

Natural leaders energising change in villages to attain and sustain open defecation free status: A case study of Plan Malawi impact areas – Mulanje and Lilongwe districts (traditional authorities Juma and Njewa)

Author

Daniel Kapatuka¹.

Abstract

This paper looks at how Plan Malawi has adopted a simple system of using natural leaders to conduct monitoring and attain open defecation free (ODF) status and retain it. The organization has concentrated its efforts on enhancing and empowering natural leaders through capacity building on monitoring for results, by following a simple data collection and monitoring process. Natural leaders have formed networks at regional, district and village levels. The networks are used as a forum for information exchange and learning on monitoring and data validation, through exchange visits where natural leaders from one village validate the monitoring data from other districts based on data presented. This process is simple and allows for data flow and use within the communities. This process has resulted in a very efficient monitoring mechanism. This paper will be looking critically at the role of natural leaders in attaining and retaining ODF in their respective villages in the Plan Malawi impact area districts of Mulanje and Lilongwe.

Keywords

Natural leader, community-led total sanitation, exchange and learning visits, monitoring, open defecation free status, sustainability, capacity building.

Introduction and purpose

In Malawi, Community Led Total Sanitation (CLTS) continues to be an effective approach for eliminating the practice of open defecation. Natural leaders are playing a key role in monitoring at village level using a simple monitoring tool. If ODF status is to be retained, the village members need to own the process. Natural leaders are community/village members, male or female, young or old, who are enthusiastic about CLTS and willing to take responsibility for retaining the village's ODF status. They are typically strong characters, able to influence others in the community. Natural leaders are supported by the majority of the village who are receptive to their opinions and arguments. Normally, during triggering, natural leaders can be recognized by their enthusiasm and motivation to move away from open defecation (*WaterAid (2011) Revitalizing Community-led Total Sanitation: A process guide*).

¹ Plan Malawi, Assistant Program Area Manager: dan.kapatuka@plan-international.org.

Setting up monitoring systems in which outsiders take the lead can cause various problems. Where monitoring and follow-up is only or mainly in the hands of outsiders, the opportunity of creating and empowering natural leaders is lost or weakened. This may interfere with the natural leaders' sense of responsibility, making them less effective in pursuing the ODF process in the community. In addition, losing the opportunity for building a group of community leaders can seriously hinder the scaling-up process – because a handful of outsiders cannot possibly cover the whole area or country.

Monitoring the sustainability of CLTS has remained the greatest challenge in the sub Saharan Africa region. Though tremendous work has been done especially on triggering, the number of triggered villages is on the rise, but if a comparison is made between triggered villages and those that retain ODF status, results are very alarming. For instance in Malawi, CLTS continues to be an effective approach for eliminating the practice of open defecation, but since its introduction in 2008 over 4,779 villages have been triggered across 28 districts and only over 1,401 villages have been declared open defecation free (ODF) (*Malawi Ministry of Health and Population, Environmental Health Office: September 2012*). Less than half of all the triggered villages have managed to retain ODF status. This can be attributed to infrequent follow-ups, and dependency of villages on a (financial) reward for participating in the CLTS process. Capacity gaps for extension workers and natural leaders make things worse.

Given the CLTS potential to promote significant health benefits, the government of Malawi decided to scale-up the approach in all 28 districts in 2011. The ultimate goal is to completely eliminate open defecation by the year 2015, creating an ODF Malawi. The Malawi ODF strategy 2015 points out clearly that natural leaders are key to villages achieving and sustaining ODF status (*Malawi ODF Strategy 2011-2015: 11*).

The Water and Sanitation Program's (WSP's) experience with participatory monitoring in East Java has shown that communities are fully able and highly motivated to monitor progress towards ODF and that they can regularly track changes in community access to improved sanitation. The data generated by initial social mapping activities and ongoing mapping updates also fulfills requirements set forth in the WHO & UNICEF Joint Monitoring Program (JMP) to track progress toward achieving the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) for Sanitation (*Mukherjee, N, Managing the Flow of Monitoring Information to Improve Rural Sanitation in East Java: 2011*). In Zamfara State, Nigeria, for example, monitoring had been taken on by the Local Government Areas (LGA), and they were constantly complaining of staff shortage for this huge task. Where natural leaders are an integral part of the approach, the cadre for monitoring is created automatically.

Although the process of monitoring is in the hands of natural leaders, practitioners agreed during a meeting convened by the Institute for Development Studies in July 2011 at Lukenya in Kenya, that taking CLTS to scale presents many challenges and

opportunities for knowledge generation and management. At the community level, people, government and NGO staff need to know how individual households are progressing so that they can take the necessary action, for example to encourage those who lag behind and to help those who are too weak to help themselves: this requires participatory Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E).

Malawi hosted an International workshop on CLTS M&E, verification, follow-ups and learning from 6th – 10th August 2012 where participants also tackled the subject of monitoring for sustainability and the involvement of natural leaders featured highly. Malawi was represented by practitioners from a cross-section of NGOs and Government. They presented a case on how monitoring, follow-ups and ODF attainment are arrived at.

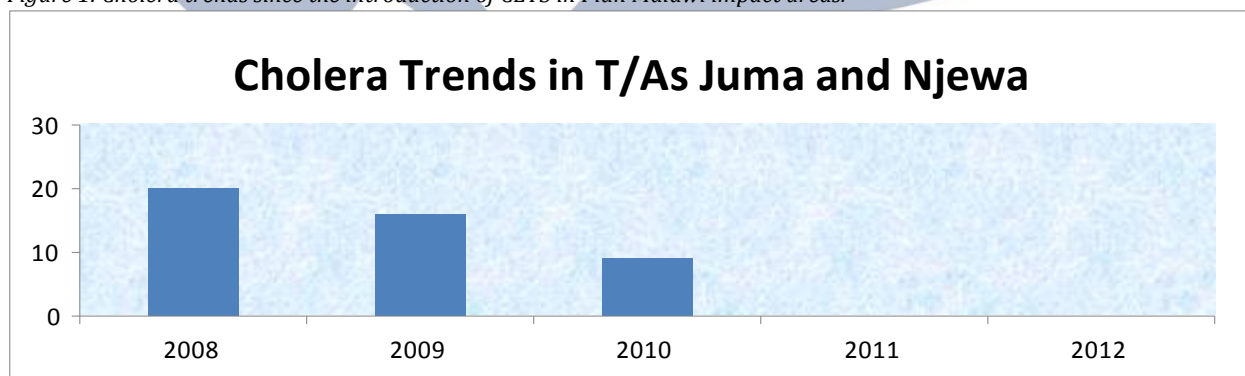
The energy and commitment of natural leaders are key to the successful spreading and sustainability of CLTS. (*Regional Sharing and Learning Workshop of CLTS Decision-makers, Practitioners and Networkers in Lusaka World Toilet Day, 19 November 2010*).

Context

In 2010, Plan Malawi launched a 5-year CLTS project in two traditional authorities (T/As) of Juma in Mulanje and Njewa in Lilongwe districts as part of a Pan African CLTS program covering eight countries: Ghana, Niger, Sierra Leone, Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, Uganda and Zambia. The aim of the project is to improve the sanitation situation in the target communities by supporting government in building capacity of extension workers to enable them to effectively facilitate CLTS and School Led Total Sanitation (SLTS), to monitor and support the communities. Communities and schools once triggered would be empowered to take action in improving their hygiene behaviours and moving from basic sanitation to improved sanitation. It is expected that school children would replicate and demonstrate whatever they had learnt from school in their homes.

T/As Juma and Njewa were selected owing to the poor sanitation track record standing at 10% for Lilongwe and 13% for Mulanje in 2009. This translates into a total of 191,389 people who practiced open defecation at project design. Since its inception in 2010, the Pan African CLTS project has already registered tremendous impact, the most significant being the reduction of cholera cases which were previously very prevalent. This is as a result of the adaptation of improved sanitation and hygiene behaviours. Figure 1 shows the trends of cholera cases in the two T/As. The major shift in the decline can be attributed to the CLTS approach coupled with awareness campaigns. Plan Malawi has taken the CLTS approach to leverage resources towards safe water provision to support villages with safe water and an improved sanitation and hygiene standard. Most of the villages which have attained ODF status have been supported with safe water which will go a long way to prevent fecal oral transmission of diseases such as cholera.

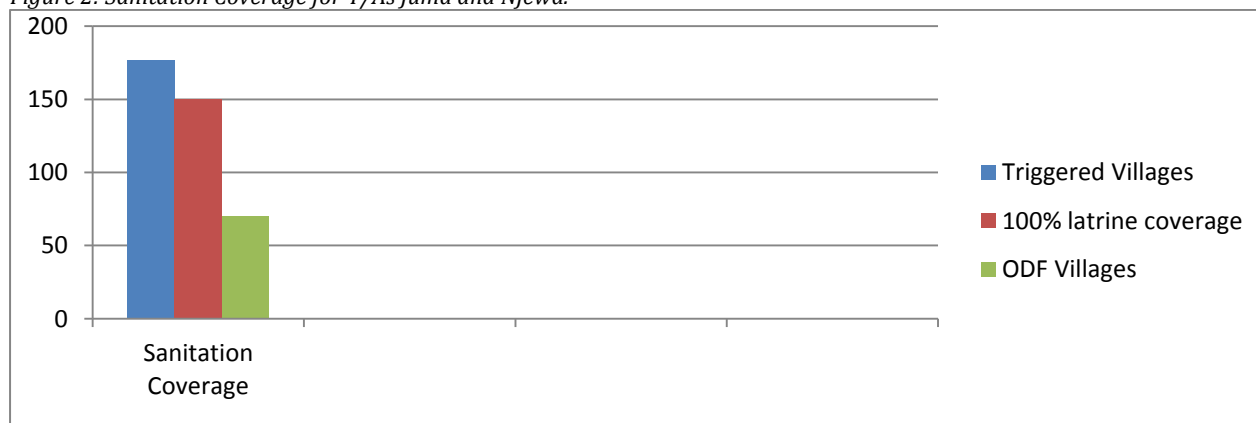
Figure 1: Cholera trends since the introduction of CLTS in Plan Malawi impact areas.



Source: District HMIS - Mulanje and Lilongwe.

From 2010, Plan Malawi has facilitated the triggering of 177 villages. Triggering is done by a combination of government extension workers, community members and Plan staff. Thereafter villages draw up an action plan to attain ODF status. To date a total of 70 villages have attained ODF status with many more achieving 100% latrine coverage. 100% latrine coverage is gained when all households in a village have latrines. ODF status is affirmed after all latrines have hand washing facilities, drop-hole covers and clean surroundings with no trace of open defecation (OD). Natural leaders have been very instrumental in triggering and door-to-door monitoring to ensure that all village members adopt good sanitation and hygiene standards. During monitoring, they stress the importance of hand washing facilities and drop-hole covers to prevent fecal-oral transmission. This is emphasized because most households do not take into consideration these two elements. Natural leaders also assist the weak and old in latrine construction. On top of that, more ODF villages were registered because the natural leaders were monitoring the process. Even more important, ODF status has been retained even a year after it was declared. CLTS encourages the community to take responsibility and to take action towards achieving the common goal of ODF status (Kar and Pasteur 2005).

Figure 2: Sanitation Coverage for T/As Juma and Njewa.



Source: Plan Malawi Sanitation Reports.

As figure 2 illustrates, there has been slow progress in attaining ODF status between 2010 and 2012, only 40% of the 177 triggered villages managed to attain ODF status while 85% attained 100% latrine coverage over the same period. The differences can largely be attributed to the slow process of ODF verification and certification by the District Coordinating Teams (DCTs). The Pan African CLTS project Mid Term Review conducted between July-October 2012 pointed out pre-occupancy as one of the major reasons why the DCT takes time to verify and certify villages ODF, often the DCT is engaged in other assignments. During the Plan Malawi WASH review meeting in February 2012, it was observed that the number of triggered villages were much higher than those that have attained ODF status. This prompted Plan Malawi to develop of a road map to improve the situation. Empowering natural leaders to take a lead in monitoring their own villages and supporting the DCT with resources to conduct frequent follow-ups were among the action points. The action points were aimed at supporting more villages in attaining ODF status and also to empower communities to

Picture 1: Natural leaders triggering a village.



sustain their own sanitation status. Though

these were the resolutions, the process did not forget to keep in touch with the community based government extension workers, the HSAs. The HSAs help in data collection, verification and validation once the natural leaders report on a village's progress towards ODF status.

From 2011, Plan Malawi has built the capacity of some natural leaders in the CLTS approach.

This training of trainers was targeting all natural leaders for capacity building, but due to resource limitation only 59 were trained. To acquire hands-on experience, the natural leaders piloted triggering in 5 villages where they helped village members come up with their own action plans to attain ODF status. To ease the task of monitoring, natural leaders within the Plan Malawi impact area have formed networks starting at village level. The number of natural leaders per community ranges from a minimum of 10 to a maximum of 26 depending on the number of villages in a community. There is no fixed number of natural leaders per community as some villages in a community can have more than two. The networks meet twice every month at community level to check and report on achievement of key indicators such as use of hand washing facilities, the availability of drop-hole covers in latrines and use of soap. The networks work closely with village leaders and extension workers to help in monitoring of triggered villages. The networks have helped in the exchange of information especially between successful ODF villages and those who struggle to attain the ODF status. Challenges are shared during networking meetings. A lot of villages have adopted good sanitation and hygiene practices because of their efforts.

Natural leaders have an action plan which they follow. They monitor the villages in groups conducting door-to-door monitoring to check the existence of drop-hole covers and the usage of hand washing facilities. They conduct community dialogue sessions and further awareness meetings on fecal oral transmission. Since they are community based and conversant with the village cultures it is easy for them to talk with the community. Monitoring is conducted on a voluntary basis and the major challenge remains in keeping them motivated. To avoid exaggerated data, natural leaders usually change the pattern of monitoring. For instance they encourage one another to monitor different villages. This in a way is a self-appraisal for both sets of villages, the well-to-do to retain their ODF status and to those lagging behind to change their behaviour and emulate their peers. For effectiveness and non-interference, the network meetings are not funded apart from the ones that are organized by the District Coordinating Team at district level. These are the forums where monitoring results are shared and discussed. The results obtained from individual households assist in decision making and support where gaps are pertinent. For example villages that are doing fine are given the option to start the Village Savings & Loans (VS&L) activities. This can help them to climb up the sanitation ladder. In villages where they are having challenges with hand washing facilities because they are not deemed necessary, a decision is made to conduct more awareness meetings on fecal oral disease transmission. The lessons from neighbouring villages/communities and districts are thus shared at village level. Since natural leaders took a lead in monitoring villages, Plan Malawi has had a significant increase in villages attaining ODF (7 from 2010-2011 to 63 villages between 2011 and 2012).

In a bid to enhance monitoring, natural leaders from one of the ODF villages realized that not every household was making effective and appropriate use of the hand washing facilities after the attainment of ODF. They realized that it posed a great risk to the

Picture 2: A child using a hand washing facility.



whole village. During one of the routine village network meetings, village members were sensitized on the health risks associated with non-use of hand washing facilities. Thus recognizing the consequences, the village members prompted the villagers into action to debate on an inventive way on how they can ensure that every household utilizes and understands the importance of washing hands after using the latrine.

To guarantee that hand washing facilities are not just being erected ceremoniously but effectively used, members of the village devised an innovative idea of planting a seedling of a tree under the hand washing facility. During spot visits, government health extension workers, natural leaders and health committee members pay special

attention to the status of the seedling; a dead seedling or one that has withered or is not growing as it should is a clear sign that the hand washing facility is not being used

To ensure that members in the village are not just watering the seedlings, but are actually using these hand washing facilities, Plan Malawi is strategically working with the health extension workers and the local health center to capture diseases that are caused by fecal-oral transmission such as diarrhea. This data is monitored on a monthly basis. Based on the current report, there has been no diarrhea case reported from the village. To further enhance behaviour change and adoption, school children from the

Picture 3: A flower benefiting from the frequent use of the hand washing facility.

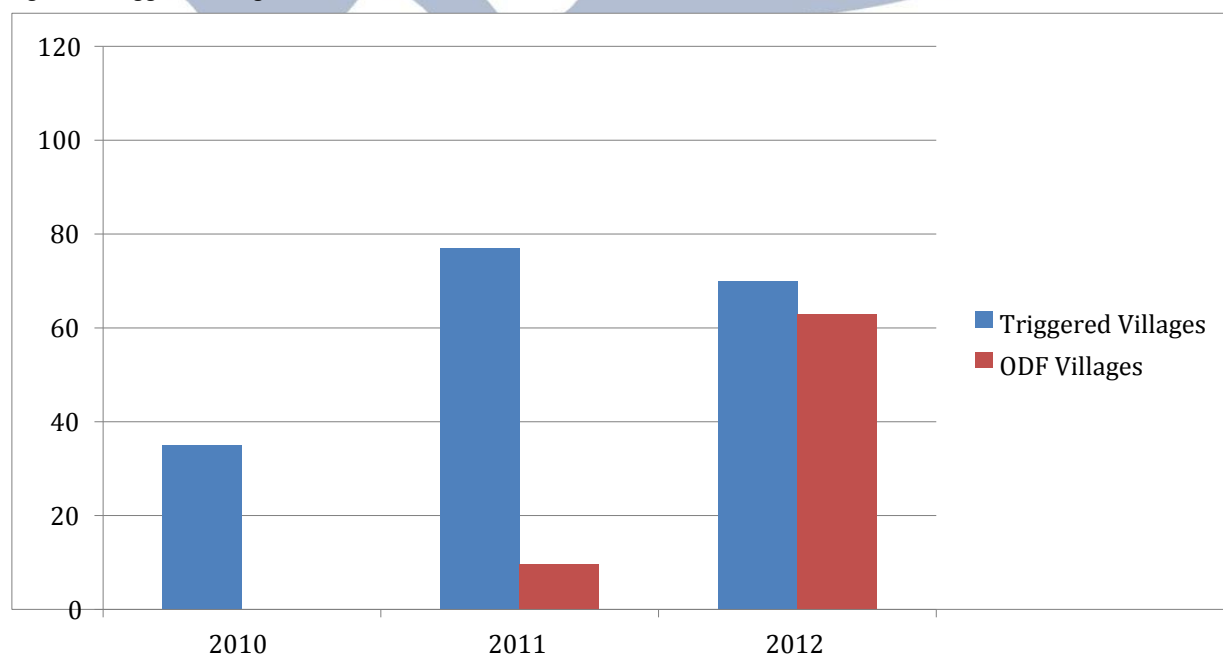


near-by primary school benefit from the weekly health talk on the importance of using hand washing facilities. In the long term, learners will grow up practicing good hygiene. This was shared through the natural leaders networking circles and has been adopted by almost all the villages that are ODF (*Msiska, T: S.H.I.T.S Issue 15 – 2012: 1*).

As a means of validating the monitoring of indicators in CLTS, Plan Malawi has adopted a framework used by the government of Malawi to harmonize monitoring indicators and reporting tools. Within the sanitation sector there

is a working group on M&E to which all implementers submit their indicators which are then consolidated and fed into the government structure. Malawi is piloting tools for reporting on sanitation by integrating it into an existing Environmental Health Quarterly reporting mechanism. A set of indicators were identified through a consultative process involving all key sector players from the public sector and NGOs. The reporting forms are at various levels namely – community, health centers and District Level. HSAs in Malawi have a critical role to play in monitoring. A system for post-ODF monitoring that is linked to HSAs seems to be effective provided the HSAs have a manageable number of villages to monitor and their work is performance based. One of the major challenges in working with HSAs is allowance syndrome. Nowadays HSAs conduct routine monitoring as part of their normal work. Natural leaders work hand in hand with HSAs to report on progress made in their villages. It is worth noting that some traditional leaders are natural leaders who take a leading role in monitoring and ODF monitoring.

Figure 3: Triggered Villages vs. ODF status attainment 2010 – 2012.




Source: Plan Malawi Water Sanitation and Hygiene Report.

Findings and discussions

All districts in Malawi have now received the “Training of Trainers” (ToT) on the CLTS approach. This means that the approach can be adopted nationwide. However, there are a number of additional and critical actions that need to be undertaken in order to support the scaling-up of CLTS triggering to accelerate the increase of ODF villages. The case of Plan Malawi is proving that natural leaders are key to villages achieving ODF status and they are playing an important role towards achievement of the ODF Malawi 2015 strategy. Natural leaders are provided with specific capacity building opportunities (e.g. networking with other natural leaders to share lessons and experiences). Gaps in capacity can always hamper their understanding of CLTS and form a barrier to the attainment and sustainability of ODF status. The number of villages that has attained and retained ODF status within the Plan Malawi impact area has steadily increased since the organization adopted the strategy of building the capacity of natural leaders. The involvement of natural leaders starts from triggering, once identified; they take charge of village action plans. They are given the responsibility to follow up and report on the progress towards a village’s ODF status. They conduct door-to-door monitoring to check on availability of latrines in households that didn’t have latrines, hand washing facilities and drop-hole covers.

Through the course of the CLTS program, one alarming revelation has been that Plan Malawi has triggered a total of 177 villages, but as figure 3 illustrates, only a few villages managed to retain ODF status in the first and second year. The number of ODF villages has dramatically increased in 2012 with approximately 63 retaining the ODF status. This can be attributed to a combination of capacity building for natural leaders and supporting the DCT with resources to conduct verification and certification of villages



for ODF status. Each household is rated against the checklist, i.e. latrines having hand washing facilities with evidence of use and availability of drop-hole covers. This has helped more villages to retain the status of ODF. The involvement of local leaders has also played a part. Once village members are shamed during triggering and understand the benefits of being ODF, the rest of the process falls into place. Sustainability becomes a non-issue as improved sanitation and hygiene behaviours become their daily meat, the involvement of natural leaders especially in door-to-door monitoring encourages individual families to uphold their sanitation situation and never look back. What starts as fear of being ashamed develops into positive behaviour reinforcement that families enjoy practicing as routine and then sustainability comes naturally.

Other than an allowance during selected meetings and trainings, some of the incentives that energize natural leaders include recognition and involving them in other development initiatives such as monitoring of child health days for immunization of children under-five. During the rainy season they assist the District Health Office (DHO) in distributing chlorine (water guard) to households. This has helped the natural leaders to play other crucial roles apart from monitoring CLTS. It is further believed that involving them in microfinance activities such as being head or playing simple roles in mobilizing other community members to be part of the saving loan groups can be the icing on the cake in the drive to motivate them to help retain ODF status. Since most of the latrines constructed by natural leaders are made from locally available materials and finished with grass thatching, the Department of Environmental Affairs has also used natural leaders to help distribute and plant about 1500 trees of different species to help curb environmental degradation and climate change.

In the course of the CLTS monitoring program, it has been observed that there are big differences in behaviour change between villages with active natural leaders and those with dormant ones. For instance in villages where children take a lead in identifying OD areas during triggering, the resultant outcome is that men are energized to construct latrines and women assist in collecting materials for building such as grass and wood. Children are later involved in monitoring those sites after triggering to ensure that OD is not taking place. This has necessitated quick adoption of sanitation and hygiene standards so that such villages are able to attain ODF status within 3 months from the date of triggering to over a year for villages whose natural leaders are not active. It is always necessary to stress to natural leaders the importance of triggering behaviour change in their villages with a clear message that it has to begin with them otherwise the process of change will take ages.

It has also been observed that most natural leaders learn the fastest with hands-on experience, by going to meetings or sanitation workshops or conducting exchange visits with successful villages where they learn how their friends do it. This they apply easily in their respective villages. It is important when planning and designing CLTS programs that networking, exchange and learning visits are part of the strategy.



Conclusion

Empowering natural leaders to take a lead in their own sanitation matters is one way of ensuring post ODF sustainability. Most of the communities lag behind because they see triggering as an external process. The capacity building of natural leaders to understand the importance of stopping OD helps the villages and communities see it more as their own process. With the help of a few experienced facilitators who guide the process they are better able to stay on track. The better the understanding of the approach the better the application of knowledge to properly monitor progress made towards attainment of ODF. Sustainability can be better attained when natural leaders learn from exchange visits from either neighbouring villages or other districts. Monitoring of neighbouring villages is not only a learning point but is also an opportunity for self-development to improve skills and develop monitoring tools that are readily applied. This energizes them to manage their own sanitation situation.