



Future
Agricultures

FAC-M Workshop Report on the Ministry of Agriculture at the District Level in Malawi

October 2009

Introduction

This workshop was held on 23rd October 2009 at Panjira Lodge in Dedza district. The workshop brought together officials working in the agricultural sector from Thyolo, Dedza and Rumphu districts. The participants included District Agricultural Development Officers, Subject Matter Specialists from the Extension Sections including the Agricultural Extension Development Officers (AEDOs), Directors of Planning and Development, NGO Officials, Agro-dealers and farmer representatives. The Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security (MoAFS) Headquarters was represented by the Chief Economist responsible for Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) (See Appendix I).

The workshop was planned both as a dissemination event of the findings of the case studies of the MoA at the district level carried out in the in Thyolo in the south, Dedza in the centre and Rumphu in the north and as consultative forum on areas that should be considered in subsequent series of these studies. These studies were carried out between November 2007 and March 2009 by the Future Agricultures Consortium (FAC) Malawi under the sub-theme of politics of policy processes. FAC is an international consortium of researchers from the United Kingdom, Ethiopia, Kenya and Malawi working to chart out the future of agriculture in Africa through research on several thematic areas within the agricultural sector.

The workshop was divided into four main sessions. The first session was devoted to introductions of the participants from the three districts including FAC-M researchers in order to create an environment of rapport and trust. The second session involved FAC-M researchers introducing FAC in general and FAC-M in particular as well as the background to the study in terms of the objectives, the methodology, the

framework of analysis of the findings and the overall goals of the workshop. The third session involved the presentation of the findings across the three districts which generated lively discussion and debate pointing to useful issues of concern moving forward. The fourth session involved group work by districts to reflect on the findings in terms of what they meant for the agricultural sector in their respective districts. The major output of the group work was a list of research priorities which the participants felt would be critical areas requiring urgent attention moving forward.

General Comments, Questions and Discussions

Most participants commended FAC-M for organizing the feedback workshop by bringing officials from the three districts together instead of doing it district by district. They pointed out that the workshop provided a very rare platform for cross learning and sharing experiences among actors in the agricultural sector at the district level without the prying eyes of higher level officials. It was observed that forums of this nature usually take place at the national level and they are often dominated by the higher level officials. They do not therefore have the opportunity to critically reflect on the challenges they face in their work. This workshop therefore afforded them a very rare opportunity to reflect at least freely, creatively and constructively about the agricultural sector at the district level arguing that they are better placed for this kind of exercise since they are much closer to the point of service delivery than their higher level counterparts.

The participants did not have many questions about the findings as they indicated that the study had brought out issues that they are already familiar with. The only difference is that the MoA studies at the district level had brought

up these issues in a much more systematic manner. They further observed that the use of the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), Knowledge, Technology and Society (KNOTS) politics of policy processes framework was quite illuminating for them. The KNOTS framework emphasises on the dynamic interaction between narratives, actor/networks and politics/interests and posits that the way in which policies are talked about, and the associated values, power relations and politics frame policies in a particular. Policy outcomes can therefore be explained in terms of the interaction between narratives, actors and interests which either create or decrease policy space as well as options for policy change. Contrary to the highly stylised perspective, the policy process in this framework is less of a linear sequence but more of a political process underpinned by a complex mesh of interactions and ramifications between a wide range of stakeholders who are driven and constrained by competing interests and the contexts in which they operate.

The consensus was that the use of this framework forced them to rethink about and reflect on the challenges that they face in their daily work in a different light with the potential to change the way they go about their routines within the agricultural sector. They nonetheless raised the following questions:

- Some participants questioned the representativeness of the research since it was only done in three districts. They argued that with 28 districts, Malawi is quite diverse to the extent that it would be unrealistic to generalize the findings to other districts. They argued that the contexts and circumstances across the 28 districts are quite variegated. The bottom line was that they wanted to know the criteria that were used to select the three districts. In response, it was pointed out that the three districts were chosen on the basis of some political economy considerations which were outlined in the

presentation within the framework of a case study approach. It was emphasized that the aim is to not to generalize the findings but to have a deeper understanding of constraints and challenges facing each district. It was, however, pointed out that if the findings can be properly interpreted they may be a manifestation of deficiencies at a much broader level in which case the results may be relevant beyond the three districts.

- Some NGO officials, particularly from Thyolo and Dedza, queried the finding that they would not mind the disappearance of the MoAFS and that they are prepared to fill the vacuum that this eventuality would create. While agreeing that MoAFS is not focusing on what they consider as its priority functions, they observed that not all NGOs can be lumped into this category. They observed that they are significant variations among NGOs which are to a very great extent motivated by the different ideologies of their donors. In response, it was pointed that this conclusion was arrived at on the basis of careful consideration and analysis of responses from the NGO officials most of whom observed that they would not mind the disappearance the MoAFS as long as it does not focus on what they perceive its priorities. The NGO officials' position was arguably a diplomatic blurb since the MoAFS officials were present in the workshop.
- Most participants observed that the studies should have been done almost at the same time across the three districts in order to maximize the comparative approach which is useful in generating lessons. The concern was that the studies were carried out in November 2007 in Thyolo and Dedza and in March 2009 in Rumphi. This was raised with regard to the finding from Rumphi which emphasized the need to consider deploying a totally different agency to run

and manage the subsidy programme. The justification was that the subsidy programme distracts them from the core responsibilities at a critical period in the farming season. Participants from Dedza and Thyolo felt this should have been reflected in their districts had it been that the studies were done in 2009 in all the three districts. This was acknowledged as a pertinent observation which will have to be addressed in the subsequent series of the studies.

- Most participants wanted to know why there are wide variations in the number of graduates at the district level. The number of graduates is as high as 20 in Rumphu and as low as 3 in Thyolo. Most participants therefore argued that there is need to critically consider how funding from MoAFS headquarters trickles down to different levels of the sector otherwise such enormous disparities should have been discerned and corrected accordingly.

The rest of the contributions were further reflections on the constraints and challenges they face in their daily routines within the sector which had further been illuminated by the politics of policy processes. These were as follows:

- Some participants felt the Agricultural Development Divisions (ADDs) were a stumbling block in as far as progress in the sector is concerned. Their point was that there was considerable waste of resources because of the duplication of structures of the District Agricultural Development Office (DADO) at the ADD level. Consequently more funds are channeled to the ADDs at the expense of the district offices which are closer to the community and therefore very crucial as compared to the ADDs in creating an enabling atmosphere for the agricultural sector and enhancing the quality of service delivery to farmers. They thus argued that the point of action is the district and not the ADD hence it's the district which requires

more funding and not the ADD. They concluded that progress would be problematic in the agricultural sector unless the statusquo changes.

- It was observed that the incomplete decentralization programme is negatively affecting the operations of DADOs. It was noted that decentralization is largely on paper as district offices are still accountable to, and receiving orders from the MoA headquarters. This state of affairs is a result of the failure to carry out the MoA functional review within the framework of decentralization policy reforms. It was reported that initial steps were taken but the actual work has been blocked due to resistance among staff at MoA headquarters and ADDs who are benefiting from the existing institutional and structural arrangements. To stress this point, participants observed that even salaries and bicycle allowances for extension workers and lead farmers are determined by the MoA headquarters but they are not conversant with the reality on the ground. They argued that budget planning does not follow a bottom up approach as ideally envisaged and that the interaction between the district agricultural offices and MoA headquarters is generally unfruitful. It was, for instance, observed that MoA headquarters still imposes outputs which are often unrealistic. It was emphasized that there is conflict of interest between the MoA and local officials on the prioritization of projects particularly in the context of the Malawi Growth and Development Strategy (MGDS) whose popular slogan is that any activity outside the MGDS will not be funded even if it reflects pressing priorities in a particular locality.
- There was consensus among participants about the problem of lack of interaction among different stakeholders (officials from district agriculture office, extension workers,

agro dealers, lead farmers, NGOs and other relevant authorities) at the district level. This was mainly attributed to the lack of patriotism among stakeholders who are deeply wedded to the culture of allowance. This was underscored by one of the participants who observed “we have developed a tendency whereby we think we cannot attend or conduct a meeting without allowance; this is a huge impediment in as far as effective interaction among stakeholders at the district level for the good of the sector is concerned”.

- The participants unanimously observed that their work is negatively affected by the political context. It was pointed out that the main challenge is the contradiction between communication from the MoA officials and the media (political language). This was particularly emphasized with reference to the subsidy programme arguing that what the MoA headquarters communicates to officials at the district level on who should be the beneficiaries of the fertilizer subsidy programme is different from what ‘the government’ communicates in the media which makes their work extremely difficult. Furthermore, the participants expressed concern with the tendency of the ministry to distort reality when it is not in line with the views of the politicians. For instance, professionally done crop estimates, are often turned down by the MoA headquarters which in turn produce their own figures. They observed that they have no choice but to incorporate the new figures since ‘they have to protect their jobs’.

District Research Priorities

Rumphi

- Determination of budget ceiling, funding allocation, and expenditure tracking.

- Existence of the ADD as a stumbling block to efficiency, effectiveness and rolling out of decentralization policy reforms.
- Improvement on the interaction between agro-dealers, lead farmers, other stakeholders and MoA.
- The perception of farmers towards lead farmers and the reality of the provision of extension services on a demand driven basis.
- The challenge of the absence of councillors on the performance of the agricultural sector.

Thyolo

- The challenge of planning processes and implementation at different levels.
- Need for coordination between government and other stakeholders.
- Tracking and monitoring of the utilization of resources.
- Access to markets and market development.
- The importance of absorbing graduates from the Natural Resources College (NRC) in the agricultural sector.
- Improvement of the district agriculture extension system.
- Compatibility of policies among the agricultural related government agencies.

Dedza

- The impact of the agricultural subsidy programme on the provision of extension services.
- The impact of partial decentralization of the agricultural service delivery at district level.
- The impact of de-linking the irrigation department from the MoAFS.
- How agro dealers and the local farmers would want the agriculture system to operate

- Further research on coordination between NGOs, government and the private sector.
- Dynamics of human resource development through NRC.

Conclusion

The participants considered the workshop as very useful for providing them with the opportunity to interrogate their operational context. There was consensus that most of the challenges that actors face within the agricultural sector are mainly a result of half-hearted implementation of reforms that are intended to facilitate improvements in the way MoA functions. In particular, the participants zeroed in on the decentralization policy reforms as holding the key to the success of MoA at the district level. As long as the policy reforms remain ambiguous and unfinished, the prospects for well functioning MoA at the district level are bleak. The current status of decentralization is creating more confusion than facilitating MoA's work. The main challenge for them was how to sustain the dialogue that this workshop had instigated in order to make improvements in the functioning of the MoA at the district, however modest.

Appendix I: List of Participants

Name	District	Organization	Position
F. Msiska	Rumphi	Mchenachena	Lead Farmer
R. Mwenitanga	Rumphi	MoA	AEDC
G. Gondwe	Thyolo	MoA	Ass. District Registrar
W. Mbughi	Thyolo	MoA	Ass. Land Conservation Officer
N. Sichali	Dedza	Irrigation Department	District Irrigation Officer
D. Banda	Dedza	Irrigation Department	District Irrigation Officer
W. Semani	Dedza	Area Stakeholder Panel	Lead Farmer
L. Kapalamula	Dedza	Area Stakeholder Panel	Lead Farmer
M. Andrew	Thyolo	MoA	AEDO
I. Nyirenda	Dedza	MoA	AEDO
R. Msanyama	Dedza	MoA	Crops Officer
C. Malunga	Thyolo	MoA	Agribusiness Officer
J. Kaluzi	Thyolo	MoA	ADADO
A. Nthala	Thyolo	MoA	Ass. District Animal Health Officer
T. Chimlomo	Dedza	MoA	AEDC
M. Kamlomo	Dedza	MoA	DADO
W. Dzonzi	Dedza	MoA	AEDO
W. Bamuzi	Thyolo	Thyolo	Farmer
E. Chatepa	Thyolo	Agro-dealer	Agro-dealer
P. Makawa	Thyolo	MoA	AEDO
L. Mumba	Rumphi	Agro-dealer	Agro-dealer
M.Lwanda	Dedza	District Assembly	District of Planning Director
F. Mkandawire	Rumphi	District Assembly	Director of Planning Director
B. Joshoua	Dedza	MoA	District Fisheries Officer
L. Chizimba	Dedza	Concern Universal	Project Manager
A. Sidik	Dedza	Concern Universal	District Manager
L. Tomoka	Dedza	MoA	Crops Officer
C. Tembo	Rumphi	Livingstonia Synod	Project Officer
I. Msiska	Rumphi	MoA	AEMO
W. MuleInga	Rumphi	Agro-dealer	Agro-dealer
E. Mthepheya	Dedza	MoA	Agro-dealer
C. Gwazayani	Dedza	Farmers World	Agro-dealer
B. Kanyumbu	Dedza	CADECOM	DRR Coordinator
V. Mkumba	Thyolo	CARD	Project Assistant
B. Mhango	Rumphi	MoA	DADO
F. Mkinga	Rumphi	DAMRA	Director
R. Musopole	Lilongwe	MoA Hq	Chief Economist

Appendix II: Workshop Programme

Time	Activity
8.00-8.30am	Registration
9.00-9.30am	Session 1 Welcome Address/Introductions Workshop Objectives DADO Dedza District B. Chinsinga (FAC-M)
9.30-10.00am	Brief FAC Introduction Background to the MoA Study Dr. B. Chinsinga (FAC-M)
10.00-10.30am	Health Break Group Photo
10.30-11.30am	Session 2 Presentation of the Research Findings
11.30-12.30pm	Discussion of the Research Findings
12.30-1.00pm	Session 3 Group Work by District
1.00-2.00pm	Session 4 Plenary discussion of group work Wrap up and way forward
2.00pm	Lunch and Departure of Participants

The Future Agricultures Consortium aims to encourage critical debate and policy dialogue on the future of agriculture in Africa. The Consortium is a partnership between research-based organisations across Africa and in the UK. Future Agricultures Consortium Secretariat at the University of Sussex, Brighton BN1 9RE UK T +44 (0) 1273 915670 E info@future-agricultures.org

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