

Public servants as development brokers: the shaping of INGOs' reducing teenage pregnancy projects in Malawi's primary education sector

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Abstract

As intermediaries between donors and beneficiaries 'local development brokers' play a crucial role in shaping the implementation of development initiatives. They tie together different interests through acts of translation and organize development interfaces, but also pursue their own ambitions. This article examines junior public servants in Malawi's primary education sector, who as a result of shifting aid modalities and priorities, have become development brokers in the implementation of multiple NGO projects. Studying their various 'broker' roles provides an analytical lens through which to examine the active co-construction of development initiatives, and how brokering affects their position and the school as a public institution. The analysis is based on ethnographic fieldwork at an under-resourced primary school in Mangochi district and on the implementation of norm-promoting projects aiming to keep girls in school and reduce teenage pregnancies. The paper describes how brokers translate global norms into messages that resonate locally, facilitate NGO activities and strategically present successes in line with project discourses. The paper argues that these strategies are intended to sustain the projects to benefit the school, the students and to supplement low salaries, thereby prioritizing short-term benefits over the quality of education. Donors' and INGOs' well-intentioned efforts to strengthen country systems, might result in undermining broader educational goals if these attempts come in the form of multiple small-scale NGO projects. These critical

reflections do not travel up the aid chain, as brokers are incentivized to produce successes.

Key words: Malawi; development brokers; NGOs; education sector; public servants; girls' education; sexuality education.

Development brokers: dynamic roles and actors

Anthropologists and sociologists have theorized the role of the intermediaries positioned between donors and local beneficiaries, arguing that they are 'local development brokers' and 'translators' who are crucial to the implementation of development initiatives (Bierschenk, Chauveau, & Olivier de Sardan, 2002; Lewis and Mosse, 2006; Merry, 2006; Watkins, Swidler, & Hannan, 2012). Bierschenk and colleagues (2002) conceptualize local development brokers as representatives of local communities; crucial in mobilizing resources, communicating needs to donors and 'respond(ing) to the dynamics of "project availability" in the development world' (p.24). These actors create room for manoeuvre in complex normative landscapes (Bierschenk, et al., 2002), in which they also pursue their own ambitions (Watkins and Swidler, 2012). The 'local development broker' emerged as an analytical category in the context of the 'denationalization' of aid starting in the 1970s in Sub-Saharan Africa, during which economic liberalization and political democratization led to state withdrawal, while non-governmental organisations (NGOs) increasingly captured development funds (Bierschenk, et al., 2002). Whereas before village heads brokered between the (post)colonial state and local kinship systems, 'local development brokers' working for and often remunerated by NGOs, now began to assume this intermediary role.

With new forms of transnational connections between people, information and ideas, the roles of local development brokers have diversified (Lewis and Mosse, 2006). In tandem with the shift of development practice from financial or instrumental assistance to the promotion of global norms (Fichtner, 2012) or the targeting of individual behaviour (Mosse and Lewis, 2005), brokers have increasingly become 'norm entrepreneurs' aiming to modify the conduct of beneficiaries, rather than mobilizing resources (Bierschenk, 2014a, p. 84). Merry (2006) uses the term 'knowledge brokers' to describe individuals who translate discourses and practices operating in fields of unequal power, channelling the flow of information from one space to another. Because they often have greater knowledge of and commitment to one side rather than the other, knowledge brokers determine this process of translation (Merry, 2006).

The way in which brokers manage their social space and translate projects to tie together different interests, provides a rich analytical perspective for examining development practices ethnographically (Lewis and Mosse, 2006, p. 20). While existing analyses of development brokers tend to focus on locals or nationals employed by NGOs (Watkins, et al., 2012), this article highlights a

different kind of broker – junior public servants who ‘broker’ the implementation of multiple NGO health and development projects in Malawi’s education sector. Although they lack a formal role, these officials are crucial in realizing the implementation of international NGO (INGO)-driven development projects, particularly in the health and education sectors. This reflects the fact that, with growing political commitment to strengthening, rather than undermining, public sector institutions, the public sector of countries in the global south have become important targets of global public policies (Bierschenk, 2014a). Current policy implementation thus entails the ‘co-production of public services [...] by international, state-national, and private actors (global, national, local NGOs)’ (Bierschenk, 2014a, p. 81). This makes the education sector – and arguably the health sector too – a site of political conflict where international development goals and national policies are mediated, negotiated, and translated (Fichtner, 2012, p. 167).

This article provides an ethnographic analysis of how junior public servants – Primary Education Advisors, head teachers and teachers – take on various ‘broker’ roles in the implementation of INGO-driven health and development programmes in Malawi’s public education sector. Focusing on NGO projects whose main aim is to keep girls in school and reduce teenage pregnancies, I analyse how head teachers broker resources in an under-resourced education sector, while their junior colleagues, the teachers, work as ‘knowledge brokers’ translating global norms about girls’ education, and sexual and reproductive health and rights into the local context.

Malawi is a particularly interesting case, because it is a donor-dependent country where donors and international and national NGOs play a large role in the co-production of public services, such as health and education. Aid modalities have been unstable, as multiple corruption scandals – for example ‘Cashgate’ in 2013 – have resulted in donors losing faith in the government and have led to recurrent shifts between providing budget support to the government and channelling funds directly to NGOs (Banik and Chasukwa, 2016, pp. 149-150). Many of these NGOs are also committed to strengthening national structures and institutions – for instance by targeting schools and health centres with training workshops. This opens a large window for junior public servants to take on supplementary roles as development brokers.

I analyse the role of junior public servants’ in the active co-construction of international NGO projects in relation to their socio-material realities. I show how NGOs play a key role in reshaping the state’s role and how state and NGO realities are intertwined in complex ways. Junior public servant brokers in the under-resourced Malawian education sector perform their various roles strategically to benefit the school, the students and themselves. While acting as brokers for NGO initiatives presents an attractive opportunity, it also has unintended consequences for the workload of junior public servants and for the under-resourced school, as it displaces core tasks. Giving priority to a multiplicity of NGO activities can therefore undermine broader educational goals.

Ethnographic context and method

The analysis is based on ethnographic fieldwork in Mangochi district, Malawi between May 2015 and August 2016. The fieldwork was conducted as part of a broader analysis of the interactions between INGOs and local communities, focusing on the More Educated Girls – Reducing Teenage Pregnancies in Malawi (RTP) project. RTP is a project funded with NOK 30 million by the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD), assigned to Save the Children Norway (SCN). SCN had no previous experience in Malawi and tasked Save the Children International Malawi (SCIM) with designing the project, which was implemented by SCIM, in partnership with the national NGOs the Forum for African Women Educationalists in Malawi (FAWEMA) and Banja La Mtsogolo (BLM) – Marie Stopes International’s national affiliate in Malawi. Reflecting that almost a third of Malawian girls between the ages of 15 and 19 have begun childbearing (National Statistical Office [NSO] Malawi and ICF, 2017), that grade repetition is high and that many girls drop out of school before the final year of primary school (UNESCO), RTP’s main aim was to reduce teenage pregnancies by 10 per cent. SCIM implemented the project over three years (January 2014–December 2016) in six administrative districts, selected because of the relatively high rates of teenage pregnancies and the potential to create synergies with other SCIM projects, such as Keeping Girls In School (KGIS).

With my Malawian research assistant, [add name], I conducted participant observation in the implementation of RTP’s activities in various ‘education zones’ in Mangochi district. We observed safe space mapping exercises, child protection committee training, discussions with communities on the root causes of school dropout, open days at primary schools, donor visits, BLM outreach services, interviews with journalists, and visits to health centres. I had regular discussions with the two implementing team members and assisted the RTP team with analysing data provided by BLM on the number of distributed contraceptives. I participated in annual RTP meetings and national project review meetings with the partner NGOs and senior government officials, and analysed project documents. I also had discussions with staff members from the SCIM head office and joined the launch of SCIM’s Inclusive Education (IE) project funded by the Norwegian Embassy.

During fieldwork, I lived in a semi-rural ethnically diverse village on the shores of Lake Malawi. My research assistant and I spoke regularly with local students about their experiences at school, reproductive health, ambitions and interactions with their relatives. We observed how teenagers – both in and out of school and from different grade levels – spent their time, interacted with their peers, spoke about each other and dealt with livelihood insecurity. We also spoke with teachers from different schools who lived in our community. Furthermore, we participated in development activities and meetings on a variety of topics implemented by different NGOs.

Many of these activities took place at the local primary school and either SCIM staff or the head teacher invited us to participate. In addition, I asked permission from the facilitator - either NGO staff or midlevel public servants - to participate. These activities enabled informal conversations with the facilitators, the head teacher, the deputy head teacher and teachers from different schools,

community health workers, community leaders and committee members from different villages. My research assistant often translated into English from the national language *Chichewa*, or the local language, *Chiyao*, except for teacher training sessions which were held in English.

More structured data collection consisted of a focus group discussion with five teachers and interviews with a senior officer at the District Education Office, the Primary Education Advisor (PEA), the head teacher, the Mother Support Group (MSG), traditional and religious leaders and staff from Community Based Organizations and NGOs. Both my assistant and I took notes during these interviews and I transcribed them immediately after. I recorded the focus group discussion with teachers. We also undertook classroom observations and accompanied the PEA on a tour around different schools in her zone during which I spoke with head teachers and several teenage mothers. In the analysis, I have paid particular attention to triangulation of data; between observations, informal conversations, interviews, project documents, and changes over time. During my absence from the field and after completion of fieldwork, I stayed in contact with the RTP district team and the head teacher via WhatsApp who continued sending updates regarding RTP's activities and phasing-out, (NGO) activities that had taken place at the studied school and NGO-organized training sessions and meetings the head teacher participated in. The continuation of relationships – both in and out of the field – was instrumental in building trust, receiving invitations to participate in development activities, and moving beyond the 'official' donor discourse to access 'private speak'.

Donor-led reforms

My analysis of junior public servants as development brokers can best be understood within the wider context of the donor-led reforms that have shaped Malawi's public sectors for decades, and which have paved the way for schools to be sites of NGO project implementation.

Although donors' intentions to adhere to global guidelines on aid effectiveness (OECD) have resulted in the development of a National Education Sector Plan in Malawi, the education sector continues to be highly fragmented. In the 2014-15 financial year, the education sector received assistance from 15 different funders, who implemented 52 different activities, and 63 per cent of funding consisted of off-budget support directed towards specific projects (Ministry of Finance Economic Planning and Development, n.d.). The education sector is severely underfunded. Mangochi district documents indicate that, compared to other sectors, education had the largest negative balance. In keeping with INGOs' stated intentions to strengthen existing national structures, strategies and policies, and in line with global guidelines on aid effectiveness (OECD), schools were important implementation sites. Projects implemented through the education sector should have, according to Save the Children project documents, a sustainable impact after phasing out.

Donors have influenced Malawi's education policies for decades (see Mundy, 2002 for a review). In 1992, USAID introduced a focus on gender inequality in education, which linked the aim of improving education to reducing fertility. This resulted in the Girls' Attainment in Basic Literacy and

Education (GABLE) initiative, which aimed to develop a gender appropriate curriculum. It also launched community mobilisation campaigns – outsourced to NGOs – and introduced fee waivers for girls in primary school, alongside infrastructure development (Hau, 1997). In 1993, a readmission policy was adopted, which allowed girls to return to school one year after giving birth. In 1994, the new democratic government introduced Free Primary Education for all, which resulted in a doubling of the number of students in primary school (Mundy, 2002). However, infrastructure development and the recruitment of teachers, failed to keep pace with the increased enrolment resulting from the policy (Chimombo, 2005). The consequences were large classes and reduced quality of education. To date, basic skills, such as mathematics and language, remain low. A World Bank and USAID-funded system-wide approach in the early 1990s aimed to improve education quality, but was undermined by an increasing number of donors, different conditionalities, poor coordination and large overlap in projects (Mundy, 2002). As a response to the HIV/AIDS crisis, UNICEF has played a large role in developing and implementing Life Skills Education, which was introduced in all Malawian primary schools in the early 2000s (Chirwa and Naidoo, 2014). As part of RTP, SCIM joined several donors in reviewing the life skills curriculum hoping to broaden the information on sexual and reproductive health and rights. The integration of reproductive health and education was problematic, as reflected in conflicting policies from different government ministries. The Ministry of Health allowed for *distribution* of contraceptives to youth of all ages, while the Ministry of Education Science and Technology only allowed for providing *information* in primary and secondary schools. Therefore, BLM’s outreach services had to take place at least 100 meters from the school.

Schools as targets of NGO interventions

During fieldwork, it emerged that RTP was only one of many INGO-implemented projects on girls’ education and reproductive health in Mangochi’s education sector, reflecting a global trend whereby development interventions increasingly target adolescent girls’ education and health in an anticipatory manner (Adams, Murphy, & Clarke, 2009).

Primary schools were important sites of implementation for NGOs to reach their intended beneficiaries, mostly adolescent girls. Mangochi was a popular choice for such interventions because of its ‘bad’ indicators in the fields of education and health. For example, 28.3 per cent of girls aged 15-19 had begun childbearing, the total fertility rate per woman was 7.0, and the median years of completed education for women was 2.7 – compared to a country average of 25.6; 5.7 and 4.9 respectively (National Statistical Office [NSO] Malawi and ICF, 2011). In 2015, there were 69 registered NGOs and this number has continued to increase. Within the district, NGOs also tended to select their catchment areas based on indicators. A senior official at the District Education Office explained the district played a role in distributing the NGOs so the whole district was covered: ‘Katuli zone has the worst indicators in the district, so all NGOs want to rush there. But we can’t have all NGOs at one place. So then we advise them to go somewhere else’. With a total of 265, the number of primary schools in each of the 17 education zones varied from 11 to 19. RTP targeted all primary

schools in seven selected zones, whereas other NGOs only targeted a few schools in their selected zones. Local NGOs tended to target a number of villages close to their offices. Consequently, every zone and school had its own patchwork of NGO initiatives. This unequal distribution of resources is characteristic for fragmented bureaucracies (Bierschenk, 2014b).

A patchwork of NGO initiatives

My analysis zooms in on one public primary school in Mangochi, located in one of RTP's target zones and the implementing site of numerous other NGO projects. During the 2015/16 school year, this school in Mangochi had over 3,000 registered students, and served seven villages in the area. Built in the 1970s for 200 students and insufficiently expanded since then, the school was bursting at the seams. Thirteen overfull classrooms meant that the remaining 18 classes took place outside under trees. There was a lack of materials, as every class had only a few instruction books. Furthermore, the number of teacher' houses – four for 57 teachers – was woefully insufficient. However, unlike schools in more remote areas, the classrooms did have benches and tables.

The school was highly dependent on NGOs. It took the head teacher one and a half hours to describe the numerous development initiatives taking place within the school. The school received assistance from two UN agencies, one international development agency, two INGOs, five national NGOs (which were subcontracted by INGOs), two locally based NGOs, four (local) companies, and there were three community committees and five Youth clubs created by NGOs (see Figure 1). The head teacher – with assistance from his deputy – was the person who managed these projects at the school.

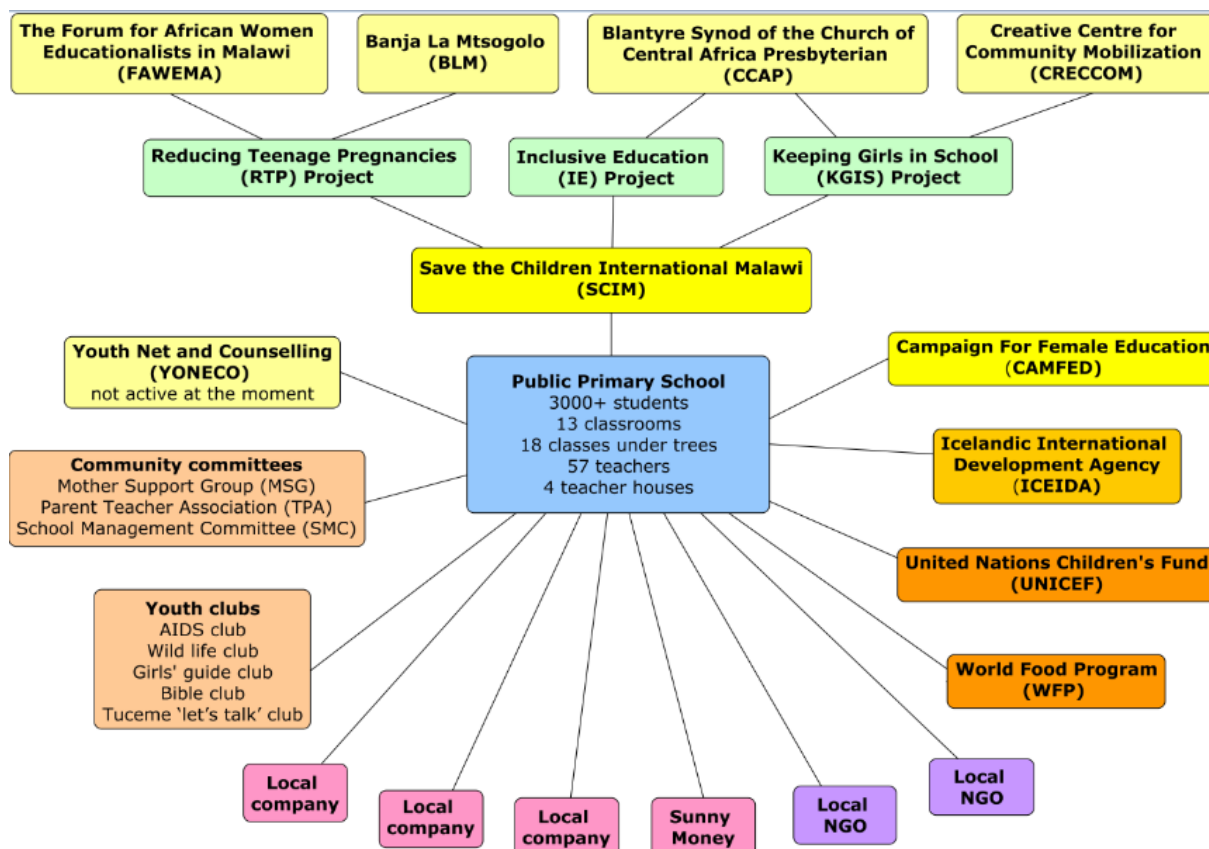


Figure 1. NGO initiatives at the primary school, October 2015–August 2016

The walls of their office were covered with hand-written posters, and traces of present and past projects were all over the room, reflecting the continuously changing composition of projects and donor priorities. Above the head teacher’s desk was an overview of the different Youth clubs and the teachers responsible for each club. There was an AIDS club, Girls’ Guide club, Wildlife club, Bible club and Interaction-in-English club. However, the head teacher explained that many of these clubs were not active anymore. On the opposite wall, hang a metal plate that – the head teacher explained – the school had received from Youth Net and Counselling (YONECO), which stated that marriage below the age of 16 was not allowed. Though in 2015, the legal age of marriage increased to 18. A carton box on top of the file cabinet was a remainder from a project by YONECO focused on sexual violence. The project had phased out and the ‘suggestion box’ was out of use, ‘but the learners [students] still report it [inappropriate behaviour from teachers]’ said the head teacher. Several solar lamps lay on one of the desks, part of a new project to provide student with lamps to use at home.

The head teacher explained that many new NGO projects had been introduced since 2012, when HIV projects gave way to multiple projects aimed at preventing school dropout among girls,

reducing teenage pregnancies, ending child marriage, and motivating teenage mothers to re-enrol. He correctly attributed this shift to the current global focus on girls' education: 'I think this is the priority of donors'.

There was a large focus on changing girls' behaviour and unfavourable community norms, through norm promotion, material support or a combination of the two. Core to many of these projects was *sensitization* – 'a set of practices aimed at making project beneficiaries willing to accept change and encouraging them to express their problems in conformity with prevailing discourses' (Rossi, 2006, p. 28). For example, a substantial part of SCIM's projects consisted of training and sensitization meetings targeting teachers, community committees and community leaders. Teachers received training in order to apply knowledge and skills in their teaching strategies, while the NGO tasked community committees – such as the Mother Support Group – with sensitizing the community on the importance of girls' education, so girls would remain in school or re-enrol after giving birth.

RTP had a *multisectoral approach* to reducing teenage pregnancies and preventing dropout among girls. As explained by a SCN staff member, this was a response to the recent priority shift in the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, from maternal health to primary education, and an attempt to integrate the two areas. With its *behaviour change approach* the project was a typical example of promoting global norms to influence the behaviour of the intended beneficiaries. Through teacher training in providing psychosocial support, it aimed to improve the learning environment, increase girls' self-efficacy, and students' knowledge about sexual reproductive health and rights. BLM outreach services were tasked with improving access to contraceptives. KGIS, on the other hand, combined norm promotion and material support by training female teachers to act as role models for girls and providing a monthly cash transfer to girls in the 7th grade. Other NGO initiatives focused on improving girls' education brought role models to the school, provided various teaching materials, pencils and notebooks or constructed toilets for girls. A programme dedicated to infrastructure and capacity building also placed particular emphasis on girls and strengthened the Mother Support Group.

PEAs and head teachers as resource brokers

The Primary Education Advisor (PEA), the head teacher, and, to a lesser extent, the deputy head teacher were crucial actors who organized the development activities at the school. Without these brokers, the implementation of NGO projects would not have been possible. Facilitating NGOs and donors access to the school, teachers, students and community groups, enabled these brokers to accrue benefits for the school, the students, and themselves. By accepting anything that NGOs offered, they operated as resource-brokers for an under-resourced school.

Each education zone in Mangochi district is supervised by a Primary Education Advisor (PEA). The PEA of the studied zone described her job as 'supervising and training teachers and convincing

the community of the importance of education'. She covered a large geographical area, and reaching the individual schools by public transport could take up to two hours. She explained that NGO staff contacted her when project activities had to be organised in schools and she communicated this to the respective head teachers. She also had a key role in training teachers for various NGO projects, and collected data on dropouts due to pregnancies and early marriages, which she communicated to SCIM staff, who reported the progress to the NGO's head office in the capital.

At the start of fieldwork the school's management consisted of a head teacher and two deputies; all of them friendly and energetic men. The head teacher was transferred to an inspector position and one of the deputies was promoted to head teacher. They lived in the few available teacher houses, which were constructed as part of the Icelandic International Development Agency's (ICEIDA) programme. The school management organized a variety of activities at the school. The requests came to them from the PEA or occasionally directly from NGO staff and they took pride in responding to the requests. Activities varied from preparing classrooms for teacher training, sensitization meetings with community groups, interviews with teenage mothers who had returned to school, the coordination of the construction of classrooms or distributing materials. On one occasion a girl in the 7th grade enthusiastically mentioned that all girls in her class had received 5000MK from the KGIS project and that the head teacher had transferred this to everyone through Airtel Money, a phone banking service. Another project allowed the head teacher to broker other resources for the school: 'One company sells solar torches to families for a reduced price. They have to pay a small fee to charge the lamps at the school and we can use that money to buy painkillers, and books and uniforms for needy students'. He also provided NGOs with lists of students who needed financial assistance with transferring to secondary school, and notified the Mother Support Group of absent girls who needed to be chased up. Additionally, the school management organized other activities, such as the distribution of schistosomiasis medication, monthly food distribution during droughts, government meetings (in which extension workers or police officers addressed community representatives and formed new committees), NGOs training sessions and community group meetings.

They, thus, facilitated access to the actors targeted by a particular NGO activity, whenever this was requested. The school management had little influence over scheduling these activities. SCIM staff explained there was little flexibility as the schedule was predetermined and they had to submit progress reports to head office. This was evident in the PEA receiving instructions from SCIM staff a couple of days in advance to facilitate a training session for all female teachers, which she agreed to do. Despite this last minute planning, the school management responded enthusiastically to NGO requests. For example, when SCIM staff notified the head teacher of a forthcoming donor visit and asked him to inform the Mother Support Group and 'bring out the best activities to please the visitors I am coming with', he happily consented.

The tendency to accept all NGO activities, reflected the severe underfunding of the education sector. As a senior official at the District Education Office said: 'We never turn down aid.

We are hungry for anyone who can help us.’ The previous head teacher claimed that ‘the NGOs are doing a great job, the school would not have managed without them’. NGO projects had become part of the school’s economy. Accepting NGO activities and maintaining good relationships with NGO staff was a strategy designed to secure present and future resources.

Brokers’ gains

Apart from benefits for the school’s economy and students, brokers also benefitted personally. For most project activities they received allowances which formed an important element of their livelihoods. Furthermore, successful brokers received more requests from NGOs to implement project activities, and gained recognition from the community.

For many activities participants received refreshments and/or allowances for lunch or transport. The head teacher selected teachers to participate in these activities and was, therefore, in a position to control who got access to resources. He described this as challenging, since all the teachers wanted to benefit from the allowances. Based on their qualifications teachers earned between MK50,000 and 80,000 a month (roughly between 75 and 125 US dollars). The low salaries, delayed payments, inflation, and lack of teacher housing meant that many teachers struggled to pay rent and provide for their families. Because of economic decline, teachers increasingly depended on side businesses to secure their livelihoods and that of their social networks (Anders 2002). These took the form of baking and selling biscuits, farming, or taking on private tuition after school hours. Brokering for NGOs can be seen as one such side business. The PEA, head teacher and his deputy were able to accumulate more allowances than the teachers, as they participated in or facilitated NGO activities more frequently. As a result the head teacher had been able to buy a fridge for his personal use.

A common complaint among NGO staff was that an ‘allowance culture’ constituted an impediment to their activities – many public servants were only willing to perform tasks for NGOs or attend meetings if they received allowances and some senior officials merely signed the attendance form, cashed the allowances and then disappeared. It is well known that allowances can alter the motivation of actors to implement education reforms (Charton, 2014) Yet, motivated public servants were crucial for the successful implementation of NGO projects. SCIM staff described certain PEAs they collaborated with as more willing than others. Therefore, in practice, certain PEAs were favoured and had a more active role in facilitating training sessions. A SCIM staff member explained: ‘It was supposed to be equal, but activeness, performance and not demanding allowances too much determined the frequency of involvement’. SCIM considered the PEA and head teacher of the zone and school we studied as enthusiastic. The head teacher explained this was why SCIM had asked him to participate in a training of trainers for one of their projects and train teachers in a different zone.

Head teachers also retained their own position by successfully accumulating resources for the school, while also gaining recognition from the community. Two students (grade 7 and 8) brought

up the departure of the previous head teacher and mentioned he had done a lot of good things for the school. Because of his efforts there were extra school blocks and teacher houses, for which the students contributed money. There were, thus, also personal incentives for continuous participation in and accepting a multiplicity of NGO activities at the school.

Unintended consequences for the public sector

Giving priority to the requests of the multiple NGO projects put pressure on the school and increased the workload of junior public servants, who delegated some of their duties to their subordinates. Teachers struggled to perform extra tasks in an under-resourced school and were demotivated by the lack of compensation from NGOs to perform activities on their behalf. Giving priority to NGOs' use of classrooms, regularly jeopardized the quality of teaching.

The sheer volume of activity overcrowded the under-resourced school. Almost on a weekly basis, two classes had to merge to make space for activities, which resulted in teachers having to teach 150 students at once. While some NGO activities displaced the school's teaching activities, other NGOs organized training sessions during the weekend in order not to interfere with the school schedule, but nevertheless required the deputy or head teacher to be present to keep the school open and, sometimes, organise refreshments. The village chief expressed his concern about this and initiated the construction of a small building – with bricks provided by the community – next to the village mosque where the community groups could meet.

Furthermore, the PEA and head teacher found that their workload increased considerably because they gave so much time to the implementation of NGO projects. As the head teacher explained 'These NGOs give us a lot of pressure on top of the big work load we already have'. He estimated that 30 per cent of his tasks were related to NGO activities. However, many of these activities he considered part of his duties as head teacher. They were just 'a matter of proper planning and delegation'. The PEA mentioned she felt the extra work was important, but it also increased the amount she had to do. During the RTP project review meeting, district sector managers complained about the work overload in the education and health sectors and remarked that PEAs were often engaged in other activities and often delegated their duties. Delegating educational and administrative tasks to their subordinates was often the only way PEAs and head teachers managed to combine facilitating NGO activities with their normal duties. This became clear in a KGIS training session when one of the teachers complained that the procedure for reporting when a girl has dropped out of school was 'too long and section heads and head teachers are too busy'. The PEA answered: 'They can delegate this to the teachers'.

Delegating was problematic, because teachers also had an incredible workload. A teacher explained she worked long hours and struggled to keep order in her 'classroom', which took place under a tree and consisted of 158 students before she requested splitting the class in two. Very often when we visited the school it was chaotic: students were running around and making noise outside

the classrooms. Students explained that teachers were often absent and that students did not pay attention during classes if they did not respect the teacher. These observations suggest teachers struggled to work under such conditions. Furthermore, the teachers invariably integrated the Youth club activities into their own teaching methodology rather than following the RTP's project manual which recommended weekly group discussion and interactive learning. One of the teachers said: 'Sometimes we counsel them, advise them, talk about HIV/AIDS, motivating them, encouraging them. We do that sometimes after the lesson, sometimes after break time'. She continued: 'these [Youth club] activities hinder the timetable of the learners [students]'. One of SCIM staff members mentioned they looked upon these tasks as part of the normal responsibility of teachers. However, teachers did not feel motivated to conduct time consuming extra-curricular activities, since NGOs did not provide financial compensation for implementing the Youth club activities on their behalf, nor for communicating messages to students or following up on absent girls. This dearth of resources at the local level was recognized at an RTP project review meeting when a senior official from a ministry argued that all resources stayed at the top, whereas the implementers of the projects – the teachers – received very little.

The PEA and school management, thus, brokered resources for the school, students, teachers, and themselves. The NGO activities became part of the school's economy and their livelihood strategies. However, this put pressure on the school, their workload and teachers' ability to teach. The strategy of prioritizing NGO activities enthusiastically should be understood in relation to the socio-material environment of the education sector and the teachers' livelihood insecurity.

Teachers as 'knowledge brokers'

Within NGO-organized activities, public servants became what Bierschenk (2014a) terms, 'norm entrepreneurs' or Merry (2006), 'knowledge brokers' – individuals who translate norms or knowledge from one sphere to another. Through a chain of trainings that followed the bureaucratic hierarchy, SCIM's projects were designed to transfer norms, knowledge and skills downwards, from the national partner NGO to the PEAs to – depending on the specific project activity – the head teachers, sections heads, selected teachers and were ultimately intended to modify the behaviour of girls. However, in these 'cascade training schemes', frequently used by NGOs in Malawi (Swidler and Watkins, 2009; Watkins and Swidler, 2012), the content was reshaped along the way. The largest translation of global norms was made at the end of the chain; by teachers who were expected to integrate the knowledge and skills they had learned in their daily teaching activities and Youth clubs.

This is best illustrated by the downplaying of reproductive health information, which was part of RTP's teacher training, in favour of encouraging sexual abstinence. Teachers were encouraged to teach this during Youth clubs and the information was a broadening of the life skills curriculum, which was mainly focused on HIV, sexual abuse, promoting abstinence and condom use. The process of translation (Lewis and Mosse, 2006; Merry, 2006) from the original training content to the message communicated to students has various aspects: alignment with prevailing community

norms; teachers' position in the community; and their ideas of motivating girls to stay in school. Teachers translated morally 'neutral' scientific health information, reinvesting it with moral meaning, as is often the case when reproductive health interventions are implemented in local realities where they are not considered morally neutral (Pigg and Adams, 2005).

The way in which teachers reshaped the content became evident during conversations with students and teachers, observations during open days and a Youth club activity. The teacher who was in charge of the Girls' Guide Club taped two white papers to the blackboard, wrote down 'CAMFED', the name of one of the INGOs focusing on girls' education, and announced to the approximately 150 girls from grade 7 and 8 that today's lesson would be about teenage pregnancy. She invited the girls to take turns reading the poem that was written on the paper, first in Chichewa and then in English.

I will be a mother too soon
But without a bright future
My future has been doomed
Because of my negligence

Alas! The counsellors were there, such as my teacher, MSGs [Mother Support Groups],
even the head teacher.
But all the advices went away like a foreign river.

The boy who did this to me has denied me
He has run away
Indeed, what comes does not beat a drum [meaning: you cannot know what happens in
the future]

Gosh, I will be a mother too soon
But without a bright future

Afterwards, the teacher asked the girls questions which were written underneath the poem. The last question was 'what lesson have you learned?' The girls answered 'do not get pregnant when you are young', 'listen to your parents', 'be a girl who obeys teachers and parents', and 'abstain'. The moral tone and behavioural instructions in the poem were obvious, as was the absence of discussing the use of contraceptives to avoid teenage pregnancies. This also became clear during an open day at one of the schools. In a quiz, the teacher asked the two competing students teams 'What does AB in

ABC stand for?’ The students answered ‘Abstinence and Be Faithful’. The C for Condom was not asked for. Frye (2017) argues that girls’ education and sexual relationships are considered oppositional in Malawi, rooted in the widespread belief that sexual relationships result in girls getting distracted, pregnant, or absent from school. Teachers therefore discourage relationships (Frye, 2017). Indeed, several girls mentioned that teachers – one female teacher in particular – encouraged them to work hard in school, break up with their boyfriends, wear long clothes because short clothes attract men and to abstain from sex. According to the students, teachers did not talk about contraceptives. Teachers, thus, translated the global norms, as included in the RTP Youth club manual, into moral injunctions and behavioural instructions. Their message resembled the content of a KGIS training in which the PEA – without further elaboration – instructed female teachers to ‘sensitize girls on the dangers of sexual relationships’ as part of being a role model. This was part of KGIS’s aim to prevent dropout among girls, without touching upon the topic of sexual and reproductive health.

Teachers had mixed opinions regarding contraceptives. Although they acknowledged that sexually active students might benefit from information and provision, the fear that that they encouraged other students to experiment with sexual relationships seemed to be greater. During a focus group discussion teacher mentioned:

Giving contraceptives it can be positive or negative, because sometimes it seems as if you are encouraging these young children ... maybe to be involved in sexual activities ... that is negative. And in the positive way, maybe they can be protected if they do that.

They are given information by BLM. They do counsel them, they do guide them, ... but because it is a government policy, let’s receive it [contraceptives]!

I think giving them information is good, but giving them the contraceptives like condoms, I think it is on the bad side, because it is like you are encouraging them to indulge in sexual activities. Then maybe giving them information on abstinence ...

The difficulty of teaching about contraceptives relates to teachers’ broader struggles to teach an increasingly elaborate life skills curriculum that, they argued, the ministry had introduced in exchange for donor funds. They agreed the topics were important, but said they had to find creative ways to teach topics related to sexual and reproductive health. For example, when teaching about sexually transmitted infections or sexual abuse, they would not mention the Chichewa words for ‘private parts’, but circle their hand in front of the crotch to indicate the body parts.

It is very, very difficult. The learners [students] can say 'eeeeish that is too much for us'. They see you as a bad teacher and you can even be chased in the community. But, it is in the curriculum, it is in the books. But, in English, we can talk about it. But, in Chichewa, it is very obscene. Even if what you are saying is good, people take you as a bad person.

Discussing sexuality related topics was highly challenging considering prevailing community norms. As became clear during NGO activities, members from the ethnically and religiously mixed community did not view contraceptive use among young people positively. Although some community members used religious arguments for not using contraceptives – such as that condoms were 'haram' because it killed sperm or that every child was a gift from God –, girls from different ethnic tribes were mostly concerned with being labeled a prostitute or becoming infertile if they used contraceptives. This became clear during various BLM outreach activities and from conversations with students. The head teacher explained that for these reasons several girls had refused to listen to a BLM health talk organized at the school.

The teachers were also aware that teaching these topics could damage their own position and identity in the community.

The teachers, we do come from different backgrounds and communities, so maybe because of your religion it is difficult to teach that topic. It is very difficult, because some learners they pray with you in church. And you can preach something very wonderful, and in class you are just talking about sex. This is a big challenge.

By talking about sexual and reproductive health related topics, teachers risked their position in the community; the social space of which they were a part and in which they had multiple roles to fulfil, such as acting as the secretary of the chief or having a position in church. The process of the translation of global norms, thus, also related to managing their identity as a respected person or – as teachers referred to themselves – 'sources of knowledge'. One of the teachers summed up the dilemma: 'culture, religion [their position in church] and [sexuality] education doesn't match'.

Teachers' translation of global norms reflects their agency as 'knowledge brokers' and ties together different interests. Teachers carefully balanced between replicating project content and communicating a message that was acceptable when considering prevailing community norms, teachers' positionality in the community, and their ideas related to motivating girls to focus on school.

Translating success and hiding criticism

As Merry (2006) theorizes about the translation of human rights, translators are selective in what they translate upwards, often presenting their work in line with donor discourses to secure funding. This is not to say that brokers in the education sector manufacture success, as there were actual improvements at the school in question, but that they were selective in the content and framing of upward translation with the aim of securing the continuation of NGO projects and sustaining the benefits they – and their school – accrued from such projects.

The PEA, head teacher, deputy and teachers perceived considerable improvements at the school, which they attributed to the NGO projects. According to SCIM, in contrast to many other schools in the district, this was one of the primary schools that had managed to reduce dropouts in recent years and to get girls to go back to school after giving birth or marrying early. In a conversation, the head teacher claimed that ‘the NGOs had done a commendable job by putting the topic [of teenage pregnancies] on the agenda’. During a focus group discussion, teachers said they appreciated the training sessions because they learned important skills and as a result paid more attention to treating boys and girls equally. They perceived that the girls were now doing better in class than the boys and that their grades had improved. The head teacher said that the relationship with the community committees had also improved, since implementing the projects required collaboration. Furthermore, he went on, the school had improved the learning environment, by successfully dealing with a few cases of sexual harassment.

Although improvements were most likely the combined effect of multiple NGO projects, they were often publically attributed to a single project, especially during donor visits. SCIM staff explained that the head teacher’s enthusiasm in communicating these successes, and its favourable location, had made the school a showcase for SCIM and attracted frequent visits from donors.

During one such donor visit, the selected teachers presented several activities – including a performance of a traditional dance and a press conference on the topic of girls’ education - as part of the usual Youth club activities. Along with the PEA, the head teacher praised the particular project and attributed the improvements to the project the donors were funding. The PEA singled out visitors from Save the Children Norway for thanks:

Thank you for all the activities you are doing through Save the Children [international Malawi]. They [pointing at the SCIM staff] are doing a very good job to sensitize us on how we can prepare these girls to come back to school. So please may I ask you to proceed with this programme, so that many girls can come back to school. Thank you so much.

The head teacher then told the visitors about one of the teenage mothers who had come back to school after encouragement from the Mother Support Group (MSG), and she was invited to share her story with the visiting donor representatives. She publically praised the MSG for encouraging her to go back to school. However, in private, the girl explained that it had been her own wish to go back to school after realising how difficult it was to raise her child in poverty. She had learned about her right to return to school from a woman who rented her father's house and from a previous campaign by YONECO, and she hoped that education would bring her a brighter future. This is not to say that the MSG had not played a role in encouraging other girls to come back to school, but that the brokers strategically framed the story of this teenage mother as a success of the NGO project.

Furthermore, during the donor visit, the PEA and head teacher praised RTP, but were silent about the contribution of other projects, such as the provision of free porridge by WPF or the KGIS cash transfer to girls in the 7th grade, which they privately claimed were the most effective components of all projects because they addressed the root cause of dropout: poverty. However, the head teacher did address the positive effect of cash transfers during an RTP project review meeting with senior Malawian bureaucrats, when SCIM asked for input to improve project activities. In this instance, he strategically suggested ideas for improvement, while simultaneously praising the project.

I understand such practices as examples of actors' strategic actions to benefit from development projects (Rossi, 2006). Their awareness of the school's and their own dependency on the projects, as well as the power differentials between them and the NGOs, helps explain why they presented actions and successes in line with project discourses and expectations. They praised projects, and when asked carefully suggested improvements. During donor visits, they collaborated with the SCIM staff, who privately stressed the importance of these donor visits for the continuation of the RTP project. Yet, for the education brokers, the continuation of *multiple* projects and resources was at stake; they brokered the continuation of NGO initiatives in light of the paucity of the school's own resources.

The emphasis on project success does not mean that brokers did not also reflect critically on the local realities of donor-driven policy. The co-existence of an official discourse presented to donors to capture development funds and 'private speak' reflecting a more accurate version of reality, is what Olivier de Sardan (2015), in the context of donor-dependent health systems, refers to as 'double speak'.

Even though the PEA, head teacher and teachers acknowledged the improvements in girls' education resulting from multiple donor-driven interventions, they privately criticized the projects' short-term nature and sometimes questioned their overlapping aims. The head teacher and teachers considered the lack of classrooms as one of the biggest problems:

There are a lot of problems that can be looked into apart from issues of reducing teenage pregnancies and girls' education; for example at our school about 18 classes are under the trees; so other NGOs can assist in infrastructure development rather than scrambling for reducing teenage pregnancy, because if these NGOs achieve a 100 per cent success retaining all the girls to school, where will they reside during rain and harsh weather?

Although ICEIDA had constructed four new classrooms and teacher houses, and, according to a senior official at the District Education Office, had extended the programme to 2020, this was considered to be far from sufficient. He said: 'We have tried to raise the issue with donors, but it is very difficult to get funding' [...] 'The system is in a total disarray'. Furthermore, the head teacher was critical of the narrow focus on girls' education, and suggested to me that it would have been more appropriate to include boys and also address the wider and material needs of students. Similarly, the PEA was frustrated that her call for greater focus on boys, alongside the emphasis on girls in development projects, had been rejected at a district level meeting:

Two or three years ago, we discussed the problem during a meeting in town. There was one NGO present – CRECCOM - and people from the government. We discussed why there is no project focusing on boys, only girls. The government said that there is no interest from organizations to focus on boys. They say that girls are more vulnerable. But in Mangochi the boys are also vulnerable because of [they are drawn to] the lake and South Africa [to earn money].

However it should be noted that Inclusive Education – a SCIM project that was launched during fieldwork – aimed to provide material support to the most disadvantaged students: girls, handicapped, and the very poor – which included boys. Additionally, I often heard criticisms that the short-term nature of projects limited the sustainability of outcomes. As one of the Mother Support Group members commented:

The NGOs just come and go, but they do not follow up. Projects will phase out and then nothing happens. We encourage girls to go to school, but by the time they reach secondary school, the project has phased out and there is no [assistance with] school fees. It is the same as with the president; he starts projects, and the new president stops those projects and starts new ones. It does not work! We just benefit at that time, but that is it.

The head teacher also privately pointed out the limitations of short-term projects, predicting that once RTP and KGIS phased out 'The situation will be back to what it was before the coming of these projects. Because most girls are coming back to school because of the cash transfer programme.'

This private speak contrasted with the effusive public speak during donor visits. Most of this private speak, however, did not travel up the aid chain. The PEA and head teacher occasionally tried to communicate needs upwards, but they refrained from publically criticizing existing projects. By maintaining alliances with NGO staff, they brokered continuity of existing projects, even though these did not necessarily cover the broader needs of the students, and the under-resourced school. The existence of this 'double speak' is reinforced by the strongly hierarchical nature of Malawian society, where criticizing superiors publically is considered unacceptable. Power relations between NGO staff and education brokers might, therefore, reinforce 'double speak'.

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that shifting donor priorities and the ambition of NGOs to strengthen existing public structures in recipient countries has created new possibilities for junior public servants in Malawi's primary education sector to play a crucial role as development brokers. As such, the article contributes a new perspective to the literature on development brokers, which has largely focused on brokers employed by NGOs. Drawing on anthropological theorizing on brokerage and translation within development practice (Lewis and Mosse, 2006; Merry, 2006; Rossi, 2006), I have shown how these brokers – in various roles – actively co-construct development projects in relation to their socio-material realities. Brokers shape and translate projects up and down the aid chain in order to tie together different interests, protect their own positionality, strategically position themselves and adapt development rationales to benefit the school, students and themselves. This analysis contributes to an understanding of what is at stake for the junior public servants, how they personally gain from operating as brokers, and what it can mean for public sector institutions like schools if teachers and other public sector officials take on these roles. I have shown how NGOs play a key role in reshaping the state's role and how state and NGO realities are intertwined in complex ways.

Primary Education Advisors (PEAs) and head teachers strategically operate to accrue resources from NGO projects and aim to broker the continuation of projects in an under-resourced education sector. Although PEAs and head teachers also played a role in training schemes, teachers made the largest translation of the content of projects. Teachers operate as 'knowledge brokers', who translate global norms on girls' education and sexual and reproductive health and rights into moral messages and behavioural instructions to students. In doing so they take into consideration the prevailing community norms, their own identity as respected fellow villagers and their ideas of motivating girls to stay in school. This is in line with Merry (2006) who argues that 'knowledge brokers' positioned at the end of a chain of brokers, are in a vulnerable position, at risk of criticism by the local community if their message diverges too much from what is acceptable. They therefore

carefully balance between replicating project discourses and creating a hybrid message that takes local realities into account (Merry, 2006).

It is perhaps not surprising that junior public servants eagerly accept broker roles. As successful brokers, they gain recognition from the community and acquire an increasingly prominent role in the implementation of NGO projects. In a context of economic decline, brokering for NGO initiatives presents an attractive opportunity for junior public servants who rely on low salaries and struggle to secure their livelihoods. In practice brokering takes the form of a side-business, similar to what Anders (2002) describes for teachers and other junior public servants in Malawi who rely on additional forms of income. Furthermore, brokering plays into reinforcing existing hierarchical relationships within state bureaucracies, as more senior public servants benefit more from allowances (Bierschenk, 2014b; Charton, 2014; Pfeiffer, 2003).

At the same time, taking on broker roles puts pressure on the public sector and distorts core tasks. Brokers prioritize NGO activities because they always provide resources of some sort, but this increases their workload, forces them to delegate other duties, and to displace classroom teaching to make room for NGO activities. Indeed, as Bierschenk (2014b) argues, based on several empirical case studies of African bureaucracies, if projects are integrated into the state apparatus, they 'tie up the human and financial resources of national bureaucracies ... into the future and deflect the energies of the officials working there from all other tasks' (p.227). Such displacement resembles the 'harmful organizational practices' Pfeiffer (2003, p. 730) has described in the context of NGO activities undermining the broader goals of Mozambique's health system. In the context of multiple projects, INGOs' and donors' well-intentioned ambition to strengthen existing structures can, paradoxically, weaken the school's broader educational goals.

Good brokers are valuable to NGOs, as project implementation and anticipated continuation depends on their enthusiasm and ability to translate success upwards. As I have shown, public sector brokers and NGO staff collaborated to translate success to donors. The different actors, including donors, seem to be content with the representation of successes of individual projects. They are 'working misunderstandings' (Watkins and Swidler, 2012), because for all these actors something else is at stake. For brokers in the education sector it is the continuity of projects in an under-resourced sector and for the NGO brokers it is more time to achieve project aims and thus safeguard their careers. This drive for success prevents critical reflections from traveling up the aid chain and limits donors' understanding of the broader unintended implications of their interventions.

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