Chapter 15:
Stories from the Bag of Life

(Excerpt from Part Four: Praxis in the Commonwealth)

In “Stories from the Bag of Life” (Chapter 15), Gladson Makowa, in an interview, shares his experience with the process of designing and operationalising a participatory learning programme about maternal and child health in Malawi. Makowa analyses what it is that makes Phukusi la Moyo (Bag of Life) a participatory communication programme. He focuses on the design process through which the programme was created, highlighting the participation of women, especially pregnant women and new mothers, in making decisions about the programme.

More information: www.col.org/LearningWithCM

COL’s Healthy Communities programme: www.col.org/HealthyCommunities
Gladson Makowa was interviewed as part of “Learning from Community Media,” a seminar held in partnership with UNESCO at the Sixth Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning, in Kochi, India, 26 November 2010.

Let’s start with the name of the programme …

The name of the programme is Phukusi la Moyo, which means “Bag of Life.”

What is the programme about?

It is about maternal and child health, with a focus on safe motherhood.

Tell us something about where it all happens

The programme takes place in Mchinji district, which is in the Central Region of Malawi. It is a rural area with a population of about 400,000. It is underdeveloped, with limited electricity and unpaved roads to the villages.

What sort of programme is Phukusi la Moyo?

Phukusi la Moyo is an educational programme, one that uses a behaviour change communication model. It addresses infant and maternal mortality and illness in the district. The programme is a combination of radio content, produced by the local community radio, and face-to-face discussed out by community-based discussion groups that are part of a larger maternal and child health network in the village. The programme is a collaborative effort between four different groups:

1. MaiMwana Trust is a six-year-old community health project that includes research and development activities. MaiMwana has established some 200 women’s groups to discuss problems and solutions relating to maternal and child health.
2. The MaiMwana groups, which function like an independent network. Women from these groups asked for a media programme that would address issues pertaining to maternal and infant mortality. They participated in all the activities through a district-wide structure of groups and committees, which comprises more than 10,000 women.

3. Mchinji District Hospital and Health Office are together responsible for the health of the district. Like the MaiMwana office, they are both located in Mchinji Bomba, the town area.

4. Mudzi Wathu Community Radio is a local station that operates under the umbrella of a Malawian non-governmental organisation (NGO) called Creative Centre for Community Mobilisation (CREECOM).

Technical inputs to the programme design process and training of the local broadcasters were provided by Story Workshop, a Malawian development communication group that works in behaviour change communication. The whole process was guided and supported financially by the Commonwealth of Learning (COL).

**What was the process to develop the programme?**

There was a one-week programme design workshop and media skills training with all of the groups collaborating in this process: MaiMwana, Mudzi Wathu, women’s groups and the Mchinji District Hospital. They were involved in making all sorts of decisions about the programme. It was designed by the group as a joint effort, and the group went on to manage it together as well. The design for the programme includes the following components:

- message matrix – a list of good and bad behaviours, and the consequences and benefits of those behaviours
- programme matrix – a table presenting the whole series of programmes, each listed with a communication objective, target audience and potential sources of information for each episode
- a format for the programme, including a name and the time and day of broadcast, together with a marketing strategy
- a plan for weekly group listening, discussion and feedback from the MaiMwana groups
Phukusi la Moyo (Bag of Life) is an educational radio programme that addresses infant and maternal mortality and illness in Mchinji district, central Malawi. The programme combines locally produced radio content (including interviews with experts) and follow-up face-to-face discussions with groups who are part of a larger maternal and child health network in the area.
What makes Phukusi la Moyo a participatory programme?

The first thing is that women themselves articulated a demand for such a programme. In other words, they decided that an educational radio programme would be a good addition to the work they were already doing.

The whole process has been participatory. The women’s group representatives were involved in the programme design, including the key messages, the format and the name of the programme. Then beyond these initial decisions, the women have been involved in the ongoing management through representation from the women’s district MaiMwana committee on what is called the core team, which meets once every two weeks. These women are the representatives of the community.

Another important way the women participate is by being part of the content for the programme, which is generated from real-life stories — basically, the women’s lived experiences of maternal and child health, both good and bad. Sixty to 80 per cent of the programme is the women’s own stories and experiences. Women take the initiative and share the problems they face through their real-life stories. For example, a woman who has delivered a still-born baby talks about the experience and how it came about. There is a 20 per cent role for health experts, who give facts and make sure that people know where to get accurate information on health-related facts. However, the real “experts” are the women themselves.

The programme producers go to the people in their villages and to their homes to make the programme: it is field-based. One very important part of the programme and a unique type of participation is the use of traditional songs and poems, adapted for specific shows, that help the local community relate to the content easily.

The women decide what the programme should be based on and there is a system for them to participate through feedback for each programme as well. Since women listen to the programme together, they also discuss the programme as a group and with their families.
Excerpt from Programme #3

DANGER SIGNS FOR PREGNANT WOMEN

*Signature tune: Phukusi la Moyo*

**Presenter:** Now it’s time for the *Phukusi la Moyo* [Bag of Life] programme which is produced by Mudzi Wathu Community Radio and brought to you by the MaiMwana project in collaboration with the Mchinji District Health Office with sponsorship from Commonwealth of Learning. You are with your usual presenters: me, Martha Suzyo Dzanja, and my friend Steven Chimutu.  

*Signature tune: Phukusi la Moyo fade out*

**Presenter:** Last week we heard about some of the MaiMwana project in Mchinji district. Now let us hear what is in today’s programme.

**Vox pop #1:** I have done 11 deliveries so far and I found a maternal problem during my sixth pregnancy: I started losing water continuously.

**Vox pop #2:** I have had successful deliveries throughout my life but I faced problems during my third pregnancy. I lost a lot of water and I reached a point of death.

**Vox pop #3:** During my delivery, I faced a problem of blood shortage after delivery. And this made me very sick for one month. Now, I do go to hospital to collect iron tablets and the doctor advised me to take milk more frequently and to go to hospital to get more iron tablets when I am out of stock.

**Presenter:** Those are some hits we have in today’s programme. Do not forget that in today’s programme we are going to hear about danger signs for a pregnant woman. If you experience any of them, rush to hospital!

*Bridge: Phukusi la Moyo (shout)*

**Presenter:** To call a spade a spade. Let us be together and listen from fellow women about their experiences during pregnancy.

**Community member #1:** I come from Ng’onomo village, Traditional Authority Nyoka. I have experienced 11 deliveries. During the sixth pregnancy, I faced a problem of losing water continuously. Then I went to hospital where I met a nurse who gave me treatment and then water stopped coming out. After the water stopped, I started bleeding heavily. The blood was all over my bed and on the floor. When the doctor saw this, he could not help me because it was not yet in my time of labour. Then he referred me from Ludzi to the district hospital.

When I arrived at the district hospital, I was welcomed by the nurses. They asked me what my problem was and I told them that I felt no pain and that I was not even close to labour but was bleeding heavily. The nurses took me to the operation theatre where they helped me through an operation. After the operation, I was put in bed and after some time I was back to my senses and realised that the problem was over, the bleeding had stopped.

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Deliveries are very dangerous. I encourage you, my fellow women, to go to hospital. Do not waste your time visiting traditional birth attendants; they do not have the skills to assist you accordingly and they cannot tell you the exact time that you are due for delivery. Therefore, you should go to hospitals for better treatment. At the hospital, they will be able to do blood transfusion if you are diagnosed anemic or if you are dehydrated. A traditional birth attendant will not be able to do this. These things can only be managed at the hospital.

Gladson Makowa is a media producer and development communication specialist from Malawi. He was formerly the Media and Communications Manager for Story Workshop, a Malawian organisation specialising in social and behaviour change communication. Gladson is currently pursuing a degree in Rural Development and Extension at the University of Malawi. Email: gladsonmakowa@yahoo.com

Listening and discussion groups are an important part of women’s participation in the Phukusi la Moyo maternal and child health programme. Discussion contributes to the learning process, allowing for questions and answers, interpretation of terminology, and feedback to the programme management team and the producers. Group decision-making and collective action are an essential part of sustained social and behavioural change.