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REPORT FROM MALAWI

June/July 2007

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Lilongwe is not quite what I was expecting in terms of an African capital and I can't help but compare it to the other African cities I have visited, such as Dakar, Harare, and Kampala. From these past experiences, I make my way around the city expecting to encounter terrible traffic, congested pedestrian walkways, heat and humidity, and pollution. But Lilongwe is surprisingly manageable and far from overwhelming. It's quite easy to get around town by foot or minibus. The climate is warm and pleasant. Many of the streets are wide and tree-lined. The commercial district displays the county's recent economic success, with new buildings and stores that remind me of Southern California strip malls. The central market, with vendors selling everything from produce to light bulbs that have been recycled and transformed into oil lanterns, is not crowded or difficult to navigate.

The afternoon of my arrival I meet with the Director of the organization I am working with to discuss goals and strategies for my time in Malawi. When I first established contact with the organization last winter, they expressed concern that the amount of money and attention directed to HIV/AIDS was sidelining other issues, which resonates with my academic interests in understanding the impact of international development and the roles of donor organizations and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). In May the NGO held a forum with donors and other NGOs—a "stakeholders" meeting, to use the NGO's parlance—to discuss how best to integrate HIV/AIDS funding along with other development concerns so that one issue is not addressed at the expense of another. A follow-up meeting is planned for some time in July or early August. In the coming weeks I will collect data on how the NGO field has evolved in recent decades. This information will help to set a framework for the stakeholders meeting so that participants can discuss in greater depth the status of the NGO field in Malawi and where future development efforts should be directed.

I begin my work by trying to get a sense of who the key players are in the NGO field, and which actors and organizations—from government offices to international donors—have the most authority and influence over others. The Director refers me to other local NGOs as well as to Government Ministries. Each interview adds a new piece of information and suggests the next step of my work. Some connections and referrals are due purely to chance. One day at lunch during my first week here, I strike up a conversation with a gentleman who happens to work with the UN Food and Agriculture Organization. After brief introductions he recounts his experience working with NGOs and the UN and continues at length with recommendations on how I should proceed, tips that later prove to be quite valuable.

Everyone I meet expresses an interest in my work and corroborates the concern about the discrepancy in resources for HIV/AIDS and non-HIV/AIDS issues. However, to arrive at

a more thorough understanding of development efforts in Malawi I want more than anecdotal evidence. I envision my work in two phases—the first devoted to collecting archival and quantitative information on the history of NGOs in Malawi and the second focusing on interviews with NGO staff to get their perspective on changes in the NGO field.

While in the States I learned of two archival resources: one, documenting HIV/AIDS NGO efforts, is housed at the Government's National AIDS Commission (NAC); the other, listing NGO activity across sectors, is maintained by the Council for Non-Governmental Organizations (CONGOMA), which is itself a NGO. Through my conversation with the UN staff member I learn of two additional resources maintained by government offices: the Registrar General's Office, and the NGO Board. From my initial informational interviews I find out that in order to operate in Malawi NGOs must be certified with the Registrar General's Offices, CONGOMA, and the NGO Board. International donors, particularly multi-lateral and bilateral funding agencies, require such certification from NGOs as part of an application for funding. I don't expect that any one of these archives will provide a perfect account of NGO field developments, but by using information from all four I hope to obtain a better perspective on how NGOs have changed with time.

I spend most of the first two weeks in Lilongwe networking and trying to learn more about where the NGO archives are located and how I can get access to them. Fortunately, NAC's archive is located in Lilongwe. After several text messages, phone calls, and a few meetings that are cancelled at the last minute, I succeed in securing some time with the department in charge of NGO relations. They maintain a thorough database of HIV/AIDS NGOs from 2004 to the present, and are more than willing to give me a copy of the database. To avoid my research being a process of extraction, taking data without giving something back to those that shared the information, I offer to return to the NAC offices in a few week's time to present the analyses I have done on the data they have provided and to teach any interested staff the steps I used in conducting the analyses.

While the NAC archives are helpful, the period of data coverage is not that extensive. Ideally, I would have data from the mid 1980s to the present to gain a sense of what the NGO sector was like before donors began funding HIV/AIDS. However, with each additional interview I realize that obtaining such details will be difficult. Looking at newspaper archives might be one way of overcoming this obstacle. Newspapers list advertisements for NGO staff openings. By looking at a sampling of newspapers I can obtain a sense of what NGOs are most active in Malawi, whether they are local or international NGOs, and what development sector is represented (i.e., HIV/AIDS, agriculture, etc.). It turns out that the newspaper archive for Malawi's oldest and most well read newspaper, The Daily Times, is located in Blantyre, the country's other major city. Fortunately, the remaining NGO archives, CONGOMA, the Registrar General's Office, and the NGO Board are also located in Blantyre. It looks like a road trip is in order. On Sunday I will make the 6-hour trip down to Blantyre and spend about a week there in the hopes of collecting more information.

More soon from Blantyre...

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I've spent the last week in Blantyre collecting archival information on NGO activity. The city itself is older than Lilongwe and certainly feels more urban with taller buildings, denser space, and more people milling about in the streets. Whereas Lilongwe gives way to vast rolling planes, Blantyre is at a higher altitude and is surrounded by hills and mountains. I have underestimated the intensity of the Southern hemisphere winter and I am not prepared for the colder climate of Blantyre. Consequently, I spend the week wearing every layer I brought with me in an effort to keep warm.

On Monday I head to the Registrar General's Office. The first staff person I meet describes the necessary forms and procedures for officially registering as an NGO in Malawi. His office consists of bookshelf after bookshelf containing file folders for each NGO registration. As I sit and listen to his explanation I keep hoping that at some point he will mention that an electronic database exists capturing all this information - the idea of going through stacks and stacks of folders of decades of material is none too appealing. Fortunately, he refers me to his supervisor, who, in turn, refers me to another department that does maintain electronic records of NGO registration. "We only have information through 2005," he says apologetically. I assure him that such time coverage is pretty good, although I am a little curious as to what sorts of NGOs were in operation in the early twentieth century. Clearly the NGOs running in 1925 were not the same as those that appeared following the Second World War and proliferated dramatically throughout the globe from the 1960s onward. Looking at the dataset reminds me of the ambiguity that the term NGO possesses, a label that is attached to an incredibly diverse array of organizations. It also reminds me that I need to arrive at a precise definition of what I mean by NGO since this organizational form is central to my research.

Unfortunately, not all archives are in such convenient electronic format. Past issues of The Daily Times newspaper are stored, not on a computer or micro-fiche as I hoped (however, foolishly and unrealistically), but in massive volumes that fill up all the shelves of a cluttered, dusty, dark, chilly, little room set apart from main office room used by the paper's reporters. I spend the next several days going through old newspapers page by page with cold, ink stained hands listening to the sounds of the BBC World, CNN, and the jovial shouts and laughter of the reporters coming from the other side of the archive room door.

In order to understand the impact of HIV/AIDS prioritization by donors I need to know what the development and NGO scene was like in the years before HIV/AIDS was recognized as an important issue. I start with newspapers from 1985 - roughly a decade before international attention really focused on HIV/AIDS in Africa. Looking at every issue for the past twenty years would be too time consuming and not an efficient use of my time here. I sample one full week of newspapers every other month for each year from 1985 to 2005 - so about 840 issues altogether. All this information is hand written in my notebook and I will have to transfer it to my computer to pick up on any patterns and trends - a task I will save for when I return to Lilongwe. My initial impression is that

while there are a few advertisements for HIV/AIDS related NGOs appearing in the late 1990s, there is a noticeable increase in HIV/AIDS related NGO advertising after 2001.

I conclude my week with a meeting with CONGOMA. Prior to my departure from Lilongwe I sent an email to CONGOMA and called their offices to introduce myself and outline what I hope to learn from them. For whatever reason the email was not received and the staff I meet are not the ones I spoke with over the phone. The CONGOMA Project Officers require that I submit another letter of introduction to be examined by the Executive Director. After reviewing my request CONGOMA promises to get back to me. Such formality and bureaucracy is a little frustrating since CONGOMA is one of the main reasons I made the trip down from Lilongwe - but there is not too much I can do about it. Fortunately, my meeting with the NGO Board is more informative and productive. I leave their offices with an electronic copy of their archives listing registered NGOs from 2002 to the present.

I will have to wait and see how CONGOMA responds, but for the most part I think I have collected as much archival information as I am going to get while here. When I get back to Lilongwe I will switch gears and focus on interviewing NGO staff working in different development sectors. The archival information will also help to guide these discussions as I will be able to ask more specific questions.

Now it's time to board a packed mini-bus to make the return trip to Lilongwe. Until next week.