

Rational trust in rural Malawi

Sverre Bjørnstad

Abstract

Most research on trust highlights its importance as a lubricating mechanism of great importance to cooperation. Unfortunately, most of this research seems to be limited to western organizations. This paper takes another direction as it concerns why people fail to trust each other within a borehole and irrigation project in rural Malawi. The focus is mainly why the motivations to trust seems to be absent for certain contexts. I have taken the standpoint that these motivations are rational; people will only place trust when they perceive the chance to gain higher than the losses. That is contrary to the view of trust as generally found in any society. Not to say that a general trust is unimportant or absent, but the final decision is always taken on rational grounds related to the specific situation and agents concerned. Durkheim and *The division of labour in society* serve to explain part of this phenomenon, whereby a more general organic and mechanic solidarity could serve as tools for expectations of trustworthiness - but it is the assessment of gains and losses which finally decides whether one choose to place trust or not. The question is then why the participants in the borehole and irrigation project found the losses to exceed the gains, not only in material terms, but also for personal reasons.

The paper is based on data collected in conjunction with the Malawian Land Tenure and Social Capital project (University of Malawi/ Norwegian Institute of Urban and Regional Research) A sample of participants in the borehole and irrigation project were interviewed while others took part in public goods games - facing dilemmas similar to those found in the cooperation projects. Central here is not the results in particular, but rather the motivations to invest and how that differed according to the various groups playing.

Key words

Norms, trustworthiness, mechanic solidarity, rationality

Contact information:
Sverre Bjoernstad
Brattbakken1, 3340 Aamot
e-mail: sverrebj@stud.ntnu.no
tel: (0047)97721088

1. INTRODUCTION

The importance of trust has in my view been largely neglected in current development studies. Which is quite remarkable, at least if we follow Tinggaard and Svendsen (2006) who perceive trust to be what constitutes social capital and render cooperation possible. This is also why, they claim, that Scandinavian countries are so wealthy. Those who live in these countries dare to cooperate as they find people around them trustworthy, and they dare to cooperate even though no one monitors their counterpart whom they often have made themselves dependent on. Resources that otherwise would have been used on quarrels, misunderstandings and costly monitoring are invested in cooperation. But if the way we look upon others' trustworthiness is important to cooperation and wealth, as Tinggaard and Svendsen (2006) asserts, then why are there so few studies on the topic related to development projects? This paper concerns a borehole and irrigation project in Malawi where the cooperation was severely hampered because participants looked upon their partners as untrustworthy. A reflection of all the issues related to the topic would be impossible due to the limit of length. Hence, what is presented here is based on my master thesis *Rationality and trustworthiness. An empirical study of a borehole and irrigation project in rural Malawi* (Bjørnstad 2008) which goes further than this paper asserts.

The main focus of what I will describe in the following paper is why norms seemed to be so general and weak that they failed to provide the security that makes people trustworthy – it became hard to know what others were going to do. This is a theme being especially relevant since norms are commonly, but still somewhat mistakenly, used to explain why we find people trustworthy (Hardin 2002). I will argue for a view that runs contrary to this and assert that only the rational and individual assessments influence the way we assess others' trustworthiness. It points to the weakness of general norms when these are met with incentives that makes it irrational to follow them, and highlights the diversity that undermines general assumptions. I will argue that trustworthiness instead should be looked upon from an end where *previous interactions* decide our apprehensions as to who is honest. The irrigation and borehole project are two excellent examples of that. That comes mainly because both of the projects are placed within an institutional setting of traditional food production and where extensive cooperation is rare. Compelling to see in these projects is the situation where villagers are forced to place their trust in people they are not used to cooperate with. We could probably formulate this in Durkheim's (1933) ideal types and thereby claim that they belong to a mechanic society forced to adopt the features of an organic society. Norms would, according to Seligman (1997) remedy the transition, but it nevertheless failed to promote trustworthiness between groups in this setting. My research question is then:
What could be the possible reasons as to why norms failed to promote trustworthiness within the borehole and irrigation project?

The data collection for the master thesis, which this paper builds upon, is performed with support from the Malawian Land Tenure and Social Capital project. It consists of a two months stay within a Malawian family located almost within the villages taking part in the borehole and irrigation project. During our stay we performed 40 in- depth

interviews supplemented with twelve public goods games whereby a number of 60 players participated. Nineteen out of these were further selected for a brief interview shortly after the games had taken place to reveal their motivations for investments. Every interview and game was done with the help of two interpreters translating Chichewa to English. I refer to my master thesis for a further description of the games and sampling method.

2. TRUSTWORTHINESS OR TRUST?

Trust in this setting should be seen as an action that involves the placement of valued outcomes in risk of others' malfeasance, mistakes or failures (Coleman 1990, Tilly 2005, Dasgupta 1988). A definition that according to Hardin (1993) is being used too widely, as what most literature describes as trust rather should be seen as trustworthiness. Svendsen and Tinggaard (2006) hold for instance that Scandinavian countries have been able to lubricate the society by a high level of *trust* which reduces uncertainty in cooperative interactions. What they actually write about according to the terminology derived from Hardin (1993) is not trust itself, but how *trustworthy* we find those we interact with to be. Hardin moves in other words the focus on *action* represented by trust, to a personal *character* represented by trustworthiness. This is a point explained by Herreros (2004) who maintains that trust itself does not reduce uncertainty like Luhmann (1979) argues for. One could moreover easily imagine that some people take a risk on a deal with a person even though that person's trustworthiness is low valued. A situation that especially appears where the potential gains still will be higher than the potential losses, although the person we trust cannot be relied on. This placement of trust, however, does not indicate a reduced uncertainty or complexity in the transaction - we cannot reduce the uncertainty simply by deciding to trust someone. Trustworthiness could on the other hand induce the placement of trust, as it increases the probability that our trust will not be exploited. That intermediary where trustworthiness indirectly causes a situation of trust is what Hardin (2002: 32) argues to be the main reason for the often mistakenly use of the trust concept. But doing the opposite around, trusting someone who is not trustworthy could easily lead to a dismantling result, and cannot therefore be found to reduce complexity. This paper is therefore an account of the rational motivations as to why we assess someone as trustworthy or not, and not the pure action these motivations trigger. And that is also the reason as to why I do not look at the results from the games in numbers, but rather the interviews in connection to them that reveal their motivations behind.

3. WHY GENERAL NORMS FAIL TO ASSERT TRUSTWORTHINESS

"Humans have an ubiquitous drive to make their environment more predictable" (North 2005: 14). North puts this sentence within an institutional setting that needs to change over time if we are to impose more certainty in our environment. I find the change from Durkheim's (1933) ideal types of mechanic society, that moves towards a society with organic features, to be such a change that imposes certainty when the environment changes. Mechanic features would in this setting especially be those we generally find within African village societies, while organic features in general point to the modern societies characterized by a high division of labour. The two projects in study were in a transition between, especially evident from their unacquaintance with

cooperation across villages. Hence, they had not yet developed the norms and rules North describes to create predictability. Seligman (1997) follows up on that point when he stresses the difference between confidence and trust (which rather should be interpreted as trustworthiness). To trust someone always got an aspect of risk, while having the confidence in something indicates that an action is more or less determined. "For central to the definition of trust (as opposed to confidence) is that it involves one in a relation where the acts, character or intentions of the other cannot be confirmed" (Seligman 1997: 20). Seligman finds the confidence within the limits of a social system, while trust operates outside or at the borderline of a system. Hence, we do not have "trust" in a doctor, what we are faced with is rather confidence in the system, which in the next turn makes doctors reliable. Such confidence obviously presupposes that we possess at least some knowledge of how the system works. And by then we are led to the focal point of Seligman's (1997) analyses where he claims that trust attached with uncertainty, as opposed to confidence is more noticeable in a modern, organic society than in mechanic societies. The extensive division of labour leads to a situation where we lose the overview and judgement as to what to expect from the many different sets of roles. That is in contrast to a mechanic society where the roles are fewer and we know what to expect from everyone. However, in the end Seligman claims that several roles in an organic society indeed may be exempt from trust and remain more of confidence instead, since several roles are left with few possibilities for negotiability due to an extensive set of rules bound to each position. But does a rule bound system necessarily imply that the overall certainty increase?

I think Seligman misses a crucial point when he takes for granted that the system works according to the rules and sanctions, and further assumes that people will have the belief in that. In case of pre-modern, mechanic societies, he states that "what is naively seen as trusting nature of premodern societies, is, in fact, nothing but confidence in a well-regulated and heavily sanctioned role expectations" (Seligman 1997:36-37). By then he assumes that the pre-modern societies are well regulated and have a functional sanction system, which is so effective that it leads to confidence rather than a situation of trust where more uncertainty is involved. That confidence to be found in mechanic societies, is according to Seligman (1997) grounded in a set of norms based on a common religious belief wiping away the uncertain position of trust. And it is the close kinship relations that make such a confidence more likely to occur, as the monitoring and control are tight in this setting. Thus, norms regulating a mechanic society will in the words of Seligman be so unified that it leaves the members in such a society without any doubt of another person's role.

That could possibly be the case within small knit communities provided there is a well- working sanction system in place. The close relations to be found here could easily render possible an extensive monitoring that turns defective behaviour into a costly affair, and thus motivate people to act in a way where trustworthiness pays off. But these are the norms maintained within a smaller group of people. The differences appear in those cases where people, across and beyond the group they belong to, interact with strangers. Hardin emphasize that the norms regulating these relations bear marks of being weak and general, as "no other than the victims of violations will have incentive to sanction violations of them" (Hardin 2002: 50). They are so universal that they do not really affect any group in particular. The greater society

does not care whether I refuse to pay back the 10 bucks I borrowed from my friend, unknown people got no incentives to punish since it does not affect them anyway. No one is even monitoring, it remains a case between the two of us with no external sanctions involved. Different from that is the case where my group of friends is aware of my cheating and unreliability. A smaller group like that could for instance sanction my actions by refusing to lend me money in the future. Hence, we see that a universal norm like promise keeping seems to be weak for those cases where smaller societies or groups are unable to monitor the actions. I find this argument to be in danger of becoming too theoretical, as it seems to miss the point of rationality from each individual's point of view. A universal norm is not necessarily effective in theory, but if the individuals involved perceive it as effective, then it also becomes effective, independent of any affiliation to groups. As the much referred Thomas theorem ascribes: "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences (Thomas and Thomas 1928: 571). Just think about the many religious and universal norms to be found within a society. A true believer of Christianity might for instance believe that God is closely watching every action, and out of that pay any debt just out of his beliefs, independent of whether a group monitors his behaviour or not. Hardin (2002) even finds these norms to be succeeded by trustworthy behaviour in a rational way only to the extent that they are in accordance with our own interests of being trustworthy. Imagine for instance when a member of a small collaboration project is supposed to help out two participants, but finds himself unable to assist both. The most rational thing to do, when the only enforcement is the communal norms is obviously to remain loyal with the one who either favour your own future interests the most, or the one who has the power to damage your interests. Ostrom (2005) asserts a similar argument when she holds that rational egoists will stick to a norm according to how strongly they value conformance with it. That makes some actors trustworthy where that specific norm is applied and others untrustworthy in situations where the same norm is not valued. We will soon see that what Ostrom and Hardin describe also tend to undermine the role of general norms in the first place. First I would like to turn the focus on the learned experiences and the information these experiences gives to be our most valued tool in our assessment of trustworthiness.

With his focus on learned experiences Hardin (2002) asserts that general norms hardly promote trustworthiness in the first place. We could indeed place trust according to an optimistic expectations of others' trustworthiness according to a typecast, but these are nothing more than optimism that we are likely to only place the smaller risks in. Let us hypothetically say that these norms really make a difference and goes beyond optimism to the extent that we are willing to place valuable outcomes in the hands of others (Tilly 2005). The generality of these norms would then imply that everyone automatically find the same person trustworthy regardless of situation, a rather unnatural setting. Hardin stresses instead that trustworthiness emerges out of *learned experiences* leading us to trust particular people or groups in those specific situations where we have interacted with them before. North (2005) describes the role of rules when he emphasizes that rules may well create certainty over uncertainty in groups where people are aware of them. But that does not apply to all those placed outside of the regime who are unaware of the rules. I would like to argue that the same logic prevails for the norms. It decreases the trustworthiness among groups and necessitates learned experiences where each one see the preferences of those they are about to trust.

Thus, what are termed general norms, take at best the form of a widespread trust to a large number of people or groups of people in relevance to those situations where we have interacted with them before. But to claim a general norm fostering trustworthiness in everyone would be an exaggeration. Granovetter (1985) elaborates this argument when he holds that most of us will have a preference for transacting with people of whom the reputation is known, which might imply that they trust their own experiences more than a generalized morality or any institutional arrangement. Information gathered on our own is often seen as more trustworthy than the information we fetch from others. The more intimate relations from such personal and learned experiences are in most cases perceived to be both richer and more accurate. A generalized knowledge will then only be approved when there is no better information available. That is different from a situation of distrust which often comes more easily to us than trust, as foregone benefits from a placement of trust only gives small losses compared to misplaced trust that typically entails higher losses. What we see here is that the placement of trust requires us to be more careful, we are in need of previous interactions as the losses at stake could be high. Trustworthiness needs to be built and is fragile. Distrust on the other hand is not attached with fear of losses in the same way as we are likely to experience it when we are about to trust someone. And that makes it easier to display mistrust than trust. One fatal failure could easily damage a reputation built on years of honesty (Hardin 2002). Searle (2001) and his discussion of rationality becomes relevant in this setting as he argues that free individuals do not keep a promise purely out of moral principles. The moral principles are external to the agent, but the pure decision to undertake an obligation, to keep a promise, is taken by the individual alone. Because promise to be trustworthy is necessarily worthless if there are no internal obligations to keep that promise. And that may explain why Seligman (1997) misses the target when he asserts that confidence substitutes trust when rules regulate cooperation.

4. WHY NORMS FAILED IN THE TWO PROJECTS

The study took place at the countryside of Malawi, in the District of Kasungu – a district which has become wealthier than most other regions in Malawi due to their profitable tobacco crops. However, this is a wealth reserved the few. The majority of the villagers cannot cultivate tobacco, as they barely have enough land for their maize crops. We entered the villages by the start of the dry season when the harvest was over. People are more relaxed at this time of the year, and seemed to appreciate our interviews. Only three out of those whom we asked were unable or unwilling to participate. All respondents were ensured anonymity and it is only the pseudonyms that are referred to in the text.

4.1 Borehole

The borehole was drilled by MASAF (Malawian Social Action Fund) in 2001. According to the treasurer, there were approximately 80 households paying the monthly fee at the time we interviewed. The borehole was originally given to the traders, a group of villagers with their main income from tobacco and small businesses. The relation between “Kinshu” villagers and traders - the two groups sharing the borehole, had recently become a relation marked by land disputes. This is a poor relation which has served to hamper cooperation and interaction between the two groups. In 2006, the traders were forced to hand over the control of the

borehole to village head (VH) Kinshu, who is currently in charge with his sister representing him as the treasurer. The treasurer is, unlike the previous committee consisting of traders, not elected. Moreover, she governs the borehole without influence from any other than her brother who is VH Kinshu.

An organic division of labor, which Seligman (1997) finds to be necessary in the movement from confidence to risk, was hardly present for the borehole project where all villagers earned their livelihood as farmers. The traders could certainly be found within a broader set of businesses than the villagers could, but the diversity was not sensational. A vast majority sold tobacco others sold fruit, vegetables, fish and maize. Only a few were selling consumer goods while some provided services like bicycle taxi and maize milling. The characteristic features of a division of labor, and its lack of role expectations, was at best vague. People within this community seemed to know each other well – they all sold their groceries at the same place and were neighbors in their leisure time. We would then, according to Seligman (1997), expect to find several norms that are held common, backed up with a well functioning sanction system that trustworthiness may build upon. But if those shared norms existed, they did not appear very clear: “The problem is that there are so many different groups of people around here, a mixed population. It comes as some have moved from the north, others coming from the southern region..... The problem is that these people all got their own culture and way of doing things. What is the right way of running the borehole might not necessarily be seen as right out of the angle of someone belonging to a different tribe. But regardless of mixture, it got no major impact on the borehole as such, only that trust becomes a facing problem” (former chairman of the committee, interpreted). There was in other words no common norms agreed upon that could secure the trustworthiness of the treasurer, everything she did would be wrong from someone’s point of view because people are equipped with different perceptions. And that is even though the list of people using the borehole, possessed by the treasurer, revealed that there were no more than 80 households paying the monthly borehole fee. These 80 households were under extensive monitoring from the treasurer, which thereby should be able to create the basis for common norms and trustworthiness (Hardin 2002).

The situation we find in the borehole could well be related to a public goods situation, since everyone shares the benefit of clean water whether they pay or not. But if no one pays, then there is no clean water in case of a breakdown either. To argue for a general norm that improves the perceived trustworthiness within the borehole project becomes even more difficult in comparison to the public goods games (Appendix 1). The immediate results certainly tell that most people were willing to invest the full amount they were given into the common chest. The tricky part, however comes when those with high levels of contributions to the common chest were asked whether they invested because they found the other players trustworthy. The average repayment, indicating the level of cooperation was relatively equal between the groups (traders – Kinshu villagers 185 kwacha, traders – traders 182 kwacha and between Kinshu villagers 186 kwacha), but the answers of whether they invested that because they found their fellow players trustworthy, differed substantially between the groups. Out of five asked after the game between traders and villagers only one said he believed everyone would give their 100 kwacha from the start. Two out of six players asked after the games among the traders had a similar opinion, while the belief that not everyone would contribute everything among the villagers ended on zero out of five players asked. Several of those who did not believe the other players

were going to invest their full amount said it would be hard for them to trust the others as every person got his own mind that would be hard for them to read. This strongly indicates that there was no general norm that trustworthiness could build upon, and especially not between traders and villagers – the two groups involved in the borehole.

Take the example of cleaning around the borehole site; everyone who arrives there at specific times is supposed to start cleaning. But there are no rules or punishments attached to absenteeism - it is just a practice everyone is aware of. It all works fine at those days the treasurer monitors, but only a few are willing to sweep when she is not there. I will relate this practice to trust in a way where ones' effort in sweeping is a placement of trust, in the sense that the work invested is merely useless if the others do not follow up. One respondent expressed this directly when she said: "If everyone trusted each other, then more people would have come" (regular user, interpreted). It turns out to be a situation where the free rider problem is exemplified, since the benefits of sweeping fall on those who do not participate in the work as well. We might then imply that those who actually sweep also will be those with incentives to punish. They are the victims of violation that Hardin (2002) describes since a heavier workload and the feeling of injustice necessarily relates to this group. The problem arises as they are equipped with few opportunities to punish in the first place, except from a possible effect on the defectors' reputation. But what does it help when most users look at the norm of cleaning with ignorance anyway? This is exactly the issue Coleman (1990) stresses in relation to a reputational effect within a public goods situation. Defection among other borehole users, who neither clean is likely to have a minor impact on the individual reputation. It becomes a "backward public goods game" where incentives for investments are substituted with defection - if everyone else refuses to clean then your best option is to stay home, or be a free rider as your reputation within that society still remains unaffected. But if everyone else sweeps, then your reputation would be severely affected if you stay at home. The lack of sanctions as it plays out in the borehole project will in the next step serve to reinforce the weakness in the norm instead of improving it (Douglas 1986).

Hardin (2002) quickly brushes aside the importance of general norms on trustworthiness when he instead argues for our reliance on learned experiences through direct interactions. A general norm fostering trustworthiness might indeed have been present, but the villagers and traders quickly learned that these norms were insufficient. It already started with the trading committee that in the view of borehole users embezzled the collected money. The probability of money misuse was introduced - If it happened to that committee, then what should hinder the current treasurer to do the same? Another example is taken from a breakdown under the trading committee where everyone was encouraged to pay more "When those originally willing to pay the extra fee realized that not everyone was going to follow them, they changed their minds and refused to pay anything as well" (former committee member, interpreted). It shows us that those who voluntarily followed a norm of extra contributions in the beginning, changed when they no longer could trust others to do the same. Learned experiences went prior to norms. A similar pattern was found in the public goods game – those who invested the full amount in the start changed their tactic when they found that some had been investing less than they expected them to. Norms like not cheating on your friends and taking advantage of others investments, presented in several interviews, were suddenly wiped away. But

these norms must have been weak already from the start. Some players saw for instance the first round as a trial round where they could test the trustworthiness of the others, even though they already had agreed on the contributions prior to the game. Such a trial round would naturally be unnecessary if there had been a strong, general norm that those players could rely on before the game even started. The borehole was in need of that trial round too. To see the first committee that embezzled money as a trial round to the borehole project leaves us with members in need of several positive experiences with the treasurer, before her trustworthiness possibly could increase from the low level she started with. Most borehole users, however, did not have that positive experience - in fact they did not have any experience with the treasurer concerning borehole issues at all. The treasurer was seen as untrustworthy in their eyes because of the negative gossip and assumptions that quickly spread throughout the society when she refused to display the records. But no one had ever discovered anything wrong. A general distrust took the place of general trust, as the latter required a learned experience while gossip was sufficient to promote the former (Hardin 2002).

4.2 Irrigation

The irrigation project is an example of how general norms to some extent may be maintained within the villages but are of less value to those actions where cooperation between villages is required. One participant mentions the use of treadle pumps whereby he always could rely on help from his fellow villagers while he would have to pay others to do the same, a situation that would be similar if he fell sick. This happens despite the aim of a united cooperation across village borders set by both CADECOM and the committee. Rules were imposed and sanctions carried out to achieve that goal, still barely without effect. Meanwhile smaller groups of villagers featured with their kinship ties, worked together in a way where the division of labor remained low, deviant behavior sanctioned, and a high level of trust maintained - characteristics that all feature mechanic societies. We would then, if we follow Seligman (1997), end up in a harmonic state where norms are so strong that confidence eventually substitutes trust (or rather trustworthiness). Unfortunately a village head in the project provides us with a more pessimistic picture than Seligman indicates. He holds that the norms of cooperation within his village indeed are stronger than between the villages, but their problems related to trust are by no means fully obliterated. An outstanding example is the villager who refused to participate in the joint work and rather paid his punishment to escape it. If there was a common norm of collaboration involved, he did not feel obliged to follow it. The village reacted by suspending him from the group, a sanction which certainly helped to strengthen the position of a common norm within the village - one rebel was out while others realized their possible losses in defective behaviour (Douglas 1986). The question is why the larger project failed to strengthen those common sets of norms that secured the trustworthiness to one another within this village?

The division of labour and lack of norm and role expectations may explain some of it, like the case was for the engine mechanic sent from the government who faced a wall of accusations and gossip. And that is even though no one within the project had the slightest insight to know whether he did a proper job or not. But still there are a number of cases to be explained, especially in the intermediary between villages and their joint cooperative efforts. Hardin's (2002) argument where general norms fail to assert trustworthiness since there are only the victims of violation who got incentives to punish, might well explain the widespread problem of theft that several participants

describe. One respondent holds for instance that three children were sent by their parents to steal maize. The crime was detected, but the thieves only had to give back what was stolen. These are sanctions that hardly improve any general norm related to stealing, as it “only encourages people to steal more” (regular member, interpreted). In another case the same thief was caught twice in a row without being punished even for the second time. The committee eventually made an effort to stop the problem by bringing in guards at night when the maize matured. It did not go long however, before these guards were accused of stealing maize as well – they could not be trustworthy as no one monitored them. These are all clear examples of how weak the participants found general norms of honesty to be when they stand alone without any monitoring or sufficient sanctions attached. On the other hand is the claim that these general norms are maintained and enforced even, without the presence of those sanctions. Take the belief in witchcraft - nearly everyone in Malawi believes in witchcraft and this project is no exception. The secretary mentions an incident where a child stole maize from one of the gardens and fell sick right after. The parents accused the owners of that garden for having bewitched their child, and complained to the committee who forwarded it to the village head. He resolved the case peacefully, but the incident still shows the belief people have in witchcraft, a belief that according to the secretary also may serve the function of preventing theft. We see that even though these sanctions did not have a root in reality out of our perspective, they still became real and had real consequences as people defined them to be real (Thomas and Thomas 1928). Why witchcraft still did not prevent all theft is both an important and interesting question to be asked. However, it is a sidetrack to the current topic and would also require more extensive research due to the scarcity of knowledge in the field.

General norms could further be seen from an angle where they failed to promote certainty and trustworthiness in the project when opposed by other norms (Hardin 2002). The best illustration of this phenomenon is perhaps those norms set by modern NGO's that clashed with the traditional norms of mechanic societies. The village head of Chistzo seemed for instance to have severe problems to accept that a committee should be given power, and that even within his own village borders where the irrigation project took place. The villagers themselves, on the other hand, were placed between the traditional power of their village head and a committee - a leadership style most people were unacquainted to. I will start by the villagers where the job of those who were set to look after the engine turn out to be a good example. My informant holds that the time for irrigation was divided according to villages; three villages were given time to irrigate in the morning and three in the afternoon. Two men, both from those villages set to irrigate in the morning, were given the responsibility to shut down and start the engine. It should be noted that this is a voluntary work which could take the entire day as they had to be there for those irrigating in the afternoon as well. It turned out to be a rather tiresome job, with the result that they only helped their own villages with the engine in the morning. By doing that they broke the general norm of promise keeping, since they already had obliged themselves to help every village involved, and not just their own. This is not an outstanding example - several incidents provide us with a view where their main concern was the norm of giving help to their own village first and thereafter others, a setting which hardly improves any general norms *between* villages. It leads us on a path where the trustworthiness of those who do not belong to your own village is low every time the village norms being contradict to those norms set to regulate

cooperation across villages. We might see this in light of Coleman's (1990) argument. Those who are not part of a specific village will neither trust this village, because they are aware of others' higher gains from being loyal to their own village instead loyalty to the project. The former has a strong norm developed over centuries with sanctions attached, while the latter hardly has reached a norm at all. VH Chistzo did not have an easy job either. The traditional norms where he possesses the ultimate power within his own village area often ended in a conflict when opposed to the interests of the project. A former chairman of the committee shows us the extreme in this situation: "Village head 'Chistzo' argued that the engine was given to Chitszo and all the others just benefitted of that. Hence, everyone got to follow what he was saying as well" (interpreted). For other participants to think that a general norm in the project would bring trustworthiness to the group, would thus require a relapse in the traditional norms where the village is put in the front seat.

We have seen that Granovetter (1985) in his theory of embeddedness holds that we prefer to transact with people whom we have interacted with in previous settings instead of people we have to assume follow general norms, or act according to their reputation. It is thereby implied that we perceive the probability of gains (trustworthiness) to be higher when we rely on previous interactions. An insight which in the next step also serves to explain what is seen as lack of trustworthiness within the irrigation project. Take for instance how the committee election, heavily overrepresented with villagers from Chistzo was performed. "The majority of the members from Chistzo voted for their own villagers. They did so because they could only assess those from their own village and say that those people are faithful and those are not" (regular member, interpreted). This quotation is a good illustration on how the lack of personal interactions also resulted in a lack of learned experiences that are so crucial to our assessments of trustworthiness. Those villagers not from Chistzo were on the other hand suddenly faced with a committee whom only a minority had personal experiences with. Just the fact that so many out of the committee members originated from the same village made the suspicion and uncertainty absolute already from the start. They needed positive experiences and actions where the committee clearly proved they could be trustworthy. But if that is a requirement for trustworthiness, then these committees were in severe problems. Accusations of money misuse, theft, and water disputes are just some incidents that overshadowed any positive experience, and encouraged a general distrust. Such distrust, which is more easily rendered than trustworthiness (Hardin 2002) becomes clearer when we look at each interview from a bird's eye view. Then we see that some were flatly negative to everything told from the committee, while others found some to be trustworthy, but then only for specific people whom they had positive experiences with.

5. CONCLUSION

What I have been arguing for above is by no means that norms are considered absent or left without importance to the community, if anyone interprets it that way. Instead I argue that these norms are left with minor influence on trustworthiness. This is mainly because the norms set to regulate cooperation between the villages were so general and vague, that they hardly were looked upon as restrictions. Then it is more accurate to say that we trust someone because we have made a deal, or interacted with them in an earlier setting (Hardin 2002). However, the main problem for these villagers relates to their way of living. As subsistence farmers they were mostly

dependent on their family members, and less dependent on people outside their village. These are characteristics which are featured in the ideal type of mechanic societies, as they are described by Durkheim (1933). The norms in these societies do not aim at extensive cooperation, but asserts instead the harmony within the village. For the success of cooperative norms, we are in need of an organic solidarity which is seen as more suitable for cooperation. That is especially so because people have made themselves dependent on one another. This is a dependence which people in the borehole and irrigation project did not dare to take a chance on. Moreover, to take that chance would have required those learned experiences which they as subsistence farmers were in lack of. It leads to a status quo where norms regulating cooperation between villages remain weak because they are not given the chance to develop. The weak norms in place were thus easily brushed aside whenever they conflicted with the more integrated village norms where sanctions had manifested. There is in fact hard to see any end to this problem, unless these villagers are willing to change their way of living. The increased number of farmers, and an area for cultivation which did not increase, led to a constant competition for land between the villages. Hence, distrust blocked interaction and thereby also the opportunity to learn that strangers could be trustworthy.

One should keep in mind that this paper only elaborates on one side of the matter, and omits those situations where people indeed looked upon their cooperation partners as trustworthy, although they were in a minority. Perhaps the two projects were not a success by itself, but they were nevertheless a tiny start providing people with the opportunity to learn. And the minority that found their counterparts trustworthy is at least an improvement from the starting point. It is a minority of role models to all those who cannot see that cooperation and honesty pays off. Take the public goods games where one of the players started out with a belief that no one was going to invest the full amount in the first round. It was proved wrong, and “that encouraged me to invest 100 kwacha in the next round as well” (group2, Kinshu – traders, interpreted). Thus, if we can give more people this kind of positive experiences, then maybe more people will dare to do like this player and invest in cooperation instead of conflict.

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Appendix 1

Description of public goods games

The following description is written by Erling Berge and Stanley Khaila. It is also to be found in Chichewa.

Dear all of you,

We are very pleased to see so many here today.

We have asked you to come here to play a game. By playing the game we propose, you may earn some money. The rules are simple but the results may be variable, some may earn a substantial amount some very little. But no player will go home with nothing.

Since there are so many here we should state very clearly at the outset that there are just 20 people that will be selected to play. You may stay to listen to the explanation for the game. Once we are through with that those who do not think it worthwhile to play will be asked to leave. Then we will select 20 by drawing lots.

These 20 will be divided into 4 groups with 5 players in each. Then each group will get to play. Group 1 today, groups 2 and 3 tomorrow and then group 4 the day after that.

When the game starts players are given 100 kwacha. Then each participant is supposed to decide on investing the money or not. If you do not invest the money you keep the 100 kwacha. If you want to invest it you can invest 20, 40, 60, 80, or 100 kwacha.

Depending on how much each one invests, you may at the end of the game put in your pocket as much as 260 kwacha every time we play or it may be as little as 40. We will play the game 5 times today. Thus in the worst case, the least you will earn is 200 kwacha and in the best of circumstances you may take away 1300 kwacha. But doing that is not easy.

In each play there will always be 5 players and the rules of the play are simple. But they are made so that what you earn depends as much on what your fellow players do as on what you do yourself.

The game is like five persons being offered to do some work together in one day. If the work is completed during the day each will get 200 kwacha. Each one might find work that provides 100 kwacha this day. But sometimes joint work is necessary and if all work hard and complete the work they have started the pay will be 200 kwacha to each this day. However if someone goes away to do extra work for himself, hoping that the others will be able to complete the work, the work will not be completed and the pay to each will be less than 200. Sometimes it will be less than the 100 kwacha one might have earned working alone.

In the game here we are not doing work. We call it investment. The investments you make or do not make go into a common chest and there the money breeds so that the amount coming out is twice as large as the one you put in. This is the same as five working together can earn more than each one working alone. If all five players put in 20 of the 100 kwacha you will be given, there will be 5 times 20 kwacha, or one hundred kwacha. After breeding these become 200 kwacha and this is then divided equally between the players so that each gets back 40 kwacha. You put in 20 kwacha and get 40 back. You still have 80 so that after such a game you will have 120 rather than 100.

Now we come to the part that may cause you some problems. There is no rule about how much each one of you should put into the common chest. Each one has to decide for herself or himself: Should it be nothing, 20, 40, 60, 80, or 100 kwacha? The problem lies in what you believe the other players do. If you put in 100 kwacha and the other 4 put in nothing there will be 100 kwacha in the chest. These breed to become 200 and each one of you get 40 kwacha returned. You who put in 100 kwacha have 40 and those who put in nothing have 140.

On the other hand if you put in nothing and all the other 4 put in 100 each there will be 400 in the chest. These breed to become 800 kwacha and are divided equally among you so that each gets 160. Those who invested 100 will now have 160 while you who invested nothing will have 260.

If some invest say 40 or 60 or 80 kwacha the sum in the chest will be less but it still breeds to become twice as large and is still divided equally among you. The amounts will be in between those we have mentioned. If all invest everything you will all double your capital. If you do not invest while the others invest you will earn more income than the others. If no one invests anything then each one of you has the 100 kwacha you were given. If you invest for example 20 kwacha while nobody else invests there is only 20 kwacha that breeds to become 40 kwacha. Divided equally on the five players each gets 8 kwacha. You who invested 20 kwacha will now have 88 kwacha and those who invested nothing have 108.

Do you understand the rules of the game? We have explained the rules as well as we are able to. If you have questions, if there are some parts of our explanation that you do not understand, please help us by asking a question.

There are today _____ people here. We said at the start that we would select 20 to play the game. We also said that there will be 5 players in a game. Thus we will play a total of 4 games. We want to select these 20 today. We want to do this by drawing lots as in a lottery. We have explained how the game is played and those who think such games inappropriate should feel free to go home. When we get to the stage where we play the game only the players will be allowed to stay.