

# Radio Listening Clubs in Malawi and How they Contribute to Expanding Ordinary People's Capabilities

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## **Abstract**

This article examines how radio listening clubs (RLCs) established by community radio stations in Malawi help to expand ordinary people's capabilities. The RLCs provide a platform for ordinary people to assemble to listen to a designated radio programme, discuss the content for its merit and then decide how best to use the information to improve their livelihoods. The programmes are produced in such a way that they raise pertinent issues faced in the community and offer listeners suggested solutions to overcome those problems. The findings discussed in the paper are based on data collected through focus group discussion with members of RLCs of Nkhotakota community radio, semi-structured interviews with its deputy station manager and other key informants, and participant observation of what goes on in the radio station. The article argues that the RLC has potential to expand the capabilities of ordinary people because the information they receive, share and discuss empowers them to make informed decisions and to be knowledgeable. By providing a forum for the discussion of issues affecting ordinary people, this article concludes that RLCs can help to raise people's awareness to existing problems and influencing them to do something about their situation. In this way, RLCs can help expand ordinary people's capabilities to achieve a life that they value.

**Keywords:** capabilities, community radio, human development, ordinary people, radio listening clubs.

## **Introduction**

The paper examines how radio listening clubs (RLCs) in Malawi contribute to expanding capabilities of ordinary people in rural areas. A listening club is a 'small listening and discussion group that meets regularly to receive a special radio programme, which the members then discuss' (Rogers *et al.*, 1977 cited in Manyozo, 2012: 29). Members discuss the content of the programme for its merit and then decide how best to use the information in their daily activities. The discussion is

conducted in such a manner that it enables sharing of knowledge and raising issues concerning community problems and finding solutions to those problems (Mchakulu, 2007). Using a case study of Nkhotakota community radio station and its RLCs in Malawi, the article demonstrates how this arrangement can enhance the lives of rural people because the information they receive, share and discuss can enable them to make informed decisions and to be knowledgeable, hence expand their capabilities. The article gives an overview of RLCs, the motivation behind their establishment, the data collection method used in the research and finally discusses how RLCs can expand the capabilities of ordinary people.

## **Origins of RLCs**

The Development Broadcasting Unit (DBU) (2000) defines a Radio Listening Club (RLC) as “a community based group organized by community members themselves and uses radio programmes to facilitate development discourse within their own community”. The RLCs that this article examines were those that were established by Nkhotakota community radio station and some NGOs working in the community. The concept of RLCs in Malawi dates back to 1966 when they were called farmers’ forum listening groups (Mackie, 1971). The origins of radio forums more generally can be traced further back to Canada during the Second World War in 1940 (Lewis and Booth, 1989) where they were called farm forums. The radio forums of Canada were “organized community-based radio structures to facilitate local people’s participation in ongoing or impending rural development projects” (Flor, 1995 cited in Manyozo, 2012: 30). From Canada radio forums spread to India in 1949 and then Africa particularly in Ghana between 1964 and 1965 where they aimed at educating adults and stimulating village self-help efforts (Berrigan, 1979: 22). Since then RLCs spread to other countries such as Malawi in 1966, Tanzania in 1967 and Senegal in 1969. These countries adopted their own models of implementation depending on their needs. For example, in Tanzania, between 1977 and 1978 Audio Cassette Listening Forums (ACLF), using audio cassette recorders, provided a development programme that enabled women to recognize the importance of their role (Berrigan, 1979: 48).

In Malawi, since independence in 1964, the Malawi Broadcasting Corporation (MBC) Radio<sup>1</sup>, a public broadcaster, acted as a communication tool in agricultural and rural development (Mackie, 1971). It was meant to compensate for the many logistical, financial, staffing and transport constraints in the Ministry of Natural Resources’ Extension Service Department with regards to “teaching Malawi’s farmers better agricultural methods” (Mackie, 1971: 106). The Extension Service model is a “system of ‘extending’ new technology from the research plots of agricultural universities out to farmers through district extension agents” (White, 2009: 13). It was “an integral part of the modernization paradigm which hoped to raise productivity in

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<sup>1</sup> After independence, Malawi was a single party state. During the one party regime (1964-1994) there was only one radio station in the country, the MBC. The MBC Act (1964) vested all broadcasting powers in this station, implying that there was no provision for the establishment of other radio stations, let alone television (Manjawira and Mitunda, 2011).

developing countries by rapid transfer of technology from the First to the Third worlds” (White, 2009: 13). It is reported that the introduction of the farmers’ forum listening group project in July 1966 in Malawi, was cost-effective and proved to be an effective rural development communication strategy in the sense that it increased farmers’ knowledge and also provided a link between farmers and agricultural service providers (Mackie, 1971: 108).

In recent years, in Malawi, the Development Broadcasting Unit (DBU) of the MBC reintroduced RLCs under the *Ndizathu Zomwe* (Our Own) Project. The DBU is “a new structure within MBC, established in 1999 to liaise with the station’s Programmes Department to effectively engage in development programming through participatory communication activities, to promote national dialogue and development issues” (Sisya, 2003 cited in Manyozo, 2005: 4). The project (*Ndizathu Zomwe*) was jointly implemented by the MBC and the Radio for Development (RfD)<sup>2</sup> of the United Kingdom (UK), with support from the British Government’s Department for International Development (DFID)<sup>3</sup>. The idea behind the RLCs was to engage members in “participatory production of programmes based on development discourses among the network of radio listening clubs” (Manyozo, 2012: 144). The DBU initially established fifteen RLCs across the country, which later increased to more than thirty. Although this number is too small for the whole country, it was reported that the DBU has “promoted a sense of ownership of the national airwaves as it enables communities to determine programme content through their chosen discourse, as evidently, the day and time of broadcast were decided by the communities themselves” (Chirwa *et al.*, 2000, cited in Manyozo, 2005: 6).

Therefore, when the first community radio station in Malawi, Dzimwe, was established in 1998, it adopted this format because it is a perceived success story. Other community radio stations which were established later, for example, Nkhotakota community radio established in 2003, also adopted the same initiative of setting up RLCs but went beyond participatory programme production to include other activities. The aim was “to facilitate people’s participation at all levels of development efforts to identify and implement appropriate and sustainable policies, programmes, and technologies to reduce poverty and improve people’s livelihoods” (Chirwa, 2005: 34). This article examines in more detail the activities which take place in the RLCs and demonstrate how they have the potential to expand people’s capabilities.

## **Participatory Communication and the Capabilities Approach**

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<sup>2</sup> RfD now named Media For Development (MFD) was established as a private production company in the mid 1990s in the UK. Its primary communication tool was radio broadcasting of educational programmes produced and researched in collaboration with African broadcasters (MFD, n.d.).

<sup>3</sup> DFID was established in 1997 to lead the UK’s work to end extreme poverty by creating jobs, unlocking the potential of girls and women and helping to save lives when humanitarian emergencies hit in 28 countries across Africa, Asia and the Middle East ([www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk)).

Since the RLCs were established to ensure that its members are involved in participatory radio programme production 'based on development discourses' (Manyozo, 2012), I employed the participatory communication theory to help understand how the clubs contribute to development but that kind of development which is related to building capabilities. Therefore, I also analyse the capabilities approach to demonstrate how RLCs help to expand capabilities. According to Carpentier (2011) in 1975, the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation released a report entitled 'What Now? Another Development'. Servaes (1999: 78-9) notes that the phrase 'Another development' in the title indicates "the ambition to develop another type of development grounded in the focus on the people's basic needs (such as eradication of poverty), self-reliance, ecological sensitivity, sustainability and participation". The report was released after scholars and development agents blamed the modernization paradigm which dominated intellectual thinking around 1945-1965 (Servaes, 1995: 40) for lack of participation of the beneficiary communities. This lack of participation was blamed for the failure of most development projects (Melkote, 1991). The Dag Hammarskjöld Report views the former approaches to development (the modernization paradigm) as "reductionist and top-down, and more supportive of transnational capital than development and poverty reduction" (Carpentier, 2011: 50). In the modernization paradigm development was viewed as modernization and focused primarily on economic growth only (Forster-Carter, 1985; Lerner, 1958). Instead the Dag Hammarskjöld report emphasizes another development characterized by a diversity of approaches, and that development should "focus on the needs of the lower echelons" of the social system (Potter *et al*, 2008 cited in Carpentier, 2011: 50). This pointed to the idea that development that focuses on human development and capabilities is more empowering and meaningful and accords individuals more personal freedom than any other notion of development. This is where the issue of grassroots participation came in, and participation is defined as a process of empowering people to participate in identifying development problems or designing development programmes (Melkote, 1991).

Thus by the late 1980s the term participation was mainstreamed in large-scale development programmes and by early 1990s, many international agencies like SIDA and USAID had mainstreamed participation and empowerment in the development projects that they were implementing worldwide (Tandon, 2008: 289).

Here emphasis shifted from the broader levels of participation in developing societies to participation in setting of development projects, where it is aimed at empowering people, capturing the indigenous knowledge and ensuring the sustainability and efficiency of the interventions (Hickey & Mohan, 2004 cited in Carpentier, 2011: 51).

Thus participation requires a higher level of people's involvement in the development projects. "Here individuals are active in development programmes and processes, they contribute ideas, take initiatives, articulate their needs and problems and assert their autonomy" (Ascroft and Masilela, 1989 in Melkote, 1991: 237).

## **Development Redefined**

The inclusion of the term 'participation' in development discourse shifts the emphasis from an understanding of development in the modernization paradigm as economic growth to that of development as expanding and facilitating human freedom and capabilities (Sen, 1992; Nussbaum, 2011). This is what Sen (1992) describes as the 'capabilities approach'. According to Alkire and Deneulin (2009: 31) "the key idea of the capability approach is that social arrangements should aim to expand people's capabilities – their freedom to promote or achieve what they value doing or being". Although social arrangements can vary from community to community and also depending on the stage of development each society is at, in this paper the RLCs are considered as the social arrangements which can help to expand people's capabilities. The RLCs are located in rural areas where essential basic resources are non-existent or limited. To ensure that these people live the lives they desire, it requires a number of social arrangements, one of which is the RLCs to try and help expand their capabilities. Extending the definition of the capabilities approach, Nussbaum (2011: 20) argues that "by capabilities, what is meant is "not just abilities residing inside a person but also the freedoms or opportunities created by a combination of personal abilities and the political, social, and economic environment". This is not the responsibility of government alone but also various development agents and agencies including the media playing a role. This paper will, therefore, argue and demonstrate how RLCs can not only enhance ordinary people's capabilities but also create opportunities for people to improve their social, cultural and economic conditions. In the capabilities approach, development is "a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy" (Sen, 1999: 3). The freedoms might be the outcome of improved well-being such as literacy, hygiene, food availability and having smaller families as a result of information addressing these issues (Stevenson, 1988: 13). This definition implies that when ordinary people are given resources such as information and an enabling environment to exercise their creative potential and natural talents they can achieve things which can bring them happiness. Breaking the chains of ill health, lack of food, poverty, lack of access to information and other social ills which perpetually keep people in bondage can ultimately bring them freedom, which is development, according to Sen (1999). The purpose of development is "to create an enabling environment for people to enjoy long, healthy, and creative lives" (Nussbaum, 2011: 1). This is the meaning of development that is adopted in this paper which aims to investigate how RLCs help to expand people's capabilities.

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

Data presented in this paper are drawn from a research project conducted in Malawi. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews with the deputy station manager of Nkhotakota community radio station and some key informants drawn

from some NGOs working with the radio station in the communities. I also conducted focus group discussions (FGDs) with the listeners of the radio station in their RLCs. These FGDs were conducted in six different RLC in Nkhotakota. Participant observation was another technique used to collect data. This involved observing what goes on in the radio station in terms of programme production, presentation, and daily operations or management. As part of participant observation, I had an opportunity to interact with and interview some selected radio practitioners such as the programme manager and production manager of the station. All the observations were recorded in a diary while all the interviews and FGDs were recorded and transcribed, and used as a resource for this study. The data were analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis.

## **Results and discussion**

### **Nkhotakota community radio station and its radio listening clubs**

Nkhotakota Community Radio station started broadcasting in 2003 with financial assistance from UNESCO. It is located in Nkhotakota district and targets a population of 303, 659 (the population of the district) which is mostly rural. The majority of the people (73 %) in the district are involved in subsistence farming and 32.1 % of the population lives in poverty (National Statistics office (NSO), 2012). The illiteracy rate in the district is 15.1 % (NSO, 2012: 23). Nkhotakota community radio station has 32 RLCs that is, about ten clubs in each of the six Traditional Authorities<sup>4</sup> (TA's or Senior Chiefs) in the district (interview with deputy station manager, 31 October 2012). While some of these clubs were established by the radio station, others were established by NGOs such as Farmers Voice Radio (FVR)<sup>5</sup>, Total Land Care (TLC) and Sasakawa Global 2000. The RLCs are composed of the chairperson, secretary, treasurer, and members. The chairperson, treasurer and secretary are elected positions by the members. The chairperson is the leader and facilitator of the club meetings. Each club is supposed to have twenty-five members but due to large numbers of people in the villages willing to join, the total number of members exceeds twenty-five in some instances. Membership in these clubs is open to anyone willing to take part. Members of the clubs are trained by the radio practitioners (interview with deputy station manager, 31 October 2012).

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<sup>4</sup> There are 28 districts in Malawi. Administratively, the districts are subdivided into Traditional Authorities (TA's) presided over by senior chiefs. The TA's are composed of villages and these are the smallest administrative units presided over by village headmen/women (National Statistical Office (NSO) 2011, 13).

<sup>5</sup> In Malawi, FVR is a consortium made up of the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Water Development (MoAIWD); Bunda College of Agriculture, a former constituent college of the University of Malawi; Centre for Alternatives for Victimized Women and Children (CAVWOC); Creative Centre for Community Mobilization (CRECCOM); Farm Radio Malawi; Malawi Broadcasting Corporation (MBC); and all community radio stations in Malawi with funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation of the USA. The pilot phase which run from July 1999 to December 2012 was implemented by the American Institute for Research (AIR) in partnership with, in the case of Malawi, the organizations mentioned above (<http://www.creccom.org/project.php?project=44>).

Nkhotakota community radio station established its RLCs to achieve three major aims. First, as support networks to ensure that there is a listening audience. Members of the RLCs give feedback to the station on its programming and daily operations. This is also a way of ensuring audience feedback and it also functions as a form of audience research. Secondly, the clubs aimed to generate income for the radio station. The station sells station branded plain paper to RLCs and individuals at a profit. This paper is used for writing letters to the station. In an effort to make their clubs visible the clubs compete among themselves by buying many sheets of paper and writing many letters, and in the process make more money for the station (interview with deputy station manager, 31 October 2012). Finally, some programmes were established with the aim of imparting specific messages targeting specific groups of people in the community. For example, these could be programmes aimed at spreading messages about HIV/AIDS, safe motherhood, programmes targeting fishermen, and so on. The programmes can be sponsored programmes by NGOs or produced by the community radio station itself. Therefore, the third reason was to ensure that programmes produced to achieve specific development purposes have an impact on their target audiences. The impact expected could be change in behaviour or adoption of a new farming technique. This implies that some specific programmes have their own listening clubs whereby members use the information listened to directly in their activities. Club members discuss what they listen to in groups and share knowledge to enhance understanding. The interview excerpt below explains the aim of establishing RLCs:

The aim was to improve listenership because we realized that when they listen to the radio in groups, they are able to discuss what they listen to. Again the level of understanding is different so in groups they can share the knowledge which each person gets from the radio. The other reason is that we wanted to make sure that these programmes that have been produced for different reasons really bring an impact on the listeners. Some clubs were specifically created for specific programmes so that the people are really able to grasp what they listen to in these programmes. We want the people to make use of what they listen to on these programmes. Some listening clubs were created mainly to enhance health in our areas; others were created to enhance agriculture activities in the district; some were created to enhance HIV and AIDS awareness while others were created to mitigate the impact of climate change. That's the whole essence of establishing the radio listening clubs (interview with deputy station manager, 31 October 2012).

As Megwa (2007: 53) argues, "community support and participation are critical to the existence and survival of community-based organizations including community radio stations". Therefore, establishment of RLCs as support networks can be viewed as a strategic move. It would be almost impossible to broadcast at community level where there is no community support since community radio stations are ostensibly established for them.

### **Activities done in RLCs and how they contribute to building capabilities**

As Banda (2007, 132) has rightly observed, the concept of RLC is 'misleading' because it assumes that club members merely listen to the radio programmes. Yet there are many activities that take place apart from listening to the radio programmes. Listening clubs are one way of engaging people in development discourses and sharing of ideas. This has some properties of the public sphere although this happens in a mediated and managed context. Among the activities that are done in the RLCs include listening to designated radio programmes, discussing the content of the programme for its merit and deciding how to use the information in their activities. The content of the programme is also used to conduct drama performances and poetry recitals carrying messages on modern methods of farming, HIV/AIDS, family planning, safe motherhood and other social issues affecting the people. Members of the clubs support one another in their farming activities and also materially and they also conduct income generating activities to support their activities. To ensure sustainability of the clubs, some NGOs such as FVR also introduced activities such as the village bank and cooperatives to help farmers generate income for themselves and for the club as a whole. Club members access the money through loans or interest on shares to meet their economic needs (interview with FVR Projects Officer, 14 March 2013).

### **Access to development information and sharing of ideas in the clubs**

The opportunity given to club members to discuss programme content with the aim of enhancing collective understanding "enables literates and illiterates to leap the illiteracy barrier" (Rogers *et al.*, 1977 cited in Manyozo, 2012: 30). Due to high illiteracy levels among the listeners, some people find it hard to understand some of the information or concepts broadcast on the radio station. However, as Held (2006: 237) argues, "through sharing information and pooling knowledge, public deliberation can transform individuals' understanding and enhance their grasp of complex problems". This is demonstrated through some radio programmes in which members listen to development information. For example, in the agricultural programmes, farmers are advised to plant maize, which is a staple food crop in Malawi, at a spacing of 15 centimetres apart using the 1-1 maize (*sasakawa*) planting system to maximize production. This is contrary to the traditional practice of planting 3 maize seeds per station at a spacing of 30 centimetres. The ridges have to be 25 centimetres apart. Within their clubs, those who are literate demonstrate to the others how to achieve the prescribed measurements using sticks. The participants explained that:

Individually you can hear on the radio that to grow maize using the *sasakawa* type of farming, you have to make your ridges at a spacing of 25centimeters apart but without knowing what it really means. However, in our club we do have some members who can demonstrate using measuring instruments such as sticks. Sometimes we invite our agricultural advisors to explain to us as a group. Therefore, when we go to our farms we know exactly what to do with the measurements. On the other hand, non-club members have problems with such measurements (FGD 3, 3 November 2012)

The manner in which members of RLCs discuss issues in groups can result in shared interpretation, shared meaning and eventually collective or individual action because the knowledge acquired from the clubs is directly applied to their activities. This point is illustrated by the farmers' response that:

In our meetings, we also make sure that every member knows how to do these things on their own with the help of those members who have understood them better, for example, this practice of growing maize at 15 centimetres apart (FGD 3, 3 November 2012).

This is a way of overcoming a problem arising from a lack of literacy. It is consistent with Chapman *et al's.* (2003) argument that RLCs "are being employed as an extension tool for their ability to reach many illiterate people, providing them with development information in the language they can understand" (cited in Manyozo, 2012: 154). Through the sharing of information, club members become their own and each others' development agents. This form of access to crucial information means that "community members have a platform for all manner of individual and collective self-expression" (Howley, 2010: 16). Therefore, RLCs also play an interventionist role by providing a platform where ordinary people can access development information and solve development conundrums for individual and community advancement. In all this, the community radio station is at the centre of the clubs' activities, both as a source of and as a tool for the dissemination of that information.

### **RLCs as a platform for building ordinary people's capabilities**

It has been argued that, "while the community radio movement is worldwide, its resonance is most felt in places where the world's most vulnerable people eke out precarious livelihoods in a bid to escape poverty" (da Costa, 2012: 138). As reported earlier, the RLCs discussed in this article are located in rural areas where resources are limited, as such ordinary people join clubs with the aim of benefiting from the opportunities that are found there some of which can help alleviate their poverty. For example, it was reported that:

We assist each other in the groups. A person cannot stand alone. For instance, if one falls sick, the club members help that person to cultivate in his garden- a thing that cannot happen when you are not in a club (FGD 4, 4 November 2012).

Despite the problems that individual members may face, members of RLCs share common problems and they realize that if they want to advance they have to uplift one another in times of problems to make sure that they are progressing together by assisting one another. According to the UNDP (1994: 13) "the purpose of development is to create an environment in which all people can expand their capabilities, and opportunities can be enlarged for both present and future generations". Here we note that RLCs can help to create such an environment. This is the main reason why ordinary people join RLCs, the hope of being assisted by

others in the face of problems. To illustrate this point one farmer confessed how he was specifically assisted by his club members:

Being in a club is very important. For instance, I did not buy fertilizers this year because I didn't have money, but my fellow club members helped me with some fertilizers and now at least I have maize. If I were not in the club, I couldn't have harvested the maize that I have now since I didn't have the fertilizers (FGD 4, 4 November 2012).

Alkire (2010: 25) argues that people are "not only the beneficiaries of development; they are also agents, whose vision, ingenuity and strength are vital to advancing their own and others' well-being". The RLC, therefore, can be an effective means of mobilizing people to participate in self-help initiatives. It can also enable people to play the role of development agents for each other.

The difference between those who joined RLCs and those people who are not members of any club is that the benefits discussed above are not available to non-members. One participant explained that:

Most of the times when, something is beginning not all people join instantly. After they have appreciated the benefits from members who joined in the first place, then the rest join the grouping. Likewise here, they are currently inspired by what we gain from the club, hence prospects of joining us. For instance, when we experiment what we have heard on the radio it is observed that we produce more yields than anyone else. So they usually ask what our secret is. Then we tell them that although you listen to the radio on your own, it is totally different with us, because we do schedule a time to discuss them in detail (FGD 3, 3 November 2012).

It can be argued that participating in RLCs can help community members achieve collective capabilities. Collective capabilities are defined as "the newly generated functioning bundles a person obtains by virtue of his/her engagement in a collectivity that help her/him achieve the life he/she has reason to value" (Ibrahim, 2006: 398). The collectivity here is the RLC. Ibrahim further gives two characteristics of collective capabilities. First, collective capabilities 'are only present through a process of collective action', and secondly, that collective capabilities are "the new choices that the individual alone would neither have nor be able to achieve unless he/she joins a collectivity, such as a self-help group" (Ibrahim, 2006: 398). In the case of RLCs, collective capabilities can be achieved through group listening to the radio, discussing the message and adopting the best practices contained in the message; for example, modern farming practices. This can help to expand people's capabilities when they act jointly or individually to implement the decisions made. It was reported that as a result of the benefits realized by early adopters, the late adopters are persuaded to join clubs with an aim of realizing the same benefits; for example, one farmer testified that:

I was one of the hard nuts to crack. I did not know that planting one maize seed per station is good and I could scorn those people who used to follow this method. Now when the advisor came to us together with Mr Nkhata [chairman of the club], they explained the importance of planting one maize

seed per station and they asked me to make manure and plant my maize seeds as advised. I found that it worked very well then I completely changed my mindset and I have finally adopted the use of manure and planting one seed per station (FGD 4, 4 November 2012).

It is common knowledge that people resist change sometimes. However, as Megwa (2007: 54) argues, “when an individual, for example, is trained to perform certain functions at a community radio station or learns from listening to community radio programmes, it is generally accepted that this knowledge and skill will be diffused to other members of the community”. Therefore, participation in RLCs can help through interpersonal influence to persuade those people who resist change to see the importance of adopting new innovations and act in concert with the others for individual and collective capabilities.

### **Access to material resources**

Banda (2007: 143) argues that “the knowledge that the clubs were organized structures, complete with rules and decision-making processes, presented an attractive forum for several development partners and policy-making elites to work with the clubs”. The participants in this study reported that participating in RLCs results in easy access to loans, farm inputs and other material resources: “We are encouraged because in our groups it is now easy to access loans” (FGD 3, 3 November 2012). The RLCs act as a platform to help farmers find organizations which assist them with free seeds, fertilizers, and to find markets for their produce. Farmers reported that:

We have other organizations in this village that help us. We have NASFAM [National Smallholder Farmers’ Association of Malawi] which assists us with groundnut seeds. NASFAM assists us because we are united and we do our activities as one (FGD 4, 4 November 2012).

When people are already organized in clubs, NGOs and other development agents find it easier to mobilize them for a particular development project in the community. Community radio stations link RLCs to different organizations which come to assist members in various ways. These opportunities are not available to community members who are not in clubs.

Furthermore, when the farm inputs are not sufficient for everyone, club members share the few resources that are there to ensure that everyone benefits equally. When a member of a club fails to repay a loan, club members mobilize themselves to bail out their colleague.

Sometimes organizations come and tell us that there is a chance of getting fertilizer on loan but there is need for a subscription fee. So what we do in our clubs is to contribute money as a club to pay for this subscription fee. When we find that the fertilizer is not enough then we just share among ourselves the little that we manage to buy. The other advantage of being in groups is that it is easier for organizations to reach us in our groups than when we are not in groups (FGD 4, 4 November 2012).

Therefore, RLCs can be used as collateral when accessing loans. As Putman (2002) argues, “a group whose members manifest trustworthiness and put trust in one another will be able to accomplish much more than a group that is comparable but lacks trust” (cited in Damasio, 2011: 40). Farmers’ participation in RLCs can also help them to develop trust in one another through how their activities are coordinated and this can improve interpersonal relationships.

### **RLCs as a forum for women empowerment**

Lennie and Tacchi (2013: 65) argue that “while the participation of women is a fundamental principle for development, it is often difficult to carry through because of gender inequalities in many societies”. Although, the whole of the rural population can be considered as marginalized, women are the most affected as they face marginalization in the family and village setting because of their considered low status or subordinate position in a male dominate society. According to Held (2006: 89), it is the subordination of women that “has created fundamental ‘hindrances to human improvements’”. The situation is especially aggravated by their lack of access to information that could help them mitigate or manage the problems that they face (Sterling *et al.*, 2009: 145). Therefore, improving women’s status “is essential if we are to move the world towards a better life for individuals” (Mongella, 1995: 121).

I also found that women’s participation in RLCs increases the opportunity for them to access and discuss crucial information necessary to help improve their livelihoods. In almost all the RLCs I visited, there were more women than men. The reasons for this are varied; some have to do with gender roles, others have to do with traditional practices and economic reasons. For example, members of some RLCs reported that men are usually busy with work and sometimes their work demands going away from home frequently. On the other hand, women remain at home most of the times so they have time to participate in club activities where radio listening is one of the activities. For example, it was reported in one FGD that:

Being a lakeshore area, boys and men normally prefer going to the lake to fish unlike being in groups because they make money from fishing. This explains why we have more female members in our groups because women and girls are at home when men have gone fishing (FGD 6, 6 November 2012).

The participants further explained that while the men are away fishing or doing other jobs, it is mostly women who are involved in farming, hence their increased interest in joining farmers clubs. The women claimed that they are always determined to succeed in implementing what they have learnt from the programmes. Women see themselves as being responsible for the upbringing of children and so if they do not work hard in the garden then there will be no food for the children. Furthermore, because of their considered low status in society, women are said to welcome development news more positively than men so that they can improve their livelihoods through the benefits that may come through joining clubs (FGD 6, 6 November 2012).

Another reason for the gender imbalance in RLCs is that sometimes ownership of the radio set is problematic. For example, an FVR projects manager explained that:

Some men think that they own the radio set so when they are going away they take it with them so that they can listen to it when doing their daily duties. Sometimes men hide batteries so they can listen to their favourite programmes at their own time when they come back. This leaves women with no opportunity to listen to the radio hence they opt to join radio listening clubs and listen to the radio in their clubs (interview, 16 March 2013).

According to a Farm Radio International (2011: 15) report, 75 percent of males and 56 percent of females in Malawi own radio sets. Although these figures do not indicate listening habits between men and women, it can be inferred that more men than women have access to a radio set. Therefore, in their quest for information more women join RLCs so that they can listen to a radio there. The RLCs serve to increase women's access to radio and to information necessary to improve their livelihoods.

However, unlike Manyozo (2005) whose study of participation in RLCs in Malawi found that there was male dominance in the dialogues that characterize RLCs despite women being in the majority, I found that when making contributions, both men and women expressed their views equally. I observed this when conducting FGDs in the clubs. It can be suggested, therefore, that over the years the RLCs have empowered women in the research area to participate without fear in issues that affect them. By participating in RLCs, more women can gain confidence to come in the open and engage in activities that improve not only their lives but that of the whole family.

To illustrate that RLCs can offer a potential solution to the lack of access to information, the participants claimed that:

Here along the lakeshore area, women were not engaging in any economic activities, only men did. These days, because of the programmes which are broadcast on the radio, women have become as active as men economically. They are now doing business just like their male counterparts (FGD 1, 2 November 2012).

This claim can be read as meaning that discussion of programme content in the RLCs has encouraged women to think about gender roles and to do something about it to reverse the situation. The claim that more and more women are now involved in small scale businesses is a sign of building capabilities as result of access to information through community radio but discussed in the RLC. The people feel that they are informed and so their awareness has been raised, and because of this, they are motivated to change. The women further claimed that they are now closing the gaps in the gender divide by contributing equally to the running of their families instead of just depending on men. One woman explained that:

As women we were just depending on our husbands for everything. Currently, many women are farming on their own thereby benefiting their homes as well (FGD 3, 3 November 2012).

Women's ability to contribute to the family income or food basket is indicative of 'women's agency' (Sen, 1999). As a result, women's "contribution to the prosperity

of the family is then more visible, and she also has more voice, because of being less dependent on others” (Sen, 1999: 192). The RLCs, therefore, can provide a forum for increasing women’s capacity to participate or engage in economic activities and to access information which contributes to their self-development and that of the family. Such a forum can enable women to discuss issues affecting them, make informed decisions, and to speak out their mind and to have a voice just as their male counterparts. In this way, RLCs can be said to play a role in empowering marginalized groups such as women and to help expand their capabilities.

Furthermore, young women claimed that the discussions which take place in RLCs have also helped them to gain confidence which enables them to among other things, negotiate use of a condom during sex, as illustrated in this response:

We as girls are equipped with skills necessary to curb harassment. We can be bold and firm on the use of condoms and in addition, if one violates our rights, we know where to go and report the human rights violations (FGD 6, 6 November 2012).

Consequently, this has the potential of reducing women’s vulnerability to abuse because the information they receive from the community radio and the discussion they hold in the RLCs can raise their awareness about such issues. This information can help empower them to defend their rights by reporting abuse cases and human rights violations. The spread of HIV/AIDS can further be reduced among the youth in the process. Therefore, instead of suffering in silence, RLCs provide a forum where the youths’ personal problems such as sexual harassment and abuse are shared and discussed, solutions suggested, and the necessary course of action taken by the affected person. This is particularly significant for people living in rural areas where there are no or very few places or organizations where abuse cases can be reported. There are also no places where people can receive counseling on the problems affecting them. Therefore, by listening to specific programmes on the community radio together and discussing problems in groups, the youth can enlighten one another about how to mitigate those problems.

### **Facilitating self-representation in development dialogues**

Fraser and Estrada (2001: 20) argue that “in poor communities, local authorities and politicians can easily take advantage of citizens, either individually or as a group, in part because the marginalized and oppressed have no way to complain”. Confirming this argument, a study by Chirwa *et al.* (2000) found that “RLCs sometimes face outright hostility from service providers such as district assemblies, civil society and NGOs, who usually do not appreciate listening to audio-tapes that articulate problems of a particular community or the idea of driving to communities for dialogues” (cited in Manyozo, 2012: 154). However, I found that all service providers mentioned by Chirwa *et al.* (2000) avail themselves to the RLCs except politicians especially MPs who shun such meetings. This leaves the electorate angry and frustrated as demonstrated in the excerpt below:

We have been asking for an opportunity to meet our MP but to no avail. Meanwhile we have just stopped because we think they regard us as unimportant people (FGD 5, 5 November 2012).

The participants reported that other office bearers at district level are readily accessible to answer people's questions: "Officials from the district hospital do come and partly the officials from the council. They explain and give the subjects a chance to speak out their views" (FGD 6, 6 November 2012). According to Tettey (2011: 24-5) "This live exchange provides a unique opportunity for ordinary citizens to directly confront or engage with public officials in ways that the normal ordering of power relations would otherwise not allow". It can allow ordinary people to make repeated calls for effective delivery of social services and implementation of projects. The reason why politicians shun such meetings is not clear. However, community radio stations in Malawi are not allowed to broadcast any political and religious news to avoid promoting 'hate speech'. Section 9.6 of the license conditions under 'Live Broadcasts' in Sub-section 9.6.3 it is stated that, "the authority shall restrict the Licensee from live broadcasts if the Licensee broadcasts hate speech whether live or recorded" (GoM, 2008). However, this cannot be the reason why politicians fail to avail themselves for such interfaces because responding to people's development needs is not tantamount to promoting hate speech. Consequently, the topics of discussion in the clubs fall short of empowering ordinary citizens politically. Discussion of governance or anything political is frowned upon as such topics of discussion are limited to service provision such as construction of school blocks, health centres, poverty alleviation, health and agriculture news (Mchakulu, 2007; Manyozo, 2012).

Another challenge that RLCs face in enhancing capabilities emanates from their relationship with community radio stations. Since radio programmes produced and recorded in the RLCs are edited by radio practitioners before they are broadcast, the power to decide what content to broadcast remains with the radio producers. For example, Members of Mpamantha farmers Club complained that some of the programmes which they produced and recorded some time back before this research had not been aired on the radio. In this case, the radio producers act as gatekeepers of the programmes that are recorded in the RLCs. Although this could be a source of conflict between members of RLCs and radio producers, such tension is diffused by the radio producers who use their power to provide any convincing explanation reassuring the members that all is well. As Carpentier and Dahlgren's (2011: 8) argue, "the presence of a participatory culture cannot be conflated with participation itself and its logics of equal(ised) power relations". This arrangement can create an illusion of participation which can make ordinary people feel as though they are involved in a democratic process when in reality they are not (Dahlgren, 1995).

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this chapter has discussed the concept of RLCs, and how it is helping to expand ordinary people's capabilities. The discussion has demonstrated how RLCs can create and expand people's capabilities to achieve more than what

individuals can actually achieve if they acted alone. The RLCs contribute to raising people's awareness to existing problems and influencing them to do something about their situation through discussing the content of a radio programme and finding solutions to their problems. The people's claims about the positive changes that have taken place in their lives and community which they attribute to the activities done in the RLCs are evidence of increased agency. By providing a forum for the discussion of issues affecting ordinary people and allowing them to engage in different economic activities for their benefit, RLCs can be said to help expand ordinary people's capabilities. They contribute to alleviate poverty "which robs people of the freedom to satisfy hunger, or to achieve sufficient nutrition, or to obtain remedies for treatable illnesses, or the opportunity to be adequately clothed or sheltered, or to enjoy clean water or sanitary facilities" (Sen, 1999: 4). Attainment of these things can enable people enjoy the life they value.

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