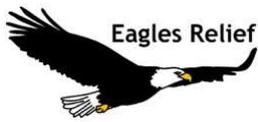


## 1.3. FROM STAFF-BASED TO COMMUNITY-FOCUSED MEAL

### EAGLES RELIEF AND DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME MALAWI



Eagles Relief and Development Programme

How this story represents an international-local faith partnership in MEAL



#### International element

International Christian donor



#### Local faith element

National faith-based Christian organisation, partnerships with local churches



#### Project country

Malawi



#### Website

<http://www.eaglesmalawi.org/>



### The organisation and activities

Living Waters Church established Eagles Relief and Development Programme in Malawi following a devastating famine in 2002. Malawi is one of the poorest countries in the world, with the majority of the population living below the international extreme poverty line of \$1.90 a day. Most of the population depends on agriculture and food security remains a major issue despite some progress being made in recent years.

The work of Eagles focuses on three main areas: having enough food, helping the vulnerable,

and caring for the environment. Eagles aims to help tackle hunger and find long-term solutions to food insecurity, so that communities can become self-reliant, prosperous, and healthy. Eagles believes that long-term solutions are most likely to succeed when local communities take ownership of change and work towards lifting themselves out of poverty. The organisation therefore works with local church partners to achieve that as part of a Community and Church Mobilisation Process (CCMP).

Eagles mobilises, trains, and supports churches of all denominations across the country to help

them work with their communities, identify local needs and resources, and bring about change. Eagles sees poverty as both a material and a spiritual issue, as when people become dependent on others for their survival, it often affects their self-esteem. Eagles therefore approach poverty alleviation as a complex issue necessitating holistic transformation.

The organisation has five field offices across Malawi and a head office in Blantyre (southern Malawi).

### MEAL approach and rationale

#### Development of a new MEAL plan

Eagles' MEAL plan was reviewed in 2019. The review took place following feedback from communities who felt that current MEAL approaches were not working for them, as they were perceived to be overly complex and designed with the Eagles-donor interface in mind. The Eagles team therefore decided to find a different system that could be fully owned by churches and communities, while meeting donors' data needs by finding synergies with MEAL approaches that are valuable and relevant in communities' lives. A pilot of the new community-led MEAL approach, which was developed with the support of an external consultant on the basis of the organisation's Theory of Change, was scheduled for later in 2020 and 2021 due to delays caused by COVID-19. It was developed through a participatory process. If a particular piece of information was not valuable for the community, Eagles either removed it from the MEAL plan or thought of a way to measure it so that it would become beneficial.

#### Data collection and analysis

Eagles' experience shows that participatory approaches can often generate more reliable data, as participants are more likely to answer honestly in a focus group with fellow community members or in a creative activity where they see no right answers, than in a survey with a donor. Data collection in the new MEAL plan is focused on outputs, intermediate outcomes, and overall outcomes.

Data on outputs is collected through a self-reflection checklist that pastors complete quarterly during training, to enable them to share their learning with other pastors. Intermediate outcomes are documented once a year through the 'Picture of Participation' tool, which is attended by church leaders, community leaders, and a representative group of members. Attendees are selected by the community and must include both individuals who are church members and others who are not. The 'Picture of Participation' tool measures the extent to which different stakeholders are committed to and engaging with the process. Information is then fed back through a community meeting.

Lastly, overall outcomes are monitored through 'Stories of Significant Change.' This process is facilitated by the local pastor or Eagles' staff at an annual Community Celebration held by local leaders to celebrate their successes. The whole community is encouraged to attend (with deliberate effort to involve those often left out), and divided into men, women, and youth to select stories. Evidence is triangulated to increase its reliability. For example, photos are taken to illustrate each of the selected Significant Stories of Change. Communities first analyse the data for themselves, using participatory tools



to identify what is going well, what challenges are a barrier to progress, and how they can be overcome. This is usually done in more detail by local church pastors and social action committees, too. Data is then also analysed by Eagles' staff, who compare targets to actual results.

### **Accountability and learning**

The evidence generated through the MEAL tools affects decision-making at all levels. Results are used first by churches and communities for their own action learning. The process equips communities to engage with local government and many have done so. For example, some community members meet with the government to hold them accountable for projects within the area. Others have shared the results of their participatory analysis, the work they are already doing, and advocate for better services.

Moreover, Eagles communicates with national church leadership and donors through meetings,

reports, church conferences, social media, and a quarterly newsletter.

### **Lessons learned**

#### **Adapting tools and terminologies**

When specific approaches do not resonate with local communities, it may be necessary to adapt both the tools and the terminology used. For example, the organisation turned a survey to gather output data into a 'Pastor's Self-Reflection' that enables pastors to analyse their own experience, successes and challenges, and share their learning with other pastors. To the organisation, this is not just a matter of playing with language, but rather a recognition of the power of language to establish a mindset of ownership.

#### **Responding to resistance**

Whilst there is immense benefit in community-led MEAL plans, the process can be slower and messier than traditional approaches. This can lead to resistance by staff who may prefer traditional approaches, which they perceive to be easier, quicker, and more predictable. It is therefore vital to generate buy-in among staff at the level of the principles behind the MEAL plan, and ideally get staff involved in designing the system. Eagles had planned to do this in a participatory way whereby staff first brainstorm challenges of the old system and where it disconnects with the organisation's vision and mission, and then edit a draft MEAL plan in response. However, the coronavirus pandemic has disrupted these plans for the time being.