

Final Evaluation Report

External Evaluation of Mangochi Basic Services
Programme Phase II, 2017-2023

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Subject Description

The evaluation analyses the Mangochi Basic Services Programme Phase II (MBSP II), covering the period from July 2017 to June 2023. The goal of the MBSP II is to improve livelihoods and socio-economic living conditions in rural communities in Mangochi District. The programme is financed by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Iceland in its bilateral development cooperation partner country of Malawi. Mangochi District Council is implementing the MBSP II at district level, managed via the modality of a programme-based approach (PBA).

Evaluation Objectives and Methodology

The overall objective is to provide an independent evaluation of the performance of the MBSP II. The main purposes of the evaluation are accountability and learning. Specifically, the main questions answered by the evaluation are as follows. To what extent have the MBSP II interventions met their stated development objectives? What are the primary successes and failures of the MBSP II and what lessons can be drawn?

At a strategic level, the core question to be addressed by the evaluation are: How suitable is the PBA at district level for stakeholders and donor partner? Does evidence suggest that the capacity of local systems and local service delivery has improved with the approach? Has the approach enhanced decentralization efforts in Malawi? To what extent does it offer lessons learned and best practices for donors and districts in Malawi?

The evaluation combines a desk review and an intensive field-mission visit (5th July to 19th July 2023) to meet partners, stakeholders and beneficiaries in Malawi (primarily in Mangochi District and then in Lilongwe). The field-mission enabled the evaluators to conduct detailed data-collection research, on-site visits and observational reviews. The evaluation corresponds to OECD-DAC evaluation standards and criteria of relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, sustainability and impact. The evaluation followed a mixed-methods approach to data collection and analysis, and used a variety of standard methodological approaches: documentation review, key informant interviews, focus group discussions, household questionnaire survey, and performance assessment using quantitative and qualitative data. The evaluation utilized the following performance rating system for the OECD-DAC criteria: (HS) Highly Satisfactory, (S) Satisfactory, (A) Adequate, (U) Unsatisfactory, and (HU) Highly Unsatisfactory.

Major findings and conclusions

The performance of the MBSP II is judged as satisfactory. It has produced real social benefits for the citizens of Mangochi District in terms of improved access to and the quality of basic service provision. Overall, the relevance, coherence, effectiveness and sustainability of the MBSP II is judged as satisfactory, and the efficiency and impact of the MBSP II is judged as adequate. The performance of the MBSP II in addressing the cross-cutting priorities for Iceland, of gender equality, human rights and environment is judged as satisfactory.

Relevance

The MBSP II was relevant when it was designed and remained so at the time of the evaluation. The MBSP II is closely aligned with national policies and strategies and the development context. This includes the Malawi Growth and Development Strategy 2017-2022 and the Malawi 2063 Vision - First 10-year Implementation Plan 2021-2030, as well as a range of national sectoral policies and strategies. It is fully aligned with the local policies and strategies of Mangochi District as defined in the District Development Plan 2017-2022. The programme specific and immediate objectives are

closely aligned with the target groups' needs and priorities for the improved provision and use of basic services in maternal health and family planning, primary education, water and sanitation, and community development, for men and women living in rural Mangochi District. The MBSP II is fully in line with Icelandic development cooperation policy aims. It is specifically linked to the developmental goal enhancing social infrastructure via basic services in order to improve living standards and increase opportunities. This programme is also fully consistent with Iceland's focus on utilizing local systems and development plans in country, through the modality of a PBA implemented at district level. The MBSP II is also consistent with the goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and with the guiding principle to "Leave no one behind", as Mangochi District is one of the less developed districts in Malawi. The quality of the programme design is satisfactory, although with some limitations. The quality of the risk assessment and mitigation planning, and of the deliberation on the cross-cutting priorities for Iceland is weak.

Coherence

The coherence of the MBSP II with other policies and interventions of the key programme stakeholders is highly satisfactory. It is fully coherent with the Government's National Decentralization Policy and efforts. The MBSP II programme finances are fully "on plan, on budget" and held on the MBSP account at the District Council. The District Council plans and implements its programmes, including MBSP II, and thereby considers issues of the coherence and potential synergies, as well as of potential overlap or duplication, across its portfolio of actions. There is a strong level of coherence and synergy between MBSP II and the other Icelandic supported development programmes in Mangochi District. Synergies are evident in regard to actions on strengthening community based health services, improving access to quality primary education, improving access to water facilities, women's empowerment and gender equality. The synergy between MBSP II and the GIZ's Energizing Development programme is strongly evident. Most notably in terms of the number of MBSP II health or primary school facilities that received support under Energizing Development to install solar power or cooking facilities. There is no evidence of overlap or duplication of development efforts between MBSP II and the programmes of other donors active in the District. But, there are limitations in regard to the promotion of potential synergy at local level. It is not evident that Mangochi District has made any substantial effort to promote potential synergies between the different donor programmes, or to share information and lessons learned under them.

Effectiveness

The effectiveness of the MBSP II in delivery and achievement of the intended results is satisfactory. But, there is a partially mixed record in terms of achievement in line with the intended targets. MBSP II is on-going up to 2025, and the evaluator judges the prospects for further progress on the programme outcomes is good. Linked to the intended direct outcomes (specific objectives), it is evident that the MBSP II has contributed to positive progress and real social benefits. As compared to the baseline data, thirteen of the 14 outcome indicators show positive progress. But one indicator records negative progress. This is the percentage of women of reproductive age receiving family planning methods. For the thirteen outcome indicators showing positive progress, five are fully on-track to or have already achieved the declared 'end-of-programme' target. Two are positively on-track and record no major setbacks but are still well short of achieving the declared targets. Six were positively on-track but experienced setbacks, notably during 2020-2021, because of external challenges.

Overall, MBSP II has and is anticipated to achieve its specific objective of improving access to, and use of, quality maternal and health services for pregnant mothers and children under 5-years age. With the availability of maternal services at local health centres, more women are attending ANC in the first trimester. The proportion of deliveries attended by skilled health workers has increased. Nevertheless, some gaps and challenges were encountered in the course of the programme's implementation. The most significant challenges in terms of delivery are related to the programme

focus area 1.1 health service infrastructure. MBSP II has achieved its specific objective of improving the quality of primary education services in its twelve target schools. The target schools now perform better than the District average on many indicators for educational results. However, the schools' enrolment rate has not yet fully recovered post COVID-19. MBSP II has achieved its specific objective to increase sustainable access to and use of improved safe water sources, and its specific objective to increase access to improved sanitation facilities. But the programme has faced certain challenges to increase the take-up of improved sanitary facilities at household level. However, the MBSP II has not yet made substantial progress or reach in terms of its specific objective of improved access of women and young people to skills development interventions and economic opportunities in designated areas of the District. The key challenge to ensuring the effective delivery of the intended outputs and outcomes is that the procurement processes to support the business groups has been slow. MBSP II has largely achieved its specific objective to increase the capacity of the Mangochi District to carry-out its development plans in a proper and timely manner. The capacity of the District to implement the MBSP II has increased.

Efficiency

The MBSP II management arrangements are appropriate. But, the efficiency of programme planning, implementation, delivery and achievement of the intended results is only adequate. The COVID-19 pandemic caused challenges for implementation during 2020 and 2021. The District adapted the modalities for managing implementation and service delivery to respond to the contextual changes arising. But, the key efficiency constraint linked to implementation is the pace of public procurement. The time taken by District Offices to prepare procurement dossiers is a key factor determining the ultimate efficiency of procurement processes. The programme monitoring, oversight and steering functions have broadly been satisfactory. But, the focus is primarily on the outputs delivery to ensure these are in keeping with the programme document, rather than supporting steering towards the medium-term perspective linked to the achievement of the direct outcomes. Weaknesses remain in terms of the availability of up-to-date technical progress data as per the MBSP II results framework. There is an improvement in terms of the extent of gender-specified data provided on the MBSP II.

Sustainability

Overall, the prospect for sustainability of the results and benefits after the end of the programme is satisfactory. Nevertheless, challenges exist linked to the sanitation and the economic empowerment results, and potentially longer-term also for water. The technical capacity of the District institutions to continue operation and maintenance of the MBSP II systems and the interventions, to deliver the results and benefits, is assessed to be good. The District Council will primarily be responsible for financial sustainability linked to the basic services developed, most notably those under the Health and the Education components. Also, local community funds exist to support the operation and certain maintenance of individual MBSP II facilities, such as water points. However, it is not evident that substantive effort has yet been made by the District to formally plan for the sustainability of the programme results and benefits after the end of the programme. It is not evident that such considerations, beyond that of ensuring funds for the general maintenance and small-scale repairs of facilities, were foreseen as necessary to be undertaken within the context of the programme design.

Impact

The direct effects and prospects for the MBSP II contribution to improved socio-economic conditions and livelihoods within the District is most strongly evident related to the programme's contribution to improving access to quality maternal health care services provided at health care facilities, including in the improved maternity wings at selected health centres and hospitals, spread around the District. Nevertheless, the neonatal mortality rate (institutional) reported in the District

has deteriorated since 2021. Post-COVID-19, this appears now to be impacted by rising costs for basic foods and the increased risks of malnourishment for pregnant women. The improved access to safe water supply sources within walking distance has positively resulted in the reduced prevalence of water-borne disease infections, such as diarrheal disease, in areas served with safe water supply, which is evident by the decreased mortality rate due to unsafe WASH services. But, without further effort by the District to sustain and scale-up the interventions, the overall prospects for longer-term impact of the programme is presently judged only to be adequate, not yet satisfactory. Overall, it is evident, based on feedback provided to the evaluator from stakeholders' as well as statistical evidence linked to most of the performance indicators defined for the MBSP II that real social benefits have been delivered via the programme in terms of improved access to and the quality of basic services provided.

The evaluator assesses the effectiveness of the PBA at district level as a development approach as satisfactory. The PBA modality implemented at district level, as compared to alternative modalities, has strengthened local ownership, and local capacity to manage large budgets and local development efforts, while enabling local hands-on control of the programme direction and its implementation. The PBA modality and Iceland's multi-sectoral approach to its deployment has directly enhanced decentralization efforts in Malawi insofar as the MBSP II has delivered specific development results and effects in Mangochi District. The PBA has certainly contributed to strengthen the operational and technical capacity of the Mangochi District institutions.

Lessons learned

The evaluation presents 17 lessons learned of which five are presented here.

- (1.) Regular District engagement with local community structures and stakeholder partners is essential to ensure the programme's relevance, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability. Cooperation with local structures during the development, implementation and follow-up of the programme actions was generally very positive. However, it is evident that the frequency of engagement with stakeholders has, at times, been more challenging for the District and extension workers to undertake in reaching remoter areas of the District.
- (2.) Successful achievement of the development effects is built on the programme's complementary mix of intervention types (e.g., infrastructure development, rehabilitation, equipment supplies and logistical support, capacity building of organizations, staffs and community groups, plus awareness-raising campaigns). This contributes to the relatively holistic approach and effectiveness in the delivery and take-up of the results.
- (3.) While local community funds exist to cover certain maintenance and small-scale repairs linked to developed facilities, such as schools or water points, respondents to the household survey indicated that the transparency and accountability in terms of the operation of the funding mechanisms is limited.
- (4.) While the DWDO and more recently the DEHO have sought to identify good or poor practice, to guide future scaling-up of similar interventions, it is not evident that other institutions have made any substantive effort in the area of knowledge management and learning.
- (5.) There is a lack of substantive effort by the District to prepare for sustainability of the programme results and benefits, including the continued operation and maintenance of the developed infrastructure facilities.

Recommendations

The evaluation presents 17 recommendations, which are summarized below.

Recommendations to ensure successful completion of the MBSP II actions

- (1.) The District Council (Secretariat and Offices), with the support of the Embassy of Iceland, should finalize the on-going infrastructure interventions and procurement processes to deliver the intended outputs.
- (2.) The District Council (Secretariat and Offices) should ensure effective operationalization of the programme results and facilities that are delivered. Key issues to be addressed are: (1) the DHO should ensure operationalization of the village clinics, which are vital health services at community level, and (2) the DWDO and the DEHO need to work further on the mobilization of local private sector actors and the development of small-scale financing mechanisms to assist take-up and maintenance of WASH services and facilities.
- (3.) The District Council (Secretariat and Offices) should ensure continuation of the provision of capacity building supports for local community structures and groups.
- (4.) The District Council (Secretariat and Offices) should ensure that capacity building and training outputs are maintained by the District Offices in-house, in order to provide for the continued provision of in-service and refresher trainings for staffs, and also for the training of local community groups.
- (5.) The District Council (Secretariat and Offices), with the support of the Embassy of Iceland, should undertake more substantive effort to learn lessons and identify good or poor practice linked to the planning, the implementation and the take-up (or not) of the intended programme results.
- (6.) The District Council (Secretariat and Offices), with the support of the Embassy of Iceland, should prepare formal sustainability plans linked to the programmes results.
- (7.) The District Council (Secretariat and Offices), with the support of the Embassy of Iceland, should explore the potential for greater engagement and collaboration with other development partners active in the MBSP II programme areas that can support the District going forward.
- (8.) The District Council (Secretariat and Offices) should establish and make use of coordination platforms between the different sectors and district offices to enable synergies of joint coordination.

Recommendations linked to the operation of the PBA modality at district level

- (9.) The Embassy of Iceland should continue to operate its PBA using pooled programme funds.
- (10.) The Embassy of Iceland should consider the introduction of a results-based performance element within its approach to the PBA.
- (11.) The Embassy of Iceland should ensure stricter reporting compliance by the supported Districts, both in terms of the timeliness and the accuracy of financial and technical reporting.

Recommendations for the potential future orientation of Icelandic support to Mangochi District

- (12.) The Embassy of Iceland, in partnership with the District Council (Secretariat and Offices), should continue to focus on the existing five components, but in a potential MBSP Phase III there should be a greater focus on how the interventions can most efficiently and effectively be replicated and/or scaled-up within the District. This should be based on an appreciation as to which other potential development partners or local funding capacities (central government transfers or local revenue) exist to support the District over the period 2025-2030 to undertake the replication and/or scaling-up of measures.

(13.) In the Education sector specifically, it is recommended that there is a shift to testing how the proven interventions can best be replicated and/or scaled-up to support a wider group of primary schools.

(14.) The Embassy of Iceland, in partnership with the District Council (Secretariat and Offices), should consider what steps, including capacity building measures for the District Council, could be undertaken to strengthen the District's coordination of donor development actions in the District.

(15.) The District Council (Secretariat and Offices) should continue to explore additional avenues for fund generation. This is especially important for the maintenance and improved security of health infrastructure.

(16.) The District Council (Secretariat and Offices) should ensure that a cascading training system is established linked to public procurement and contracting processes, as well as continuous monitoring, evaluation and quality assurance and control of infrastructure construction sites of external contractors.

(17.) The Embassy of Iceland, in partnership with the District Council (Secretariat and Offices), should establish clear processes for the development of sustainability planning from the onset of similar programmes and activities. These should specify concrete measures that need to be undertaken during the lifetime of the programme for the long-term sustainability management of each sub-component.