Malawi Social Labs

Background

The social lab is a 2-year action learning initiative in Malawi, funded by USAID Local Works, a new initiative aimed at promoting locally owned and led development. The social labs in Malawi are being led by Root Change and Keystone Accountability as part of a USAID Local Works BAA action research grant (2017-2019).

Social labs are taking place in two districts in Malawi, Rumphi in the North and Mulanje in the South. In Rumphi we partnered with Youth and Society (YAS), an emerging civil society leader working on citizen voice, human rights, and governance, and in the south hired two Field Managers with deep connections to grassroots community development.

About Social Labs

Social Labs are a collaborative and experimental approach to tackling complex problems. According to Zaid Hassan, the author of The Social Labs Revolution, Social Labs have three core characteristics:
1. they are social (bringing together diverse actors and organizations),
2. they are experimental; and
3. they address systemic challenges.

Listening Tour

The idea to use a social lab approach came from a listening tour conducted by Root Change and Keystone Accountability in early 2017 in Malawi. Root Change met with over 120 diverse actors across the country, many of whom had been nominated because of their deep understanding of the challenges of the aid system in Malawi. From the listening tour, we identified four recurring development “traps” that were echoed by many in the stories we heard, including:

1. restrictive financing that has created a dependence on (often) external intermediaries;
2. a lack of established channels for citizens and constituents to engage in development projects and voice concerns or give feedback;
3. a disregard for complexity-aware capacity development for local actors; and
4. extractive measurement practices that prevent communities from benefiting from data they produce.

We looked to social labs as an alternative model that could convene actors at multiple levels within a district to focus on these systemic traps.
Malawi Social Labs

Goals

- To bring together a diverse set of changemakers in a district (representatives of citizen groups, VDCs, ADCs, CBOs, NGOs, TAs, local government, international agencies) to critically examine the system of relationships, roles and responsibilities that support community development;
- To identify a series of lean experiments (micro-actions) that can be tested over 2 month cycles to strengthen that system and improve trust, accountability, roles, and local ownership.

Social Lab Process

The social lab provides a facilitated process for participants to identify systemic challenges to community development within their district, form teams and test ideas to improve trust and accountability.

**Design Workshop**
Social Labs were launched during a weeklong design workshop, which convened a diverse, multi-stakeholder group of 70-80 participants in each district. By the end of the five days, participants had formed teams and voted on their top 5-6 ideas to address systemic problems in development through an iterative portfolio of lean experiments.

**Lean Experimentation**
Social labs follow a two-month experiment cycle to design, test, and adapt lean experiments or micro-actions that require little resources and are carried out within one target community or sub-set of actors. For each two-month experiment cycle, social lab teams are provided with a small $500 grant to support transportation, communication, and convening of the social lab team and other stakeholders. These resources are not intended to fund project activities.

**Reflection Workshop and Coaching**
All social lab participants reconvene every two months through a 2 day Reflection Workshop to discuss what each team has learned, get peer feedback and redesign another round of experiments. Social lab facilitators convene coaching sessions with teams in between reflection workshops based on demand from participants.

**Feedback Survey**
An anonymous feedback survey is used during each reflection workshop to collect perception data on how participants are finding the social lab process and team dynamics. This data is shared back during reflection sessions as way for groups to discuss openly how the work is going and make commitments for improvement.