

Taking part in public life: democracy and civic education

Even though the first democratic elections were held in 1994, democracy is still not widely appreciated by every Malawian. In this sense, a project funded by the European Union on civic education is making a difference on the ground.

Established in 1999, the National Initiative for Civic Education (NICE) is a joint project of the Republic of Malawi and the European Union, managed by the German Agency for Technical Cooperation (GTZ). Its objective is to entrench core democratic values at the grassroots level through the provision of civic education. "The unique approach of NICE is that, contrary to other civic education projects in Africa, it is a country-wide programme, operating throughout all districts and villages. Our structures reach at least 10-15 per cent of the population of Malawi. We have been on the ground for four years and we have already seen the impact that our programme is making: people now understand things in a different way; they

know they have rights, but they don't have to wait for government, donors, or NGOs to deliver; they have to help themselves to improve their lives", argues Christian Peters-Berries, a German national who is the project manager.

The "goat culture"

NICE provides information and training while facilitating various services that make people aware of their own interests and responsibilities. Instruments used include workshops, debates, and cultural activities involving local communities. "Democracy is not meaningful if people do not take part in public

life. Participation must start at the village level. Specific community needs, HIV/AIDS, food security, environmental protection, gender and general issues on democracy, local governance and rule of law are used as entry points", explains Mr Pius Mtiye, district officer of the Thyolo district.

A crucial factor contributing to the success of NICE is its decentralised implementation structure, which comprises 29 district offices, three regional offices, and one national office. NICE works with thousands of volunteers called zone coordinators and paracivic educators. Throughout all its activities, the programme aims at promoting self-organisation and empowering people.

"Through NICE we have contributed to re-vitalising voluntarism in Malawi. When people participate in a workshop generally they expect to receive an allowance. But if we provide a payment, we cannot be sure that people are really interested in what we do and in the services we provide. Actually, we have invented the so-called "goat culture", which is now very popular in Malawi. We buy a goat, some maize meal, some rice and we give them to the community to prepare a meal. Then, after that we have conducted our activities, we sit together and continue our discussions while eating", says Mr Peters-Berries.

Rural libraries

One of the most original initiatives promoted by NICE is the establishment of rural libraries to enable rural people to have access to information. At the moment there are about 80. One of them is the Chimvu Rural Library. "At the very beginning there were no places for these libraries. Communities got mobilised and built their own structures. In our library people can read books, magazines, newspapers. Many people come every day: teachers, villagers, women, but also students whose schools do not have such facilities. The rural libraries have also become a venue to discuss public issues in everyday life: people are thus able to appreciate what government does, and perhaps they will be in a good position to demand better services", says Group Village Headman Charles Mangazi.

Civic education

A major role is played by NICE in view of the elections to be held in May 2004. NICE, which contributed to the high voter turnout during the 1999 elections, is working to ensure that every Malawian participates in free and fair elections. "First we have to tell people that they have the right to choose, but as we are a non-partisan organisation we certainly don't tell people who to vote for. We just produce and circulate voter education materials. We analyse the manifestos of the different parties so that people can make an informed choice", explains Mr John Tabwali, one of the paracivic educators.

For this reason, NICE faces some constraints and challenges: political violence and intolerance in some areas frustrates the efforts of district officers. At national level, NICE was seen by some politicians as an antagonistic force and faced a few attempts to close it down. These calls have now stopped, and actually some politicians have asked to extend its reach. In an environment where the democratisation process is deteriorating, NICE goes in the opposite direction: "Actually, our aim is to formalise NICE into a model that can be replicated in other countries to deliver the same results as in Malawi," concludes Mr Peters-Berries. ■ MC

Christian Peters-Berries



Starting with the Thyolo district, NICE today has established rural libraries in other districts where such useful documents as the Malawi Constitution and other publications on human rights and general knowledge are made available to the public.