

**Combining research with advocacy and service
delivery: experience from NGOs in Malawi**

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The candidate confirms that the work submitted is her own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

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Abstract

There is increasing interest in the role of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in research. NGOs are typically known for their work as service providers or advocates, but some NGOs conduct research alongside these other activities.

NGOs' involvement in service delivery and advocacy may provide opportunities for research. I assess three such opportunities. First, involvement in service delivery may mean NGOs can identify research questions that respond to frontline knowledge gaps, so ensuring research is relevant. Second, service delivery may provide a source of research data, through examining service delivery activities or using information collected through programme monitoring. Third, NGOs' advocacy might support communication of research findings, by bringing a commitment to promoting action and channels to share results.

These potential advantages of service delivery and advocacy for research are frequently suggested in the literature. However, there is limited evidence on the way these relationships between research, service delivery and advocacy work in practice, or on their variation between different contexts. This leaves little guidance on conditions needed to maximise the value of input from NGOs' service delivery and advocacy to research.

In response, this thesis examines these relationships between research, service delivery and advocacy through the experience of four NGOs in Malawi. I consider whether service delivery provides research questions and data and whether advocacy supports research communication. Based on the case NGOs' experiences, I identify conditions within and outside NGOs that affect the value of drawing on service delivery and advocacy in these ways and scope to make these connections. I conclude by providing guidance on ways to support an effective role for NGOs' service delivery and advocacy in research, with recommendations for NGOs, academic partners and donors.

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Abbreviations

BOND	British Overseas NGOs for Development
DFID	Department for International Development
INGO	International non-governmental organisation
INTRAC	International NGO Training and Research Centre
M&E	Monitoring and evaluation
MoH	Ministry of Health
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
WHO	World Health Organization

1 Introduction

This thesis examines relationships between non-governmental organisations' (NGOs) service delivery and advocacy and their research. There is increasing attention to NGOs' role in research, but little empirical investigation of their research activities. Links between service delivery, advocacy and research are also widely discussed, but primarily in relation to use of research findings in policy and practice. My thesis looks instead at how service delivery and advocacy can be used to support research. I consider three relationships between these functions of service delivery, advocacy and research: the role of service delivery as a source of research questions; the role of service delivery as a source of research data; and the role of advocacy in communication of research findings. I examine these three relationships through the experience of NGOs in Malawi. The thesis concentrates particularly on research for health, but relates to and considers international development research more broadly. In this introductory chapter, I describe the background and rationale for this study (1.1), then set out my research aims and questions, including a conceptual framework and definitions (1.2). I follow this with more detailed discussion of existing literature to clarify current knowledge and gaps in the evidence (1.3). A brief introduction to Malawi then provides contextual background for the remainder of the thesis (1.4). I finish the chapter with an outline of the thesis structure and argument (1.5).

1.1 Background: the interest in research for development and the potential contribution of NGOs to research

Recent decades have seen increasing emphasis on the importance of research to inform development policies, within international health (Hanney & Gonzalez Block, 2006) and broader development (Sumner & Tribe, 2008). Spending on research is increasing among donors and developing country governments (DFID, 2008; Newman, 2014). Within discussions about international health and development research, it is widely stressed that more effort is needed to ensure research is relevant and leads to action (Stone, 2002; Hanney et al., 2003; Mills et al., 2004; Young, 2005). As these authors and official strategies suggest, much research undertaken in developing countries does not fit policy priorities, and uptake in policy or practice remains weak (WHO, 2012a).

Alongside this attention to development research and its effectiveness, there is rising interest in the role of NGOs in research. International health and development NGOs are typically known for their work as service providers or advocates, but research has

grown as an area of NGO activity (Edwards, 1994a; Hulme, 1994; Stone & Pratt, 1994; Vakil, 1997; Stone, 2002; Beaulieu, 2013; Hayman, 2013). As the older references suggest, NGO involvement in research has been discussed for at least two decades. However, recent years have seen a renewed emphasis on research among NGOs (Hayman, 2013). There is also increasing interest in collaboration between NGOs and academics or other researchers. Again a long-standing discussion (Edwards, 1994a; Hulme, 1994; Stone & Pratt, 1994), this collaboration has become a renewed concern. In the UK international development sector, for example, partnership between NGOs and academics has been the focus for several recent meetings and projects (INTRAC, 2012; Green, 2013; BOND, 2014; Carter, 2014). Initiatives and reports from other countries and global conferences indicate a similar interest elsewhere (Jayawickrama, 2009; Roche, 2013; Australian Council for International Development, 2014; Medicus Mundi International, 2014a). As part of this growing focus on NGO research, there have been calls for more NGO engagement in research from both NGOs and the wider research community. Within international health, for example, the 2008 Global Ministerial Forum on Research for Health Communiqué stated that “Civil society organizations (CSOs) can and must play a stronger role in decisions on research for health” (Global Ministerial Forum for Health Research, 2008 p.3). Proponents suggest NGOs are and should be active at all stages of the research cycle, including identifying priorities, producing data, dissemination and using research findings (Sanders et al., 2004; Delisle et al., 2005; ANIS et al., 2008). A similar interest in NGO involvement in research is found outside international development. For example, NGO engagement has been the focus of several recent European research initiatives (CONSIDER, 2014; PREPARES, 2014).

There are several rationales behind this concern to increase NGO involvement in research, within international development and beyond. Some relate to normative ideas about the research process. In particular, engagement by NGOs and other civil society organisations is seen as one means of public participation in research (Gall et al., 2009; Rainey & Goujon, 2012). Other rationales relate to principles about NGOs' contribution to development, particularly the potential value of research for producing alternative ideas and approaches, something long seen as an NGO role (Bebbington et al., 2008). Relatedly, some highlight the potential for NGOs to produce research on topics ignored by dominant research funders and elite interests (Sanders et al., 2004; Hess, 2009). Other rationales are more instrumental. A common theme is the value of research for improving NGOs' work, both service delivery and advocacy (Delisle et al., 2005; Pollard & Court, 2005; Zachariah et al., 2010). Research has long been discussed as important for NGO effectiveness (Stone & Pratt, 1994). This has become

a growing concern with the increasing attention to evidence-based approaches in development, driven by interest within NGOs and by donor demands for evidence of impact (Bangert, 2011; Hayman, 2013).

While these instrumental rationales focus on the value of engaging in research for NGOs, other rationales emphasise the value of NGO involvement for research. NGOs are claimed to bring a range of benefits to research, such as links to communities, ethical values and resources (Delisle et al., 2005; Bhan et al., 2007; De Haan, 2009). Some aspects of NGOs' potential contribution relate to their involvement in service delivery and advocacy, including the three relationships between service delivery, advocacy and research that I examine in this thesis. First, service delivery may provide a source of research questions. Through their service delivery experience, NGOs may be able to generate research questions that respond to frontline knowledge gaps, enhancing the relevance of research findings. Second, service delivery may provide a source of research data. This could involve field testing different approaches or technologies, evaluating service delivery interventions, or using data collected as part of service delivery monitoring. Third, NGOs' involvement in advocacy might support communication of research findings. As I describe in 1.3, each of these ways that NGOs' service delivery and advocacy might support research is suggested in academic literature and in organisational strategies and guidelines.

As well as supporting research, these relationships between service delivery, advocacy and research are significant for discussions among NGOs about linking their advocacy and service delivery. As explained in 1.3.4, the link between advocacy and service delivery is an area of longstanding concern among development NGOs. There are ongoing efforts to strengthen these links, and NGOs' organisational strategies often reflect an interest in using service delivery experience to inform advocacy (for example, ActionAid International, 2004; Gosling & Cohen, 2007; O'Connell et al., 2007). Drawing on service delivery to identify research questions and generate data, and then using advocacy to share the findings, provides a way for NGOs to integrate their service delivery and advocacy functions.

While these potential contributions of NGOs' service delivery and advocacy to research are often suggested, there are uncertainties around the value and feasibility of drawing on service delivery and advocacy in these ways. My own experience of working in NGOs suggests these connections between service delivery, advocacy and research are not always made. For example, there is sometimes limited input from service delivery staff to research agendas, and advocacy activities are not always used to

disseminate findings. Existing literature also points to possible difficulties. For example, as described in 1.3, service delivery staff may lack skills to define research questions, service delivery monitoring records may be too unreliable to provide research data, and NGOs may have insufficient advocacy capacity to communicate research findings. Additionally, NGOs may have limited skills, time and funding to undertake research, limiting scope to make use of opportunities that are provided by their involvement in service delivery and advocacy.

Although the literature indicates these possible contributions of NGOs' service delivery and advocacy to research, and some potential obstacles, there is little empirical research. The role of service delivery as a source of questions and data and of advocacy in research communication is often noted briefly, without discussion of the conditions needed to realise these opportunities. This limited available information means there is little guidance about when and how to make these connections between service delivery, advocacy and research, or how to ensure input from service delivery and advocacy to research is effective. Further, by neglecting variability and necessary conditions, claims about the value of NGOs' service delivery and advocacy for research create potentially misleading information, for both NGOs and for the external researchers who might work with them. The limited information on relationships between NGOs' research, service delivery and advocacy reflects a lack of material on NGO involvement in research more broadly. This is acknowledged as a gap in the literature, and there have been calls for more work to examine NGOs' research engagement (Vakil, 1997; Delisle et al., 2005; Kuruvilla, 2005; Holland, 2006; Bhan et al., 2007; Green & Bennett, 2007; Lavis et al., 2009; Zachariah et al., 2010; Beaulieu, 2013).

1.2 Research aims and focus

My research responds to this growing interest in NGO research, the potential for service delivery and advocacy to feed into research, and the limited existing analysis. The aim is to improve understanding of three ways that NGOs' service delivery and advocacy might support research, examining:

- the role of service delivery as a source of relevant research questions,
- the role of service delivery as a source of research data, and
- the role of advocacy in supporting communication of research findings.

With each of these three relationships, I examine whether service delivery and

advocacy are used in these ways and provide the anticipated support, and conditions that affect this. These conditions include aspects such as organisational aims and capacities, external relationships and the nature of service delivery and advocacy.

The next sections clarify my research aims by defining key terms, giving more detail on the rationale and focus, and then providing a conceptual framework diagram.

1.2.1 Definitions

The thesis includes some key concepts and terms that can be understood in different ways. I define the understanding used throughout the thesis below, considering in turn NGOs, service delivery, advocacy and research.

NGOs

There is a substantial literature discussing the nature of NGOs, and their diversity in terms of structure, activities, and other organisational characteristics hinders any simple definition (Vakil, 1997; Lewis, 2010). I follow the definition of NGOs as formally constituted organisations that are largely independent from government and aimed at promoting welfare rather than making profit (Green, 2007 p.107). NGOs form part of a broader civil society that also includes institutions such as foundations, community-based organizations, social movements and trade unions (Lewis & Kanji, 2009 p.121). My focus is NGOs that are involved in service delivery, advocacy and research, not, for example, NGOs that focus only on research and advocacy, or NGOs that do not undertake research. I look at both international and national NGOs. International NGOs (INGOs) usually have their headquarters in high-income countries and work in several developing countries. National NGOs (sometimes called local or Southern NGOs) are based in the developing country where programmes are implemented (in this case, Malawi), and usually work only in that country (Vakil, 1997; Lewis, 2010).

Service delivery

Service delivery involves the activities implemented by NGOs to support aspects of human development, such as better health or education. I include within this providing goods or services directly (for example, building water points or running health centres), and supporting delivery by others (for example, through training government providers). I also include support for individual and community action (for example, creating awareness for behaviour change). These service delivery activities are sometimes called NGOs' programme work, but I largely avoid this term as it is sometimes understood to incorporate advocacy.

Advocacy

Advocacy involves activities to influence the policy and practice of decision makers, to bring about change in support of an identified goal. It may include lobbying, which involves approaching decision makers directly, or campaigning, which involves mobilising public support (Chandler, 2005). Advocacy targets people whose decisions affect others, and does not include activities aimed at changing the behaviour of individuals primarily for their own benefit (such as the behaviour change communication noted under service delivery) (International HIV/AIDS Alliance, 2002).

While advocacy and service delivery are often identified as separate approaches, NGO activities can combine elements of both. For example, service delivery often involves influencing community leaders, government or other service providers to secure their support for implementation.

Research

Research is a more complex concept to define. I use the definition of research as a process that “aims to investigate, learn and produce knowledge by gathering information, contemplation, trial, and/or synthesis” (Crewe & Young, 2002 p.3). However, boundaries between research and other information-generating activities are debated (Boddy et al., 2006). Reflecting this, previous studies have found divergent ideas within and between NGOs about what constitutes research (Stone & Pratt, 1994; Delisle et al., 2005). This was apparent in the case NGOs studied for this thesis, with some staff noting these uncertain distinctions and questioning which aspects of their work should be considered as research.

In defining my focus, I distinguish research from two other kinds of activity: evaluation and more informal information gathering. These distinctions are made to provide focus and are not a judgement on the value of these other activities. Distinctions between research and evaluation are particularly problematic with studies that examine the effectiveness of an intervention (often the aim when using service delivery as a basis for generating data). While research and evaluation overlap, I follow those who see evaluation as focused more on immediate project management whereas research aims at producing wider knowledge (Patton, 2012). Criteria to distinguish research from evaluation are debated (Mathison, 2008), and this distinction would not be supported by all those who describe their work as evaluation. However, this distinction fitted dominant understandings within the case NGOs. Routine evaluation of project effects is often a donor requirement, focused on progress towards project indicators. Case NGO staff described this evaluation as a separate exercise to broader research designed to

examine the effectiveness of different activities and aimed at wider learning. I concentrate on these studies that go beyond immediate assessment of project activities, largely following the NGOs' understanding of this work as research. However, I draw on some examples of work that aims more at informing immediate project management and that would be classed as monitoring or evaluation, by the NGOs or other definitions. I use these examples when they provide information on conditions or processes that would apply to research and so help answer my questions about relationships between research, service delivery and advocacy.

The second distinction is between research and more informal information collection. The case NGOs sometimes collect information as part of ongoing programme management, for example discussing community priorities during monitoring visits, or using quick observations or discussions to provide information for advocacy. When mentioned, this work was not generally considered as research. For example, an officer in one NGO mentioned collecting information during programme visits but emphasised that this "is not research, it's just monitoring", and a programme director explained that "we don't look at that as research per se". Similarly, discussing some rapid information collection to provide evidence for advocacy, a research officer in another NGO said this work was "really not research". Clear distinctions around what level of formality and scale of work constitute research are difficult, and there were different ideas among NGO staff. While appreciating the difficulty of drawing boundaries, I focus on more formal, planned studies that were clearly seen as research within the NGOs. As well as following dominant understandings among NGO staff, this more formal research is the focus for those who emphasise the value of input from NGOs' service delivery and advocacy.

1.2.2 Rationale and intended audience

In this section I expand on the background provided in 1.1 to provide an explicit rationale for the thesis and to indicate the intended value of this study.

As described in 1.1, there is growing interest in NGOs' involvement in research, among NGOs and the wider research community. These discussions suggest that NGOs' service delivery and advocacy may provide opportunities that can help make research more effective. In particular:

- Drawing on NGOs' service delivery experience to identify research questions may make research more relevant, so increasing the value of research and the likelihood that findings will be applied.

- NGOs' service delivery may provide a source of data. As well as the general benefit of access to data, service delivery settings may have particular value for providing data about real world effectiveness, so providing findings that are more practical and easily implemented.
- NGOs' advocacy may support communication of research findings, potentially enhancing research use.

If NGOs' service delivery and advocacy can support research in these ways, this might help address the gaps in research relevance and use noted in 1.1. In addition, a combination of these three strategies could help NGOs in their efforts to link advocacy and service delivery, through drawing on service delivery to prioritise and produce research that is shared through advocacy.

As indicated in 1.1 and explained further in 1.3, this potential value of service delivery as a source of questions and data and of NGOs' advocacy for research communication is indicated in existing literature. These three ways that service delivery and advocacy might support research are given as reasons for NGOs to engage in research and as reasons for academics to work with NGOs. Beyond discussions in academic literature, the assumed value of NGOs' service delivery and advocacy for research, and the potential to integrate service delivery, advocacy and research in this way, is apparent in programme documents. For example, drawing on NGOs' service delivery to produce research questions and data and on their advocacy for research communication is recommended in guidance for researchers (Duflo et al., 2006; WHO, 2006), and suggested in NGO research strategies (e.g. Medicus Mundi International, 2009; Sightsavers, 2014). However, as explained in more detail in 1.3, there are also indications that NGOs' service delivery and advocacy do not always provide the anticipated opportunities for research, and that these functions are not always connected.

The potential value of NGOs' service delivery and advocacy for research, and the indications of possible constraints, suggest a need for NGOs and researchers to understand how best to make use of NGOs' service delivery and advocacy in research. This requires information about conditions affecting the value and feasibility of drawing on service delivery for questions and data and on advocacy for communicating findings. As indicated in 1.1 and explained further in 1.3, existing literature provides limited guidance. There is little detail or discussion of required conditions. Research from different organisational settings can help to move beyond the assumed value of

making these connections between research, service delivery and advocacy, providing information about how these relationships work in practice in different contexts.

This rationale underpins my research objectives set out above, examining whether and how service delivery provides research questions and data and advocacy supports research communication, and conditions that affect these relationships. Understanding these conditions requires attention to internal and external organisational contexts, as set out in relation to the conceptual framework diagram in 1.2.4.

By increasing our understanding of varied relationships between NGOs' research, service delivery and advocacy, I hope the thesis can provide guidance for researchers who want to benefit from collaboration with NGOs, and for NGOs interested in managing relationships between these different organisational functions to strengthen their research.

1.2.3 Clarifying the research focus

This section provides more detail on the scope of my thesis, to clarify the boundaries and focus.

A first aspect relates to my focus within overall relationships between service delivery, advocacy and research. As explained above, I focus on the role of service delivery as a source of research questions and data, and the role of advocacy in supporting communication of research findings. This focus was established during fieldwork and analysis as the thesis scope was progressively refined. Service delivery and advocacy could feed into and affect research in numerous ways, positive and negative. For example, service delivery experience might help staff plan feasible research designs; using service delivery as a basis for generating data might affect research costs and timeframes; and involvement in advocacy could bring selective use of research findings. I originally planned to look broadly at relationships between research, service delivery and advocacy, considering a range of connections and effects (this broader objective is reflected in some of the methods discussed in Chapter 2). During fieldwork and analysis, I refined the focus based on aspects that seemed most significant in the fieldwork data and where I had most to contribute to existing thinking and literature. For example, while the role of service delivery staff in bringing contacts for data collection and contextual knowledge for research design was discussed by research participants, these issues are covered by existing literatures on practitioner research, independence in evaluations and the relative merits of insider or outsider approaches (Salipante &

Aram, 2003; Brannick & Coghlan, 2007; Laybourn, 2010). Other aspects raised in the literature were not evident during fieldwork, or involve complex and contested concepts that could not be usefully assessed (such as the implications of involvement in advocacy for objectivity). Consequently, I decided not to examine these aspects in the thesis. The role of service delivery as a source of questions and data and the role of advocacy in research communication stood out as areas that have practical significance, and as areas where the case NGOs' experiences challenge assumptions found in academic articles and research guidance.

A related and important aspect of my focus is that I do not assess whether involvement in service delivery and advocacy affects use of research findings, either within NGOs or among external actors. Each relationship between service delivery, advocacy and research that I examine may increase the use of research findings in policy or practice, as suggested in the earlier rationale. If service delivery brings relevant research questions and provides a realistic setting for data collection, and advocacy supports efforts to communicate results, application of research findings may be more likely (WHO, 2004; Walley et al., 2007; Parkhurst et al., 2010; Peters et al., 2013). However, the literature on use of research in policy and practice shows that many factors beyond the research process affect application of findings, for example political context and researchers' reputation (Hanney et al., 2003; Court et al., 2006; Carden, 2009). Consequently, examining use of research findings may say more about these wider issues than about the impact of service delivery and advocacy on research. There was also a practical constraint to assessing research use. Examining current or recent research was likely to provide a better understanding of research processes, by enabling observation and reducing recall problems (as discussed in Chapter 2 on research methods). However, use of research findings in policy or practice may take years (Weiss, 1979), meaning uptake of recent research cannot be fully assessed. Given these constraints and the considerable existing literature on research use within international development, I focus on earlier stages of the research process. In relation to research communication, this means I restrict the analysis to whether NGOs seek uptake and communicate findings, rather than whether they actually secure action in response to research results.

A further aspect of my focus relates to the sector. My research questions were sparked by discussions about relationships between research, policy and practice and the role of NGOs in research in relation to health in developing countries. I broadened this focus during the research, moving beyond health to also consider research in related development sectors. Discussions about the link between research, advocacy and

service delivery and the role of NGOs seem especially prominent in health. This perhaps reflects the longer attention to research and evidence-based approaches and higher levels of research activity and funding in health than in many areas of international development (Jacob, 2013; Fiennes & Wulf, 2014). However, there is interest in NGOs' research and relationships between research, service delivery and advocacy in other development sectors, and the broader international development literature provides relevant evidence (e.g. Edwards, 1994b; Aniekwe et al., 2012). The value of experience from other sectors was also apparent during fieldwork. Of the four case NGOs, one works only on health, and three work on health and related sectors (for example, education, nutrition, child labour, and livelihoods). Their research experience in other sectors provided information that I judged useful to answering my research questions (I explain this further in Chapter 2). Given the shared concerns between health and other development sectors and the value of wider material, I retain an emphasis on health but engage with literature and data from international development research more broadly.

Finally, my empirical focus involves situations where NGOs participate in producing research, either alone or in partnership with academics or other researchers. This excludes, for example, NGO input to national research prioritisation exercises or their role in communicating findings from research by academics. However, I consider implications of the findings for these wider NGO contributions.

1.2.4 A conceptual framework diagram

Building on the definitions and explanation of my focus provided above, Figure 1 provides a conceptual diagram for the thesis. This diagram sets out the place of research, service delivery and advocacy in my analysis and illustrates how these concepts are linked within a wider organisational context.

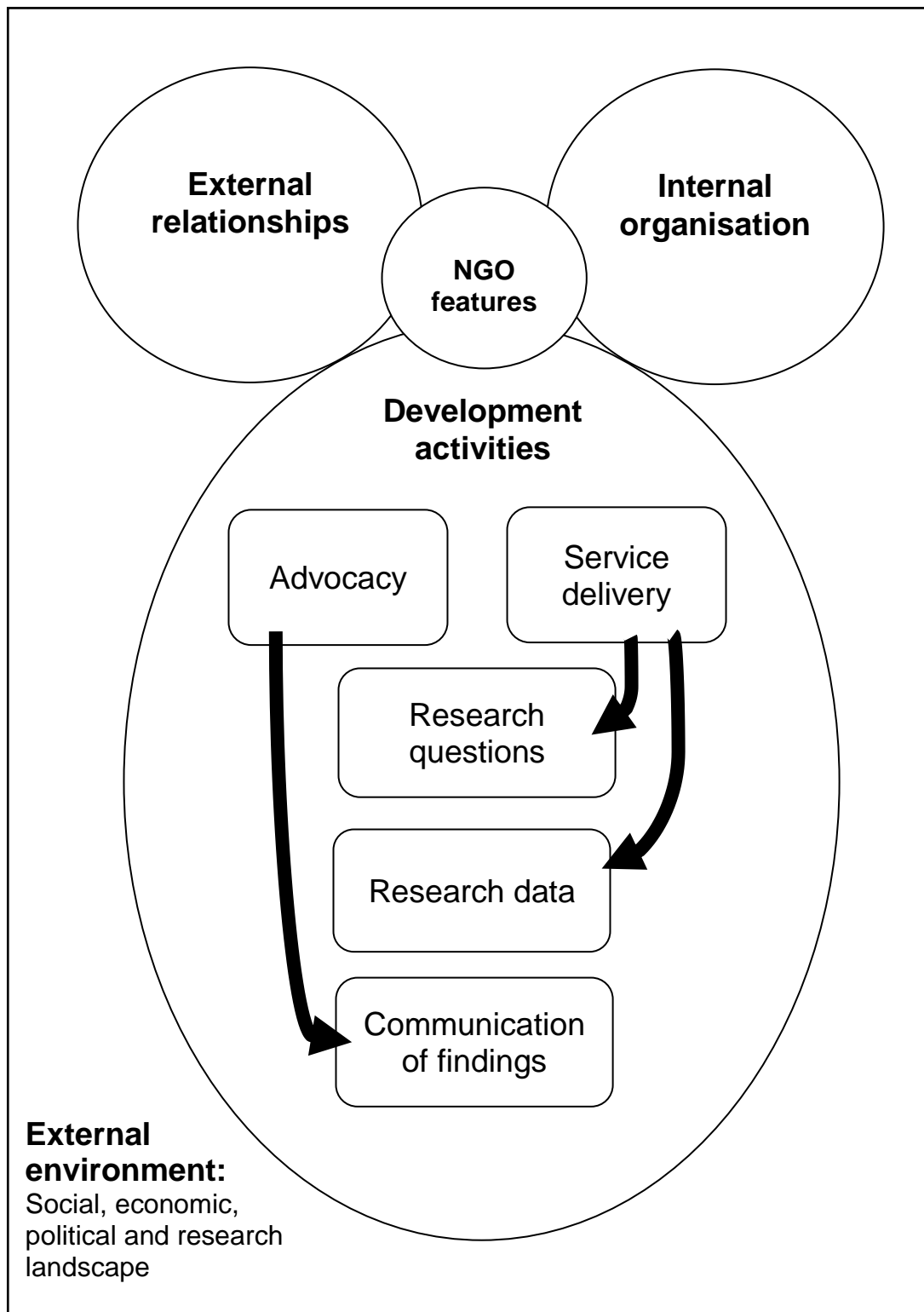
The arrows indicate my focus on input from service delivery and advocacy to different stages of research. This is a key aspect of the thesis: throughout, I consider how advocacy and service delivery are used to support research (providing questions, data and support for communication), not how NGOs' research findings are used in or affect their service delivery and advocacy.

Relationships between research, service delivery and advocacy will influence and be influenced by the organisational context in which these interactions take place. In depicting this context, the diagram draws on models from NGO management that

depict NGO structures as embracing development activities, internal organisational features and external relationships, all operating within an external environment (James, 2005; Lewis, 2007). The development activities are the main focus for this study, comprising advocacy, service delivery and research. Internal NGO features, external relationships and the external environment form the organisational context. Relevant internal features include, for example, aims and values, structures, funding processes, staff numbers and skills, and information systems. Relevant external relationships include those with government, donors, other civil society organisations, and research organisations. Key features of the external environment include social, economic and political aspects and the broader research landscape. Section 1.4 provides a brief introduction to this external environment, introducing Malawi, the national context for my research.

During the thesis development, versions of this diagram have helped me to retain focus on input from service delivery and advocacy to research, rather than vice versa, and to recognise potentially relevant dimensions of context.

Figure 1: Conceptual framework



1.3 Existing knowledge about relationships between service delivery, advocacy and research

In section 1.1 I introduced the increasing attention to the role of NGOs in research and the potential value of input from service delivery and advocacy for research. Here, I expand the discussion of existing literature to provide fuller information on current knowledge and remaining gaps.

The background to my research questions stems from two areas of literature. The first involves discussions of research within the literature on NGOs. The second involves discussions of research for development, and in particular relationships between research, policy and practice. These literatures overlap in an interest in the role of NGOs in supporting more effective research, including through their involvement in service delivery and advocacy.

I concentrate here on the literature about relationships between research, service delivery and advocacy that inspired and helped to refine my research focus, to provide background for the thesis. During the course of the study I drew on other areas of literature to help explain findings from the fieldwork and see whether they matched wider NGO experiences. This literature is included in relevant chapters. In discussing background literature, I look outside my specific focus on NGOs to consider material on relationships between research, service delivery and advocacy in other organisations. In addition, although my focus is situations where NGOs are involved in producing research, I also consider literature on the role of NGOs' service delivery or advocacy in supporting research produced by others (for example, disseminating findings from academics). This reflects the limited literature on these issues and the value of wider material for providing relevant ideas.

I first discuss existing research in relation to each of the three relationships between research, service delivery and advocacy that I investigate in the thesis: input from service delivery to research questions, input from service delivery to research data, and input from advocacy to communication of research findings. I then outline an interest in linking service delivery and advocacy, which brings together these three areas. To conclude, I identify limitations of the current evidence.

1.3.1 Service delivery as a source of research questions

Calls for more NGO involvement in defining research agendas are increasingly common (Sanders et al., 2004; Delisle et al., 2005; De Haan, 2009; Aniekwe et al.,

2012; WHO, 2012b). Sometimes the contribution that NGOs can make to identifying research questions is not explicitly discussed, but various possible benefits are indicated within this literature. For example, some suggest NGOs bring community perceptions, ensuring research questions reflect community experiences and needs (Loewenson, 2003; Porter et al., 2004). Others point to the potential value of involvement in advocacy for identifying questions that apply to current policy debates (Sudarshan, 1999). NGO input to research agendas may also have negative effects, and more critical discussions highlight a risk that NGOs will pursue research topics that support organisational interests (Lewis & Madon, 2004; Mannan, 2006). In line with my research aims, I concentrate on literature specifically highlighting the value of involvement in service delivery for developing relevant research questions.

The idea that NGOs' service delivery is a source of relevant research questions is stated particularly clearly by Zachariah and colleagues, in one of the most detailed articles on NGO research. Describing their organisation's approach, they suggest "research questions are generated by identifying the constraints and challenges of implementing each programme's medical activities. The answers provided to these questions should then have direct, practical relevance to solving the identified constraints and challenges" (Zachariah et al., 2010 p.2). Similar ideas are discussed by Kidwell-Drake and colleagues. They highlight the benefit of an NGO consortium for producing a "field-driven research agenda" (2010 p.2121), and suggest that "NGO staff should be well informed of the obstacles to implementation", so helping to focus research on "concerns that are relevant to the end users" (2010 p.2123). This idea that service delivery experience can provide a source of research questions is found in NGO research strategies. For example, one international NGO network strategy states that "close to the difficulties and problems of translating the 'big' approaches into daily life, [NGOs] have a huge insight and are in an excellent position to ask the 'right' questions" (Medicus Mundi International, 2009 p.4). Not only can research questions come from NGOs' service delivery experience, some suggest this practical experience should be the basis for research. For example, Zachariah et al. describe research questions that are "generated from within programmes" as an "essential element" for NGO research (2010 p.4).

While the examples above are from health, similar themes can be found in other areas of international development. Indeed, the potential value of NGOs' service delivery as a source of research questions was implied in debates about the future of development studies in the late 1980s and 1990s. One high profile NGO practitioner argued that much development research was irrelevant, partly because it emphasised abstract

theory and followed academics' interests rather than those of practitioners (Edwards, 1989; Edwards, 1994a). While Edwards focuses on the need for more participatory research, his argument encompasses a link between research agendas and NGOs' service delivery experience. Ideally, NGOs' "practical work feeds their learning, research and evaluation", and this link to practical activities is "the key [to] relevant development research" (Edwards, 1994b p.117). As well as supporting NGOs' own research, NGOs' presumed ability to identify relevant questions is often seen as a reason for international development academics to collaborate with NGOs (Brown et al., 2003; Garrett, 2004; Aniekwe et al., 2012; McLaren, 2013).

The value of input from service delivery practitioners to research questions is also highlighted within the wider health and development research literature, beyond discussion of NGOs (WHO, 2009; Loewenson, 2010). For example, involving service delivery practitioners in identifying research questions is one element of a call to "get practice into research" (Walley et al., 2007 p.424). Official research strategies follow this idea, calling for "demand-driven research" that tackles problems identified by policy makers and managers (WHO, 2012b p.3). Similarly, guidance from some development research funders emphasises the value of questions from practitioners' or policy makers' experience (e.g. DFID, 2013).

However, the literature also indicates possible difficulties. One barrier is that research agendas may be dominated by donor interests rather than NGOs' priorities (Mannan, 2006; Bazán et al., 2008; Beaulieu, 2010; Schwarz, 2010a), reducing NGOs' ability to use service delivery as a source of questions. Another difficulty is that NGO staff may lack the skills to define research questions (CORE Group, 2008; Zachariah et al., 2010). Others criticise the idea of relying on service delivery experience as a basis for research questions. This criticism was implied within the development studies debates of the 1980s and 1990s, with some arguing in favour of academic input to research agendas. External researchers might bring understanding of experience in other areas or wider economic and political structures that affect frontline problems (Booth, 1994a; Hulme, 1994). Even when research focuses on understanding programme issues, NGO staff may not identify these programme questions. One experience of collaboration found that NGO staff suggested questions around personnel management and reporting, while external researchers raised questions linked to service delivery impact (Garrett, 2004). Indeed, countering Edwards as part of the relevance debates, Booth asks "do NGOs know what research they want, and is this what they need?" (1994a p.24). These different ideas about the desirable focus for research highlight a further issue raised in the development studies literature and

beyond: the ambiguous and subjective nature of relevance (Booth, 1994a; Rappert, 1999; Mohan & Wilson, 2005; Staeheli & Mitchell, 2005). Different views on what counts as relevant preclude any automatic link between questions based on service delivery experience and the relevance of research.

Summarising, the literature suggests NGOs' service delivery may be a valuable source of research questions that can bring more relevant research. Both NGOs and academics have emphasised the value of NGO input to research agendas. Similar claims about the potential for service delivery experience to indicate relevant research topics are made in wider discussions of health research, beyond NGOs. However, some discussions indicate possible barriers to using service delivery experience as a source of research topics, including insufficient skills to identify questions and funding constraints. Other literature questions the appropriateness of relying on service delivery practitioners to identify research agendas, and points to the contested nature of relevance.

1.3.2 Service delivery as a source of research data

A second way NGOs' service delivery might feed into and support research is by providing a source of research data. Indeed, NGO programmes have been described as a research "goldmine" (Medicus Mundi International, 2009 p.4; Fuentes, 2013). As well as providing a basis for research by NGOs, this value of service delivery as a source of data is given as one reason for academics to work with NGOs (Stone & Pratt, 1994; Roper, 2002; Delisle et al., 2005; Stevens, 2011; Aniekwe et al., 2012).

Involvement in service delivery could assist production of data in several ways. For example, service delivery staff may have local contacts, access to communities and contextual knowledge that facilitate data collection (Porter et al., 2004; Bhan et al., 2007). I focus on two approaches highlighted in the literature that make particularly direct use of NGOs' service delivery programmes. First, service delivery activities could provide a research site to test new interventions or learn about existing activities, an opportunity highlighted by NGOs, academics and other researchers (Delisle et al., 2005; CORE Group, 2008; Zachariah et al., 2009; Kidwell Drake et al., 2010; Zachariah et al., 2010; Berhanu, 2013; Nyangara, 2014). This approach is sometimes linked to an image of NGOs as "real world laboratories" (Nyangara, 2014), with suggestions that NGOs have the flexibility to adapt service delivery and try innovative approaches (Duflo et al., 2006; Kidwell Drake et al., 2010; Berhanu, 2013). It was proposed as part of the relevance debates discussed in the previous section, with service delivery seen as

providing a basis for research through experimentation and learning (Edwards, 1994b). The second approach is using monitoring records from NGOs' service delivery programmes as data for research, again an opportunity noted by NGOs and researchers (Bakewell, 2007; Surtees & Craggs, 2010; Hayman, 2013). As with using service delivery as a source of questions, this use of monitoring records for research data is given as the correct approach to research in service delivery settings by Zachariah and colleagues. They suggest that "if properly embedded in normal programme settings, the operational research team will mainly draw on data that are routinely collected" (Zachariah et al., 2012 p.416). In this view, service delivery monitoring records are the recommended source of data, not just one option.

Both approaches, using service delivery activities and monitoring records, are also proposed beyond NGO programmes. For example, advocates of "getting research out of practice" suggest "ongoing interventions provide numerous opportunities for integrated research and evidence development" (Parkhurst et al., 2010 p.1415). This use of service delivery as a research site is gaining attention among some donors and recommended for their programmes. For example, a recent UK government report urged the Department for International Development (DFID) to "put trialling and innovation at the centre of programme design and take full advantage of opportunities to test what works" (Evidence into Action and What Works Team, 2014 p.3). Scope to produce research data through service delivery activities is also emphasised beyond development, for example in relation to practice-based research in health in high-income countries (Ammerman et al., 2014). The research value of monitoring records is likewise discussed beyond NGOs, within development and more widely, for example use of government records for research (Tropika.net, 2008; Robson, 2011 pp.359–361; Bamberger et al., 2012). More broadly, the large literatures on action, implementation and operational research and field-based experiments relate to this use of service delivery as a basis for generating data (Brydon-Miller et al., 2003; Duflo et al., 2006; Global Fund & TDR, 2008; Peters et al., 2013). Definitions and methodologies under all these approaches vary, but some interpretations incorporate the learning from practice that is central to use of service delivery for research data.

However, there are potential constraints to using service delivery for generating research data. A range of technical and ethical challenges are discussed in the literature. For example, use of service delivery activities as a source of data faces risks of bias, as existing knowledge of the NGO and its activities may influence respondents' answers (Bakewell, 2007; Surtees & Craggs, 2010; Copestake, 2014). Technical and ethical challenges are raised particularly critically in debates about the growing focus

on randomised trials in development, one approach to using service delivery activities to generate data. A range of concerns are discussed, for example the ethics of randomisation and risks to validity in complex social settings (Barrett & Carter, 2010; Ravallion, 2012; Camfield & Duvendack, 2014). Technical and ethical constraints are also identified in relation to use of monitoring records. A particular ethical challenge concerns the implications for informed consent of using monitoring information for a different research purpose (Bakewell, 2007; Surtees & Craggs, 2010). Scope to use monitoring records for research may also be affected by unreliability, inaccessibility and gaps in content, difficulties noted within NGOs and beyond (Surtees & Craggs, 2010; Robson, 2011 pp.359–361; Bamberger et al., 2012; Duvendack & Pasanen, 2013).

A widely recognised constraint, affecting use of service delivery as a source of data and other kinds of research, is limited research capacity among NGOs. Lack of skills, funding and time and low prioritisation of research are frequently noted (Ng’ethe, 1991; Stone & Pratt, 1994; Garrett, 2004; Delisle et al., 2005; CORE Group, 2008; Zachariah et al., 2009; Zachariah et al., 2010; Aniekwe et al., 2012; Hayman, 2013). Perhaps reflecting varied capacity among NGOs, however, some articles stress NGOs’ access to funding and advanced research skills (Bhan et al., 2007; Stone, 2007). This suggests some diversity among NGOs in capacity to make use of service delivery for research data.

Summarising, the literature suggests that service delivery may provide a source of research data, through testing new approaches or learning about existing interventions, or through using information in monitoring records. This potential is given as a reason for academics to collaborate with NGOs. The value of service delivery for research data is also highlighted in relation to broader health and international development research, beyond NGOs. However, there are indications of possible difficulties, including technical and ethical constraints to using service delivery in this way, and limited capacity for such research.

1.3.3 Advocacy as enabling communication of research findings

The role of NGOs’ advocacy in research communication is a controversial area. Many stress the potential value of NGO advocacy for research uptake, as I discuss below. However, within the NGO sector and among external critics, there are also concerns that advocacy goals will lead NGOs to distort research communication through biased use of findings (Edwards, 1994b; Harper, 2001; Stone et al., 2001; Edwards & Zadek, 2003; Green & Bennett, 2007). I focus on whether and how NGOs’ advocacy supports

communication of findings and attempts to promote uptake, and do not examine how advocacy affects the content of communication messages.

The idea that advocacy by NGOs could support communication of research findings is widespread within international health and development. This role for NGO advocacy is noted within discussions focused on NGOs (McCoy et al., 2004; Sanders et al., 2004; Delisle et al., 2005; Bhan et al., 2007; De Haan, 2009; Kidwell Drake et al., 2010; De Ceukelaire et al., 2011; Kennell & Woolley, 2012; Zachariah et al., 2012), and in literature focused on research uptake more broadly (Court & Maxwell, 2005; Saxena, 2005; WHO, 2006; Wheeler, 2009; Hooton, 2010; Orem et al., 2013; Stringer & Dougill, 2013). As with service delivery input to research, this potential value of NGOs' advocacy for promoting uptake is given as a reason for academics to work with NGOs (Sanders et al., 2004; Court & Maxwell, 2005; Delisle et al., 2005; WHO, 2006; De Haan, 2009; Wheeler, 2009; Hooton, 2010; De Ceukelaire et al., 2011; Kennell & Woolley, 2012; Stringer & Dougill, 2013). This literature also matches discussions on service delivery in framing use of NGOs' advocacy for research communication as a recommendation, not just an option to consider. For example, several articles call for more engagement with advocacy NGOs by researchers (Sanders et al., 2004; De Ceukelaire et al., 2011; Kennell & Woolley, 2012).

Although much of this literature does not explain in detail how NGOs' advocacy supports research communication, it points to two key processes. The first involves the idea that NGOs with an advocacy function will want to promote action in response to their research. An organisational advocacy mandate may mean NGOs seek uptake because they see policy influence as part of their mission (this is implied by McCoy et al., 2004; Sanders et al., 2004). For example, NGOs are described as "mainly committed to activist campaigns aimed at changing policy" (Sanders et al., 2004 p.761). Additionally, NGOs may be less affected by concerns that seeking policy influence could compromise objectivity and threaten credibility, risks often noted in discussions of academic engagement in advocacy (Brownson et al., 2006; Nelson & Vucetich, 2009; Haynes et al., 2011; Sisk et al., 2011; Morton et al., 2012). NGOs with an existing advocacy mandate might not face these constraints and so be more motivated to pursue uptake. This is implied by those who suggest academics worried about neutrality can liaise with advocacy organisations to promote action in response to their findings (Hooton, 2010; Drimie & Quinlan, 2011; Morton et al., 2012; Holmes, 2013). For example, one research consortium engages with NGOs because researchers "are not likely to be best placed or best skilled to do direct advocacy, which can be seen as compromising neutrality" (Holmes, 2013 p.4). Similarly, analysis of

another research project found NGOs “could engage in outright advocacy for change through various channels”, whereas researchers “were understandably reluctant to advocate openly for change” (Hooton, 2010 pp.996–997). Not all academics share these concerns about neutrality, and indeed, international development researchers often seek influence (Lindén, 2014). However, as suggested by the references above, engaging in policy debates raises concerns among some academics.

The second way that advocacy might help research communication involves the role of NGOs’ advocacy activities, including the channels these provide and resources associated with these activities such as skills, contacts and knowledge of policy processes (Sanders et al., 2004; WHO, 2006; Bhan et al., 2007; Green & Bennett, 2007; Kidwell Drake et al., 2010; Kennell & Woolley, 2012). I focus on direct use of advocacy activities for dissemination and uptake, rather than the associated resources. The value of these activities for communicating research findings is suggested by researchers and NGO staff. For example, a call for partnership between academics and advocacy organisations suggests “advocates provide the platforms and vehicles for disseminating [research findings] beyond the R&D community” (Kennell & Woolley, 2012 p.S30). Advocacy activities can provide channels for influence via a “long route” of social mobilisation, or a “short route” of direct contact with policy makers (Bazán et al., 2008 p.179). Both approaches are discussed as helping research uptake. Through the short route, which largely involves lobbying, NGOs might use their networks to engage directly with policy makers to promote action on research findings (Bhan et al., 2007; Kidwell Drake et al., 2010). Through the long route, NGOs can work with social movements, communities or the wider public to campaign and build support for action (McCoy et al., 2004; Sanders et al., 2004; Wheeler, 2009; De Ceukelaire et al., 2011). In a widely quoted example from Thailand, public support generated through collaboration between researchers and NGOs was one corner of “the triangle that moves the mountain”, alongside research evidence and political support (Nitayarumphong, 2006 p.83).

While this literature includes examples of securing research uptake through NGO advocacy, other reports suggest considerable variation in NGOs’ ability to communicate research findings. Numerous constraints are identified, including gaps in advocacy capacity such as insufficient networking, funding and understanding of policy processes; barriers related to the political context; and limited skills to package research findings (Court et al., 2006; Beaulieu, 2013; Orem et al., 2013). This suggests that even when NGOs have an advocacy function, they may lack capacity to promote research uptake.

Summarising, the literature suggests NGOs' involvement in advocacy might support communication of research findings. This may be through bringing motivation to promote action in response to research, with NGOs involved in advocacy seen as pursuing research uptake, or through the role of advocacy activities as channels to communicate findings. Academics are advised to work with NGOs to obtain support with communicating research findings. However, there are also indications of weak capacity for advocacy and research communication among some NGOs.

1.3.4 Linking service delivery with advocacy via research

As shown in previous sections, using service delivery to produce questions and data and drawing on advocacy to communicate findings are sometimes recommended, not just given as possible approaches. The combination of these three elements is also portrayed as the appropriate strategy. This relates to a long-standing concern about the link between NGOs' service delivery and advocacy. Connections between NGOs' service delivery and advocacy are considered important for the legitimacy and success of advocacy, and to enhance service delivery impact by promoting adoption of effective approaches (Edwards & Hulme, 1992; Edwards, 1993; Fowler, 1997; Harper, 1997; Anderson, 2000). Although primarily discussed in relation to INGOs, a separation between advocacy and service delivery is also raised as a concern among national NGOs (Lewis & Madon, 2004). One way to strengthen these links is using advocacy to communicate research that is inspired by or documents service delivery activities, so bringing together the three relationships that I examine. This approach is suggested by Edwards as part of his discussion about making research relevant. Through NGOs' service delivery activities, "ideas can be tried out, evaluated and revised quickly". This then provides a basis for advocacy, as "lessons learned can be shared more widely and used to influence others" (Edwards, 1994b p.117). Similarly, Fowler (1997 p.124) argues that building advocacy positions on learning from service delivery is the way NGOs can distinguish themselves from other research institutes. This suggests an overall research system based on using service delivery for questions and data and using advocacy for research communication.

Discussions of this relationship between service delivery and advocacy often highlight potential breaks in the chain from service delivery to advocacy. For example, organisational structures and decision-making systems may limit information sharing between service delivery managers and advocacy teams, or focus advocacy priorities away from service delivery concerns (Edwards, 1993; Lewis & Madon, 2004). However, constraints may exist within each stage as well as between them, with

difficulties in using service delivery to generate questions or data or in using advocacy to communicate research findings. This is where my thesis applies: I do not examine the overall link from service delivery to advocacy within the NGOs, but rather these individual components.

1.3.5 Gaps in the existing evidence

Although current literature indicates the potential for NGOs' service delivery and advocacy to feed into research and suggests some possible constraints, there are gaps in the evidence. An overarching issue is limited material on these issues. While many articles provide relevant ideas or examples, I have not found other work with a specific focus on detailed investigation of whether and how NGOs draw on their service delivery as a source of research questions and data and on their advocacy for communicating findings. The literature on NGO involvement in research is growing but this is a relatively new area of focus and there remain few detailed studies. Within this literature on NGO research, only some articles specifically consider relationships between NGOs' research, service delivery and advocacy. When links between research, service delivery and advocacy are discussed, the focus is often use of research findings in service delivery and advocacy (e.g. Pollard & Court, 2005), not my focus on the way advocacy and service delivery might be used to support research. The references cited in earlier sections largely focus on other issues, and mention the potential use of NGOs' service delivery and advocacy in identifying questions, producing data or communicating findings as one small aspect of a wider discussion. Indeed, reference to the value of service delivery and advocacy for NGOs' research is often a minor aside, mentioned in one line, or implicit rather than explicitly analysed. Further, several articles are calls for NGO engagement in research that aim to highlight the potential benefits, rather than discussing conditions that affect NGO involvement (e.g. Sanders et al., 2004; De Haan, 2009). Consequently, when relationships between research, service delivery and advocacy are discussed in more detail, the focus is sometimes providing examples of their potential value rather than considering when these links are feasible and effective (an aim acknowledged by some authors, e.g. Kidwell Drake et al., 2010).

Two more specific gaps stem from this difference in aims and focus. The first gap is limited empirical material. There are few detailed case studies that focus on the role of service delivery and advocacy in NGOs' research. Some articles are opinion pieces or editorials with little reference to empirical data (e.g. McCoy et al., 2004; Kennell & Woolley, 2012). Others provide brief examples (a few sentences or a paragraph), or a

range of longer examples but not specifically focused on input from service delivery and advocacy to research (e.g. Sanders et al., 2004; Delisle et al., 2005; Bhan et al., 2007; De Haan, 2009; Aniekwe et al., 2012). Articles that do provide more detailed examples that relate at least in part to input from service delivery and advocacy to research are often by staff from large INGOs and about the experience of these organisations (e.g. Kidwell Drake et al., 2010; Zachariah et al., 2010). There is little information on INGO country offices or national NGOs. There is also little comparative research across NGOs. Further, articles that do consider experiences from different organisations are again based largely on discussions with INGO headquarters staff (e.g. Delisle et al., 2005; CORE Group, 2008). While there are detailed case studies of research among national NGOs, including some comparative work, these have a wider focus, with limited explicit information on service delivery and advocacy (e.g. Mannan, 2006; Beaulieu, 2013). Additionally, when articles are informed by research on different NGOs, data collection sometimes involves document review or one or two interviews per organisation (e.g. Delisle et al., 2005). This means different perspectives within these NGOs may not be heard. This limited empirical material contributes to a lack of detail on the way relationships between research, service delivery and advocacy work in practice.

The second gap is limited information on conditions affecting input from service delivery and advocacy to research questions, data and communication. This partly reflects the aims of some existing literature. As noted above, several papers aim to promote NGO involvement in research, not to analyse it. It also reflects the limited comparative work, which means there is little information on the effects of different organisational contexts. Perhaps because input from service delivery and advocacy to research is often a minor focus, assumptions underpinning these potential links are rarely interrogated. The barriers identified in 1.3.1-4 often come from other articles or other article sections, rather than being noted when authors discuss potential input from service delivery and advocacy to research. Consequently, claims about the potential for NGOs' service delivery and advocacy to support research are often simplified, without explicit discussion of required conditions and potential variation. When conditions are noted, these are sometimes based on the experience of large INGOs and may not apply in other organisational contexts (e.g. Zachariah et al., 2010). The main constraint noted in existing literature is NGO capacity for research, but there is limited discussion or analysis to indicate how and why research capacity varies between NGOs.

Summarising, the existing literature provides a valuable indication of the potential for

service delivery and advocacy to support development of research questions, data and communication, and points to some potential constraints. However, there is limited detail and evidence, particularly on variation between NGOs and conditions that affect the way service delivery and advocacy are used in research. In these respects, existing material reflects the broader literature on NGOs, described as often neglecting diversity, context and the constraints and enablers of NGOs in different circumstances (Lewis & Opoku-Mensah, 2006). This brings generalisations about NGOs' potential contribution to research, and leaves gaps in our understanding about how to manage these relationships between service delivery, advocacy and research. I aim to contribute to an improved understanding through comparative research that considers variation within and between different organisational contexts, recognising NGOs' potential roles as "contingent rather than inherent" (Lewis & Opoku-Mensah, 2006 p.673). The next chapter discusses this research approach and the associated methods. Before that, I briefly introduce Malawi, the focus country for this study.

1.4 An introduction to Malawi

My decision to look at NGOs in Malawi primarily followed interest from some Malawian NGOs in participating in the research. When I explored initial options for case study NGOs through relevant email groups, I received most responses from NGOs in Malawi. Their interest meant locating the study in Malawi would be feasible and potentially useful for these organisations. Further research on the Malawian context indicated discussions among different stakeholders about links between research, policy and practice and the role of NGOs in research, suggesting that the study might also fit these wider agendas. I explain these aspects of the context below as part of a brief introduction to relevant aspects of the Malawian setting, including low levels of social development, the large NGO sector, and the growing interest in research.

Malawi remains one of the world's poorest countries, ranked 174 out of 187 in the latest Human Development Index (UNDP, 2014). Poverty has fallen over recent decades but remains high, with approximately 60% of the population living below the \$1.25 a day poverty line (UNDP, 2014). There have been improvements in some areas of health, but the health system faces continued challenges, including insufficient staff, medical supplies and infrastructure (Ministry of Health, 2011). This is reflected in health indicators: the lifetime risk of maternal mortality is one in 36, HIV prevalence among adults is over 10% (placing Malawi among the ten countries with the world's highest prevalence rates), and almost half of children under five are stunted through malnutrition (UNICEF, 2013). Donor funding is significant, providing around 40% of the

national budget (Reality of Aid Africa, 2013). This funding is unpredictable, and has at times been withdrawn due to donors' concerns about government corruption or policy direction (Cammack, 2012; Dionne, 2014).

The NGO sector in Malawi is growing and diverse. One estimate suggests over 500 registered NGOs (ICNL, 2014), but the total figure is unknown. The number of NGOs has increased since 1994, when Malawi moved from an authoritarian one party state to a multi-party system (Reality of Aid Africa, 2013). Early NGO work focused on service delivery, but with democratisation and increasing political space, NGO involvement in advocacy increased (Reality of Aid Africa, 2013). Political space varies, however: relations between government and NGOs deteriorated under the second term of Bingu Wa Mutharika, president from 2004 until his death in 2012. There was growing tension in 2011-12, with attacks on some NGO offices and warnings against criticising government (Chinsinga & Kayuni, 2010; Cammack, 2012; Chiweza & Tembo, 2012). Most Malawian NGOs rely on funding from foreign donors, often via INGOs but sometimes directly from bilateral government donors or multilateral organisations. Following the global recession that began in the late 2000s and cuts to aid in donor countries, funding declined and became increasingly competitive (INTRAC, 2012). The new funding environment also involved increasing donor emphasis on providing evidence to demonstrate results (INTRAC, 2012). Beyond this requirement for evidence of impact, there is growing attention to research more broadly within the NGO sector in Malawi (this was indicated in interviews with donors and NGO staff).

Donor funding is also important for the national research sector, though figures on research spending are uncertain and estimates of the proportion of donor funding vary (Holland, 2009; AU-NEPAD, 2010). Research funding is high by African standards: Malawi is one of few countries estimated to achieve the African Union target of spending 1% of GDP on research and development (AU-NEPAD, 2010). This is likely to reflect the presence of some large internationally funded research initiatives (INASP, 2012), including several programmes for health research. Within government strategies and national discussions of research, there is a concern to develop capacity, increase research relevance and strengthen links between research, policy and practice (Ministry of Health, 2011; NCST, 2011). The concern for research to be relevant to national development priorities is long-standing (Holland, 2009). However, national attention to evidence-based approaches has increased, and this perhaps heightens the focus among government and the research community on relevance and uptake. This interest was clear in the title for the 2012 National Research Dissemination Conference, 'Towards evidence-based policy decision making'. Keynote speakers

emphasised the need for academics to provide research that could help development and for research to be effectively communicated and translated into policy. NGOs are recognised as a stakeholder in national research within the workplan for the National Commission on Science and Technology, which oversees research in Malawi (NCST, 2011), and in the National Health Research Agenda (Ministry of Health, 2012). There is a growing interest in NGO engagement in research within national research governance structures, including plans to strengthen NGO research capacity (this was indicated in interviews with the National Commission on Science and Technology).

In summary, key aspects of the Malawian context of relevance for the thesis focus are limited resources, high dependence on external funding, a large and increasingly competitive NGO sector, and a growing interest in research both nationally and among NGOs. Further aspects of the national context are discussed as relevant within later chapters.

1.5 Thesis outline

Following this introduction, Chapter 2 describes my research methods. I explain the case study approach and why this was adopted, and specific methods used to generate data with each case NGO. I discuss challenges encountered during the research and the strengths and limitations of my approach.

Chapter 3 introduces the four NGOs that form the primary case studies. I provide brief background information on organisational features such as size, funding and activities, and introduce their research approaches. The descriptions highlight diversity among the case NGOs, including different research aims and capacities. As shown in the remainder of the thesis, these different organisational contexts affect relationships between service delivery, advocacy and research.

The next three chapters provide the main empirical findings, each examining one of the three relationships between research, service delivery and advocacy. The chapters are structured differently to suit their specific focus, but each raises three broad themes that affect input from service delivery and advocacy to research: whether NGOs want to draw on their service delivery and advocacy in research, whether service delivery and advocacy provide the anticipated opportunities and benefits for research, and whether NGOs are able to use these opportunities. I suggest that using service delivery as a source of questions and data and using advocacy for research communication is not always relevant or feasible. This varies with different organisational aims and

contexts, including the nature of service delivery and advocacy, internal capacity and external relationships.

In Chapter 4, I explore the role of service delivery as source of research questions. I suggest NGOs do not aim to rely only on service delivery when identifying research topics; they consider other criteria and may value other sources of ideas. I then examine assumptions that service delivery staff are well-placed to identify research topics, and highlight aspects such as ability and motivation that can limit their suggestions for research. NGOs' ability to pursue questions inspired by service delivery is also affected by their control over research agendas. As I explain, relationships with external actors and financial autonomy affect NGOs' capacity to undertake the research they find of interest. Finally, I consider the perceived relevance of research findings, suggesting that this depends on more than the source of research questions. Overall, a research agenda generated through service delivery does not fully match NGOs' aspirations or abilities, and does not guarantee relevance.

Chapter 5 turns to the role of service delivery as a source of data. I look first at whether service delivery activities and monitoring records can provide the information needed to answer research questions. Within this, I examine the relevance of service delivery activities as a source of data for particular kinds of research question, and potential gaps in monitoring records. I also look at conditions affecting scope to adapt service delivery activities or monitoring records when this is required to generate data (for example, to meet conditions for experimental research or to change the content of monitoring systems). For service delivery to be a viable data source, any changes need to be acceptable for NGOs' organisational principles and practically feasible. Combining these aspects, I suggest using service delivery as a source of data may not meet research aims, or may involve difficult compromises. Having considered whether service delivery provides a suitable opportunity to generate data, I examine NGOs' capacity to use this opportunity. Substantial contrasts in levels of funding, time and skills, as well as motivation, contribute to varied use of service delivery for research data between and within NGOs.

Chapter 6 examines the role of advocacy in supporting communication of research findings. I analyse NGOs' aims and roles in research communication, and suggest that despite involvement in advocacy, they do not always promote action in response to research findings. I then examine their research communication strategies. All the case NGOs use advocacy activities for communicating findings, and these activities provide channels to share results and a means to promote action. However, some NGOs also

communicate findings through channels such as journals, meaning their research communication does not rely only on advocacy activities. I also identify barriers to communicating research findings, including a mismatch between existing advocacy activities and those that can support research communication. Overall, as with using service delivery for questions and data, organisational involvement in advocacy does not always support research communication as expected, and using advocacy to communicate findings does not always fit NGOs' aims or abilities.

The final chapter provides a summary of the findings, bringing together common themes across the three relationships between research, service delivery and advocacy. I conclude with suggestions for further research and recommendations for NGO practitioners and the donors and academics who might work with them.

2 Research design and methods

This chapter sets out the strategies used to answer my research questions. I start with the overall research approach, explaining the qualitative case study design (2.1). I then describe selection of case NGOs and processes for access (2.2), and methods used to generate data about these cases and the national context (2.3). Following this, I outline the approach to analysis (2.4) and steps to increase rigour (2.5), and discuss research ethics (2.6). Throughout, I consider strengths and challenges of the research approach.

2.1 Research design

The study used a combination of qualitative methods to examine relationships between research, service delivery and advocacy within four NGOs in Malawi. Three key features of this design are explained in turn in 2.1.1: the qualitative approach, comparative case studies and flexibility. The thesis drew on ideas from realist research, and I outline this approach in 2.1.2.

2.1.1 Qualitative case study design

A qualitative approach was selected to enable detailed understanding of NGOs' experiences, attention to context and insight into how and why their research processes operate in particular ways (Miles & Huberman, 1994 p.10). In addition, the limited existing literature meant there was particular value in a qualitative approach with flexibility to pursue emerging themes (Robson, 2011).

The case study design suited the need to understand complex real-world situations (Denscombe, 2007 p.38). The holistic approach provided by case studies, considering systems as a whole and the interactions of multiple elements, was appropriate given the wide range of factors within NGOs' organisational systems and external environments that affect their research. In line with the qualitative emphasis on how and why questions, using case studies also helped to explain relationships between research, service delivery and advocacy among NGOs, through detailed examination of processes leading to different outcomes in particular contexts (Maxwell, 2012).

Two levels of case study were used: organisational cases of the NGOs, and within each NGO, cases of particular research projects. With both levels, I employed a comparative approach (considering different organisations and research projects). This comparison was designed to strengthen and refine explanations by indicating variation in processes between contexts (Miles & Huberman, 1994 p.172; Thomas, 1998 p.323;

Robson, 2011 p.140). As described in Chapter 1, limited attention to this influence of context is a gap in existing literature. Comparing different NGOs provided insight into the effects of different organisational contexts and research systems. Cases of specific research projects provided information on conditions contributing to varied relationships between service delivery, advocacy and research within organisational environments.

A common criticism of case studies is the difficulty of generalising from the findings. This research aimed at developing middle range theory, that is, more localised explanations that consider what happens under particular conditions (Pawson & Tilley, 1997). The approach to generalisation is theoretical rather than statistical or representational (Thomas, 1998 p.323; Robson, 2011 p.160). The case study situations are not designed to represent a wider population. Instead, information from the cases is used to identify processes and contexts that may affect relationships between research, service delivery and advocacy in other organisations with similar conditions. Key features of the case study contexts are described, to allow judgements on the extent to which findings might be transferable to other NGOs (Miles & Huberman, 1994 p.279; Denscombe, 2007 p.43).

As noted above, one strength of qualitative research is the flexibility to respond to ongoing findings and pursue emerging insights (Patton, 2002 p.14; Robson, 2011). Methods were adapted during the research to focus on particular issues and for practical reasons. In some cases, I made changes and tried different approaches when original methods or styles did not bring required information (for example, experimenting with use of a timeline in interviews to prompt more specific detail, using group discussions to benefit from the interaction among individuals, and finding additional interviewees). The research design was also adapted and refined through initial and ongoing discussions with the case NGOs and research participants, to fit their organisational structures and availability and the types of evidence available. For example, there was more scope for observation in some NGOs and group discussions were not feasible in every organisation. Specific changes and variations are discussed in later sections.

2.1.2 A realist approach

The study draws on realist thinking. There are many versions of realism and the nature and implications of a realist position are debated. Two widely discussed aspects that apply to my approach are the understanding of reality and our access to it, and the approach to causality.

On the former, the versions of realism that inform my approach hold that an independent reality exists (an ontological realism), but that our knowledge of this reality is affected by our position and conceptual understandings (an epistemological constructivism) (Sayer, 2000; Carter & New, 2004; Maxwell, 2012). In this perspective, social relations, structures, events and experiences exist beyond the researcher's attempts to perceive and explain them. However, our understanding of this world is partial and provisional, with diverse perspectives on the same phenomena. With this basis, research cannot produce theories that mirror reality, but aims at theories that have an adequate relationship with reality to be useful (Maxwell, 2012). The acceptance that all knowledge is situated and value-laden means objectivity is unattainable, and necessitates reflection on the researcher's position and role in generating data (at a practical level through methods such as a research diary). It also implies that research participants' perceptions of events and underlying causes might be incomplete (Sayer, 2000; Carter & New, 2004), so mechanisms and processes they suggest in interviews may need interrogating through other research.

In relation to causality, realism involves a generative model of causality with an emphasis on the complex, layered nature of social reality and role of context (Pawson & Tilley, 1997; Sayer, 2000; Carter & New, 2004; Maxwell, 2004). Events and experiences reflect underlying processes – the idea of 'ontological depth' (Sayer, 2000). With this understanding, realist research attempts to go beyond what is directly observed, instead using these observations to infer underlying causes. In analysing causes, realism examines the processes and structures through which patterns are generated, that is, detecting mechanisms not just sequences or correlations. As emphasised in all these accounts, these underlying mechanisms are not universal laws: the social world is complex and the way mechanisms function is affected by context and human action. Consequently, identified patterns are contingent tendencies or 'demi-regularities' (Wong et al., 2013 p.13). This underlines the need to consider context as a core part of explanation. It also points to realism's interest in both structure and agency: subjective interpretations and understandings are important in driving actions, which in turn both create and are limited by social structures (Pawson & Tilley, 1997; Carter & New, 2004; Maxwell, 2004). Overall, realist research aims to examine the way mechanisms and contexts operate together to bring about outcomes - the question of what works for whom in what circumstances, and why (Pawson & Tilley, 1997; Pawson & Manzano-Santaella, 2012). For my research aim, a realist approach means identifying the varied processes and conditions that contribute to different relationships between research, service delivery and advocacy.

2.2 Case study identification, selection and access

This section discusses the organisational cases used in the research, explaining how and why they were selected and processes for access. The cases of particular research projects within each NGO included all the examples of research studies that I learnt about during interviews.

2.2.1 Selection and identification of cases

The research focused on four NGOs as the main organisational cases. I refer to these using the pseudonyms Flint, Clay, Chalk and Marl. Limiting research to four organisations was designed to benefit from a comparative approach while retaining scope for in-depth understanding within available time. The detail of research processes and organisational contexts was important to indicate how things work in practice and the multiple factors that affect this. Restricting the number of cases also allowed time to speak with a range of people in each NGO, and these different perspectives provided a more comprehensive picture. In addition, having a longer period with each organisation fostered more open relationships (as discussed in relation to strategies for rigour in 2.5).

Selection of NGOs was purposeful, that is, “selecting information-rich cases whose study will illuminate the questions under study” (Patton 2002, p.230). The NGOs had specific features that could support insight into relationships between research, service delivery and advocacy. Given the limited existing research in this area, there were many issues of potential interest but few that could be singled out before starting research as deserving particular attention. Consequently there were just four initial criteria for case selection:

1. NGOs involved in service delivery and advocacy as well as research. This was essential given the study’s focus on interactions between these three functions.
2. NGOs undertaking research on health. As explained in Chapter 1, my focus started in health but broadened during research to consider international development more widely. Case NGOs were selected in line with the original focus. Many NGOs operate in several sectors, working on health alongside other aspects of development, and this applied to three of the case NGOs. My original plan was to include these more generalist NGOs but to focus on their health activities. However, their research in other sectors provided relevant insights, for example using different models and so indicating potential advantages of alternative approaches. In addition, their experiences with other

research affected their approach to research in health, so their health research could only be understood in reference to their wider research portfolio.

Consequently, I widened the focus during fieldwork to consider research in related sectors. Their work in these other sectors was all on issues that could be considered as social determinants of health (for example, gender, education, nutrition, child labour, and livelihoods) (CSDH, 2008).

3. NGOs that were currently doing research or that had completed research projects within the last six months. This timeframe was designed to facilitate observation and discussion of the research process, and to reduce problems of recall.

4. A mix of international and national NGOs. While NGOs vary in many ways, the divide between international and national organisations is particularly prominent in the NGO literature (Lewis, 2010). Chalk and Marl are INGOs, while Flint and Clay are Malawian organisations. Examining these contrasting settings helped to explore context, for example variations in scale of operation, structures and access to resources. Including national organisations within the sample was particularly important to counter the emphasis on INGO experiences within existing literature, discussed in Chapter 1.

The status of an organisation as international or national is sometimes unclear and debated. Some NGOs only work in Malawi but have strong links to international organisations through their funding or historical establishment. These relationships and their influence were explored during the research. Case studies of INGOs focused on their country office in Malawi, but considered interaction with regional or international offices.

The first two criteria relate to the overall focus of my research, looking at NGOs involved in research, service delivery and advocacy and with a particular emphasis on health. The third condition relates to the practicalities of generating data. The fourth aspect, including national and international NGOs, involves a more theoretical idea about the kinds of conditions that might affect relationships between research, service delivery and advocacy. Additional theoretically-based criteria were added during the first few months of fieldwork as the research progressed. Drawing broadly on the idea of strategic sampling (Mason, 2002 p.123), I sought to include NGOs with features that could help to examine emerging ideas about factors affecting NGOs' research. With this approach, I started interviews with one NGO that met the core criteria (Flint), and contacted other NGOs as I developed ideas about potentially significant conditions and

gaps in the current selection. For example, I approached NGOs that covered the following contexts that I thought might affect relationships between research, service delivery and advocacy:

- A strong research reputation and history. (Flint are newer to research, potentially affecting their capacity. Clay provided an example of a Malawian NGO with a longer research history. Marl and Chalk provided this contrast among INGOs.)
- Separate research staff. (Flint have no research staff, with a more integrated structure. Clay, Chalk and Marl have separate research staff or teams.)
- NGOs involved in different types of research. (For example, Chalk have a more community-based research approach and Marl have more quantitative research and experience of medical trials.)

While I considered these criteria and aimed to sample strategically, case selection also reflected practical and ethical considerations. A decisive factor involved access and the NGOs' interest in the study, discussed in 2.2.2. Location was also important. I worked with NGOs in two towns in one region of Malawi. This eased transport logistics and increased flexibility to rearrange interviews around NGOs' changing schedules, but limited the choice of organisations. Scope to select organisations on the basis of relevant features was also limited by minimal initial knowledge of the NGOs combined with limited available time. I researched each organisation online before making contact, but my understanding of each NGO developed as I learnt more about it. With more time, I could have gained further insight into relevant aspects of diversity among NGOs and developed clearer theoretical ideas to test through selection of later cases. However, six months fieldwork necessitated fairly rapid selection, with decisions based on limited information about each organisation and possible dimensions of interest.

In addition, while I thought the NGO features discussed above might be significant, the relevant features changed over time with ongoing analysis. Particular features of the NGOs become relevant in relation to emerging explanations. This role of theory, combined with the growing understanding about each case, makes identification of cases an ongoing process: it may be unclear at the outset what an empirical example is a case of, and this may change during the research (Ragin, 1992; Emmel, 2013). The criteria listed above were "bold conjectures" about aspects of context that might be relevant (Emmel, 2013 p.69). What each NGO came to represent varied as I learnt more about the organisations and developed ideas about relationships between research, service delivery and advocacy. For example, a case of an INGO might

become a case of having sufficient funding at some points in analysis, or of limited advocacy at others. In this way, while selection considered aspects such as organisational structure and research approach, additional dimensions of variation became significant during analysis, such as the nature of each NGO's relationship with donors.

Although selection was subject to practical constraints and the relevant qualities of each case changed during research, the four main NGOs have provided a sample with significant diversity. Their differences highlight aspects of organisational context that affect relationships between research, service delivery and advocacy. For example, the sample includes NGOs with different organisational aims, levels of capacity, external relationships, and approaches to service delivery, advocacy and research. Although the study is limited to four main NGOs, this diversity helps to develop explanations that may apply across a range of settings (Miles & Huberman, 1994 p.279). The particular features of each NGO are described further in Chapter 3.

Beyond the four main cases, I interviewed a small number of staff from two other NGOs as peripheral cases. These peripheral cases shed further light on the role of context and gave some indications about whether issues raised in core cases were shared more widely. When similar issues were raised, their experiences provided more confidence in explanations developed on the basis of the core cases. In addition, by widening the range of models and experiences, these peripheral cases highlighted further potential difficulties and potentially effective strategies. However, the brief engagement with these two NGOs gives limited understanding of their research, and I refer to their experience only occasionally in the thesis text.

Selection criteria for these peripheral NGOs were the same as for core cases; they were initially approached as potential core case studies alongside the other NGOs, so met the same conditions. From this starting point, whether an NGO became a core or peripheral case was determined largely by timing. NGOs that I was able to access during the first few months of fieldwork became the main cases (Flint, Clay, and Chalk). Organisations that I met later largely became peripheral case studies. However, one NGO that I contacted in the last two months of fieldwork became a core case (Marl). Their experience provided a particularly contrasting context to the previous three core NGOs and brought insights that I judged as contributing substantially to the analysis (in particular, illustrating a different level of capacity, structure and research approach). In addition, although I contacted this NGO at a relatively late stage, I was able to undertake four detailed interviews while in Malawi that produced considerable relevant information, and two further interviews by Skype. Nevertheless, the later engagement

with Marl limited scope for observation and interviews with district staff, and this has been considered in analysis.

I identified NGOs that might meet the selection criteria in advance of fieldwork and while in Malawi. Several routes were used to identify possible organisations, including email groups that include NGOs involved in research, NGO networks, web searches, discussions with colleagues and my existing knowledge of the NGO sector.

2.2.2 Agreements on access

As in any research involving human interaction and consent, selection of cases was two-way, dependent on each NGO's willingness to share information. Though unavoidable, this self-selection had ethical and practical benefits. In particular, NGOs' interest in the research was important for reciprocity: these NGOs were more likely to find some value in the research that would compensate for their time as participants. (I discuss reciprocity further in 2.6.) In addition, NGOs with an interest in the research were more likely to dedicate time for interviews or group discussions, facilitating the research process.

This self-selection may have affected the types of organisation that became case studies and the aspects emphasised during interviews. For example, it may have been that NGOs with concerns about their research approach were interested because they hoped the study would provide guidance. Alternately, NGO directors who saw their research as successful might have hoped the study would showcase their work. Some NGOs may simply have been happy to help, or may have felt obliged to participate when I approached them on the basis of a common contact. The rationale for participating was not always clear, either at this organisational level or among individual interviewees. Where motivations were shared, this helped my interpretation of interview and group discussions (for example, one NGO seemed keen that my research should identify areas for capacity building, which perhaps led staff to emphasise current skills gaps during interviews).

I approached possible NGOs by email, and where necessary, followed up by phone. Research access to NGOs is often portrayed as a significant challenge, due to their concern for public reputation and limited time (Mercer, 2006). However, I received positive replies from the majority of NGOs contacted, at least initially. When NGOs expressed interest in participating, I arranged initial meetings to discuss the study (these meetings are discussed further under informed consent in 2.6.2).

Following introductory meetings, access to organisations and sources of data within them was ongoing, renegotiated as research developed (Denscombe, 2007 pp.71–2). This was particularly important given the flexible approach: I needed to adapt selection of interviewees and methods to respond to new information, arising opportunities and emerging theory, so could not specify in advance exactly what would be involved. This process of ongoing access included, for example, discussion with primary contacts about access to documents or participation in staff meetings and discussion with individual interviewees about their involvement.

Gatekeepers were important in approaching potential cases and negotiating access. Ideally, gatekeepers should be selected with care as their relationships with others can affect participants' openness and reactions to the researcher (Irvine, 2003). In practice, there was little choice in initial gatekeeper because with all the case NGOs, I only had contact details for the director. These directors were however the appropriate starting point, because the decision on involvement concerned the whole organisation, going directly to more junior staff rather than respecting organisational hierarchy might have caused offence, and without an introduction to the NGO from the director, I did not know which other staff to approach. While these directors were my initial contact, in Chalk the research manager became my main contact point, and in Clay a programme manager sometimes played this role.

These directors and managers played an important introductory role and gave up significant time to support my research. However, being sponsored by the director, research or programme manager may have affected the way I was seen by other staff. I sought to compensate for this by emphasising confidentiality and where possible, contacting potential interviewees directly to explain the research rather than setting up meetings through my primary contact. Despite this, on at least one occasion, I felt participants might be giving views that they felt would please the director or research manager, particularly when I was introduced by this senior contact and had little time to build rapport. This and other factors affecting openness were considered in analysis to assess the credibility of particular data.

2.3 Methods for generating data

I used a combination of methods to generate information on research experience in the core case NGOs, including interviews, focus groups, document review and observation. With peripheral cases, data collection was restricted to interviews and

documents. I also used interviews, documents and participant observation for information on the national research and NGO context. In this section, I discuss each of these methods and then how they were combined.

During research design, I used a table based on my original research questions to help identify required information and potential sources of data, as a guide to selecting methods and sampling (see Annex 1). As discussed in Chapter 1, my focus narrowed during the research. I initially planned to look broadly at multiple ways service delivery and advocacy feed into and affect research, and some aspects of the methods reflect this initial scope.

2.3.1 Interviews

In-depth interviews were the primary research method. Interviews provided a way to access the knowledge and experiences of key actors in the NGOs' research systems, and an in-depth approach suited the exploratory nature of this study and need for detailed information on complex systems (Denscombe, 2007 p.176). Below, I discuss selection of people to interview and the interview process.

Selecting interviewees for the case NGOs

Potential interviewees were identified through ongoing discussions with directors or research leads and through interviews, where these indicated the involvement of other staff in research. As with selection of NGOs, selection of interviewees was purposeful. Within each organisation, selection considered staff members' knowledge of and position in relation to the NGO's research system. Given the focus on relationships between research, service delivery and advocacy, I spoke to staff working in each of these three areas (in most cases, staff worked on more than one or all three). I also interviewed directors, for their thoughts on the overall organisational relationship between research, service delivery and advocacy, and because their views were likely to influence organisational research systems. Where there was a choice, I interviewed staff who had been in the NGOs for long enough to become familiar with the research process. Among people working on service delivery and advocacy, I included staff in the central office and some at district level, except in Marl where there was no time to interview district service delivery staff. Selection of district staff largely depended on their location and transport. More time with district offices would have provided more understanding of the place of research in daily service delivery and the views of service delivery teams, but this would have required longer fieldwork.

I also interviewed some former staff and people from international offices. In two cases, I spoke to former staff because I wanted information on processes and events where current staff had limited information (Flint and Chalk). I also spoke to a former director in Clay, to seek more critical reflections on their approach as I felt interviews with current staff were not providing information on potential difficulties. With one of the INGOs, Chalk, I interviewed a UK staff member. This provided useful information on funding arrangements and comparison between country programmes, which helped my understanding of the organisational context. Some staff in the other INGO (Marl) had worked in other country programmes, so provided this comparison directly.

As well as my ideas about which staff would have relevant information, selection of interviewees depended on access, in particular participants' availability. Sometimes the people with most knowledge about the research system had little time for interviews, particularly in Flint where research is led by a busy director. I worked around this by being flexible in timing and repeatedly reorganising meetings, but his limited time reduced opportunities to check information from other staff and to discuss some aspects of their work.

The number of interviewees varied between the core NGOs (five in Marl, seven in Clay, eight in Flint, thirteen in Chalk). The smaller number in Marl reflected my later contact with this NGO, as previously explained. With some participants, especially staff leading research, I arranged one or two repeat interviews to allow more detailed discussion. In deciding the number of interviews, I considered:

- NGO size and the number of staff involved in research, service delivery and advocacy. Smaller NGOs had fewer staff, and staff tended to be involved in more activities, so fewer interviews were needed to get a relevant range of views.
- Variation in staff roles. If many staff had similar jobs or types of involvement in research, interviewing several of these staff was less likely to bring new insights than in cases where staff roles were more diverse.
- Information from other methods, such as group discussions, informal conversations or participant observation. Where opportunities for other sources of information were more limited, interviews were more important.
- Information from past interviews. Considering existing data helped to indicate whether further interviews were needed to answer new questions, fill gaps, or check ideas and information from earlier interviews.
- Time and logistics, for example who was available, their location, and the most productive use of my remaining time.

Overall, there were around 41 formal interviews with 33 staff or former staff in the four core case NGOs. I also had numerous informal conversations with these and other staff, ranging from two minutes to two hours.

Beyond NGO staff, I interviewed some people from external organisations working with the case NGOs. In Chalk, much research was undertaken by consultants so I interviewed one of these consultants to explore their thoughts on the process. I was also able to interview a donor who funded Chalk, to understand their rationale for providing research funding and their view on Chalk's research. For Clay, I spoke to two donors, which provided external perspectives on their research and information about the donor relationship. I initially hoped to interview more external organisations working with the NGOs, including donors, government partners and research organisations. Discussions with NGO staff raised issues about the actions of external partners, and interviewing these partners would have provided a different perspective on both challenges and successes. I also wanted to understand external perceptions of the relevance of each NGO's research. However, scope for these external interviews was limited by time, access and concern about implications for confidentiality. I have indicated in relevant chapters where this creates gaps in the understanding.

With the peripheral case NGOs, the number of interviewees was much smaller. In both organisations, I interviewed the director to provide an overview of their research processes and the relationships to service delivery and advocacy. One NGO was small and the director was heavily involved in their research, so interviewing him provided sufficient information. The other NGO was larger with a separate research unit, so I also interviewed the research manager.

The interview process

Most interviews lasted 1-1.5 hours, allowing time to cover priority topics and to develop rapport. A few interviews were shorter, especially repeat interviews and those where staff or external officials had particularly busy schedules. I used interview guides to provide focus and make efficient use of time (Patton, 2002 p.343). These were tailored to participants depending on their role, and revised during the research to explore emerging themes and insights. An example interview guide is given in Annex 2.

Interview discussions focused on understanding how service delivery and advocacy feed into research and conditions that affect this. Initial interviews asked broadly about the research process, links to service delivery and advocacy and potentially significant aspects of the organisational context. Overarching ideas from the literature about the

value of input from service delivery and advocacy to research were considered through, for example, asking about the source of research questions and perceived relevance of research. To understand aspects that participants considered important, I asked open questions about the process followed in particular research projects and overall. However, when participants did not raise conditions that I thought might affect relationships between research, service delivery and advocacy (such as funding or academic partnership), I also asked about these directly. As research progressed, I asked more specifically about emerging theories. This included, for example, following up comments from previous interviews about particular outcomes or processes, to understand more detail and variation with different conditions, and checking my interpretation of particular processes.

Interviews face a number of challenges, including mutual misunderstanding and issues of openness, flattering responses and recall error that can bring differences between what people say they do (or did) and what actually happens (Patton, 2002; Denscombe, 2007). I explain below the steps taken to tackle these challenges.

To promote openness, I used neutral responses during interviews, discussed confidentiality, and sought to build rapport (Patton, 2002). Strategies to develop rapport included sharing difficulties from my experience in NGOs, and providing advice or information in response to interviewee requests. Where possible, I also used informal conversations in advance of interviews to build trust. Most interviews took place in private offices or meeting rooms, to provide some confidentiality.

To strengthen mutual understanding and increase reliability, I checked my interpretation during interviews, for example feeding back to see if I had understood correctly, and asking interviewees what they meant by particular terms. When participants' comments seemed unclear or unreliable, I asked different questions on the same topic, to allow triangulation. To minimise difficulties with recall and post-hoc rationalisation, I focused on recent and ongoing events, used phrases such as 'only if you remember' to reduce potential pressure to manufacture an answer, and avoided 'why' questions (for example, asking instead about processes that led to particular actions) (Patton, 2002 p.363; Hsiung, 2010). Where practical, I used short repeat interviews or informal conversations to check points that were particularly surprising or unclear when transcribing. I also worked to improve the way I asked about particular issues by listening to and reflecting on early interviews, to identify phrasing that made sense to participants and the types of questions that tended to elicit useful information. The majority of interviews were audio recorded. Where this was not feasible, I took

detailed notes and expanded these the same day.

To support attention to potential unreliability during analysis, I used a research diary to reflect on my relationship with participants and considered how this might affect the data. When writing up interviews, I included factual details (such as the people involved, time, location and thoroughness of my notes), and impressions of the interview relationship (for example, the degree of openness), to assist later interpretation. In analysing data, I also considered how what was said related to information from other sources, internal consistency and whether interviewees were likely to be fully aware of issues under discussion, for example whether they were speaking from direct experience (Denscombe, 2007 pp.201–2).

Despite these efforts, interviews were inevitably affected to varying degrees by my inexperience as a researcher and the research relationship. This has been considered in analysing interview data, for example noticing where my questions may have prompted particular answers and considering factors that might have influenced the information shared. Overall, however, participants were generous with their time and openly discussed internal processes, constraints and challenges. Their contributions and the range of interviewees produced extensive data that provide new information about relationships between NGOs' research, service delivery and advocacy.

2.3.2 Group discussions

I used focus group discussions to complement the interview data and investigate particular topics. Focus groups allowed participants to share ideas, stimulating input, and seemed to help accuracy as information was verified by other participants (Patton, 2002 p.387; Mayoux, 2003; Denscombe, 2007 pp.178–9). A further benefit was the role of group discussion in providing space for staff members to share ideas, something the NGOs said they would appreciate to help identify new approaches. I designed group discussions to investigate perceptions of what made a good research project and strengths and weaknesses of different studies. These topics were linked to my original approach of looking broadly at the influence of service delivery and advocacy on research processes and outputs (noted in 1.2.3). However, the discussions provided valuable data for my refined focus on the roles of service delivery in research questions and data and advocacy in research communication, for example providing information on relevance and dissemination.

I arranged focus groups in Chalk and Flint. In Marl, this was not possible within

available time, and in Clay, I felt this information was clear from interviews. Group size and composition was determined partly by availability, with four people in Chalk and five in Flint. In each organisation, participants included staff involved in service delivery and advocacy and with knowledge of the NGO's research. Ideally, groups would have included a wider range of people (for example, district staff), but this was not practically feasible. I sought to counter this by exploring topics covered in group discussions through individual interviews with some of those who could not attend. Group discussions can suppress contrasting views (Patton, 2002 p.387). To support open discussion, I did not include some senior managers or research leads whose presence might have limited what was said. Perhaps because these staff were not present, focus group participants seemed able to disagree openly and challenged each other's ideas.

The discussions were based around a preference ranking matrix, an exercise used in participatory research (Rennie & Singh, 1995). Participants first identified characteristics that they felt marked a good research project, and then scored different research projects against these. Using this exercise had a number of benefits for improving communication, including encouraging participation from everyone, providing a common conceptual basis for discussion, helping participants think through complex ideas, and making discussions more entertaining, which in turn encouraged input (Mayoux, 2003; Crilly et al., 2006). The approach had a particular advantage in the context of this study because methods associated with participatory research are often used within NGOs. Staff were familiar with this type of exercise, saw it as a valid means of generating information, and seemed confident participating. A key drawback was that the exercise was a lengthy process and could not be fully completed. However, the matrix was a way to stimulate discussion, and the key data came from the conversation rather than the scoring. Throughout the exercise, I asked questions to clarify or draw out the thinking behind suggested criteria and scores, and participants also questioned each other. This probing was essential as diagrams can only provide credible evidence if their meaning is understood (Mayoux, 2003).

Discussions were audio recorded and lists of criteria and matrices were captured using digital photographs. I shared summaries of each discussion with participants.

2.3.3 Observation

Observation was not suitable as the main research method for this study because many of the processes of interest are not easily observed (for example, they take place through email exchanges), or they happen over long periods that do not fit PhD

fieldwork (the process from research planning to dissemination may take several years). However, a small amount of observation was possible, and this provided useful insights into research processes and organisational contexts.

The nature and extent of observation varied between NGOs, depending partly on practicalities. With Flint, I spent several weeks working from their office and attended several staff meetings. In Clay, I attended a staff meeting and observed some district activities, including a local government meeting organised to present a new project and a community monitoring visit. In Chalk, I attended a meeting with consultants to discuss a draft research report, and in Marl, I attended a meeting about a forthcoming research training workshop. Informal conversations were also possible during visits to each NGO's office for interviews.

The degree of participation in this observation varied. In most cases I attended meetings primarily as an onlooker or guest, but there was space to interact with other participants and ask questions. My presence may have affected behaviour and discussions during observation. This is hard to judge, although some NGO staff said meetings had been typical despite my presence. I used field notes to record what people said during meetings or informal conversations and to describe events such as visitors or programme activities. These notes were expanded and written up as soon as possible (usually the same day). As with writing up interviews, I included impressions of research relationships and factual aspects of the context in these observation notes, to assist later analysis.

This observation complemented interviews by enhancing understanding of context and indicating informal processes and aspects that interviewees may take for granted or decline to mention (Patton, 2002 pp.262–3). Attending staff meetings and spending time in NGO offices was particularly helpful for information on organisational relationships, priorities, activities and routines. Informal conversations also helped build rapport and gave space to check information from earlier interviews. Participation in research meetings provided detail on the research process and a more vivid picture of issues discussed in interviews. Had it been feasible, further observation would have added value to the study, particularly attending more research meetings to follow decisions and counter the reliance in interviews on retrospective explanation.

2.3.4 Document review

I used NGOs' websites, publicly available reports and internal documents for

information on the organisational context and their research activities. In selecting relevant documents, I focused on recent plans and reports for information on organisational aims and activities, and on reports about specific research projects for information on the purpose, process and findings (including terms of reference, drafts and final reports). I also looked at documents produced by other organisations for information about the case NGOs. For example, press articles gave information on advocacy activities, and discussion lists and conference websites gave some indications about dissemination. In addition, some research or programme reports by other organisations mentioned work by the case NGOs.

Material was identified through internet searches, via the NGOs' websites, and through discussion with each NGO. In some cases it was difficult to access documents. On several occasions, people told me about particular reports and said I should read them, but then could not find these reports in their files or did not have copies (often because of earlier computer breakdowns). This was in itself relevant for understanding organisational information management. It did, however, limit my understanding of some of their research.

Documents needed to be interpreted with care given that official organisational reports tend to say little about internal difficulties or differences (Roche, 1998) and reported processes can involve intentions rather than practice (Abbott et al., 2004). However, this public presentation of NGOs' research and other activities is itself an important part of organisational context, reflecting formal aims and values. Using documents for background information also helped to avoid wasting interviewees' time. I reviewed some of this material before approaching NGOs to assess their suitability as case studies. Once working with each NGO, document review complemented interviews, indicating issues to follow up and providing a way to check or get further information on issues mentioned by interviewees (Patton, 2002 p.307).

2.3.5 Combining methods with the case NGOs

The combination of interviews, group discussions, observation and document analysis varied between the case NGOs, depending largely on practicalities. This affects the nature of the data for each organisation as different methods provide better access to different types of information. For example, where I could spend extended periods in an NGO's office, I obtained a better understanding of their daily activities. Where I could attend organisational staff meetings, I gained more information on the NGO's wider programmes, beyond research. Although it was not possible to employ identical

methods in each organisation, I was often able to access similar information and achieve similar results through different channels. For example, considering information on the NGOs' organisational context and rapport:

- In Flint, extended periods in the office helped to build rapport and provided information about organisational processes.
- In Clay, spending time in the office was not feasible due to lack of space. However, I undertook nine individual or group meetings with staff to provide input for a strategic planning process (explained in 2.6 in relation to reciprocity). These discussions covered Clay's strengths and weaknesses, providing information on the organisational context. Support for this strategic planning also developed rapport.
- In Chalk and Marl, staff seemed particularly open from the start. These are INGOs and some staff were from Europe or North America, so their openness perhaps reflected the greater financial security of INGOs and my more similar cultural background. This made time to develop rapport less necessary. There was also more website material on some aspects of the organisational context for these NGOs.

In this way, where access to information was not possible through one channel, I sought to compensate through other approaches.

2.3.6 Information on the national context

External context affects processes within NGOs, so I needed to understand relevant dimensions of the national situation. Interviews within NGO staff gave some information, but I used observation, document review and interviews outside the NGOs to provide an overview of the national research and NGO context.

For information on the research context, particularly relationships between NGOs and academics, I interviewed two academics. Both were suggested by other contacts and had experience of collaboration with NGOs. I also spoke to several academics informally. To give a wider picture of the research environment, including government priorities and debates beyond academia, I attended the National Research Dissemination Conference. Keynote speeches and audience questions indicated some of the pressing concerns and ideas about research in Malawi. An interview with an officer in the National Science and Technology Committee provided indications of their interest in NGO research, which helped to indicate how my research might contribute. Finally, I interviewed a research officer in a government health agency to gain some insight into external views on NGOs' research.

For information on the NGO context, I interviewed a Malawian consultant with long experience of work with and research on NGOs, and a Malawian donor staff member who previously worked in NGOs and had good knowledge of the sector. Interviews with Malawian NGO networks might have provided further information, but proved difficult to arrange.

Documents provided useful background on both the NGO and research sectors. Relevant sources included grey literature produced by NGOs and donors, media articles, official government reports and academic papers. Some of this material was given to me by interviewees or other contacts, and some was found on the internet.

Summarising, data generation employed a combination of methods, considering what approaches would produce the information needed to identify and examine theories about relationships between research, service delivery and advocacy, and adjusting approaches to suit practical conditions. The next section turns to analysis of this data.

2.4 Analysis

Through analysis, I aimed to provide explanations about relationships between research, service delivery and advocacy that are supported by the data, attuned to context and that have practical significance. Analysis involved initial processing during fieldwork and later, more focused development of categories and explanations. I describe these stages below, then discuss approaches to respondent validation through sharing preliminary findings with case NGOs. In common with other descriptions of realist research, analysis was not just “technical or sequential”, but rather an iterative process of interpretation and debate, combining more structured steps with creativity and argument (Greenhalgh et al., 2009 p.396).

2.4.1 Data processing, documentation and early analysis

Analysis was ongoing throughout fieldwork (Patton, 2002 pp.436–7; Maxwell, 2009), drawing on new data to inform future methods, interview questions, and selection of interviewees, documents and observation sites. As indicated in the previous section, most notes and audio recordings were written up or transcribed shortly after the event. This provided an opportunity to identify areas for clarification and issues to explore in later data collection.

As previously noted, I kept a research diary. As well as providing a space to reflect on research relationships, the diary served as an audit trail and a broader step in early analysis. The diary included a daily record of activities, decisions made and the reasons behind them. I also used it for reflection on the research process (beyond relationships with interviewees), considering what was working well, what changes were needed and how my actions may have affected the data. At a more conceptual level, I used the diary to record and refine thoughts about possible patterns and interpretations.

2.4.2 More focused analysis

Following fieldwork, analysis involved three main processes: familiarisation and categorisation, identifying connections and developing explanations, and testing and refining explanations, discussed in turn below.

Familiarity with the data as a whole was developed by re-reading transcripts and other field notes. During this process, I noted themes or codes on the transcripts, and recorded questions and ideas about relationships, commonalities and differences across the interviews. Codes included issues from the research questions, ideas I developed during fieldwork, and new ideas at this stage. They comprised organisational categories (such as 'research dissemination'); substantive categories (such as 'research seen as irrelevant'); and more theoretical categories about relationships (such as 'project funding determining research') (Maxwell, 2012 pp.112–113). Preliminary coding was done by hand, and for me, manual coding enabled more analytical thinking as it was easier to note down ideas about relationships and underlying processes. However, I used NVivo for a second round of coding. This particularly assisted data organisation, making it easier to collect paragraphs on the same issue and compare information from different interviewees (Mason, 2002 p.165; Maxwell, 2012 p.125). Annex 3 provides a list of the codes used in NVivo.

The process of reading through the data and applying broad codes gave a more systematic picture of the issues covered, going beyond my first impressions. It helped to check for consistency, allowing me to compare different descriptions of particular events and experiences as a way to identify different views and consider reliability. Bringing together the data in this way also facilitated later stages of analysis. However, coding can detach data from context (Mason, 2002 p.166; Maxwell, 2012). To retain attention to context at this early stage, I produced a case study of each core NGO with my initial impressions of the organisation and relationships between their research,

service delivery and advocacy.

The second process of identifying connections and developing explanations began during fieldwork and then continued as part of familiarisation and categorisation. As above, I noted ideas about relationships while reading through transcripts and used memos within the research diary to develop early explanations. More focused work to examine patterns and underlying processes was then an ongoing process throughout early stages of writing. Displays, particularly matrices and network diagrams, helped to explore relationships among categories and variations between cases, both suggesting and refining possible explanations (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Mason, 2002 p.169; Maxwell, 2012 pp.117–8). The idea of following programme pathways from realist evaluation (Pawson & Tilley, 1997) or funnels of attrition from theory based impact evaluation (White, 2014) contributed to the analysis. These approaches involve identifying steps in an intervention process and assumptions about the way programmes bring desired outcomes. They are based on individual participation in programmes so do not translate directly to my research focus. However, the broad ideas helped both analysis and chapter structuring, and I used these metaphors to think through assumptions made in claims that service delivery and advocacy provide opportunities for research, and to identify stages and conditions needed for this to happen.

The third process of refining explanations and testing findings was also an ongoing activity. To check and improve initial explanations, I tested them against the data. This meant looking for negative evidence and considering alternative interpretations (Miles & Huberman, 1994 pp.271–5; Patton, 2002 pp.553–5; Denscombe, 2007 p.302). Ideas about possible underlying processes arising from one piece of data were considered against other data to see whether they were supported and how they should be revised, an iterative strategy that “zigzags between ideas and evidence” (Emmel, 2013 p.6). My ideas were also tested through discussion with colleagues and supervisors, and to some extent, through discussion with case NGO staff (explained below).

The work to develop and refine explanations involved analysis within-case, considering processes in particular research projects and NGOs, and cross-case. Within-case analysis showed the complexity of causation and specific, grounded patterns, while cross-case analysis pointed to effects of organisational context (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Considering how processes varied between NGOs pointed to significant conditions influencing their research approach, for example, the effect of organisational structures on decisions about research agendas and the influence of capacities on

attitudes towards academic partnership.

2.4.3 Sharing initial findings with the case NGOs

Sharing findings with the NGOs was ethical practice. My focus here is analysis, and in relation to this, discussing preliminary findings with research participants can help to check factual accuracies and indicate whether proposed explanations make sense or whether there might be alternative processes at work (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Denscombe, 2007 p.297). However, respondent validation is a complex process that does not necessarily clarify or confirm findings. The same issues of subjectivity and researcher-interviewee relations are present in validation as in earlier data generation, and the analysis is likely to go beyond participants' direct experience and so differ from their own understanding (Crilly et al., 2006; Denscombe, 2007 p.298). There are also practical difficulties, including participants' time and skills to provide feedback (Crilly et al., 2006). Practical challenges, including my own timeframes and participants' availability, limited respondent validation and scope to refine explanations through discussion with NGO staff. However, I have discussed some findings with some of the case NGOs, as explained below.

Feedback to NGO participants involved two main steps: providing practical suggestions during or shortly after fieldwork, and sharing preliminary thesis findings and conclusions at a later stage in analysis. On the former, Flint and Chalk asked for feedback on their research, including recommendations to strengthen their approach. (Perhaps reflecting their longer experience of research, Marl and Clay did not request this.) Providing relevant feedback required a different analysis to that for the thesis questions, in terms of speed and focus. With Flint, I shared preliminary recommendations towards the end of fieldwork through conversations with senior staff, then provided a written summary. The majority of data collection with Flint took place in the first half of fieldwork, giving me time to identify key issues and consider possible strategies before leaving Malawi. With Chalk, I provided a written report at an early stage in data analysis, and the research manager sent his comments on this. Although this feedback to Chalk and Flint was not structured around the thesis questions, there were overlaps. Consequently, this feedback process provided an opportunity to test my understanding and to obtain further data that contributed to the analysis.

Feedback on the thesis conclusions has only been possible to a limited extent. I originally planned to make a second visit to Malawi to discuss findings with each NGO as a way to check my interpretations. This has not been feasible within the time

available to finalise the thesis. In the absence of face to face discussion, I prepared a summary report of the main thesis findings and recommendations and shared this by email with key contacts in each NGO. Although I did not anticipate detailed feedback given their hectic schedules, sharing findings was important ethically. I received feedback from Chalk and limited comments from Flint (both in agreement with my conclusions), but this has not been an effective approach. Hectic workloads and staff changes limited the NGOs' availability, and written summary reports and email are an inadequate channel for this kind of discussion. I decided not to pursue further discussion of the findings (for example, via Skype) at this stage, as the analytical and ethical benefit is balanced against imposing further on their time. However, I hope to return to Malawi following completion of the thesis, to share findings with these NGOs and with academics who supported and expressed interest in the research.

Although I have not had detailed feedback on the overall thesis conclusions, during analysis I have been able to discuss particular aspects through Skype interviews or email conversations with research participants. I have sought to do this with areas where I was particularly uncertain, and where possible, this has helped to fill some information gaps and check and refine my ideas.

2.5 Strategies to increase rigour

Throughout research design, data generation and analysis, steps were taken to strengthen the accuracy of the data and reliability of interpretations. Many of these steps are discussed in previous sections, for example interviewing staff from different departments, audio recording interviews and seeking negative cases. Here, I outline further measures used to promote rigour that applied throughout the process, including triangulation, prolonged engagement, and reflexivity.

Triangulation involved comparison within interviews, between research participants and between methods. Given varied and changing perspectives, triangulation tends not to produce "a single clear version agreed by all in every respect" (Thomas, 1998 p.331). It is not a simple process of using different data to check the findings, but helped to identify inconsistencies and provide a more comprehensive picture (Patton, 2002 p.556; Denscombe, 2007 p.138).

In relation to prolonged engagement (Robson, 2011 p.157), I was in frequent contact with the first three main case NGOs for at least six weeks during fieldwork, in one case

spending several weeks in their office, and in the others making frequent visits for interviews. This was within five to six months of more occasional communication while in Malawi. This was not feasible with Marl, as they became a case study towards the end of fieldwork, so correspondence and meetings took place over four weeks. Since ending fieldwork, I have stayed in touch with each NGO to varying degrees, including further contact via Skype and email and following developments via organisational websites. This prolonged engagement helped build trust and openness (particularly important given the risks associated with perceptions of external researchers, discussed in relation to reflexivity below). In some cases, longer contact brought dramatic changes in the information I was given, as discussions became more candid. It also provided a more comprehensive understanding of NGOs' activities. I had time to learn about variations in practices and experiences, and was able to identify obstacles by following the progress of some research projects. This prolonged engagement provides more information than much existing comparative research on NGO research, which as described Chapter 1, sometimes relies on one interview per NGO or website material. However, six weeks is not long to understand an organisation. The diversity of their activities and experiences, many layers of processes at work, and limitations in research relationships mean my understanding is inevitably partial.

Important aspects of reflexivity involved considering how my personal experience and background affected my interpretations and my relationships with research participants. I used the research diary to reflect on both aspects. As indicated in 2.1.2, a realist position involves recognising that researchers are not neutral and objective, instead considering how personal values and relationships affect the generation and interpretation of data (Maxwell, 2012). Attention to my interpretations and personal bias was particularly important given my previous work as a policy advisor and researcher within NGOs. My familiarity with NGO language and settings may have meant there were aspects I took for granted and so failed to notice or question in the way another outsider might. One aspect that helped counter this risk was that I spent the first months of fieldwork primarily with Malawian NGOs. Although this was not a planned strategy, starting fieldwork in the more alien setting made me more conscious of conditions within the more familiar INGO contexts. I also sought to manage preconceptions by challenging assumptions during analysis. This involved processes noted in 2.4.2 such as seeking negative cases, and discussion with colleagues to provide alternative viewpoints. Discussion with critical colleagues and supervisors was particularly important to avoid respect for the NGOs' aims and staff clouding judgement on the effectiveness of their research approach. As recognised by others researching NGOs, it can be hard to critique organisations when you sympathise with their goals

(Lashaw, 2012). Considerable critical reflection among many NGO interviewees also helped to counter this risk. While my personal experience working in NGOs brought potential disadvantages, it also brought insights that contributed to the research. For example, it highlighted gaps in existing literature and provided an additional source of evidence to help think through emerging theories.

My previous work in NGOs may also have affected reactions to me from research participants. It may have facilitated access and contributed to rapport. A more significant influence on reactions from research participants was probably my status as a visitor from a high-income country. Many people from Europe who visit Malawian NGOs are developing funding proposals, collecting success stories or conducting monitoring and evaluation (M&E) visits. This may have skewed perceptions of me and expectations of the type of information I wanted. I may have been seen as a possible source of funding, or, as noted in relation to access, as the author of a flattering case study about their work. I may also have been seen as a threat, seeking to uncover ineffective practice. I sought to counter such expectations by emphasising that my research was neither evaluation nor publicity, that I was interested in understanding what was happening and why, rather than judging, and that, to help support NGOs' research, it was important to know about difficulties and constraints as well as successes. These points were made during initial meetings with each NGO, introductions to interviews and ongoing conversations with NGO staff. I also emphasised that the NGOs' names would only be included in study reports if the directors felt this was appropriate when they saw the findings. As indicated above, prolonged engagement also helped to build trust and overcome some initial assumptions about my role.

These strategies of triangulation, prolonged involvement and reflexivity, together with steps discussed elsewhere in this chapter, help to strengthen the research.

2.6 Ethical research

Key ethical issues for this research involved confidentiality, informed consent, and reciprocity. The study was approved by the University of Leeds ethics committee in the UK (reference number HSLTLM/11/004), and by the National Commission for Science and Technology (RTT/2/20) and Centre for Social Research (CSR/11/11/05) in Malawi. Given the flexible nature of qualitative research and the unpredictability of fieldwork, ethical issues could not be fully predicted in advance (ASA, 2011). Consequently, it

was important to reflect on and respond to ethical considerations throughout the research.

While I considered ethical issues in detail before the fieldwork and worried about them at length during data collection and analysis, research participants were much less concerned. Perhaps because my research topics were not regarded as sensitive, participants were largely uninterested in information sheets or processes for confidentiality. Their relaxed approach might also have reflected their own confidence and familiarity with research; there were some suggestions that procedures such as consent forms were more relevant for work with vulnerable groups or for those with no understanding of research processes and their implications. This points to the complicated power relations involved in research with elites (Cochrane, 1998; Busby, 2011). The majority of interviewees were in fairly senior positions, older (significant in a culture that respects age), and used to meeting people from outside their organisation. They perhaps felt more in control of the situation than an inexperienced research student, so the relationship was not simply that of a powerful researcher and a vulnerable interviewee. Power relations were also affected by my dependence on individuals for their time and on the goodwill of the NGOs for ongoing access, a dependence that means “interviewers are frequently in the position of supplicant” (Cochrane, 1998 p.2124). Despite participants’ confidence, however, there were risks to individuals and the case organisations, and I sought to address these through the strategies discussed below.

2.6.1 Protecting confidentiality

Organisational confidentiality

In decisions about organisational confidentiality, I have considered the risks and benefits of naming the case NGOs, the wishes of NGO managers and the feasibility of confidentiality. I was aware that NGO directors may feel organisational confidentiality was unnecessary, and indeed, may wish to see their research experience publicised. Using pseudonyms can conflict with acknowledging participants’ input and may deny them a valued opportunity for profile (Guenther, 2009). I was also aware that an expectation that the NGO will be named in reports could influence responses and reduce openness (Boddy et al., 2010). Further, the potential implications of naming may not be fully apparent to participants (Guenther, 2009). NGO staff might not have recognised the risks, particularly in advance of data collection and report writing. Seeking to balance these issues, in introductory meetings with each NGO, I emphasised that I was interested in challenges as well as what was working, and

suggested we decide on confidentiality once preliminary findings were available.

During the analysis, I decided not to use the NGOs' real names, instead using the pseudonyms Chalk, Marl, Clay and Flint. This was partly because naming the NGOs would need clear and informed agreement from NGO managers. Although two NGOs said they were happy to be named, two were uncertain about this. It seemed inconsistent to name some but not others. Further, without more understanding of the findings, I felt NGO managers were not in a position to assess the risks, particularly given the challenges with respondent validation discussed in 2.4.3. A good organisational image is critical in a sector that relies on its reputation with the public and development agencies for funds, and with the government for influence and permission to operate. While this study has identified examples of promising practice that could enhance the reputation of the case organisations, it also points to difficulties that may be at odds with the NGOs' public profiles, and that could be interpreted critically. Informed agreement on use of names would need face to face discussion and more awareness of the thesis content among NGO staff. In addition, I feel naming the NGOs would not significantly benefit either the organisations or the thesis analysis. However, using pseudonyms does not guarantee confidentiality. Development NGO networks are often closely-knit, perhaps more so in a small country like Malawi. This creates challenges for confidentiality. Even if pseudonyms are used, organisations may be identified by other people, yet removing further identifying features (such as activities and mission) can reduce analytic rigour (Guenther, 2009). I have sought to balance the need for contextual understanding with confidentiality by removing details that would easily identify an organisation and using more generic categories. For example, giving the details of a research project would often make the NGO traceable online. Consequently, I have described research projects in generic terms when information about this research is available on the internet. This means some loss of detail. Similar considerations apply in quoting from organisational documents, given the risk that organisational identity could be traced by finding documents via search engines. To avoid this, with documents that are on the internet, I have either not used quotes, only quoted short phrases that are commonly used, or slightly changed quotations to make them less traceable. In deciding whether and how to quote documents and describe research projects, I drew on guidance from discussions of social media research about testing traceability (Beninger et al., 2014), using Google to check different descriptions and phrases. Where words have been changed in quotes from documents or interviews, this is indicated by putting the replacements in square brackets.

Individual confidentiality

Confidentiality of individual participants was important to avoid creating tension within NGOs and to promote openness. I have not mentioned individual names within the thesis, and I did not reveal what I had been told by individual participants when discussing the research within case organisations. As previously noted, the majority of interviews were conducted in private offices. However, similar difficulties to those for organisational confidentiality apply at individual level. The study looked at relatively small organisations in a tightly networked field. Even without providing names, participants within each NGO may recognise each other in reports of the findings, and people in other organisations may also be able to guess at individual identities (Langley & Royer, 2006; Guenther, 2009; Boddy et al., 2010). Changing names and minor identifying characteristics may not guarantee individual anonymity. However, as with organisational confidentiality, removing further identifying features can hinder analysis (Guenther, 2009). These risks were included in study information sheets and discussed with participants at the start of interviews. In using quotes, I have given the participant's organisational role, because this is often critical for the analysis. However, I have used more generic job descriptions (for example, programme advisor rather than HIV advisor, and programme manager rather than HIV programme manager). This increases confidentiality for some participants, particularly those at more junior levels, but does not protect staff where there is only one individual in a category, such as the director and research manager.

Focus group discussions brought further challenges for internal confidentiality. Participants share views with each other, and may also share information from the discussions beyond the group (Boddy et al., 2010). I asked participants to respect each other's confidentiality at the start of the discussions, and did not mention individual names in reports from the meetings that were shared with participants.

Data security

Securing data contributed to both organisational and individual confidentiality. Several steps were taken to safeguard data:

- Relying primarily on secure university personal file space to store files.
- Password protecting sensitive files when using laptops and removable storage devices.
- Using an encrypted memory stick and laptop drive for audio files that could not be password protected.
- Keeping hard copies of sensitive material (such as field notes) and organisational

documents in a locked case during fieldwork, and in a locked filing cabinet in the UK.

2.6.2 Informed consent

Informed consent applied to each NGO as an organisation and to individual research participants, discussed in turn below.

Organisational consent

Organisational involvement in the study was discussed through introductory meetings with the core case NGOs, involving the director and other staff that they identified (for example, the research manager). These discussions covered the purpose of the research, proposed methods, requested input, use of the data, potential risks and benefits, and processes for confidentiality, as well as any questions and concerns from NGO staff. I offered all the NGOs time to consider involvement.

This process differed with Marl because, as previously explained, I originally anticipated that they would be a peripheral case. The consent process was lighter with the peripheral NGOs, as an introductory meeting to discuss access for one or two interviews would have been inefficient use of their time. Instead, I emailed information about the study to the NGO directors so that they could decide whether they would be willing to meet for an interview (or to suggest other staff I should meet). I discussed processes for confidentiality and the nature of the research when we met, before interviews commenced. When I realised Marl would be a more significant case study, I provided further information to the director and met him to explain the research in more detail.

Individual consent

Individual participants were informed of similar aspects to those covered in the introductory meetings with NGOs (research purpose, requested input, data use, risks and benefits, processes for confidentiality, and options for withdrawal). In most cases, this information was provided in writing through an information sheet emailed to participants a few days in advance of interviews or focus groups. However, this was sometimes impractical, for example when interviews were organised without sufficient advance notice, or when informal discussions developed into more substantive interviews. Either way, given that some participants might not find time to read the information sheet, I talked through the main points before interviews commenced and asked whether participants had questions and were happy to proceed. While some

people did read and comment on the information sheets, face-to-face discussion seemed a more helpful approach, especially where I was in frequent contact with interviewees (ASA, 2011). I checked willingness to continue during interviews, especially recognising participants' time constraints.

I planned to use signed consent forms, but decided against this at an early stage in the fieldwork. Written procedures can be uncomfortable for participants, affecting rapport and hence data quality (ASA, 2011; Ritchie et al., 2013 p.92). In addition, when I discussed consent forms with research participants, they regarded them as added bureaucracy that did little to protect participants and had more value for the researcher (a perception shared by some researchers (Ritchie et al., 2013 p.92)). Signed forms were also unfeasible given numerous informal conversations. Where qualitative research involves such ongoing interaction with participants, consent is an open-ended process (ASA, 2011). Building open communication with potential participants and ensuring they had space to ask questions or withdraw seemed a more valid approach.

There are challenges to the voluntary nature of consent within organisational research. In particular, there is a risk that NGO managers may put pressure on staff at lower levels to participate (Boddy et al. 2010). To mitigate this, where possible I approached potential participants myself rather than via managers, and emphasised to each individual that they did not have to participate.

Consent proved more complicated in some elite interviews, particularly with some senior NGO staff, government officials and donors. Although these participants were aware of the purpose of our conversation, I found they began giving their views before I could talk through ethical processes and confidentiality (an issue noted by Boddy et al., 2010). Although this is a challenge for consent, these individuals were used to speaking on the record, and the information they shared was not private or sensitive.

Consent was needed for observation as well as interviews. Establishing consent from all participants in advance of observation can be difficult, and permission may initially need to be obtained from those in charge of particular activities (ASA 2011). Where I attended NGO meetings, I asked permission from (or was invited by) the person chairing the meeting. They introduced me at the start of meetings so that other participants knew I was there as a researcher.

2.6.3 Reciprocity

Each NGO gave considerable time to help the research, and I sought to reciprocate through several channels. Reciprocity is particularly important in research in developing countries, as a way to counter some of the inequalities involved in North-South research relationships (Developing Areas Research Group, 2003). With the core case NGOs, I discussed what they would find of interest from the study and how else I might repay their help. The approach then varied between the NGOs, depending on their priorities. This engagement with the NGOs could be seen by some as affecting neutrality. In line with the realist emphasis on considering the effects of personal relationships and reactions rather than seeking objectivity, I felt the ethics of reciprocity outweighed any concerns to remain more distant from the NGOs' activities.

Some aspects related directly to my research. One approach was providing feedback from the research findings. As discussed in 2.4.3, some NGOs wanted feedback on aspects of their own practice and I provided reports on requested issues. I have also shared summaries of the thesis findings, though as previously discussed, this has so far been limited by reliance on email. The research process also had benefits for some individual participants, with some saying they found group discussions or interviews a useful opportunity for reflection.

Beyond potential benefits directly associated with my research, I tried to reciprocate through support in other areas. In introductory meetings, I emphasised that I was happy to help with ongoing research or other activities during my time with the NGO. Each organisation had different requests, and I tried to accommodate these. For example, Chalk and Flint wanted support with research capacity, and after discussing what would be appropriate, I facilitated a training workshop in Chalk and provided guidance on literature reviews and abstracts in Flint. In Clay, I helped a strategic planning process by conducting interviews and focus groups with staff, trustees and external stakeholders. (These discussions also provided information for the thesis, and I sought advance permission to use the information from the director and individual participants.) With these three NGOs, I was also able to suggest funding sources, guidance manuals and contacts who could assist their research or other work. Scope for this type of support in Marl was limited by timing. In addition, their extensive capacity meant there was little need for any support I could provide.

As well as providing support, I sought to minimise inconvenience for research participants. For example, to respect their time, I used ongoing reflection on data needs

to keep discussions focused on essential information, arranged interviews at times and places that suited participants, and shortened interviews to fit time available.

As clear from the discussions above, the nature of this research has created ethical challenges. I hope these different strategies have provided protection and support for individual participants and the case NGOs. I anticipate that research ethics will be an ongoing process, considered during further dissemination of the research findings and feedback to NGO staff.

2.7 Conclusion

This chapter has set out my research approach, explaining the choice of a qualitative case study design and methods within this, and challenges along the way. Overall, I see the main strengths as the comparative design, encompassing NGOs with contrasting organisational contexts and research approaches, and the extended engagement with the main cases. These approaches enhance the thesis' contribution to our understanding of relationships between research, service delivery and advocacy by helping address some of the gaps identified in relation to existing literature. In particular, they allow more detailed understanding of the way service delivery and advocacy feed into research, and provide insight into variation within and between different organisations, including national NGOs. I have also discussed constraints and limitations in generating and analysing data. Perhaps the most significant is limited scope to refine explanations and refute or confirm findings through discussion with research participants. Some challenges were unavoidable practical difficulties, while others reflected my developing experience as a researcher.

The remaining chapters present and discuss the findings produced through these methods, starting with brief background information on the four core NGO cases.

3 Introducing the case study NGOs

This chapter introduces the four NGOs that form the main organisations cases, to provide descriptive context as background for later analysis. I discuss each NGO in turn, describing their funding, structure and activities, and outlining their research approach. As noted in the previous chapter on research methods, I use generic job titles. Programme manager indicates a more senior position to project manager, and some NGOs have a programme director above the programme manager. To further support confidentiality, I give approximate rather than exact figures for aspects such as size and income.

3.1 Marl

Marl is a very large international NGO. It comprises several constituent member associations, with headquarters in different high-income countries. Marl work in countries across Africa, Asia and Latin America, and they have worked in Malawi since the mid-1980s.

Funding

Global expenditure is several hundred million dollars, with well over \$10 million spent in Malawi each year. This funding is raised by and transferred from the international headquarters. The majority of funding (over 80%) comes from public donations rather than donor grants allocated to specific activities. This gives Marl far more flexible core funding than the other case NGOs.

Structure

The Malawi programme reports to the regional and international headquarters. These offices provide technical support and approve plans and budgets.

Within Malawi, Marl have several hundred staff. Most work in the district where the majority of service delivery takes place, including the district and programme managers. Overall coordination is provided by the programme and country directors, who work from the headquarters in one of Malawi's main cities. There is a full-time advocacy officer.

Research is overseen by the programme director. Marl have two full-time research staff (a research officer and coordinator). Both previously worked in Northern universities and they have significant research experience. Additional research staff are recruited to

assist with specific projects. The research staff provide input to M&E, but there are M&E staff to lead on this work.

Activities

Marl's work involves medical service provision, focusing on HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment. This includes activities to strengthen health services at community, primary and secondary levels through direct service provision, training health workers, providing technical support and equipment, and working with community groups.

Advocacy involves participation in national working groups that bring together government and other development actors, direct contact with policy makers, and some work with civil society coalitions.

Marl are working towards leaving the district where most service delivery takes place, handing over activities to government. To enable this, service delivery is increasingly integrated within government structures and takes place largely through government health facilities.

Approach to research

Research has been a growing focus in Marl, internationally and within Malawi. There is an international research policy and the headquarters research team has published articles emphasising the importance of research for NGOs. The Malawi office has been involved in research for over a decade, but a research coordinator was recruited in 2010 to increase research quantity and quality. Despite this attention to research, the organisational priorities remain service delivery and advocacy. These activities have far higher profile on the website and in organisational reports. The prioritisation of service delivery was indicated by the programme director. She stressed that when considering potential research, Marl ensure "the objectives of the programme are respected" and noted that they should not "jump into a lot of operational research. It's not good for us to do that". The role for research is supporting Marl's service delivery and advocacy: the research policy and staff in Malawi stress that all research should have immediate relevance, providing "direct feedback into our programme activities" [research coordinator]. Although research is valued, it is a secondary priority that must help, and not detract from, their other work.

Research is discussed as "operational research" and primarily involves learning from service delivery activities. Larger studies tend to be prospective research to examine new interventions. These rely mainly on quantitative methods and often last two to

three years. There are also shorter pieces of retrospective research that assess existing interventions, usually taking a few months and often using quantitative and qualitative techniques. Most studies are undertaken by the research officer and coordinator, with support from other staff. This operational research is designed to support service delivery, advocacy or both. In addition to operational research, Marl sometimes conduct quick studies to collect information for specific advocacy goals, for example a rapid survey of capacity among health worker training institutions.

Summarising, Marl is a large international NGO with experienced research staff and flexible funding. Their research focuses on examining service delivery interventions.

3.2 Chalk

Chalk is a medium sized international NGO that works in several countries. Malawi is Chalk's largest programme, and they have worked there since the late 1980s.

Funding

International income is over \$20 million, and expenditure in Malawi is over \$10 million. Almost 90% of the international income is restricted, that is, tied to specific activities. Most grants for the Malawi programme come from bilateral or multilateral donors, including some large grants of five to six years. However, there is sufficient core funding to provide some stability and flexibility. For example, Chalk Malawi can afford to provide all staff with a grant for further education or training.

Structure

Chalk is fairly decentralised, internationally and within Malawi. There is a UK office, but it is regarded as having a support function rather than as a headquarters. Staff in both the UK and Malawi said decisions are made in Malawi, partly because most funding is raised by the Malawi team rather than being passed on from the UK.

Chalk Malawi has a few hundred staff. The majority are based in district offices, working directly on project activities. Project managers are supervised by programme managers, who report to the country director. There were no advocacy staff at the time of fieldwork. Several staff have a master's level qualification and many have a bachelor's degree.

Research is led by a team in the country headquarters that I call the Technical Support Unit. This team also leads on M&E and advises project staff on cross-cutting issues such as gender and HIV. The head of this unit is the research manager. He oversees most Chalk research but also manages the team's other activities. The four other team members are sometimes involved in research and lead some studies.

Activities

Chalk work in several sectors, including water and sanitation, food security, gender, HIV, malaria, livelihoods, and microfinance. Examples of specific service delivery activities include constructing latrines, distributing mosquito nets, promoting fuel-efficient cookstoves, and supporting production of new crop varieties to enhance nutrition. These services are largely delivered directly by Chalk rather than through funding partner organisations. However, Chalk also support other service providers, for example training local volunteers, funding local government planning exercises, and supporting local health workers and government extension workers.

Advocacy is a newer area for Chalk and less prominent than service delivery in the organisational strategy. National advocacy includes participation in NGO networks and working groups with government and other development agencies. District advocacy includes supporting communities to present their concerns to policy makers and discussion with local government.

Partnership is a key principle, applying to both service delivery and advocacy. This includes an emphasis on working to support government, and Chalk's strategy emphasises alignment with government plans. Programmes are often run in collaboration with district government, and sometimes in consortia with other NGOs.

Approach to research

Chalk have been involved in research for at least two decades, but this has become a growing focus in recent years. Research is included in Chalk Malawi's country strategy. As in Marl, however, research is a secondary concern. The research manager emphasised that "research is a very small part of what we do" and suggested that "if there was no funding for research tomorrow, people probably wouldn't notice". Service delivery and advocacy take priority; research should directly support these activities and not impede them. This is seen in Chalk's criteria for accepting partnership with external researchers: any proposed research must fit Chalk's aims, the researcher must demonstrate the potential use for people on the ground, and the research must not detract from "core programmatic work" [research manager]. There is as yet no

organisational research strategy, though there are plans to develop a policy outlining research aims and approaches.

Chalk undertake four main types of research. The first type involves research done as part of a large, six-year service delivery project that I refer to as the District Development Project. Funded by a bilateral donor, this project involves service delivery and some advocacy in two districts. The project grant includes funding for two pieces of research a year. Studies typically examine existing interventions or approaches, including programmes by Chalk and other actors. There is a particular focus on social and cultural aspects that affect implementation (for example, community attitudes towards agricultural schemes or energy technologies). The research is largely qualitative but sometimes uses mixed methods. It is led by the research manager, and usually undertaken by consultants. This research aims to inform Chalk's own work and that of other development agencies and government. The second type of research involves studies undertaken in partnership with research organisations such as European universities, and often initiated by these external partners. This research sometimes involves field testing, for example assessing new technologies or crop varieties, and sometimes assesses existing service delivery activities to understand their effects. The third type is research undertaken within specific projects to inform immediate plans. This particularly includes situation analyses and studies about community attitudes and practices towards issues such as HIV and gender. This research often combines surveys, interviews and focus groups. It is sometimes undertaken by consultants, but increasingly by Chalk staff (particularly members of the Technical Support Unit). Finally, research is occasionally done to provide information for specific pieces of advocacy. One example is a quick review of condom supply in Chalk programme districts to provide evidence for advocacy on this issue by a civil society network.

In summary, Chalk is a medium sized NGO with some dedicated staff time for research and some financial flexibility. They undertake several kinds of research, particularly studies that examine service delivery interventions or provide information on local conditions for project planning, and occasional information collection for advocacy.

3.3 Flint

Flint is a Malawian NGO established in the late 1990s. Since then, it has grown to be

one of the larger Malawian NGOs and it is now well known with a high profile director.

Funding

Flint's annual budget is over \$1 million. Almost all this income comes as grants for specific project activities, largely through INGOs but also from bilateral or multilateral donors and commercial companies. Grant length varies from one to five years. Although the larger grants provide some stability, the search for new funding is a constant concern.

Structure

Flint have around 70 staff, most based in district offices. Daily service delivery activities are largely managed by district teams, but Flint have some national projects that are run from the headquarters. District managers report to programme managers, who in turn report to the executive director. There is an advocacy officer, but he also works on service delivery and other staff also undertake advocacy. Most staff have high school education, but those in senior positions generally have a diploma, bachelor's or master's degree.

Flint talk of a 'research department' but this remains largely aspirational and there are no research staff. The director is officially responsible for research, but studies are often led by other staff. There were no M&E staff at the time of fieldwork, which is significant because M&E staff often provide support for research in NGOs with limited resources. A small number of staff have attended research training courses of a few days to a week, and at least two headquarters staff have been involved in university research.

Activities

Flint work in three overlapping areas: supporting young people, issues affecting women and children, and governance. Many projects focus on HIV and sexual and reproductive health, but Flint also work in areas such as child abuse, income generation and domestic violence. Specific service delivery activities include training community members to advise others on sexual health, providing counselling and advice for young people, and raising community awareness about issues such as child labour. Activities are implemented directly by Flint staff with communities rather than through funding another NGO or supporting government workers.

Advocacy is an important part of Flint's work. Nationally, Flint participate in civil society networks and undertake advocacy alone, for example through media work or meetings

with policy makers. At district and local levels, Flint support advocacy by community members and intervene in individual cases (for example, appealing to decision makers on a child's behalf).

Approach to research

Research is a new focus for Flint. Although they have been involved in research in the past, they are keen to increase this engagement. Reflecting this, research was added to the organisational mission in 2011 and included in the new strategic plan. However, as in Chalk and Marl, research is a secondary priority that only has value to support service delivery or advocacy. As emphasised by the director, "it's not just a research for the sake of doing a research, it's not an academic research. It is a research that has to inform our programming".

Flint undertake different kinds of research. As in Chalk, there are situation analyses within specific service delivery projects. Flint have also done broader situation analyses and needs assessments outside specific projects, designed to inform future service delivery. Other research provides information for advocacy. This includes studies undertaken as part of advocacy projects based on monitoring government services, and occasional quick research for particular advocacy goals.

Research often combines surveys, interviews and focus groups. Studies are usually led and undertaken by Flint staff, but sometimes consultants or research institutions have provided support.

In summary, Flint is a Malawian NGO with little financial flexibility and no dedicated staff time for research. They undertake several kinds of research, particularly situation analyses to provide information for service delivery and studies that monitor government programmes as part of advocacy projects.

3.4 Clay

Clay was established as a Malawian NGO in the late 1990s. The NGO originated from a programme led by an international organisation that ran during the 1990s.

Funding

Clay have an annual income of around \$2 million. This funding comes almost entirely

from grants for specific projects, mostly through INGOs but some directly from bilateral and multilateral donors. As staff at all levels are highly aware, this funding structure has implications for organisational survival and staffing: “This is a project based organisation. We don’t have projects, people will lose their jobs” [manager]. Funding is increasingly hard to secure, partly due to the global recession. While Clay have some larger grants of around five years, others last only one year and are too small to cover Clay’s costs. Several staff have left and some posts have not been replaced due to lack of funding. Despite these difficulties, Clay have a good reputation with several large donors and still secure sizeable contracts.

Structure

Clay have approximately 30 staff. Most are based in the headquarters, but there are a few small district offices (some with just one project officer). The programme team is headed by a programme director, who reports to the executive director. Below that are two managers, one who leads on research and M&E, and one for training and communications. There are around ten project officers, but this changes with the number of ongoing projects. Clay also has an M&E officer. Most staff have a bachelor’s degree and some have a master’s. The research manager and several other senior staff have significant experience with the kind of research undertaken by Clay, having studied this approach at university and worked with Clay for over a decade.

Activities

Clay’s focus is community mobilisation rather than a particular sector. They work in several areas, including women’s rights, HIV prevention, child labour and girls’ education.

In contrast to the other case NGOs, research is a core part of the programme approach and has been since Clay was founded. A formally documented programme model encompassing research was developed through the programme that led to Clay’s establishment. This model still guides projects today, though it is an ideal and the approach varies between projects. The process starts with a form of participant observation research, undertaken by a group of research assistants who are trained in Clay’s approach. This group stay in a village within the project area for one to two weeks, during which time they learn about attitudes and practices affecting the project issue (for example, HIV prevention). The group then develop a play based on their findings. This is performed in the village and attended by residents and people from surrounding areas. During the play, the audience are asked to give their opinions and an action plan is then developed through audience discussion. Decision makers from

the community and local government are invited to attend the performance, and asked to respond to relevant issues raised in the discussions.

Clay follow this research and drama with further activities designed to support community mobilisation. For service delivery, Clay traditionally work through government structures, training government extension workers to support communities on issues related to the project. They also provide training and awareness for individuals and community groups such as school management committees. In terms of advocacy, some projects support community members to influence local government or other policy makers. Clay also undertake national advocacy through government meetings and participation in NGO networks.

Approach to research

As described above, research is central to Clay's work. This research aims both to provide information for later project activities, and to stimulate action by raising awareness and providing a basis for discussion. This dual purpose was described by the programme director, who explained that their research:

“is done for two major reasons. The first one is to get deep-rooted causes of different social issues. [...] And we believe that by doing that we would be able to tailor make our strategies and deliver them appropriately. Secondly it's done to sensitise and mobilise. So at the end of the [process] we envisage community action planning. In Clay, we cannot do [this research] without achieving those two.”

The link to promoting action is integral to the research. Development of the action plan is considered “a must”: “once you do that, you know you have achieved. There's no way that you can carry out [this process] without producing a plan” [research manager]. As in the other case NGOs, the value of research is providing a basis for service delivery and advocacy.

Beyond the research linked to community drama, most of Clay's research involves situation analyses or baseline studies, conducted when projects begin in order to guide activities and provide indicators for later evaluation. This research usually involves surveys and sometimes interviews or focus groups in project areas. It is usually designed by Clay and undertaken with support from externally recruited research assistants, though sometimes this research is led by donors.

In summary, Clay is a Malawian NGO with little financial flexibility and some dedicated staff time for research. Research is a core part of their programme model and involves a process of participant observation combined with community drama and discussion.

3.5 Conclusion

The descriptions above indicate areas of similarity and difference between the case NGOs. The implications of these organisational contexts are discussed throughout the thesis. Three aspects to highlight at this stage are the prioritisation of research, different organisational approaches to research and varied capacities.

On the first of these, the discussion indicates the secondary place of research within each NGO. For the case NGOs, research has value as a support for service delivery or advocacy, not as an end in itself. Staff across the organisations stress that research should have immediate practical implications, informing either their own service delivery or the work of others through advocacy. Indeed, there is a concern that research should not exceed this support role, only being justified when it is expected to support service delivery or advocacy, and further, not to obstruct these activities. This secondary place of research matches descriptions from other NGOs (Edwards, 1994b; Mannan, 2006; CORE Group, 2008). As will be seen in later chapters, this prioritisation affects research processes, particularly use of service delivery for research.

The descriptions also show that NGOs are interested in different kinds of research. Their different approaches are summarised in the table below. This is not a rigid classification; there are overlaps between categories and variations within them. It also focuses on the broad research approach and aim, and studies vary in other aspects such as methods and who undertakes the research. However, the table serves to indicate that case NGOs emphasise different kinds of research. These types of research are sometimes associated with particular research paradigms. For example, Clay's participant observation is based on ideas of participatory action research, and some of Marl's research on service delivery interventions follows a quantitative and broadly positivist philosophy. However, approaches vary and there are not consistent links between methodological paradigms, types of research and each NGO. For example, some of Clay's baseline studies follow quantitative approaches, and Marl has undertaken qualitative studies that draw on participatory research traditions.

Table 1: Types of research in the case NGOs

Type of research	NGOs that undertake this type of research
Situation analyses, baseline studies or needs assessments (within projects or broader)	Chalk, Flint, Clay
Research on service delivery interventions and approaches (examining effectiveness or social and cultural factors that affect results)	Marl, Chalk
Research to monitor government services	Flint
Quick research for specific advocacy goals	Marl, Chalk, Flint
Participant observation and community drama	Clay

Finally, the cases indicate diversity in organisational capacity for research. Marl is the largest of the case NGOs, with a flexible international budget and experienced research staff. Chalk have some financial stability but less flexible core funding and less dedicated staff time for research. Flint and Clay both depend almost entirely on grants tied to specific project activities, and their financial situation is more precarious. Flint have no research staff, but Clay have dedicated time for research and substantial experience of their research approach.

The diversity in research approaches, capacities and broader organisational contexts affects relationships between service delivery, advocacy and research. Diversity among NGOs is increasingly highlighted within the NGO literature (Lewis & Opoku-Mensah, 2006). However, as suggested in Chapter 1, this diversity receives little explicit attention from those emphasising NGOs' contribution to research. As the following chapters explain, different research aims and organisational contexts bring different ideas about how research should draw on service delivery and advocacy, and varied scope to make these connections.

4 Identifying research questions: the role of service delivery in NGO research agendas

This chapter examines the role of service delivery as a source of research questions. I consider whether NGOs' research agendas come from their service delivery experience, and whether a basis in service delivery leads to relevant research. As described in Chapter 1, the idea that NGOs can identify relevant research questions through their service delivery is found in academic articles and research strategies. This role of service delivery as a source of research questions is seen as a benefit for NGOs, and as a reason for academics to work with NGOs. Similar ideas are found in discussions about effective research beyond NGOs. In particular, the international health literature includes calls to involve service delivery practitioners in defining research agendas and recommendations for "demand-driven research" (WHO, 2012b p.3).

These discussions include four claims and assumptions, made to varying degrees by different authors and sometimes implicit. First, research questions are relevant, and only relevant, when generated through service delivery. Second, those involved in service delivery can identify research questions. Third, NGOs can use these questions as a basis for their research agendas. Fourth, questions generated through service delivery lead to relevant findings. Experience from the case NGOs challenges these assumed relationships between service delivery, research agendas and relevance. Examining their approaches suggests that a research agenda generated through service delivery does not fully match NGOs' aspirations or abilities, and does not guarantee relevance.

I explain this through four sections, each focusing primarily on one of the four assumptions. I start by examining the link between a basis in service delivery and the perceived relevance of research questions. I consider whether NGOs want to use their service delivery as a basis for research agendas, reviewing their formal research models, criteria for useful research and interest in additional sources of ideas (4.1). The next two sections consider potential obstacles to developing research agendas through service delivery experience. In 4.2, I discuss whether involvement in service delivery does prompt research questions, by examining identification of potential topics among service delivery staff. I then examine NGOs' ability to pursue their preferred research agenda, considering the influence of donors, headquarters offices and available budgets (4.3). Finally, I examine whether questions that come from service delivery

produce relevant research findings, identifying other aspects that affect perceptions of relevance (4.4).

4.1 Selecting research topics: considering more than service delivery experience

In this section, I consider whether NGOs want to rely on their service delivery experience when identifying research topics. As indicated above and in Chapter 1, some recommendations on NGO research suggest questions must be generated through service delivery experience for research to be relevant (e.g. Zachariah et al., 2010). The case NGOs' experiences suggest this addresses only one aspect that NGOs consider when identifying research priorities and may be too restrictive. Rather than just considering their service delivery experience, their views on useful research topics include other criteria and other sources of research ideas. The result is that topics identified from service delivery are sometimes seen as irrelevant, while topics that do not come from service delivery are sometimes considered relevant.

I first briefly review the NGOs' overall organisational interest in using service delivery as a source of research topics (4.1.1). I then examine their selection of topics in more detail, looking at two aspects that mean NGOs' ideas about useful research consider more than whether questions come from service delivery. First, when research ideas are developed within NGOs, selection of topics involves other criteria, not just whether the issue comes from service delivery (4.1.2). Second, NGOs may welcome research ideas that come from external organisations rather than their own service delivery (4.1.3).

4.1.1 Varied interest in generating questions from service delivery

Interest in using service delivery as a source of research questions varies between NGOs and with different kinds of research. In this section, I outline this variation in relation to NGOs' formal or dominant understandings of research, to show how aims vary even at this overarching organisational level.

Among the case NGOs, attention to generating research questions through service delivery ranges from seeing this as central to their approach, to organisational models that do not mention the source of research topics. The former applies in Marl and Flint. Marl staff emphasise that research questions are based on service delivery experience, coming "from the field" [research coordinator]. Their international research policy also recommends that questions are generated from service delivery experience. Flint does

not have a formal research strategy, but senior managers suggested that research topics should be identified through service delivery activities. For example, the director explained that “as we are doing the work, things will be emerging”. Similarly, a programme manager suggested that “when we provide services to people, we are able to come across emerging issues that can inform us that maybe there is a need for us to conduct research in this area”. In contrast, Chalk have no fixed position on the preferred source of research questions: the research manager humbly described selection of topics as “quite arbitrary”. Clay have a clear research model, but this does not include using service delivery as a source of research questions.

Clay’s lack of interest in generating questions from service delivery points to the importance of NGOs’ research aims and approaches for the relevance of service delivery as a source of research topics. Clay’s source of research questions reflects the kind of research they do: their participant observation research and situation analyses are undertaken as part of specific projects, and research topics come directly from project plans. If Clay have a project on child labour, for example, the research aim is understanding community views on child labour. There is no discussion about possible research topics. While clearest in Clay because this affects all their research, this also applies to some research in the other NGOs. For example, Chalk and Flint also conduct situation analyses where topics are determined by the project focus. Another kind of research where service delivery may not be considered as a source of research questions involves research to support advocacy. As indicated in Chapter 3, Flint, Marl and Chalk sometimes undertake short pieces of research for specific advocacy goals. Although topics for some of this advocacy research are generated from service delivery, for others, research questions are identified through advocacy networks or issues seen in the wider policy environment. For example, the Marl survey of medical training institutes noted in Chapter 3 was prompted by proposed government cuts in funding for healthcare training. Both advocacy goals and project plans may reflect service delivery experience, but with these kinds of research, questions come from other sources (involvement in advocacy or project plans), not directly through service delivery experience in the way suggested by some literature and NGO staff.

This overview suggests using service delivery as a source of research questions does not always fit NGOs’ research approach. Sometimes, as in Clay, identifying questions through service delivery has no place in the organisational research model. Even when NGOs’ official approach suggests questions come from service delivery, this may only be their strategy for some research and they may also use other sources of ideas, as suggested by the project and advocacy research in Flint and Marl. Indeed, while I

focused here on official, overarching ideas about the source of research questions, the practice is unsurprisingly different. As explained in the remainder of this chapter, NGOs' more detailed ideas about useful research topics are more complex and variable, and they cannot always follow the research agendas they want. I consider the first part of this in the rest of 4.1, by looking at NGOs' decisions around research priorities.

4.1.2 Examining multiple criteria when selecting topics

NGOs' ideas about useful research topics involve multiple aspects, not just whether questions come from service delivery experience. The multiplicity of criteria is evident in comments from the Marl research coordinator describing annual research planning discussions:

“We're thinking about all the different policies that are being done in the country and what we're seeing in the hospital and what the published research has found and trying to come up with what we think makes sense for research in this setting and is in line with Marl's philosophy.”

Service delivery experience is one source of ideas, as indicated by the reference to issues seen in the hospital. However, her comments show that research prioritisation also considers whether topics are appropriate for Marl and the context, existing research and wider policy discussions. These three aspects are also part of Chalk's decisions, and they are discussed in turn below.

First, the topic should be appropriate for the NGO's role and an area where they add value. Chalk feel they can contribute more to understanding social and cultural aspects of development than technical issues. Following this principle, a study on an agricultural technology examined cultural factors that affect implementation rather than technical features. Similarly, research on malaria was dismissed because the research manager felt the university was better placed to pursue medical topics. Marl also define their role in contrast to universities. As indicated in the international research policy and by the research coordinator in Malawi, they see their research niche as examining interventions in practice, with clinical trials better run by universities. This concern for topics to fit perceived organisational strengths and contributions means some questions arising through service delivery may be considered unsuitable topics.

Second, the topic should not be covered by existing research, including academic work and data such as government statistics. In both Marl and Chalk, research staff review current literature to check whether proposed research is needed. This is designed partly to avoid wasting resources when existing research could answer their questions.

It also helps to indicate whether proposed research contributes to existing knowledge and so may be of wider interest. For example, Marl's programme director explained that when they review potential research topics, they examine international literature to see whether there would be "added value" and the research coordinator talked of contributing "to the body of literature".

This concern for wider interest also applies to the third aspect considered when selecting topics: ongoing policy discussions. Knowledge of policy debates and discussions helps indicate potential interest in the findings among other organisations. For example, Marl started research on a new HIV regimen partly because Malawi is the first country to adopt this approach and Marl saw it as an opportunity for international learning. An interest in contributing to these wider discussions was indicated in comments by Chalk's director, who emphasised the value of topics in areas of debate:

"I think the best places for us to do research are where you have an ideological split. [...] And actually of all these things I think the truth is a bit in the middle. [...] Hopefully we can start to tease that out. [...] I think that's where we can add value and where evidence can add value, where you've got a polarised debate."

This interest in resolving current debates contributed to Chalk's selection of some research topics, for example agricultural technology and microfinance. A related aspect is consideration of agreed national research priorities. Within international health, there has been growing emphasis on developing national research agendas to ensure research meets country needs (Viergever et al., 2010). A National Health Research Agenda was launched in Malawi in February 2012. As a new development, this agenda had not affected selection of past research topics in the case NGOs, but it was mentioned by Marl as one aspect they now consider when identifying research projects.

Chalk and Marl's interest in these particular criteria partly reflects specific research aims. For example, the concern for wider relevance applies when research is designed, fully or in part, to inform or influence other organisations. Chalk's director was discussing research under their District Development Project, which aims to stimulate external discussion as well as inform Chalk's service delivery. Consequently, they consider whether potential topics would contribute to thinking among other development actors. Similarly, Marl aim partly to inform national and international healthcare, so consider relevance of proposed topics to policy discussions within Malawi and international thinking. With different research aims, these criteria may be less relevant. For example, some Flint research examines needs and conditions among a potential beneficiary group. Wider policy discussions are not important for this research because it aims primarily to inform Flint's own work. The focus on

understanding local conditions also makes reviewing literature less significant. Flint want current information on locations where they work, which is rarely available from existing reports. The advocacy officer explained that although they use government data when designing projects, primary research is needed before projects begin: government figures “can be outdated. [...] Things change and the situation may be different now”. Existing literature may be more important for selecting more analytical topics, such as the research to understand interventions in Chalk and Marl. As this suggests, specific criteria for priority topics are likely to vary between NGOs and types of research. However, these examples indicate that NGOs’ decisions about useful areas for research sometimes consider more than links to service delivery. Other criteria are valued, and this means questions arising through service delivery may not be accepted onto the research agenda.

4.1.3 Consultation and collaboration with external partners

As well as considering multiple criteria within NGOs, selection of research topics sometimes incorporates ideas from external partners. As with the internal criteria, NGOs’ interest in external input means they do not aim to rely only on identifying questions through service delivery. This external input can come through consulting on topics proposed within NGOs or through considering topics suggested by external stakeholders, approaches discussed in turn below.

Seeking external input to research agendas

In selecting and refining research topics, Chalk and Marl sometimes ask people outside the organisation for their views on proposed research. This can involve informal feedback on potential topics from contacts in other organisations, or more formal consultation through collaboration or review by government partners.

This interest in external consultation reflects aims for research and organisational principles. In relation to aims, external consultation provides information on existing research and wider interest in proposed topics, two criteria discussed in the previous section. For example, Chalk discuss potential topics with researchers or practitioners who have expertise on the subject to see whether they say “others are already doing that or there’s no interest in it” [research manager]. Consultation is also designed to support aims of research uptake, by promoting ownership of the findings among potential target audiences (a strategy discussed in Chapter 6 on advocacy and research communication). The influence of organisational principles relates to a commitment to partnership. As described in Chapter 3, government collaboration is a

key principle for Chalk. This affects their approach to developing research agendas, encouraging discussion with government about potential topics. This was explained by a programme manager, who linked discussion with government about research under the District Development Project to Chalk's partnerships with government in this and other programmes. Research often involves:

“people from government. And a lot of our work is in close collaboration with government, and certainly the model of this programme is wanting to work within government decentralised structures.”

One example of this approach is a study on government structures, undertaken jointly with the relevant ministry. Research questions were shaped through discussion with government officials, so reflected more than Chalk's service delivery experience. Government partnership is also important for Marl, particularly given the ongoing handover of service delivery to government management. Partly because of this, they seek district government input to research proposals.

These experiences indicate that NGOs may not want to rely only on their own service delivery experience to produce research questions, instead also seeking external input. The rationales in Marl and Chalk suggest this may apply if NGOs are concerned with wider relevance and partnership, see other contacts as a useful source of advice on existing literature, or seek influence through ownership. In these situations, NGOs' service delivery experience may be considered an inadequate basis for selecting research topics.

Considering research ideas from outside the NGO

As well as asking external contacts for their ideas on topics proposed by NGO staff, NGOs sometimes accept topics proposed by external stakeholders. This can include international headquarters, donors, research institutes or universities, and sometimes government. I focus here on suggestions from research organisations, as approaches from these external researchers are common in Marl and Chalk. Ideas from NGO headquarters and donors are discussed in 4.3, as the power relations with these external actors mean a different set of processes are involved.

Some research initiated by external researchers is valued by NGO staff and produces findings they see as relevant, suggesting again that NGOs do not always view their service delivery as the only source of useful topics. This is clearest in Chalk, where several studies have been initiated by external researchers. European universities and multilateral research institutes have approached Chalk with ideas for research, such as evaluating Chalk interventions or field testing new technologies. Chalk do not accept all

these suggestions from external researchers; as noted in Chapter 3, external proposals for research are only accepted if they fit Chalk's aims. However, Chalk will consider these external ideas for research, and the resulting research findings are often viewed positively by Chalk staff. One example is a study with a European university to develop renewable energy technology. Chalk are now investigating options to expand use of the technology in their work, indicating its relevance.

However, interest in external contributions to the research agenda varies between NGOs. Discussions in Chalk and Marl suggest this is affected by organisational principles, research capacity and past experience of academic collaboration. Variation in these aspects brings different attitudes towards research partnership, with Chalk more likely than Marl to view partnerships positively and so to consider external suggestions for research topics. I discuss these aspects of principles, capacity and experience in turn below.

The role of organisational principles relates to ideas about partnership. As previously indicated, partnership is a central idea in Chalk. This encompasses partnership with external researchers, and their country strategy includes academic collaboration. In contrast, although Marl work closely with government in Malawi, their broader approach is to work independently. Indeed, the director said wryly that in general, "we like to do things alone", and complained "this is typical Marl mentality". This contributes to greater hesitation about working with external academics, indicated in the organisational research policy and discussions with staff.

In relation to research capacity, interest in external research proposals is affected by NGOs' existing research skills and funding and consequently their need for collaboration to provide resources. Chalk welcome academic partnerships partly because they can bring research skills and funding, a contribution discussed further in relation to research capacity in Chapter 5. Marl have research staff, experience in the kind of research they undertake, and adequate research funding, so academics bring less benefit. As noted by the research coordinator discussing Marl's more limited collaborative research, "we are unique in that we don't need funding, we already have our own funding". This internal research capacity makes partnership less important and consequently reduces interest in external ideas for research topics.

Past experience of working with academics also differs between Chalk and Marl. This relates particularly to disagreements around priorities and dissemination strategies. Such disagreements between NGOs and academics are widely reported in the

literature (Delisle et al., 2005; Moseley, 2007; CORE Group, 2008; Aniekwe et al., 2012). Marl have had negative experiences when working with academics, as explained by the research coordinator:

“In the past Marl did do what was supposed to be collaborative research and we were just a data source, and then as soon as Marl gave over their data, we never heard anything ever again. I think Marl wasn’t in any of the publications or anything.”

As this suggests, Marl feel they were not adequately involved or credited by some academics. This experience made Marl more cautious about proposals from external researchers and discouraged future academic collaboration. Research partnerships are a newer area for Chalk and until 2012, their experience was largely positive. However, recent disagreements mean the research manager finds academic partnerships increasingly frustrating:

“Another area [that] is becoming a real issue for me is the joint work with academia. [...] They really don’t understand the NGO world and our need (in Chalk anyway) for practical lessons and outcomes. [...] I think this is something that may lead us to reconsider partnering in research with them unless we can address this.”

Chalk feel university researchers have different ideas about the purpose of research. Chalk want research to produce benefits “on the ground”. They feel academics “want academic publications and conferences, not results that will influence development practices in Malawi”. Different priorities have contributed to disagreements on dissemination: Chalk want to share results immediately with those who might use them, but some academics have resisted public dissemination until findings are published in peer reviewed articles. This experience has made Chalk more cautious about future partnerships, potentially changing their attitude towards external suggestions for research.

Academics involved in these partnerships may have different perspectives, and this would be a valuable area for further investigation. However, although the NGOs’ views may be one-sided, their perceptions of the risks and benefits of academic partnership affect openness to external suggestions for research topics. If NGOs value partnership as an organisational principle, appreciate the additional capacity provided by academics and have largely positive experience of academic collaboration, they may be more interested in considering external proposals for research. When NGOs are interested in collaboration, as in Chalk, these external suggestions can form a significant part of their research agenda.

4.1.4 Summary

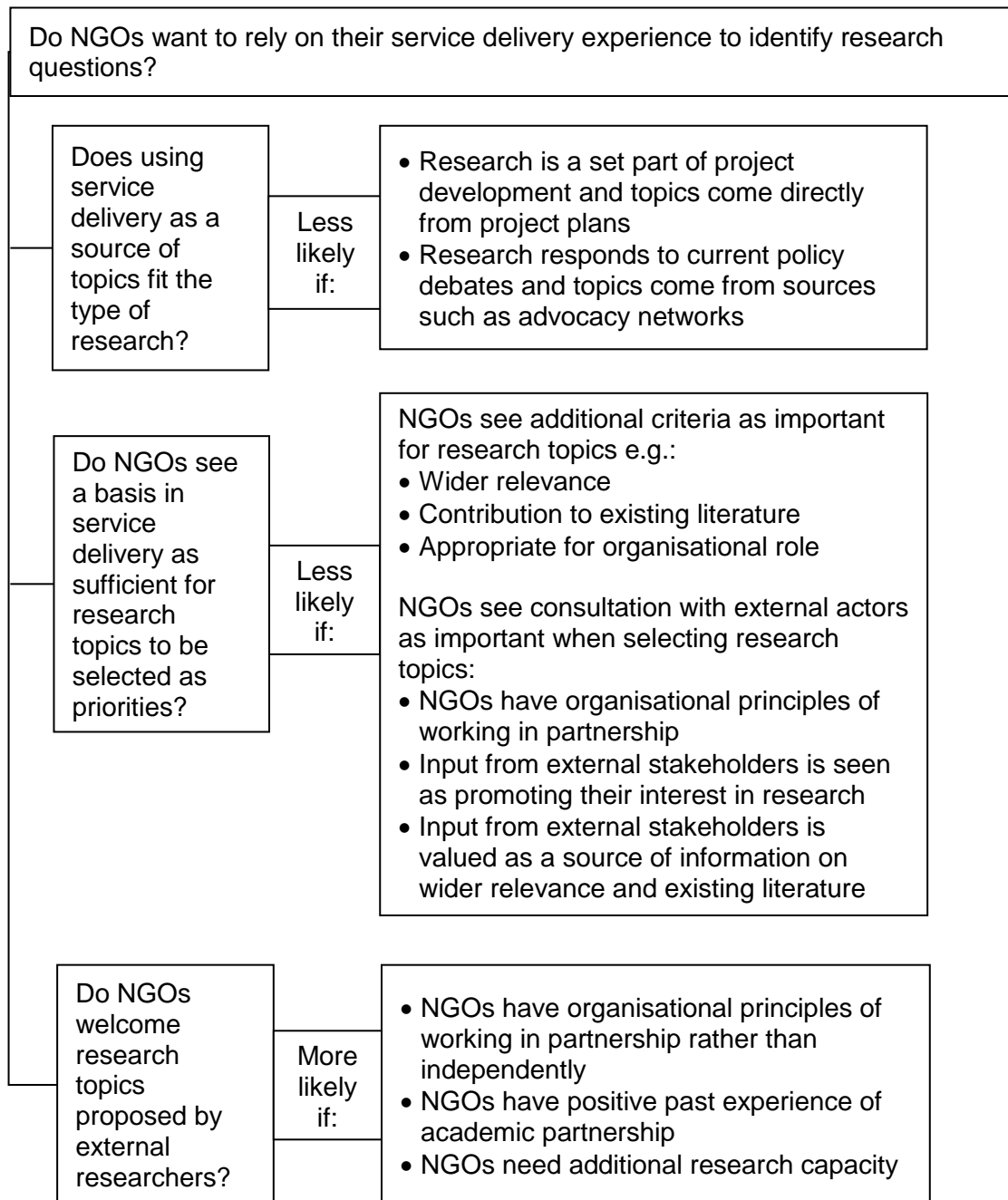
The case NGOs’ experiences suggest different research aims and organisational approaches create variation in the extent to which NGOs want to draw on their service

delivery in identifying research questions. This involves three aspects: generating topics from service delivery may not fit some kinds of research; selection of topics may also consider other criteria; and research ideas from external sources may be welcomed. On the first of these, identifying topics from service delivery is not applicable for all kinds of research. For example, if research takes place as part of a project development process, topics may be determined by project plans (as with some situation analyses). Likewise, topics for some research designed to support advocacy come from issues raised in policy networks, rather than from service delivery. If NGOs undertake these kinds of research, using service delivery to generate research questions may not be part of their organisational research approach or may only fit some of their research. Second, NGOs may consider multiple criteria when identifying research priorities, not just whether topics come from service delivery experience. These additional criteria can include availability of existing research, fit with NGOs' ideas about their most appropriate contribution to research, and relevance to other organisations. Some topics inspired by service delivery are not considered useful areas for research because they do not meet these criteria. Third, NGOs may also value input from other organisations to research agendas. This can include feedback from external partners on topics proposed within NGOs, to check for wider relevance and existing literature or to promote external interest. It may also involve considering topics proposed by other organisations, particularly if NGOs value academic partnership. If NGOs are interested in these additional criteria and sources, they may not aim to rely only on their service delivery when developing research agendas.

These conclusions are summarised in Figure 2, which indicates conditions affecting whether NGOs are likely to see their service delivery as a relevant or sufficient basis for identifying research topics and their likely interest in other sources of ideas. This and subsequent summary diagrams are inevitably simplifications, designed to indicate overarching points.

This section has focused on NGOs' aims and interests, considering whether they want to use service delivery as a basis for identifying topics. The next two sections consider whether this is possible, looking first at conditions affecting identification of research topics among service delivery staff.

Figure 2: Conditions affecting whether NGOs want to rely on service delivery to identify research questions



4.2 Service delivery staff as a source of research questions: constraints of capacity and interest

The idea that NGOs can generate research questions through their service delivery experience suggests that service delivery staff can and do identify research gaps. The value of service delivery insight is emphasised in international health strategies, beyond NGOs. For example, the World Health Organization (WHO) suggests “those on

the front lines of policy-making or service delivery are particularly sensitive to what is working and what is not, and therefore they are able to point to important priorities for research” (WHO, 2009 pp.12–13). Across the case NGOs, the staff who might be expected to identify research questions according to WHO’s suggestion are often not those proposing topics. Their experiences suggest service delivery staff sometimes lack capacity and motivation to identify research topics and feed into research prioritisation. Partly because of this, research topics often come from senior managers and research staff rather than those more directly engaged in service delivery.

I discuss this by examining the case NGOs’ experiences of securing staff input to research agendas. I focus particularly on Chalk because they have a regular process of research prioritisation and raised limited staff input as a concern. Their discussions about this process help suggest factors that affect identification of research topics by service delivery staff. While focusing on Chalk, I refer to other case NGOs to provide further evidence and information on variation between organisational contexts.

Before moving to the main discussion, I provide some background context and clarify my focus. Within Chalk, the regular process of identifying research questions involves the research done as part of their District Development project. As noted in Chapter 3, this six-year programme includes funding for two pieces of research a year, creating a biannual process of identifying topics. This process is led by Chalk’s research manager. He asks staff (including those who manage or advise service delivery projects at headquarters and district level) for suggestions via email, often circulating possible topics and asking for feedback or other ideas. This process has largely failed. Few staff reply with suggestions, as acknowledged by one programme advisor describing the process:

“[The research manager] circulates an email, people respond, others don’t.”

[KG] “When you say people respond, does anyone respond?”

“Er...maybe...maybe less than 5%, I think the response is bad, I must just be frank. I’m not either good!”

The limited response has disappointed the research manager, who would like further input from programme staff. Although he continues asking for topics with each round of research, this is now done “without any expectations of getting any answers”. As a result, research ideas often come from the research manager, or through his discussions with programme staff and the country director. This limited identification of research topics by service delivery staff, particularly those at more junior levels, is apparent beyond Chalk. In Marl, research ideas, particularly for larger studies, tend to come from research staff or programme directors, rather than staff working on daily implementation. Similarly, research ideas in Flint are often identified by the director, not

the district staff most closely involved in service delivery.

This limited input from service delivery staff does not mean research topics are unrelated to service delivery. Throughout this section, I ask whether service delivery involvement makes NGO staff well-placed to identify research topics, not whether research questions draw on service delivery experience. Chalk's research manager has significant service delivery involvement. He also leads on M&E and cross-cutting issues that are part of implementation, and has frequent contact with headquarters and district service delivery staff. There is a clear link between the studies undertaken under the District Development Project and service delivery problems or issues experienced by Chalk. This picture is similar in Marl and Flint. As this suggests, the level of input from staff most closely involved in service delivery does not determine whether questions draw on service delivery experience. However, limited response from service delivery staff to requests for research ideas does suggest that close involvement in service delivery does not always stimulate research ideas.

Within Chalk, limited response to requests for research topics seems to reflect a combination of interacting factors, including capacity to contribute to research agendas, prioritisation of research, and the nature of the process used to elicit suggestions. These three issues are examined in turn below.

4.2.1 Capacity to contribute to development of research agendas

The capacity of staff to provide suggestions for research depends on time to make suggestions, ability to develop ideas for potential topics, and in some situations, ability to turn broad topics into research questions. I examine each aspect in this section.

Time to contribute to discussions about research

Providing input to potential research agendas requires time. Chalk staff responsible for programme management are busy running service delivery activities, and say they have little time to feed into discussions about research. Talking about her response to requests for research ideas, one project manager said she was unable to give much input because:

“Here at implementation level we've got so much on our table [...] A few hours you are in the office, a few hours you are there in the field seeing how things are, you are all over trying to make things work. I don't have much time to concentrate much on the research.”

She contrasted her situation, trying to fit research alongside the varied work of project implementation, with that of the headquarters team responsible for research:

“Our friends there, they have got only specific things to do, and it’s day in day out they are doing those types of work, whilst for us it’s from A to Z. [...] So when this one comes [requests for feedback on research ideas or documents], it’s just in the middle of doing something.”

Unlike service delivery staff, the research manager has allocated time for research and fewer other responsibilities. Service delivery staff who are not in this position may lack time to put forward potential research topics.

While time to suggest topics is important, this becomes more significant when combined with the capacity to generate ideas discussed below, and the prioritisation and process of identifying topics discussed in later sections.

Capacity to generate research ideas

Limited feedback on research topics from service delivery staff seems to reflect a lack of ideas, not just time to submit them. Chalk’s research manager does not ask other staff to prepare a research proposal, simply to comment on suggested topics or propose others. If staff were thinking about possible research in the course of their work, responding to these emails would just involve noting down their existing ideas. However, it seems Chalk programme staff do not routinely consider potential research, making it harder to respond when asked for suggestions. Capacity to generate ideas, including for research, was seen as an organisational problem by senior managers. It means service delivery staff “don’t actually have the ideas, maybe, to come forward with” [programme manager]. When asked in interviews, some service delivery staff could not suggest areas for research. This applied in Chalk and Flint, the case NGOs where I spoke with more junior service delivery staff and where research agendas are not pre-defined. (I was unable to meet service delivery staff below the programme director in Marl due to time, and in Clay, research questions follow project plans as previously described.) Discussions in Chalk suggest several interrelated processes that hinder development of ideas for research, including an acceptance of current approaches, a focus on immediate service delivery, and limited exposure to wider discussions, discussed in turn below.

Accepting current approaches

The acceptance of current approaches involves two behaviours that might otherwise prompt research: not questioning current practice, and so not considering research to assess its effectiveness, and not imagining alternative approaches that could be tested through research. These behaviours are discussed in literature on NGO innovation and learning. Although NGOs are often associated with innovative approaches, more critical accounts describe limited ability to innovate within the sector (Lewis, 2007;

Lewis & Kanji, 2009; Banks & Hulme, 2012). Constraints identified in this literature often involve flexibility to implement innovative approaches, an issue discussed in Chapter 5. However, the innovation literature also discusses development of ideas for alternative approaches (Dover & Lawrence, 2012; Seelos & Mair, 2012), one of the behaviours that might prompt research topics. The related literature on organisational learning similarly points to varied capacity for developing new ideas and limited questioning of current practice within NGOs (Britton, 2005; Goold, 2006).

This picture is identified by Chalk staff. As noted by a programme manager, “all NGOs talk about themselves as learning organisations, innovatory organisations and so on, but very few are, actually”. Chalk is working to strengthen organisational learning and innovation, but these processes were in the early stages and staff felt there was too much acceptance of current practice. They talk about this as ‘business as usual’, meaning “our programmes do not change much, and sometimes we adopt a traditional way of doing things” [programme manager]. The implication for development of research ideas was stated bluntly by another programme manager, who suggested I examine:

“the generation of research ideas or topics in our work. Are we doing business as usual? Or are we experimenting? And then the research ideas ought to come from that. How effective are we, or are NGOs, in terms of identifying research topics?” [KG] “How effective are they?”
 “I think not much.”

The literature on NGO innovation and learning indicates numerous factors that affect whether staff question current practice and consider alternatives, including conditions at individual, organisational and environmental levels (Britton, 2005; Goold, 2006; Dover & Lawrence, 2012; Seelos & Mair, 2012). One aspect that seems particularly significant in Chalk is socialisation into organisational ways of thinking. The ‘business as usual’ culture was seen to result partly from the long-term nature of the country team: many staff have worked for Chalk for over ten years, and “there’s certainly an element of ‘this is the way we’ve always done it and it works, sort of, so we’ll keep doing it’” [programme manager]. Immersion in organisational systems can make it difficult to recognise assumptions, question existing approaches or identify new options (Goold, 2006; Dover & Lawrence, 2012).

Given this potential difficulty in questioning longstanding ideas, new staff may sometimes be better placed to identify areas for research. Chalk’s research manager and director identified assumptions to be tested through research, and both were relatively new to Chalk. The potential value of newer staff for questioning current

approaches was suggested explicitly in one of the other case NGOs, Marl. Their research officer emphasised the role of fresh insight when explaining how some research topics were suggested by a new programme manager:

“She took this over, and of course when taking it over you realise, ‘OK, this is ongoing, but is it actually working or not?’ You ask these questions.”

New staff (perhaps especially those in positions of authority) may be particularly important for identifying research topics such as this, which assess existing approaches. Flint also has long-term staff, including the founding director, and he has identified potential research topics. However, these topics tend to focus on new areas of work, and Flint had not seriously considered research to assess existing programmes. This partly follows their research aims and those of their donors, but their limited interest in examining current practice may also reflect the difficulty of recognising and questioning organisational assumptions. As well as identifying assumptions to be tested, new staff may bring ideas from other organisations that could be examined through research. This was also apparent in Marl. For example, an idea for research to pilot a community approach for HIV treatment came from the research officer, who saw this approach in another country in her previous job.

While socialisation into organisational systems contributes to the acceptance of current approaches, the focus on immediate service delivery and degree of wider exposure discussed in the next two sections also play a role. As well as affecting whether staff identify questions about current practice or alternatives, these two processes can limit identification of other kinds of research topic, as explained below.

Focusing on immediate service delivery

Managing daily service delivery may limit capacity to develop ideas for research by reducing time and space to think beyond immediate deliverables. This differs from the earlier discussion of time to respond to emails about research; here, the issue is time to think of research topics. The lack of time and space for thinking about potential research reflects the nature of service delivery, with hectic schedules and a focus on meeting set targets. Both aspects are suggested in comments from one Chalk programme manager, explaining his lack of response to emails requesting research ideas:

“People like us, we are just interested in the implementation because we have a project target to meet and this and that. So, we are just focused on meeting our targets and making sure things happen. So sometimes it’s difficult to generate research topics. [...] It takes time, so we sort of relegate those to the list of minor priorities.”

In relation to hectic schedules, the programme manager described the difficulties of the project he managed, saying it was an ambitious programme with many components. Delivering on the activities agreed with donors, consortium partners and his line managers left no time to think about anything else. This is a well-known problem in NGOs, where a focus on action and delivering project outputs can reduce time to reflect and generate new ideas (Goold, 2006; Dover & Lawrence, 2012). Indeed, “anyone who has worked in a field position for an NGO knows how difficult it is to find time to read, think and write” (Edwards, 1989 p.133). This lack of thinking time may hinder the ongoing reflection that could prompt research ideas and the development of these ideas into research topics. This need for time to conceptualise research is noted as a potential challenge in other NGOs (Ng’ethe, 1991).

As well as reducing time for thinking, involvement in service delivery may limit space for critical reflection through the focus on delivering pre-planned activities. This is suggested in the quote above through the comment on meeting targets, and highlighted in critical discussions of development management. Potentially rigid management tools such as logframes and the growing focus on delivering results and meeting donor targets can restrict attention to effectiveness or alternative approaches (Wallace, 2013; Valters, 2014). In addition to limiting questions about current practice, the focus on immediate service delivery tasks may constrain identification of research topics related to wider issues. This is perhaps reflected in concerns among senior Chalk managers that frontline service delivery staff “tend to focus much more on the day to day activities, and it’s quite hard to get them to pull back and look at the more strategic importance of what they’re doing” [programme manager]. These wider issues might include underlying causes of a failure to meet targets, debates about particular approaches, aspects of the political context that influence project effectiveness, or the potential value of programme lessons for wider audiences. These are all areas that have prompted research in Chalk, but largely by the research manager or senior directors, rather than those directly implementing projects. By limiting attention to questions of effectiveness, alternatives or wider processes beyond service delivery, this target-driven nature of service delivery may hinder staff capacity to identify research topics. Attention to these kinds of questions can also be affected by exposure beyond service delivery, discussed below.

Exposure to wider ideas and debates

Staff seem more able to identify research questions when they are exposed to ideas and debates beyond the immediate concerns of service delivery management. This exposure may come through working in other organisations, as with the discussion of

new staff in relation to socialisation into organisational systems, or through channels such as external meetings or reading. Exposure appears to help identification of research questions in several ways. One aspect involves countering the acceptance of current approaches. This may be by creating awareness of alternatives, as indicated by the earlier example of the community treatment approach suggested by Marl's research officer. Exposure may also promote more critical thinking about the effectiveness of current practice. For example, Chalk's director referred to books he had read when discussing the need for research to challenge assumptions among service delivery staff:

"I sent an email to all my staff this morning about this book that I've been reading, I like reading economics books, but it's basically saying, and I agree with it 100%, that there's no one big solution to poverty. [...] There's a lot of problems and then you need to look at the data and solve the problem. So all our staff have got this view that if people pay for something they value it more. Intuitively that should be correct, but when you actually look at the data about distribution of nets and some other interventions, that correlation doesn't hold. [...] So that's where I want to get us to, is the place where we're not just making bold assumptions and then developing programmes on them, it's actually drilling down and getting the evidence."

Exposure to alternative thinking via literature contributed to his recognition that their assumptions may be misplaced, and to identification of potential research topics to test these ideas.

As well as supporting awareness of assumptions and alternatives, exposure may help staff identify research topics by providing information on wider policy discussions where research could contribute. This broader picture is important when NGOs want research to have external relevance, one of the criteria discussed in 4.1.2. As explained there, Chalk sometimes prioritise research in areas of debate. Senior managers and research staff identify these debates through external exposure, for example by attending network meetings. This role of exposure in supporting awareness of wider issues and consequently identification of research topics was articulated particularly clearly in discussions about annual research planning in Marl. As noted in the introduction to 4.2, research topics tend to be suggested by senior programme managers and research staff, not by staff directly running service delivery. This applies particularly for larger studies, which Marl want to be relevant to broader policy discussions. The research coordinator linked ability to identify suitable research topics to wider exposure, contrasting input from senior managers (who are largely expatriates) and more junior service delivery staff (who tend to be Malawian):

"We would like more national staff to propose topics than what they do, but sometimes that's difficult. It depends on the level of the national staff, and you also have to have a broader viewpoint. So a lot of the times it's more the people like the programme manager, and the programme director, like myself as the research person. Because we have an idea of what else is going on in the country and

outside of the country, it makes it a little bit easier to know what we need to do next.” Senior staff and research managers are more involved in external networks and discussions with other Marl offices. This exposure provides information on policy debates and gaps in existing research, helping these staff to identify research topics with wider relevance. This may be harder for frontline service delivery staff. The research coordinator compared their limited exposure to that of academics:

“One of the nice things about academia I would say is that you’re often going to conferences, you may have a meeting every week with your research group where people present different information. If you’re a field level implementer, you may never have that. You may be in the hospital every single day. Not everyone has access to all the different journals and things to have more this global picture.”

Lack of exposure beyond immediate service delivery may make it hard for staff to understand links between their work and wider discussions. This in turn may mean service delivery staff struggle to identify questions that contribute to broader policy agendas, an issue noted in other NGOs (CORE Group, 2008).

A final way exposure can help identification of research topics relates to another standard discussed in 4.1.2, contributing to existing literature. Service delivery staff are sometimes unfamiliar with existing literature and so unaware of research that can answer the questions they face in managing programmes. For example, Chalk’s research manager said that when service delivery staff do suggest potential topics, a quick internet search often shows there is already research on the issue. This limited awareness of existing literature is recognised among NGOs more generally (Hayman, 2013). Wider exposure through familiarity with existing research may help counter this, so helping staff to identify research questions that avoid duplication.

The links between exposure beyond service delivery, strategic thinking, seniority and ability to identify research questions may be multidirectional. I have suggested that wider exposure helps staff identify research questions by supporting critical thinking about assumptions or alternatives and familiarity with wider debates and literature. In addition, I suggested earlier that the hectic, target-based nature of service delivery may limit critical reflection among staff responsible for daily implementation. Senior managers and research staff are more removed from this immediate service delivery focus and they are often part of external and internal networks where they are exposed to alternative ideas. In Marl and Chalk, these staff also tended to be more recent appointments, again increasing their external exposure. These conditions may increase their ability to identify research topics. However, senior managers and research staff may be more strategic thinkers anyway, regardless of wider exposure, and recruited to these positions partly because of their critical abilities. This raises the question of

whether immersion in frontline, target-based service delivery and lack of exposure limit critical thought and strategic insight, or whether staff occupy more frontline positions because their analytic skills are less developed. It seems likely that both individual abilities and work conditions play a role. This was suggested by the Marl research coordinator when I asked whether individual skills or immersion in service delivery limited research ideas:

“I think it’s both, honestly I think it’s both. I think you can make an argument easily for both cases. There are some people who are more talented in terms of thinking of the research idea. [...] But I think exposure is a huge part of it, I really do.”

Her own experience supports the role of exposure. When the research coordinator joined Marl, her time was spent within the organisation and this affected her ability to identify research topics:

“I had a hard time myself even coming up with new ideas initially. And then I talked about it with [the programme director and district programme manager] and they started sending me to more of these events where I got to see what other research was being done and why it was important and what gaps we had.”

For the same individual, exposure to wider discussions through external events helped indicate potential research topics, suggesting this does not just reflect personal skills. She was not personally involved in service delivery, but her broader comments about exposure applied to service delivery staff. In addition to her experience, where senior managers and research staff in Marl and Chalk discussed potential topics, they often referred to wider policy discussions, again suggesting the value of external exposure.

To recap, exposure beyond service delivery through networks, meetings, former employment or literature seems to help staff identify research topics. This might work through increasing awareness of assumptions and alternatives, or through providing knowledge of wider discussions and existing literature that indicates where research might contribute. Together with socialisation into organisational ideas and involvement in hectic, target-driven service delivery, limited exposure may hinder capacity to identify potential research topics.

Skills to formulate research questions

Input to research agendas may also require capacity to turn ideas for possible topics into research questions. As noted in Chapter 1, some literature on NGO research suggests staff may lack skills to define research questions (CORE Group, 2008; Zachariah et al., 2010). Insufficient research skills did not appear to be a significant factor in Chalk. The staff who are asked for suggestions all have some familiarity with research, and they are only asked to suggest possible topics. Skills to define questions may be a more significant barrier in organisations where service delivery staff have

less research experience, or where they are expected to be more involved in formulating detailed research proposals. These two scenarios are discussed below in relation to Flint and Marl.

In Flint, few district managers have experience of designing research and these staff have not proposed research ideas. Senior managers felt training was needed to support input to research agendas from district staff:

“[Research is] a new department which is just coming in and people are yet to get into touch with it. [...] We are trying to make efforts of how do we involve everybody in this. But that does not just come in a vacuum, you need to take people through a process, how do they identify research topics.” [programme manager]

Skills were not the only factor limiting suggestions for research questions from district staff. Perhaps more importantly, they had not been asked to suggest research ideas. However, research experience seems to play a role. The headquarters staff who had suggested research questions all had some research training. There was some uncertainty about how to develop research questions among even senior staff with less research experience. For example, one programme manager without research training asked me for advice on identifying research questions. This uncertainty suggests involvement in service delivery is not enough to identify research questions, something underlined by the programme manager’s emphasis on the need for “a process”. Support and training may be needed to help service delivery staff suggest and develop research questions.

Research skills were also considered important for input to research agendas in Marl. Their experience differs from other case NGOs in two significant ways: Marl have more focus on building research capacity among junior programme staff, and these staff are asked not only to propose research ideas but to plan and undertake research. As discussed earlier, more junior staff make limited input to the annual research planning exercise for larger research studies, but Marl have encouraged and supported smaller studies by these staff on the service delivery projects where they are involved. This capacity building has involved workshops and mentoring for project staff to help them identify topics and design research. As a larger organisation, with ample flexible funding and international research teams who can run workshops, Marl is able to provide this support. The small number of interviews within Marl precludes evaluation of this research training. However, senior managers and research staff said it had generated ideas for research among service delivery staff, and several more junior staff were planning research within their projects. While skills are the formal capacity building agenda, the training could plausibly fulfil several functions that might counter obstacles mentioned elsewhere in this section, including dedicated time and motivation

to think about research. In addition, while skills are needed to formulate research questions, research training and experience may also enhance the capacity to generate broad research topics discussed in the previous section. For example, staff with research experience are perhaps better equipped to identify problems where research might help.

Summarising the discussion of capacity, the case NGOs' experiences suggest service delivery staff sometimes have limited ability to suggest research questions. They may lack time to contribute to discussions about research agendas or to think about potential topics, and may be so focused on meeting targets that they do not consider wider or underlying issues that might prompt research. This focus on delivery, as well as long-term immersion in organisational assumptions, may also foster acceptance of current approaches, such that staff do not consider research that might question standard strategies or explore alternatives. Limited exposure to wider discussions, through channels such as reading, external meetings or working in other organisations, may also limit critical reflection on current practice and ideas for alternatives. This exposure might also be needed to identify questions that add to existing literature and policy discussions, important criteria for research topics in some NGOs. Finally, input from service delivery staff may require skills to define questions, particularly if they are expected to develop proposals. These conditions can mean some service delivery staff have limited ability to suggest ideas for research.

4.2.2 Prioritisation and interest in research

While service delivery staff sometimes lack capacity to identify and suggest research topics, motivation also limits their input. This was apparent in Chalk, where one programme advisor suggested that staff ignore requests for research ideas because they see research as low priority:

“I think it's just the interest to engage in the process, I think just bluntly that's it. [...] Maybe this is, 'I have more things that I'm engaged in, I'm doing this, OK you want research topics, OK, I'll think about it, I'll come back to you...' I think it's just level of engagement.”

Combined with busy service delivery schedules, limited interest pushes requests for research topics down the list of inbox priorities. Two aspects seem significant in reducing staff interest in research: the perceived value of research, and responsibility for research, discussed in turn below.

The perceived value of research

The value placed on research by service delivery staff is a question of priority rather than absolute interest. As discussed in Chapter 3, research is a secondary priority throughout the NGOs. In Chalk, service delivery managers emphasised the importance of research, but saw service delivery as more urgent. As explained by one programme manager:

“The challenge that is always there is to see value for research in a development project. Because that is a software service, if you understand what I mean. You don’t immediately see the value added out of research. You don’t see it until it happens later or when the findings of the research, the recommendations of the research are incorporated into the programming, into implementation.”

The benefits of research are more distant and intangible, making it less urgent and important than what he described as the “hardware” of service delivery.

This prioritisation partly reflects the overall place of research within Chalk. As described in Chapter 3, research is a newer area and remains a small part of Chalk’s work. In addition, the contribution that research might make to the priority of service delivery is perhaps weakly recognised among some service delivery staff. Both aspects were articulated by another programme manager, who described their focus on implementation and a need to understand how research could help:

“I would think it’s one thing that as an organisation we probably need to [...] improve on, that we need to see research as an important element of the work that we’ve been doing. I think traditionally we’ve been so much looking at or focusing on the service delivery, supplying the farm inputs, the livestock, training the farmers in this, irrigation, agronomy, horticulture, animal husbandry, and then not seeing the research element as part of the work that actually would add value to the core work that’s being done. So there is need for a shift in the way we look at things.”

Limited understanding of the way research can support service delivery may be partly because the purpose of research has not been clearly emphasised. There is no research strategy, and the research manager suggested they should do more to ensure staff understand the rationale for research and how it can help their work. Even when staff understand the value of research, however, service delivery is likely to be the priority for their time given its higher place within Chalk’s organisational agenda.

Research as other people’s responsibility

Perceptions of responsibility for research can also limit interest and input from service delivery staff. Several people noted a tendency for Chalk staff to focus on work for which they are directly responsible, not engaging in activities led by others. This was considered a general issue for Chalk, beyond research, as explained by one programme manager:

“[Lack of feedback] is a common phenomenon in Chalk and it’s not just the research

issues. Most of the issues when they are circulated you rarely get comments from people. [...] People are busy with their 'own things', in quotes, so much so that to find time to read something and make constructive comments, normally it wouldn't happen in time."

Research is seen as primarily the research manager's responsibility, and other staff see input as optional. Combined with the sometimes limited understanding of exactly how research might help their own service delivery work noted above, this focus on direct responsibilities may reduce engagement in research prioritisation.

Different organisational structures for research affect this responsibility and consequent input from programme staff. Marl also has dedicated research staff, but research is the overall responsibility of the programme director. Reflecting this responsibility, the programme director is fully involved in suggesting and agreeing research topics, so this is not left to research staff. In some NGOs, organisational structures place decisions fully with service delivery staff. This was the situation in one of the periphery case NGOs, where I interviewed just two staff. In this NGO, the responsibility of service delivery staff for research is cemented by placing research funding within their programme budgets. Topics are discussed with research staff to refine ideas and avoid duplication, but programme managers prepare a research brief describing what they need and the research team plays more of a consultancy role. By giving service delivery staff greater responsibility for research, these structures and processes seem to increase their role in identifying questions.

Summarising, interest in research among service delivery staff may affect their input to research agendas. Where service delivery takes greater priority (as it does across the case NGOs), or staff see research as other people's work, they may view suggesting research topics as unimportant or at least less urgent.

4.2.3 The process of asking for research ideas

So far, this section has focused on ability and interest among staff to suggest research questions. Their input is also affected by the process used to request potential topics. Limited capacity or motivation to identify and put forward research ideas does not necessarily prevent input to research agendas. However, it suggests the process of identifying topics needs to accommodate this variable capacity and interest. This does not seem to be the case in Chalk. As noted in the introduction to 4.2, the research manager uses email to request potential topics for the District Development Project research. This process might be more effective if staff were considering research during their ongoing work and so had ideas to submit, or if research was sufficiently

prioritised that staff made time to consider research options when asked (assuming service delivery schedules allowed this). However, the process does not fit the context of hectic workloads, limited ongoing reflection and capacity to identify topics, and low prioritisation of research.

An alternative approach, suggested by one Chalk project manager, would involve meetings to discuss ideas and longer timeframes; currently “there isn’t much room to think about it”. Meetings and discussion appear significant in prompting research ideas. For example, Chalk’s research manager said some ideas emerged through his conversations with service delivery staff, whereas none of the accepted topics seem to have been suggested via email. Similarly, Marl’s training workshops involve discussion with service delivery staff about potential topics. This role of conversation in generating and refining research ideas perhaps reflects the value of dialogue and interaction for thinking, something emphasised in relation to organisational learning (Britton, 2005; Goold, 2006). Creating dedicated discussion space may also overcome the difficulties of time and motivation that can mean emails on research are forgotten. Further, meetings might counter issues around skills in NGOs where limited research experience is a barrier, by providing an easier way for people to share tentative ideas. Chalk’s growing work to support organisational learning may provide a basis for this kind of dialogue about potential research topics. Regular learning workshops are held to discuss challenges on a particular programme theme (for example, water or crop production). These workshops have prompted at least one research idea, and a programme advisor responsible for organising them felt they could become a regular source of potential topics. By identifying problems, the workshops can highlight issues where more information is needed. This process of discussion may better suit conditions of limited time, capacity and motivation, so increasing identification of research questions by service delivery staff.

4.2.4 Summary

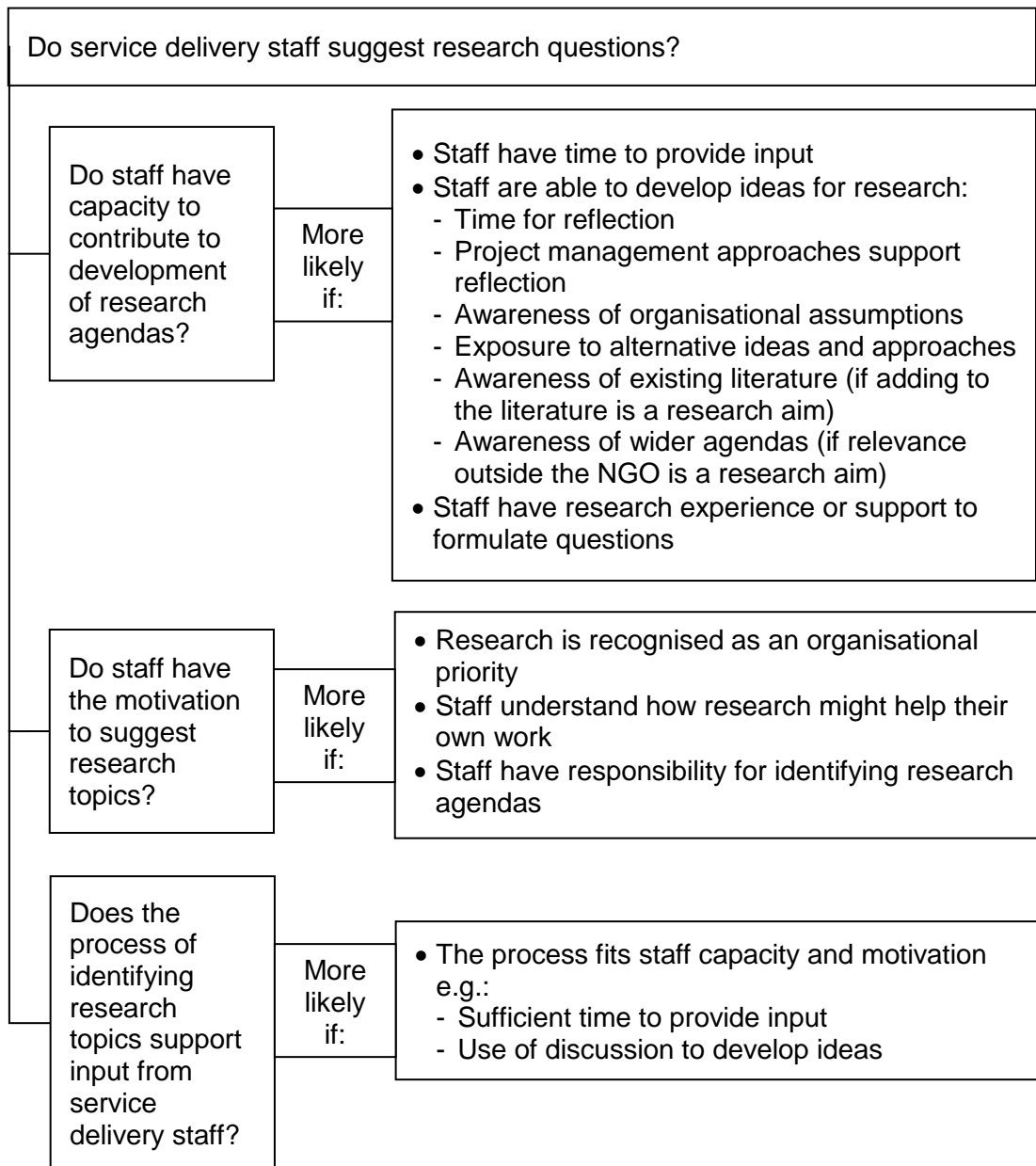
Input to research agendas from service delivery staff may be constrained by insufficient capacity and motivation to identify questions and engage in discussions about research. Rather than putting NGO staff in “an excellent position to ask the ‘right’ questions” (Medicus Mundi International, 2009 p.4), involvement in service delivery might not be enough to prompt research ideas, and can indeed limit capacity to identify and suggest research topics. On the latter, hectic service delivery schedules can reduce time to contribute to research agendas and to reflect on potential research topics. Immersion in service delivery might also counter critical thinking about

effectiveness or alternatives through a focus on meeting targets. In terms of involvement in service delivery being insufficient, the case NGOs' experiences suggest staff may also require wider exposure, research skills and motivation to identify research questions. A lack of exposure beyond service delivery might limit awareness of assumptions or potential alternatives, and reduce knowledge of wider discussions where research could contribute. It can also mean staff are unfamiliar with existing literature that could answer their questions, such that service delivery knowledge gaps are not necessarily research gaps. In NGOs with limited research experience, lack of skills to formulate questions may further reduce capacity to propose research ideas. This situation can be compounded by low prioritisation of research among service delivery staff, reflecting an organisational focus on service delivery and structures that place responsibility for research elsewhere. Input may be further reduced through processes for requesting research ideas that do not support prioritisation and reflection, such as relying on email. These different barriers interact. For example, hectic schedules force prioritisation of activities, and this combines with the lower value placed on research to reduce staff input.

These constraints do not mean service delivery staff never suggest research topics or that research is unrelated to service delivery experience. However, they help explain the limited response to requests for research ideas in Chalk. These processes also enable identification of research questions by research staff and senior managers, who have more exposure, research skills and responsibility for identifying research topics. This capacity to generate research ideas among those somewhat removed from daily service delivery lends some weight to Booth's suggestion that sometimes, "those who are relatively uninvolved may well have a clearer vision than those who are in the thick of the struggle" (1994b p.11). Similarly, these conditions may help explain Garrett's observation, noted in Chapter 1, that external researchers sometimes suggest questions on programme effectiveness not identified by NGO staff (Garrett, 2004). Without organisational processes to support reflection, discuss questions and prioritise research, frontline service delivery staff may be poorly positioned to identify research topics.

These conclusions are summarised in Figure 3, which indicates conditions likely to support identification of research topics by service delivery staff.

Figure 3: Conditions affecting whether service delivery staff suggest potential research questions



4.3 Control over the research agenda

Previous sections have considered NGOs' ideas about relevant research agendas and whether those involved in service delivery can identify research questions. This section examines whether NGOs can follow these agendas and take these questions forward. Whatever their ideas about ideal research topics, NGOs may lack choice in their research agendas. They may face obligations to undertake research that they do not consider a priority, and constraints that prevent desired research being undertaken. In

this section I discuss two related aspects that affect NGOs' control over their research agenda: relationships with NGO headquarters and donors, and financial position.

4.3.1 External approval and requirements for research

Input to research agendas from outside the NGO may be sought and welcomed, as discussed in 4.1.3 in relation to consultation with government and academic partners. However, sometimes external input acts as an obligation or constraint. This applies particularly when input comes from organisations that have financial power or decision-making authority over the NGO. Their influence operates through the external organisation requesting or requiring research on particular topics, and through their approval for topics proposed by the NGOs. I examine this influence below in relation to input from INGO headquarters and donors.

The influence of INGO headquarters on country office research agendas

Headquarters offices have a particular influence on research agendas in Marl. This influence works partly through the regional and international headquarters proposing research topics, particularly for multi-country studies organised by the headquarters where the Malawi office is asked to participate. These headquarters suggestions may be welcomed and considered relevant. For example, programme and research staff in Malawi spoke positively about a study on blood testing that was initiated by the headquarters. These proposals are invitations or requests, and can be rejected by the team in Malawi. The research coordinator emphasised that suggestions from the headquarters are considered in relation to what the Malawi office sees as country priorities:

“We always have to balance the needs of the country with the larger Marl objectives. [...] Doing cross-country analyses can be very powerful, but it should not be at the expense of the country in which you're currently in, it should only be in addition.”

However, while these proposals could be rejected, staff in Malawi appear to feel some obligation to accept headquarters suggestions, even when they do not see them as research priorities. This hesitation to refuse proposals from the headquarters is reflected in comments from the research officer about a multi-country HIV study: “I didn't even think it was so great, but we were asked to do it”.

As well as initiating research, Marl's international headquarters affects research agendas in Malawi through authorisation for topics proposed by the Malawi team. Following the annual planning process within Malawi, the programme director takes proposals for research (and other activities) to the international headquarters for approval. As explained by the research coordinator, “they basically debate and defend

the research that they want to do in Malawi”. As with requests for research by the headquarters, this approval involves dialogue, not simple imposition of decisions by the headquarters. The coordinator emphasised that approval for research “was always open for discussion”. This headquarters review was discussed by staff in Malawi as a reasonable process, with outcomes depending partly on whether the Malawi programme director could “give good reasons and good justifications” [research coordinator]. The process involves criteria that staff in Malawi see as valuable, including aspects discussed in 4.1.2 such as existing literature and international relevance, and research underway in other Marl country programmes, to avoid duplication. Most proposals put forward by the Malawi team have been accepted: “a lot of our research ideas, we got the go, we got the green light for them” [research coordinator]. However, even though this approval process has not constrained Marl Malawi’s research agenda in ways they consider unreasonable, it means their research agenda is not:

“anything we want, it has to be approved by our technical team. [...] So it has a screening.” [programme director]

This influence of the regional and international headquarters on Marl Malawi’s research agenda means research questions are not identified only through their own service delivery experience. As described in 4.1.1, the organisational research policy and staff in Malawi emphasise that questions should come from programme level service delivery experience. However, as suggested above and acknowledged by Marl staff in Malawi, although the country programme has the “largest input” to the research agenda, identification of research questions is in practice “multidirectional” [research coordinator].

Organisational structures affect the influence of international offices on research agendas. As indicated in Chapter 3 introducing the NGOs, Marl’s European and regional offices are headquarters that approve and fund activities in Malawi. The structure in Chalk, the other international NGO, is more decentralised. A UK staff member explained that Chalk “have a lot more resources, a lot more capacity within our Malawi country office than we do in the UK”, and that country offices “have authority to develop their own work”. The difference was clear in comments from the NGOs’ country directors. Referring to the headquarters, Marl’s director said that “I’m not the boss, I just coordinate the work in Malawi – there are lots of people above me”. In contrast, Chalk Malawi’s director emphasised that the UK office “don’t tell us what to do”. This organisational structure puts control over the research agenda with Chalk’s Malawi office. This was apparent in conversations with staff in Malawi, where there was no reference to suggestions or requests from the UK office. It was stated directly by the

Chalk UK staff member, who leads on research within the UK office:

“The bulk of resources, and I suppose the bulk of power really, sits within the Malawi programme. So our Malawi office is able to develop their own links with research institutions, their own research agenda, their own research priorities.”

When international NGOs are more decentralised, with financial and decision-making control at country level, their international offices are likely to have less influence on research agendas. This in turn could contribute to a greater role for country-level service delivery experience in research agendas.

Donor influence on research agendas

While Marl’s financial and administrative structure means the headquarters influences their research agenda, in other NGOs, relationships with donors affect research topics. Donor influence on NGO research agendas has been identified among other NGOs, as noted in my discussion of the literature in Chapter 1 (Mannan, 2006; Bazán et al., 2008; Beaulieu, 2010; Schwarz, 2010a). This influence is unsurprising given that donor power over NGO activities is frequently discussed within the wider NGO literature, and often criticised as overriding local priorities (Edwards & Hulme, 1996; Anderson et al., 2012; Wallace & Porter, 2013). A similar picture of donor control is described for NGOs in Malawi (Barber & Bowie, 2008; Watkins et al., 2012). Donors’ interests affect research agendas within Flint, Clay and Chalk, the case NGOs that depend primarily on donor funding. Their experiences suggest the extent of donor influence varies, from a more collaborative process of consultation to situations where research topics are seen as imposed. The extent of donor control seems to reflect the approach of particular donors and NGOs’ financial dependence, with some donors following a more open approach and some NGOs better placed to refuse donor suggestions. This continuum is described below through examples indicating three levels of donor control and NGO choice.

In the first situation, there are no starting parameters from the donor, but donors are consulted and their interests influence the topics proposed by NGOs. This applies to Chalk’s research under the District Development Project. Chalk are required to discuss possible research topics with the donor as part of contract management. The research manager and donor emphasise that the donor does not tell Chalk what research to do. Reflecting a strong partnership between this donor and Chalk, dating back over a decade, Chalk are able to discuss options and see what is of shared interest. Despite this mutual respect, the donor’s interests affect Chalk’s selection of research topics. Indeed, some staff see the donor as too influential, asking “who drives that research? How has the topic been identified? Is it an issue as an organisation, or is it an issue for

the donor?” [programme manager]. The potential constraint on Chalk’s choices is clear in an email from the research manager, asking staff for thoughts on potential research topics. He notes in relation to one topic that the donor “may or may not go for it” and says another option “may appeal to [the donor]”. Here, donor influence operates through Chalk proposing research that they think would be of interest to the donor, rather than the donor suggesting or rejecting topics. Chalk are not forced to undertake research they consider irrelevant, and all the research under the District Development Project has been of interest to at least some staff in Chalk. However, some topics were selected partly because the donor works on these issues, and the need for donor agreement limits what research can be undertaken.

The second situation involves more initial restrictions, with donors setting a broad agenda within which NGOs can propose research topics. One example is Flint’s research on counselling needs among young people, undertaken as part of a network project on reproductive health. As explained by one of the Flint staff who led this research, the broad outlines of the project were developed by the immediate funder, an INGO:

“If you look at the whole project, it was a project or an idea to start up a network from the funders. [...] They had the conceptual framework of what sort of network we want, what issues do we want them to tackle.”

However, NGO network members identified what they wanted to do within this framework: “when it came down to the implementation, we had to be specific on what we want to do as Flint”. The project included support for each NGO member to conduct a needs assessment. As with the overall project, the parameters for this research were determined by the funders, but individual NGOs could choose specific topics. The research had:

“to be within the broader aim on education, sexual and reproductive health and HIV and AIDS. [...] And as individual organisations, we were supposed to further explore and expand on what our ideas are going to be.”

Flint’s decision to focus on counselling needs reflected their service delivery priorities. The research is valued by Flint staff, so as with Chalk’s experience, donor interests have not displaced those of the NGO. The donor’s focus was sufficiently aligned with Flint’s priorities and their approach sufficiently flexible that Flint could choose a research topic they saw as useful. However, the donor framework, combined with Flint’s financial dependence on donors, restricted the possible research agenda.

The third situation involves direct and restrictive donor influence, through making particular research mandatory. This was described by a Flint programme manager, who noted that some research is “just donor driven type of research projects”. As

explained by a former Flint manager, it is:

“not that we are doing it as our programme, but probably we are supposed, we are expected to do that, to provide baseline information, or the network demands us to carry out research.”

Although described particularly clearly in Flint, the other NGOs that rely on funding from institutional donors (Chalk and Clay) also noted that some research is a donor requirement. This applies most often to situation analyses or baseline surveys at the start of project implementation. However, there are also examples of donors requiring other kinds of research, particularly within advocacy projects in Flint. This research is part of the project design, and the donor’s research requirements have to be accepted if the NGO wants the funding that comes with the project. As with the situations of greater donor flexibility, this ‘donor driven’ research can be appreciated by NGO staff. For example, Chalk, Flint and Clay all saw situation analyses as useful and complained that donors sometimes refuse to fund such research. However, in these situations, NGOs have little choice over the research topic if they want the donor’s funding.

These different situations suggest the extent and nature of donor influence on research agendas vary. In all these situations, however, financial dependence on donors means research agendas reflect more than NGOs’ ideas about priority topics. The need for donor approval can restrict potential research topics through NGOs identifying subjects they see as linked to donor agendas or through donors providing initial parameters, as shown in the first two situations above. As indicated by the third situation, donor requirements may also make some research topics obligatory. This donor influence is a further way that research agendas do not just reflect questions from NGOs’ service delivery experience.

4.3.2 Availability of funding for research

Research questions that come from service delivery experience may not be pursued if NGOs cannot secure funding for this research. Availability of funding is affected by the relationships with donors and headquarters offices discussed above. This section focuses on whether funding can be obtained rather than how these relationships influence selection of topics. Funding affects all stages of research, and I examine availability of funds and factors influencing this in more detail in the next chapter, as part of discussions about NGOs’ research capacity. However, I highlight funding briefly here because of the way it affects research agendas and NGOs’ ability to pursue questions arising from service delivery experience.

The need to secure funding from either donors or international headquarters affects

research agendas across the NGOs, but their experiences vary sharply with different financial situations. The clearest examples of funding as a constraint come from Flint, which as previously indicated depends almost entirely on donor funding. Several ideas for research, some based on service delivery experience, were delayed or not taken forward due to lack of funding. For example, discussing one planned study, the director explained that it had not started because “the challenge is that the partner wants us to raise most of the resources and that’s quite heavy on our part”. Flint invest substantial time in securing donor funding for their work, in an increasingly competitive funding environment. Finding research funding is an unpredictable and arduous process. In this situation, it may not be feasible to pursue research topics that come from service delivery. Combined with the influence of donors in proposing research topics, this need for funding means Flint’s idea that research questions come from service delivery is somewhat aspirational. As described at the start of this chapter, senior managers suggest research questions arise in the course of service delivery. Some of Flint’s research topics have come directly from service delivery experience in this way. However, their dependence on donor funding means most research that is taken forwards comes from opportunities presented by donors or donor requirements, while ideas for research generated within Flint sometimes founder.

When funding is available, the amounts available affect what research can be done. This was indicated in discussions about appropriate research in Chalk. Funding for some research is already secured as part of the District Development Project grant. However, the budget for each study is limited, and this affects which research ideas are pursued. As explained by the research manager, selection of topics considers whether the research “is something we can get an affordable competent person to do”. The research is usually done by consultants, and has to be a topic that can be completed within a limited number of consultancy days by a consultant who charges modest rates. Some topics of interest to Chalk service delivery staff are judged impractical given available funds. For example, some research questions on water and sanitation were considered too expensive. In these situations where funding is available but limited, some research is possible, but financial constraints affect which topics are viable.

Marl’s financial situation is very different. As a large international NGO that receives core funding from its headquarters, Marl has much more freedom to take forward research that it chooses. The director explained that research funding is included in the annual forecast if plans are known at that stage, and they can request additional funding during the year: one of the “nice things about Marl” is that “if you need something and you can justify it, you get it”. Although funding has to be approved by

the headquarters, as discussed in the previous section, this internal funding is more secure than applying to donors, and approval is likely. As explained by the programme director, lack of funding has not prevented any research:

“My experience is, all the ideas we had, they were implemented. [...] In Marl we are very, very lucky to have that flexibility.”

The only financial limitation she noted was that:

“Lately, due to the international crisis, they are putting up more constraints, and they don’t want us to get involved in long-term operational research studies. So they say commit yourself until 2015 but don’t go beyond that.”

These comments come from an interview in early 2013. Marl’s ability to develop three-year research plans despite the global recession stands in sharp contrast to the situation in Flint, where funded research involves periods of a few months to a year. When NGOs have this financial flexibility, questions arising from service delivery can be translated into research projects more easily.

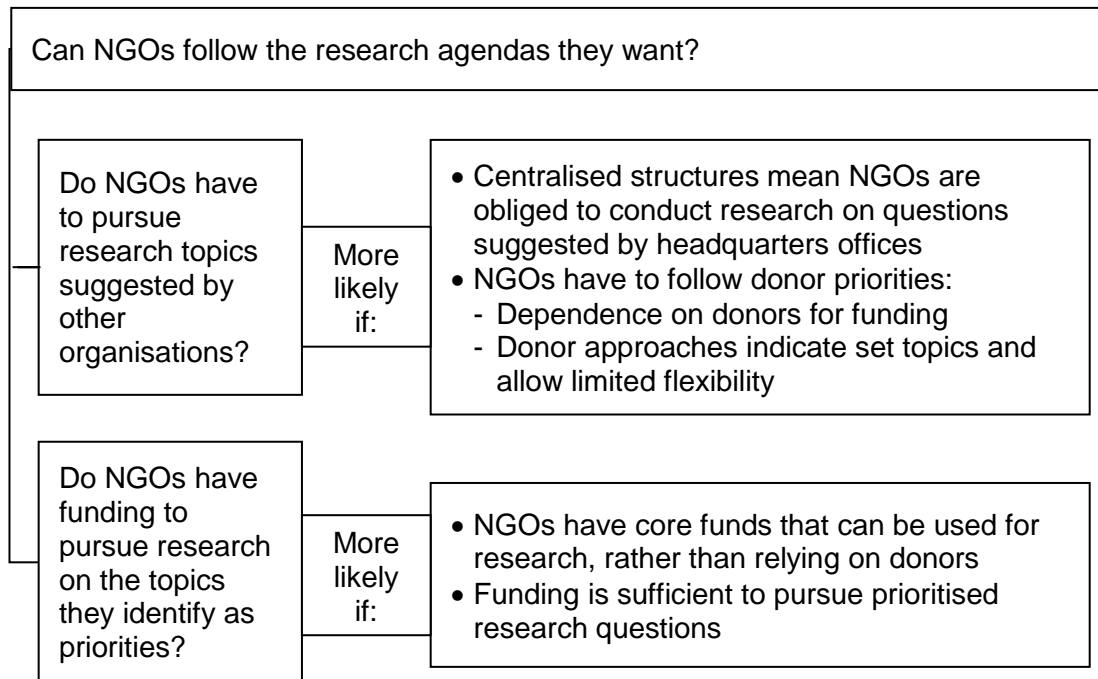
4.3.3 Summary

Dependence on external organisations and financial constraints mean NGOs’ actual research agendas differ from their ideas about what research would be useful. Donors and headquarters offices that control funding or have decision-making power affect what research is undertaken. Their interests may limit the range of topics that NGOs can take forward, or these actors may propose or require research on particular issues. Research topics proposed by headquarters offices and donors are sometimes welcomed by NGO staff. However, this headquarters or donor influence means NGOs’ research agendas must accommodate these interests and cannot just respond to questions arising in service delivery. Research agendas are also affected by funding, including absolute availability of funding for any research, and adequate budgets to pursue prioritised topics.

These constraints vary between NGOs. Organisations with more financial flexibility have more control over their research agenda: they have funding to take forward research that they choose and less need to follow donor interests. This increases scope to pursue research questions that come from service delivery (or from other sources that they see as relevant). NGOs that rely heavily on donor funding have less control: they may be unable to take forward research questions from service delivery, and be obliged to conduct research on topics suggested by donors. Donor approaches and organisational structures also affect the constraints, with more NGO country office control likely when donors follow more flexible approaches and NGOs have more decentralised structures. Figure 4 summarises these conclusions, indicating conditions

that affect whether NGOs are able to control their research agendas and pursue questions that come from service delivery.

Figure 4: Conditions affecting NGOs' control over their research agenda



4.4 The perceived relevance of completed research

This section considers whether questions originating through service delivery lead to relevant research findings. I discussed relevance in 4.1 in relation to NGOs' selection criteria for proposed research. As suggested there, questions identified through service delivery are not always seen as relevant topics for research, because these questions may not meet other criteria considered important for relevance (such as contributing to wider discussions). This section focuses on perceptions of completed research. As indicated in the literature review in Chapter 1, some writers suggest that research findings will be relevant when the questions come from problems identified in service delivery (e.g. Zachariah et al., 2010). The case NGOs' experiences suggest the relationship between origin of research questions and perceived relevance of findings is more complex.

Relevance is a complicated and contested concept. As described in Chapter 1, academic discussions within international development and beyond highlight the difficulties of judging and defining relevance, and the political and economic factors that

affect these definitions. This complexity was noted by Chalk staff in a group discussion about the value of research. As they suggested, “there’s a lot in relevance”. As a standard, “maybe relevance is too overarching”, and it needs “unpacking”. In this section, I focus on the NGOs’ perceptions of relevance, and in some cases their comments on the views of external stakeholders. NGO staff have a highly instrumental understanding of relevance, seeing research as designed to directly inform policy or practice (Weiss, 1998; Sumner & Tribe, 2008). This is reflected in Chalk’s concern for change “on the ground” discussed in 4.1.3, and in ideas across the case NGOs about the prioritisation and purpose of research, described in Chapter 3. For these NGOs, research should have immediate value for service delivery or advocacy. For example, the research coordinator in Marl said research “feeds directly into our programme activities”, and Flint’s director stressed that they want research “that focuses on the work that we are doing, immediately” and “directly informs our programming”. Some academics have questioned relevance as a goal for research, particularly when considered in these instrumental terms (May, 2005; Perry, 2006). They see a focus on use in policy or practice as potentially damaging space for reflection, critique and independence. Indeed, some suggest “[i]t is an open question how far down the path of relevance researchers can travel without putting something of value at stake” (Henig, 2008 p.360). In the development sector, the concern with instrumental relevance has been criticised as potentially sidelining deeper and more critical political analysis (Harriss-White, 2007; Bazán et al., 2008). Here, however, I accept the NGOs’ instrumental definition of relevance. As well as reflecting the NGOs’ research aims, this is important because those who suggest involvement in service delivery can bring research relevance understand it in these instrumental terms (Kidwell Drake et al., 2010; Zachariah et al., 2010).

In the following sections, I examine two issues that mean a question arising from service delivery experience is no guarantee of relevant findings: the subjective nature of relevance, and the influence of the research process on perceptions of relevance.

4.4.1 Varied views on the relevance of research

Research initiated by an NGO based on their service delivery experience and seen as relevant by some people may be considered irrelevant by some staff or external partners. As recognised by Chalk staff, “relevance is subjective”. Different staff and organisations have different priorities and interests, and this affects their views on the value of research findings.

Varied ideas about the relevance of particular studies among NGO staff are a particular issue for Chalk. Their broad organisational agenda means staff have diverse interests (for example, some specialise in HIV, others in agriculture or sanitation). Staff sometimes have limited awareness of research gaps in other sectors, and see research on their own subject as a greater priority. Their expertise in specific areas also makes it harder to understand research on other topics. This discourages staff from reading research reports and engaging with the findings:

“The moment an issue goes a bit more technical then you find that it’s only people that are conversant with that field that would feel comfortable. [...] The moment people read two paragraphs and they can’t understand, well why bother?”
[programme manager]

Even when questions come from one area of Chalk’s service delivery, the broad agenda means staff in other programmes may not understand the findings or see them as useful. In Marl and Chalk, there were no comments about internally-initiated research being irrelevant. Further interviews may have revealed different opinions. However, it seems likely that their narrower organisational agendas make research more easily relevant for all staff.

Views on relevance can also vary between NGOs and external partners. Some of Marl’s research is seen as useful by some external organisations. For example, the research lead in a national health agency described Marl as a “centre of excellence” for research and praised the value of their reports. Marl’s findings have also been circulated by donors around email networks in Malawi, with positive comments about their value. Interest in their findings among some external organisations was described by Marl’s research officer. She explained that their research on the community approach for HIV treatment “has generated a lot of interest” among government and donors. Similarly, following research on a peer support programme, “several organisations asked for the report”. Donors were interested in these studies partly because their focus matched donor priorities of community involvement and cost-saving. However, external interest varies between studies and organisations. Describing district government interest in the research on peer support, the research officer said there was:

“not much really, because it was so much Marl projects. [...] Marl was paying for the clients, for the staff [...] The district said from the beginning ‘we will not be able to take that over’, so their interest in any evaluation was minimal.”

This research was not of interest to district government because it assessed a service delivery approach that they cannot afford, reflecting the long-standing issue of NGO projects as “islands of excellence” (Uvin et al., 2000 p.1409). As this suggests, when other organisations have different agendas and priorities to NGOs, they may see

research based on NGOs' service delivery experience as irrelevant. These different interests within NGOs and between organisations mean that any research, whether or not based on service delivery experience, is likely to be considered more relevant by some groups than others.

4.4.2 The influence of the research process on relevance

The perceived relevance of research findings is also affected by the research process. Experience from the case NGOs suggests that consultation at the planning stage, the quality of data collection, analysis and writing, and the form of dissemination all affect the relevance of research findings. This influence of the research process means that relevance depends on more than the source of research questions. These three aspects of consultation, quality and dissemination are described in turn below.

Consultation on research design means that whatever the source of overall research questions, the exact focus and approach can be checked and adapted to suit the interests of potential research users, so increasing perceived relevance. The influence of consultation on perceptions of relevance was suggested by the discussion about NGOs seeking external input to research questions in 4.1.3. Chalk's consultation with government goes beyond research questions to consider aspects of design such as case study selection, and provides a positive example. With their study on government structures in particular, consultation was seen as creating government interest in the research findings. For example, the consultant who undertook this research said the ministry was "very proud" of the final report, and related this to Chalk's willingness to adapt the research focus and approach to suit government interests: Chalk "went by the convenience of the ministry and what they were looking for", considering government views in research design.

The effect of consultation on perceived relevance is also seen with research proposed or required by headquarters offices or donors, the situation discussed in 4.3.1. A negative example comes from Marl's multi-country HIV study, initiated by the headquarters. The research officer leading this study in Malawi felt it may be irrelevant for their national agenda because it assessed an approach likely to be discontinued:

"It will compare the hospital and the health centre and the improved health posts. It's questionable because the health posts may not exist for much longer, but that was how it was set up."

The difficulties partly reflect a lack of consultation, which meant the research officer could not advise those developing the proposal about local circumstances:

"They [headquarters office] wrote the original proposal, and that was originally

shared with the programme director, and then I was handed it over when it was already set up.”

Research plans were developed with insufficient input from those working in the area, reducing the study’s perceived relevance. This role of consultation for incorporating local information and so supporting relevance is also seen with research initiated by donors. As discussed in 4.3.1, some research is required by donors, particularly situation analyses or baseline surveys, and donors sometimes lead this research. Clay staff are happy for donors to lead these studies as long as Clay are consulted:

“Because we are here implementing, I think we are the ones who know more of what is happening. And if the donor just comes, chances of maybe having tools that are not really addressing many issues are likely to be high.” [project officer]

While there often is consultation, both Clay and Flint gave examples of research undertaken by donors with little input from the NGO staff, and where findings were not considered useful. As described by a Clay manager:

“We have had some other research or baselines that have been purely done by the donor. I remember one that when we started implementing and we looked at our indicators and the results we were saying ‘ah we don’t have a base for this indicator, we don’t have a base for this indicator’. So it was like we were not consulted at the very beginning.”

With these examples, Clay and Flint’s concern is not the overall research topic, but rather the specific design. As with the examples from Chalk and Marl, this suggests perceived relevance depends on more than the research question.

Another aspect of the research process that affects perceptions of relevance is the quality of data collection, analysis and report writing. Where this process is weak, perceived relevance can decline during research if it does not deliver expected outcomes. This happened with Chalk research on an agricultural scheme. Some staff who saw the topic as relevant felt the final report was less useful. Although data was collected on areas they saw as important, staff felt the consultant did not adequately analyse the data or address the terms of reference in the final report:

“I think the analysis didn’t do justice to the data. It was all there but maybe how in the end it really transcribed into knowledge, I think there was a lot to be desired.” [programme advisor]

The topic was relevant, but research findings did not adequately answer staff questions, making the final research less relevant. This significance of research quality for relevance has been highlighted in relation to international development research (Haddad, 2007). Again, it means research questions are not the only influence on relevance.

A final aspect of the process that affected views of relevance is the nature of dissemination. In particular, perceptions of relevance may be greater when findings are

discussed with staff to explain their purpose and how results could be applied. This was suggested by conversations in Chalk. Internal dissemination currently relies largely on circulating research reports. This seems to reduce perceived relevance. Staff only read the reports if they think the research is relevant, so sometimes dismiss it as irrelevant without knowing the findings. In several cases, Chalk staff said particular studies were unhelpful without having read the reports. In addition, when staff read reports rather than discussing them with others, they may not understand why the research is useful or how it could be applied, particularly given different areas of expertise and levels of comprehension. Some Chalk staff suggested that sharing findings through meetings would ensure more people see value in research findings and understand their implications:

“If you take that approach of making a presentation, engage in a discussion, it creates an environment where issues can be brought to a certain common level, that more people would get involved in making a contribution and the like.”
[programme manager]

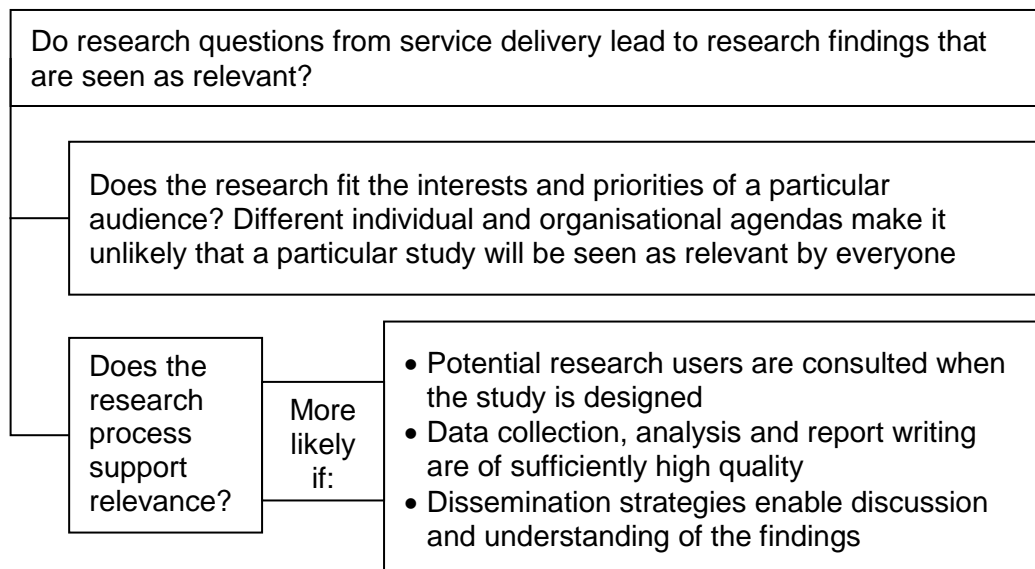
This approach would fit the relational nature of learning noted in 4.2.3 with respect to approaches for identifying research topics. Discussion might ensure staff know what research is actually about, and help them understand why it may be important. The value of such discussion for increasing perceived relevance was suggested in a group interview. A staff member who originally felt one study was not useful changed his mind during discussion with other staff when they explained the knowledge gap it addressed. This influence of dissemination approaches on relevance is noted by others, with criticism of NGOs’ tendency to rely on written reports with inaccessible formats and language (Edwards, 1994b), and suggestions that clear presentation can make academics’ findings more relevant to practitioners (Hulme, 1994). As with the effects of consultation and research quality, the influence of dissemination approaches on relevance means research findings may be considered unhelpful even when research questions come from service delivery experience.

4.4.3 Summary

The case NGOs’ experiences suggest that the source of research questions does not determine the perceived relevance of the findings. Perceptions of relevance vary between people and organisations. Research identified within the NGO and related to service delivery problems may not match the interests of all staff or external partners. In addition, perceived relevance depends on the research process, not just the questions. One aspect of this process is consultation at the planning stage: adequate consultation can mean research initiated by other organisations is considered relevant by NGO staff, and vice versa, that research initiated by NGO staff is considered

relevant by others. Other aspects of the process that affect relevance include the quality of research production and dissemination. When research is considered low quality or dissemination formats do not foster understanding, research may be seen as irrelevant even if the research questions were considered useful. In this way, relevance can be “lost in translation” through inappropriate dissemination, as well as “lost before translation” through choice of research topic (Shapiro et al., 2007 p.249). This subjective and complex nature of relevance means there is no straightforward link from questions identified through service delivery to relevant research findings. Figure 5 summarises these conclusions.

Figure 5: Conditions affecting whether questions from service delivery lead to relevant research findings



4.5 Conclusion

The case NGOs' experiences suggest that relationships between service delivery, research agendas and relevance are more uncertain and variable than suggested by some of those calling for NGO engagement in research. While service delivery can provide an opportunity for generating research questions, the findings indicate variation in whether relying on service delivery as a source of questions suits NGOs' aims; in whether involvement in service delivery supports identification of questions that lead to relevant research; and in NGOs' capacities to use this opportunity.

On the first of these findings, experiences from the case organisations indicate variation in the extent to which NGOs want to rely on their service delivery experience for developing research agendas. Generating questions through service delivery does

not always fit NGOs' research aims, or can be insufficient to meet these aims. Even when service delivery is a valued source of questions, NGOs seem likely to consider additional criteria and sources of ideas when identifying useful topics. These organisational choices are not apparent in literature emphasising the value of NGOs' service delivery as a source of questions. However, they fit guidelines on research prioritisation, which suggest considering criteria such as existing literature and consulting different stakeholders (Viergever et al., 2010). This attention to additional criteria and interest in other sources of ideas suggests NGOs' service delivery is neither a sufficient nor essential basis for identifying relevant research topics.

The second main finding is that generating research questions from service delivery experience is more difficult than implied by those who suggest service delivery practitioners can identify research topics, and does not guarantee the expected benefit of relevant findings. In relation to difficulty in generating questions from service delivery, the findings suggest involvement in service delivery is not enough to enable identification of research topics. Indeed, for individual staff, immersion in service delivery can limit ideas for research as a focus on delivery reduces time and space for reflection. Although some service delivery staff do identify potential research questions through their work, this depends on aspects such as motivation, capacity, and an appropriate process to request or encourage research ideas. Questions do not simply emerge from service delivery; this requires particular conditions and support. Some of these conditions are noted in existing literature about NGO research, particularly skills to define research questions (CORE Group, 2008; Zachariah et al., 2010), but the case NGOs' experiences point to a wider range of factors. By examining these conditions, the findings help reconcile claims that service delivery practitioners are either in the best position to identify relevant topics (e.g. WHO, 2009; Zachariah et al., 2010), or sometimes lack the required insight (Booth, 1994b).

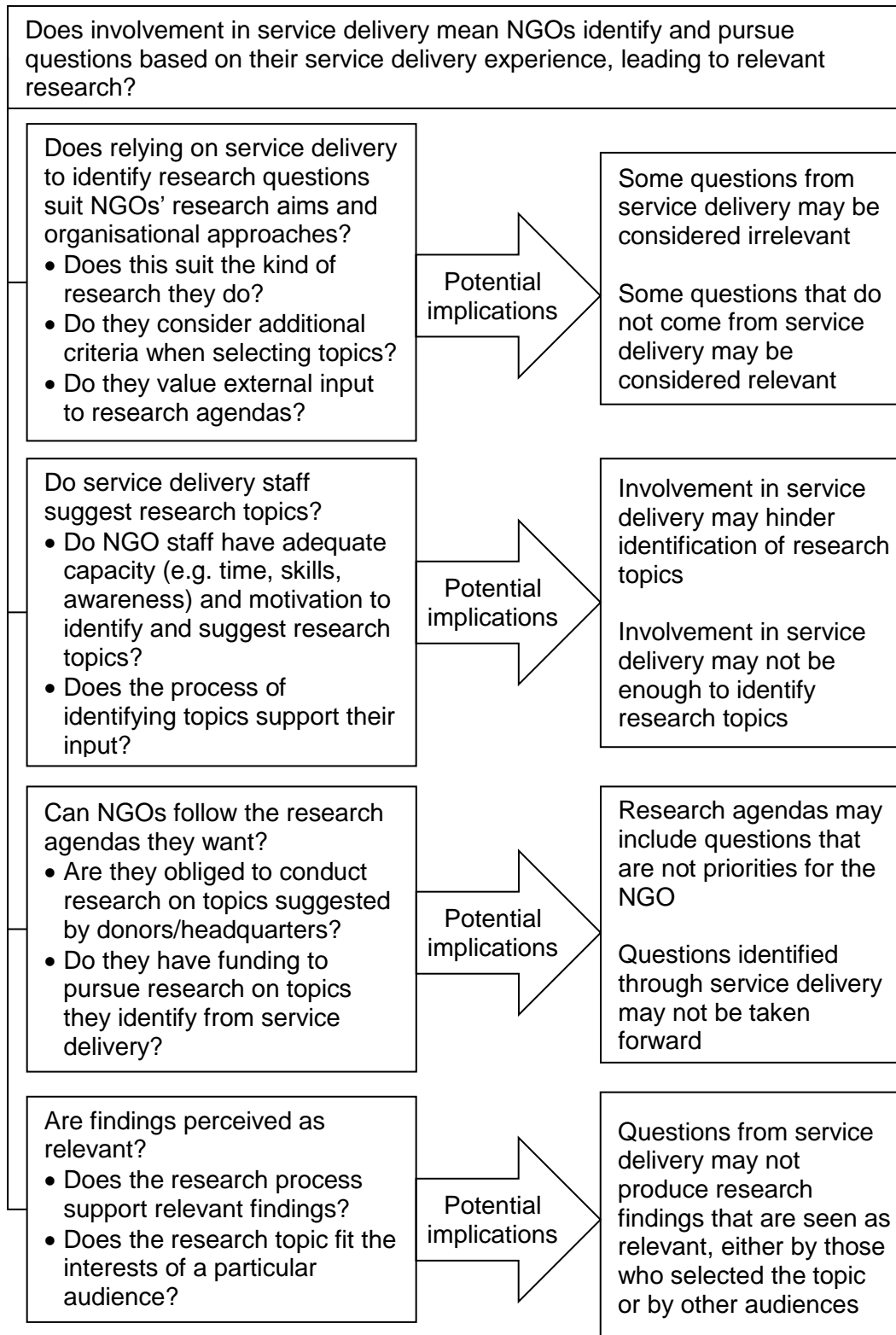
In relation to expected benefits, questions that come from service delivery do not necessarily produce relevant research findings. This is partly because relevance is subjective and priorities vary within NGOs and between organisations. The ambiguous and subjective nature of relevance is widely discussed in literature on research, but not clearly acknowledged by some of those who suggest NGOs can identify relevant questions. Perceptions of relevance also depend on the research process, including consultation during planning stages, research quality and dissemination strategies. Consequently, the perceived relevance of research findings depends on more than the research question. As with NGOs' attention to multiple criteria when selecting research topics, these dynamics mean that identifying questions through service delivery

experience is not sufficient for relevance.

The third overarching finding is that when service delivery does generate research questions that NGOs want to pursue, NGOs vary in their ability to follow research agendas that match these priorities. Relationships with international headquarters or donors can mean NGOs' research agendas include questions that they do not see as priorities, while insufficient funding sometimes means NGOs cannot pursue the questions they identify. Research agendas in all NGOs consider costs, but for NGOs without core funding, financial constraints mean greater compromise between their research priorities and donor interests. This influence of donors confirms suggestions in existing literature (Mannan, 2006; Bazán et al., 2008; Beaulieu, 2010; Schwarz, 2010a). Experience from the case NGOs contributes understanding about the different ways this influence can operate, and the variation between donors and NGO contexts.

These conclusions are summarised in Figure 6. As indicated in this diagram and the preceding discussion, the findings suggest the role of service delivery as a source of research questions varies with NGOs' aims, the nature of opportunities provided by service delivery, and NGO capacity. The same three aspects affect the role of service delivery as a source of research data, the topic for the next chapter.

Figure 6: Conditions affecting use of service delivery as a source of research questions



5 Using service delivery activities and monitoring records to generate research data

This chapter considers the role of NGOs' service delivery as a source of research data. As described in Chapter 1, the potential to use data from service delivery is given as a reason for NGOs to engage in research and for academics to collaborate with NGOs. I examine this potential by considering two ways service delivery may support generation of research data. First, service delivery activities could provide data through testing new approaches or learning about existing interventions. Second, monitoring records collected for NGOs' service delivery could be used as data for research. As explained in Chapter 1, both approaches are highlighted as opportunities within discussions of NGO involvement in research.

The case NGOs' experiences confirm that both service delivery activities and monitoring records can be valued resources for producing research data. However, their experiences also suggest service delivery is sometimes an irrelevant or inadequate source of data. Further, using service delivery to produce data may require difficult compromises, and NGOs may be unable to capitalise on opportunities for research provided by service delivery. Differences in aims, capacities and the nature of service delivery bring variation in the extent to which case NGOs draw on their service delivery as a source of research data.

To explain this and structure the chapter, I consider progressive conditions needed for service delivery to be used as a source of research data: whether NGOs aim to use service delivery in this way, whether service delivery can provide data for research, either in its existing form or through modification, and NGOs' capacity to use data from service delivery for research. The first half of the chapter brings together the former aspects to consider whether service delivery provides data that meet NGOs' research aims and answers their research questions. I look first at whether service delivery activities are a relevant source of data (5.1), then consider whether existing monitoring records provide information to answer research questions (5.2). As these sections suggest, service delivery may need adapting to support production of research data, and I consider scope to make these changes in 5.3. Even if service delivery can provide data that answer research questions, or can be changed to enable this, NGOs need capacity to use this opportunity. I consider this in the second half of the chapter (5.4), including aspects such as funding, time and skills.

To help interpretation of the chapter, I first clarify and delineate my focus, starting with the two ways service delivery might provide research data. In relation to use of monitoring records, by monitoring I mean ongoing collection of information to inform project management and assess progress (OECD-DAC, 2002). This contrasts with evaluation, which involves more occasional assessment of project processes and outcomes (OECD-DAC, 2002). Although evaluation reports could also provide research data, I concentrate on monitoring records because they were the focus when case NGO staff discussed use of service delivery M&E information for research. This is not a hard divide, as the same records may be used for evaluations, and distinctions between monitoring and evaluation varied. For example, Marl refer to their “M&E database”, which collects data on an ongoing basis to inform management decisions, but also provides information for project evaluation. By use of service delivery activities for generating data, I mean conducting research on programme activities (including service delivery approaches and technologies), during or after implementation, to learn about processes, effects, or conditions affecting outcomes. As described in Chapter 1, this overlaps with aspects of implementation, operational or action research, and with evaluation. Case NGO staff saw the studies that I analyse here as a separate activity to evaluation. However, as discussed in Chapter 1, the division between research and evaluation is debated and these studies could be categorised differently. The two approaches of using service delivery monitoring records and activities may overlap, with monitoring records providing data to learn from service delivery activities. However, service delivery activities can be examined without using monitoring records (instead using separate data collection), and monitoring records can answer other kinds of research questions (for example, indicating disease trends). Consequently, I discuss service delivery activities and monitoring records separately.

Another area for clarification is that my focus is whether NGOs’ research draws on service delivery activities and monitoring records, not whether NGOs use monitoring records or learn from service delivery activities. These are different questions, and my conclusions should not be read as addressing the latter. For example, Flint do not use monitoring records as data for research, but do use some monitoring records to inform programme management. Varied definitions of research complicate this divide. For example, Flint’s informal analysis of monitoring records might be considered research under some definitions. In line with my overall approach discussed in Chapter 1, I look only at use of service delivery data in more formal studies defined as research by NGO staff, not at other kinds of information generation and use.

Numerous factors affect use of data from service delivery. Given available space, I

focus on selected aspects. Within international development and beyond, there is considerable literature on technical and ethical questions around generating data from service delivery. For example, as described in Chapter 1, there are risks of bias when NGOs conduct research in project settings and debates about the ethics of using monitoring data for research. While recognising their importance, I largely avoid discussion of technical and ethical issues covered in this literature, focusing instead on aspects of organisational context that affect the perceived value of and potential to use data from service delivery.

5.1 Service delivery activities as a source of research data: relevance to research aims

Service delivery activities will only be a useful source of research data if they provide information that suits research aims. As described in Chapter 3, the case NGOs undertake different kinds of research, and aims vary between organisations and particular research projects. Data from service delivery activities do not meet all their research aims, creating varied interest in using service delivery as a source of data. In this section, I describe research aims where service delivery activities are considered a relevant data source, outlining two areas of testing new approaches and learning about existing activities. I then consider research aims where alternative or additional sources of data may be required.

5.1.1 Learning about service delivery approaches

NGOs' service delivery activities can provide relevant data when research is designed to learn about their service delivery. This is an aim for Chalk and Marl, the case NGOs most interested in using data from service delivery for research. For Marl, learning from service delivery is the main purpose of research, as described in Chapter 3. This is reflected in their international research policy's focus on 'operational research', described as often involving "lessons learnt" during implementation. Similarly, Chalk's Malawi country strategy includes research as one activity designed to support "learning [from] programme experience". Within this overall approach, there are several more specific aims where service delivery provides relevant data. These include two broad categories of testing new interventions and learning about existing activities, described in turn below.

Testing new or alternative approaches

One aim where service delivery activities may provide relevant data relates to

understanding the practical effectiveness of new interventions. With this aim, service delivery activities generate research data through examining approaches or technologies that are newly developed or new to the NGO and testing them on the ground. For example, Marl piloted a different approach to testing blood and new forms of community involvement in HIV treatment. Similarly, Chalk research includes studies to develop cheaper ways to make soap and construct latrines, field trials of new crop varieties, and the research on new renewable energy technology mentioned in Chapter 4. The aim of understanding effectiveness on the ground was indicated in research reports and conversations with staff. For example, a paper on the energy technology study explains that previous research was largely “laboratory based”, but the Malawi study examined effectiveness under “field conditions”. Similarly, discussing Chalk’s involvement in crop trials, a programme manager explained that they value partnership with agricultural research organisations because, although these organisations have:

“strong research capability, often I think the weak linkage is to real farmers. And so they can have their field trials at [the agricultural research institute] or wherever, but often what they’re weak on is actually having real farmers carrying out trials. And getting results which are taking into account the real difficulties of implementing these things in the field. So we’ve tried to link up with them much more.”

This potential to test new approaches under realistic conditions is highlighted by some of those emphasising the value of NGOs’ service delivery as a research site (Delisle et al., 2005; Kidwell Drake et al., 2010). It is also a primary rationale for research in service delivery settings more widely, within development, international health and beyond (Green, 2008; Peters et al., 2013; Quaglio et al., 2014). With this aim, service delivery activities are a relevant source of data.

Understanding existing service delivery

A second area where service delivery activities can provide relevant data relates to understanding existing interventions. Much Marl and Chalk research examines current service delivery activities. This research is often retrospective, but both NGOs have some prospective research. For example, Chalk assessed different makes of mosquito net by allocating two makes randomly during a net distribution programme.

As with testing new approaches, the value of research on existing activities reflects particular research aims. One important aim in Chalk and Marl is understanding whether their service delivery has the intended effects. For example, Marl’s research officer described her work as about “documenting programmes, finding out if they work, if they don’t work”. This is a primary rationale for research in Chalk, stressed by the country director:

“You find in our organisation, and we’re not alone in the development world, people

make assumptions and then they base multimillion pound and multimillion dollar interventions on those assumptions, and we don't do enough to challenge those assumptions."

Other staff also emphasised this research aim of checking and challenging existing approaches. This aim is demonstrated in Chalk's research on the impacts of an agricultural scheme, as explained by a programme manager:

"Technical and social design [are] done before [the schemes] are put in place, but we're not aware, in Malawi at least, of anything having been done post-implementation to see whether all of those impacts were actually valid."

The findings challenged ideas about effective approaches, helping to inform Chalk and others about design of future schemes.

As well as assessing programme effects, research on existing service delivery can help achieve aims around understanding barriers to progress. For example, a project manager explained that one aim of research on a service delivery approach where Chalk were encountering difficulties was "to find out what is it that we are missing". Examining ongoing activities can provide data to indicate "what are the things that are preventing us from getting it right", for example by learning about community perceptions of an intervention.

A further aim that may be met with data from existing service delivery involves demonstrating the effects of programme approaches to encourage their wider adoption. This aim is clearest in Flint. They have rarely undertaken research on service delivery activities, for reasons explained in 5.4 on capacity. However, some staff mentioned the potential value of this kind of research, and related this to evidencing programme success. For example, the director explained that he wanted to conduct research on Flint's service delivery because the findings could promote government interest in their approaches. To encourage this government action:

"you have to demonstrate certain things. And you can only do that by saying can we interview 10 to 15 people who have gone through that particular programme and say what has been the effectiveness of this."

As with checking effectiveness and understanding barriers, this aim of demonstrating programme effects makes service delivery a relevant source of data.

These aims related to understanding existing activities are significant for the emphasis on testing innovative strategies found in some discussions of NGO service delivery as a research site (e.g. Delisle et al., 2005; Kidwell Drake et al., 2010). The case NGOs' interest in understanding existing approaches suggests this focus on innovation is too narrow: aims of checking programme effects and assumptions, understanding barriers and documenting effects mean long-standing service delivery activities can provide

valued data. However, service delivery does not provide relevant data for all research aims, as I explain below.

5.1.2 Different research purposes: limits to service delivery activities as a relevant source of data

In the examples discussed above, NGOs' service delivery activities can provide data that suits research aims, either testing new approaches or learning about existing activities. NGOs' own service delivery activities may not provide relevant data for research with other aims, or may not be a sufficient basis for generating data.

Sometimes service delivery activities are not an appropriate source of data. As explained in relation to implementation research, service delivery activities are central to questions such as whether, how and why interventions work, but less relevant for some other research questions, such as identifying community views or needs to inform programme design (Peters et al., 2013). The latter is an aim for much research in Flint, Chalk and Clay, particularly situation analyses and needs assessments. For example, as described in Chapter 3, Clay's main research involves spending time in communities before activities begin to understand attitudes and practices regarding programme issues (such as barriers to education or perceptions of gender-based violence). As explained by the research manager, this research aims partly at "getting facts on the ground, real issues, before full implementation". Given this aim, learning about service delivery activities is not part of Clay's research model. Another area where NGOs' service delivery activities may not provide relevant data is when research aims to monitor government programmes. This is a focus for some research in Flint. For example, one project uses community monitoring to assess government services such as health facilities. This research aims to support an advocacy role of holding government to account, and data comes from government programmes rather than Flint's service delivery. With these aims of assessing community needs or monitoring government, service delivery activities may not provide relevant data. Consequently, service delivery is not a suitable source of data for all NGOs' research.

Sometimes NGOs' service delivery activities are not a sufficient source of data to meet research aims. Even when research is designed partly to learn about an NGO's own service delivery, there may be value in extending data collection beyond this.

Discussions with Marl and Chalk pointed to three potential benefits. First, collecting data beyond an NGO's own programmes can enable comparison between approaches. For example, research by Chalk on a household technology aimed to compare the

benefits of Chalk's technology against models used by other organisations. This aim could not be met only through data from Chalk's service delivery. Extending research beyond an NGO's own programmes supports learning about possible alternatives.

A second potential benefit is that broader data collection beyond an NGO's own programmes can expand sample size. Although Marl's research focuses on learning from their own service delivery, they sometimes collaborate with other organisations for research that collects data from multiple sites. For example, Marl discussed planned research on HIV care with government and other NGOs to see if a multi-centre study was possible. The research coordinator explained that this would provide "bigger sample sizes", significant for the quantitative research based on health centre records followed in much Marl research.

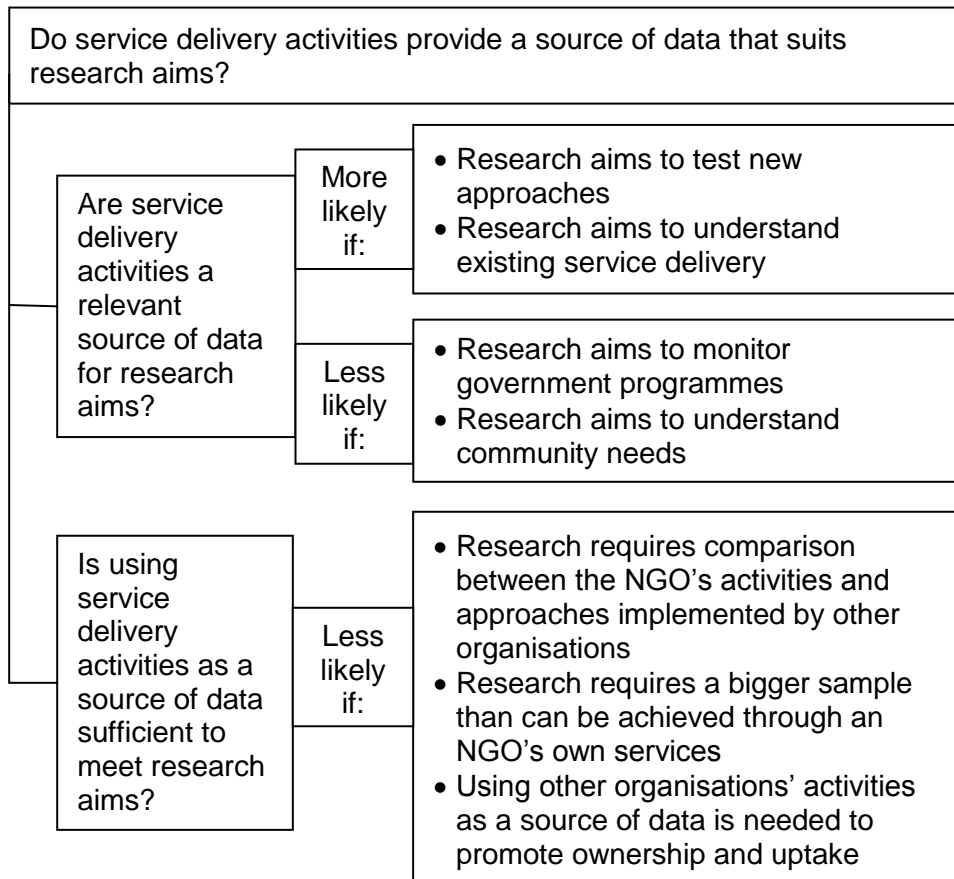
The third potential benefit is that collecting data from activities run by different organisations may support research uptake. This was also mentioned by Marl's research coordinator, who felt multi-centre studies meant research would "hopefully have a bigger impact". This could work through several processes. For example, literature on research uptake suggests that application of findings is influenced by perceptions of accuracy and generalisability, which a bigger sample and range of settings might support (Court et al., 2006; Loewenson, 2010). The same literature indicates the value of involving other organisations to promote their interest in applying findings, an idea of ownership that was noted in relation to consultation on research questions in 4.1.3, and that I discuss further under research communication in Chapter 6. If NGOs see these processes as important for impact, or if they are interested in the potential benefits of sample size and comparison, their own service delivery activities might not provide sufficient data.

5.1.3 Summary

This discussion of the different purposes of research suggests the relevance of service delivery activities as a source of data varies with research aims. This seems obvious, but this varied relevance is not explicit in papers highlighting the value of NGO service delivery for research data. Recognising different aims is important when considering how NGOs could or should use their service delivery for research. NGOs' service delivery cannot provide useful or adequate data for all research. For example, service delivery activities may provide valuable data when research aims to test new approaches, but might not help research designed to monitor government performance, or may not provide sufficient data when research needs a larger sample

or comparison. These conclusions are summarised in Figure 7 below. Given that research aims vary within and between NGOs, this varied relevance means using service delivery activities as the source of data is not always of interest for NGOs.

Figure 7: Conditions affecting whether service delivery activities provide data that suit research aims



5.2 Monitoring records as a source of research data: content, reliability and access

This section examines the second way service delivery may provide research data, looking at use of monitoring records. Routine service delivery monitoring can create large amounts of data that could be used for research. However, as with service delivery activities, monitoring records cannot always meet research data requirements. This reflects a combination of NGOs' research aims and the nature of monitoring records. Challenges for NGO monitoring, including capacity and incentives to collect reliable and useful data, are extensively documented (Ebrahim, 2002; Laybourn, 2010; Newcomer et al., 2012; Eyben et al., 2013). This section does not fully assess NGO monitoring systems or identify all their possible limitations as a source of research data.

Instead, I focus on some key difficulties experienced by the case NGOs, considering aspects of content, reliability, and accessibility.

In discussing use of monitoring records as research data, I focus primarily on Marl. Among the case NGOs, Marl draw most on monitoring records for research, which meant most discussion of the opportunities and constraints to using monitoring data during interviews. Marl see monitoring information as a considerable resource for research. This is indicated in their international research policy, which emphasises a “synergy” between monitoring and research and suggests monitoring data can be used for research. Marl Malawi staff also saw monitoring records as a potential source of research data. This was highlighted by the advocacy officer, who described their monitoring database as providing quick answers to research questions:

“We are collecting data in [the district], so there is a lot of data. If you have questions, it’s easy to just go into the database, really to just go and find out.”

In line with this interest, monitoring records are a primary source of research data in Marl Malawi, used in retrospective studies to assess existing programmes and prospective research on new interventions. However, Marl’s experience also indicates potential limitations of monitoring records, including content and reliability, discussed in turn below. While focusing on Marl, I draw on examples from other case NGOs to highlight additional issues.

5.2.1 Content of monitoring records

Monitoring records may not include the information needed for research. As noted in Chapter 1, this difficulty is identified in existing literature and guidance (Robson, 2011 p.359; Bamberger et al., 2012), and it was confirmed by Marl’s experience. As explained by the research coordinator, retrospective use of monitoring data can be difficult because “you’re using an existing database that may not have been set up specifically for your research”. Monitoring systems are designed for programme monitoring, and may not measure outcomes of interest for research.

Sometimes research and monitoring have a different focus, even when research uses service delivery activities. This is indicated by an example from Chalk. Their research to pilot renewable energy technology was added onto an existing household energy project. The existing programme aimed to promote outcomes such as reduced fuelwood consumption and improved health. The energy technology research had different aims around producing electricity, which would not have been included in project monitoring. Partly because of this, existing monitoring records could not provide the data needed for this research. In contrast, Chalk’s research on mosquito nets

focused on the same outcomes assessed through routine monitoring (use and durability). Consequently, data collection could rely largely on routine monitoring, with one additional variable on make of net. When research and monitoring require the same information in this way, monitoring records are more likely to provide useful research data. As with the need for data on service delivery activities to fit research aims discussed in 5.1, this varied correspondence between the focus of monitoring records and research questions is somewhat obvious. However, given assertions that monitoring records can and should be used for research (e.g. Zachariah et al., 2012), recognising this varied relevance is important.

Even when research and monitoring share the same broad focus, monitoring records may lack some information needed for research. One difficulty highlighted in Marl is level of detail. For example, their research sometimes requires information on individual outcomes, but routine monitoring provides aggregate data. Similarly, monitoring records may not capture each stage of an intervention, making it hard to answer questions about where difficulties arise. This was described by the research officer discussing research on a new system for diagnosis:

“We want to know how many samples have been taken from how many patients, how many samples have been sent to the lab, how many samples have been returned to the health facility and how many results have been disclosed to the patients. So these are the steps you need to know in order to see if it works, it’s not enough to know just how many samples have been taken. But the health centre register only has a column for samples taken and results arrived, so no column for the result disclosed to patient.”

This lack of detail on the service delivery process meant monitoring records could not answer Marl’s research questions on programme effects. Another possible gap in content apparent in Marl reflects the focus of their routine monitoring on quantitative indicators. Sometimes their research questions require qualitative information, for example to explain quantitative trends or understand patient perceptions. To overcome this gap, Marl’s research often goes beyond existing monitoring records to collect qualitative data.

The significance of these and other possible gaps in content depends on research aims: monitoring records that do not help some research questions may answer others. As explained by Marl’s research coordinator, the value of monitoring records “depends on the research that we’re doing”. For example, information on individual outcomes is unnecessary for much Marl research. The fit between these aims and information provided through monitoring affects the potential to use monitoring records for research data, and may mean research requires separate or additional data collection.

5.2.2 Reliability of monitoring data

When monitoring records provide the information needed for research, their value may be limited by unreliable data (Surtees & Craggs, 2010; Robson, 2011 p.361; Bamberger et al., 2012; Duvendack & Pasanen, 2013). Variable data quality has been a growing concern in Marl. As explained by the research officer:

“I think a previous mistake was to assume that the data collected by Marl is correct. Whereas in fact it isn't, and nobody bothered to check, and now that we've started checking we realise in each and every programme there are problems.”

The unreliability of some monitoring data has caused problems for Marl's research. Some studies were abandoned because they used potentially erroneous monitoring records, and in other research, gaps in monitoring data prevented clear conclusions. Unreliability has also hindered journal publication. The research officer explained that an article on one Marl programme was rejected by reviewers partly because “the quantitative data was not good enough”, as it came from weak monitoring records. This journal rejection is significant because Marl see publication as a mark of rigour and important channel for dissemination (as explained in the next chapter on research communication). Unreliable monitoring data, therefore, sometimes prevent Marl meeting desired research standards.

Discussions with Marl staff suggested numerous factors that can affect reliability of monitoring records. Many of these partly reflect Marl's context of working with government in an under-resourced health system. As discussed in previous chapters, Marl are moving control of their programmes to government, and their service delivery largely takes place through government health facilities. This partnership applies to monitoring, which increasingly relies on the government health management information system (HMIS). HMIS in developing countries are often weak (Evans & Stansfield 2003; Vital Wave Consulting 2009), and this applies in Malawi, where human resources, funding and infrastructure are considered inadequate (Republic of Malawi & Health Metrics Network, 2009). As stated by Marl's research coordinator, “in this country and in many resource-limited settings, documentation is notoriously poor”. Government partnership and reliance on the HMIS contribute to difficulties in design of monitoring systems and capacity among staff responsible for data collection and processing, two broad challenges for reliability discussed in turn below.

Design of monitoring systems

Data reliability is affected by monitoring systems that include parallel structures, complex databases and unclear tools. Parallel monitoring between government and other organisations is recognised as hindering health information management in

Malawi (Republic of Malawi & Health Metrics Network, 2009). There are sometimes multiple monitoring systems within organisations, as in Marl where different projects have different databases. The research officer described this situation:

“There is parallel data - you have ministry data and Marl data. [...] And then in Marl you have these pillars, you have community pillar, health centre pillar, hospital pillar and then crosscutting you have the medical people and the PMTCT [prevention of mother to child transmission of HIV] people [...] so everybody was collecting data.”

These multiple systems create difficulties for staff responsible for collecting data. As the country director explained, “as soon as you start putting in your own M&E tools, you create work for people - nurses have four registers on their desks instead of one”.

Single databases are sometimes too difficult in themselves for staff to use. For example, one database “was too complicated for anyone to actually understand to fill in correctly” [Marl research officer]. Complex and intensive monitoring systems mean information is often not recorded and staff sometimes stop completing monitoring forms altogether: “people often say M&E tools ‘died a natural death’” [country director]. This inconsistency creates gaps in the data needed for research.

Even if staff do complete monitoring records, poorly designed tools may reduce data accuracy. Marl’s research coordinator noted ambiguities in new government monitoring forms that would hinder consistent data collection:

“I’m looking at the data tools, I’m looking at the variables and I’m saying ‘well what does this one mean?’, and ‘what does this one mean?’, and ‘how do you interpret this?’. There’s nothing written about how to interpret many of the variables.”

A further difficulty is that, typically for health services in low-income countries, monitoring systems are largely paper-based not electronic. This increases the workload and chance of errors, as data are transferred between different forms and “there are mistakes at each stage” [research officer]. These inaccuracies can reduce the value of monitoring data for research.

Capacity among data collectors and monitoring staff

Complex and intensive reporting systems are a particular problem because of capacity among staff responsible for collecting and checking monitoring information. Data, for government HMIS and much of Marl’s monitoring, are collected by frontline health staff who have heavy workloads treating patients. The research coordinator emphasised the difficulty faced by health staff in finding time to complete monitoring forms:

“You have a resource limited setting, so in terms of recording just the bare minimum data [...] you have 100 women in your waiting room, you’re supposed to be giving education, about HIV and condoms and antiretrovirals and testing and all that stuff, and you’re supposed to do that for 100 women. Something’s got to give. And a lot of the time, what gives are the data.”

Relying on service delivery staff for data collection, in a context where these staff have

high workloads, affects reliability and consequently the value of monitoring records for research.

Capacity among staff responsible for designing monitoring tools and checking or analysing data can also affect reliability. Marl's research officer explained that past problems partly reflected a database manager with limited experience, little supervision, and no time to visit those collecting data to check information and fill gaps. Weaknesses in monitoring data were only noticed when Marl recruited research staff with time and skills to identify mistakes. These staff are helping to strengthen reliability, so increasing scope to use monitoring records for research.

The particular challenges of staff capacity and system design in Marl reflect the nature of their data collection and service delivery. In the other case NGOs, data are usually collected by short-term research assistants or NGO project staff rather than frontline health workers. Although busy, these NGO staff usually deal with less urgent issues than patient health. In addition, Marl's monitoring involves constant data collection on individual patients, rather than the occasional surveys that sometimes comprise monitoring in other NGOs. The latter can be fitted around other activities more easily. Working within and attempting to rely on government monitoring systems also creates particular difficulties, because of the current weaknesses in government HMIS. While these aspects of monitoring systems were key constraints in Marl, numerous other issues could reduce reliability. One potential challenge relates to incentives, discussed below.

The purpose of monitoring and incentives for reliability

The reliability of monitoring records and hence their value for research may be affected by incentives against accurate reporting. A tension between learning and accountability to donors is a widely recognised difficulty for NGO M&E (Goold, 2006; Laybourn, 2010; Eyben et al., 2013). Pressure to secure further funding can mean M&E is designed to indicate progress, not to understand programme effects (Bebbington, 2005; Bornstein, 2006; Watkins et al., 2012; Moxham, 2013). This focus may mean NGO staff want to produce impressive rather than accurate figures, a situation identified among NGOs in Malawi (Malunga, 2007; Watkins & Swidler, 2013). These incentives against accuracy are recognised as potentially reducing the value of monitoring records for research (Bamberger et al., 2012 p.94).

I have limited evidence on this from the case NGOs, partly because my focus was research not M&E and understanding how aims affect accuracy would need more

observation of the monitoring process. However, conversations in Clay and Flint suggest there is sometimes an interest in proving results. For example, Clay's programme manager complained that lack of evaluation in one project meant:

“it's difficult to share the success with other partners or donors. I believe we did a very good job in this project but we don't have evidence in terms of a summative evaluation report that we can showcase to people.”

Given that evaluations often draw on monitoring records, this aim of showcasing might affect reliability when collecting monitoring data. A similar aim was mentioned in relation to Flint's interest in using research to demonstrate success in 5.1.1. This does not apply to all their M&E. Despite the emphasis on proving results in some conversations, Clay and Flint staff also emphasised the importance of accuracy and took steps to promote this. For example, the Clay manager who oversees M&E explained that with baseline surveys:

“It's better to have independent people who do not have any vested interest in the whole set up. So they come up with objective information.”

Given this mixed picture, it seems likely that aims and incentives vary; while a concern to impress seems unlikely to affect all monitoring, it may reduce reliability in some monitoring records. Combined with the widespread discussion of incentives in the literature, this suggests motivations associated with donor reporting should be considered as possible factors affecting reliability of monitoring records and consequently their value for research.

Summarising, the reliability of monitoring records may be affected by system design, staff capacity and incentives. As with the fit between monitoring content and research aims, the implication of these constraints will depend on standards required for research. Ideas about what constitutes rigour vary (Mills et al., 2008; Guijt & Roche, 2014), and lower levels of accuracy may be acceptable for some purposes in NGOs (Garrett, 2004). Further, when incomplete monitoring data do not answer original research questions, they may have value for other research, perhaps illuminating intervention processes (Small & Uttal, 2005). For example, a report on a Marl scheme to support health workers discusses gaps in the scheme's database as one programme limitation: the unreliability of monitoring records is itself a finding. When monitoring records do not provide the required reliability, however, this may reduce potential to use these records for research or to produce research that meets desired standards.

5.2.3 Accessibility of monitoring data

Beyond content and reliability, a further potential challenge to the value of monitoring

records for research involves accessibility. This is partly about physical access. In Flint and Clay, monitoring records are often difficult to find because reports are not always shared or collated centrally. As noted by one Clay manager, “we have a lot of data but it’s not well organised”. Much raw data from project monitoring is held in paper files around the office. Another Clay officer explained that “different people have different bits of information”, so you have to “look on different computers” to find data needed for reporting. In both Flint and Clay, this seemed partly to reflect information technology systems (with no shared computer drive), but also organisational coordination. This inaccessibility of monitoring data due to weak information management systems is highlighted as a problem for using monitoring data in other NGOs (Hayman, 2013) and for evaluation more broadly (Bamberger et al., 2012 p.83).

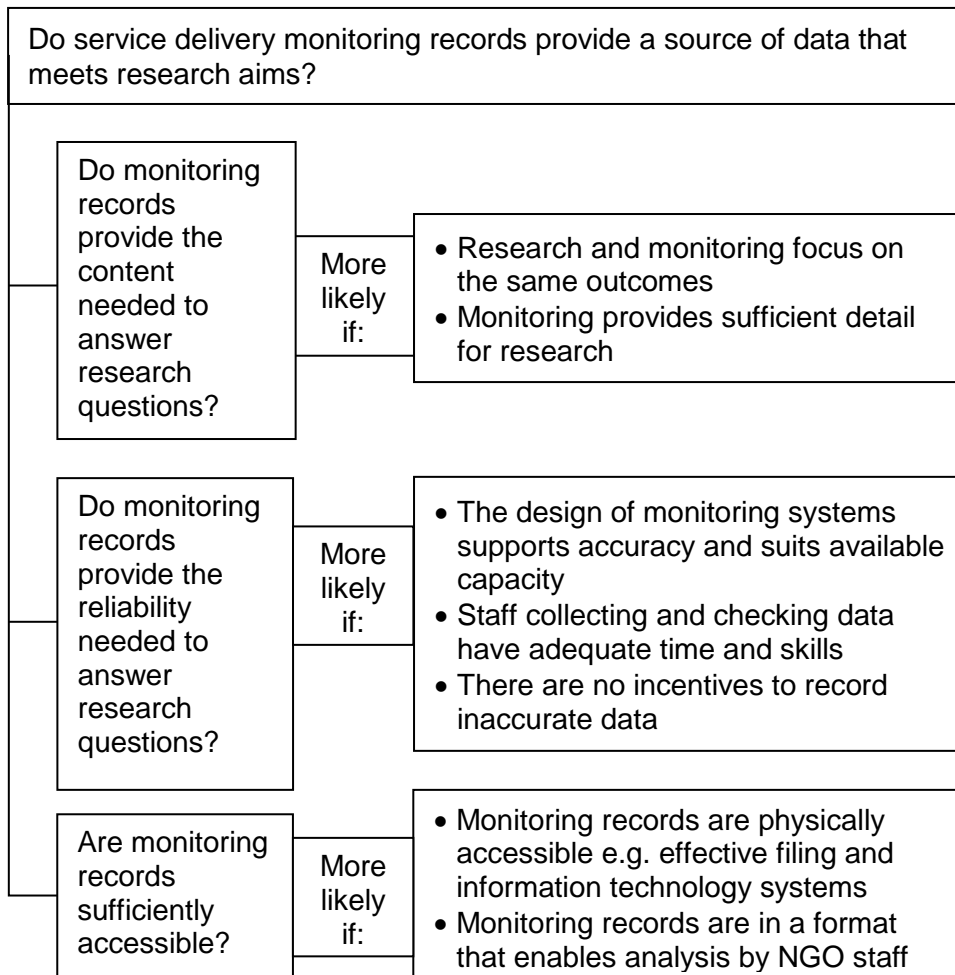
As well as physical access, data need to be in a format that NGO staff can interpret. One aspect affecting this is the extent to which data are processed. This was indicated in discussions with Flint about the potential value of monitoring records for research. This was considered greatest with a youth support programme where monitoring information is collated in a spreadsheet. One staff member explained that this programme “has a well-established system of compilation of information”, and another said this meant “it’s more of refined data [...] easier to use. While in other projects, we tend to get raw data which has not been analysed”. Processing through the spreadsheet makes finding answers from these monitoring records faster and more straightforward. This need for data to be in a format that can be readily analysed is also noted in relation to use of monitoring data from other organisations (Bamberger et al., 2012 p.266). Together with physical access, this ease of interpretation affects the potential to use monitoring records for research.

5.2.4 Summary

The case NGOs’ experiences indicate the varied value of monitoring records as a source of research data. Monitoring records may not match the information needed for research, for example being designed to measure different outcomes. They may be insufficiently reliable, due to staff capacity, system design or incentives to demonstrate success. Monitoring data may also be inaccessible to staff, due to weak information management systems or inadequate processing. These conditions are summarised in Figure 8 below. Particular constraints will vary between organisational contexts, for example whether monitoring involves ongoing data collection by frontline staff or occasional surveys, availability of skilled staff, and donor reporting requirements. However, the broad conditions of reliability, content and accessibility seem likely to

affect the research value of monitoring records more generally. These constraints mean monitoring records will not always provide adequate data for research.

Figure 8: Conditions affecting whether service delivery monitoring records provide data that meet research aims



One implication of these potential limitations is that monitoring records may provide research data if they can be adapted to provide required information and strengthen reliability. Scope for this adaptation is considered as part of the next section, which builds on the analysis of service delivery activities and monitoring so far to consider situations where they need changing to support research.

5.3 The acceptability and feasibility of adapting service delivery to support generation of research data

Sometimes service delivery needs modifying to produce data that can meet research aims. Scope to make these changes affects potential to use service delivery as a

source of data. In this section I first summarise ways existing service delivery activities and monitoring records may need adapting to enable required data production, then consider the acceptability and feasibility of these changes.

5.3.1 The need to adapt service delivery for research

The case NGOs' experiences suggest service delivery activities and monitoring records often provide a source of data that meets research aims without any changes.

Sometimes, however, adjustments are made. Previous sections pointed towards some ways service delivery may need adapting for research, and I expand on these below.

Section 5.1 suggested that using service delivery activities as a basis for generating data involves two categories of collecting data on existing programmes or testing new approaches. When research aims to test new approaches, service delivery activities need changing, either adapting existing activities or starting new programmes. For example, Marl's research on blood testing required a change in service delivery to add the new approaches. Similarly, Chalk's support for field testing crop varieties and energy technology involved adapting service delivery to include the new products.

A further reason service delivery activities may need adjusting, not indicated in 5.1, is for experimental or quasi-experimental research. The value and applicability of these approaches are fiercely debated within international development (Chambers et al., 2009; Ravallion, 2012; Camfield & Duvendack, 2014). I do not reiterate these debates as appropriate research methods are not my focus. Instead, I consider NGOs' scope to adapt service delivery activities when they see a need for these research designs. In the case NGOs, research on service delivery often follows an observational approach, collecting data without changing programme activities. However, there are examples of experimental or quasi-experimental research where service delivery is modified to compare a control and intervention group or two approaches. One example is Chalk research with a European university on the health effects of some household equipment, which involved a randomised control trial. To enable comparison between households with and without the equipment, distribution was phased, with some households receiving their equipment a week later. Another example is Chalk's research on mosquito nets, where service delivery was adjusted by allocating the two brands randomly during net distribution as noted in 5.1.1. When such research designs are selected, implementation of new or existing service delivery activities is altered to produce research data.

Monitoring records may need adjusting to overcome the limitations of reliability or content discussed in 5.2. When monitoring information does not answer research questions, research may rely on separate or additional data collection, as happens with most Chalk research on service delivery activities and Marl's qualitative research with service providers. When information needed for research is closer to that provided through monitoring records, monitoring systems can sometimes be adjusted to incorporate additional data or strengthen reliability. Marl are taking several steps to strengthen reliability, to improve M&E as well as support research. One approach is building monitoring capacity and providing quality assurance during research projects. For example, Marl's research on the new HIV treatment regimen primarily drew on existing monitoring data, collected from the six health centres used as research sites by a data entry officer. As well as compiling information from patient records, this data officer improved reliability by advising clinic staff on data collection and checking data were recorded (for example, asking nurses to collect missing information during future patient visits). Marl are also strengthening the overall monitoring system by working with government to develop a new monitoring database that brings together information from government activities and different Marl projects. This will reduce duplication and simplify data collection, so reducing the burden on frontline staff and hopefully improving reliability. This new database is also designed to enhance the content of monitoring records, as it includes data on individual patients, and consequently, the research coordinator explained, "will be very powerful". Within individual research projects, Marl sometimes adapt monitoring tools to include variables needed for research. Another example of this approach is Chalk's research on mosquito nets, where information on bednet brand was added to existing monitoring forms as explained in 5.2.1.

Summarising the discussion above, I have indicated four changes to service delivery activities or monitoring records that may be needed to support generation of research data:

- Starting new activities or adapting existing activities to test new approaches
- Modifying new or existing activities to meet experimental research designs
- Strengthening monitoring systems to enhance reliability
- Adapting monitoring systems to collect additional or different information

Sometimes no change is required, for example when research aims to learn from existing service delivery activities and uses observational approaches, or monitoring data provides the necessary information. This necessarily applies to retrospective research, where there is no opportunity to adapt monitoring or activities, for example

Chalk's research on the agricultural scheme. Sometimes just one change is made, for example Chalk's research on energy technology added this new product, but involved separate data collection so routine monitoring was unchanged. Sometimes several changes are needed. For example, Chalk's mosquito net research added a new service delivery technology (an additional brand of net), changed the way service delivery was undertaken (randomly distributing each net brand), and modified monitoring tools (adding information on net brand).

Options for generating research data through service delivery depend on ability to adapt service delivery in these ways. This in turn depends on the acceptability and feasibility of required changes. In the remainder of this section, I examine the acceptability and then feasibility of adjusting service delivery for research. As indicated in the introduction, technical and ethical aspects of research on service delivery are extensively discussed in existing literature, including the implications of experimental designs. I focus instead on organisational contexts and the way NGOs' ideas and relationships affect scope to adapt service delivery for research.

5.3.2 The acceptability of changing service delivery for research

NGOs' aims and principles affect the acceptability of adjusting service delivery activities and monitoring systems for research. I explore this through two aspects: a concern for research findings to be relevant, which applies particularly to service delivery activities, and commitment to government partnership, which I discuss in relation to monitoring records.

Retaining the relevance and applicability of research findings

As described in previous chapters, the case NGOs want their research to have direct relevance, understood as the potential for findings to affect programmes and policies. As repeatedly emphasised by Chalk's research manager, research must have "practical benefit". This idea of relevance affects the acceptability of changing service delivery activities for research. Examples from Chalk and Marl suggest two aspects of relevance that affect acceptability, and I examine these below.

First, approaches examined through research should fit the Malawian context and available resources, so they can be introduced or scaled up. The principle that pilot projects should adopt realistic conditions that can be replicated, including financial constraints, is recommended by other researchers and NGO networks (Duflo et al., 2006; Walley et al., 2007; The Humanitarian Centre, 2011). Two contrasting examples

from Chalk illustrate how this concern affects acceptability. The first involves research that was rejected because Chalk felt it would require changes to service delivery that could not be implemented more widely. The research with a European university to assess the health effects of some household equipment was a pilot project for a larger study. The pilot used a model of this equipment that Chalk promote in routine programmes. Chalk's research suggests this model may not produce the intended health benefits. For the larger study, the university decided to use a more expensive model that was more likely to provide the intended health benefits they wanted to examine. Based on their programme experience, Chalk felt this new equipment would not be adopted by potential beneficiaries. The research manager explained that "the new [equipment] at that time was \$350. We have trouble selling [the equipment] at MKw400" (about \$1) and noted that:

"the end result wouldn't have any meaningful impact on the way we work, mainly due to the cost, type of technology, and cultural acceptability."

Decisions about affordability and acceptability of new approaches are complicated, as attitudes and available resources can change and technologies may become cheaper if scaled up. However, in this example, the research design involved changes to service delivery that Chalk felt made the research inapplicable for the Malawian setting and consequently irrelevant to Chalk's programmes. Partly because of this, Chalk declined to participate in the larger study. The second example is the study with another European university on energy technology. Although Chalk had concerns about price, they found ways to link the technology to business funding, making it affordable for wider service delivery. This contributed to Chalk's decision to continue collaboration on a second larger study.

The second aspect of relevance is the idea that if service delivery activities are changed for research, they should retain sufficient similarity to routine service delivery for the research to apply to ongoing implementation. This aspect of relevance is also highlighted by other researchers (Walley et al., 2007). It was a further concern with the proposed research on health effects of the household equipment. Using a different model meant the results would not apply to the equipment in wider use, so the findings would say little about the effects of Chalk's programmes. This contributed to Chalk's decision that proposed changes to service delivery for this research were unacceptable.

These examples suggest changes to service delivery activities for research are more acceptable if new approaches introduced for research are considered appropriate for the context, and changes do not mean activities no longer follow the approach

research is designed to assess. This applied for the energy technology study, so service delivery could be adapted and used as a source of research data. With the health effects study, proposed changes were unacceptable, so the university could not use Chalk's service delivery activities for their research. Both aspects of relevance were also discussed in Marl. Their experience indicates possible tensions between these principles and other organisational aims. These tensions limit scope to adjust service delivery activities for research or create difficult compromises in using service delivery to generate data. I explain this below in relation to two areas of concern for Marl: ethical standards and rigour.

Balancing relevance and ethics

The ethical challenge discussed here involves decisions about whether to change the nature of an intervention, for example by introducing new approaches, rather than the decisions about who receives it discussed in relation to experimental research. Ethical concerns can arise when following service delivery approaches that can be applied within existing resources means lower standards for research participants. This is seen in the Chalk household equipment example. The more expensive equipment favoured by external researchers may have more impact on household health but is considered unaffordable, making research to assess this model irrelevant. The ethics of this potential trade-off were raised by Marl's research coordinator in relation to research on the new HIV treatment regimen. The new regimen has potential side effects, including kidney damage. In richer countries, patients would be tested before changing to the new drug regimen to check it is safe for them, but these tests are not part of government policy in Malawi because they would require additional resources. This created a dilemma for Marl. Evaluating the treatment approach stipulated by government policy would follow their ideas of relevance, but implementing the new regimen without additional tests meant accepting a lower standard of care:

“Your ethical review committee is going to want you to do those tests, but by doing those tests then you're no longer testing what you're trying to test. [...] And it basically makes it pointless in terms of research, because you're doing tests and you're doing interventions and you're changing it in such a way that it's never going to be applicable for the population. So that's challenging, I think that's one of the biggest things for people like us who are doing that, because obviously you want to be very ethical, but you also want to be able to be appropriate, to have research that makes sense in the setting.”

The example shows both aspects of relevance noted above. First, the costs of testing and the government's limited health budget meant that if the tests were added, the research would assess an intervention that could not be widely adopted, and Marl want research to test activities that can “realistically be implemented” [research coordinator]. Second, adapting the intervention away from the routine approach would mean results

did not apply to the policy being assessed. With this example, Marl decided to proceed without the additional tests, partly because this was approved by the Malawi ethical review board. Principles of relevance overrode concerns for higher standards of care. However, this was a difficult and contested decision: “it’s still highly debated [...] it is tricky, and it is hard, and there’s still a lot of people who don’t agree with that” [research coordinator].

The ethical concerns in this example reflect a situation where higher standards are more expensive or considered otherwise unviable within existing resources. When alternatives to current practice are expected to provide similar (or better) standards of care with equal or fewer resources, adapting service delivery does not mean balancing higher standards against relevance. One example is Marl’s research on blood testing. The new approaches are less resource-intensive than current practice, so could be applied if found effective. In addition, the current testing approach is often not implemented because of logistical difficulties, so using the alternative would raise rather than lower standards. Further, the new approach was implemented alongside the standard venous sample, so there was no compromise for research participants. This made changing service delivery activities for research more acceptable, without compromises between relevance and standards of care.

This decision between standards of service delivery involves choices for programmes, not just research. For example, Marl would have implemented the new HIV regimen as part of service delivery regardless of research interest. However, the tension plays out in research: implementing interventions to provide a basis for generating data may face difficult choices about the acceptability of following currently feasible approaches or higher standards of care and research ethics. This in turn increases the difficulty of using service delivery as a source of research data.

Balancing relevance and reliability

Ensuring service delivery activities assessed through research are relevant can also raise dilemmas about rigour. This was indicated by Marl’s research coordinator in an example that combines service delivery activities and monitoring systems. The example relates to another aspect of their HIV regimen study, involving patients who are lost to follow up, that is, who stop coming for treatment. When patients do not attend clinical appointments, this creates gaps in the research data as their health cannot be monitored. It also means patients are not treated; as the research coordinator emphasised, “the main concern is not with the loss to follow up for research but their loss to follow up from the programme itself”. Reflecting this service delivery

goal, processes to tackle loss to follow up are part of service delivery systems, and patients are supposed to be traced by community health volunteers. As the research coordinator explained, this creates difficulties:

“Those people aren’t necessarily paid [...] so you have this weird situation where you have volunteers who really don’t have the time or the energy to be volunteers, and they already have a lot of work that they’re doing anyway, and now you’re seen as ‘oh God, here they come again, asking me to do another...’, you know?”

The information systems of rural Malawi add to the difficulties, as patients may not have phones, there may be no clear directions to their houses, and travel is slow. In this situation, finding patients, for clinical care and to collect missing data, is intensive work, and relying on volunteers can mean monitoring records are incomplete. This does not necessarily reduce the value of monitoring data for research. As suggested in 5.2.2, incomplete records may help understanding of the intervention process, and proportion of patients lost to follow up is one outcome of interest for Marl’s research. However, their main focus is HIV transmission, and assessing this requires continued patient monitoring.

Marl could employ research staff to find missing patients and so reduce data gaps. However, using research staff rather than community volunteers would change the standard service delivery system that Marl want to work within so that research assesses routine procedures. Consequently, the research coordinator explained, she needed to work through the standard system of hospital managers and community volunteers to trace patients rather than asking research staff to find them, even though this might mean data gaps. Adapting service delivery approaches for research was not acceptable on grounds of relevance, but this meant a compromise with reliability.

This tension between following standard service delivery practice and possible implications for rigour will vary with current service delivery approaches and research designs. In relation to service delivery approaches, gaps in the data reflect the difficulties of working in an under-resourced setting where existing systems to identify patients are unreliable. On research designs, the tension arises from the quantitative approach, where rigour is often seen to demand complete data. Indeed, a compromise between rigour and realism is often discussed in relation to quantitative research in practical settings: control over the intervention process can facilitate some aspects of reliability but may come at the expense of assessing realistic conditions (Small & Uttal, 2005; Roe & Just, 2009). Tensions between following standard practice and ensuring rigour might not apply for other research designs, such as qualitative approaches.

Summarising, experience from Chalk and Marl suggests the acceptability of changing service delivery activities to support research depends partly on implications for perceived relevance. This includes the potential to scale up approaches or technologies being introduced and the extent to which practices assessed through research approximate standard conditions. When NGOs share these ideas of relevance and proposed changes do not meet these conditions, changes may be considered unacceptable, potentially reducing scope to use service delivery as a research site. However, meeting these conditions can involve compromise with other research aims and principles. When feasible activities involve lower standards, there may be tension between relevance and levels of care. When routine approaches produce unreliable data, there may be tension between relevance and rigour. As this suggests, compromises will vary with research aims and the nature of service delivery. When they occur, these compromises increase the difficulty of using service delivery as a source of research data.

Supporting government systems

The acceptability of changing service delivery for research is also affected by government partnership. As previously discussed, Marl want to work within and support government systems as part of their strategy to move service delivery to government control. This government collaboration contributed to decisions in the examples discussed above on relevance: implementing standard policy on patient testing and tracing patients reflected Marl's concern to follow government approaches as well as principles of relevance. Government partnership also affects Marl's approach to changing monitoring for research, the focus for this section. As discussed in 5.2, Marl want to rely primarily on government HMIS for M&E and research, but overburdened staff and weak systems make HMIS data unreliable. Additionally, the HMIS may not include information needed for research. As well as contributing to gaps in content and reliability, working with government systems affects the acceptability of measures to address these gaps, as discussed below.

Adapting monitoring by adding data requirements

When monitoring does not provide the content needed to answer research questions, it could be adjusted to include this information, as indicated in 5.3.1. Marl have adapted monitoring systems for research in the past, expanding existing monitoring tools or asking staff to complete supplementary forms. However, Marl now consider adding to existing monitoring problematic, partly because of their commitment to government partnership. This commitment means Marl do not want to disrupt government systems. In addition, the particular context of government systems in Malawi means changing

monitoring can have negative effects. Working within government frameworks means relying on data collection by frontline staff in a health system with a shortage of health workers and intensive monitoring. In this situation, asking for additional data means increasing workloads for the government staff Marl want to support, and in their experience, risks further reducing reliability. This context was highlighted by the research coordinator, who explained that given the “overburdened health care system”:

“Every time you add a variable, you’re adding more work and that’s going to come at the expense of what? You have to really justify that variable if you’re going to have the regular clinical staff collecting it.”

Given these potential consequences, Marl now minimise any additions to monitoring tools for research. As stressed by the research coordinator, “we’re trying to not invent yet another form to confuse and overburden people”.

Marl still expand monitoring tools when additional variables are considered essential for research; as the research coordinator explained, “sometimes there’s just stuff that you need to add for your research that is not part of the national data collection tools”.

However, working within government systems limits the extent of acceptable change. This raises potential difficulties with the suggestion that if “researchers realise that the information is not available through routine registers and treatment cards [...] the data-capturing instruments can be modified, which can lead to improved routine monitoring of programmes” (Zachariah et al., 2012 p.416). Adjusting monitoring may be more difficult than this suggests, and when monitoring systems are strained, adding to monitoring tools may reduce reliability, not strengthen monitoring.

Adjusting monitoring tools may be easier when monitoring is less frequent and capacity less stretched. This flexibility was suggested in an example from Chalk about an annual monitoring survey for a nutrition programme. The questionnaire is sometimes expanded to include information requested by government partners. The survey is a more flexible format, partly because it is occasional rather than daily work and the government staff hired to collect data focus only on data collection during surveys rather than trying to simultaneously provide services. Further, while Chalk work with government, the survey is not part of government monitoring so changes do not raise concerns about disrupting government systems. These different monitoring contexts affect the acceptability of adjusting monitoring to add content for research.

Improving the reliability of monitoring by employing additional staff

A commitment to working within government systems can also limit the acceptability of steps to strengthen reliability. To avoid imposing on government service delivery staff

and support reliability, Marl could hire people to collect additional data for research. However, employing separate research staff runs against Marl's principle of working with government systems. This principle includes supporting government capacity by using research as an opportunity to strengthen data collection skills among government health staff. This interest means Marl prefer to rely on existing service delivery staff to collect data, despite potential risks for reliability:

“Do we have the resources potentially to bring in all the people who would do the research? Well yes, I guess the answer to that is yes, we could. But is that in line with our organisation's philosophy? And the answer is clearly no. So what we're trying to do is both capacity building at the same time as getting the data. And so that means that we use a lot of the resources that are already there, with the idea being that it's going to be harder to use those resources because you're dealing with people who have never been trained in research at all, and who don't have any of the background of why it might be important to you.” [research coordinator]

In using monitoring data, Marl face competing concerns: they want to rely on the existing system of monitoring by health service staff, but also want to avoid additional data requirements negatively affecting either these staff or data reliability. The result, the research coordinator explained, is “a little bit of a compromise”, sometimes employing a few extra staff when significant additional data are required.

The HIV regimen study illustrates the implications for reliability. Data came primarily from routine monitoring records, with a small number of extra variables added for research. In two of the six research sites, CD4 counts were also assessed. Marl employed a nurse to lead data collection in these two sites, because of the additional workload implied by CD4 testing. The nurses hired by Marl had more focus on and time for data collection, and this increased reliability: the research coordinator described the difference between the sites with Marl research nurses and government staff as “100%! I mean absolutely, where we had our own clinical staff our data was much better”. This shows the value for reliability of changing monitoring by employing separate staff, but Marl's concern to support government systems limits acceptable use of this approach. Consequently, using monitoring data for research involves a compromise between reliability and working with government. As with adding content, the compromise is created by Marl's context of constant monitoring within stressed government systems. Recruiting staff to enhance content or reliability would be easier with more flexible monitoring approaches, such as occasional surveys, and enhancing reliability without additional staff may be easier in systems with more capacity.

Summarising this discussion of adjusting monitoring for research, the acceptability of changes for content or reliability is affected by organisational aims and principles. For

Marl, these principles include working within and supporting government systems, and this is balanced against concern to obtain reliable data on the content needed for research. A context of under-resourced government service delivery and monitoring, with continuous data collection by frontline staff, creates compromises between these aims. When systems are overstretched, changing monitoring to collect additional data may reduce reliability. Employing additional staff to improve reliability may be unacceptable when monitoring is part of government systems and NGOs want to work within these. This brings difficult decisions about whether and how monitoring should be adapted for research. As emphasised by the research coordinator, “this is tricky! Really, really, really, really tricky”. Obtaining required information and reliability while following organisational principles can be hard, potentially affecting the value of monitoring records for research data.

Strengthening routine monitoring can help avoid tensions and facilitate use of monitoring records for research. As indicated in 5.3.1, Marl are working with government to improve HMIS content and reliability. This may facilitate future use of HMIS data for research without adjustments. Strengthening routine monitoring will sometimes be a long-term strategy, however, and it seems likely some research would still require additional data. Consequently, even with a stronger system, monitoring records may need changing to support research, and organisational principles may make changes unacceptable.

5.3.3 The feasibility of changing service delivery for research

Adapting service delivery to enable production of research data depends on the feasibility as well as acceptability of required changes. This involves NGO flexibility. As described in Chapter 1, the presumed flexibility of NGO programming is given as one advantage of using NGOs’ service delivery to obtain research data, enabling changes for experimental research or piloting new approaches (Duflo et al., 2006; Kidwell Drake et al., 2010; Berhanu, 2013). This flexibility and ability to develop innovative activities have often been seen as NGO strengths, linked to organisational features such as smaller size and less formal structures. However, growing critiques since the 1990s suggest NGOs’ flexibility and ability to innovate is overstated (Lewis, 2007; Lewis & Kanji, 2009; Banks & Hulme, 2012). The critique of NGO innovation was noted in Chapter 4 in relation to development of ideas for new approaches. The analysis of innovation in this section is instead about flexibility to implement these ideas. Various constraints are identified within the literature, including growth in organisational size, project management approaches such as logframes, dependence on donors and

government collaboration (Edwards & Hulme, 1992; Fyvie & Ager, 1999; Bakewell & Garbutt, 2005; Banks & Hulme, 2012; Pratt, 2014). Below, I consider constraints apparent in the case NGOs, examining how relationships with implementing partners and funders affect the feasibility of adapting service delivery for research by limiting NGOs' control over programme activities and monitoring.

Government partnership and flexibility in service delivery

When programmes are implemented in collaboration with other organisations, adapting service delivery for research may require agreement from programme partners, including government. As discussed in 5.3.2, government partnership affects the acceptability of changing service delivery for research. It may also affect NGOs' ability to make changes they see as appropriate. NGO flexibility is often contrasted with government bureaucracy and reluctance to experiment (Edwards & Hulme, 1992), a comparison made by some of the authors cited above who emphasise the value of NGO flexibility for research (Duflo et al., 2006; Kidwell Drake et al., 2010). More rigid government structures may mean a balance between working with government for impact, and working alone for flexibility, a familiar tension in discussions of NGO strategy (Edwards & Hulme, 1992; Batley & Rose, 2010; Mcloughlin, 2011). Experience from the case NGOs suggests government partnership can affect scope to adapt service delivery for research, or at least slow changes. I illustrate this below in relation to initiating new activities, then changing existing service delivery.

The influence of government partnership on the feasibility of introducing new activities for research is seen in contrasting examples from Marl and Chalk. An example of government partnership delaying research comes from Marl's work to pilot a community HIV treatment approach, designed to assess the effectiveness of this strategy. Given Marl's concern to move control of service delivery to the Ministry of Health, Marl felt the pilot should be led by government. As the research officer explained, the government was eager to try the community approach and Marl feel government involvement enhances the pilot's potential impact. However, working in partnership caused delays: "they did it in their speed so that's why it also took a year to get started, but at least they started it and not us, and they say 'it's our thing'". In this example, government collaboration did not prevent development of new activities for research, but it did increase the necessary work and negotiation.

Piloting new activities for research may be faster and easier in programmes where NGOs retain more control. In Marl, this means changes to service delivery for research are more likely in the hospital laboratory, which remains largely under Marl

management. As explained by the research coordinator:

“In the laboratory setting, that would be the one setting in which we had a few differences, and that’s because we are still very much running the lab.”

Initiating new approaches is easier because the laboratory is run directly by Marl. This contributed to the feasibility of Marl’s research on blood testing, which required changes to laboratory procedures.

The potential constraints of working with government for flexibility can lead NGOs to find other research partners. Discussing Chalk’s research on cheaper ways to make soap, a programme manager explained that they explored collaboration with a government agency, but found little interest in new approaches:

“The bureaucracy there, it’s a bit frustrating to make some improvements. They seem to be a bit rigid and ‘this is how we do it and we do it that way’. If you want to bring in some suggestions, it’s probably difficult.”

Given this government response, Chalk instead collaborated with a Malawian university to develop the soap. In this example, Chalk were free to choose research partners. If they had been obliged to work with government, the government resistance might have made this research unfeasible, in turn limiting use of service delivery as a source of data.

As well as affecting the feasibility of initiating new activities, government partnership may affect flexibility to adapt service delivery for research designs or data requirements. Marl’s changes to service delivery for research on the new HIV treatment regimen, including hiring nurses for additional data collection and testing CD4 levels, needed government approval because Marl work through government service delivery structures. As explained by the research coordinator:

“All of that has to be decided on in agreement with the Ministry of Health. We generally have MoUs [Memoranda of Understanding] that govern either the project overall or specific research endeavours.”

Use of formal contracts between Marl and government to guide research and programme activities means changing service delivery for research requires government agreement. As with developing the new community groups, required changes have been approved, so this has not prevented research. However, these examples suggest that when NGOs want to work with government structures, government agreement is a precondition for adapting service delivery to support research.

The difference between NGOs and government in willingness to adapt service delivery and try new approaches should not be overstated. As previously indicated, NGO

flexibility is questioned, and as shown by Marl's example of the community treatment approach, governments do try new activities. Regardless of the inherent flexibility of different types of organisation, working with other partners affects control over service delivery activities and means decisions on whether and how to adapt programmes require more consultation. This potential reduction in flexibility could apply equally to collaboration between NGOs and other kinds of implementing partner.

Donor flexibility and funding

The feasibility of adapting service delivery for research may also be affected by relationships with donors. Dependence on donors could affect NGO flexibility in two ways: adapting existing service delivery activities and monitoring may require donor approval, and donor funding may be needed to develop new service delivery activities. I discuss these in turn below.

First, on donor agreement, when service delivery activities have been approved and funded by donors, changes may require donor permission. Existing literature suggests donor management systems can restrict flexibility. NGOs may be required to follow original project plans and assessed against these plans, with little scope to adapt activities or try new approaches (Fowler, 1997; Bakewell & Garbutt, 2005; Barber & Bowie, 2008; Eyben et al., 2013; Wallace & Porter, 2013). This may reduce opportunities for research. For example, Fisher describes fixed logframes that constrain ongoing adaptation as "the major challenge facing action research in development" (2011 p.94). Donor agreement may also affect flexibility to adjust monitoring for research. Rigid M&E approaches among some donors are widely discussed in debates about NGO evaluation (Ebrahim, 2002; Eyben et al., 2013). I concentrate below on flexibility with service delivery activities as the area where I have more relevant information from the case NGOs.

Donor willingness to adapt service delivery activities for research was not raised as a constraint by interviewees. However, this may partly reflect particular characteristics of the case NGOs. Marl make most changes to service delivery for research, but they largely depend on core funding so do not need donor approval. The most donor-dependent NGOs, Flint and Clay, are not trying to use or change service delivery activities for research (reflecting a focus on other sources of data as indicated in 5.1, and capacity as discussed in 5.4). Although Clay and Flint did not discuss donor approval to change service delivery for research, they did discuss donor flexibility to adapt projects in other situations (for example, when baseline surveys suggest planned activities are inappropriate). Their experience suggests approval to change planned

activities varies between donors: “if the donor is very good sometimes they would allow you to change the activities, but sometimes not” [former Clay director]. This variation in flexibility between donors is reported in other research (ITAD & NEF Consulting, 2014). When donors insist on following agreed logframes, this might restrict changes to service delivery for research.

Chalk is the only case NGO that has adapted service delivery activities for research in donor-funded programmes. In these cases, donors have supported and indeed encouraged research. Chalk’s experience suggests possible factors that may affect donor approval. One condition is donor interest in research. Chalk’s research on energy technology and the health effects of household equipment used a livelihood project funded by a donor that sees supporting NGO research as part of their role (the same donor has funded other Chalk research). This donor was also funding the European university that led the energy technology research, so had a vested interest in its success. Similarly, Chalk’s research on mosquito nets was initiated by the donor agency, so again, the donor had an interest in the research. The financial cost of required changes may also affect donor approval. Clay staff suggested donors are more likely to approve changes that can be made within planned budgets. When service delivery was changed for research in Chalk, the additional funding required was likely to be minimal or available from research partners. For example, phasing distribution of the equipment to assess health effects would imply limited extra expense (if any), and this could have been covered by the university or Chalk’s core funds. A final factor that may affect donor approval, and which contributes to financial costs, is the scale of change. The household equipment study involved a one week phasing of equipment distribution for 26 households, a relatively minor change within a six-year, district-wide programme. A more substantive change, such as randomising equipment models across Chalk’s programme or phasing distribution to one district by a year, might have required more negotiation. My limited information on discussions with donors about this research and an absence of negative examples make this analysis tentative. However, these aspects of donor interest in research, need for additional funding and scale of change seem likely to be among conditions that affect donor approval to change service delivery plans for research.

The second, related way that donor dependence might affect the feasibility of changing service delivery to support research involves funding to develop new pilot activities. The significance of donor funding depends on an NGO’s financial position and alternative sources of funding, and the nature of new activities. On the former, donor funding is needed when NGOs lack core funding to develop new activities, and the

costs are not covered by other research partners. Marl's core funding means they can establish new service delivery activities without donor support. Although donor-dependent, Flint and Clay are not trying to develop new activities for research. Consequently, the significance of donor funding again applies particularly to Chalk. Sometimes, funding for new activities comes from research partners, as with the energy technology study, where the university funds the new equipment. When costs are not paid by partners, donor support may be needed. This was suggested in discussion about potential research with a university to pilot equipment for local electricity supply. The pilot incorporates research to assess effectiveness, so provides a source of research data. A programme manager explained that "it looks like we've now got funding [from a donor] to pilot that", indicating that Chalk could not have implemented this activity without donor support. The technology involved in electricity supply perhaps made this research particularly dependent on additional funding, illustrating the second aspect above about the nature of new service delivery activities. Some new activities may not require additional funding, for example activities that use existing staff time such as changing approaches to community awareness. The scale of activity will also affect the need for funding. For example, small tests with a few households may be cheaper than a district-wide programme, reducing the need for donor support and so facilitating use of service delivery for research data.

Summarising, relationships with donors may affect flexibility to adapt service delivery or introduce new activities as a basis for generating data. There is limited direct evidence on this from the case NGOs. However, the conditions in examples from Chalk's changes to service delivery for research and the NGOs' experiences of donor flexibility more generally, together with existing literature, provide some indications of this donor influence. Their experiences suggest that when service delivery is implemented with donor funding, donor agreement may be required to change plans, and likelihood of approval may vary between donors and proposed changes. Donor relationships may also affect scope to implement new activities, when lack of existing resources and the nature of planned activities mean donor funding is required. By affecting the feasibility of adjusting service delivery, this donor flexibility and funding could affect potential to use service delivery as a source of research data.

5.3.4 Summary

This section has suggested that scope to generate research data through service delivery depends on the acceptability and feasibility of any changes to activities or monitoring needed to support research. Service delivery may need adjusting to provide

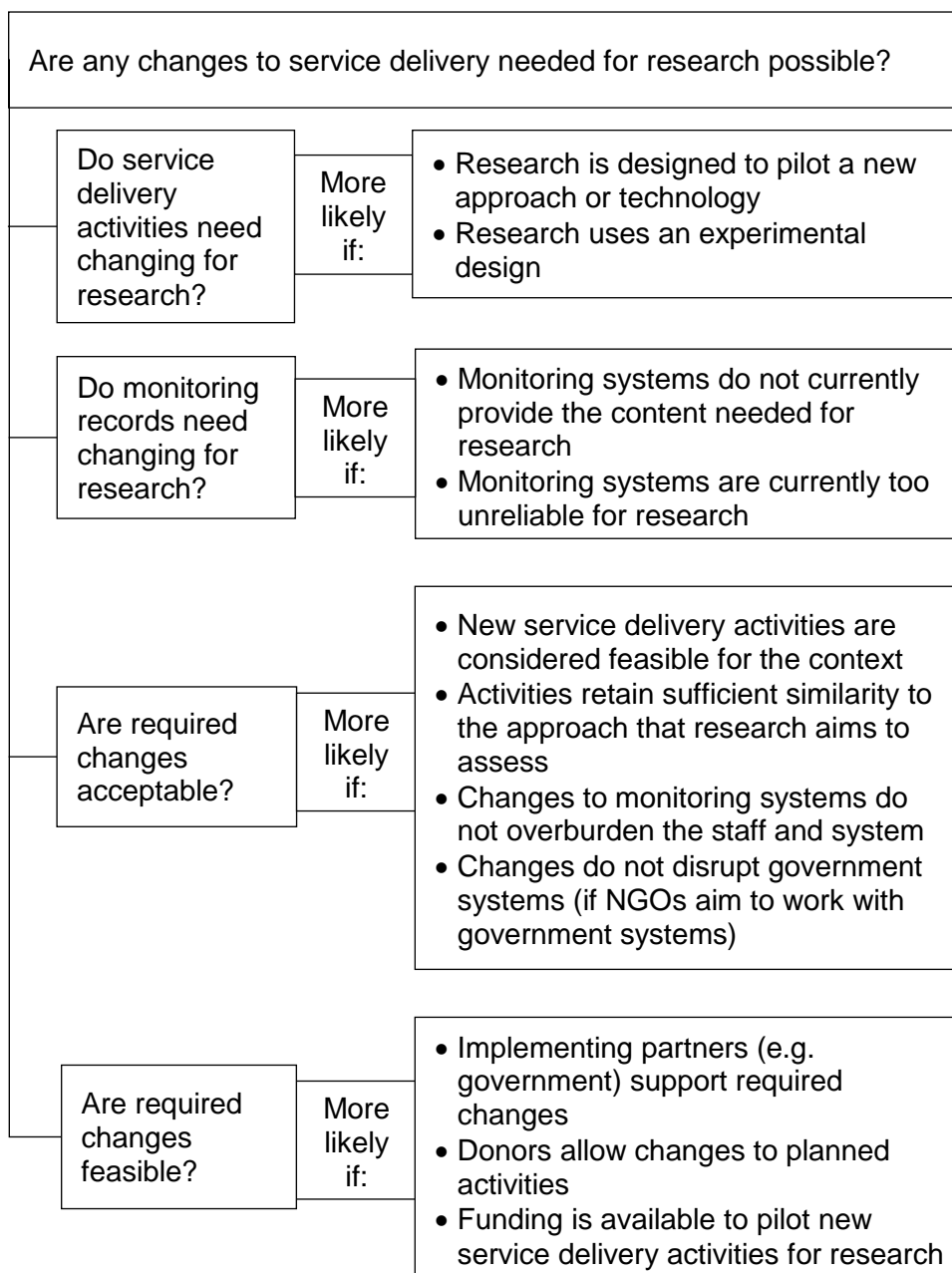
data for particular research questions and designs. This might involve developing new activities, changing the way activities are undertaken to incorporate new approaches or to suit experimental designs, or changing the content and reliability of monitoring records. The acceptability of these changes is affected by organisational principles. One principle from the case NGOs is a concern that findings should be applicable within current contexts of limited funding. This affects the kinds of new activities that can be piloted through research and the extent to which existing activities can be modified to suit research designs. Similarly, concern to align with and support government staff and systems may affect the acceptability of adjusting monitoring records. There can be difficult compromises in balancing organisational principles and research aims. For example, approaches needed for reliability may clash with those that support staff capacity and government systems. When changes to service delivery activities for research are acceptable, constraints on NGOs' ability to adapt their programmes might make changes unfeasible. Changes may require agreement from donors and implementing partners, including government. Availability of funding can also limit change, by affecting scope to pilot new activities for research. The nature of required changes, including financial cost and scale, affects the significance of these different requirements for acceptability and feasibility. These conditions are summarised in Figure 9. These constraints do not mean service delivery cannot be used as a source of data; research designs and questions could be changed to suit what is possible. Rather, these conditions mean service delivery may not be a viable data source for some research aims and approaches.

So far, this chapter has discussed the value of service delivery as a source of research data. The next section moves to NGOs' capacity to exploit this data source. Before switching focus, I want to emphasise that despite potential constraints, NGOs' service delivery often can provide a basis for generating data. This is indicated by the examples of research using service delivery among the case NGOs, and by the large body of research in service delivery settings in other organisations. Indeed, Chalk and Marl have used their service delivery to produce data for research that has been appreciated by other organisations in Malawi and beyond. Comments from Marl's research coordinator encapsulate the perceived value of monitoring records and service delivery activities for research data, despite the difficulties. On monitoring, she noted that "every data set has limitations", and while very aware of the difficulties, she felt that "we do have large databases that have a lot of data that can sometimes be very, very useful". The value of service delivery activities was emphasised when discussing challenges around balancing control over intervention processes and data collection against working with government systems in realistic settings:

“I think scientific rigour is probably the area where, you know, we’ll never, we don’t want to be a clinical randomised control trial, that’s not what the field setting is about. There is a trade-off, you have to accept some level of diminished quality for the fact that you’re in this setting. But the power of the setting is also amazing. What you can get from here is phenomenal.”

Although there are sometimes compromises, when research aims and designs can be met through existing service delivery activities or monitoring records, or required changes are possible, NGOs’ service delivery can provide a source of research data that is highly valued by NGO staff and external researchers.

Figure 9: Conditions affecting whether changes to service delivery required for research are possible



5.4 Capacity to use service delivery as a source of research data

The previous sections considered whether service delivery activities and monitoring records provide opportunities for generating research data that meet research aims. In this section, I consider NGOs' capacity to use these opportunities. Research capacity varies between the case NGOs. Chalk and particularly Marl have more capacity, contributing to their greater use of service delivery for research data. Flint face more constraints, limiting capacity to use service delivery as a source of data despite some interest in this kind of research. This varied research capacity among NGOs is noted by some of those who discuss the potential value of service delivery for generating data (e.g. Delisle et al., 2005; CORE Group, 2008; Zachariah et al., 2010). Indeed, as described in Chapter 1, gaps in NGO research capacity are widely mentioned within existing literature. While existing accounts highlight potential gaps, they provide limited detail or discussion of the causes of varied capacity. They also focus largely on INGOs, with little information on research capacity among national organisations. Some of these issues are addressed in wider literature on NGO organisational capacity, not specifically relating to research, which provides more explanation of potential constraints (e.g. Fowler, 1997; James & Wrigley, 2007; Malunga, 2007; Swidler & Watkins, 2009). In this section, I draw on this wider literature and the case NGOs' experiences to describe and explain variation in their research capacity. I focus on aspects of capacity that seem particularly significant in enabling or constraining research among the case NGOs. I look in turn at funding, staff time and research skills, and then consider collaboration with external researchers as a possible way to overcome these constraints. These aspects are all affected by prioritisation of research, which I discuss at the end of the section. While the focus is capacity for research that uses data from service delivery, these issues affect research more broadly, so I draw on examples from other kinds of research to provide further evidence and understanding.

5.4.1 Funding for research

In 5.3.3 I noted that funding may be needed to adapt service delivery for research, for example to pilot new activities. Here, my focus is funding for the research itself, for example budgets for staff and logistics to collect data. The effect of funding on NGOs' ability to use service delivery as a source of research data depends partly on the need for additional funding, and I consider this first below. I then examine access to additional funds, considering two options of securing research budgets as part of service delivery funding and through separate research grants.

The need to secure additional funding for research

The need for additional funding depends on the balance between expenditure associated with planned research and NGOs' existing funding. In relation to the cost of planned research, some studies could be undertaken without additional expenditure. This might apply when existing monitoring records can be used or adjusted to provide data, but also when additional data can be collected through existing activities. Chalk's research manager and Flint's director both noted potential to collect data during programme management activities, for example conducting interviews during community visits. However, there were no clear examples of this approach. Although there may be scope to conduct more research through existing activities, this would only be possible for particular research questions and designs, probably small-scale research. Even small studies may require funding to cover fees associated with ethical review, and studies with more extensive data collection are likely to require funding for staff time and logistics. Both the Chalk research manager and Flint director also saw funding as a major constraint, so did not think all research could be done within existing programme budgets. Perhaps reflecting this variation in costs between studies, other Flint staff underlined the need for additional funding. For example, a programme manager said "we have also learnt that [research] is not a cheap activity, it needs quite a lot of resources", and the advocacy officer emphasised the centrality of funding in determining whether Flint could do research:

"Even if it's just a minor issue that you just want to get a clear understanding of what is happening, you require maybe fuel for a vehicle to take you to that particular area, so the resources are very key."

Relatively low costs such as transport are particularly significant for NGOs like Flint. This highlights the influence of existing resources on the need for additional funding. Flint have little core funding and depend on donor grants. Most grants are tied to specific activities agreed in advance, and cannot easily be used for other purposes, highlighting again the donor inflexibility discussed in 5.3.3. This was indicated in relation to funding for research on issues affecting families of abused children. Flint initially discussed using a programme M&E budget to pay for data collection, but later decided this was not possible because "we also need to adhere to donor requirements" [project officer]. Similarly, a Chalk UK officer explained that the bulk of their funding is "project based" and cannot be reassigned to research. NGOs with more flexible funding are better placed to cover financial costs associated with research, as with Marl's large and primarily unrestricted international budget. This significance of flexible funding applies within as well as between NGOs. For example, Flint could afford to investigate the causes of social disruption in a project area a few years ago because one donor was providing flexible funding at the time. As explained by the advocacy officer, "the

nature of their support was a strategic grant, it was funding the institution”, giving Flint flexibility to spend some of their existing income on research and making additional funding unnecessary.

When existing funds cannot cover the costs associated with planned research, additional funding is required. The next two sections consider options for obtaining this funding. I focus on Chalk because, in contrast to Marl, Chalk have less core funding so need additional research grants, and in contrast to Flint or Clay, Chalk have more interest in research on service delivery and have sought funding for this. Despite the examples discussed so far in this chapter, the majority of Chalk’s service delivery is not used to provide research data. As explained by one programme manager, “I would say out of ten projects, maybe two or three would have a research component”. Lack of funding has a major influence on this. The shortage results from limited inclusion of research within service delivery budgets, and difficulty in securing separate research grants, the two funding options suggested by proponents of ‘getting research out of practice’ (Parkhurst et al., 2010 p.1415). These two options are considered in turn below.

Research funding within service delivery project budgets

Service delivery is more likely to be used as a source of research data if programme plans include research budgets. Reflecting on which projects include research, a Chalk programme manager explained that:

“I suppose ultimately it does often come down to money. If we haven’t got money within a budget for research, then obviously it’s much less likely we’re going to do it.”

Within Chalk, initial service delivery plans rarely contain a research budget. This section considers factors contributing to this, including perceptions of donor interest in research and prioritisation of research among NGO staff. While I concentrate on decisions among NGO staff about whether to include research in service delivery proposals, their requests for research budgets will only bring funding if proposals are approved. This seems likely to depend on aspects such as donor assessment of research plans and NGO capacity to deliver, levels of competition, and donors’ focus. However, the discussion below is limited to decisions within NGOs rather than factors influencing proposal success because my data come from NGO staff.

Perceptions of donor interest in research

Chalk’s experience suggests lack of research funding in service delivery proposals partly reflects concern among NGO staff that including research would make proposals uncompetitive. A programme manager explained this:

“When we are doing the proposals we have to balance between how much research related work can we put into this versus the chances of us succeeding with this. Because most of the funding has come through the global competitive bidding, which is not an easy thing to do. And then if you have things like research, OK you are trying to do something which you are not even very sure of, that automatically reduces your chances of succeeding.”

The same fears have been documented among other NGOs. For example, discussions with a network of international health NGOs found “some NGOs felt that building research activities into applications for implementation funds would increase overall project costs, causing them to appear uncompetitive and reducing chances of securing funding” (CORE Group, 2008 p.8).

This concern that including research would hinder success reflects a feeling that few donors want to fund research. Chalk’s research manager said most “donors are interested in research but not in funding it”, and suggested that including research budgets in proposals “would require a significant change of mindset of donors”. One aspect seen as limiting donor interest relates to the uncertainty of outcomes from research. Reflecting the management systems and focus on pre-planned targets noted in relation to flexibility in 5.3.3, donors are seen to require specific, predictable results. This is perhaps suggested in the programme manager’s comment on doing something they are “not very sure of”, and was indicated clearly by the Chalk UK staff member:

“We have to make sure that we develop projects that have very clear objectives, clear outcomes, show a clear local impact, and I think getting funding for the direct implementation of activities, where we’re able to show very clearly what the direct number of beneficiaries would be, is always easier for us than getting funding for research.”

Service delivery outcomes are often less predictable than these comments suggest (Eyben et al., 2013; Wallace & Porter, 2013), but they can perhaps be indicated more easily than research outcomes given uncertainty around findings and complex, long-term pathways to uptake (DFID, 2013; Neufeld et al., 2014). Although donors obviously do fund research, uncertain impacts may be more significant for service delivery funding streams, where donors are perhaps more focused on immediate change on the ground. This seems to contribute to Chalk’s hesitancy about including research within service delivery budgets.

However, interest in research varies between donors, and with it opportunities to access research funding. For donor interest to enable inclusion of research budgets within service delivery proposals, donors need to be willing not just to fund research, but to combine funds for research and service delivery and to fund research on service delivery. All three aspects applied for Chalk’s District Development Project, which as described in previous chapters includes research funding. Chalk staff see this project

as exceptional due to the donor's support for research. As explained by the research manager, "it's only because this donor is interested in promoting research that we are able to undertake it". Other Chalk staff, in the UK and Malawi, made similar comments about the significance of this donor's interest for enabling research. As well as overall interest, this donor is willing to fund research within service delivery grants. Chalk's former Malawi director explained that some donors separate grants for research and service delivery: "there is more compartmentalisation – this is poverty reduction, this is research, and so on". In contrast, the donor for the District Development project "will mix them", allowing inclusion of research and service delivery in the same programme. This donor is also keen to fund research that examines service delivery activities, a requirement if funding is to support use of service delivery as a source of data. Some donors have other research priorities, and this contributes to lack of funding for research on service delivery in Flint. The director complained that:

"Most donors when they want to fund research, [...] the focus is how does that relate to advocacy on the major government programmes. [...] But not directly the study to link to service delivery. So I've found that to be a little bit of a challenge."

Flint's experience may reflect a donor view of national NGOs as supporting government accountability (an approach discussed further in Chapter 6). Apart from baseline studies and needs assessments, most research funding received by Flint is part of this kind of advocacy project, where research assesses government service delivery as described in 5.1.2. Flint receive little if any funding for research to understand the effects of their own service delivery interventions. For an NGO like Flint that depends almost completely on donors, this donor focus on monitoring government limits scope to generate research data from their own service delivery. In contrast, Chalk's experience shows how donor interest in research on service delivery and an integrated funding approach can facilitate inclusion of research budgets within service delivery plans.

Donors might disagree with these suggestions from NGO staff that they are often unwilling to fund research on service delivery or to support research within service delivery programmes, and this would be a valuable area for further investigation. Flint in particular appear to criticise donors as reluctant to fund such research without actually having asked them for support. There is support for some of the NGOs' concerns from existing literature. In particular, separate funding streams for research and programme development are noted as a barrier to implementation research within international health (Peters et al., 2013 p.37). Regardless of actual donor approaches, NGO perceptions that research will disadvantage proposals deter inclusion of research budgets in service delivery plans. Based on the discussions in Chalk and Flint,

inclusion of research within service delivery proposals seems more likely when NGOs think donors: are interested in research, accept uncertain and longer-term outcomes, allow integration of research and service delivery in the same funded project, and support research on NGOs' service delivery, not just government monitoring. NGO perceptions of these aspects may affect their confidence to include research within service delivery proposals, and consequently chances of securing funding to use service delivery as a source of data.

NGO interest in including research budgets within service delivery plans

Although concern about donor reactions is one reason service delivery budgets omit research, this omission also reflects prioritisation of service delivery by NGO staff and limited attention to research during programme planning. As described in previous chapters, research is secondary to implementation, and it seems Chalk staff do not prioritise research when developing their plans. This means that “when we are designing programmes or projects, research does not take precedence in the list of what we are going to do” [Chalk programme manager]. When this prioritisation is combined with limited available funding, research loses out to activities seen as having more immediate impact:

“In many cases when we design the project we are working with tight budgets, and priority now is to allocate the resources to the deliverables. I said research is software but then there is hardware type of deliverable. So like the boreholes, when you see boreholes, when people have the animals, when they have the seeds. So you would want to make the maximum investment along those lines rather than spend money on research.” [Chalk programme manager]

Similarly, the Chalk UK officer, who supports country funding, explained that research is “not a top priority” when donor ceilings mean budgets are “already quite restricted”. In contrast, while Marl share the concern to avoid taking resources from service delivery, they can seek additional funding for research more easily through their international headquarters. Their programme director explained that “we try to put extra resources because we don't want to draw resources from operations”. In NGOs like Marl with more generous budgets, research can be funded alongside the priority of service delivery.

While staff may choose to omit research from project plans because they feel it is not the priority or might disadvantage proposals, sometimes research is not even considered. The Chalk programme manager quoted above admitted that:

“From my experience research doesn't come out as an activity in any discussion. So (laughs), so it's difficult to remember it when you are doing budgeting.”

Another programme manager's reaction when I asked what affects whether projects include research also suggested Chalk do not routinely consider incorporating research

in service delivery budgets:

“That’s an interesting question from a design point of view, we probably haven’t included money for a research budget and maybe that’s something we should consider, even in new project design going forward, is actually putting in a little bit of money for research.”

In Marl, attention to research seems a more systematic part of project design. The programme director explained that when starting new programmes, they decide whether research (as opposed to routine M&E) is needed. Reasons for different levels of attention to research during programme planning are unclear, but it may reflect different expectations of the possibility of accessing research funding (which is more likely for Marl), and the greater expectation of research from Marl’s headquarters.

The combination of this limited prioritisation or attention to research among NGO staff and the perception that donors are unwilling to fund research may mean clear indication of donor interest in research can help inclusion of research in service delivery proposals. Chalk’s UK staff member said research budgets are included “where there is more of a push from the donor, from the funder, to show how you’re actually learning from your work”. When Chalk Malawi have included research in service delivery budgets, this seems to have followed donor encouragement or indeed requirements for research, rather than Chalk proposing research and the donor then agreeing. This applied to funding for the District Development Project, where Chalk recognised the donor’s interest in research through earlier collaboration. It also applied with funding for Chalk’s research on cheaper types of soap. A programme manager explained that this soap research was incorporated in a water and sanitation programme following donor requests to include “some innovations, some kind of research”. Explicit donor interest means NGOs know research will not disadvantage the proposal, and there is some pressure to prioritise research, either encouraging or necessitating inclusion of a research budget. As indicated above, the emphasis on research from Marl’s headquarters may play a similar role, encouraging attention to research in internal planning and budgeting. Overall then, attitudes towards research from those providing funding, and perceptions of these attitudes among NGO staff, seem to affect attention to research in programme planning and inclusion of research budget lines in proposals. This in turn affects access to the funding needed to use service delivery as a source of research data.

Separate grants for research

When research is omitted from project budgets, service delivery could be used as a source of research data if separate research funds are identified. However, securing research grants can be difficult. For example, Chalk submitted proposals for research

that would assess service delivery programmes to three major donors, but two were rejected, and although a concept note for the other was accepted, Chalk did not submit the full proposal. The reasons for rejection are unclear without seeing donor feedback, but discussion in Chalk and Flint suggests several factors that may limit ability to apply for and secure research grants.

A first issue is time and skills to prepare bids. In Chalk, preparation of research funding proposals depends on the research manager, so they are not developed if he cannot find time due to other priorities or if funding deadlines clash with time out of the office. While relying on one person is difficult, finding time is perhaps even harder in NGOs without research staff. Applications also require knowledge and expertise in research funding, and the Chalk UK officer suggested staff have “very little experience” with such grants. This applies particularly in other Chalk country offices, which do not have a research manager.

A second factor that can limit ability to apply for research funding is the need for a track record of research. This was mentioned as an obstacle to securing funding in Flint and Chalk. For example, Chalk’s research manager felt that increased funding would depend partly on building their research reputation, and a programme manager in Flint said securing research funding “requires you to be well established and you should have a name in order to get that type of money that you want for research”. It is unclear whether this has actually contributed to rejection of funding proposals, but donors often request proven capacity, so limited research experience could affect proposal success.

A third aspect is contact with capable research partners. This relates partly to this need for expertise, and to requirements for independence. The latter is a particular constraint for research that assesses an NGO’s own service delivery. As with two of the grants where Chalk submitted proposals, donors may stipulate that the NGO implementing activities to be examined cannot lead the research. This makes access to funding dependent on partnership with external researchers. Independence is also a concern for some NGO staff, as indicated by the discussion of bias in M&E in 5.2.2. Regardless, where independence is a funding requirement, external partners are compulsory. This means limited availability of or contacts with capable partners can hinder access to funding, and Chalk’s research manager felt “finding a good research partner is very difficult”. This contributed to difficulties with the bid where Chalk did not submit a full proposal. Chalk planned to collaborate with a Malawian college, but this college was reluctant to lead the research, and requirements for independence meant Chalk could not be principal applicant. The research manager felt that although the college has

“some very good people”, there was insufficient organisation and commitment, noting that “if the development of the proposals was anything to go by, we were probably lucky not to get the money!” Perceived gaps in the college’s capacity may reflect the wider research landscape in Malawi, discussed further in relation to collaboration in 5.4.3.

Constraints will vary with the requirements of particular funding schemes. The grants applied for by Chalk promoted highly technical research that needed a research partner and substantial experience with the donors’ preferred approaches (as indicated in the grant evaluation criteria). Securing research grants is likely to be easier when requirements match NGOs’ experience. One example is funding for research by Flint on attitudes to child abuse. This grant came through an international NGO network programme designed to build research capacity. Aimed at supporting NGOs that were new to research, the funding did not require independence or research experience. The application process was perhaps also simpler, based on existing contacts within the network and so reducing the time and expertise needed to submit proposals. Although Flint’s child abuse research did not directly use their service delivery as a source of data, variation in grant requirements would affect funding for research that does draw on service delivery.

Summarising, when research on service delivery requires additional funding and this is not included in service delivery budgets, one option is a separate research grant. Chalk’s experience suggests NGOs cannot always meet research funding requirements, such as experience with managing research and collaboration with capable independent partners. They may also lack time and knowledge to apply for grants, particularly when there are no or few research staff. Requirements of particular funding opportunities will affect the level and nature of constraints. These potential barriers to securing research funding can constrain opportunities to use service delivery as a source of research data.

5.4.2 Staff time and skills for research

As well as affecting scope to apply for research funding, staff time and research skills affect capacity to undertake research that uses service delivery data. As with funding, the effects of time and skills depend on the gap between existing resources and those needed for the research NGOs want to undertake. Different research approaches require different skills and staff numbers (Green & Bennett, 2007). For example, some Marl studies need statistical knowledge and staff to collect data, whereas Chalk’s

research is often mixed methods and undertaken by consultants, so requiring some understanding of qualitative and quantitative techniques and experience of managing consultancies. The variation in requirements was indicated by Marl's research coordinator:

“If you're doing a simple survey then it's not so difficult. But if you want to do these longer-term prospective research projects, then you've got to put your resources there.”

A “simple survey” may actually require significant research skills to design and implement, but the quote makes the point that the time and skills needed to use service delivery as a source of data will depend on research aims and designs. This variation applies throughout the discussion below. I look at staff time then skills, considering conditions that affect their availability and interactions between time, skills and funding.

Staff time: balancing service delivery and research

Involvement in service delivery can limit time for research. This was seen in Chapter 4 in relation to time to contribute to research agendas. Here, the focus is time to undertake research. I illustrate the time constraints below, consider the role of research staff in providing time and then examine aspects of the organisational funding environment that affect ability to hire research staff and manage time.

The difficulty of finding time to undertake research alongside service delivery is widely recognised in discussions of NGO research (Porter et al., 2004; CORE Group, 2008; Zachariah et al., 2010). This dual workload was highlighted by a former Flint manager:

“As an NGO, if you are engaging yourself with research, that means you have to balance the project implementation and the research that you are carrying out.”

He went on to emphasise the significance of prioritisation in determining time for research, something noted for NGOs (Hayman, 2013) and other research organisations (Bennett et al., 2010). Flint had created time for research around programme work when research was a priority. However, given overall lower prioritisation of research, difficulty in finding time for both service delivery and research can mean research loses out. One example is Flint's research to understand experiences among families of abused children. Flint developed initial plans for this research in early 2012. A year later no progress had been made. Although partly due to funding, as discussed in 5.4.1, lack of time was a significant constraint. The director, who initiated this research, was busy with international travel and other work. Although he said “we should be rolling it out and doing the study anytime now, we just want to clear a bit of backlog, I've a lot of backlog of work”, this didn't happen. A project officer who had been asked to develop the research was also busy:

“Unfortunately there's been a lot going around, I was in Kenya, I was attending a

meeting, I was up and down. The counselling officer left, so she has handed over the project to me - you know what that means!”

Similar difficulties were seen with other Flint research, with studies either not happening or being delayed. The responsive nature of Flint’s service delivery, which sometimes involves dealing with incidents that arise in programme districts or requests from local people, perhaps adds to difficulty in finding time. Discussing delays with some research, the advocacy officer explained that:

“For an NGO, you can’t be in the office and put up a sign on the door saying ‘please don’t disturb’. That doesn’t exist for a service provider!”

This context of reliance on service delivery staff who are struggling to meet other deadlines or responding to immediate client issues seems to reduce time for research and so constrain use of service delivery as a source of data.

Availability of research staff

Staff with dedicated research time can help to overcome the difficulty of balancing service delivery and research workloads, as happens in Marl and Chalk. A Chalk programme manager stressed the importance of the research manager post:

“If the research was put under [the project managers], nothing would have happened, because they are so busy with the day to day running. But in this case it’s fantastic, we have the resource, we have [the research manager] who can concentrate on that element. It wouldn’t matter whether the whole month he doesn’t make an input into the District Development Project, the Project will still run because there are full-time [programme staff]. So those are some of the small dynamics that are there but they have quite a lot of impact.”

This quote indicates again the balance between prioritisation of service delivery and available resources that was seen in relation to funding. Chalk and Flint prioritise service delivery. Having research staff means Chalk can give time to research without taking from service delivery. In Flint, research relies on a director whose primary focus is programme management, reducing time for research. As he explained, lack of research staff is “an issue, because right now I’m responsible for the research and that can have its own implications”. As well as contributing hours, research staff may shift the balance between time and priorities by supporting prioritisation and so promoting time for research among other staff. The Chalk UK officer indicated this when discussing the greater volume of research in Chalk Malawi compared to country offices without research staff:

“Having that research post means you’ve got someone [whose] main focus is on research, and they’re driving that agenda forward within the programme, and that does make a difference.”

These experiences suggest that staff with dedicated research responsibility help create organisational time for research, both by reducing the opportunity cost of research as less time is taken from other activities, and by promoting attention to research within

staff schedules.

Ability to hire research staff of course depends on funding. This may come from core budgets, as in Marl, or from donors, as in Chalk, where the donor for the District Development Project pays for the research manager post through the project budget. Chalk staff in Malawi and the UK emphasised the importance of donor support for this post in enabling research. While Chalk have donor support and Marl have core funds, Flint hoped to recruit a research manager but this was “funds permitting, if we have enough resources” [programme manager]. Flint had not yet sought funding for research staff, but discussion of the organisational funding environment suggested donor support may not be forthcoming, as I explain below.

Project funding and staff time for research

Funding relationships between international organisations and national NGOs appear to affect time for research by limiting capacity to recruit research staff and by contributing to overall staff shortages and heavy workloads among existing staff. In particular, analyses of the NGO sector in Malawi and internationally suggest funding is often short-term and restricted to programme activities, without supporting costs such as staff recruitment needed to maintain or strengthen organisational capacity (James & Wrigley, 2007; Malunga, 2007; Pratt, 2014). This was a concern in both Flint and Clay, where staff criticised the INGOs that are often their immediate donors for failing to support staff costs. In Flint, for example, the director complained that although INGOs “talk about partnership”, they want Flint to deliver activities but “don’t want to contribute to salaries”. Existing staff are already committed, so donor reluctance to cover staff costs “is a headache for Flint” – they “can’t reduce the number of people in other districts to do the work [the INGO] wants to be done”. Although Flint and Clay’s experience is often with INGOs, these intermediaries are sometimes passing on constraints that originate among government donors, especially a focus on short-term results that hinders longer-term support for local partners (James, 2010). Project budgets were particularly tight because of the global recession and consequent cuts in donor aid to Malawi, which reduced grant size. In this context, “most of the donors, it’s either they would say ‘we don’t have money’, or if they have it’s very small, which can just labour us” [Clay director]. This pressure on budgets was seen as further reducing support for staff costs. This is not a universal picture: some donors do provide long-term core support, in Malawi and elsewhere (Malunga, 2007; Pratt, 2014). For example, Flint have a valued relationship with one INGO which they feel does support organisational capacity, and another INGO provided funding for an M&E officer. However, the broader pattern is short-term funding limited to project activities.

This lack of support for staff salaries seems likely to reduce ability to recruit research staff. It also affects time for research among existing staff by increasing their workloads. This is partly through the lack of support for programme staff costs, meaning staff juggle multiple project activities, something noted more widely among Malawian NGOs (Swidler & Watkins, 2009). In addition, small, short-term grants combined with the insecurity of donor funding mean a constant focus on securing new resources (Fowler, 1997; Swidler & Watkins, 2009; Watkins et al., 2012). In Flint, much of the director's week is spent networking with donors to maintain or seek funding, taking time that could be used for research. Securing funding may have been particularly time consuming because funding cuts associated with the recession increased competition for available grants, with NGOs "scrambling for resources at the donors' door" [Clay director]. High levels of rejection meant more applications needed preparing. For Clay, this situation does not affect use of service delivery for research data because that is not the kind of research Clay pursue. However, for NGOs like Flint that have some interest in using data from service delivery, dependence on donor funding characterised by short-term, insecure support for project activities and minimal support for staff costs may limit time for such research, by reducing capacity to recruit research staff and increasing workloads among existing staff.

Planning time for research

Time for research is affected by use of available time, not just overall workloads. As well as the prioritisation of service delivery discussed earlier, this involves planning. Poor planning was emphasised by Flint staff as causing delays to some studies. For example, a programme manager said Flint:

"miss the point at the planning level. [...] When we do our studies it's like we are doing an activity that will stop midway and then we will pick it up later on, and then it will stop and then we will pick it up later on."

Other staff made similar comments, suggesting there was insufficient attention to scheduling time needed for research. This sense of inadequate planning seems to apply more broadly within Flint, beyond research. Senior staff criticised a lack of planning during team meetings. Workplans seemed unpredictable. For example, it was harder to arrange interviews in Flint than other NGOs, with appointments cancelled more often and staff frequently away without notice.

Numerous issues might affect organisational planning, including the responsive nature of some Flint work noted earlier, and insufficient communication, mentioned by Flint staff as a contributory factor. The dependence on external donors and funding relationships discussed above may also contribute. Unpredictability of donor funding is

criticised in Malawi and more widely as causing problems for national organisations (Barber & Bowie, 2008; Watkins et al., 2012). Among Malawian NGOs, uncertainty about whether funding will be secured, when it will arrive and how long it will last make planning difficult (Malunga, 2007). This was apparent in Flint. Annual plans seem to be lists of activities Flint would like to do rather than a guide to what activities will be conducted and when: logframes note funding for many activities as “to be identified”. The financial uncertainty seems to affect time for research. Flint’s advocacy officer explained that planning research time was difficult because “the problem is that you plan to start in March, you only get the funding in June, and by then you have other things on”. This uncertainty may have been exacerbated by the funding cuts and increased competition associated with the recession. For example, Flint had grants where donor funding cuts were transferred by INGOs, leading to planned activities being scaled down or cancelled. NGOs with core funding can work around inconsistent donor disbursements. However, when activities are tied to particular budgets, donor delays can upset existing plans (Fowler, 1997 p.132), potentially taking time from research.

As well as making it hard to know when activities will take place, unpredictable funding may hinder planning by encouraging NGOs to take on multiple projects. As noted earlier, small, insecure grants foster an ongoing search for new projects. Indeed, Flint’s director described their projects as “countless”. Experience with other Malawian NGOs suggests balancing numerous projects means hectic schedules and demands from multiple stakeholders, hindering time management (Swidler & Watkins, 2009). One temporary staff member contrasted Flint with previous employers that were “well organised”, and related this to the large number of different activities: “I feel they are doing too much, just too much”. Different project deadlines, relationships and funding streams increase the difficulty of planning, which may in turn hinder scheduled time for research.

Summarising this discussion of staff time, capacity to use service delivery as a source of research data is affected by availability and use of staff time. Recruitment of research staff and service delivery staff workloads affect time available, while prioritisation of service delivery and planning systems affect time use. When NGOs depend on donors, limited support for staff costs may deter recruitment of research staff and contribute to heavy workloads, while unpredictable, small grants may increase time spent on funding applications and hinder planning. NGOs such as Marl, with secure, flexible funding, seem better placed to recruit sufficient research and programme staff, and may have more control over their workplans. This facilitates time

for research and consequently use of data from service delivery.

Research skills

Staff skills also affect use of service delivery for research data. This was a particular constraint in Flint. As noted in the previous chapter, most staff have little research experience, particularly at district level, and existing skills were considered “very limited” [programme manager]. The director emphasised the need to increase use of information collected through service delivery: “in Flint, I will tell you that there is a lot of information, but very little of that information is being used”. Although he saw this as partly about motivation, he emphasised the role of limited skills in constraining use of monitoring records and project activities for research data: “we don’t have interviewing skills, we can’t engage people, and we can’t do a report”.

As with staff time, availability of skills is affected by funding. Research staff can bring expertise, but as previously discussed, their recruitment requires resources. NGOs with more funding can also hire more skilled staff, something highlighted by a former Flint manager:

“You already know the difference between local NGOs and international. The international, because they have got access to more resources, they would get the right people to carry out the research, with skills, and they would be able to pay them the way they want. While in Flint as a local NGO, probably that could take time to develop because there’s limited access to resources.”

Research skills are not necessarily higher in INGOs (for example, Clay staff have substantial experience in their community research approach). However, ability to pay higher salaries can enable recruitment and retention of staff with more qualifications and experience. The consequent drain of skilled staff from national to international organisations is noted in Malawi and more widely (Barber & Bowie, 2008; Malunga, 2009; Pratt, 2014). This former Flint manager is one example: he had some research skills, but left to work in an INGO. Funding also affects scope to enhance skills among existing staff. Flint saw potential for research training from nearby universities, but noted that “those guys can support you at any time provided you have the resources, that’s the difficult part” [programme manager]. The significance of funding for availability of skills is highlighted by the contrast with Marl. Flexible funds mean Marl can hire experienced research staff, who manage research directly and mentor others. Headquarters research staff provide further ongoing support. Marl can also afford to run international research training courses for country staff and capacity building workshops within Malawi (including the workshops to support research design discussed in Chapter 4). This training has supported research by programme staff that uses data from service delivery activities and monitoring records.

While funding is significant, time and prioritisation also affect both availability of skills and their use. Flint were not fully using existing skills. Two headquarters staff had worked in university research, and their skills could have been used more extensively. For example, one of these staff noted that if asked, they could have analysed existing data that had not been used, including some monitoring records and qualitative data collected for a research study. Flint were also not using potentially free or low-cost opportunities to develop skills. For example, the staff with research experience could have trained others, and Flint asked me to provide research training but did not find time for this. In contrast Chalk requested research training and quickly organised a staff workshop. This difference may partly reflect Flint's prioritisation and time constraints discussed earlier, both for the director who was leading research but giving it limited attention, and through his ideas about priorities for other staff. The role of Chalk's research manager in providing time and prioritisation seems to enable more attention to identifying and taking opportunities to develop research skills.

Summarising, for service delivery to provide a source of research data, NGOs need skills to design and undertake such research. Access to funding affects availability of skills through recruitment, retention and training, while prioritisation and availability of time seem to affect whether NGOs use existing skills and take opportunities for skills development. As noted at the start of this section, required skills, as well as time and funding, vary with the research approach. This includes research aims and design, and whether research is conducted by NGO staff or through working with external researchers, a possible strategy for expanding capacity discussed in the next section.

5.4.3 Working with external researchers to provide capacity

When NGOs lack research capacity, working with external researchers could support use of service delivery data. Collaboration between NGOs and academics is often discussed as a mutually beneficial exchange, with academics bringing skills and sometimes funding, while NGOs bring access to data through service delivery (Roper, 2002; Delisle et al., 2005; Stevens, 2011; Aniekwe et al., 2012; ELHRA, 2012). I consider the potential for partnership as a strategy to secure research capacity in this section. I first discuss whether external collaboration can provide capacity for research, either directly or through building NGOs' research skills. I then consider requirements for working with external researchers, including NGOs' ability to manage partnerships and openness to collaboration.

Support for capacity to use service delivery data from external researchers

Among the case NGOs, Chalk work most with external researchers, both through consultancy and research partnerships. Indeed, much of their research that uses data from service delivery activities involves external collaboration. Chalk's experience suggests external researchers can provide time, skills and sometimes funding, but this is affected by varied capacity among potential partners.

Looking first at positive experiences, the advantages of external collaboration for time were emphasised in relation to Chalk's use of consultants. Research was previously undertaken by the research manager, but Chalk moved towards commissioning research. The director explained that this change meant:

“we should be able to produce a higher volume of good quality research. Whereas if you're employing one person they can do high quality within a certain restricted field, if you're starting to call on others, you can do a lot more.”

When relying on the research manager, Chalk produced one main piece of research over two years. With research for the District Development Project, which is primarily commissioned, the aim is two studies annually. These deadlines are not met and time taken will vary with the nature of research, but working with consultants does provide additional time and so enable more research, including studies that draw on Chalk's service delivery activities.

Beyond consultancy, Chalk have often worked in partnership with universities or other research institutions, as indicated by examples in this chapter of work with agricultural organisations on crop trials, a Malawian university on soap, and European universities on energy technology and household equipment. These partnerships have brought expertise that supports use of data from service delivery. For example, a programme manager explained that in partnerships with agricultural institutions:

“The research guys will come in and design trials and make sure that all the statistical significance and everything is taken into account.”

As well as skills, these partnerships sometimes bring financial resources. Some external researchers have funding when they approach Chalk. When partners do not already have resources, collaboration can enable funding applications by helping to meet demands for research experience and independence, as indicated in 5.4.1. Chalk have submitted several joint funding applications with academics, for example the work to pilot local electricity supplies.

Although external researchers sometimes bring expertise and funding, this depends partly on capacity and interest among external partners. Skills and motivation seem to vary, particularly among Malawian researchers; Chalk's research manager said there

was “no comparison” between research partners from Europe and those in Malawi. This reflects the wider Malawian research landscape. As others have discussed, there are highly skilled researchers in Malawi, but overall research capacity is low, with limited numbers of experienced researchers (Chirwa et al., 2011; NCST, 2011). Research with Malawian academics suggests that when researchers have adequate skills, they may lack time and motivation: a focus on maximising consultancy wages can mean academics accept too much work to undertake each piece well, and they may feel the organisations commissioning research will not recognise or require high quality work (Holland, 2006). This seems to be reflected in Chalk’s experience of commissioning research. Staff complained that although some consultants “do a professional job”, others do not produce research of the desired quality or within agreed timeframes: “you struggle with them and you spend more on them, but you can still do the same work but even better work” [programme advisor]. This variation in skills and commitment means consultants have not always provided adequate capacity for research: some studies have been halted and Chalk have been disappointed with the quality of other research reports.

This research landscape also seems to limit potential for collaboration with Malawian researchers as partners rather than consultants. Several NGO staff and academics talked of limited partnership between NGOs and universities in Malawi. Academic interviewees described a “weak ability to work together and make alliances” [social science academic] and suggested “the academic-civil society relationship is very weak. [...] There is no obvious collaboration” [health academic]. Joint work tends to involve one-off consultancy rather than longer-term institutional collaboration, something noted more widely for NGO-academic partnerships (Wight, 2008; Stevens, 2011). This contributes to a relationship focused on funding. The first response from one academic when asked for his thoughts on working with NGOs was that pay is low compared to research for donors. The focus on consultancy, combined with low salaries and limited research grants, means Malawian researchers are unlikely to contribute skills for free or to bring funding. Availability of consultancy money and limited experience of collaborative partnership with NGOs may also reduce motivation to spend time working with NGOs on uncertain funding bids. This perhaps contributes to Chalk’s difficulties in finding Malawian research partners with commitment to developing funding proposals, noted in 5.4.1.

These gaps in skills, time, and motivation affect scope for working with external researchers, as consultants or partners, to secure capacity for research on service delivery. One response is to develop internal skills, a strategy discussed below.

Using research collaboration to develop internal capacity

As well as providing capacity to use service delivery data directly, collaboration with external researchers could strengthen NGOs' internal research skills (CORE Group, 2008; Aniekwe et al., 2012). There is some experience of this approach in Chalk and Flint. Partly because of the difficulties discussed above, particularly with consultants, Chalk is increasingly trying to build and use internal skills. Flint also want to strengthen internal research capacity, due to the cost of consultants and an organisational commitment to staff development. Flint see academic collaboration as one means of developing this capacity, as explained by a programme manager:

“We are still amateurs in the field of research, and we need somebody to hold our hand and walk us through. So we really need support from academic institutions to build our capacity and then take us along maybe for two, three years, until a time when we can say ‘OK, now we have the skills, we can do that research on our own’.”

For Flint, working with academics is a short-term approach rather than a long-term means of providing research capacity.

As with other aspects of external collaboration, this support for internal capacity has varied success. Chalk's experience suggests research partnerships and consultancy work can both help develop skills. For example, a Chalk project officer who worked with European university staff on the household equipment research thought this collaboration built his expertise:

“I feel the involvement of academics was a good part of it. Because it was like we were sharing ideas, we discuss issues. [...] I've learnt a lot from them.”

A similarly positive account came from a district officer who accompanied the consultant for Chalk's research comparing different household technology models. Afterwards, she reported that this experience “exposed me to a whole lot of new things about research that I had no knowledge of”. In particular, she learnt about qualitative methods that could be used for impact assessment, so supporting future use of service delivery as a source of research data.

An example from Flint gives a more mixed picture of working with external researchers for capacity development. As noted in 5.4.1, Flint's child abuse study was funded through a network programme to build NGO research capacity. Each NGO was paired with a research organisation that would provide support, and Flint was linked to an institute in another African country. The research institute team provided some training during a short visit to Malawi, including advice on quantitative data entry that Flint saw as useful for future research. However, Flint felt support for qualitative skills was limited, with insufficient training or time for practice. Another gap was skills for analysis,

an area Flint considered particularly important. Data was sent to the research institute team for analysis, and the director felt there was “very little learning on our part”.

Several factors might contribute to these varied results. Reports and guidelines on research capacity building indicate numerous conditions that affect success, such as ownership and clear understanding of capacity needs (Bennett et al., 2010; DFID, 2010; Vogel, 2012). Two aspects identified in this guidance that seem relevant for the example in Flint are research partners’ capacity and clearly agreed plans. On capacity, although Flint felt the research institute staff had research skills, they had limited time to provide support. Being based in another country, much support was via email, and there were often long delays in communication: “they also do other things, so you could wait maybe for a month or two months before they give you feedback” [programme manager]. When the research institute staff were in Malawi, difficulty in understanding their English meant some Flint staff struggled to follow the training. In terms of agreed plans, there was uncertainty about who was responsible for different aspects of the study and about the support Flint could expect from the research partner. Roles were unclear partly because Flint and the research institute had agreements with the donor INGO rather than each other, as the director explained:

“Unfortunately this MoU [memorandum of understanding] was not between Flint and this organisation, it was with [the donor INGO]. So they had a separate MoU and we did not even know what went into the MoU.”

This framework seemed to hinder accountability between Flint and the research institute, reducing Flint’s ability to secure the support they wanted. These difficulties around time and clear roles are acknowledged by the donor INGO in a report on the project, which indicates the importance of research mentors’ availability and agreed responsibilities. Similar lessons about the need for time among academic partners and clear communication have been identified from other partnerships designed to support NGO research capacity (Porter et al., 2004).

These different experiences suggest working with external researchers can contribute to internal research skills, and consequently support capacity to use service delivery as a source of research data. However, this depends on adequate capacity among external partners and effective partnership arrangements, including clearly agreed plans.

NGOs’ capacity to develop and support partnerships

Working with external researchers, for short-term support or skills development, can require some existing research capacity. This is clear in the case of consultancy, where

commissioning research requires funding. Chalk's District Development Project budget includes research funding that covers consultant fees, but Flint's experience is that donors are often unwilling to fund consultancies:

“It is expensive to hire consultants, they are not cheap. And sometimes most donors are very reluctant to give that amount of money to support a consultancy service.”
[programme manager]

Fees may be particularly high because, in Malawi as in other countries, more qualified researchers often provide consultancy work for international donors who can pay high prices, making them unaffordable for NGOs with tighter budgets (Stevens, 2011). This may limit use of consultants, as in Flint, or restrict NGOs to working with cheaper (and potentially less experienced) consultants, as happens in Chalk.

More collaborative partnerships do not require this funding to commission research, but often have other costs. Time to develop and manage partnerships is a particular issue. Chalk's research manager spends considerable time discussing research ideas with potential partners, collaborating in research design, and contributing to reports. The importance of his time for enabling collaboration was indicated by the Chalk UK officer discussing variation in academic partnership between Chalk country offices. Beyond Malawi, it was “difficult to get much off the ground”, partly because other country teams lack research staff, so arranging collaboration relies on busy programme managers. Having the research manager in Malawi “does make all the difference”. Supporting collaboration can also have financial costs, even when researchers' time is paid for through other grants. For example, Chalk has sometimes used core funding to cover transport and other logistics for external researchers. This need for time and potentially funding means partnerships cannot fully substitute for internal research capacity.

NGOs' interest in collaboration and openness with data

The potential for research partnerships to support use of data from service delivery also depends on NGOs' willingness to collaborate. As explained in the previous chapter, interest in working with external researchers varies between NGOs, affected by aspects such as past experience and need for additional capacity. As well as affecting the interest in external suggestions for research discussed in Chapter 4, NGOs' views on the risks and benefits of collaboration affect scope for academic partnership to support research capacity. For example, although Chalk often work with external partners, they are increasingly frustrated by disagreements on priorities, as described in Chapter 4. This negative experience may reduce future interest in academic collaboration and consequently potential to rely on external partners as a source of capacity for research on service delivery.

Chalk's partnerships have mainly used service delivery activities to generate research data, but collaboration could also provide time or skills to use monitoring records for research. NGOs are increasingly encouraged to share internal data, including M&E records, both to enable use by researchers and to support accountability (BOND, 2006; Hall et al., 2012; Hayman, 2013; Breslin, 2014). As these authors note, NGOs' willingness to share data varies. There can be ethical issues such as confidentiality and informed consent (Hall et al., 2012; Raftree, 2013), and concern about risks for organisational reputation if monitoring records indicate gaps in NGO work (BOND, 2006). This varied openness with monitoring data is seen across the case NGOs. In line with their overall approach to collaboration, Chalk seem most interested in use of monitoring records by external researchers. The director emphasised the opportunity provided by Chalk data when discussing the mutual value of academic partnerships:

“The benefit we can bring to research institutions is 650,000 people who we work with, a lot of data, it's great data. [...] For example, this mosquito net distribution we've just done, for a researcher who's interested in malaria it's gold dust. 600,000 people, distributed nets to all of them, we've got data about how many nets they had before, malaria prevalence before, it would be an excellent site.”

Marl also discuss the potential value of monitoring records for external researchers, but again following their overall approach to partnership, there is more caution around sharing data. The international research policy recommends working with others when Marl lack capacity to process data internally. Similar themes are indicated in a new policy on data sharing, designed to increase access to monitoring records for external researchers. However, these policies also highlight potential risks, such as confidentiality of sensitive data (perhaps reflecting Marl's greater focus on medical research).

As well as concerns about reputational and ethical risks, openness with data is affected by an interest in capturing organisational benefits from research. This relates partly to fears that researchers may follow an extractive approach, using NGOs as a source of data without further involvement. This risk is indicated in the comments from Marl's research coordinator in 4.1.3 about being “just a data source”, and it is discussed as a challenge for NGO-academic partnerships more widely (Brown et al., 2003; Moseley, 2007). A concern to avoid this situation and participate in the research process and resulting benefits affects attitudes towards sharing data. For example, Marl's research policy identifies an interest in the reputational benefits of producing and authoring research as one consideration for academic partnership (an interest discussed further in relation to research communication in Chapter 6). The effects of this interest in organisational benefit on attitudes towards external use of monitoring records were particularly apparent in Flint. External researchers have approached Flint asking to use

records from the youth support programme mentioned in 5.2.3, but Flint are unwilling to share this data. This is partly about confidentiality for clients and data ownership (the project is a government partnership, so monitoring records officially belong to government). However, Flint's hesitation also reflects a feeling that others should not benefit from Flint's information. A project officer said Flint are "very careful where we share the data because we know it is valuable and more use can be made of it". The issue was stated bluntly by a temporary staff member when I asked about Flint's caution in sharing data:

"You can say that again! The problem is, this is a local NGO. For them, they are in competition with others. It is an issue of survival. The thinking is, if they share the information, someone will capitalise on that."

More discussion with Flint would be needed to understand what value for others they see in their data, and whether they have a clear idea of this. It may involve the potential for research to enhance organisational reputation, or use of monitoring information to support funding applications. Alongside attitudes towards collaboration for research on service delivery activities, these concerns about risks or loss of possible organisational benefits when sharing monitoring records affect the potential for academic partnership to support use of data from service delivery.

Summarising this discussion of working with external researchers, experiences from the case NGOs suggest collaboration can provide skills, time and funding that enable use of service delivery data for research. Collaboration may also help build internal research skills. However, the value of collaboration for supporting capacity is affected by partnership arrangements and skills and motivation among external researchers. The latter may be limited in countries like Malawi where academics depend on consultancy work and where research capacity is limited. Settings where researchers have less need to maximise consultancy fees, sufficient training and stronger links to NGOs might enable more effective collaboration and consequently support for NGOs' research capacity. Scope for collaboration also depends on NGOs' capacity: hiring consultants and developing partnerships requires time and sometimes funding, which may be unavailable in NGOs with limited budgets and no research staff. Finally, the potential for academic partners to support use of service delivery activities or monitoring records also depends on NGOs' views of the risks and benefits of partnership. For example, if NGOs are concerned about confidentiality or want to benefit from research opportunities provided by service delivery data themselves, they may be less willing to share data with academics. The constraints vary between NGOs with different organisational contexts. For NGOs like Chalk, with an interest in

partnership and availability of time and funding, the primary challenge may be lack of capable, motivated external researchers. For organisations like Flint, with limited funding and concern about competitors benefiting from Flint's data, internal interest and capacity may be more significant.

As noted in Chapter 4, the academics involved in these partnerships may see them differently. Discussion with external researchers would help to assess explanations and issues raised by NGO staff, including aspects such as inadequate capacity and disagreement on roles. While there may well be additional factors involved, however, the NGOs' accounts are plausible and in line with existing discussions of the Malawian research landscape.

5.4.4 Prioritisation of research

The discussions above on funding, skills, time and collaboration all raise issues around the priority placed on research by NGO staff and their commitment to overcome constraints. On funding, for example, NGOs could design research to use existing activities, making additional funding unnecessary, and increased prioritisation of research might help its inclusion in programme budgets. The greater prioritisation of service delivery also limits time for research, and seems to reduce NGOs' use of both their existing research skills and opportunities to develop research experience. NGOs could sometimes overcome gaps in time, skills and funding by working with others, but their openness to collaboration varies. This role of prioritisation and commitment in capacity is highlighted within discussions of NGO organisational development (Kaplan, 2000; James & Wrigley, 2007; Fowler & Ubels, 2010) and research capacity (Lusthaus et al., 1995; Green & Bennett, 2007; DFID, 2010; Mirzoev et al., 2012). Some organisations have more motivation to overcome resource constraints, for example working around funding shortfalls and protecting time for research (Kaplan, 2000; Bennett et al., 2010; Fowler & Ubels, 2010).

However, while prioritisation affects NGOs' capacity to use service delivery as a source of research data, resource gaps are significant and cannot all be overcome just through more commitment. For example, only collecting data through existing activities would limit the kinds of research that could be done and may not answer NGOs' research questions. While there may be more opportunities to seek funding than currently taken, Chalk's failed attempts with some funding bids suggest there are also constraints. When staff need to implement contractually obliged activities and NGOs cannot afford to hire extra staff, finding time for research is harder than when research staff are

available. The significance of resources, rather than priorities, was indicated by the Chalk UK officer when discussing different levels of research between country offices:

“I don’t think there’s a difference in attitude or a difference in understanding of the benefits, I think it’s really just about capacity.”

As the only office with research staff, Chalk Malawi is better positioned than other country offices with similar interest in research. This significance of resources is seen in comparing the case NGOs: research is a secondary priority in all the organisations, but they have varied capacity to support research alongside service delivery. The greater use of service delivery as a source of data in Marl than Flint, for example, is not just about motivation. Further, resources can support prioritisation and ability to overcome other constraints. For example, research staff can bring attention to research and look for opportunities to do more within existing resources. This was seen in earlier examples from Chalk, where the research manager increases the prioritisation of research and supports relationships with external partners who bring skills, time and funds.

Overall, it seems that organisational priorities and commitment to research affect NGO capacity to use service delivery as a source of data, influencing use of existing capacity and whether NGOs seek additional resources. However, availability of resources gives more choice in what research can be done and makes research on service delivery easier.

5.4.5 Summary

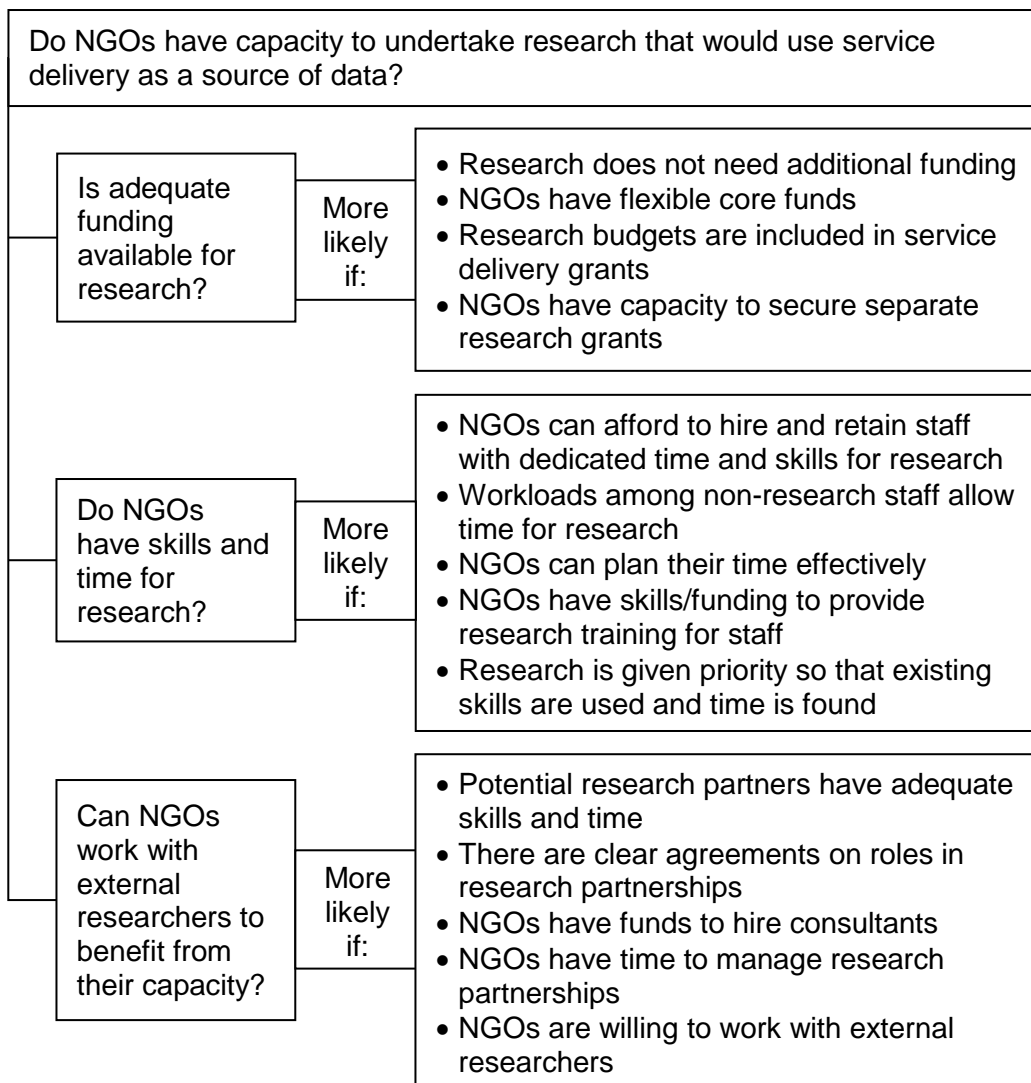
Using service delivery activities and monitoring records as a source of research data depends on research capacity, including funding, skills, time, and motivation.

Availability of these resources is affected by NGOs’ internal capacity, including prioritisation, donor support, and external collaboration. Some NGOs have flexible core funding that can be used for research, but others depend on securing donor grants.

When donor support is needed, research budgets may not be included in service delivery proposals, either because research is not a priority for NGO staff (particularly when available funding does not cover desired service delivery), or because of concerns that including research makes proposals uncompetitive. Securing separate research grants can be difficult, due to limited time and research experience or a need for capable external research partners. NGOs also have different levels of research time and skills. Some have financial resources to invest in research staff and training, but others rely on project staff who struggle to meet service delivery workloads. Donor funding based on short-term support for project activities may limit scope to invest in research skills and to preserve research time. Collaborating with external partners can

provide research capacity and so enable use of service delivery data. However, skills and interest among external partners vary, developing and supporting partnerships requires time and sometimes funding, and NGOs may see risks from collaboration and sharing data. These conditions are summarised in Figure 10. The potential constraints mean that when NGOs see opportunities to use service delivery activities and monitoring records as a source of research data, they have varied capacity to take this forward.

Figure 10: Conditions affecting NGOs' capacity to undertake research that would use service delivery as a source of data



As noted in the introduction to section 5.4, gaps in research capacity among NGOs are widely suggested. The case NGOs' experiences support this picture and help to identify conditions affecting research capacity. Providing more information on possible causes of capacity gaps helps to suggest areas for intervention. Their experiences also challenge assumptions sometimes made about the resources NGOs contribute to

research. In particular, the difficulty in finding time to undertake research and collaborate with partners questions the idea that NGOs can provide staff for research “at little or no cost” (Delisle et al., 2005). As others have noted, NGO staff are busy and undertaking research or supporting academic partners has opportunity costs for other priority activities (Porter et al., 2004; Moseley, 2007; Hayman, 2013).

Beyond literature on NGO research, the case NGOs’ experiences reflect issues emphasised in analyses of research capacity in other kinds of organisation (such as universities), and in discussions of organisational capacity beyond research. These include: 1) the importance of intangible resources, 2) external relationships, 3) interdependence between capacity elements, and 4) fitting capacity to needs. On the first of these, capacity includes less visible qualities such as leadership and commitment, as well as technical skills or material resources (Kaplan, 2000; Ghaffar et al., 2008; Clarke & Oswald, 2010; Fowler & Ubels, 2010). The importance of this is evident in the influence of prioritisation and motivation on, for example, attempts to secure funding or allocation of time for research. On the second, relationships with other organisations, and associated power, affect scope for action (Clarke & Oswald, 2010; Fowler & Ubels, 2010). The importance of externally imposed constraints is highlighted in discussion of “unleashing” research capacity (Green & Bennett, 2007 p.43). Within the case NGOs, donor relationships influence availability and use of time and research skills, as well as availability of research funding. On the third issue of interdependence, there are interactions between individual, organisational and environmental aspects of capacity and between components such as funding, skills and values (Kaplan, 2000; Green & Bennett, 2007). Within the case NGOs, for example, skills and time help to secure funding, while funding can buy time and skills by allowing NGOs to hire research staff and provide training. Conversely, insecure, small grants can increase workloads and take time from research. Similarly, time and prioritisation affect use of available skills and skills development. Links between different levels of capacity are also clear, for example the Malawian research environment affects scope to find partners who can support organisational capacity. Finally on the fourth issue, required capacity depends on the task (Green & Bennett, 2007; Mirzoev et al., 2012). Research aims and preferred approaches vary between the case NGOs, affecting the skills, time and funding needed to use service delivery as a source of data.

These aspects of capacity have implications for strategies to support NGOs’ use of service delivery data for research, and NGO research capacity more broadly. The significance of intangible qualities, interdependent components, and external

relationships suggest capacity development should tackle aspects such as prioritisation, work on multiple levels and elements, and address external frameworks such as donor approaches. Developing NGO research capacity requires more than skills training, a message emphasised for organisational and research capacity more widely (James & Wrigley, 2007; Ghaffar et al., 2008; DFID, 2010). The case NGOs' varied experience also highlights the need to consider different organisational contexts in supporting capacity. Some recommendations made for supporting NGO research on service delivery may only be effective in large NGOs with core funding like Marl. These recommendations include hiring research staff and providing training (Zachariah et al., 2010). This depends on adequate flexible funding or donor support for recruitment, and skilled staff who can deliver training or funding for external trainers - resources which may be unavailable. Other recommendations include giving staff dedicated time for research and including research time and budgets in annual plans (Zachariah et al., 2010). Allocating research time is easier when additional staff can be recruited, which again depends on funding. The feasibility of building research into annual plans and budgets depends on control over annual planning, which is less certain when activities depend on unpredictable donor funding. These varied starting points will affect appropriate strategies to support NGO research capacity.

5.5 Conclusions

The case NGOs' experiences suggest the idea of NGO service delivery as a source of research data should be treated with caution. While service delivery activities and monitoring records can sometimes be used to generate research data, the findings suggest the potential value of this resource varies in ways not explicit in current literature. As with using service delivery to provide research questions, NGOs do not always aim to use service delivery as their source of data, service delivery does not always provide the anticipated opportunities for producing data, and NGOs may lack capacity to use opportunities that exist.

The first main finding is that varied research aims affect the relevance of service delivery activities as a basis for generating data. For example, while NGOs' service delivery activities may provide relevant data for research designed to test new approaches or examine existing practice, they are less likely to provide useful information for research aims such as understanding community needs or monitoring government services. Even when research focuses partly on learning from an NGO's own work, there may be value in extending data collection beyond this, for example to

increase sample size. These different aims are significant when considering how NGOs should use data from their service delivery: this will not be useful or adequate for all research.

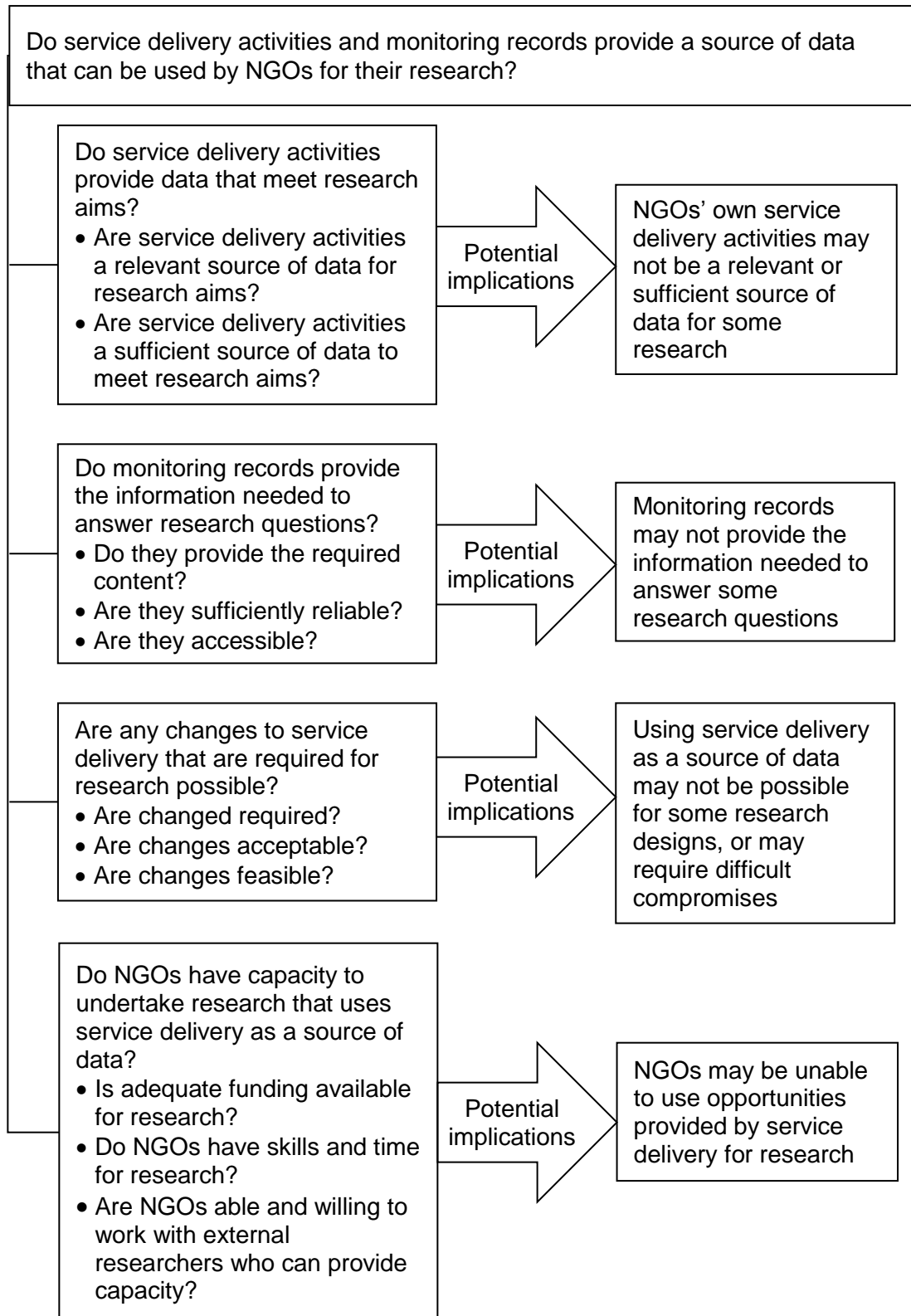
The second main finding is variation in whether monitoring records provide data that meet research aims. Monitoring records can only help answer some research questions, and they are sometimes too unreliable or inaccessible to use for research or do not provide all required information. These limitations suggest the guideline that research should “mainly draw on data that are routinely collected” (Zachariah et al., 2012 p.416) is sometimes inappropriate: this will depend on the quality and scope of existing monitoring systems and their fit with research aims.

Third, scope to use service delivery activities and monitoring records for research also depends on whether they need modifying to produce data, and if so, whether this modification is possible. Monitoring systems may need changing to strengthen reliability or add content, while service delivery activities may need adapting to suit experimental designs or introduce new interventions for field testing. The findings suggest scope to make these changes depends on their acceptability and feasibility, which in turn depend on aspects such as organisational principles and relationships with government and donors. Changes to service delivery for research often are possible, but sometimes involve difficult choices, for example compromises between reliability and supporting government systems. These constraints and compromises contrast with the assumptions of NGO flexibility found in some discussions of NGO service delivery as a research site.

Finally, when service delivery can provide data that meet NGOs’ research aims, making use of this opportunity requires funding, skills, and time. The case NGOs’ experiences suggest three routes to securing this capacity. A first strategy is providing capacity internally. This is more viable for NGOs with large flexible funds that can be used to recruit or train research staff and cover the costs of research. A second strategy is collaboration with external researchers who can bring capacity (including skills, time and sometimes funding). This depends on availability of capable and interested partners, and NGOs’ interest and capacity to support collaboration. A third strategy is donor funding for research, but such funding depends on donor interest and NGO initiative and ability to apply for research grants. Differences in internal resources, donor support, and willingness and ability to collaborate with external researchers bring varied capacity to use service delivery data for research.

These conclusions are summarised in Figure 11. The diagram indicates the significance of NGOs' aims, the nature of opportunities provided by service delivery and NGOs' capacity. Similar themes are found in the next chapter, which turns to the role of advocacy and to later stages of research, examining whether NGOs' involvement in advocacy supports communication of research findings.

Figure 11: Conditions affecting use of NGOs' service delivery to provide data for research



6 The role of advocacy in supporting research dissemination and uptake

Academics, NGO staff and others suggest that NGOs' advocacy can support communication of research findings. As described in Chapter 1, this literature suggests that NGOs' advocacy mandate means they will seek to ensure research findings influence policy, and that their advocacy activities provide channels to communicate research findings. Indeed, academics are often encouraged to work with advocacy NGOs to benefit from this presumed ability to promote research uptake. I consider this expected relationship between advocacy and research communication in this chapter, examining whether and how NGOs' involvement in advocacy supports communication of research findings.

The case NGOs' experiences suggest a more limited and variable role for advocacy than might be expected from existing literature. There are examples where NGOs do not seek action in response to their research findings, share findings through channels typically associated with academics rather than through advocacy activities, and lack capacity to communicate findings despite their advocacy function. Examining these experiences, I suggest advocacy can support research communication, but its role varies with NGOs' organisational aims, approaches and capacities. In this introduction, I define some key concepts and set out the chapter's structure and focus.

Research communication, dissemination and uptake are terms with many definitions. In particular, authors vary in whether they understand dissemination as limited to sharing findings (e.g. Mouton, 2012), or as incorporating further steps to encourage research use (e.g. Wilson et al., 2010). To differentiate these two actions, I use dissemination to imply sharing research findings, and promoting uptake to mean taking additional steps to encourage application of research findings (this draws broadly on distinctions made by Shaxon, 2010; Mouton, 2012; and Cassidy, 2013). I use research communication as shorthand to cover both activities, that is, action by NGOs to share their research findings externally, with or without further steps to promote action. This distinction between disseminating findings and promoting uptake is a continuum, not a sharp divide (Brownson et al., 2006; Morton et al., 2012). Research communication may involve just sharing information or outright pursuit of action, or a position between these poles. With all these terms, I am referring to sharing results and conclusions of research, not, for example, informing potential audiences that research is taking place.

Advocacy is also defined in multiple ways. As stated in Chapter 1, I understand advocacy as effort to influence policy or practice of decision makers. Seeking and promoting uptake can be seen as a form of advocacy, because it involves the aim of influence. However, as discussed in later sections, the boundaries around advocacy and distinctions between advocacy and other forms of research communication are ambiguous (Brownson et al., 2006).

To examine relationships between advocacy and research communication, I look in turn at the two ways advocacy might support research communication noted in Chapter 1. First, I examine whether an organisational advocacy mandate means NGOs promote research uptake, rather than just disseminating results (6.1). I then consider advocacy activities as a channel for research communication, examining whether and how NGOs' use their advocacy activities to communicate research findings (6.2). Following this, I examine capacity, considering situations where NGOs cannot communicate findings as they want, despite involvement in advocacy (6.3).

To clarify the scope, throughout the chapter I discuss research where NGOs see value in communicating findings externally, and do not examine dissemination within NGOs. This external communication is the focus in discussions about advocacy and research communication. I also concentrate on the main research communication strategies used by NGOs' offices in Malawi, not every approach they employ or activity by international headquarters. In keeping with my interest in how NGOs' advocacy supports their research communication rather than vice versa, I do not examine whether their advocacy uses research or whether using research makes advocacy more effective. The latter are discussed in existing reports (e.g. Kuruvilla, 2005; Court et al., 2006). Similarly, while research communication strategies discussed in this chapter are sometimes examined by others in relation to their effectiveness (for example, networking and collaboration), my focus is why these strategies are used by NGOs and whether they draw on advocacy activities, not whether they result in research uptake. There is considerable existing literature about the effectiveness of research communication approaches (e.g. Hanney et al., 2003; Carden, 2009).

6.1 Research communication aims and roles: dissemination or uptake

This section considers whether NGOs' involvement in advocacy means their research communication involves promoting uptake, rather than just dissemination. Given their advocacy mandate, NGOs may be committed to promoting action in response to research findings, and less concerned than some academics about implications for

impartiality. As described in Chapter 1, both aspects are suggested in current literature on NGO advocacy and research communication.

Examining the case NGOs' research communication approaches suggests variation in the extent to which they pursue uptake. Flint and Clay emphasise promoting action in response to findings and see this as part of their advocacy role. The connection between this aim and their advocacy mandate is sometimes explicit in project frameworks. For example, some Flint advocacy projects involve research on government services with the aim of using results to influence policy; advocacy project plans incorporate the focus on uptake. Both NGOs openly pursue action. For example, a Flint report on one of these projects notes that "Flint appealed to Members of Parliament" to act on research findings. In Marl and Chalk, however, research communication sometimes involves providing information rather than pursuing policy influence. Their experiences suggest that despite organisational involvement in advocacy, research communication for some studies and in some NGOs emphasises dissemination.

Two situations appear to produce this emphasis on dissemination. First, with some studies, NGOs may aim only for dissemination rather than uptake due to the nature of the research findings or the policy context. Second, when NGOs do aim for uptake, they may limit their role to dissemination if their organisational advocacy approach emphasises sharing information rather than pushing for change. To clarify these two situations, it helps to add to the definitions of dissemination and uptake provided in the introduction by distinguishing between aims and activities. While uptake can be an aim (with researchers hoping to secure application of their findings), promoting uptake is an activity. Similarly, dissemination can be seen as the aim of ensuring information has been spread, and as the activity of sharing this information. With this distinction, NGOs may aim for application of research findings (uptake) but limit their activity to sharing information (dissemination). The first situation involves aims and I examine this in 6.1.1, considering factors that can mean NGOs aim for dissemination rather than uptake. The second situation involves activities and I examine this in 6.1.2, explaining how, even when NGOs aim for uptake, organisational advocacy roles can shift research communication towards dissemination rather than actively promoting uptake.

6.1.1 Research communication when NGOs aim only for dissemination

Organisational involvement in advocacy does not mean NGOs aim for uptake with all their research. Even when NGOs see value in communicating findings externally, they

sometimes aim only to share information. This was apparent in Marl. Discussing the relationship between their research and advocacy, the advocacy officer explained that “some of it is linked, some of it is not”. Research is:

“shared at national level, whether that’s going to influence policy or it’s going to go as a lesson learnt. So I don’t think it’s all the issues that directly feed into advocacy, but I’m definitely sure that there are lessons learnt in each and every one of them that we use, to just share.”

With “lessons learnt”, research communication aims only to provide information, “not specifically to say ‘you know government, this is what you should do’”. The aim is dissemination not uptake. This research communication is not part of their advocacy work; they do not seek influence and see advocacy as inappropriate. As explained below, whether findings become ‘lessons learnt’ depends partly on whether staff see action in response to results as necessary, clear and feasible.

Action on findings as unnecessary

Research communication may aim for dissemination despite organisational involvement in advocacy if NGO staff see no need for action in response to the findings of a particular study. Asked whether ongoing studies were linked to advocacy, Marl’s research coordinator explained that this would depend on the results:

“With the [HIV regimen study], if we find out that we have lots of renal impairment then we’re going to be advocating for baseline testing. If the [blood test] study shows that [the new method] is just as effective, then we’re going to be advocating for that to be rolled out at all the health centres.”

These examples indicate two situations where Marl see advocacy as unnecessary because findings show no value in changing current practice. First, research may confirm the suitability of current policy. This is indicated by the HIV regimen example, which involves assessing potential kidney damage related to the new drug combination. Whether research communication aims at dissemination or uptake depends on the conclusions for patient safety: Marl will inform government if current policy appears safe, but will not seek influence because no change is required. Second, research may show no benefit from alternatives to current policy. As explained in Chapter 5, the blood test research assesses a less resource intensive test as a substitute for the standard method. Communication of this research will only focus on uptake if findings are interpreted as suggesting the new method is beneficial. This suggests that where research does not indicate gaps in current practice or demonstrate benefits of an alternative approach, NGOs may aim only for dissemination and see advocacy as unnecessary.

This dependence of the need for advocacy on study findings may be a particular issue with research designed to assess a specific intervention, the value of which is

unknown, as with Marl's research on blood testing and the HIV regimen. Most studies in the other case NGOs aim to understand and assess programmes or issues known to be problematic, for example health service quality, female education or limited use of a particular household technology. Such research is more open-ended than a focused assessment of whether a particular intervention is effective. In addition, it examines a service or issue experiencing difficulties, so there are almost inevitably areas for improvement. Consequently, this broad examination of a problematic area seems more likely to indicate a need for action, and in turn to encourage an aim of uptake.

Uncertainty about the action needed in response to findings

Another situation that can mean NGOs aim only for dissemination and see advocacy as inappropriate is uncertainty about the correct course of action following research. If staff are unsure whether or what action is needed, they may decide not to promote any particular policy changes in response to study findings. Several processes might promote this uncertainty, and I consider two below using an example from Marl. I then consider reactions to uncertainty in other case NGOs. Comparing their responses suggests conditions that affect the influence of inconclusive findings on NGOs' research communication aims.

Uncertainty in Marl: encouraging a focus on dissemination

Marl's experience suggests two aspects of uncertainty that can encourage a focus on dissemination rather than uptake. The first is inconclusive findings, with results considered too ambiguous to support any particular course of action. This was apparent in Marl's research on task shifting to community health workers. Task shifting had been a focus for Marl's advocacy, based partly on earlier research suggesting that this approach increased access and efficiency. Their strategy later changed from promoting action to sharing Marl's experience, moving research communication towards dissemination. This change reflected a number of factors, so the example is also used with issues discussed later in this section. However, it was partly a response to further research that questioned the effectiveness of task shifting. The research officer explained that when she joined Marl, part of her role was "to find evidence that this is actually a good solution". However:

"From what I saw, I wasn't so sure myself whether I thought it was the best solution. [...] I then investigated more the time savings. [...] And so, the findings were not really conclusive, were not convincing. I couldn't say 'wow, we are saving so much time for the [doctor], so let's advocate for [community assistants] doing the job instead'. No, it wasn't."

Against expectations that research would endorse Marl's approach, inconclusive findings brought uncertainty within Marl about the effectiveness of task shifting. This

uncertainty “made us see more clearly that task shifting is not currently an issue that we should be pushing”. Ambiguous findings meant Marl staff were not confident their approach should be adopted, contributing to their move away from advocacy and shift in research communication towards dissemination.

A second aspect of uncertainty involves the gap between research results and policy decisions: NGOs may feel that research findings on their own do not indicate what action to take. This was a further influence on communication of Marl’s work on task shifting. Even if the findings had clearly shown efficiency savings, they felt the value of task shifting depended on wider factors not addressed by their research. These wider factors included the balance of resources between different cadres and values around quality of care not just access. The Ministry of Health opposed task shifting because it would require further investment in community workers rather than more qualified staff. Marl’s research officer emphasised that they appreciated the ministry’s rationale: “I find understandably, they want to have high quality health systems, they want to have good quality staff”. This recognition that task shifting may have disadvantages within the context of wider policy decisions contributed to Marl’s uncertainty about the value of relying on community workers. This in turn contributed to their withdrawal from advocacy on this issue and emphasis on dissemination.

These two aspects of uncertainty are identified in discussions of evidence-based policy and academic engagement in advocacy. In relation to inconclusive findings, more critical literature on evidence-based policy emphasises that research results, particularly from a single study, are rarely if ever decisive (Merton, 1945; Nutley & Davies, 2000; Sharpe, 2004; Pawson, 2006). For example, there may be gaps in the research process, inconsistent results or numerous possible interpretations, hindering a clear answer to research questions. This literature also highlights the gap between research findings and policy decisions, suggesting that even clear results do not reveal required action. Policy choices are political questions that depend on values and priorities, and cannot be answered purely through research (du Toit, 2012; Levitt, 2013; Rutter et al., 2013). Some academics see both aspects as reasons to oppose advocacy, with concern around “uncertainty about the truth of some scientific claim and uncertainty about the value of a specific policy” (Nelson & Vucetich, 2009 p.1096). On the former aspect of uncertain conclusions, even those who feel researchers can engage in policy discussions sometimes suggest promoting uptake is justified only with more definite findings (Barnard et al., 2007; Morton et al., 2012). As with Marl, academics may focus on dissemination when results are inconclusive (Crichton & Theobald, 2011). Likewise, some academics see advocacy as inappropriate due to the

role of aspects such as ethical and political values in policy decisions (Shim & Thomson, 2010). This suggests some similarity in reactions to uncertainty between Marl and some academics. As seen in later sections, similarity between aspects of research communication in the case NGOs and approaches sometimes associated with academics is a recurring theme in this chapter. This similarity questions the image of contrasting NGO and academic approaches to research communication suggested in the literature. (This contrast may also be reduced through academic practices that involve advocacy, but academics' approaches are not my focus.) However, while Marl's approach sometimes resembles these academic responses to uncertainty, reactions in other case NGOs differ. Uncertain findings do not always mean NGOs aim only for dissemination and see advocacy as inappropriate, as I discuss below.

Varied reactions to uncertainty: retaining an aim of uptake and basis for advocacy

Uncertainty about what action to promote following research was primarily an issue in Marl. Staff in other case NGOs did not mention examples where they felt unsure what action was needed. There are several possible reasons for this, and I discuss three that seem to contribute below: clear findings combined with broad recommendations, failure to recognise uncertainty, and dependence of policy recommendations on more than research findings.

First, uncertainty may not arise, because findings provide reasonable confidence for particular recommendations. This partly involves results: some studies produce clearer conclusions than others. Marl see some research as giving firmer answers, and the academic responses to uncertainty noted earlier suggest they sometimes feel findings provide sufficient clarity to justify policy influence (Crichton & Theobald, 2011). This confidence also involves specificity of recommendations. Broad policy messages may be possible even if precise strategies depend on more than research. For example, Flint's research on child abuse suggested many people believe abuse only affects girls. One recommendation was to increase awareness that boys are also affected, so asking for action to address the problem rather than adoption of a specific awareness-raising approach. With such general recommendations, uncertainty about exactly what to do may not prevent advocacy.

Second, awareness and acceptance of uncertainty may vary, with inconclusive findings sometimes overlooked. As noted in Chapter 1, NGO advocacy is often criticised for ignoring research limitations. This may reflect limited research skills and consequent inability to realise results are inconclusive (Harper, 2001). Marl's research staff were

trained to assess research through several years of university experience. Comments by Marl's research coordinator about their HIV treatment regimen study - "If we find very few people have problems, then what we can say is not it's safe, but rather here's one more population in which it appears to be safe" – suggest a greater awareness of research limitations than was evident in other case NGOs. The socialisation into organisational systems discussed in Chapter 4 may also play a role. A commitment to particular ideas could mean uncertain findings are not recognised or acknowledged. NGOs are often criticised for this ideological bias in their interpretation and use of research (Harper, 2001; Roche, 2010; Seay, 2010). Concepts of objectivity are problematic (Letherby et al., 2013), and as explained in Chapter 1, my research did not examine bias among NGOs. However, Marl's recognition that research did not clearly endorse their policy of task shifting contrasts with this idea that advocacy NGOs cannot acknowledge opposing evidence. Without this openness, inconclusive findings may be ignored. In turn, even if results are uncertain, NGOs might see advocacy as appropriate and aim for uptake.

Third, NGOs may aim for uptake despite uncertain results if their proposals for action do not depend only on research findings. This could be because recommendations reflect organisational beliefs rather than research, as suggested by the discussion of bias above. More positively, there are examples where proposals for action do not just rely on research because they are identified through discussions that build on research findings, so going beyond rather than ignoring results. In Clay and sometimes Chalk, the research process includes dialogue with external audiences to interpret findings, and other information, in order to develop recommendations.

For Clay, this dialogue is a core part of their research process. Research identifies problems and their causes, for example forms of gender violence. As explained in Chapter 3, these issues are presented during a drama performance, and community members are asked to identify solutions. For example, during a performance about child labour, the audience suggested penalties for employing children should be increased. The policy recommendation emerged through discussion, not just from research findings. This approach means Clay have recommendations they can promote through advocacy even if research findings do not clearly indicate required action.

While participatory development of recommendations is part of programme design in Clay, Chalk have used dialogues partly to compensate for perceived gaps in research. One example is their microfinance study. Chalk organised a small workshop to discuss

draft findings with the research consultants, inviting NGO practitioners and government staff working on microfinance. This workshop had several functions, but focused on interpreting results to identify recommendations. Chalk felt the draft report contained good data but lacked clear implications for action: “it’s not clear at the end what it all means” [country director]. The absence of specific recommendations may have been partly because the consultants lacked the financial sector experience needed to identify realistic options. Commenting on a report I produced as feedback for Chalk, the research manager wrote that one of the “main benefits” of the workshop was “having practical and relevant input into the findings of the reports which the consultant (as academics or inexperienced) may have overlooked”. Even with more experienced researchers however, study design might have impeded recommendations. The study sought to understand community views about financial services. This provided considerable information on social preferences and possible drawbacks of existing services, but would not show the feasibility or effectiveness of alternative approaches. The programme knowledge of NGO and government staff helped to identify implications for existing practice, taking the report’s conclusions beyond the immediate research findings. This helped Chalk move beyond their initial uncertainty about required action, providing recommendations that could be included in the research report.

Concepts of ‘opening up’ and ‘closing down’ from discussions of participatory policy analysis (Stirling, 2008) help explain how these dialogues in Clay and Chalk overcome the potential impasse of uncertainty, enabling identification of recommendations. Opening up involves seeking different opinions on potential strategies, for example through policy consultations (Macleod et al., 2008; Stirling, 2008). This appears to tackle the uncertainty related to action depending on more than research findings. Bringing different stakeholders together, through a drama performance or workshop, helps to consider additional factors that affect policy choices, such as values and priorities. Stakeholder input can also provide practical knowledge about what is feasible and how recommendations could be implemented, considering “know-how” and “know-who” alongside the information about problems and “what works” that is more likely to be derived from research (Nutley et al., 2007 p.23). The need for this practical input was highlighted in the comments from Chalk’s research manager above. Closing down involves securing a consensus on action despite uncertain evidence and diverse interests (Macleod et al., 2008; Stirling, 2008). This appears to tackle the uncertainty related to both inconclusive findings and the need to consider more than research. Both opening up and closing down are seen in the dialogues organised by Chalk and Clay. Discussions go beyond research findings to invite opinion on possible action,

opening up the process, and then develop consensus on the appropriate response, closing down decisions to provide recommendations.

These three processes mean uncertainty in research does not prevent identification of recommendations for action. Findings are either more conclusive or considered reliable, or further processes are used to identify necessary action. In contrast, uncertainty may discourage an aim of uptake when findings are less conclusive, NGOs have the skills and openness to recognise uncertainty, and their recommendations rely on clear research findings rather than being developed through additional processes. In these situations, as with some studies in Marl, NGOs may restrict their aim to dissemination despite an organisational advocacy mandate.

Action on findings as unachievable: policy contexts that limit scope for change

The previous sections considered situations where research communication for a particular study focuses on dissemination rather than uptake because NGO staff are unsure what action is needed or feel action is unnecessary. When NGOs are clear that particular action should be taken in response to research findings, they may still aim only for dissemination if they see limited scope for policy change. The nature of particular policy contexts, including negative external reactions and difficulties in implementation, can mean uptake is considered unlikely.

This was apparent in discussions of Marl's research on task shifting. As noted earlier, Marl reduced efforts to promote task shifting and moved towards sharing information about their experience. As well as reflecting their uncertainty about the value of task shifting, they stopped advocacy on this issue because they felt changing current policy would be difficult and protracted. One reason was unexpectedly strong opposition from health professional associations, which meant advocacy made little progress: "Marl had been pushing for years and nothing has changed" [research officer]. Even if policy change was agreed, the complexity of implementation meant rapid uptake was unfeasible. Formalising task shifting would require changing job descriptions for multiple cadres:

"We see that revising all the job descriptions of all the staff in Malawi, it's a lengthy process. [...] You cannot just look at the [community assistants] and say let's change what they're doing and keep the others the same. So it's a long process."
[research officer]

While implementation of some recommendations from research is more straightforward, this policy issue was complicated and required detailed technical discussions. Combined with the opposition, this meant action on task shifting was considered unattainable in the short-term. There was no value in promoting uptake,

and this moved research communication towards an aim of dissemination.

Summarising this section, Marl's experience suggests that despite organisational involvement in advocacy, NGOs may aim only for dissemination with some research studies. This may be because staff feel action in response to findings is unnecessary, they are unsure whether or what action is needed, or they consider application of research findings unfeasible. Even when NGOs do aim for uptake, ideas about appropriate advocacy roles can limit their research communication to disseminating findings rather than promoting action, as explained below.

6.1.2 Organisational advocacy roles: providing information rather than influencing policy

Organisational advocacy approaches in some NGOs focus on providing information and making suggestions rather than explicitly pursuing policy change. When NGOs take this approach, their research communication can resemble dissemination rather than uptake, even when this research communication is considered part of advocacy work and NGOs want to see policy changes in response to their findings. Going back to the earlier distinction between aims and activities, the aim is uptake but the activity is dissemination.

This difference in roles is seen among the case NGOs. As noted earlier, Clay and Flint see their role as actively promoting policy change in response to research findings. In contrast, Chalk and to some extent Marl feel they should not explicitly promote uptake, or only pursue this to a limited degree, even when staff want to see action on their results. This organisational approach complicates the definition of advocacy, given in the introduction as effort to influence policy. This definition is less clear when NGOs see advocacy as providing information rather than outright pursuit of policy change. This quieter approach might not be included within some definitions of advocacy. However, I consider this approach as advocacy, both because this follows case NGOs' views, and because this approach aims to bring change so constitutes effort to influence policy, albeit this effort is limited to sharing information. In this section, I first describe this focus on dissemination rather than promoting uptake and the way it reflects broader advocacy roles. I then discuss aspects of the organisational and external context that affect the extent to which NGOs push for influence through their advocacy and research communication.

For Chalk, the emphasis on dissemination reflects an advocacy mandate focused on providing information rather than driving change. Research reports include recommendations for government and other actors, but Chalk focus on sharing these reports and recommendations rather than more actively pursuing uptake. For example, they do not plan which policy makers need to do what or meet different stakeholders to discuss options and monitor progress. This is partly because Chalk feel pursuing action is beyond their remit. When asked whether they promote recommendations from their research, the director explained that decisions on action sit with national policy working groups or government:

“We wouldn’t see it as our role to drive that, but what we would see it as being is the role of these groups. So on the [government structures] study, there are some quite clear recommendations. We’ve done that with the ministry, we’ve given it to the ministry, if the ministry believes in it and values it, it should be the one pushing the recommendations.”

This role of contributing information for government decisions is reflected in study terms of reference, which describe research as designed to “inform government policy and stimulate discussions”. This corresponds to Chalk’s wider organisational advocacy approach. The director stressed that Chalk “very much do advocacy with a small a rather than a capital A”:

“We’re not an organisation that shouts loudly and says we’ve got this big issue. [...] It isn’t about holding a big workshop or having a campaign, you won’t see us doing that. The most you’ll see is us producing a research report and disseminating it fairly quietly.”

Disseminating research, rather than pushing for uptake, is part of an advocacy role based on participating in policy through low-profile information sharing. This emphasis on government leadership does not mean Chalk are unconcerned about application of research findings: they aim for influence. For example, staff described research reports as supporting “leverage with government” [director] and “our overall objective of influencing and stimulating” [research manager]. However, while aiming to promote policy change, they do not see pushing for change as an appropriate role. Their approach appears to be encouraging discussion in the hope this will lead to action; aiming for uptake but largely restricting research communication activity to dissemination.

In contrast, Marl have a clearer emphasis on influence. Although they do not see uptake as required or appropriate with all studies (as discussed in 6.1.1), when findings suggest a need for change, Marl see their role as promoting action. For example, the research coordinator described senior management’s involvement in “pushing a particular agenda that we believe is for the benefit of patients in Malawi”. Indeed, the international research policy identifies a responsibility to promote application of

research findings as one aspect of the ethics framework. However, although Marl see promoting uptake as a responsibility and part of their role, within Malawi they only pursue action to a limited degree. Indeed, research communication that is designed to encourage uptake is sometimes presented as merely sharing findings. The advocacy officer explained that when discussing results in network meetings:

“We always have to emphasise that ‘we’re not pushing for policy direction, I think we just want to share this information, it’s for you good to know, so you know the lessons just in case, maybe in the future or whenever, you may find this information useful’.”

The public emphasis is dissemination rather than explicitly promoting uptake, even when Marl aim for influence.

As noted in the chapter introduction, the distinction between disseminating findings and promoting uptake is a continuum. Marl and Chalk’s positions are not absolute and both NGOs do take steps to promote action, as explained in 6.2. However, their overall approach is more restricted than the “outright advocacy” (Hooton, 2010 p.996) to promote research uptake that might be expected from existing literature. Numerous aspects of the internal and political context could contribute to this hesitation about explicitly pursuing action, in research communication and advocacy more broadly. Below I discuss two conditions that are significant in Marl and Chalk: government collaboration and legitimacy.

Government partnership: supporting government goals

A programmatic approach of government partnership contributes to Marl and Chalk’s emphasis on disseminating information rather than explicitly seeking policy influence. Both NGOs see their role as supporting government. For Chalk, this is an organisation-wide principle, highlighted in international and country-level policy documents. In Marl, government partnership reflects the Malawi setting. As indicated in previous chapters, Marl is preparing to transfer its district service delivery programme to the Ministry of Health and this entails close collaboration with government.

Their emphasis on supporting government systems guides approaches to advocacy and within that research communication, encouraging collaborative discussion rather than demands for change. Marl’s research officer explained how government partnership affected their advocacy:

“We started to change our strategy a bit, we went much less confrontational over the MoH [Ministry of Health], much more, not that it was confrontational before but it was more this typical advocacy thing, like ‘we want this and let’s push for it’. And we moved out of that and we worked much more hand in hand with the MoH.”

This change in approach happened partly “because of the planned handover, which

means we have to work together". The transfer of programme activities to government directly limits the extent to which Marl pursue action in response to their research. This was illustrated by reactions to the evaluation of a Marl health worker scheme. The evaluation identified gaps in the scheme. Marl thought the scheme could be improved, but government felt it should close. Marl respected this decision rather than pursuing their recommendations. The research officer explained how the handover contributed to this:

"We would say 'OK let's alter it', but then we are working together with the ministry and it shouldn't be a Marl system, it should be a ministry system. And the ministry, after my presentation on it they said 'ah well, we are not keen on keeping it anyway, so let's drop it'. And that was not the intention, the intention was maybe see how we can improve it, but if the ministry says we don't want to do it, there's no use in us doing it when we know we're going to leave in two years' time."

As indicated by this example, supporting government systems means research communication involves providing ideas and suggestions, and leaving decisions on appropriate action to government.

Working with government also means effective programme delivery depends on cooperative relationships, which may be upset by more concerted attempts at influence. Chalk's research manager noted that confrontational advocacy could "create risks for the programme work on the ground". Consequently, their advocacy follows a "constructive partnership approach", and they "don't do the agitating people stuff". Research communication focused on sharing information rather than pursuing uptake is part of this partnership approach.

These experiences suggest that a concern to work within government systems and maintain government partnerships may limit the extent to which NGOs pursue influence through their advocacy. This in turn contributes to an emphasis on disseminating findings rather than promoting uptake in research communication.

Legitimacy of advocacy by international organisations

Concern about the legitimacy of advocacy by international organisations can also limit attempts to push uptake. This concern reflects international discourses about NGO roles and discussions in Malawi, both of which suggest national policy decisions should rest with national actors. In relation to international discourses, longstanding debates about the respective contributions of international and national NGOs have seen a shift in thinking towards a new "division of labour" that allocates responsibility for national advocacy to southern NGOs (Nyamugasira, 1998 p.298). Alongside concern about INGOs' legitimacy, this shift reflects ideas of local ownership, capacity building and a

view of national NGOs as better placed to influence national government and represent poor people (Edwards, 1993; Nyamugasira, 1998; Hudson, 2000). Within Malawi, there is public and political anxiety about the influence of international organisations on policy agendas. The government has criticised donors (Cammack, 2012; Resnick, 2012) and sometimes seeks to discredit civil society campaigning as sponsored by Western countries (Chiumia, 2014). In this context, INGOs may see explicitly pursuing influence as inappropriate and potentially counter-productive.

These ideas about appropriate roles for international organisations were reflected in discussions with Marl, where the advocacy officer described Malawian organisations as the more legitimate advocacy leads:

“As Marl, we are an international organisation, so sometimes we don’t want to interfere too much on the local issues, that is best left to the local civil society organisations.”

Similar concerns about overstepping their remit are expressed by other INGOs in Malawi. For example, one INGO I spoke to suggested Malawian organisations should lead advocacy work because they are “closer to the people” and “have more legitimacy”, whereas advocacy by INGOs “might be questioned” because they are international organisations. This view of actively promoting policy change as beyond INGOs’ mandate encourages an emphasis on dissemination rather than promoting uptake.

While international thinking relegates INGOs to a supporting role, it encourages advocacy by national NGOs, seeing them as key stakeholders in national policy making. Advocacy by national NGOs is expected, and financially supported by donors. For example, the INGO staff member quoted above felt Clay should undertake more advocacy because they have “legitimacy to speak on these issues” (the INGO funds some of Clay’s projects). Part of this interest in national NGO advocacy is about civil society as a check on government. This watchdog function is promoted internationally by organisations like the World Bank (Norman, 2014). It underpins some donor support for Malawian NGOs, including the Flint projects that use research to monitor government service delivery. This role supports an explicit focus on policy influence, based on holding government to account rather than Marl and Chalk’s approach of supporting government systems. With this different position, national NGOs’ advocacy can involve openly seeking policy change, and within this, research communication can focus on pushing uptake, not just sharing results. Flint and Clay have no hesitation about influencing policy, and as previously discussed, see their role as promoting uptake.

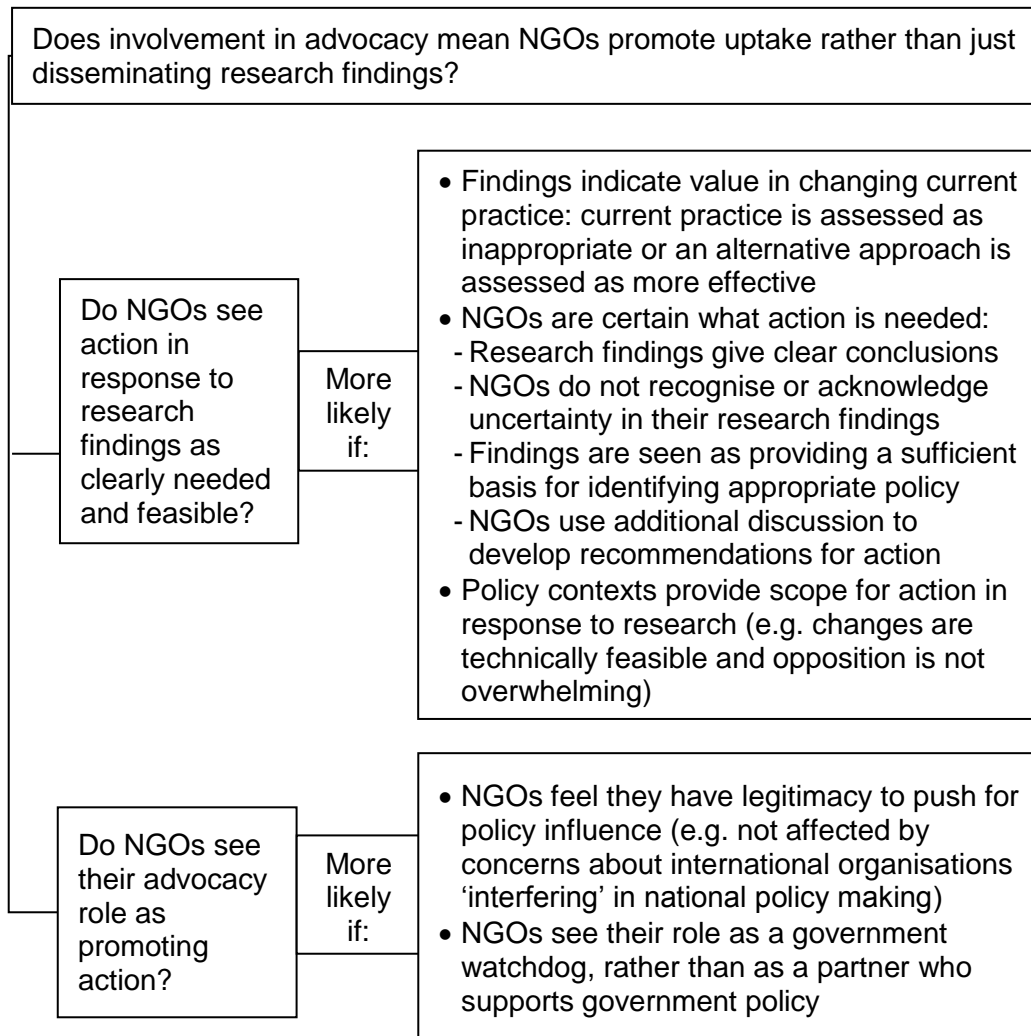
By affecting the extent to which NGOs seek influence through their advocacy, these ideas about government collaboration and legitimacy can mean organisational involvement in advocacy does not translate into pursuing uptake. The hesitation to promote uptake in some case NGOs points again to similarity with research communication styles often associated with academics. It suggests limitations to the recommendation (noted in Chapter 1) that academics should work with NGOs to promote uptake because NGOs will not be restricted by concern to preserve neutrality. While protection of academic impartiality may not apply in NGOs, they may hesitate to push research uptake for other reasons, such as concern about legitimacy and government partnership.

6.1.3 Summary

The case NGOs' experiences indicate variation in whether NGOs promote research uptake. Sometimes NGOs do not aim to secure uptake of study findings. This may be because they see no need for action, if findings support current policy. It may be because they are unsure whether or what action is needed, either because results are uncertain or because appropriate policy depends on more than research findings. NGOs may also aim primarily for dissemination if strong opposition or other aspects of the policy environment mean uptake is unlikely. In addition, when NGOs do aim for uptake, ideas about their appropriate advocacy role affect the extent to which they pursue action in response to research findings. For some NGOs, advocacy centres on sharing information, or at least not explicitly seeking influence, rather than openly promoting action. Various conditions might contribute to this quieter approach, but concerns about the legitimacy of policy influence by international organisations and commitment to supporting government systems were significant among the case NGOs. This emphasis on dissemination with some studies and in some organisations contrasts with expectations in the literature that NGOs involved in advocacy will actively promote uptake in response to their research findings.

These conclusions are summarised in Figure 12, which indicates conditions likely to encourage a focus on promoting uptake.

Figure 12: Conditions affecting whether NGOs disseminate research findings or promote uptake



6.2 Research communication strategies: a varied role for advocacy activities

This section considers the second way that involvement in advocacy might support research communication, examining whether NGOs use their advocacy activities to communicate research findings. By advocacy activities, I mean the work undertaken in support of NGOs' advocacy function, for example participation in policy networks or projects that aim to influence decision makers. The case NGOs' experiences show that advocacy activities sometimes can support research communication, and I explain in 6.2.1 how they draw on their advocacy activities to disseminate findings and promote uptake. Their use of advocacy activities varies, reflecting the different aims and organisational roles discussed in 6.1, and different ideas about how to secure

influence. These aims and ideas also affect the extent to which NGOs rely on their advocacy activities for research communication. As I discuss in 6.2.2, some NGOs see research-based strategies such as journal articles as a better way to meet some of their aims, meaning their research communication does not rely only on advocacy activities.

6.2.1 Advocacy activities as a means for research communication

All the case NGOs draw on their advocacy activities to communicate research findings. These advocacy activities support research communication through two broad functions: they provide a channel for sharing findings, and a way to encourage action by decision makers in response to research findings. However, they meet these functions in different ways, and NGOs have different ideas about which activities are appropriate and effective. I explain this below using examples of formal and informal networks and workshops.

Advocacy networks as a resource for research communication

The value of advocacy networks for sharing findings and promoting uptake is widely discussed in literature on getting research into practice (Court et al., 2006; Green & Bennett, 2007). The case NGOs all participate in a range of formal and informal networks with government and other development actors as part of their advocacy work. Chalk and Marl see these networks as important channels for research communication, but different aims mean they focus on different kinds of network, as I discuss below.

Formal networks as a channel to disseminate research findings

Chalk's main strategy for research communication involves disseminating findings through formal networks. Chalk are a member of several NGO coalitions, district government committees and national working groups that include government, donors and other development actors. The director explained the central role of these networks in Chalk's advocacy and research communication:

“That’s how I’d see us doing advocacy [...] It’s about working, using our M&E framework, seeing what works, what evidence have we got about what works, and then using the forums that we naturally sit in, and we sit in a lot of national forums, as a place to disseminate that information.”

The description of forums that Chalk “naturally sit in” highlights the way this network membership is part of Chalk's advocacy function. Staff attend network meetings as part of their advocacy work, and this provides an opportunity for research communication. The director's comments also highlight the role of networks as a channel to share

findings. Chalk use their networks to disseminate results by presenting at meetings, circulating research reports via email and by taking hard copies to meetings; the research manager explained that “anyone who leaves the office is given a handful”. For Chalk, these advocacy networks support research communication by providing a channel to reach their target audience of other development actors at district or national level. Indeed, discussing external research communication, the research manager said “the most effective thing for us is the networks”.

Chalk’s interest in these formal networks partly reflects their focus on dissemination rather than uptake. As discussed in 6.1.2, Chalk see their role primarily as informing discussion. Formal network meetings may be more effective for this role than for more actively promoting uptake. This is suggested by the approach towards formal networks in Marl. They also value formal network meetings for communicating research findings, but primarily when their aim is “sharing information” [advocacy officer]. As described in 6.1.2, although Marl avoid more outspoken advocacy, they have a clearer focus on influence than Chalk. When their aim is promoting uptake, these formal networks can be inadequate. One difficulty is tight agendas in network meetings. This limits time to discuss research findings and decide next steps, reducing the potential to promote action. Varied interests within formal networks can also create barriers. Working groups include a range of actors. As explained by Marl’s advocacy officer, some group members may have no interest in acting on research findings, or indeed, may oppose action:

“It’s not everybody in that group who would be really interested in the issue that you want to present. For example, task shifting. There will be [an organisation for medical professionals] there who will say ‘task shifting is not a good idea, we don’t agree to that’. There will be [a government board] who say ‘have these people been trained on handling these drugs?’ [...] So... it’s a challenge, because I think it’s difficult to push an agenda forward through such kind of forums.”

The advocacy officer’s concern to “push an agenda forward” highlights the aim of uptake. When NGOs see their role as dissemination, as with Chalk, the need for time to discuss action and consensus on the right approach may be less important. Indeed, given Chalk’s role of stimulating debate, opposing views might be welcome. Chalk’s director seemed happy about disagreement with the conclusions of their research on an agricultural approach: “we got challenged on some of the figures, which is good because it means people are reading it”. Comments by the research manager also suggest Chalk’s use of formal networks reflects a focus on dissemination rather than a belief that sharing findings through networks will ensure uptake. He noted that “whether this approach has any actual impact on policy or practice is very debatable”, suggesting scepticism about the value of formal networks for securing action.

These views about formal networks suggest that the perceived value of particular advocacy activities for research communication varies between NGOs, in this case related to organisational roles of dissemination or uptake. Marl's interest in promoting uptake contributes to their use of informal networks, discussed below.

Informal networks as a space for discussion and means of building trust

Marl's core advocacy approach in Malawi involves developing relationships with individual policy makers. They use these informal networks for research communication. As with formal networks, informal networks provide a channel to share findings. However, they also provide a way to promote decision makers' interest in applying research findings, so helping Marl's aim of uptake. I describe these two functions below.

As a channel to share findings, informal networks operate by helping Marl to organise meetings with policy makers. The advocacy officer explained how their relationships with government officials provide this opportunity for discussion and influence:

“Our strategy is really trying to work closely with government. [...] Head of mission was doing that and I think she also has established herself really closely with the key people, so that most of the times we don't have to go out and say oh blah blah blah or press release or what what what, we have that access to the key decision makers where we can just say ‘oh look by the way, can we have lunch?’, and you bring issues up.”

Marl's ability to convene these meetings and so create this channel depends on the role of networks in developing relationships of trust with policy makers. As recognised in discussions of linking research to policy, trust between research providers and target audiences can be developed through ongoing discussion and collaboration via networks (Green & Bennett, 2007; Loewenson, 2010). This literature also indicates that building trust takes work (Carden, 2009; Young & Quinn, 2012). This effort was implied by Marl's advocacy officer as she described her collaboration with government staff and the role of this in supporting Marl's access to decision makers:

“I'm in close touch with the person responsible in the ministry, they can call me to say ‘oh I've got this issue, how do I resolve it [...] or what is your advice or your suggestion?’ So we have that level of influence, which I think is very good at the moment, that we don't want to mess it up.”

Her concern to maintain this relationship shows that government trust in Marl could be fragile, and required ongoing effort and care through the informal networks.

The value of trust for increasing Marl's capacity to convene meetings with decision makers was indicated in contrast to the experience of some Malawian NGOs. Describing Marl's work with national civil society coalitions, the advocacy officer

highlighted Marl's greater ability to attract policy makers to a meeting:

"If it's something that civil society really want to press with MoH or other government sectors or donors that they don't have direct access to, that Marl we have direct access to, they can say 'oh, can you help us out, organise a meeting with the donors, because if it's Marl calling for that kind of meeting they will come'. Because they know the level of influence that Marl as an organisation has. 'But if we call for that meeting they will say 'oh civil society, they just want to make noise again, we're not going to meet you'."

The more confrontational advocacy undertaken by some local NGOs contributes to distrust among policy makers and reluctance to meet. This government suspicion is noted in reports on governance in Malawi (Reality of Aid Africa, 2013) and in discussions among Malawian civil society. One NGO leader claimed in an email group conversation that "Government fears local NGOs. [...] They deliberately avoid an interface with CSOs/NGOs". Without relationships of trust, NGOs may be unable to create spaces where research findings can be discussed with target audiences. Marl's informal networks help them avoid this.

As well as facilitating channels to share findings, trust contributes to the second function provided by networks: creating interest in applying these findings. Trust in the providers of research is recognised as a significant influence on the perceived credibility of findings and their consequent application (Green & Bennett, 2007; Loewenson, 2010). The value of this was highlighted by Marl's advocacy officer, who suggested that their close relationships with government make policy makers less "suspicious" of Marl's research and enhance their willingness to listen to the findings:

"They [government] really trust us that, we are working towards the same goal, we are working in their best interest really, so whatever research we are trying to do actually is to [...] help them. [...] So our research, usually they are keen to want to know."

Government interest in Marl's findings reflects a belief that Marl's research can be relied upon and that, because Marl supports the government, Marl's findings may be relevant for government priorities. This trust and interest in Marl's research is suggested by the attention to some of their findings among government and other development agencies discussed in Chapter 4. As noted there, the research officer in one government health agency described Marl as a "centre of excellence" for research, and donors have circulated Marl's research around their networks. As with the role of trust in enabling meetings, the value of trust for creating interest in research findings was indicated in comparison to the experience of some Malawian NGOs. Discussing research by one civil society network, Marl's advocacy officer suggested that because of the "confrontational nature" of their advocacy, "government can be a little bit on the defensive side, they can be on the defensive side in that sometimes they don't want to know". When NGOs are not trusted, government may view their research as irrelevant

or damaging and refuse to consider it. Marl use their advocacy networks to avert this risk by building trust and so promoting policy makers' interest in applying their results.

For Marl, then, informal advocacy networks support research communication by helping to create opportunities to share research findings, and by developing relationships of trust that enhance the perceived credibility of research and so support uptake. With different ideas about how to secure uptake, NGOs may see informal networks as inadequate for research communication, as I explain in relation to Flint below.

Advocacy workshops as a means of creating pressure on decision makers

Flint also use their advocacy activities for research communication, but rather than relying on networks, Flint focus on organising workshops to discuss findings with policy makers. Their approach illustrates a different way that advocacy activities can help to secure space to share findings and promote action. It also indicates the effect of NGOs' ideas about effective and appropriate strategies for influence on the perceived value of particular advocacy activities. I explain these aspects in turn below.

Flint have used workshops for research communication in two advocacy projects that involve research on government services. In each project, Flint organised a workshop with policy makers to present the findings. As explained by the manager for one project, Flint held a:

“national dialogue [...] We had those who are responsible from the ministry, those who are responsible for [providing the government service]. So it was like they were also informed.”

As well as providing an opportunity to share their findings, these workshops help to promote action by target audiences in response to the findings. In contrast to the relationships of trust created through informal networks, Flint's workshops promote action by placing pressure on decision makers. This pressure is created in two ways. First, workshops can attract media coverage. The value of this coverage for creating pressure was indicated by Flint's programme manager:

“The good part of workshops is that you generate discussions and debates, and when these are captured by the media, the duty bearers are forced to act on the issue.”

Second, pressure is created within the workshop by inviting people with experience of the issue who can confirm research findings and support Flint's call for action. As explained by the programme manager,

“In a workshop, you have people that are interested in the research topic and have knowledge on the same, they may easily back you up based on what they know and what they have read.”

Workshop participants include, for example, community members affected by the issues and other NGOs working in the area. Their support increases the credibility of the findings and reduces scope for advocacy targets to dismiss the research, so increasing pressure on them to respond.

Flint's interest in creating pressure points to the variation among NGOs in ideas about effective strategies for influence, and through this, in the perceived value of particular advocacy activities. The need to apply pressure through workshops was highlighted by Flint's programme manager in comparison to perceived shortcomings of networks for research communication. Flint participate in several formal NGO and government networks. Like Marl, they feel these meetings do not provide time to discuss research findings. While Marl see meeting individual policy makers as an alternative, effective approach, Flint also see this informal networking as inadequate. Flint often have connections with the decision makers targeted by their research, but the programme manager felt that if met individually, these officials would dismiss research findings and refuse to act:

“When you target the few that matter, sometimes they become defensive on the issue. [...] They will need you to justify quite a lot and may think you are exaggerating the issue.”

The comment about target audiences being 'defensive' highlights the different ideas about how to secure uptake. Marl's advocacy officer also mentioned this potential 'defensiveness' of target audiences, but while Marl pre-empt this by building trust, Flint overcome resistance by creating pressure. These different ideas of trust and pressure contribute to use of different advocacy activities for promoting uptake.

The different approaches also illustrate the way ideas about organisational role affect the perceived value of particular advocacy activities. As discussed in section 6.1, Chalk and Marl hesitate to openly pursue influence and emphasise partnership with government. Working through government policy making systems, as with Chalk's use of formal networks, and building trust with government, as with Marl's networking, fit this approach. Flint's open commitment to influence is reflected in their use of a more public and potentially confrontational arena for sharing findings. Public workshops and media coverage fit the watchdog role that Flint's advocacy projects are designed to support. In contrast, the earlier comment from Chalk's director that their advocacy "isn't about holding a big workshop" shows how this activity is seen as inappropriate for Chalk's role.

Summarising this discussion of advocacy activities, the examples of networks and workshops show how NGOs' advocacy activities can support research communication by providing a channel to share findings and a way to promote action, either through trust or pressure. NGOs' aims for research communication and their ideas about effective strategies and organisational roles contribute to an interest in using different kinds of advocacy activities for communicating findings. These different aims and ideas also bring an interest in research communication strategies that do not rely on NGOs' advocacy activities, as I discuss below.

6.2.2 Using research-based channels rather than advocacy activities

While existing literature emphasises the value of NGOs' advocacy activities for research communication, these advocacy activities are just one approach used by case NGOs to disseminate findings and promote uptake. Research communication, particularly in Chalk and Marl, also involves journal publication, conferences and collaboration with target audiences during research. I refer to these strategies as 'research-based' because they involve activities built around the research process, such as collaboration with target audiences, or established channels focused on research, such as journals or conferences. This contrasts with strategies that rely on activities undertaken as part of an NGO's advocacy function, such as the networking and workshops discussed in the previous section. This divide between advocacy activities and research-based strategies is not clear-cut. Among other areas of ambiguity, NGOs sometimes use strategies such as journal publication to secure influence, giving research-based channels an advocacy purpose. In making this distinction, my purpose is not to definitively categorise particular research communication strategies as either using advocacy activities or not. Rather, I aim to indicate that research communication varies in the extent to which it makes direct use of activities undertaken as part of NGOs' organisational advocacy function.

These research-based strategies provide the same functions for research communication seen with advocacy activities: they are a channel for sharing findings and a means to promote action in response to research among decision makers. Their use reflects further ideas among the NGOs about how to secure action, beyond the strategies of pressure through workshops and trust through networking discussed above. These research-based strategies also meet additional aims for research communication, including reaching different target audiences and supporting organisational interests other than research uptake. Below, I use examples of journal publication and collaboration to explain how these research-based strategies are used

for research communication, and how their use reflects NGOs' aims and ideas.

Journal publication as a route to international influence

Journal publication is a primary strategy for communicating research findings in Marl. Publication is encouraged by Marl's headquarters; indeed, the research officer in Malawi described it as "expected". They often submit research from Malawi to international journals, and the number of journal articles is an indicator in their annual activity report. Chalk also publish some articles, particularly when research is undertaken in partnership with academics, and Flint are interested in journal publication. I focus on Marl as the NGO that makes most use of this approach.

Marl's use of journals for research communication reflects an aim of international influence, particularly within the health sector. Advocacy to international actors is a greater focus for Marl than the other case NGOs. They see this international target audience as using and respecting peer-reviewed articles. With this aim and understanding, Marl see journal publication as supporting research uptake, both by providing a channel to reach international actors and by promoting their interest in applying Marl's findings. The role of journals as a channel to share findings is emphasised in Marl's international research policy: one rationale for publication is that journal articles are included in databases and on the internet, so likely to be found by people in other countries. Marl staff in Malawi also noted the value of journals for taking research to potential audiences, particularly international health organisations:

"Peer reviewed articles are good in terms of advocacy at the international level, because probably organisations like WHO will pick up something from the Lancet and all these other big international journals." [advocacy officer]

The research policy also emphasises the role of journals in helping to promote action in response to research findings. As with informal networks, this involves a process of trust, in particular studies and in Marl as an organisation. In relation to trust in particular studies, Marl see publication as indicating the reliability of their research, and consequently increasing interest in the findings among target audiences. Their research policy describes publication as a mark of "credibility" and "a validation process" that helps to promote action by international policy makers and Ministries of Health. This was also noted by the advocacy officer in Malawi, who again highlighted the context of targeting international medical organisations. She suggested that publication primarily supports influence with "such huge organisations who value, like WHO usually values evidence and that kind of rigour in scientific research". In relation to trust in Marl as an organisation, Marl see publication as enhancing their global reputation. The policy suggests publications provide "credibility" for the organisation,

increasing their international “role and influence”. This rationale was also suggested by the research officer in Malawi, who felt the headquarters’ emphasis on journals was partly about strengthening Marl’s reputation and consequent ability to advocate. Her comments also highlight the context of influence within the international health sector:

“I would say Marl, in order to lobby and advocate for innovations in medicine and health you must have very sound credentials, I would say. And in this world I think you get these credentials by publishing really good evidence.”

This interest in organisational reputation brings in an aim beyond the immediate goal of research uptake. Support for Marl’s profile helps them secure action in response to research findings, but also enables advocacy on other issues by increasing Marl’s overall authority in global health discussions.

While Marl see journal publication as useful for influencing international health organisations, it is less valued for research communication within Malawi. Marl staff noted the value of journal articles, but emphasised the headquarters’ interest in publication and saw journals as less useful for promoting uptake among local or national policy makers. For example, discussing publication, the advocacy officer felt that “for the national level advocacy, I think it doesn’t carry much weight”. They see direct discussion as more effective for sharing information and influencing opinion within Malawi, building trust through relationships rather than peer-review. This different audience contributes to their greater use of advocacy networks rather than journals for national research communication.

Marl’s interest in journals suggests one set of aims and ideas that can encourage use of research-based communication strategies: an aim of influencing international organisations seen as respecting publication. Different aims and ideas about how to secure influence contribute to use of another research-based strategy, collaboration with potential research users, which I discuss below.

Collaboration with potential research users for ownership, credibility and capacity

Both Chalk and Marl sometimes seek collaboration with potential audiences during the research process, partly as a way to promote research uptake. This collaboration was discussed in Chapter 4 in relation to consultation on research questions, but it sometimes extends throughout the research process. Their interest in collaboration reflects ideas about organisational roles and further ways to secure audience interest. Collaboration is particularly emphasised by Chalk, and I discuss their rationale below.

Chalk have involved government and other potential research users at different stages of research, including design, data collection and discussion of draft findings. A key approach is reference groups, created for all the studies under the District Development Project. These groups of five to ten people include government officials, academics and NGO staff who provide feedback on terms of reference and draft reports. Other strategies for collaboration include involving government staff in data collection and design of research undertaken as part of district projects, and the workshops to discuss draft findings and agree recommendations described in 6.1.1. (These are different to Flint's research communication workshops, being smaller, more private, and held at an earlier stage in the research process to seek feedback.)

As with other advocacy activities and research-based strategies, collaboration provides a channel to share research findings and a way to promote action. This time the channel involves the reference groups, workshops or other meetings held as part of the research process. The means of promoting action in response to findings partly involves a process of promoting ownership. Collaborating with potential audiences during research is designed to generate their interest by giving them a role and influence on the process. As explained by a Chalk programme advisor:

“We work hand in hand with the key stakeholders, like government, with the relevant line ministries, so that they own the process. Because we want to influence policy and they're the policy makers and policy holders so they need to be involved in the process by sitting on research reference groups.”

This idea of ownership was repeated by several staff in Chalk, and the strategy is used with research for district projects as well as the national research. Like participation in formal networks, this approach fits Chalk's organisational principle of government partnership. Supporting ownership is a way to promote action on research that leaves decisions up to government, in line with Chalk's advocacy approach outlined in 6.1.

Collaboration is also designed to promote action by strengthening research credibility. In contrast to Marl's focus on peer review, Chalk seek to increase research credibility by using external input to strengthen rigour and transparency. Rigour was emphasised as a primary function of reference groups by Chalk's research manager, who talked of their importance for “validity and reliability”. Workshops to discuss draft findings play a similar role, helping “to address potential challenges or inaccuracies before circulating”. In terms of transparency, reference groups and workshops open up the research process to counter suspicion of bias. The research manager said workshops “demonstrated that Chalk took consultation and transparency seriously” and “promoted objectivity i.e. not only Chalk or the reference group had a chance to input into the findings and recommendations”. This in turn was seen as helping “government buy-in

to the report”.

As in Marl, Chalk’s interest in research-based approaches reflects additional aims beyond research dissemination or uptake. In particular, collaboration brings additional capacity and expertise. For example, Chalk choose to work with government staff for data collection partly because Chalk staff lack time to collect data themselves and working with government officials is cheaper than hiring freelance researchers. Similarly, although the rigour provided by reference groups is seen as increasing external acceptance of findings, Chalk want research to be accurate for their own use.

These rationales indicate a further set of aims and ideas that can encourage interest in using research-based strategies to communicate findings: belief in the value of ownership for promoting action; an idea that external input can enhance quality and transparency, and through that the credibility and acceptance of research; commitment to government partnership; and interest in using external input to provide capacity and expertise. As with use of journals, these aims and ideas mean research communication does not rely only on advocacy activities.

The interest in research-based channels among some case NGOs points to further similarity with approaches often associated with academics. As well as the obvious academic interest in journals and conferences, some academics use collaboration for ownership and credibility (Henninck & Stephenson, 2005; Jones, 2005). For example, one academic in Malawi described involving policy makers from the start of research to promote their interest. This similarity should not be overstated; for example, no case NGOs rely only on research-based strategies (although this approach is perhaps also increasingly unusual among academics (Wilson et al., 2010)). However, as with the similarity in aims and approaches discussed in 6.1, the shared interest in research-based strategies suggests limitations to the idea that academics can benefit from NGOs’ contrasting research communication activities.

6.2.3 Summary

This section examined whether and how the case NGOs use advocacy activities for research communication. Their experiences confirm suggestions in existing literature that advocacy activities can support communication of research findings. Specifically, these activities can provide a channel for reaching people NGOs want to act in response to research findings, and a means of promoting this action. However, their experiences also indicate that NGOs value different advocacy activities and do not rely

only on advocacy activities for research communication. Identifying how advocacy activities support research communication – by providing a channel to share findings and means of influence – helps show that these functions can be met in other ways. In particular, research-based strategies that do not rely on NGOs' advocacy activities can also take findings to potential audiences and promote their interest in responding.

NGOs' varied interest in particular advocacy activities reflects different aims for research communication, and different ideas about how to achieve these aims. Advocacy activities vary in the kinds of channel they provide and the way they promote action, so suit different aims and approaches. One aspect is whether NGOs aim for uptake or dissemination. For example, formal advocacy networks may only meet aims of dissemination, particularly if meetings lack discussion time and include groups who oppose action. Ideas about effective strategies for influence also bring different approaches. Informal networks with policy makers are more likely to be valued if NGOs see relationships of trust as a way to promote interest in their research findings. Alternatively, if NGOs feel public pressure is needed to secure action, they may see informal networks as inadequate and use workshops and media attention to promote uptake. Preferred strategies also depend on ideas about organisational roles. For example, NGOs may see advocacy networks as a more appropriate strategy than public workshops if they emphasise government partnership and providing information rather than explicitly pushing for change. Such diverse approaches are discussed in wider literature and guidance on NGO advocacy (Coe & Kingham, 2007; Chandler, 2010; Almog-Bar & Schmid, 2014) and noted in some accounts of NGO roles in research communication (Court et al., 2006; Bazán et al., 2008; Kennell & Woolley, 2012; Beaulieu, 2013). Overall, however, this diversity is not emphasised in discussions about the value of NGOs' advocacy for communicating research findings.

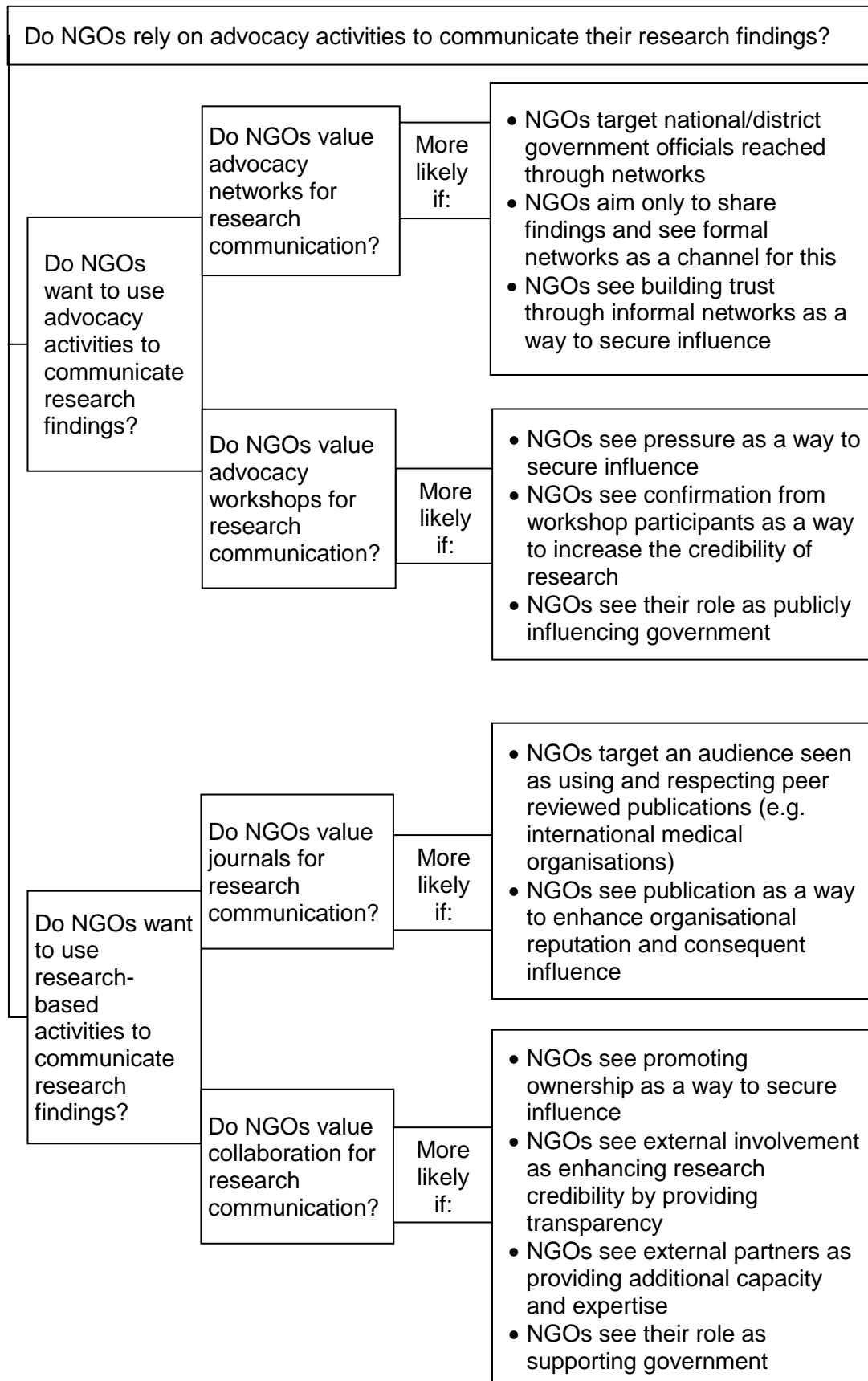
This variation in NGOs' aims and ideas also underlies the interest in research-based communication strategies that do not rely on advocacy activities. Some NGOs see these research-based approaches as a more effective and appropriate way to meet some of their aims. For example, if NGOs want to influence international audiences that they see as respecting peer review, they may value journal publication. If NGOs emphasise partnership with government (or other target users of their research), and see ownership as a means of securing action, they may focus on collaboration with potential audiences during research. Ideas about how to strengthen the credibility of research are one aspect of these different approaches to securing interest. Ideas about what makes research credible vary (Pollard & Court, 2005), and this is seen with the case NGOs. Particular research communication activities provide credibility in different

ways, for example peer review through journal publication, transparency through collaboration, as well as approaches based on advocacy activities such as trust through networks and confirmation from other workshop participants. Aims beyond the immediate goals of research dissemination and uptake also affect the balance between advocacy activities and research-based channels. For example, if NGOs see publication as enhancing organisational reputation, they may value journals for more than their role in communicating findings. Similarly, if NGOs want expert input to enhance research quality, they may value collaboration to provide this input, as well as to create ownership for uptake.

These conclusions are summarised in Figure 13, which indicates some ideas within NGOs that can encourage interest in particular research communication activities. This is not intended as an exhaustive list of research communication activities and conditions affecting their use. Rather, the options in the diagram serve to illustrate how NGOs' aims and ideas about appropriate and effective strategies bring an interest in using different advocacy activities for research communication, and in using activities that do not rely on their advocacy function.

The different views on the value of particular advocacy activities and the reliance on research-based strategies to meet some aims point towards limitations of advocacy activities for research communication. In the next section, I consider limitations further, examining how involvement in advocacy may not guarantee capacity to communicate research findings.

Figure 13: Conditions affecting whether NGOs rely on advocacy activities to communicate research findings



6.3 Capacity for research communication: having the right kind of advocacy

This section considers whether NGOs involved in advocacy are able to communicate research findings. It develops two implications of the varied research communication activities discussed in section 6.2. I described there how the case NGOs are communicating their findings through different activities. Implicit in this is their ability to access or develop these channels. I also suggested that NGOs' organisational aims and influencing strategies affect the perceived suitability of particular advocacy activities for research communication. I focused in 6.2 on the way this contributes to diverse research communication strategies, but the varied suitability also means some advocacy activities may not support research communication. In this section, I consider how these two aspects - the ability of particular advocacy activities to support research communication, and capacity to develop preferred advocacy channels – can interact such that NGOs cannot communicate research findings in ways they see as effective despite involvement in advocacy.

I first outline the dependence of different research communication strategies on particular organisational capacities and conditions (6.3.1). I then discuss why some advocacy activities may not support research communication (6.3.2). These two aspects are then examined together to explain how they can limit communication of research findings, considering the situation in Flint (6.3.3). I focus on Flint because they experienced the greatest difficulties with research communication: findings from several studies were not shared at all with the external decision makers who Flint thought should respond to them. Although I focus on Flint, all the case NGOs identified gaps in their research communication. For Chalk, Clay and Marl, these gaps relate primarily to greater use of particular channels or finding ways to increase dissemination or uptake. They largely felt able to make these improvements and saw the required change as a shift in strategy. Flint's situation was more extreme, and so provides the most significant example for this section.

6.3.1 Ability to access or create research communication channels

The case NGOs' use of different channels to communicate findings reflects organisational capacities as well as the ideas about effective and appropriate approaches discussed in 6.2. These capacities affect NGOs' options for research communication and their ability to share results as they want. Relevant capacities are largely discussed in previous chapters or other literature. Consequently, my aim with this section is restricted to indicating their importance for NGOs' research

communication, rather than providing a detailed analysis.

Some aspects relate to advocacy capacity. For example, Chalk's use of formal networks depends on membership of these networks and time and funding to attend meetings. Marl's informal networking relies on an advocacy officer with time to develop these connections. Indeed, Marl created the advocacy officer position because they recognised the work needed to build relationships. Flint's dissemination workshops require funding (a condition explained further in 6.3.3). Without these capacities, the NGOs could not use these channels for research communication. The potential constraints are highlighted by situations where these capacities are not present. For example, Chalk's research manager felt organising more meetings with decision makers was not a viable option for research communication, partly due to the time involved. Unlike Marl, Chalk did not have an advocacy officer, limiting their ability to invest in developing informal networks. Similarly, Clay staff discussed barriers to engaging in formal networks, including limited funding for travel to the capital and exclusion from invitations. This varied advocacy capacity among the case NGOs matches wider descriptions of NGO advocacy. As noted in Chapter 1, reports from other countries highlight constraints such as limited engagement in policy networks (Court et al., 2006; Beaulieu, 2013; Orem et al., 2013). Discussions of NGO advocacy in Malawi also indicate difficulties such as inadequate time and funding (Reality of Aid Africa, 2013). Given this existing literature and my thesis focus on relationships between advocacy and research rather than advocacy capacity, I do not discuss these constraints further. However, recognising this varied advocacy capacity is important given assumptions that NGOs involved in advocacy can communicate research findings.

Capacity also affects the research-based approaches to communicating findings. For example, case NGO staff discussed lack of time, skills and funding as barriers to communicating findings through journals and conferences. As discussed in Chapter 5, these capacities vary greatly between case NGOs. Marl have experienced research staff who can support development of articles and conference abstracts, and funding for conference travel. In NGOs without research experience or flexible funding, these approaches may not be possible. For example, Flint's director wanted to increase dissemination through conferences and journals, but felt this would require sponsorship for travel and improved writing skills.

Given the earlier discussion about research capacity, I do not re-examine this here. However, one aspect not previously discussed, and important for understanding NGOs'

potential contribution, involves the implication of research capacity gaps for academic collaboration with NGOs. As previously described, academics are sometimes encouraged to work with NGOs because it is assumed NGOs' advocacy can support uptake of academics' research. I suggested in earlier sections that the presumed complementarity of contrasting approaches could be questioned, as NGOs' research communication approaches sometimes resemble those often associated with academics. As well as affecting the potential added value of NGO advocacy, NGOs' interest in more academic approaches, combined with limited research capacity, can reverse the anticipated relationship of support. If NGOs want to publish findings in journals and lack time or skills for this, they may see collaboration with academic partners as assisting NGOs' research communication, rather than vice versa. This is seen in Chalk. Journal publication of research findings has been restricted to studies undertaken in partnership with external researchers. These partnerships are welcomed partly because academics can support publication. Although Chalk feel some academic partners focus too much on producing articles (as described in Chapter 4), they value academic support for publication when priorities can be reconciled. Indeed, Chalk's director saw co-authored articles with academics as "a big growth area for us", because Chalk have limited publication experience and academics help access this channel. This potential for academics to assist NGOs with journal publication has been recognised by others (Porter et al., 2004), but runs counter to the more common emphasis on NGO support for academics' research communication.

These capacities in advocacy and research affect opportunities for research communication in all the case NGOs. In some cases, limited capacity contributes to an absence of research communication, as I discuss in the example from Flint in 6.3.3. Before that, I examine the second issue introduced earlier: advocacy activities that do not support research communication.

6.3.2 The ability of existing advocacy to support research communication

Particular advocacy activities will only support research communication if they meet NGOs' aims for research communication and their ideas about how to achieve these aims. This was suggested by the discussion of NGOs' interest in different advocacy activities in 6.2. As well as affecting which advocacy activities NGOs use, this need for activities to fit NGOs' aims means some advocacy activities do not support research communication. NGO staff see some of their advocacy activities as ineffective in reaching and influencing target audiences for research. Marl's doubt about the value of formal networks for promoting uptake and Flint's limited use of their formal and informal

networks are part of a wider picture: the case NGOs all undertake a range of advocacy activities, many of which are not used to share research findings.

The lack of fit between research communication aims and advocacy activities can involve target audiences and topics, or the process for influence. On the former, much advocacy, particularly in Chalk, Flint and Clay, involves supporting communities to demand action on local issues, for example through meetings with district government. This local advocacy does not involve the national policy makers often targeted by research. It also focuses on immediate community concerns (such as lack of a borehole) rather than issues addressed in research. Difference in topics can also limit the value of national advocacy activities. For example, Flint participate in several civil society coalitions, but many of these campaign on broad political concerns such as national governance. Consequently, while participation may help other aspects of Flint's advocacy, it does not provide a channel for discussing the narrower topics covered in their research (such as child abuse). Even when advocacy activities target the audiences that NGOs want to act on research findings, NGO staff may see these activities as unable to influence this audience. For example, as suggested in 6.2, Flint feel informal networks do not provide the pressure on decision makers needed to stimulate action. Similarly, Flint and Marl feel formal network meetings are too short to discuss research. Some aspects of this mismatch between advocacy activities and research communication are more clear-cut, particularly target audience and sector. Activities that involve different audiences seem likely to be considered unsuitable by any NGO. Other aspects depend more on organisational ideas, such that an activity considered useful by one NGO is considered ineffective by others. This applies particularly to fit in terms of influencing strategy.

The limitations of some advocacy activities for research communication are perhaps unsurprising given that these activities often have other aims and are not designed for communicating research. For example, Flint's advocacy work with community groups is designed to build community power and resolve local issues, not to persuade national policy makers to act on research findings. Similarly, formal network meetings may support Marl's advocacy by enabling input to policy discussions, but meeting agendas are not designed for detailed review of research findings. The advocacy activities used by Flint and Clay to promote uptake are specifically designed for this purpose: workshops and drama performances are developed as part of projects based on using research findings for advocacy. Marl and Chalk did not develop their advocacy networks for sharing research, but the rationales for this networking match their research communication approach. For example, Marl's informal networking involves

influencing national decision makers through building trust and using meetings to discuss issues. The same people are target audiences for some Marl research, and Marl see the same methods as helping research uptake. This shared audience and strategy means this advocacy activity can support research communication even though this is not its original or only function.

A mismatch between ongoing advocacy activities and aims for research communication does not necessarily limit communication of research findings. This depends on whether NGOs have other advocacy activities that do support research communication, or whether they can access or develop alternative channels. For example, although Chalk do not use their community advocacy to share findings, they have other advocacy activities that are used (national networks). Similarly, Marl feel formal groups do not support uptake, but they can use informal networks and research-based channels instead. A difference between existing advocacy activities and approaches seen as necessary for promoting uptake becomes more problematic when NGOs see all their ongoing advocacy activities as unsuitable for research communication, and they cannot develop preferred channels. This situation can restrict research communication, as I discuss below.

6.3.3 Insufficient capacity and the wrong advocacy activities: restricting research communication

If ongoing advocacy activities are inadequate for research communication and NGOs lack capacity to develop the channels they want, findings may not be communicated despite organisational involvement in advocacy. This combination limits communication of findings from Flint's research. Several staff, including the director, said Flint needed to strengthen research communication. They complained that research is "just hanging" [programme manager]; findings are not disseminated or promoted among external audiences to encourage action. Several issues limit Flint's research communication, but the capacity gaps and perceived inadequacy of some advocacy activities discussed in this section play a significant role.

Flint have strong advocacy capacity in some respects. The director is well connected and they participate in district, national and international networks, manage several advocacy projects, and undertake community advocacy. However, this ongoing advocacy activity is not considered adequate for promoting research uptake. As previously described, these activities target different audiences or sectors, or they do not provide the pressure Flint see as required. Instead, Flint see workshops as the

suitable approach for research communication. Workshops are not part of Flint's ongoing, routine advocacy activities, so require additional funding. This funding is a particular constraint partly because, as discussed in previous chapters, Flint lack core funds and depend on donors. In addition, workshops are expensive in the Malawian context, because policy makers often demand a per diem or allowance to attend. As explained by Flint's advocacy officer, "you know the African MPs, you cannot invite them without giving them something". This is a challenge for research communication noted more widely in Africa (Newman et al., 2013). These costs limit opportunities to promote uptake. Several staff emphasised funding as one cause of limited research communication. For example, the programme manager said a gap in Flint's research was:

"having research results informing our advocacy framework and then taking on board those issues and going flat out to advocate. But the challenge that we have with that is that sometimes resources are a limiting factor, because in Malawi, sometimes to do advocacy, it can be costly."

The role of allowances in increasing these costs was identified more explicitly by a project officer:

"We would wish to share the findings but sometimes it also depends on how much funds we have to do that. You know sometimes in Malawi the problem we have is that each and every time we convene people, they will think (rubs fingers)."

The expectation of allowances, combined with limited core funding, makes Flint's preferred approach to research communication unaffordable unless they secure donor support. Consequently, Flint has only held workshops when research is part of a funded advocacy project. The programme manager explained the importance of this project framework in relation to the research on government services discussed in 6.2:

"In some of our programmes with partners, we are able to do high level advocacy. For example we have some activities with support from [the national network that coordinated the project funding] where we are trying to [monitor services]. So that one, because we are in partnership with [that network], we were able to organise an advocacy session with members of parliament in Lilongwe and we were able to meet them. But that was coming from the background that resources were there and we were working in a partnership."

This research was conducted as part of an advocacy project that included a budget for promoting government action in response to research findings. Consequently, Flint had resources to organise the workshop they saw as necessary for research communication. When funding is unavailable, Flint's focus on workshops, combined with the high costs and Flint's lack of core funding, mean findings may not be communicated.

The perceived inadequacy of ongoing advocacy work for research communication and

need for additional funding were indicated in discussion about a study on mental health. After this research was conducted, Flint applied for additional funds to undertake advocacy using the findings. As the director explained, the application was unsuccessful:

“The work has to be used to advocate for changes in certain things. So the follow up proposal that we developed on mental health was to see how these changes can be effected at various levels, which was more of advocacy. But I guess it was turned down because the understanding was that when the results were generated then Flint would be able to utilise that within its framework to do advocacy. But sooner or later we realised that advocacy on its own was one of the most expensive components.”

The funder may have had other reasons for rejecting this grant application. However, if the director’s view is correct, this highlights an expectation that NGOs involved in advocacy can use their existing activities to communicate research. The same assumption is made, more or less explicitly, by some of those who emphasise the value of NGOs’ advocacy for research uptake. For example, one research group highlights the potential for NGOs to share findings through “ongoing processes of social mobilisation” (Wheeler, 2009 p.14). Although this applied in Wheeler’s examples, Flint’s experience suggests NGOs’ existing advocacy is not always adequate for research communication. Consequently, as with Flint, they may need additional support to develop advocacy activities that can reach and influence target audiences for research.

While Flint see lack of funding as preventing research communication, ability and motivation to work around financial constraints also play a role. As noted in 6.3.2, some limitations of particular activities for research communication are more definite, as with target audience, but other perceived limitations reflect organisational ideas. One implication is that NGOs unable to develop their preferred channels may be able to communicate findings through alternative influencing strategies that fit their resources. For example, Flint could try to secure uptake by building trust through collaboration. This would be cheaper than workshops, reducing or removing the need for donor support. Although Flint have a rationale for using workshops (scope to create pressure), and see networks as inadequate, they do not seem to have considered collaboration as an option. This may partly reflect limited exposure to research communication approaches beyond workshops, itself an aspect of capacity. As noted by several people I met, workshops are a common format for promoting action in Malawi, and a default option for sharing research findings. In contrast, Chalk and Marl also noted the high cost of workshops, but identified alternative approaches. For example, Chalk’s research manager explained that “while we could have presentations and workshops, realistically we don’t have the budget for them”. Chalk’s interest in

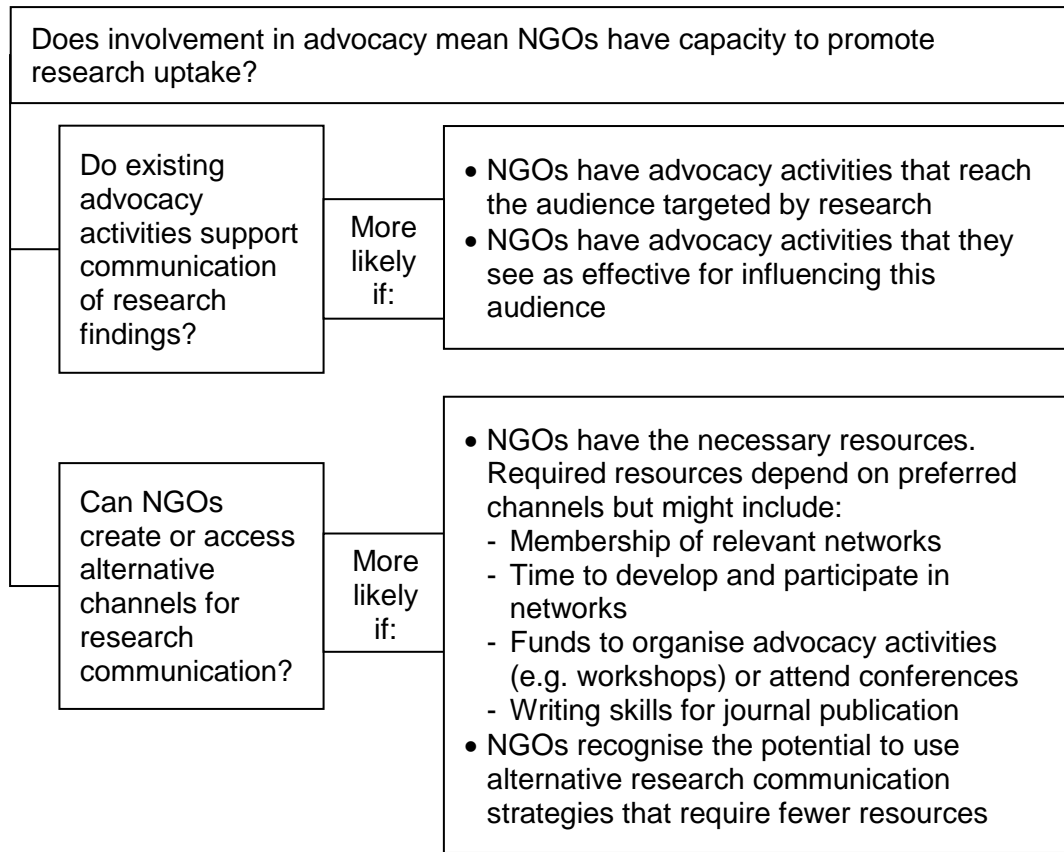
networks and collaboration reflects this financial constraint, as well as their view of large workshops as inappropriate for Chalk's role. These different responses to the cost of workshops suggest skills and motivation to find alternative approaches are significant for enabling research communication.

6.3.4 Summary

This section discussed two aspects that can limit NGOs' ability to communicate research findings despite organisational involvement in advocacy: capacity to develop preferred research communication channels and the suitability of existing advocacy activities. These conditions are outlined in Figure 14. In relation to capacity, NGOs' ability to use advocacy activities for research communication depends on resources to undertake these activities. The strategies discussed in 6.2 require resources such as access to relevant networks, time to meet policy makers, and funding for workshops. These resources are sometimes unavailable, limiting NGOs' options for research communication or preventing use of channels they see as effective. In addition, interest in research-based channels means some NGOs' require research skills to follow their preferred strategies. This can mean they see academics as a source of support for research communication, reversing the anticipated relationship between NGOs and academics. In relation to the suitability of advocacy activities, if they are to support research communication, advocacy activities need to involve the audiences that NGOs want to respond to research findings and the processes NGOs see as effective for influencing action. NGOs need the kind of advocacy activities that can support research communication, not just any advocacy.

A combination of these processes can make NGOs unable to communicate research findings in ways they see as effective, even if they have capacity for some kinds of advocacy and an organisational advocacy function. If ongoing advocacy activities involve different target audiences or do not meet NGOs' ideas about how to secure action, their preferred approach requires additional resources that are unavailable, and they lack experience or flexibility to consider alternative strategies, NGOs may struggle to communicate research findings.

Figure 14: Conditions affecting NGOs' capacity to communicate research findings



6.4 Conclusions

In this chapter, I examined the role of NGOs' advocacy in research dissemination and uptake. Existing literature suggests NGOs' involvement in advocacy can support research communication by bringing an interest in promoting research uptake and channels for communicating findings. The case NGOs' experiences suggest this is not always the case. Echoing the three broad findings on the role of service delivery discussed in previous chapters, their experiences point to variation in whether advocacy provides the anticipated opportunities and support for research communication, in whether NGOs want to connect these functions, and in NGOs' capacity to make these connections.

In relation to the opportunities and support provided by advocacy, the case NGOs' experiences suggest involvement in advocacy does not necessarily bring the focus on promoting uptake anticipated in existing literature. NGOs may not aim for uptake if findings endorse current practice or give no clear recommendations, or policy contexts oppose change. When NGOs do aim for action in response to research findings, they

may focus on dissemination or only promote uptake to a limited degree if their advocacy approach involves sharing information rather than explicitly pursuing change. This limited push for uptake by some NGOs contrasts with the distinction between hesitant academics and outspoken NGO advocacy suggested in some literature on NGOs' role in research communication.

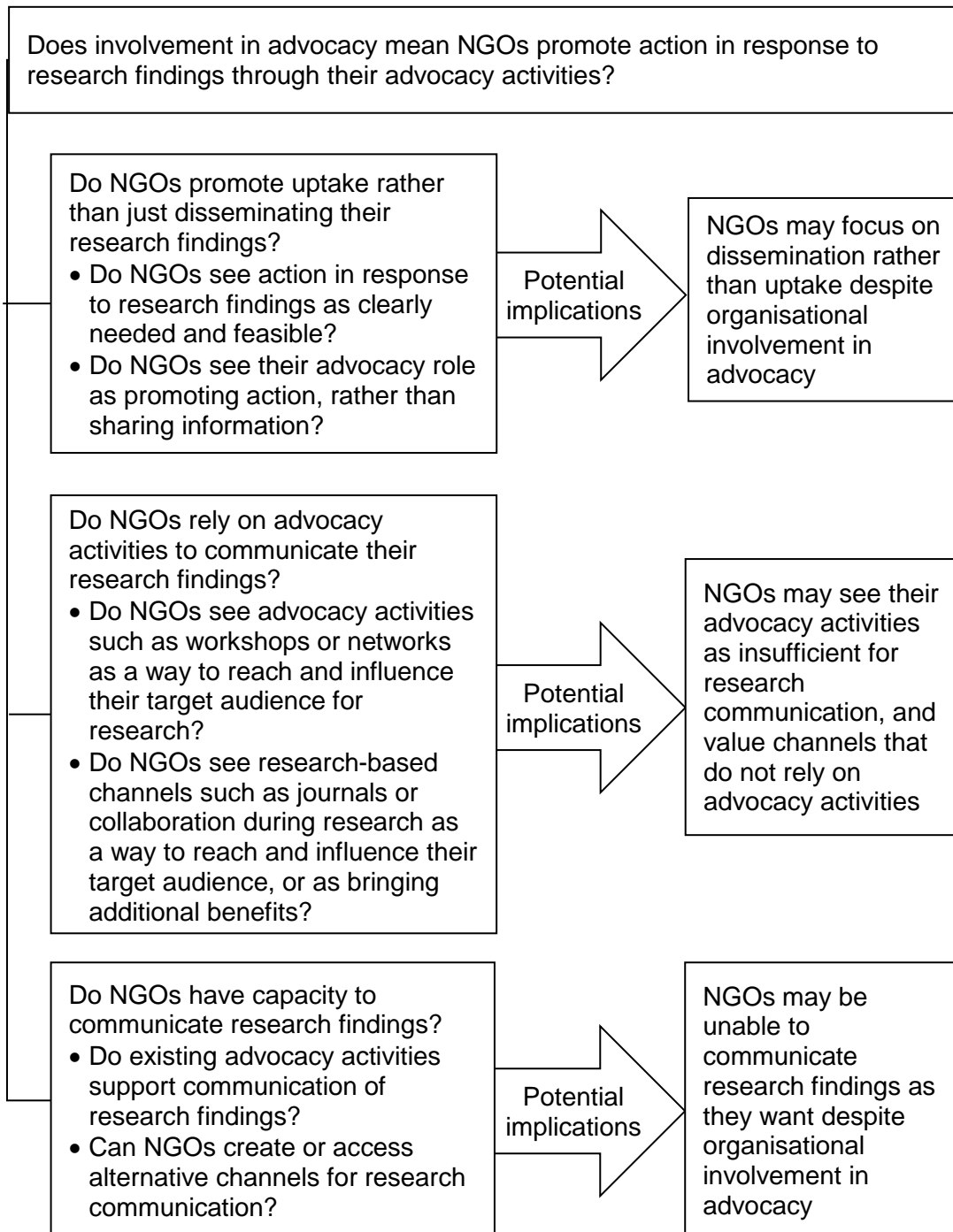
The literature also suggests that NGOs' advocacy activities can support research communication. The case NGOs' experiences confirm this, with many examples of NGOs using their advocacy activities to communicate findings. However, the findings indicate variation in the value of particular advocacy activities for research communication. Advocacy activities are not always designed for sharing research findings, and may involve audiences and influencing strategies considered irrelevant or ineffective for research communication. This varied value of advocacy activities and consequent need for NGOs to have the kind of advocacy activities that suit research communication is not clear within existing literature.

In relation to NGOs' interest in drawing on their advocacy for research communication, the findings suggest variation in the extent to which NGOs want to rely on advocacy activities to communicate findings. All the case NGOs use advocacy activities for research communication, but some NGOs see advocacy activities as insufficient and also value research-based approaches, such as journal publication. Their interest in these research-based approaches contrasts with the emphasis on advocacy activities within literature on NGOs' role in research communication. However, use of channels such as journal articles has been reported among other NGOs (Beaulieu, 2013).

Finally, in relation to capacity, NGOs vary in their ability to develop or access channels for research communication. Undertaking advocacy activities that can support research communication requires resources such as time, network membership or funding. When existing advocacy activities do not suit research communication, inadequate resources may mean NGOs cannot communicate findings as they want despite involvement in advocacy. Low capacity for research communication is documented in some reports of NGOs in other countries (Court et al., 2006; Beaulieu, 2013; Orem et al., 2013). However, there remains limited evidence on NGOs' ability to communicate research findings (Green & Bennett, 2007) and overall, varied capacity receives little attention from those who highlight NGOs' role in dissemination and uptake. The findings also indicate the role of research skills in enabling research communication, and through this, the unexpected interest among some NGO staff in academic support for NGOs' research communication.

These findings are summarised in Figure 15, which indicates conditions affecting the relationship between advocacy and research communication. The findings have implications for strategies to support NGOs' research communication, and for academics considering collaboration with NGOs to increase research uptake. These implications, and those stemming from findings in previous chapters about the role of service delivery, are discussed in the next chapter.

Figure 15: Conditions affecting the role of advocacy in NGOs' research communication



7 Contingent opportunities: maximising the value of service delivery and advocacy for research

My aim for this thesis is to improve understanding of three ways that NGOs' involvement in service delivery and advocacy might support research: the potential for service delivery experience to provide a source of research questions, for service delivery activities and monitoring records to provide research data, and for advocacy to enable communication of research findings. In this final chapter, I first revisit the background and rationale for this thesis (7.1), then bring together and summarise findings from previous chapters about NGOs' use of service delivery and advocacy in research (7.2). Following this, I consider areas for further investigation (7.3). Finally, I provide recommendations based on the findings that might help NGOs interested in research, researchers interested in working with NGOs, and donors interested in supporting NGOs' research (7.4).

7.1 Background to the research

There has been growing attention to the role of NGOs in research. Among other contributions, calls for NGO engagement in research highlight the potential for NGOs' service delivery to provide research questions and data and for their advocacy to support communication of research findings. As explained in Chapter 1, this contribution is suggested in articles focused on NGOs (e.g. Delisle et al., 2005; Kidwell Drake et al., 2010; Zachariah et al., 2010), and in references to NGOs in literature with a broader focus on producing research or communicating findings (e.g. Court & Maxwell, 2005; Duflo et al., 2006; WHO, 2006).

Although this potential value of NGOs' service delivery for developing research questions and data and of their advocacy for communicating findings is often suggested and sometimes documented, scope to make these connections and their effects seemed likely to vary. As I explained in Chapter 1, existing literature gives little information on when and how these connections between research, service delivery and advocacy operate. There is limited detail or discussion of variation in these processes between different contexts. This creates assumptions about NGOs' potential contribution to research that may not always apply, and limited information on conditions needed to realise these opportunities.

In response, I sought to understand how these relationships between research, service delivery and advocacy work in practice, by examining research processes in four

contrasting NGOs in Malawi. I investigated whether NGOs' service delivery provides a source of research questions and data, and whether their advocacy supports communication of research findings. Throughout, the thesis responded to the call for research on NGOs to recognise their characteristics and capacities as "contingent rather than inherent" (Lewis & Opoku-Mensah, 2006 p.673), by considering conditions that enable and constrain input from service delivery and advocacy to research. By examining these relationships between service delivery, advocacy and research in different organisational contexts, the thesis contributes to a more nuanced picture of when and how NGOs' service delivery and advocacy can support research.

Having located my focus in relation to gaps in existing knowledge, the next section summarises the thesis findings.

7.2 Service delivery and advocacy as opportunities for research: key findings

This thesis highlights diverse relationships between NGOs' research, service delivery and advocacy. The case NGOs' experiences show that service delivery and advocacy do sometimes support research in the ways suggested in the literature. There are examples where research questions are inspired or informed by service delivery experience, and some of this research is considered highly relevant by NGO staff and external audiences. Some of the case NGOs' research draws on their service delivery as a source of research data, using service delivery activities to test new approaches or learn from existing interventions, or using information from monitoring records. Advocacy activities are used to support research communication in all the case NGOs, and can provide a channel to share results and a means of promoting interest in research findings among target audiences. However, whether and how these connections between research, service delivery and advocacy operate varies between research studies and organisations. I have suggested three overarching and intersecting conditions that affect these connections and the value of involvement in service delivery and advocacy for research. The first is whether using service delivery to provide questions and data and advocacy to communicate findings is relevant and sufficient for NGOs' research aims. The second condition is whether service delivery and advocacy provide the expected opportunities for research. Third, when service delivery and advocacy can provide relevant input to the research process, the relationship varies with NGOs' capacity to use these opportunities. I summarise these three aspects below.

7.2.1 Meeting research aims: the perceived value of input from service delivery and advocacy to research

NGOs have different research aims and approaches. Use of service delivery as a source of questions or data and use of advocacy to support communication of research findings is not relevant or sufficient for all research aims. This affects the extent to which NGOs want to draw on service delivery and advocacy for research questions, data and communication.

Starting with research questions, as explained in 4.1, the case NGOs do not see their own service delivery experience as the only relevant input to research agendas. Even when research questions come partly from service delivery experience, NGOs may consider other aspects such as existing literature and interest among external partners when deciding topics. They may also welcome research questions suggested by other organisations or academics. Service delivery experience is often an insufficient basis for identifying questions that meet their research aims, and it is not seen as the only source of relevant topics.

Research aims also affect the value of service delivery as a source of data. As explained in 5.1, service delivery activities may provide relevant data when research is designed to test new approaches or assess existing service delivery, but this is less likely when research involves monitoring government or understanding community attitudes. In addition, if research is designed to compare approaches used by different organisations or requires a large sample size, NGOs' own service delivery may provide insufficient data. This variation means that for some research aims, NGOs' service delivery activities are an inappropriate or inadequate basis for generating data.

Similarly, NGOs' aims and their ideas about how to achieve these affect whether they want to rely on advocacy activities for research communication. As explained in 6.2, some NGOs value research-based channels as a better way to meet some of their aims. For example, an aim of influencing an international audience seen as respecting peer review can bring an interest in journal publication. The channels provided by advocacy activities are insufficient for some research communication aims.

Overall then, using service delivery as a source of research questions and data and advocacy for communicating findings suits some research aims, but this is not sufficient or relevant for all research. NGOs may not want to make these connections between research, service delivery and advocacy, or may see them as one of several

required strategies.

7.2.2 The nature of opportunities provided by service delivery and advocacy for research

Service delivery and advocacy vary in the extent to which they provide the anticipated opportunities for research. Using service delivery as a source of questions and data may be difficult, questions from service delivery experience are not necessarily relevant, and involvement in advocacy may not bring the expected emphasis on promoting uptake or channels for communicating findings.

Starting again with research questions, as explained in 4.2, the case NGOs' experiences suggest involvement in service delivery is not enough to enable identification of research topics. Immersion in service delivery may even limit capacity to identify research ideas, by reducing time and space for critical reflection. For service delivery staff to suggest topics, additional conditions are likely to be required, such as time for reflection, motivation, or exposure beyond service delivery to challenge assumptions. Further, research questions stimulated by service delivery experience do not necessarily bring relevant research findings. As explained in 4.4, perceived relevance varies with individual interests and depends on the research process, not just the source of research questions.

Service delivery also provides mixed opportunities as a source of research data. As explained in Chapter 5, scope to produce research data through service delivery depends on whether existing activities and monitoring records provide required information, and if not, whether they can be adapted to meet research aims. Monitoring records need to provide content that answers research questions, and must be sufficiently reliable and accessible, as explained in 5.2. Sometimes limitations can be overcome by adapting monitoring to add content or strengthen reliability. Service delivery activities may also need changing to produce required data, either introducing new approaches for pilot studies, or adapting implementation for experimental designs. For service delivery to provide a source of data, any required changes need to be acceptable and feasible, considering aspects such as fit with organisational principles and programme flexibility. As explained in 5.3, these conditions can prevent use of service delivery as a source of data for some research, or mean using data from service delivery involves difficult compromises.

The opportunities provided by involvement in advocacy for research communication

also vary. As explained in 6.1, involvement in advocacy does not always bring the expected emphasis on promoting uptake. NGOs may not aim for uptake if results are uncertain or support current practice or if uptake is unlikely. Further, advocacy for some NGOs involves providing information rather than explicitly seeking influence, encouraging an emphasis on dissemination even when NGOs aim for uptake. In addition, as explained in 6.3, advocacy activities vary in their ability to support research communication. To provide effective channels for dissemination and support for uptake, advocacy activities need to involve the audiences targeted by research and strategies seen as effective in influencing these audiences. Some advocacy activities do not provide effective channels for research communication.

In summary, the thesis suggests drawing on service delivery and advocacy for research can be more difficult than sometimes assumed and may not have the anticipated benefits. This means the opportunities provided by service delivery and advocacy for NGOs' own research will vary, as will NGOs' potential contribution to research questions, data or communication in studies led by other organisations.

7.2.3 Capacity to use opportunities provided by service delivery and advocacy for research

When NGOs want to draw on service delivery and advocacy for their research, and service delivery and advocacy can be used in this way, NGOs need capacity to use these opportunities. To take forward research questions that come from service delivery experience, NGOs need control over their research agenda. As explained in 4.3, this control is affected by external relationships with headquarters offices and donors, and by internal funding. Capacity is also needed to use service delivery as a source of research data, including research skills, time and funding. These resources vary with NGOs' internal capacity (including prioritisation of research), support from donors, and willingness and ability to collaborate with external researchers, as explained in 5.4. Scope to communicate research findings through advocacy activities also depends on capacity. NGOs need resources to pursue the advocacy activities they see as necessary, such as funding for workshops. As explained in 6.3, combined with the potential limitations of existing advocacy activities, insufficient capacity to develop preferred advocacy channels can mean NGOs are unable to communicate findings as they want despite involvement in advocacy.

Required capacity varies with the kind of research NGOs want to do and the way they want to communicate findings. For example, as suggested in 5.4, simple analysis of

existing monitoring records requires different levels of time, skills and funding to a large experimental study involving programme implementation across a district. Similarly, as suggested in 6.3, using workshops to communicate findings can require more funding than, for example, meeting decision makers individually. One implication is that NGOs may be able to increase use of service delivery and advocacy for research within existing resources, by changing their research approach or using alternative strategies.

Overall, organisational capacity affects NGOs' potential to draw on service delivery as a source of questions and data and to use advocacy for research communication. Varied capacity will affect NGOs' contribution to research. It has implications for NGOs, in identifying appropriate research approaches, and for donors, in removing constraints and providing support.

7.2.4 Implications for NGOs' research systems and academic collaboration

Taking together the three components discussed above, the thesis suggests the potential contribution of NGOs' service delivery and advocacy to research will vary with different research aims and organisational contexts. Recognising different aims, possible difficulties and enabling conditions can help our understanding of whether and how to draw on NGOs' service delivery and advocacy in research.

For NGOs, this variability suggests that appropriate research systems will depend on the organisation. The use of service delivery as a source of research questions and data and of advocacy for research communication is often framed as the recommended approach, as explained in Chapter 1. This applies to particular components, such as use of service delivery to produce questions and data (e.g. Zachariah et al., 2010), and to an overall system of using research on service delivery as a basis for advocacy (Edwards, 1994b; Fowler, 1997). Particular NGOs' research approaches are sometimes described as the model for other organisations to follow (for example, based on articles by Zachariah and colleagues, Médecins Sans Frontières' approach has been described as a "benchmark" by other NGOs (Schwarz, 2010b; Medicus Mundi International, 2014b)). However, NGOs have different research aims and organisational capacities. Drawing on service delivery and advocacy in research will not always be relevant or viable, and one NGO's model may not suit other NGOs' aspirations or abilities.

The variation within and between NGOs also has implications for academics seeking

collaboration. As described in Chapter 1, the value of NGOs' service delivery and advocacy for research is seen as a reason for academics to work with NGOs. Anticipated benefits include a source of relevant research questions, access to data, and channels for promoting uptake. Current literature suggests these benefits "appear relatively undisputed" (Aniekwe et al., 2012 p.10). As indicated by the summary above, my findings suggest these outcomes vary. A clearer understanding of the value of NGOs' service delivery and advocacy for research, including variation with different conditions and ways to support their input, can help effective collaboration. In particular, the varied nature of opportunities provided by service delivery and advocacy suggests that working with NGOs to identify research questions, generate data or promote uptake may require either: selecting NGOs, or particular service delivery and advocacy activities within them, that provide the necessary conditions (for example, working with more flexible service delivery programmes that can be adapted for research); providing support to meet necessary conditions (for example, helping NGOs overcome financial constraints to adapting service delivery); or adjusting research strategies to fit constraints (for example, using research designs that do not require unfeasible changes). These issues also apply for non-academic research institutes working with NGOs.

More specific implications of the findings are identified in section 7.4 on recommendations. Before that, I suggest areas for further research.

7.3 Areas for further research

This thesis has contributed to the understanding of relationships between NGOs' research, service delivery and advocacy in the ways discussed above. There are inevitably gaps and areas for further investigation. Challenges associated with the selection of methods and their implementation were discussed in Chapter 2 on research design, including aspects such as time, access, and my own cultural background. I concentrate here on implications of the thesis scope and focus for further research. Two broad areas seem particularly valuable for further investigation: refining the conclusions from this study, and moving forward support for NGO research.

On the former, further research could usefully develop the conclusions from this thesis by investigating research processes in other NGOs. I used a comparative qualitative case study approach with a small number of NGOs. This strategy was designed to provide the detail needed to understand how research processes work in practice,

while giving insight into variation between organisational contexts. The sample of NGOs included organisations with diverse research approaches and capacities, and indicated numerous conditions that affect relationships between research, service delivery and advocacy. Literature on NGOs indicates some similarity between significant aspects of the organisational contexts in the case organisations and other NGOs, for example relationships with donors and limited research capacity. This suggests that the cases were not atypical and findings may apply more widely. However, further research would be needed to test and review explanations in other organisational contexts. Research with other NGOs could refine and so strengthen explanations presented here. In addition, examining approaches used by other NGOs might indicate additional strategies to manage and enhance use of service delivery and advocacy in research.

This last point leads to the second area for further investigation, aimed at supporting NGOs' effective use of service delivery and advocacy in their research. Although I provided guidance on potential options for some case NGOs, my research aimed to understand the situation, not to develop and test strategies that might strengthen NGOs' research. This is a potential area for further work, either with the case NGOs if this is of interest for them, or with other organisations. The findings suggest constraints to organisational research capacity, but also indicate scope for NGOs to enhance use of service delivery and advocacy for research within existing resources. For example, different approaches could be used to help service delivery staff identify research topics, and opportunities for research might be considered when designing monitoring tools. Action research with interested NGOs could explore these opportunities. This might strengthen research within participating organisations and provide further understanding of constraints and enablers to using service delivery and advocacy for research.

These areas of research would build on findings from this study, further developing the understanding of when and how NGOs' service delivery and advocacy can support research.

7.4 Recommendations for managing relationships between research, service delivery and advocacy

The thesis conclusions suggest possible action to support an effective contribution of NGOs' service delivery and advocacy to research. This includes action for NGOs wishing to strengthen their research approach, for academics or other researchers

considering collaboration with NGOs, and for donors that want to support NGO research (including INGOs that support national NGO partners). Below, I suggest recommendations related to overall research approaches, questions, data, communication and capacity, and indicate the relevant actor.

7.4.1 Overall research approaches

NGOs:

In developing organisational research strategies, recognise that appropriate relationships between research, service delivery and advocacy depend on aims and abilities. Different organisational contexts will require different approaches, and there is not one model. Identify research aims, then consider whether and how drawing on service delivery and advocacy suits these aims. Assess organisational capacities, and consider what strategies are feasible. This need to tailor approaches to context should be remembered when considering the recommendations below.

Consider where research sits in organisational priorities. Prioritisation of research affects relationships between research, service delivery and advocacy. For example, low prioritisation of research among service delivery staff can limit their input to research agendas, time for research and attempts to seek research funding. If research is a priority, developing a research strategy, and effectively communicating and supporting this strategy among staff, may increase recognition and use of opportunities to draw on service delivery and advocacy in research.

7.4.2 Using service delivery as a source of research questions

NGOs:

Do not restrict identification of research questions to internal consideration of service delivery experience. External research organisations or academics may have useful research ideas. Consultation with other stakeholders, for example government, can also help to ensure research questions have wider relevance and do not duplicate existing reports.

In developing strategies to enhance research relevance, consider processes at different stages of research, not just identification of questions. Relevance of findings depends on, for example, producing research of sufficient quality to meet research aims, and using dissemination approaches that explain the significance of findings. On the latter, sharing findings with staff through discussion rather than email can help them appreciate the implications.

NGOs and academics:

In seeking input to research agendas from service delivery staff, consider what support is required. Involvement in service delivery does not automatically prompt research questions. Depending on existing capacities and motivation, the following steps may be useful:

- Consider using discussion rather than relying on email to ask programme staff for ideas. This might overcome barriers related to time, motivation, and confidence or skills to identify possible topics.
- Given that staff may find it difficult to formulate questions, try asking about problems they are encountering rather than asking for defined research questions, and support the move from broad topics to defined questions.
- Exposure to wider discussions and experiences sometimes helps identification of research topics, by challenging assumptions about current practice and supporting awareness of wider debates where research might contribute. Support exposure through, for example, meetings with other organisations or discussions of existing research.
- Service delivery staff may be unaware of existing research that could answer their questions, and consequently the topics they suggest might not be research gaps. Supporting staff familiarity with existing research can avoid duplicating existing research and help fill knowledge gaps. This support could draw on existing resources about evidence literacy, which provide guidelines for identifying and assessing relevant research (INASP, 2010; Hayman, 2013).
- Research training (for example, using workshops and mentoring to plan and implement small studies) may help staff to identify research questions, by supporting appreciation of research, providing time to think about research, and assisting formulation of research questions.
- Giving programme staff responsibility for identifying research topics may encourage their input. However, depending on existing skills, this may need balancing with support for capacity to identify appropriate topics.

Donors:

Ask NGO partners about their research priorities, and consider supporting research in these areas. Research agendas sometimes focus on topics proposed by donors, while topics that originate from NGOs' service delivery experience may go unfunded.

If supporting demand-driven research approaches (WHO, 2012b), recognise that input from practitioners may need support, and that topics suggested by researchers may be welcomed by practitioners. Attention to demand may be more effective if it involves

dialogue rather than a one-way flow of requests from policy or programme managers.

7.4.3 Using service delivery as a source of data

NGOs:

If using monitoring records for research data suits the research strategy, consider future research use when monitoring systems are designed. In particular, include appropriate content and quality controls. Otherwise, monitoring records may not provide the information and reliability needed to answer research questions. If there is limited capacity for data collection, weigh the benefits of additional information against risks of overloading monitoring systems.

Consider whether data from service delivery activities run by other organisations can add value to research. Collaborating with others to collect data beyond your own programmes might, for example, enable comparison between approaches or expand the sample size.

Academics:

In considering collaboration with NGOs as a source of research data, do not assume NGOs have flexibility to adapt service delivery to suit research. Changes to implementation for experimental designs or to test new approaches need to be acceptable and feasible for NGOs. For example, NGO principles such as working with government or concerns that approaches assessed through research should be affordable may limit the acceptability and feasibility of particular research designs, affecting whether and how service delivery can be changed for research.

Discuss with NGOs whether changes required for research are or can be made acceptable. Proposed research designs may need adapting to accommodate NGOs' concerns and principles, for example testing cheaper approaches (considering NGOs' suggestions may also enhance the applicability of findings).

Support the feasibility of any changes to service delivery for research, for example through assisting with constraints such as funding or allowing additional time for negotiation with donors or other partners.

Donors:

If you want NGO partners to undertake research on service delivery, allow flexibility to adapt activities and tailor monitoring as needed to support research.

7.4.4 Using advocacy for research communication

NGOs:

If existing research communication is inadequate and you cannot develop the activities you want to use to promote uptake, consider whether there are other ways to share findings. There may be research communication strategies that do not require significant funding, such as collaborating with potential audiences during research design.

Academics:

In considering working with NGOs to communicate research findings and in identifying potential partners, recognise that NGOs have diverse research communication and advocacy approaches:

- NGOs follow different strategies, for example creating pressure or building trust, and targeting local, national or international audiences. Consider whether NGOs have strategies that correspond to your goals for research impact.
- Some NGOs emphasise sharing information rather than explicitly promoting uptake, and employ channels often used by academics, such as collaboration with potential research users. Consider whether working with NGOs will add to academic research communication strategies.

In identifying potential NGO partners, recognise also that NGOs have different advocacy capacities, affecting the value of collaboration for research communication. Some NGOs are better resourced for promoting uptake, for example having adequate networks, time or funds.

Discuss approaches to journal publication with NGO partners. NGOs may see journal publication as a useful strategy, and want academic support for this. However, a focus on journal publication at the expense of other research outputs and impact on the ground is likely to damage relationships with NGO partners.

Donors:

When funding NGOs to undertake research, do not assume NGOs have capacity to communicate research findings. NGOs cannot always promote research uptake through their existing advocacy activities (for example, ongoing advocacy may involve different target audiences). If NGOs lack resources to create alternative channels, they may be unable to share findings effectively without further support.

Required support for research communication will vary depending on relevant strategies and existing capacity; it may include funding but also resources such as development of networks and staff time.

7.4.5 Supporting research capacity

NGOs:

If research capacity is insufficient, explore ways to strengthen capacity within existing resources. For example, in relation to skills, there may be staff with research experience who can support others, or scope to collaborate with academic partners.

If additional funding is needed, consider opportunities to build research budgets into programme proposals, and discuss scope for this with donors.

Consider how research designs can be adapted to suit available capacity. Different kinds of research need different levels of funding, time and skills. Small-scale data collection or use of monitoring records may be feasible without additional resources.

Academics:

Recognise that supporting academic partners requires time and sometimes funding. Some NGOs have limited capacity to engage in collaboration.

If working with NGOs, discuss whether they would appreciate support for research capacity and how this could be provided (for example, through mentoring NGO staff during a research project).

Donors:

If considering support for research capacity among NGO partners, recognise that diverse research aims and varied existing strengths and gaps mean different capacity needs.

The combined effects of funding, time, skills, and prioritisation mean supporting capacity needs more than money for specific research projects or training workshops.

For some NGOs, a particularly useful area for support may be covering the costs of skilled research staff who can coordinate research, provide motivation, and oversee partnerships with external researchers, as well as undertaking research themselves.

To support research funding, particularly for research aimed at learning from service delivery, provide options for including research budgets within service delivery programme grants.

If you are willing to fund research by NGO partners, through service delivery budgets or separately, clearly indicate this so that NGO staff recognise the opportunity and have confidence to apply.

Consider how donor behaviour may be constraining NGO capacity for research and identify options for “unleashing” capacity (Green & Bennett, 2007 p.43). In particular, more predictable, longer-term grants that include support for staff costs might reduce time spent on securing funding and ease staff workloads, freeing up time for research.

Consider options for supporting collaboration between NGOs and other research organisations, as a way to support NGOs’ research capacity. NGOs may lack connections to reliable and capable research partners who can help to undertake research and source funds, so there may be a role for donors in brokering such partnerships.

Donors, NGOs and academics:

If engaging in or supporting collaboration between NGOs and academics, ensure there is clear agreement on priorities and responsibilities, and that both NGOs and research partners have sufficient time and skills to contribute to the partnership.

These recommendations are areas to consider. Their feasibility and effectiveness could usefully be explored in different organisational contexts, as suggested in 7.3.

7.5 Conclusion

Research is more likely to contribute to progress in international health and development if it is relevant and effectively communicated to people who could use the findings (Stone, 2002; Hanney et al., 2003; Mills et al., 2004; WHO, 2004; Young, 2005; DFID, 2008; WHO, 2012a). NGOs’ involvement in service delivery and advocacy may mean they can contribute to this agenda for more effective research, supporting development of research questions and data and communication of findings. This potential is given as a reason for NGOs to engage in research and for academics to

collaborate with NGOs, but limited evidence meant an uncertain basis for action. Based on experiences among NGOs in Malawi, this thesis suggests that different organisational contexts affect the feasibility and value of drawing on service delivery for research questions and data and on advocacy for research communication. These approaches do not suit all research aims, and they require particular conditions and capacities. A better understanding of the varied value of input from service delivery and advocacy and of the conditions needed to support this input can help to maximise NGOs' contribution to research.

I hope the findings can contribute to thinking and practice among NGOs and the wider research community. For academics and donors that work with NGOs, the findings provide more understanding of NGOs' potential role in research, and indicate areas where support may be needed. For NGOs, given increasing interest in research, they may value guidance about ways to manage relationships between their research, advocacy and service delivery. The findings are already being used by some NGOs to support their thinking about research. For example, Medicus Mundi International has used elements of the thesis as background input for two recent workshops. The UK development NGO network (British Overseas NGOs for Development, or BOND) and the International NGO Training and Research Centre (INTRAC, a UK-based NGO that provides support for other development NGOs) have asked me to share the results through their networks. Going forwards, I hope to collaborate with these and other organisations to build on the thesis findings and further explore strategies for effective NGO research.

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Annex 1 Information needs and data sources

The table was developed as part of research design to identify possible sources of information. The table was based on my original research questions (in 2011), and information needs and sources of information were adjusted as the research focus was refined.

Research question	Information needed	How	Who/what
<p>1. How is research connected to service delivery and advocacy within NGOs?</p> <p><i>This information is needed for each NGO, and for both the NGO's research system as a whole and the case study research projects</i></p>	<p>1.1 Conceptual understanding of the aims and place of research: to what extent and in what ways is research seen as supporting and part of service delivery or advocacy</p> <p>Consider: Explicitly stated aims and more informal or implicit perspectives Variations in understanding of research aims between different actors within the NGOs Definitions of research</p> <p>1.2 Processes for research planning, data collection, analysis and dissemination: a) Actors: Who makes the decisions, who is involved in research activities, at what stage in the process, in what roles, to what extent, and through what channels b) Information: what information /data is used in decisions about research and as research data c) Activities: use of service delivery/advocacy activities in the research (e.g. as research sites, channels for dissemination)</p> <p>Consider: Focus is on involvement of the service delivery and advocacy functions Identify intended and formally</p>	<p>Document review</p> <p>In-depth individual or group interviews</p> <p>Focus group discussions</p> <p>Participant observation, if feasible (i.e. if research-related activities take place during the fieldwork period and access is possible)</p>	<p>NGO policies and reports</p> <p>Meeting notes if available</p> <p>NGO staff leading on research, service delivery and advocacy</p> <p>NGO management</p> <p>Others identified by research staff as involved in the process (within the NGO and external research partners)</p> <p>Meetings to plan, discuss or disseminate research (or other meetings where research is discussed e.g. programme planning)</p>

	stated processes and actual practices		
<p>2. How do service delivery and advocacy affect the organisational environment and capacities for research?</p> <p><i>This information is needed for each NGO</i></p>	<p>2.1 Effects of service delivery and advocacy on aspects of organisational research capacity, including:</p> <p>a) Resources: Time Skills Funds (availability and budgeting processes)</p> <p>b) Planning and reporting processes</p> <p>c) Contacts (e.g. with potential research users and information sources)</p> <p>d) Reputation (with potential research users)</p> <p>e) Values (e.g. what is considered to be effective/successful research).</p>	<p>In-depth individual or group interviews</p> <p>Focus group discussions</p>	<p>NGO staff leading on research, service delivery and advocacy</p> <p>NGO management (including human resources and finance)</p> <p>Targets of the NGOs' research (for reputation)</p>
<p>3. How do these relationships to service delivery and advocacy affect research processes and outputs?</p> <p><i>This information is needed for each NGO, and for both the NGO's research system as a whole and the case study research projects.</i></p>	<p>3.1 Perceived effects of the relationships identified in Q1&2 (i.e. connections between research, service delivery and advocacy, and effects of service delivery and advocacy on research capacity):</p> <p>a) Effects on the research process (the nature of research planning, conduct and dissemination, including duration and financial and other costs)</p> <p>b) Effects on research outputs (including perceived relevance, rigour and legitimacy)</p> <p>c) Definitions and understandings of relevance, rigour, legitimacy and other research characteristics</p>	<p>In-depth individual or group interviews</p> <p>Focus group discussions</p>	<p>NGO staff leading on research, service delivery and advocacy</p> <p>NGO management</p>
	<p>3.2 Perceptions among external research audiences of:</p> <p>a) the NGOs' research (including rigour,</p>	<p>Document review</p>	<p>Articles and commentaries on the NGOs' research (if these exist)</p>

	<p>relevance and legitimacy)</p> <p>b) how this is affected by service delivery and advocacy</p> <p>c) definitions and understandings of relevance, rigour, legitimacy and other research characteristics</p>	In-depth interviews	Research targets (as identified by the NGOs).
<p>4. What factors influence these relationships and effects?</p> <p><i>This information is needed for each NGO, and for both the NGO's research system as a whole and the case study research projects.</i></p>	<p>4.1 Context - internal organisation:</p> <p>a) Aims and values</p> <p>b) Planning and decision-making processes</p> <p>c) Funding sources and budgeting</p> <p>d) Structures (physical, teams and roles)</p> <p>e) Reporting systems</p> <p>Consider: Actual practice and implicit understandings as well as formally stated aims, structures or procedures.</p> <p>4.2 Context - service delivery and advocacy approaches:</p> <p>a) Aims of these activities</p> <p>b) Actors involved</p> <p>c) Activities (e.g. collaboration, campaigning)</p> <p>d) Place of research in these processes</p> <p>4.3 Context – external relationships:</p> <p>a) Relationships with government, donors, other NGOs, research organisations e.g. collaboration/competition, formal/informal partnerships, accountability channels, funding</p> <p>b) Effects of these relationships on the research process</p> <p>4.4 Context - national and international environment:</p> <p>a) Dominant aspects of the national and international</p>	<p>Document review</p> <p>In-depth individual or group interviews</p> <p>Focus group discussions</p>	<p>NGO plans, policies and reports</p> <p>Literature on the national and international context</p> <p>NGO staff leading on research, service delivery and advocacy</p> <p>NGO management</p> <p>Research staff in other NGOs involved in service delivery, advocacy and research, to see whether they have similar experiences.</p> <p>Key informants in the research, NGO and policy sectors, for information on the national research and NGO context</p>

	<p>environment that affect NGO research (e.g. donor interest in research, strength of other research organisations)</p> <p>4.5 NGO action: a) Strategies used to shape relationships between research, service delivery and advocacy b) Effectiveness of these strategies</p>		
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Annex 2 Example interview guide

Interview guides were tailored to individual participants, depending on their position in the organisation and involvement in research, on what information I had already and on themes of interest from previous discussions. Questions were also adapted during interviews to focus on issues raised by research participants. Consequently, the guide below provides an indication of some of the kinds of questions that were asked rather than an exact schedule. This guide comes from an early stage in fieldwork, and some areas relate to my original wider focus on relationships between research, service delivery and advocacy beyond the role of service delivery in research questions and data and advocacy in research communication.

Introductions

- Thanks
- Explain the study purpose and research plans
- Note particular areas of focus for the interview depending on participant's position
- Discuss ethics - confidentiality, consent and withdrawal, permission to record
- Any questions from participant

Participant's role in the NGO

- Areas of work
- Any changes in role
- Background and comparison to previous work places

Overview of the NGO's approach to research

- History and why started research
- Purpose of research
- Changes in approach to research and reasons for these

Participant's role in research

- Different studies
- Stages of involvement

Current research plans

- Source of ideas for these, purpose, approach

Specific processes for one research project

- Rationale and aims for this research
- source of idea and reasons for selections
- process for research planning, data collection, authorisation, analysis, dissemination
- people involved at different stages, reasons for their involvement
- dissemination – plans/process for this, internal and external
- strengths/challenges of this research project
- probe on relation to service delivery/advocacy e.g. data collection in service

- delivery programme areas, involvement of service delivery staff, use in advocacy
- differences to other research by this NGO

Research capacity

- Strengths/weaknesses compared to other organisations doing research
- Variation in capacity between district offices, reasons for this
- Examples of research that could not be taken forward, reasons for this
- Any experiences of training or capacity building for research
- Any other challenges for research
- Any partners or organisations that have supported research
- Support from donors and experience of funding for research

Advocacy

- Involvement in advocacy, type of advocacy, aims, who is involved, links to research

Reflections on research

- Views on most effective research projects, reasons for this
- Examples of research projects that have been disappointing, reasons for this

Closing

- Thanks
- Anything to add
- Any questions

Annex 3 Coding list

The list of categories below was used for coding in NVivo, primarily to organise the data for further analysis.

Audience

- External audience
- Internal staff

Conceptual understanding of research

- Definitions of research
- Having faith in the research
- Ideal models of research
- Interest in research
- Objectivity
- Research seen as useful
- Sharing failures
- Sharing grassroots experiences
- Standards for good research

Credibility

Rigour

- Types of evidence
- Views on SD-A-R integration

External views on the research

- External views Marl
- External views Clay
- External views Chalk
- External views Flint
- NGOs don't do research

Funding and donors

- Donor interest in research
- Reducing costs
- Project structure determining research

M&E

- Baselines
- Documentation
- Impact
- Value for money

National context

- Competition between NGOs
- Political situation
- Funding situation

Organisational context

- Approach to advocacy
- Advocacy training
- Identifying advocacy issues
- Approach to service delivery
- History of research
- Information flows
- Learning processes
- Networks
- Organisational size
- Personal experience
- Structure

Practical setting for research

- Understanding of context
- Data and information
- Research skills
- Research timeframes
- Seeing implementation of research
- Skills & contacts for dissemination
- Time for research
- Own work areas

Purpose of research

- Profile
- Research for advocacy
- Research to inform programming
- Research used in strategic decision-making

Research stages and processes

- Identifying research topics
- Planning
- Methods
- Data collection
- Analysis
- Writing
- Dissemination
- Ethics
- Understanding of results
- Using in service delivery
- Not completed
- Using other research
- Capacity building
- Learning and adapting research processes

Research studies

(list of individual research projects in each NGO)

Research types

- Information for advocacy
- Direct input to service delivery
- Field testing
- Operational research
- Policy research

Who is involved in research

- Academics
- Other research institutes
- Communities
- Research staff
- Government
- Consultants
- Learning about findings through involvement
- Research by staff or consultants - pros and cons