

# Youth, Agriculture and Land Grabs in Malawi<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

*Malawi has featured in the international media as a potential trigger of the unique version of the African Green Revolution for the rest of the countries to emulate. It has been flagged as such following the success of the fertilizer subsidy programme that has seen Malawi overcome perpetual chronic food shortages to attain unprecedented food surplus. Since the 2005/06 growing season when the subsidy programme was launched, Malawi has been producing surplus food over and above its annual requirements estimated at 2.1 million tones. However, the role of the youth has not featured at all in this success story yet more than half of the population in the country is considered youth. Strikingly, the Malawi's success story has coincided with the government's Green Belt initiative under which it is giving out land to large scale local and foreign investors for irrigated agriculture along Lake Malawi and major rivers in the country as a strategy for consolidating the food security gains under the auspices of the fertilizer subsidy programme. The concern is that under the Green Belt initiative, vast tracks of land are being appropriated from smallholder farmers whose land ownership is estimated at an average of 0.5 hectares per capita. This paper explores how the youth are engaging with the Green Belt initiative particularly in terms of how they are engaging with the processes in terms of their roles and what they perceive as potential alternative livelihood strategies within the context of the agri-food sector. The argument of this paper is that the youth are marginalized in the Green Revolution success story because of the stalled land reform and the absence of a supportive policy infrastructure for their involvement.*

## Introduction

This paper explores youth engagement in the agri-food sector in Malawi against the backdrop of two key related developments. The youth are a critical constituent in Malawi since they form more than half of the total population estimated at 13.1 million according to the 2008 Population and Housing Census (NSO, 2008). It is, for instance, estimated that 54 percent of the total population is younger than 18 years which has potentially significant implications for future trajectories of growth and development.

Malawi has implemented a Farm Input Subsidy Programme (FISP) since the 2005/06 growing season which has been held as a tremendous success (Dorward and Chirwa, 2011). The success has been underlined by the country's ability to produce food surplus over and above the annual requirements after almost about two decades of grappling with pervasive food insecurity and chronic food shortages. Malawi is now able to feed itself without taking recourse either to food aid or commercial food imports. As a result of the unprecedented success, Malawi

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features as a model in the international policy dialogue and debates for the rest of the countries on the African continent to emulate in order to kick-start their fledgling agricultural sectors as engines of growth and sustainable poverty reduction (UNESCO, 2009; AGRA, 2009; Chinsinga, 2010).

There is, however, contentious debate about the sustainability of the success of the FISP in keeping Malawi both food secure and self-sufficient. This debate is mainly led by a group of donors who are skeptical about the efficiency and effectiveness of the FISP in the use of valuable inputs let alone its affordability in the long-term (Dorward and Chirwa, 2011). Questions about the capacity of the government to properly target beneficiaries to limit the potential distortionary effects of subsidies, the impact of consecutive years of favourable climatic patterns on the success of the FISP and the opportunity cost of resources invested in the programme are raised among many others (Holden and Tostensen, 2011). As a response to some of these questions, the government is implementing the Green Belt Initiative (GBI) in order to guarantee the long term sustainability of food security and sufficiency gains realized through the implementation of the FISP.

According to GoM (2009), the GBI is a programme aimed at achieving and sustaining an agricultural revolution in order to provide a sound footing for sustained economic growth and development. Its stated objective is to use the available water resources to increase agricultural production, productivity, incomes and food security at both household and national levels, and to spur economic growth and development through the development of small and large scale irrigation schemes and maximization of rain-fed agriculture practices (Chingaape, et al., 2011). Through the GBI, the government has committed itself to offer local and international investors land amounting to about 1 million hectares for irrigated agriculture.

However, the major concern is that the GBI is being propagated at a time when there is virtual impasse in land reforms meant to correct chronic imbalances in land tenure and ownership patterns that left a vast majority of smallholder farmers almost landless (Chingaape, et al., 2011). The average per capita land ownership is estimated at 0.5 ha. This is considered inadequate to the extent that the land at the disposal of the majority smallholder farmers is described as “simply providing a cushion or safety net that will provide them with a base while their primary incomes need to be generated elsewhere” (Smith, 1998: 8).

The main argument of this paper is that the youth are marginalized in the Malawi's green revolution success story because of stalled land reforms and the absence of a supportive policy infrastructure for their involvement in the agri-food sector. The land reform impasse, which is in the interest of bureaucratic and political elite, disempowers the youth as key actors in the sector. Since the transition to democracy in May 1994, there have not been any significant policy pronouncements on the youth's role and involvement in the agri-food sector. While clearly prioritizing the agricultural sector as the engine of growth and poverty reduction, the overarching development strategies such as the Poverty Alleviation Programme (PAP) (1995), the Malawi Poverty Reduction Strategy (MPRS) (2001) and the Malawi Growth and Development Strategy (MGDS) (2006) have been almost totally silent on the role and involvement of the youth in the sector. The policy vacuum is further exacerbated by the reluctance of the youthful experts in the sector to be deployed in the rural areas to provide technical and extension support services to the farmers.

This paper is based on field work carried out in two districts in southern Malawi, namely: Zomba and Mangochi. The field work was entirely qualitative using Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and Key Informant Interviews among the youth and Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Water Development officials in the sector respectively. The qualitative approach was preferred due to

the nature of the subject matter of empirical investigation. This approach is ideal because it provides the means of acquiring an in depth understanding of human behaviour. This is the case because the approach provides the opportunity to explore issues, understand phenomena and answer questions (Bryman, 2011 and Campbell, 2002). The primary focus is on understanding the meanings that people attach to actions, decisions, beliefs and values within their social world and understanding the mental mapping process they use to make sense and interpret the world around them. This approach yields spoken words, opinions and expressions that are of greater value when analyzing social contexts and institutions.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: Following this introduction, the next section examines the primacy of agriculture in Malawi paying particular attention to the role of the youth. It also examines briefly the FISP and the GBI to further firm up the context for the rest of the discussion. The third section discusses the empirical realities of the youth's engagement in the agri-food sector highlighting constraints and opportunities including their implications for the future of the sector. The fourth and final section provides some concluding remarks and reflections.

### **The Primacy of Agriculture and Youth in Malawi**

Agriculture is the principal source of livelihood in Malawi. It is estimated that up to 84 percent of Malawians eke their livelihood directly out of agriculture which contributes over 90 percent to the country's export earnings and about 39 percent of the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and accounts for 85 percent of total employment (Chirwa, 2004 and Chinsinga, 2008).

The country's agricultural sector has hardly undergone any notable transformation. Instead of diminishing in importance, the agricultural sector is increasingly becoming dominant in the country's overall economic portfolio (Chinsinga, 2002 and Chirwa et al., 2006). The increase in importance of the agricultural sector is attributed to the devastating effects of structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) on the manufacturing sector. The contribution of the manufacturing sector to the country's GDP decreased from 16 to 11 percent between 1994 and 2004 either because of the total collapse or relocation of some industries to neighbouring countries within the region. The manufacturing sector accounts for at least 11 percent of GDP of which agro-processing constitutes 26 percent (Chinsinga, 2008).

The overwhelming dominance of the agricultural sector in the country's overall economic portfolio suggests that access to land is very critical. It is a significant determinant of whether a household will be food secure, less vulnerable to risks and shocks and earn a livelihood above the poverty line. The major concern, however, is that ownership of land and distribution is highly unequal in Malawi. It is, for instance, estimated that one in every three smallholder farmers cultivate between 0.5 and 1 ha of land; 55 percent of smallholders have less than 1 ha of land and that 70 percent cultivate less than a hectare and devote 70 percent of the land to maize, the main staple (Chirwa, 2004 and Chinsinga, 2008). Less than 5 percent of the smallholder farmers cultivate on average 1 ha. It is further estimated that between 1.8 and 2 million smallholder farmers cultivate on average 1 ha whereas 30, 000 estates cultivate 10-500 hectares (Kanyongolo, 2005).

The land problem contributes greatly to one of the challenges facing the agricultural sector in Malawi. Malawi is locked up in what Dorward and Chirwa (2011) refer to as the low maize productivity trap (LMPT) principally because those farmers with small pieces of land continue to cultivate maize even when it is not efficient for them to do so. This is reinforced by the high input prices and inter-year maize price instability. The fear of low maize prices does not make it attractive for potential maize surplus producers to invest in maize production while the fear of

high maize prices forces maize deficit farmers to grow as much maize as they can on their small pieces of land even though they cannot afford the high yielding seeds and fertilizer. In away, FISP is a potential means of breaking down the constraints that have locked up Malawi in the low maize productivity trap since through vouchers it makes high quality farm inputs accessible to the majority of smallholders who would not have ordinarily accessed them.

Land reforms have been attempted to rectify the chronic land imbalances but have not achieved much. According to Kanyongolo (2005), the reforms that have been implemented have essentially maintained the colonial land classification scheme even though attempts were made to alter actual designations. These reforms did not only institute mechanisms for converting customary land into estate land but also reinforced the postcolonial dual agricultural strategy that distinguished estate farming from smallholder farming (Kishindo, 2004 and Chirwa, 2004).

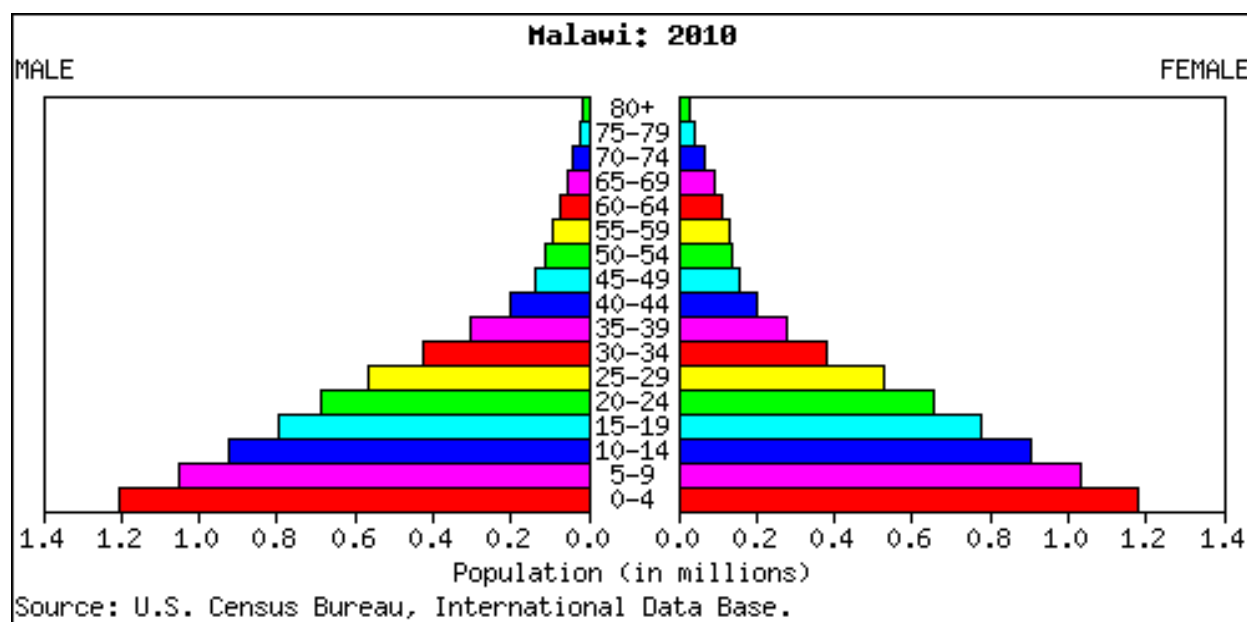
The latest land reforms which have stalled are linked to the democratization project at the turn of the 1990s. The land reform efforts kicked off with a Presidential Commission of Inquiry on Land Reform in 1996 culminating in the development of a draft land policy endorsed by Cabinet in July 2002 (Peters and Kambewa, 2007). A Special Law Commission was empanelled in 2003, tasked to review existing land legislation and develop new legislation for effective land administration by consulting as widely as possible with relevant stakeholders. The enabling legislative framework for the land policy is yet to be promulgated into law although the Special Law Commission wound up its work more than 7 years ago (Chinsinga, 2011). The impasse in the implementation of the land reforms is attributed mainly to the desire of the political and bureaucratic elite to protect and defend their own interests. The majority of them acquired massive tracts of land under auspices of the previous land reforms which they are not prepared to give up even though much of it lies idle.

This is precisely what raises concerns with the GBI. The GBI does not target the idle land owned by the political and bureaucratic elite most of which lies idle but that owned by smallholder farmers (Chingaibe, et al., 2011). Yet, the majority of the smallholder farmers as demonstrated earlier, are grappling with acute shortage of land to enable them earn meaningful livelihoods. The GBI is driven by government's realization that one of the major investment problems encountered by big farmers is lack of large tracts of land viable for commercial farming at the highest possible economies of scale. Thus through the GBI, the government has committed itself to facilitate acquisition of land from smallholder farmers almost to the tune of 1 million hectares. The distinctive feature of the land grabs in Malawi is that they are supply driven. The government is courting potential local and international investors by offering them land to be acquired from smallholder farmers for large scale irrigation schemes.

According to the GBI concept paper, it is inspired by the painful memories of the severe drought beginning early 2001 which triggered three consecutive years of hunger. By 2005, five million people were affected by famine; all while large quantities of water flowed out of the country to the oceans of the world. The underlying goal of the GBI is to protect gains in food security, reduce vulnerability to drought and to boost production further by irrigating a million hectares of land lying within 20km of the country's three lakes and 13 perennial rivers. The GBI is further touted as a mechanism for diversifying crop production to include wheat, rice, millet, cotton, lentils and beans (GoM, 2009). The GBI is, however, not without critics. They argue that the promises of job creation and foreign exchange earnings through foreign investment should not substitute the need for policies that would grow domestic investment. The following sentiments of one of the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Water Development officials in Zomba district are illustrative: "if we allow foreigners to grab land in the belt, we will lose out on the market because they will be producing what they need for their countries instead of us producing what they would need and sell it to them".

As stated earlier, the youth are a critical constituent in Malawi which, according to the 2008 Population and Housing Census, makes up more than half of the total population. Figure 1 below clearly illustrates that Malawi is dominated by a youthful population which has significant implications for its future trajectories of development in various spheres not least in the agri-food sector.

**Figure 1: Malawi Population Pyramid for 2010**



Source: [www.nationmaster.com/country/mi-mal](http://www.nationmaster.com/country/mi-mal) [accessed on 9th March 2012]

The population of Malawi, estimated at 13.1 million, is widely acknowledged as disproportionately youthful because 54 percent of Malawians are under the age of 18. However, the question of who exactly qualifies as youth is not a straightforward one both internationally and locally. The national youth policy defines youth as all young people, female and male, from the age of 14 to 25 years while acknowledging that youth is not a chronological sequence but also a term used to describe roles ascribed to the young (GoM, 2009). The implication is that the term youth is employed flexibly in which case young people less than 14 and over 25 years can be accommodated depending on their socio-economic circumstances.

Some well known programmes targeting the youth do not use the definition stipulated in the national youth policy. Most notable ones are the Malawi Rural Development Fund (MARDEF) and the Youth Enterprise Development Fund (YEDEF). These programmes designate the youth as males and females aged between 18 and 35. In the proposals to revise the national youth policy, youth shall include all those males and females aged between 14 and 30. A further layer of complexity comes about when youth are considered in the agricultural context. According to the Ministry of Agriculture and Water Development officials “[youth] are those that have not yet married or are living with a guardian and are not able to support themselves”. This suggests that in the agricultural sector, age is not necessarily used to distinguish between youths and adults. The youth are essentially those who are not married and cannot sustain themselves economically”.

The competing perspectives about the youth are also manifested at the international level. The definitions of youth vary tremendously. For instance, the United Nations defines youth as all

individuals aged between 15 and 24 while the World Bank expands the definition of youth to include all young people aged between 12 and 24. Overall, however, policy discussions concerning the youth have been based on the premise that the youth are in transition from childhood to adulthood. As such, the youth have specific characteristics that make them a distinct demographic and social category (Bennel, 2007).

Munthali (2010) views the youth as a double edged sword. They, on one hand, present an unprecedented demographic dividend of human resource while on the other hand, the demographic bonus could easily turn into a catastrophe if the youth are not equipped with the right skills for the job market and more importantly self employing skills. In the case of Malawi, this makes the agri-food sector a priority. The formal sector is very small, estimated at 500,000 jobs only and projected to shrink further due to the devastating economic crisis battling the global and national economies since 2007.

## **Youth and Agriculture: Empirical Realities**

### *Youth's Vision of Good Life*

It is quite striking that the youth do not define their vision of good life with reference to their involvement in the agri-food sector. There were different versions of the youth's conception of good life but mostly revolved around "owning a descent iron sheet roofed house, ready availability of food and fashionable clothes for our families, sending children to a good boarding school and at least having a mountain bike and a television screen"<sup>2</sup>. The youth strongly feel that their vision of good life cannot be achieved by spending their time, and investing their energies in the agri-food sector. They argue that life in the sector is not only demanding but it is also to a very large extent a huge gamble especially in view of the challenges that confronts the sector. Male youths at Chitenjere Village, Malosa EPA, Zomba district observed that "[one] can spend all his or her time in agriculture but still be very poor while those who are bold enough to venture out to the outside world prosper within a very short period of time".

There are several factors that the youth singled out as impeding prosperity in the agricultural sector which were corroborated by the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Water Development (MoAI&WD) officials. The challenges include scarcity of land, limited access to improved farm inputs, lack of viable markets and limited extension support. Land is a big challenge for the youth because "it is only the elders and married people that have land of their own to cultivate and not us the youth as we are considered an integral part of our families"<sup>3</sup>. As further elaborated below, the youth are marginalized in access to inputs because they are not targeted at all by the government supported input programmes. They argued that "we are told that we are energetic enough to work to obtain improved inputs on our own; moreover most of us are not married and we would not require inputs since we are fed by our families"<sup>4</sup>. Markets are a problem since most of these areas are inaccessible and it therefore "takes time and effort to get the produce to lucrative markets which in the final analysis might not be worth it"<sup>5</sup>. There is serious lack of loan opportunities to boost agricultural activities. In an FGD, female youth at Malemia Village, Malosa EPA, Zomba district observed that "we are constrained to take agriculture seriously because there are no means or sources of loans for us the youth to invest in the sector which contributes to making agriculture less attractive". In addition, "even if there

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<sup>2</sup> FGD with Male Youth at Ibrahim Village, Katuli EPA, Mangochi District and FGD with Female Youth, Malemia Village, Malosa EPA, Zomba District.

<sup>3</sup> FGD with Male Youth, Katuli Village, Katuli EPA, Mangochi District.

<sup>4</sup> FGD with Female Youth, Ibrahim Village, Katuli EPA, Mangochi District.

<sup>5</sup> FGD with Male Youth at Chitenjere Village, Malosa EPA, Zomba District.

were loan opportunities, most of us would still be reluctant to engage in agriculture for lack adequate extension support; we haven't had an extension officer in our area now for six years"<sup>6</sup>.

Similar observations were made by Butt, et al., (2011). To the list described above, they added lack of continuity in agricultural policies, politicized environment in agricultural support institutions, isolation of agricultural education, research and extension wings, unfavourable prices, buyers and middlemen, absence of infrastructure for farm exports, deficient management and marketing skills, a large number of small operations and unproductive tenancy systems.

The combination of these factors has given agriculture a bad image amongst the youth as a primary source of livelihood. Most of the youth describe working in the agricultural sector as "dirty work and demeaning"<sup>7</sup>. There is a widespread perception that "[agriculture] is not rewarding and its benefits are long term"<sup>8</sup>. Others simply demonise agriculture "simply the basic means of survival"<sup>9</sup>. For the youth of these areas, therefore, there are three alternatives through which they can realize their dreams of good life, namely: 1) migrating to urban areas in search of employment; 2) engaging in business; and 3) migrating to South Africa. These are considered as the surest means of attaining good life while agriculture is condemned as laborious, less rewarding, exploitative and long term to reap rewards. In this regard, male youth of Ibrahim Village, Katuli EPA, Mangochi district observed that "if you find a descent house with a TV screen and a mountain bike, it is not because of farming; the owners acquired them through other means such as working in South Africa and whilst there they sent money to their relatives to help them build houses with burnt bricks roofed with corrugated iron sheets". In short, "the youth do not see agriculture with all its inherent challenges, particularly its low returns and a very long gestation period as a means of attaining their version of good life"<sup>10</sup>.

It is, nevertheless, striking that the importance of agriculture among the youth is widely acknowledged. In all the FGDs, the youth indicated that agriculture was the mainstay for their respective communities. However, they qualified its importance clearly stating that the majority of the people are in agriculture not by choice but because they do not have any other alternative. They observed that "given a choice, we would do other things for a living such as business because agriculture is really demanding and there are many factors working against it"<sup>11</sup>. They stressed that because of the challenges facing the agricultural sector coupled with the processes of land alienation "we end up working for others at very exploitative wages which just locks us up into a vicious circle of poverty"<sup>12</sup>. According to Dorward and Chirwa (2011), this contributes to the enduring low maize productivity trap for Malawi. The message is that people in these areas continue in the agricultural sector simply because they do not have alternatives.

There is, however, an interesting counter narrative associated mainly with the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Water Development officials. They argue that the youth appear to be disinterested in agriculture because of their ignorance about the inherent potential of agriculture to transform their lives. They argue that "the problem is that the youth think of agriculture as the domain of the elderly"<sup>13</sup>; "they think as dynamic as they are they need to get rich fast which they

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<sup>6</sup> FGD with Male Youth, Chitenjere Village, Malosa EPA, Zomba District.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with a Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Water Development Official, Katuli EPA, Mangochi District.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with a Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Water Development official, Malosa EPA, Zomba District.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with a Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Water Development, Malosa EPA, Zomba District.

<sup>11</sup> FGD with Male Youth, Katuli Village, Katuli EPA, Mangochi District.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with a Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Water Development official, Malosa EPA, Zomba District.

feel is not possible working in the agricultural sector but engaging in some lucrative non-farm activities”<sup>14</sup>. The apparent disinterest of the youth in agriculture, they argue, simply reflects “the lack of understanding on the part of the youth of agriculture as a business”<sup>15</sup>. They nonetheless acknowledge that the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Water Development is partly to blame for failing to prop up the image of agriculture due to the weak extension system. There is, however, a strong feeling that the youth will be pushed back into agriculture as the only feasible livelihood strategy due to the worsening of economic conditions. This could potentially be an opportunity “to change the youth’s perception of agriculture as a sector without viable possibilities for them to realize their dreams of a good life”<sup>16</sup>

### *Lack of Supportive Policy Infrastructure*

The policy environment does not encourage youth’s involvement in the agri-food sector. Most officials from the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Water Development observed that no policy framework has been put in place to support the involvement of the youth let alone to cater for their interests in the sector since the transition to democracy in May 1994. There has been a substantial policy vacuum following the dismantling of the Malawi Young Pioneer (MYP) movement which provided a platform for the youth to learn various trades including farming (Englund, 2002). By the time they graduated from the MYP training bases, “the youth were fully equipped to embark on serious farming”<sup>17</sup>. Without putting in place an alternative, “the dismantling of the MYP marked the genesis of pushing the youth to the peripheral of agricultural activities”<sup>18</sup>. The MYP was dismantled on allegations that besides equipping the youth to become self-reliant, it also functioned as a paramilitary agency for the Malawi Congress Party (MCP). In this guise, the MYP was used to quell dissent against the one party regime.

A critical review of the major policy documents since May 1994 is quite revealing. The youth are not treated and targeted as a distinct category desiring attention in the Poverty Alleviation Programme (PAP) (1994); Vision 2020 (1998); Malawi Poverty Reduction Strategy (MPRS) (2001); and the Malawi Growth and Development Strategy (MGDS) (2006). The youth do not even appear in the sections on crosscutting issues dominated by gender, HIV/AIDS, environment and technology. Similar observations were made by Bennel (2007). He argued that the youth as a target group is not a major priority of most governments in low income countries. He argued that Ministries of Youth are generally very poorly resourced and are usually subsumed or combined with other government responsibilities, most commonly culture, sports and education. The Economic Commission of Africa made similar observations in its review of the national poverty alleviation strategies across the continent in 2005. The main observation was that the youth receives very little attention in the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) with chapters on agriculture mentioning youth. In only 2 out of 12 PRSPs, youth were singled out as a special group in mainstreaming employment and even in these exceptional cases, urban youth is of greater concern than rural youth (Bennel, 2007). This is even manifest at the global level. The 2007 World Development Report on the youth devotes only four paragraphs on how to expand rural opportunities for the youth and focuses mainly on rural farm activities.

The bias towards the non-agricultural sectors is apparent in nearly all the initiatives that have targeted the youth since May 1994. These initiatives have focused on promoting

<sup>14</sup> Interview with a Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Water Development, Katuli EPA, Mangochi District.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with a Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Water Development official, Malosa EPA, Zomba District.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with a Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Water Development official, Katuli EPA, Mangochi District.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.



entrepreneurship among the youth without any particular emphasis on agri-business. The major ones have been the Youth Revolving Fund (YRF) to the tune of 70 million in 1996; the Malawi Rural Development Fund (MARDEF) to the tune of MK 4 billion in 2005; and the Youth Enterprise Development Fund (YEDEF) to the tune of MK 2 billion in 2009. According to Chinsinga (2002), the major problem with initiatives of this nature is that they are often heavily politicized and benefit disproportionately the urban youth. They are often targeted at “the supporters of the governing party at a particular point in time with no spillovers to the agri-food sector”<sup>19</sup>.

The absence of a supportive policy infrastructure is further exacerbated by the fact that youthful graduates from agriculture colleges are reluctant to work in rural areas. Therefore, even though a good number of people have qualified as experts in extension, the problem of farmers’ limited access to extension services within easy reach persists (Chinsinga, 2007). The graduates from Bunda College and Natural Resources College are reluctant to work in rural areas because of poor living conditions and most of them are hesitant to work in the public sector because of low pay. The official observed that “the graduates are reluctant to work in rural areas because of poor facilities; they are the ‘network’ generation which cannot imagine living in areas without electricity, where phones cannot work, where Internet is inaccessible and roads are in a bad shape”<sup>20</sup>. There is an additional constraint especially for those coming from Natural Resources College. It was argued that “[these graduates] are not particularly keen to work in the public sector because they are keen to recoup the exorbitant fees for their studies and most of them have never lived in rural areas before”<sup>21</sup>. Following the swift implementation of structural adjustment programmes, the Natural Resources College was privatized; it stopped functioning as a public institution for agricultural extensionists (Chinsinga, 2007). It started admitting students on the market fee basis which in a way puts pressure on them to recoup their investment as soon as they can. The fear is that if this trend continues, “very soon there will be a generation of farmers that will be poorly equipped with agricultural skills will further worsen the image of agriculture as a viable livelihood strategy”<sup>22</sup>.

### *Marginalization of the Youth in Agricultural Support Programmes*

The youth are marginalized in the implementation of agricultural support programmes in Malawi. This is not surprising because almost all the major overarching development strategies are silent on the role of the youth in the agricultural sector. Both the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Water Development officials and the youth gave the Farm Input Subsidy Programme (FISP) as a perfect example of how the youth are marginalized in the agricultural sector.

FISP, as stated earlier, provides farmers with access to cheaper inputs through the use of vouchers (Dorward and Chirwa, 2011). The criteria for targeting FISP have been a subject of contentious discussion and criticism. The main thrust of the debate has been that the targeting criteria are both vague and fluid, changing from year to year and varying across the same areas within the same year. However, the officially prescribed targeting criteria focuses on the elderly, widows, orphans, female headed households and other vulnerable segments of society. The youth are excluded “yet most of them have either never gone to school or are just school dropouts without a job and any tangible source of capital to embark on meaningful farming”<sup>23</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> Interview with a Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Water Development official, Malosa EPA, Zomba District.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with a Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Water Development official, Katuliu EPA, Mangochi District.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with a Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Water Development official, Malosa EPA, Zomba District.

While the youth are clearly resource constrained, “it is difficult to understand why they are not the primary target of the programme”<sup>24</sup>.

Similar sentiments were echoed by the youths themselves. They observed that “we are out of FISP; we benefit from FISP not in our own right but as members of our families except those that are from child headed households”<sup>25</sup>. As stated earlier, the justification for excluding the youth from FISP is that they are energetic enough to take care of themselves. The sentiments from the FGD with female youth at Ibrahim Village are quite revealing: “they tell us to go out to look for casual labour to enable use procure fertilizer but the only place we can get such work is from the Greek estates whose wages are quite exploitative”. These sentiments show, inter alia, that rural Malawi is hard on the youths. As long as they are healthy, they do not deserve sympathy from communities around them. They can be able to survive (Chinsinga, 2004).

Some Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Water Development officials, however, felt the exclusion of the youth from FISP is a missed opportunity in the efforts to revive and sustain the productivity of the agri-food sector in Malawi. Two main reasons were given. Taking recourse to Malawi’s current demographic structure, they argued that “the ageing farming population must be addressed in order to guarantee sustainability in agricultural production and food security in the country”<sup>26</sup>. According to Suriname (undated), the production of food in the SADC region of which Malawi is part will be seriously undermined in the near future if young farmers do not replace the minority ageing cohort. The exclusion of the youth is further seen as a missed opportunity because “the success of the agri-food sector is likely to depend to a greater degree on the active engagement of the youth since they comprise the biggest proportion of the population”<sup>27</sup>. The argument is that in addition to sheer numbers, “the youth also have high levels of energy and since farming in Malawi is predominantly manual, we cannot rely on an ageing population”<sup>28</sup>. According to Bennel (2007), the youth have to be particularly targeted because they have demonstrated greater propensity and willingness to adopt new ideas and technology which may be key to changing the way agriculture is conceptualized, practiced and perceived.

### *Land Grabs in the Eyes of the Youth*

In Mangochi district, about 400 hectares of land has been sold to Greek farmers who mainly cultivate maize and tobacco whereas in Zomba the smallholder farmers are being asked to consolidate their land for purposes of promoting large scale irrigated agriculture. The drive to consolidate landholdings is mainly through rehabilitating and expanding the former government run irrigation schemes under the auspices of the Green Belt Initiative (GBI). In both cases, the youth indicated “we lie at the peripheral of land transactions processes; we only get to be communicated about the outcomes”<sup>29</sup>. They further observed that the land deals are dominated by local chiefs and government officials with some involvement of their parents while they are totally ignored “when we are future of this area”<sup>30</sup>. Overall, the youth demonstrated a sense of powerlessness, alienation and hopelessness about the land transactions yet agriculture remains the principal livelihood strategy for these areas.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> FGD with Male Youth from Ibrahim Village, Katuli EPA, Mangochi District.

<sup>26</sup> Interview with an official from District Agriculture Development Office (DADO), Zomba District.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Interview with a Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Water Development, Malosa EPA, Zomba District.

<sup>29</sup> FGD with Male Youth, Ibrahim Village, Katuli EPA, Zomba District.

<sup>30</sup> FGD with Female Youth, Malemia Village, Malosa EPA, Zomba District.

The main concern for the youth was that the land deals are taking place when the average landholding per capita is declining mainly due to rapid population growth estimated at 3 percent per annum (NSO, 2008). The hardest hit, however, are the male youth who due to the matrilineal cultural system have to relocate to wives homestead upon marriage. This means that they can only access land for agricultural purposes through their wives. In this regard, they observed that “the land accessed through marriage is often too small to enable them engage in productive and competitive agriculture”<sup>31</sup>. This cultural pattern of settlement was singled out as a contributing to the youths disinterest in agriculture. The married youth are often not keen “to invest hard earned resources in ‘foreign land’ because they can be chased at any time”<sup>32</sup>. Actually several studies have shown that the matrilineal system in which the man relocates to his wife’s homestead contributes tremendously to soil fertility degradation since men are not fully committed to undertake the necessary investments to maintain the appropriate levels of soil fertility.

There are, however, two competing discourses among the youth about the land grabs. In general, there is some kind of a love-hate relationship. Some of the youth see land grabs as a necessary evil “since the new land owners are creating employment and they are making it possible for us to access improved seed and fertilizer through contract farming arrangement”<sup>33</sup>. Given all the constraints facing agriculture in these areas, the new land owners are widely seen as offering hope to the people. Nevertheless, the debates in the FGDs were contentious with some participants arguing that “we are better off with the new land owners since they provide us with seed, fertilizer and some jobs that keep our lives going; the government cannot afford to give us these things, so at present we are better off with them around”<sup>34</sup>. For the youths subscribing to this view, their argument was that the acquisition of land by foreigners should be facilitated as long as viable mechanisms are put in place to ensure that they give back to their neighbourhood communities. This is in tune with the premise of the GBI concept paper. GBI is justified as creating employment opportunities for the local communities whose land would have been acquired by investors (GoM, 2009). However, the question about what kind of employment is not addressed at all.

Most of the youth condemned the land grabs as exploitative. They argue that the land that is being offered to the investors should have been redistributed to them. While it is indeed true that the investors are providing employment opportunities, “very little attention is given to the nature of employment; some of us have been working for them [investors] for three years and we are simply helping them get richer and richer while we remain trapped in a vicious circle of poverty”<sup>35</sup>. To further strengthen their case, they gave an example of maize contract farming they are engaged in. The estate on which they work is involved in maize seed production for Seed Co. While they sell maize to the estate for MK50/kg, the estate sells to Seed Co at MK200/kg. The concern is that MK50 per kg is not the net they make per kg because the estate deducts from their proceeds the cost of seed and fertilizer. In addition, the estate charges for the technical services and labour provided to them at MK1.00 per planting station. They, therefore, argued that “this is very exploitative since the estate is behaving as if it is a microfinance institution”<sup>36</sup>. The general view of the youth subscribing to this perspective is that the so called

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<sup>31</sup> FGD with Male Youth, Katuli Village, Katuli EPA, Mangochi District.

<sup>32</sup> FGD with Male Youth, Chitenjere Village, Molosa EPA, Zomba District.

<sup>33</sup> FGD with Female Youth, Katuli Village, Katuli EPA, Mangochi District.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> FGD with Youth, Ibrahim Village, Katuli EPA, Mangochi District.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

investors are simply using them as tools to generate wealth while they descend deeper and deeper into poverty.

### **Concluding Remarks and Reflections**

The paper has demonstrated that while agriculture remains the principal source of livelihood in the Malawi and the youth are a dominant constituent in the country's demographic structure, they are not fully engaged in the sector. The youth are very much at the peripheral of the agricultural processes which is clearly underlined by their conception of good life. The youth do not see working in the agricultural sector as a viable means of realizing their dreams of a good life. Instead, they link possibilities for their version of good life to employment in urban areas, engaging in non-farm business enterprise and migrating to South Africa for casual labour.

Both FISP and GBI have further marginalized the involvement of the youth in the agricultural sector. The youth are not FISP beneficiaries although the majority of them are resource constrained. The way in which the youth are treated in FISP is a clear manifestation of the fact that rural Malawi is hard on the youth. As long as they are in good health, they can fend for themselves. The implementation of the GBI is further complicating the youth's access to land reducing most of them to casual labourers on estates. The implementation of GBI does not inspire hope that the vexing land question will be dealt with once and for all. As argued earlier, the political and bureaucratic elite are not keen on finalizing the land reforms because they are protecting their own interests.

The current fate of the youth is regarded as a missed opportunity because the youth are the future of the agri-food sector since they will have to replace the minority ageing farming population. According to Suriname (undated), the strengths of the youth in the sector include latent energy, capacity and ability to produce and excellent source of ideas and innovation. The situation of the youth in the agri-food sector is further exacerbated by the weak supportive policy infrastructure for youth's involvement in the agricultural sector. The policy vacuum is further weakened by the increasing number of youthful experts that are shunning deployment in rural areas.

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