti-poverty instrument, community participation is singled out as a major factor explaining the 'success' of SFs, and refutes the doubts about their ability to reach the poor, both at the geographical and household levels (Rawlings et al., 2001).

However, demand-driven mechanisms like SFs that rely on communities to define investment priorities and implement them have been questioned regarding their ability to represent the views of, and reach, the poor, particularly the poorest of the poor. As such, despite their community participation rhetoric, SFs, like other similar demand-driven programmes, might not work well in environments with disparities in power, and may possibly be detrimental to poor communities. Further questions have also been asked about how demand-driven SFs are in reality, both in terms of the participatory aspects and outcomes of community consultations (Devereux, 2002). By placing special emphasis on a set projects menu and strict eligibility criteria, SFs have

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[2] Tracing its origins to the perceived failure of previous technocratic and top-down development initiatives, the new community participation approach claims to represent a shift of initiative by reversing the agents for initiating action from outside agents to the beneficiaries themselves. There are a host of benefits attributed to the community participation approach, ranging from enhanced efficiency and effectiveness, sustainability of development interventions and the promotion of the processes of democratisation and empowerment (Cleaver, 2001). For a more detailed review of the arguments in favour of community participation, see Chambers R., **Rural Development: Putting the Last First**, Essex:Longman; Chambers R. and Pretty J. (1993), "Towards a Learning Paradigm: New Professionalism and Institutions for Agriculture", **IDS Discussion Paper 334**, Brighton:IDS; Chambers R., (1997)**Whose reality Counts? Putting the First Last**, London:ITDG. The volume edited by Cooke B. and Kothari U. (2001), **Participation: The New Tyranny**, also has a number of chapters that offer reviews of the benefits associated with community participation in development initiatives.

also been criticised for promoting a specific set of projects. Where the priorities and needs of the poor have not fitted into such categories, they have not been funded, raising further questions about their demand-driven nature.

The majority of the evaluations looking at community participation in SFs have however tended to generalise about the nature of community participation. As a result, there does not appear to be an adequate analysis of the participatory process itself to assess the depth and scope of community participation and whether such participation can generate the benefits associated with the new approach. This paper attempts to contribute to this existing knowledge gap by analysing the nature and type of community participation in three Social Fund projects from Mangochi district of southern Malawi[3].

What is 'community participation'?

To get a fuller understanding of the participatory processes in Social Funds, it is necessary to have a good understanding of what "community participation" means. While there appears to be a general agreement in the literature that the word community refers to a "specific group of people with shared interests living in a defined geographic area" (Schmidt et al., 1989:346), the word 'participation' on the other hand, presents a number of difficulties in terms of its definition. White et al.'s (1994:16) imagery of participation as "kaleidoscopic", is perhaps most illustrative of the variety and diversity in these definitions, which, "just like the momentary image in the kaleidoscope, can be very fragile and elusive, changing from one moment to another".

This diversity of definitions notwithstanding, it is still possible to pick out a number of common threads around the participation concept. The first thread is that participation involves the *active* involvement of the project beneficiaries in identifying, planning, implementing, managing and evaluating projects (Rifkin 1985, Bamberger, 1991, Pretty, 1996). Active here suggests that local people are actively involved in influencing and sharing control over initiatives and decisions that affect them and not only brought in to legitimate the process of participation while still remaining silent and passive contributors

The second thread is that participation involves *choice*. Participation here, in the words of Rifkin (1985), implies "the right and responsibility of people to make choices and therefore, explicitly or implicitly, to have power over decisions which affect their lives". There is a linkage with the previous thread of *active* involvement here in that the type of participation where beneficiaries are simply informed of a decision already made for them does not entail choice, and hence, is not participatory.

Thirdly, both active involvement and choice require that there must exist opportunities of making the choices of the local people *effective* thus giving them

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[3] The choice of Mangochi, one of Malawi's 29 districts, was made for its accessibility to the author given the time constraints for the study. The choice of the three case studies is however purposive, and includes one example of each of the three types of projects supported by the Malawi Social Action Fund, MASAF, namely Community Sub Projects (CSPs), Sponsored Sub projects (SSPs) and Public Works Programmes (PWPs).

control of the project as well as empowering them to undertake it should they wish. This suggests that there should also be mechanisms in the participatory process to allow the choices made by local communities to be implemented.

From these three threads, it is therefore possible to present a definition of community participation as:

> *"The active involvement of local communities in development initiatives, where specified groups, sharing the same interests or living in a defined geographic area, actively pursue the identification of their needs and establish mechanisms to make their choice effective."*

However participation can take different forms and varying degrees, ranging from what has been has been termed as '*genuine participation*' (White et al. 1994), or '*self mobilisation*' (Pretty, 1994). Here, local communities are active participants and are empowered to retain control at all levels of the development process. On the other end of the scale is placed what has been variously described as '*passive*' participation (Rifkin, 1985); '*tokenism*' (Hart, 1992); '*manipulated*' participation (Bordenave (1994) or '*pseudo*' participation (White et al., (1994). This is the minimal type of participation, whereby control of the project and decision making power rests with planners, administrators and the community's elite, the extent of people's participation being that of passive listeners to what is being planned for them.

Pretty's (1994) framework of the participation ladder (Box 1), also referred to as the participation typology, which positions participation on a seven-step ladder, is very useful in analysing these varying degrees of participation. The top tier of the ladder represents the narrowest type of community participation. The other steps in the middle represent a gradual widening of the participatory space, with the seventh and lowest rung on the ladder representing the highest level of community participation.

Box 1. The Participation Ladder.

Typology	Characteristics
1. Passive Participation	People participate by being told what is going to happen or has already happened. It is a unilateral announcement by an administration of project management without listening to people's responses.
2. Participation in Information Giving	People participate by answering questions posed by extractive researchers using questionnaire surveys or similar approaches. People do not have the opportunity to influence proceedings, and research findings are neither shared nor checked for accuracy.
3. Participation by Consultation	People participate by being consulted or answering questions, and external people listen to views. These external professionals define both problems and solutions, and may modify these in the light of people's responses. Such a consultative process does not concede any share in decision-making and professionals are under no obligation to take on board people's views.
4. Participation for Material Incentives	People participate by providing resources, such as labour, in return for food, cash and other material incentives. However, the people have no stake in prolonging activities when the incentives end.
5. Functional Participation	People participate by forming groups to meet predetermined objectives related to the project. Such involvement does not tend to be at early stages of project cycles or planning, but rather after major decisions have already been made. These institutions tend to be dependent on external initiators and facilitators, but may become self-dependent.
6. Interactive Participation	People participate in joint analysis, which leads to action plans and the formation of new local institutions or the strengthening of existing ones. Participation is seen as a right, and not just a means to achieve project goals. These groups take control over local decisions, and so people have a stake in maintaining structures.
7. **Self-Mobilisation**	People participate by taking initiatives independent of external institutions to change systems. They develop contacts with external institutions for resources and technical advice they need, but retain control over how resources are used.

Adapted from Pretty, (1994, 1996), Pimbert and Pretty, (1995).

Social Funds and Community Participation.

Social Funds (SFs) are defined by the World Bank as:

> "Agencies that finance small projects in several sectors targeted to benefit a country's poor and vulnerable groups based on a participatory manner of demand generated by local groups and screened against a set of eligibility criteria…They operate as second tier agencies in that they appraise, finance and supervise implementation of social investments identified and executed by a wide range of actors, including local governments, NGOs, local offices of line ministries and community groups…."[4]

Falling under a broad framework of poverty reduction, SFs support a strategy that has three core components: promotion of broad-based economic growth; investment in human capital; and social safety nets for vulnerable groups. In terms of focus and activity, SFs provide support for a wide range of community projects, primarily investing in basic social and economic infrastructure with the added goal of community development and acting as a safety net scheme in times of hardship, using ways that are "decentralised, demand driven, participatory, low cost, and fast-disbursing" (Tendler and Serrano, 1999).

Although still a relatively new approach, SFs now account for a growing share of the portfolio in the social protection and human development areas, attracting about nine percent of the World Bank's Programme of Targeted Interventions (TPIs), whose main objective is to channel resources to help reduce poverty and improve the living conditions of the poor (Owen and van Domelen, 1998). As of May 2001, there were a total of 98 ongoing SF projects in 58 countries, costing an estimated $3.5 billion. With donor and government co-financing included, SFs have attracted nearly US$ 9 billion in investments since their inception in 1987, principally from the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank, and the European Union, (World Bank, 2001). Figure 1 below summarises the trends in SFs investments between the years 1988 and 2000:

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[4] Rawlings et al., (2001:1).

Figure 1: Trends in Social Fund Investments, 1988 - 2000[5]
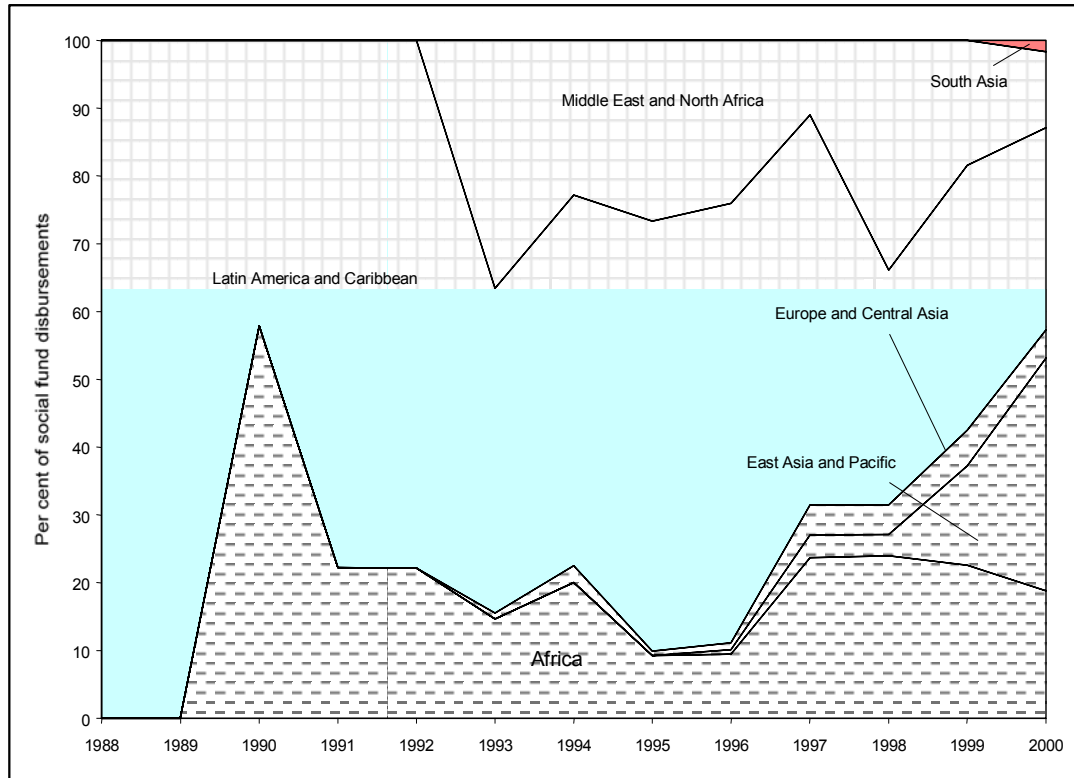
As Figure 1 above shows, the earliest Social Funds were entirely located in Latin America. Prominent among these were the first three phases of Bolivian Emergency Social Funds, launched in 1987, 1988 and 1990 respectively, whose principle aim was addressing the 'emergency' of the increased poverty that economic adjustment and reform programmes were imposing on the poorest groups. However, as the 1980s drew to a close, SFs began to spread beyond Latin America, with Africa becoming the next continent to benefit. While more Latin American countries, such as Sao Tome and Principe (Multi Sector Project, 1989), Nicaragua (Social Investment Funds, 1993), began to implement their own SFs, a number of African countries also started to initiate SF programmes. Among the earliest African countries to implement SFs were; Guinea (Socio-Economic Support Project, 1989), Egypt (Emergency Social Fund, I, 1991) Zambia (Social Recovery Project, phases 1 and 2, 1991 and 1995), and Mali (Public Works and Capacity Building Project, 1992).

By the mid 1990s, SFs had been introduced in the Middle East and North African countries, including Algeria (1996), Morocco (1996), the West Bank (1997), Yemen (1997). In the later part of the 1990s, SFs had spread to a number of European, East and Central Asian and Pacific countries, among them, Tajikistan, Turkey, Thailand and Uzbekistan. By the close of the 1990s, a number of South Asian countries, among them Sri Lanka, had also introduced their own SF projects.

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[5] This graph is adapted from a public lecture on Social Funds by Howard White of the Insitute of development Studies (IDS), University of Sussex, at the University of London, in November 2001.

The Malawi Social Action Fund, (MASAF).

The Malawi Social Action Fund (MASAF) was established in 1995 as part of broad based poverty-alleviation initiative adopted by a new democratic government which came to power in 1994. Linking Malawi's widespread and deeply entrenched poverty[6] to decades of top-down policies under the 'life' presidency of Hastings Banda, the United Democratic Front (UDF) government, which came to power in 1994, adopted what it characterised as a 'community-led and partnership-driven' policy approach in its poverty alleviation efforts, of which MASAF forms a central pillar.

To date, there have been two phases of MASAF. The first phase, MASAF I, ran for three years from 1995 to 1998, and received US$56 million in funding from the World Bank and a further $2.9 million from the Malawi government. A second phase, MASAF II, running from 1999 to May 2003, received US$ 66 million from the World Bank Negotiations are currently underway for a third phase which is expected to run for a period of ten years.

MASAF undertakes three categories of projects. The first category is the Community sub-Projects (CSPs). This component provides financial and technical support for programmes that target the creation of community assets. These include construction and rehabilitation of primary schools, secondary schools and health facilities; rehabilitation and construction of economic infrastructure, such as markets, small scale water supplies, storm drainages and sanitation subprojects; and the construction and pavement of access roads and construction of bridges[7].

The second type of project under MASAF is Public Works Programmes, (PWPs). This is a safety net scheme, aimed at helping poor and vulnerable individuals, households and communities by supporting programmes of labour-intensive construction activities. PWPs create employment opportunities at the minimum wage to provide self-targeting individuals who have no alternative income opportunities. Projects under this component include construction, rehabilitation and maintenance of economic infrastructure, such as rural access roads, rainwater-harvesting structures, improved natural resource management through afforestation and terracing.

Since 1998, MASAF has also introduced a third component, the Sponsored Sub-Projects (SSPs). This component specifically aims to get resources and support for programmes targeted at marginalized groups through agencies already working with them. Projects under this component include support for orphan projects, programmes targeted at tackling the AIDS pandemic and support for organisations working with people with disabilities. Table 1 gives a summary of the projects that have been undertaken under MASAF phases 1 and 2:

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[6] According to a recent Integrated Household Survey and Poverty Analysis, 65 percent of Malawi's estimated 10 million people live below the national poverty line, (NSO, 1998, Zomba
[7] The building of health centres was suspended in 1998 because government was unable to guarantee provision of personnel for most of the new health centres built by MASAF (van Donge et al., 2001)

Table 1.   Projects Under MASAF I and II as of November 30, 2002.

COMPONENT	MASAF I	MASAF II	TOTAL	AMOUNT (Malawi Kwacha, MK)
Community Sub-Projects	1372	2185	3557	3,337,413,671.05
Public Works Programmes	477	378	855	1,117,796,596.23
Sponsored Sub-Projects	-	158	158	88,106,694.31
GRAND TOTAL	**1849**	**2748**	**4597**	**4,543,316,951.59**

Source: Malawi Social Action Fund Supplement, **Nation Newspaper**, December 14-15, 2002.

'Community Participation' in MASAF projects.

Working under the motto of "The People's Fund for Community Development", the Malawi Social Action Fund claims to create "a new approach to community development by providing communities with opportunities to *actively* and *effectively* participate in the identification, preparation, and implementation of their own development projects..." (MASAF, 1999:7, my emphasis). This emphasis on community participation has led to MASAF being hailed as a model of community participation (Box 3).

> **Box 2: Community Participation in MASAF**
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> In Malawi, the Social Fund begins with the formation of a community project committee (CPC) that is responsible for preparing, managing and supervising project activities and serves as an intermediary between the community as a whole and MASAF. The process begins with an *open community* meeting to discuss priority needs and problems and to *identify a priority project*...Once the community chooses a project, it elects a Project Management Committee, PMC. An application form is completed that contains details of the project-types and funding requested. It includes a description of the participatory process followed during preparation. Following project appraisal and approval, MASAF provides four days of training in the district headquarters to members of the PMC..."
>
> Parker and Serrano, (2000:15).

Community participation in MASAF is said to take the form of "active" local community involvement in "*decision making at all stages of the project cycle, which includes project identification and preparation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation, and maintenance of completed projects,*" (MASAF, 1999:2, my emphasis). In pursuing these participatory and inclusive goals, communities requesting MASAF assistance are supposed to "take steps to ensure that *all* members of the community participate fully at all the stages of the project implementation cycle. People *from all the areas* that will make direct use of the project should be included as the community," (MASAF, 1999:10, my emphasis). However, despite its claims to being a very participatory anti-poverty instrument, no detailed analysis has

ever been taken to look at the scope of community participation in MASAF (van Donge et al., 2001). It was with this in mind that we undertook fieldwork to look at the nature of participation in three MASAF projects in Mangochi district of southern Malawi between May and June 2002.

The Three Case Studies.

The first project in this study is the Chilipa Community Day Secondary School (CDSS), located 60 kilometres from Mangochi District Headquarters. The project documents indicate that this project benefits a total of 9,500 people, the total population of the six villages that the school is supposed to serve. The MASAF project, which was initiated in 1997, has three components: construction of a two-classroom block, which is at finishing level; construction of two teachers houses, one that has already been finished and the other in the final stages of completion. The third component is the drilling of a borehole at the school, which has already been completed. This project, which comes under MASAF's Community Sub-Projects component, received a total funding of MK1,460,164.

The second project reviewed is the Ngao School for orphans, which falls under the Sponsored Sub-Projects component of MASAF. While MASAF has provided funding totalling MK746,000 a local Non-Governmental Organisation, the Namwera Aids Action Committee (NACC), has been MASAF's partner in coordinating the project. The project, which was launched in 2001, involves the construction of a two-classroom block, which is currently at roofing level. The school caters for children between the ages of two and six who have lost one or both parents to AIDS[8] from four villages - Ngao, Iputi Sutula, and Malulu. At the time of the study, there were 84 pupils in the school, 66 of whom were orphans, with the rest as 'fee-paying' pupils.

The third project, which comes under MASAF's Public Works Programme, was the construction of a 21 kilometre rural road linking Mbaluku and Nalikolo. The project, which received MK 1.95 million in funding, was expected to generate employment opportunities to self-selecting members of the local communities in three villages through which the road passes. On paper, this project is complete, although we found on our visit that two key bridges on the road had not been constructed, rendering the road unusable to the extent that it is now overgrown with bushes

Community Participation in Practice.

Using a combination of semi-structured interviews with key personnel in the communities themselves, MASAF headquarters in Lilongwe and at the MASAF Liwonde Zone (which covers Mangochi district), and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) in the three communities, we analysed the extent of community participation in five phases of the project cycle, namely, needs assessment and project selection, planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation and maintenance.

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[8] Malawi, like most Southern African countries, has been hard hit by the HIV/AIDS epidemic. An estimated 19 % of the country's 10 million people is estimated to be living with HIV/AIDS according to the latest UN-AIDS figures.

Needs Assessment and Project Selection.

MASAF argues that one of the crucial design principles in its projects is that "communities must play a key role in the identification...of activities" (MASAF, 1999:7, 10). However, our findings suggest that the local communities in all the three projects played very little and limited roles in the needs assessment and project selection phases that their role cannot qualify as being 'key' to the subsequent decisions to choose the projects undertaken.

This low level of community engagement in the needs assessment and project selection phase was particularly evident in the Chilipa project, where the consultation process did not take place at an open community forum, as Parker and Serrano (Box 2) suggest, but, at "a meeting of traditional, political leaders and religious leaders, convened by the Chilipa School Committee," as the application form freely admits. This contradicts MASAF's claims that "*all* members of the community participate fully" in the needs assessment and project selection stage and that these should include "people from all the areas that will make direct use of the project". Given the limited scope for community consultation, it is perhaps not surprising that the school committee heavily influenced the agenda of the meeting. As the meeting's minutes, which were attached to the application form to MASAF, note, the school committee chairperson, went " straight to outline the topic of the gathering", "pointing out problems faced by the school, such as insufficient classrooms, teachers houses…as possible projects to seek funding for." As a result, what ended up being adopted as a community project was in reality a priority project not for the geographical Chilipa community, but that of the school committee.

These minimal levels of community consultation are also reflected in the Ngao orphan school project. As in the Chilipa project, the needs assessment and project selection phase did not take place in an open community forum, but, according to Ngao Village Headman's Counsellor, at the Village Development Committee (VDC)[9] level. Although in theory the involvement of the VDC, whose members are supposed to be elected by the wider village community, should have provided some scope for the community to influence this crucial phase of the project, albeit in an indirect manner. However, the community in-put through this body would appear to have been very minimal at best. Instead, the Namwera Aids Action Committee (NACC) is reported to have made its own "independent assessments of the needs for orphans in the Ngawo area" and "identified the orphan school as the most pressing of these needs". The meeting with the VDC was thus limited to informing and getting the community to endorse what the NACC had already identified as the community's needs, in a manner that is not any different from the top-down manner which SFs claim to be an antithesis of. However, it is worthy pointing out that once the decision to introduce an Orphan School had been made, this *did* create a need for a decent school infrastructure for the project which is currently using a grass-thatched shack to temporarily house the school.

Of the three projects, only the Mbaluku project would appear to have been responding to what was an expressed community need. A number of people interviewed,

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[9] The Village Development Committee (VDC) is the lowest body in the government's development trajectory, which starts with the National Development Committee at the top, moving down to the regional, district, area, and then the VDC.

including the FGD participants, did point out that the issue of the need for an access road linking Mbaluku and Nalikolo villages had been brought up at previous community and political meetings. However, once the need for as road had been expressed, the area's traditional leaders, working together with their Member of Parliament, took it upon themselves to classify this as a top priority need, without consulting with the community. This culminated in the MP approaching MASAF to seek funding for the project on his own. So although the project, might have been responding to an expressed community need, its selection was done in a top-down manner, with very little evidence of community consultation. This in turn highlights the probability that MASAF projects are open to capture by influential elites, especially politicians, who might use them to advance their own political agenda.

In summary, our findings found very little evidence to support the claims that project communities take a 'key' role in the needs assessment and project selection stage. At most, the level of community participation in the three projects was limited to being informed what had already been decided by other players in the form of the school committee and the traditional leaders (Chilipa), the Namwera Aids Action Committee (Ngao) and the Member of Parliament in the Mbaluku-Nalikolo project. The type of participation in the Chilipa and Ngao projects, where none of the community members were given space to actively engage and contribute to the needs identification process would seem to fit into the first category of "passive participation." With regard to the Mbaluku -Nalikolo road project, there is some evidence that the communities were consulted in previous forums about their needs, of which the road construction was one. However, the people were not consulted in defining solutions to their problems, only to be told by their Member of Parliament about the new road construction. On the participation typology, this would rank into the third category, that of participation by consultation.

Project Planning.

The second phase at which communities are supposed to take a direct and active part is during project-planning. In all the three cases, however, the findings revealed that communities generally consider project planning to be the responsibility of service providers, particularly government, or that at the very least, it was the responsibility of the Project Management Committees (PMCs) or the implementing NGOs. As a result, the community members in the three projects sought no direct or active role for themselves at this stage. Instead, the PMCs, to the extent that they represented the project communities, provided a form of indirect community participation at the planning phase of the three projects. However, the selection of membership to these PMCs does yet again expose the limited nature of community participation. While MASAF procedures suggest that the PMCs are to be chosen at open community meetings through popular and democratic procedures, this was not the case in all the three projects.

In the Chilipa project, the PMC selection was left entirely in the hands of the village headmen. These traditional leaders, according to the PMC chair, were each "asked to nominate a trustworthy person in their villages to be included in the PMC." In the Ngao project, the selection of the project Support Committee, (PSC), is said to have been dictated by Namwera Aids Action Committee, who not only imposed its Ngao Village Aids Action Committee to double as the PSC, but also seconded its

chairperson to assume the role of PSC chair. According to the NAAC administrator, this was done "to avoid management problems which are likely to arise if local people are left to manage the project and handle cash." A similar top-down decision-making in the selection of the project committee was also evident in the Mbaluku road project, where United Democratic Front party area committee also doubled as the PMC. Even this party-dominated committee also played a very limited role in the project planning, which was instead left in the hands of technical personnel from the District Roads Improvement Programme (DRIMP).

The limited nature of community involvement in the project-planning phase of MASAF projects is perhaps best illustrated during the course of project budgeting. If communities are directly and actively involved in project planning, designing and budgeting for projects, then it would seem natural to expect different varieties of projects being undertaken with different budgets that would also take into account the cost of materials in individual areas. However, the general evidence from MASAF, as van Donge et al., (2001) found out, is that projects tend to have a distinctive design characteristic and shape, while at the same time attracting what can be considered uniform or standardised funding. A closer analysis of MASAF funding in Mangochi district would also appear to support this observation. The Chilipa project category, which covers the construction of a single two-classroom block, two teachers houses, 64 desks and one borehole, all receive a uniform funding of MK1,460,164. Of the total of 25 projects in the education sector in the district, ten have received exactly this amount of funding, with a similar number receiving just about double this amount (MK3,645,761.45) with double the infrastructure being constructed. Similar observations also emerge from the water projects in the district, with 28 communities with two borehole projects all receiving identical sums of MK 649,138.42.

The general acceptance by the community members in all the three projects that there is very little role for them in the planning phase suggests that despite the rhetoric of community participation, it is very difficult and perhaps unlikely, that community members, due to their actual and self-perceived lack of technical skills, can play a a direct, active and influential role at the planning phase. At best, the highest level of their input at this stage can largely be indirect, working through the PMCs who receive some basic planning and technical training from MASAF. However, our findings reveal that even this form of indirect participation was very limited because of the less-than participatory nature of the selection of all the three Project Management Committees. In addition, the standardisation of funding of the majority of MASAF projects, suggests that the role of the organs, which ostensibly represent the local communities - the PMCs- play a limited role in the budgetary processes of the planning which appear to be predetermined by MASAF.

Project Implementation.

This is perhaps the part of the project cycle that the majority of the community members participated. In the Chilipa and Ngao schools projects, community participation took the form of moulding bricks, gathering stones and sand to the project sites and supplying water.

However, in both these projects, the nature of community involvement would appear to exhibit the traits of coercion. In Chilpa, we observed a high level of reluctance by the majority of the community members to freely contribute to the project. This resulted in the traditional and political leadership threatening unspecified sanctions against members who were evading work on the project. Ironically, this reluctance would appear to have stemmed from the fact that the project was not addressing what was considered by many as the community's priority need, a view which was put forcefully by village headman Chilpa himself, when he said:

> "…one of the contributory factors to the very low levels of community contributions in the [school] project was "*umphawi*", poverty. If we had a project addressing this need first, people would have been freed from the pressure that forces them not to participate because they are trying to earn some money so that they can eat."

In this case, we see that by addressing a need that was not considered a priority in the village, participation posed a significant cost to the poorest of the poor, clashing with activities that would contribute to their well being.

Community contributions to the Ngao project was also highest at this stage of the project cycle, with the community members moulding bricks and ferrying stones and sand to the building site. However, signs of general reluctance to participate without monetary rewards are also identifiable here. According to the Ngao village headman's counsellor, a number of people were reported to have avoided working on the project altogether, citing the reason that "because it was free", their time would be better spent by pursing other "more productive activities." In order to get as many community members to participate in the project, the traditional leaders, working with the ruling UDF party stalwarts, had to threaten people with ostracism and eviction.

While the two projects at Chilpa and Ngao struggled to get people involved, the Mbaluku-Nalikolo road project had too many people offering their labour for a very limited number of places. Participants in this project were paid a minimum daily wage of MK 15, to do the earthwork. Although the high number of people willing to take part would suggest a very high level of community commitment and willingness to work, this enthusiasm is closely tied to the project's ability to give its workers a monetary wage. This observation came across in the FGDs where it was pointed out that "there is nobody in this community who can maintain the road without getting paid…the government should hire us again and pay us to maintain it in future…" This suggests that the participation is closely tied to the monetary incentive, without which the participants have no stake in prolonging the project.

The project implementation stage is therefore the only phase that community participation can be said to have been at its widest point, placing all our three projects on the fourth ladder on the participation typology, that of participation through the contribution of labour for material incentives. In the Chilpa and Ngao cases, the main incentive was to avoid some form of unspecified community sanctions. In the Nalikolo project, the introduction of the cash incentive appears to have been the main motivating factor for community participation.

Monitoring and Evaluation.

In the MASAF structure, the scope of involvement in project monitoring and evaluation for the community is said to exist in the space created by the requirement that Project Management Committees (PMCs) should "report to the community on the general progress of the project". However, our study findings reveal yet again the limited scope that exists in reality.

In the Chilipa project, the committee has not been reporting to the geographical Chilipa community which is said to benefit from the project. Instead, it has been reporting to the Secondary School's committee. In the words of Village Headman Chilipa, "the PMC does not work directly with the communities.... the school committee acts as an agent between the PMC and the project community." Only three such feedback meetings between the PMC and the school committee are reported to have taken place in the three-year life of the project. In the Ngao project, the Project Support Committee, according to the NACC Coordinator, "made no consultations with the community on progress of the project". This, coupled with the decision of the implementing NGO not to involve the community in any planning and management decisions, would appear to have further narrowed the scope for community participation. In both cases, this would, in my view, qualify this very limited and restricted form of community participation to the lowest rung on the ladder, that of passive participation.

The Mbaluku-Nalikolo road project would also appear to have similar and very narrow spaces for community participation in monitoring and evaluation. Here too, the PMC is reported to have made no effort to give feedback to the community members, although the project's chairperson pointed out that the committee was always willing to do so on request. Despite the fact that the project has on paper been finished and yet no community member has taken the initiative to question the Committee why the two bridges on the road are yet to be built. This, above everything, perhaps highlights the limited opportunities for the community to play an active monitoring role. This is especially relevant when one takes into account the fact that funding for the project included money specifically set aside for the construction of the bridges which might however have been corruptly misappropriated. That none of our interviewees or FGD participants knew anything about what had happened to the money meant for the bridge therefore, at the very least, suggests a reluctance by the community to utilise whatever spaces exist for engagement with their Project Committee. This absence of space for the community to make any active contributions, or influence the choice of the project's direction would seem to me to position it also on the first rung on the participation ladder.

Maintenance.

It was not possible to fully assess the nature of community involvement in the maintenance of the three projects, as they were all in the final stages of completion. However, it is still possible to make a number of observations on this aspect, judging by the nature of community participation in the earlier phases. Firstly, one of the claims from MASAF (1999) and the general pro-SF literature is that community involvement in project maintenance arises from the community's identification with the project due to their involvement in the initial phases, especially at the needs

assessment and priority setting stages and at the implementation phase. However, given that our findings show that the communities in all the three project areas have not been actively involved in the crucial needs identification and project selection stages, and that their involvement during implementation was mostly coerced, it is difficult to envisage any of the communities identifying closely with the projects.

When asked about what they perceived to be their role in the maintenance of the project once it is finished, the general consensus in Chilipa was that the school committee would assume overall responsibility over maintenance, while in Ngao, this role is expected to be undertaken by the Village Aids Action committee. In the Mbaluku road project, as we have already seen, the community members see the responsibility of resurfacing the road as belonging to the government, although they still envisage a role for themselves as hired wage labourers.

These findings would appear to confirm those of Van Donge et al (2001), where the authors surmise that overall, "there is very limited evidence of community involvement at the maintenance and post-funding phases of the projects". Although community participation in SF activities is presented as a way of increasing the likelihood of the project's success, the future, whether good or bad, of our three projects, once completed, can not be said to be very good indicators of the outcomes of community participation, which we have found to be consistently very limited.

Looking at the high levels of poverty in the three communities, as is generally typical of rural Malawi, it is also possible to argue that even if the communities were able to identify and relate more to the projects, they might not have the capacity or the means to maintain projects on their own in future. This is perhaps illustrated vividly in the Ngao project. Considering the shack that is currently being used as an orphan school, one wonders whether this community can have the capacity to maintain the type of structure being built by MASAF on their own.

What is 'Community Participation' in Participation in the Three Projects?

Based on our findings and observations, we have tabulated the levels of community participation at each of the five stages of the projects' cycle in **Table 3** below:

Table 3: Community Participation in the Three Projects.

Phase/ Project	Needs assessment and project selection	Project Planning	Implementation	Evaluation and Monitoring	Maintenance
Chilipa Project	Passive (rung 1)	Passive (rung 1)	Participation for Material Incentives (rung 4)	Participation in Information Giving (2)	--
Ngao	Passive (1)	Passive (rung 1)	Participation for Material Incentives (rung 4)	Passive (1)	--
Mbaluku / Nalikolo	Participation by consultation (rung 3)	Passive (rung 1)	Participation for Material Incentives (rung 4)	Participation in Information Giving(2)	--

Omitting the score ranking for the maintenance stage, and with the exception of the implementation stage, the degree of participation in the majority phases of the three projects is more of the narrowest form of community participation on the participation ladder. In other words, the people have not been active participants involved in influencing and sharing control over the development initiatives, but have been brought in merely to legitimate the process of participation while still remaining silent and passive contributors. This passive participation fails to satisfy the three key attributes of our definitions of participation, namely, active involvement, the existence of choice as well as the possibility of making the choices effective. Although this limited form of participation still represents a shift towards giving community members some indication on what is being done for them, it cannot be said to differ significantly from the top-down government driven initiatives of the past. Instead of the government and other outside bureaucrats dictating the needs of the community and suggesting the types of projects to be undertaken, the approach in the majority of the project cycles has been to substitute these far-away and invisible government bureaucrats with local 'experts' in the name of the Community Secondary school committee, the Namwera Aids Action Committee, the political leaders, and, to a lesser extent, the traditional leaders. These emergent local 'experts' have only made the minimum of efforts to dialogue with the community. This type of 'passive' participation, where local communities are only used as passive participants, is what Pimbert and Pretty, (1998) have argued can neither achieve "any of the benefits arising from participation" nor have any "lasting impacts on people's lives."

It is therefore perhaps not surprising that these very *tokenist* levels of community participation have failed to generate one of the main benefits attributed to community participation, that of making projects relevant and responsive to community needs (Table 2). In both the Chilipa and Ngao communities, the MASAF projects did not even feature among what were considered the top five community needs. Instead, the general sentiment was that MASAF's Public Works Component were the option that could have contributed more to addressing some of the community's most pressing needs, namely income poverty. This also serves to show that what constitutes 'community' voice in the MASAF approach, might satisfy one half of what the term 'community actually means – one which has a direct interest in the project at the expense of the geographic community. Where the geographic community is bigger than the interested community, then the project can only benefit a very small group while at worst, sidelining and perhaps hurting the majority.

In the one case where the project did respond to one of the expressed community needs, vis-à-vis the Mbaluku-Nalikolo road project, we find that the monetary incentive has taken precedence over the community's desire to overcome its problems. This is perhaps why there is still no bridge across the Ntubwiza river[10] making the road unusable. Consequently, the project has failed to address the need that it was designed for - improving road access between Mbaluku and Nalikolo villages. The fact that none of the 'community' members have queried MASAF or government officials about the status of the bridges perhaps highlights one of the dilemmas of community participation as an anti-poverty approach in areas of high incidences of poverty. In this case, the monetary incentive has displaced the main and

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[10] The absence of a bridge across Ntubwiza river means that the only way to cross is to wade through the shoulder-deep waters. With the added risk of crocodile attacks, it is perhaps not surprising that nobody wants to use this road until the bridge is constructed.

initial purpose of the project: to improve road communication between the two villages. Instead, there appears to be a general community satisfaction that their participation generated some monetary benefits even if this did not address what was considered the most pressing need in the first instance. To the extent that the project has created a sense of community dependency, this project can be said to have failed to empower the local communities to undertake development on their initiative, contradicting one of the long-term benefits attributed to community participation.

Because the input from the local community, and especially from the poorest members of the community, was missing at the earliest stages, the three projects have all failed to respond to what the communities themselves perceived as their priority needs. In both the Chilipa and Ngao cases, the choice of projects, which were not considered priority needs, contributed to problems with general community participation, resulting in non-voluntary and coerced community contributions. These forms of coerced participation would also seem to have exacted high opportunity costs especially for the poorest members of the community, who had to forgo the option of pursuing the more pressing needs of undertaking an activity elsewhere to generate income for '*nsima*', their meal. This finding raises an important implication with regard to the objective of Social Funds to specifically target the participation of the poorest members of the community, which fails to take into account the implications on the poor people's well-being.

However, perhaps our most important finding in this study is that what is labelled as community participation in MASAF projects does not appear to us to be satisfying the attributes of 'citizenship' engagement in the policy places, as there were very few and exceedingly limited spaces, for the local communities to participate actively in the various stages of the project cycle. Nor do we find any strong evidence to suggest that the nature of community involvement in all our three projects to have been of the type which would ultimately contribute to " the increased empowerment of the poor, [creating the] means by which the poor are better able to forge their own development, " (Salmen, 1999:1). Instead, all three projects have failed to empower the poor to become their own citizens, identifying their needs and choosing projects that address their priority community needs.

Conclusion.

This paper has looked at the nature of community participation in three case studies from the Malawi Social Action Fund. We make no claims to these three case studies being representative of all the projects that have been undertaken by MASAF. The findings therefore have to be seen first and foremost as being case specific. For a more fuller and representative understanding of community participation in MASAF, there is need to have a bigger and more representative study than this one.

These observations notwithstanding, our findings have revealed that in the main, what constitutes "community participation" in these three MASAF projects is very narrow and very limited, taking on a very passive and indirect nature. While there have been limits on the space for local community engagement in the policy process, our findings also reveal that what constitutes 'community' can represent a narrow group of individuals who have captured the participatory process to have their interests promoted as those of the community.

Consequently, the projects are failing to generate the benefits that are attributed to community participation in development initiatives while at the same time failing to empower the local communities to take charge of decisions that contribute to their well being and social advancement. Of particular note is the fact that the very limited nature of community influence on decision-making has meant that none of the three projects are responding to what were perceived as the community's most pressing need, that of general poverty. In the final run, this very narrow participation has meant that there are very little signs of communities identifying themselves with the projects and there are no signs that the communities will themselves take an interest in project maintain at the post-funding phases.

While we acknowledge that these findings from the thousands of projects that have been funded by MASAF cannot be representative of how this particular SF works in reality, the narrow scope of community participation in these three case studies raises important questions that might need to be addressed to enable MASAF become a more effective anti-poverty instrument. At the very least, these findings do question the claims of those who highlight MASAF as a model of community participation in SFs for these three cases certainly suggest that the acclaimed community participation in MASAF is at best, not universal.

Our main objective has not been to dismiss either Social Funds or community participation as key instruments and strategies in the battle against poverty. On this score, we freely acknowledge that Social Funds, and MASAF in particular, have contributed a lot to the poverty alleviation efforts in a number of developing countries, among them Malawi, as evident from the ever increasing rich list of the number of projects undertaken. By highlighting the very narrow scope and very shallow depth of community participation, it is our hope that more effort can be made in making community participation in Social Funds and MASAF in particular more participatory and in thus generate more and perhaps better benefits to society than is currently the case. What we have done in this paper therefore is to suggest that instead of taking community participation at face value, one needs to take a deeper analysis of the participatory process itself if community participation has to deliver some of the benefits attributed to it.

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Table 2: Priority Needs Ranking in the Three Case Studies.

Community/ Ranking	Chilipa		Ngao		Mbaluku (Laini Village)	
	Male FGD	Female FGD	Male FGD	Female FGD	Male FGD	Female FGD
1	Income generation	Safe water	Land relocation	Income generation	Irrigation scheme	Clinic
2	Employment opportunities	Employment opportunities	Employment opportunities	Water	Bridge on Ntumbwiza river	Bridge/road
3	Road/transport	Income generation	Agricultural subsidies	Employment opportunities	Road	Employment opportunities
4	Telephone	Telephone/electricity	School	School	Clinic	Agricultural subsidies and inputs
5	water	Markets	Secondary school	clinic	Prevent hippos from destroying crops	Police.