

Medknow

Online ISSN: 1872-1001

March 2018 | Volume 16 | Number 1

INTERVENTION

**Journal of Mental Health
and Psychosocial Support
in Conflict Affected Areas**

The role and experience of local faith leaders in promoting child protection: a case study from Malawi

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Abstract

Frequently, community based strategies include engagement with local faith leaders. However, there have been few systematic attempts to document how faith leaders themselves define their roles in these initiatives. This study examined local faith leaders and their spouses, in flood affected areas of Malawi, who had been oriented to child protection issues through World Vision workshops aimed explicitly at relating protection concerns to religious teachings. Many participants reported that attending a workshop had been transformational in terms of their perspectives regarding the protection of children. The key child protection issues identified by participants included child marriage, lack of attendance at school, child labour (including forced labour), harsh physical punishment and sexual abuse. Many faith leaders – and their wives – became active in addressing child protection issues as a result of the programme, although the form of this action varied widely and was significantly influenced by their varied status and capacities.

KEY IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

- Faith leaders can be effective community based advocates for child protection both embedded within, and equipped to challenge, shared religious beliefs and practices
- Faith leaders are not a homogenous group and strategies to engage with them need to reflect their widely varying status, resources and capacities
- The wives of pastors and women who are leading ministries are a particularly powerful resource to engage with local child protection issues

Keywords: child protection, local faith leaders, Malawi, mobilisation, religion, sensitisation, spouses

INTRODUCTION

Building on existing community capacities and structures is a major goal of much contemporary programming in the fields of child protection and psychosocial support. It is important to note that religious groups and organisations constitute a major component of local capacity in many settings. There is, therefore, growing recognition of the potential importance of engagement with faith leaders in humanitarian and development programming. For example, UNICEF (2012) now sees partnership with faith communities as key to its mandate to protect children from violence, abuse and neglect. UNICEF's collaboration with the organisation *Religions for Peace* has resulted in the documentation of strategies for more effective engagement with local faith actors (Dodd & Robinson, 2010), contributing to a growing literature on developing more effective partnership with religious communities and institutions (Melton & Anderson, 2008; Robinson, 2010; Firelight

Foundation, 2014; Ager & El Nakib, 2015). A common feature of these reports is acknowledgement of the embeddedness of local faith communities, their long history of caring for vulnerable populations and their access to a significant volunteer base.

There are significant barriers, however, to engagement with local faith groups and communities within contexts of humanitarian response. Despite the interest in '*localisation*' of humanitarian and broader development activities, analyses regularly point to the weakness of partnership between international agencies and local actors that fail to effectively utilise knowledge, reach and proximity of the latter due to funding, governance and reporting

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Access this article online

Quick Response Code:



Website:

www.interventionjournal.org

DOI:

10.1097/WTF.0000000000000156

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How to cite this article: Eyber, C., Kachale, B., Shields, T., & Ager, A. (2018). The role and experience of local faith leaders in promoting child protection: a case study from Malawi. *Intervention*, 16(1), 31-37.

expectations of the former (Ramalingam, Gray, & Cerruti, 2013; Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities (JLIF & LC), 2015). Additionally, engaging with religious actors may raise concern regarding issues of partiality in distribution of assistance, or coercive proselytisation (Ager & Ager, 2015). Ager, Abebe & Ager (2014) noted that while a large number of programming reports lodged on the MHPSS.net web portal made reference to faith or religion, in the vast majority of cases reported, engagement was superficial. Despite the injunction in the Inter-Agency Steering Committee (IASC) mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) guidelines to engage with local faith leaders and identify and build on local healing practices, there are few examples of this being mainstreamed into programmatic response.

This may reflect, as UNHCR has observed with respect to its own operations, a lack of 'faith literacy' on the part of humanitarian agencies (UNHCR, 2014). Developing community based approaches requires a much stronger understanding of the dynamics of local faith communities and, given their influence, the role of faith leaders in shaping and reforming social norms and practices (UNICEF, 2012; World Vision International, 2012). The focus of this study is developing such an understanding in a rural, disaster affected community in Malawi, where there had been efforts to mobilise faith leaders in respect of child protection concerns. It is based on data collected in relation to piloting by World Vision of an intervention seeking to sensitise and mobilise local faith leaders and their spouses to respond to child protection concerns within their communities.

Background and context

Malawi has significant child protection concerns, with one in six children being described as vulnerable to violence, abuse, exploitation and neglect, and/or at risk from HIV/AIDS (UNICEF Malawi, 2011). An estimated 2.4 million children are growing up in violent homes, witnessing domestic violence and experiencing its negative effects (National Statistical Office & Inner City Fund Macro, 2011). Sixty-five per cent of girls experience some form of child abuse during their lifetime, which includes rape, forced and child marriage, compared to 35% of boys. One in four children is involved in child labour (National Statistical Office & Inner City Fund Macro, 2011). School completion rates are low, with nearly 32% of female youth of secondary age out of school compared to 23% of male youth of the same age (National Statistical Office & Inner City Fund Macro, 2011). The rate of adolescent girls aged 15–19 who have begun childbearing is 29% (National Statistical Office & Inner City Fund Macro, 2011).

Many of these child protection challenges are more pronounced in rural, impoverished parts of the country and are exacerbated by environmental disasters that further limit children's opportunities for education and development.

It is within two such communities that this study took place: Chingale and Namachete in Zomba District, southern Malawi. The dominant ethnic groups in these areas are Mang'anja, Yao and Lomwe. Marriage practice is

predominantly matrilineal. Christians are the major religious group (76.8%), subdivided in various denominations, such as Catholic, Anglican, Presbyterian, Pentecostal, Baptist and Adventist, amongst others. The second major religion practiced in the district is Islam (18%) with 4.4% of the population citing no religious affiliation and 0.8% believe in other religions. Of particular relevance to this study, the Zomba District Demographic Profile notes that '*religious institutions and organisations are very important stakeholders in the District's development primarily because they provide education, health services and other important public facilities*' (Zomba District Assembly, 2009, p 12).

METHODOLOGY

The aim of the study was to explore the role and experience of faith leaders in promoting child protection in rural communities following a sensitisation workshop on the theme. This report is based on fieldwork conducted between 28 August and 6 September 2015 in the 2015 flood affected communities of Chingale and Namachete where a sensitisation programme had taken place and where the effects were explored through a qualitative methodology. The study involved 17 key informant interviews (KIIs) with Christian faith leaders and their spouses, seven KIIs with other local stakeholders (e.g. police, social welfare officers and head teachers); nine focus group discussions (FGDs) with community groups, including three with children, two with faith leaders, two with child protection committees, one with village headmen and one with congregation members engaged in child protection work. Additionally, semi-structured interviews with six World Vision staff across national, district and sub-district levels were conducted. Given the fact that '*working with faith leaders*' is frequently commended in psychosocial programming guidelines (e.g. IASC, 2007), the focus of this article is specifically based on findings from research with faith leaders and their spouses.

World Vision International implements the '*Channels of Hope*' child protection (CoH CP) programme in many countries where the focus is on mobilising and capacity building with faith leaders and their spouses in relation to child protection issues in their own communities. This is done through emphasising religious understanding of how children's wellbeing should be promoted and protected. World Vision self-identifies as a Christian organisation, but utilises the CoH programme in a range of faith communities and across a range of sectors. In collaboration with Islamic Relief it has, for example, developed a Muslim version of the programme. However, as the sub-districts in Malawi where this work took place were predominantly Christian, the intervention included Christian faith leaders only. As part of this programme, an interactive three day workshop for faith leaders and their spouses that drew on both technical child protection knowledge and relevant religious teachings was implemented in both communities in January 2014.

The study followed some 18 months after the completion of these workshops, and was conducted by independent researchers who had no affiliation with World Vision.

While the funding for this research came from World Vision it was undertaken with the explicit understanding that it constitutes research and not an evaluation of the intervention, and that all findings would be reported in the process.

KIIs and FGDs were facilitated by the first three authors, with interpreters required to support the process in some instances. Interviews and discussions were recorded with a digital recorder (with the permission of participants) or documented through extensive written notes. The first two authors developed preliminary thematic analysis of the data, which was revised with input from the third and fourth author. The focus here is on the roles and experience of local faith leaders and their spouses, which are of potential broader relevance to supporting strategies for engaging with local faith communities on child protection issues. The analysis addresses the manner in which local faith leaders have used the ideas shared and developed at the workshop and related this to their role within communities regarding the protection of children. It does not constitute an evaluation of these workshops, given that they are designed as just one component of a more comprehensive child protection intervention strategy.

FINDINGS

Children, formal authorities and faith leaders recognise recurrent child protection concerns and their drivers

Across discussions in Chingale and Namachete a fairly consistent portrayal of child protection concerns emerged. Lack of school attendance, child labour (including forced labour), child marriage, sexual abuse and harsh physical punishment were consistent themes that were articulated, although there was some variation in emphasis. For example, in discussions with youths in Chingale, the most prominent protection issues raised were girls being forced into marriage, sexual abuse, children being given adult tasks, being sent to sell goods on school days, being denied food, corporal punishment and being made to sleep outside for not completing tasks or misbehaving. Girls were generally considered at greater risk of experiencing these situations than boys.

'I have three friends who were forced into marriage, it is mostly with a man not of their age, most of these marriages do not last, when a girl has three children, the husband will go to town and then will never come back.' Girl member, Youth FGD, Chingale

Youth were able to identify contextual factors contributing to such risks:

'A key factor is poverty; parents believe that marrying a girl means their financial burden, and that of the girl, will be put onto the new family.' Youth FGD, Chingale

These accounts by youth were broadly echoed by the formal Child Protection Committees (CPCs) in each area, as well as faith leaders in both Namachete and Chingale, who largely concurred with these judgements regarding major child protection concerns in their communities.

Child marriage and child labour were widely seen as risks closely linked to food shortages and economic conditions. In Namachete, the influence of Lake Chirwa (a major fishing area) and the proximity of Mozambique, where children are regularly trafficked to work on tobacco farms, were seen as significant factors exacerbating risks:

'Early marriage, school dropout rates are quite high for both boys and girls . . . Boy children are trafficked to Mozambique to work on farms there, most parents get payment in advance from middlemen. Fishing families send their boy children to go and work assisting fishermen mending nets (usually uncles and in-laws), in this work boys are exposed to smoking marijuana so they can cope with the work there, CPC FGD, Namachete

It appeared that in both Chingale and Namachete economic conditions had worsened, thereby exacerbating child protection risks. These risks were also exacerbated by the floods that hit the area in early 2015, which was most intense in Namachete due to the greater flood impact.

'The floods hit hard in Namachete and it affected our efforts to pursue child protection issues this year. It has been difficult for us to rescue child marriage victims, as well as child labour victims, due to poverty that has been aggravated by floods. Families see this as the only way to overcome household poverty.' PF FGD, Namachete

Faith leaders reported increased sensitisation to child protection concerns

There was strong evidence of increased sensitisation to child protection issues among faith leaders following the workshops. This was reflected not only in their personal understanding and behaviour, but also in their perception of their role within the community in relation to these child protection concerns.

The majority of faith leaders and their spouses in this study reported a clear recognition of their own responsibility to act on child protection concerns that they had not considered to be part of their remit and area of engagement prior to the workshop.

'Yes, the training [workshop] opened my eyes, at first I thought these child protection issues were the responsibility of community leaders and parents,[it] opened my eyes to a greater calling, which I was neglecting, I realise the missed opportunities I lost and planned that I will be a real part of change my community. I learnt that I was to take part in the welfare of all children in the community and not only those members of my congregation, which is what I was doing.' Pastor JM, Namachete

Changes in faith leaders' understanding of their role were generally linked to broader changes in their perceptions. This could involve changes in the understanding of what constituted protection concerns:

'I knew that some people hit their children, but I didn't realise that this is child abuse.' KII, Pastor H, Chingale

'Abuse like psychological, name calling, they are normal those things. We used to call children 'you are a dog' and it was something very light. Now we have opened up to

learning. So, name calling was not new but the way it was presented was.’ Pastor FM, Chingale

However, there were also many examples of more personal transformative change occurring:

‘I can never be the same again. There was me before the workshop and me after the workshop. I am changed and I can never go back to how I was before.’ Pastor K, Chingale

Other participants commented on their own parenting styles and how these were transformed through participation of the workshop:

‘The training made me reflect on my personal parenting style, I realised how much I had abused my own children and used it, most of the time to enforce good behaviour, I am now able to sit down with my children to discuss behavioural issues.’ Pastor DK, Chingale

Although these accounts indicated strong engagement of faith leaders with child protection concerns, there were aspects of the child protection ‘agenda’ presented in the workshops with which pastors signalled the need to critically engage to reflect local realities and contexts:

‘Allowing children to exercise their rights, some children will decide not to go to the farm. Forcing them to go to the farm is a form of abuse and beating such children to comply is a form of abuse. I did not agree to this concept. If I allow my son to decide whether he wants to go to school or not, he will end up becoming my burden forever.’ Rev CA, Chingale

Faith leaders in both Namachete and Chingale highlighted that culture and context must play a part in how issues are understood and dealt with in their communities. As a participant in an FGD in Chingale reflected:

‘There are a lot of NGOs who go around and preach about children’s rights. This makes the children rude and the community [parents, elders] doesn’t like it. Even in the church people have a negative attitude towards this. We need to find the right approach to this.’ Congregation FGD, Chingale

Faith leaders occupy radically diverse positions of status and influence

Even within a setting marked by strong Christian (as opposed to multifaith) identity, there was marked diversity in the circumstances of different faith leaders. Home visits to faith leaders reinforced the widely varying circumstances in which they worked and lived. These circumstances were reflected in the economic circumstances of their own homesteads, the size of their congregations, their status as faith leaders within their own congregations, as well as in their communities. These circumstances influenced their resources and capacity to initiate action. Three distinct groups of pastors could be identified.

Pastors of established churches

This group comprised pastors of established churches¹, with relatively large congregations, who were respected within their congregations and within the larger community. They commanded significant resources and influence. These pastors generally lived closer to centres and villages and earned

their living mainly through their pastor’s salary. One of these was the pastor from a Presbyterian church who expressed his confidence in his ability to influence his community:

‘I am not lazy. I do things and I organise things. I tell them [church groups] what to do and they are impressed and then they agree.’ Pastor, SJP KII, Chingale

This group spoke good English, were educated to a high level and connected to church bodies outside of their immediate communities. Some of them also had good working relations with civil society structures. This group had confidence and influence in their congregations and displayed innovation by utilising the existing structures in their congregations, such as the Women’s Guild, youth, men’s ministry, etc., to take up child protection issues

Pastors of large, poor churches

This group comprised pastors of relatively large, but poor, churches who were respected within these congregations, but had limited access to resources beyond. These pastors were mostly unsalaried and conducted other income generation on the side. Their influence in the communities varied, with some having good relationships with village authorities. This group of pastors had some confidence in their own abilities, but felt they needed support for initiating child protection activities, such as further training and resources for influencing their congregations and communities.

Pastors of small independent churches

This group comprised pastors of smaller, independent churches who generally had small and poor congregations and limited influence over both congregations and communities. As one pastor said:

‘No one listens to me. I try to tell them something but they say: “Who are you to tell us something?” I can’t change their minds.’ KII, Pastor HN, Namachete

This group of pastors tended to live more remotely in rural areas and earned their living through farming, like everyone else in their neighbourhood. Their status as faith leaders seemed contested within the communities and their resources very limited. The pastors in this group generally did not speak English and some were semi-literate. As one of the pastors explained:

‘Another reason why some pastors manage to succeed on child protection and others not is low self-esteem. You must have noticed on Sunday that some of us are reluctant [shy] to speak and that element also makes a pastor unable to fulfil the work’

Q: What are the reasons for the low self-esteem?

‘It’s an issue of personality and of education. I want to highlight, and you may be surprised, that some of us as pastors can’t write our own names.’ Pastor TM KII, Chingale

Pastors’ wives

Pastors’ wives across all the three types of churches were frequently well informed and motivated to respond to child protection issues. Many initiated actions such as awareness raising sessions with women in their congregations, as well

as responding to individual cases of child neglect and abuse. However, some of the wives considered that their ability to influence others around them, without their husband's endorsement was limited. One of the wives spoke of the need for them to become stronger and more confident in order to overcome this hurdle:

'The problem is with us – we look down on ourselves that we can't deliver [information]. We should stand up and stop thinking of ourselves as failures. We must believe that we can do the work!' FGD, Pastors wives, Chingale

Local faith leaders deploy diverse mobilisation strategies

Local faith leaders were found to be engaged in a wide range of mobilisation strategies with respect to child protection issues, outlined below.

Sensitisation

Many pastors, especially those from more established churches, reported using sermons and various existing structures and groups within their churches to conduct sensitisation sessions. These included presentations to women's groups (e.g. the Women's Guild), youth groups and church elders. The content of these sessions varied, but topics included the need to stop corporal punishment and the importance of ensuring that girls who have babies can go back to school.

In addition to presenting messages to their congregations through sermons, pastors in the latter two categories, particularly in more rural settings, often reported attempting sensitisation through community meetings. Some pastors of the small independent churches reported that these efforts were not always well received by congregations and community members, indicating that their influence was constrained.

Establishing church initiatives

Pastors of established churches generally worked through their existing church structures to further child protection. They expressed satisfaction with this approach. Pastors of large, poorer churches generally attempted to establish new specific child protection committees, but these had met with mixed success. A pastors' ability to motivate a group and clearly convey the ways it could work and to what purpose seemed critical to successful initiatives.

Q: Did you form a [a new child protection group] after the workshop?

'No, I tried to sell the idea to form a [group] in my congregation, but my congregation was not keen to belong to another committee, so I just raised awareness on protecting children and charged each one with that responsibility.' Pastor JK, KII, Masaula

Mobilising congregations and other community members was, at times, a difficult task for pastors of small, rural churches. These pastors often worked with little support or authority. However, their potential role as a catalyst for

prompting discussion within communities was well illustrated through this account:

'I did not get anyone who listened to me, but I continued to talk about children's right to stay in school. This morning, 8 young boys and girls came to me and said: "we hear that you are saying we should stay in school." So, I counselled them and they accepted my advice.' Pastor B, Chingale

Direct engagement with child protection cases

A majority of pastors reported direct involvement in preventing individual children from being abused or extricating children from situations that represented a violation of their rights. Satisfaction was expressed in relation to such instances, such as preventing a child marriage from taking place, getting a child back into school after they had dropped out, preventing harsh physical punishment of a child, etc. Teamwork and collaboration were common features of more successful action with most pastors working as a team, together with their wives. As one wife explained:

'We are most successful when we go together. We always approach families together, as husband and wife. Then people don't feel like we are just coming to talk bad things to them.' KII Pastor S. and Wife H., Chingale

Other pastors teamed up with one another or worked through the Pastors Fraternal² to try and address issues. For example, two pastors had lobbied their village leaders to support them to approach businessmen who were showing videos during the day from 9:00 am onwards, which resulted in many children missing school to go to watch the video shows. Working together, the pastors and the village leaders persuaded the men to open the video shows from 4:00 pm to 10:00 pm, after children have completed their school day.

In other instances, pastors engaged actively with government officials and village authorities to try to enact child protection. Therefore, it would appear, that pastors felt empowered to take action, which they previously had not considered, either because they lacked awareness or because they did not know how to take action.

Faith based authority can either reinforce, or compete with, other forms of civil authority

We have noted above that faith leaders had varying degrees of influence, depending on their capacities and the context in which they were operating. The establishment of other child protection initiatives such as CPC and other programmes created additional sources of authority and influence on child protection matters. These forces could effectively align, such as in a reported instance in one community of the establishment of a local by-law proscribing child marriage, and in which advocacy by faith leaders had played a key role. In another instance, a senior women's leader in a Catholic Church reported seeing health and education personnel as the appropriate drivers of change for the initiatives she planned, rather than convening a new structure within the church. She has

established a very effective ‘*working group of three*’: a health promotor, a teacher and herself.

There were also, however, examples of less effective coordination. Several examples were cited where a child protection incident had been reported separately to the CPC and other community committees. Separately, the two committees’ representatives went to respond to the issue. The community committee was reported to have sent back the CPC representatives as they were viewed as interfering with their business:

‘We were informed of a child who was raped by her uncle and we went there to respond to the issue, where we met with [other community group] members. They asked us what we wanted, when we explained to them our purpose for coming, they sent us back saying it was none of our business.’ CPC member, Namachete

DISCUSSION

This research supports the findings of Ager & El Nakib (2015) and Robinson (2010) which suggests that faith leaders can be valuable, embedded partners for reinforcing child protection concerns within communities. In particular, this study indicates that faith leaders’ understanding of the sociocultural factors that influence attitudes and behaviours, as well as their direct experience of the socioeconomic circumstances within their communities, provides them with the opportunity of speaking about child protection concerns from an insider’s perspective. The majority of faith leaders in this study may be considered ‘*insiders*’ to the communities they live in, experience the same difficulties and poverty, and know the dominant attitudes towards children, marriage, education and wellbeing. At the same time, the study indicates that they are uniquely placed as religious leaders to provide guidance and advice to their congregations on a range of issues, as they are respected as moral leaders who guide behaviour and uphold values. Their inclusion as partners in working towards eliminating child protection violations is crucial in persuading community members to change certain practices.

Our findings are based on a case study of the role and experience of Christian faith leaders in predominantly Christian communities in two sub-districts of southern Malawi. As such, it would be inappropriate to seek to generalise specific findings to other communities, contexts and religions. However, the principle that faith leaders have a role in shaping local community understandings of child protection as a result of their embeddedness, influence and understanding encourages further exploration of this route to strengthening community based child protection.

The role of the spouses of faith leaders was particularly highlighted in our study and this also constitutes a topic that has been largely neglected in the literature up to date. In this study, all of the spouses were wives (although there was one couple where both husband and wife were pastors of the church, and one Roman Catholic priest who did not have a wife) and within their position in the faith

congregations they are able to use their role and influence to engage in a range of sensitisation activities and promotion of child protection. Their access to women in the faith communities and their (potential) status allows them to discuss issues in a way that few other women can. The partnership between pastor and wife displayed in ‘*team*’ visits to households seemed to facilitate access to households in a manner that may otherwise not have been possible for the pastor or his wife on their own. However, the statements by some of the wives that they lacked confidence and needed the backing of their husbands indicates that more attention needs to be paid to how agencies can engage with the wives and further support their efforts in child protection.

While there is convincing evidence that pastors and their wives actively translated their training experience into action to promote child protection, the findings caution against making blanket assumptions about how effective these actions can be. The pastors’ very diverse circumstances and range of influence suggest that it cannot be assumed that pastors are a homogenous group that will respond and motivate the members of their congregations in similar ways. The varying mobilisation strategies employed are testimony to the fact that the pastors are innovative in their attempts to positively change child protection concerns, but also that some strategies are more suited to specific religious congregations, as well as to the particular position of the pastor himself. Pastors from the smaller, independent churches are likely to benefit most from linking with other pastors in undertaking joint actions, whereas pastors from the established churches seemed to be most effective through activating existing structures within their churches in order to reach congregation members. Further research into how faith leaders mobilise and how they coordinate this within and outside their own congregations is needed in order to support the initiatives of pastors in the child protection field.

A final discussion point arises in regard to the cooperation between formal child protection mechanisms within government and civil society structures, and the informal initiatives set up by faith leaders. It is evident that there needs to be cooperation and mutual respect between these two mechanisms in order to foster an effective working relationship. It is in the interests of all actors who wish to promote child protection that individual child abuse cases, community practices and other factors that negatively affect children can be brought to the fore and resolved appropriately. One possibility to achieve this is through the active incorporation of faith leaders into child protection committees and local authority structures where general and specific cases of children are discussed and resolved. However, it is also clear that relationships between the formal and informal mechanisms may be complex, requiring the support and attention of all actors involved in the child protection system, an aim that in this setting was generally prioritised by the actors involved. Further research needs to investigate how this could be facilitated in diverse settings, for example, in inter-faith and non Christian communities, where a range of different child

protection concerns and cooperation between faith leaders and the formal system may take a different shape.

Acknowledgments

The authors wish to thank all who supported planning and implementation of this study, including: Andrew Ware, (World Vision, UK), Naire Salima, Richard Chigwenembe, Ndamyo Nkosi, Linda Banda, Janet Mbwadzulu, Wezi Mjathu, Binwell Ntoso, Arthur Mpumulo, Paul Chiwambo and Maxwell Kamiza (World Vision Malawi) and Bill Forbes, Robyn Cawker and Christo Greyling (World Vision International). We also acknowledge the support of staff at Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh, especially Linda Graham and Janice Burr. Finally, we are grateful for the kindness and hospitality of the communities of Chingale and Namachete that so generously assisted us in our work.

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¹These were generally churches that operated within a national or international denominational network, which had been established for a longer time period, and which had wider access to resources, e.g. the Catholic Church, protestant churches such as the CCAP (Church of Central Africa Presbyterian) denomination, amongst others.

²An organisation for pastors that facilitates communication and cooperation between churches in districts, and at a national level.