

Seeing Like a Village: Village Headmen and AIDS Intervention

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The international community's overwhelming mobilization against AIDS in Africa will depend on the decisions and actions of local agents implementing interventions on the ground. Intervention against HIV and AIDS requires a great deal of funding and technical assistance, thus the importance of donors, researchers, and technocrats, typically supplied by the international community. However, the intervention simultaneously requires many more local agents to relay the goods and services supported by the international community in order to achieve the goals of reducing the incidence of HIV and mitigating the impact of AIDS among targeted populations. Local agents are an essential link between the donors supporting HIV and AIDS intervention and their intended beneficiaries. This paper describes one set of the global AIDS intervention's local agents, their preferences, and the context in which they make decisions. I analyze original survey and in-depth interview data collected in 2008 and 2009 in rural Malawi to characterize the role of village headmen in implementing the global AIDS intervention. Because in many of Malawi's rural villages there are few public or government-supported services or infrastructure, the local headman plays an important role in shaping organization and mobilization to meet the village's needs. I describe why village headmen are important to the global intervention against AIDS and I demonstrate that their preferences are more in line with those of their local principals — ordinary villagers — than their global principals, the international activists and donors providing an abundance of resources to combat AIDS in Africa. Plainly, the survey data demonstrate that on average, headmen's policy preferences are aligned with those of their villagers. Despite the great priority given to HIV/AIDS interventions in the global community, village headmen give relatively low priority to HIV/AIDS services when posited against other pressing issues.