



# A formative evaluation of the recovery public works programme in Blantyre City, Malawi



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## ABSTRACT

Public works programmes (PWP) are popular social protection instruments in the context of chronic poverty but very little has been published in the way of implementation and outcomes of these programmes. This paper presents a formative process and outcome evaluation of the recovery PWP in Blantyre City, Malawi. The evaluation used longitudinal household survey data of PWP beneficiaries, programme records and interview responses from programme staff and community leaders. Largely, the process evaluation findings showed an agreement between actual and planned activities. The outcome evaluation found indications that the PWP community assets offered some potential benefits to the communities, and that PWP wages allowed the beneficiaries to purchase some food. This however, did not translate into more meals per day, nor did the earnings prevent the decline in household assets as expected. Given a plausible PWP theory and high implementation fidelity, the PWP wage rate or number of days was either just enough to smooth participant income, or insufficient altogether, to enable achievement of more distal outcomes.

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## 1. Introduction

In Sub-Saharan Africa, unemployment levels stand at 7.5% and about 80% of the labour force is employed in the informal sector (Mo Ibrahim Foundation, 2013). Living standards in the region are also very low with 48.5% of the population living on less than \$1.25 a day, and 69.9% on less than \$2.00 a day (Mo Ibrahim Foundation, 2013). Consequently, the majority of the population are undernourished (FAO, 2013), and the condition of public infrastructure is also poor. In 2010 for instance, less than one-fifth of roads in the Sub-Saharan region were recorded as paved compared to the global average of almost three-fifth (Mo Ibrahim Foundation, 2013).

Public works programmes offer the promise of an attractive solution to these problems by providing temporary labour-intensive employment opportunities as a means to both transfer cash incomes to very poor households and develop public infrastructure. But PWPs suffer from a mixed reputation in the

development literature. On one hand, PWPs are often lauded as strong social protection instruments that economically uplift the status of poor and unemployed populations whilst providing social benefits to the whole community (Subbarao, del Ninno, Andrews, & Rodríguez-Alas, 2013). On the other hand, PWPs are said to be prone to corruption and often viewed as both administratively demanding and expensive ways of transferring resources to the poor (Grosh, 2008; Zimmermann, 2014). As a result, there is still considerable confusion as to what types of PWP interventions are most likely to bring about positive livelihood change, and how best these interventions might be delivered in different contexts.

In light of these challenges, effective programme evaluation is increasingly understood as critical to ensuring improvement-oriented reflection and learning in pro-poor development programmes (ÖIR, 2012). Within PWPs, credible monitoring and evaluation systems have been highlighted as being critical to allow for midcourse corrections and to respond to sudden changes which can inhibit effective implementation (del Ninno, Subbarao, & Milazzo, 2009). The challenge however is that most poor countries including those in Sub Saharan Africa do not have programme monitoring and evaluation systems that track information about the outcomes of the PWPs (Subbarao et al., 2013). This therefore poses problems for programme evaluators in their attempts to conduct systematic evaluations of PWPs.

Abbreviations: PWP, public work programme.

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As far as documented PWP evaluations go, much of the emphasis has been placed on summative evaluations (those that examine overall programme merit when it comes to an end) with a focus on assessment of the targeting efficiency and programme impact (del Ninno et al., 2009). Literature about formative evaluations is very limited, more especially when it comes to examining the actual PWP implementation process. A formative evaluation is an assessment that takes place before or during a project’s implementation to improve its design and performance (<http://evaluationtoolbox.net.au>). This paper fills that gap of knowledge with a formative evaluation that combines both process and outcome assessments of a community-based public works programme in Blantyre City, Malawi. The process evaluation employs measures to assess programme implementation and thus provides detailed information about how PWPs work as well as the level of fidelity with which PWPs are implemented. Uniquely, this formative evaluation provides a comprehensive conceptual framework to aid systematic evaluations of both the implementation process and outcomes of PWPs.

1.1. Evaluations of PWPs

While previous research has explored elements of programme success, regional variations in the effectiveness and the specific systems of monitoring and evaluation required to support implementation of PWPs are less well understood (del Ninno et al., 2009). Most evaluations of PWPs have shown them to offer short-term benefits as safety-nets to participants, but emphasise that PWPs cannot be seen as a long-term solution to poverty (Davies, Guenther, Leavy, Mitchell, & Tanner, 2009 ; Subbarao et al., 1997; del Ninno et al., 2009). Some evaluations have shown a positive relationship between PWPs and food security or general livelihood improvement. For instance, an evaluation of the national PWP in Malawi showed an improvement in the number of meals per day among participants when compared to non-participants

(Mvula, Chirwa, Zgovu, & Kadzamira, 2000). Similarly, Galasso and Ravallion (2004) found that the 2002 Jefes programme in Argentina allowed 2% of Argentina’s population to rise above the country’s food poverty line. In the same vein, final reports of several livelihood and food security projects have also shown some livelihood related benefits in terms of household income increases and higher agricultural productivity (Coupe & Pasteur, 2009; Innovative Resources Management, 2005; VSO, 2011)

In Latvia, the national PWP increased the short-term incomes of beneficiaries by 37% relative to non-beneficiaries (Azam et al., 2012). Consequently, beneficiaries were 7.3% less likely to cut down consumption on staple foods than non-beneficiaries. These food security gains are collaborated by Berhane, Hoddinott, Kumar, and Taffesse (2011) who found that the PWP in Ethiopia significantly reduced the period of food shortages by 1.05 months.

In a multi-country review of PWPs in Sub-Saharan Africa, McCord (2012) reports that PWPs prevent distress sell off of assets and also check depletion of productive assets. In some cases, there have actually been reports of increase in asset holdings among participants to a record of 58% (Haushofer & Shapiro, 2013). On utilisation of PWP wage earnings, Mattinen and Ogden (2006) found that the largest proportion of earnings from Somalia’s Action Contre la Faim PWP went to repayment of debts, and purchase of food and livestock. Similarly, McCord (2004) found that more than three-quarters of the PWP participants in South Africa (KwaZulu Natal and Limpopo) spent their wages on food. Furthermore, the participants reported an increase in material household assets as well as financial assets like savings.

Despite the anti-poverty gains, evidence as to the impact of community asset projects on livelihoods is comparatively thin. This is due to the fact that the socioeconomic outcomes of the community assets are often overlooked therefore not monitored (McCord, 2005). Most of the available studies only mention the assets created and how participants felt about them. Subbarao (2003) for instance, reports that the Maharashtra Employment

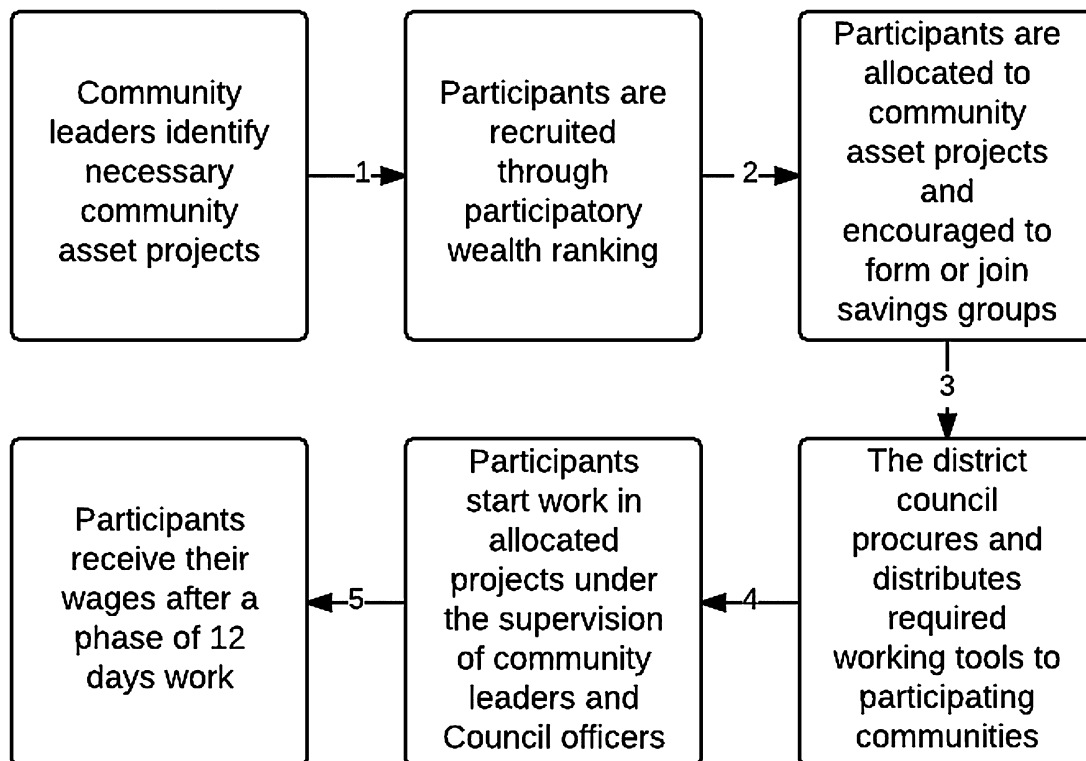


Fig. 1. The PWP service utilisation chart.

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