

## Advocacy case studies

# BUILDING BRIDGES BETWEEN LOCAL COMMUNITIES AND NATIONAL INCLUSIVE POLICIES AND PRACTICES IN MALAWI

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<b>COUNTRY:</b>	<b>Malawi</b>
<b>THEMES:</b>	<b>Health; disability; water, sanitation and hygiene</b>
<b>ADVOCACY APPROACHES:</b>	<b>Building relationships; educating community members; using the media; government officials: educating; government officials: meeting with; government officials: lobbying; church and community mobilisation</b>

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Rural communities suffered greatly in the Covid-19 pandemic. Many vulnerable people in these communities had to choose between food and soap during the crisis. The access of rural villages to electricity and media channels is very restricted; therefore, many communities did not receive adequate support or information on how to handle Covid-19.

In response to this need, Tearfund partner, Eagles, operated a radio programme to raise awareness of Covid-19 in these communities. Villagers could call in to the radio programme with their questions. One day, a villager with a visual impairment called in and made Eagles aware of the plight of people who are blind during the pandemic. They had no access to any of the written information being shared as it wasn't in braille. They were also not able to attend village meetings, so they were not receiving the support they required, such as hygiene supplies.

Therefore, Eagles reached out to the local government officials from the caller's district. The officials confessed that they had not considered the special needs of people who are blind when they were planning the response to Covid-19 in their area. Eagles also met with another organisation specialising in helping people who are blind in Malawi, called Torch Trust for the Blind. Torch Trust for the Blind made Eagles aware that funding for producing leaflets about Covid-19 in braille was very limited. Furthermore, their database showed there were at least 1,000 people with visual impairments suffering similarly to the caller throughout the country. Eagles realised that the lack of financial transparency of the national government's budgets for the districts made accountability between the rural communities and government very difficult.

After their meetings with Torch Trust for the Blind, Eagles met with national government officials to discuss the unique needs of people who are blind in Malawi during Covid-19, such as WASH hygiene at community boreholes. They are also petitioning the government to provide more funding to organisations and district initiatives to support vulnerable people in rural communities. Additionally, Eagles visited pastors of rural churches throughout the country to raise awareness of the needs of people with visual impairments. This was to encourage the church to be a first responder to the most vulnerable in their communities. Eagles provides Church and Community Transformation (CCT) training for many of these pastors and continues to support them to understand what their challenges are as they respond to the needs of the population.

From this experience, Eagles has learnt the importance of including the voices of the most vulnerable when planning policies and interventions. It is crucial to first listen to people to understand the challenges from their perspective. Additionally, in responding to crises, it is important to engage stakeholders across sectors and to never make assumptions in the risk analysis process. When the Malawi government and NGOs did not follow this advice, it led to an uninformed response to Covid-19 in the country. However, Eagles is now finding that in building relationships and alliances with national and local government officials, pastors, other NGOs and communities, they are able to be more creative in reaching out to the most vulnerable in rural communities, and can further spread important messages regarding Covid-19.