Future Agricultures

Research Paper

Democratic Politics and State Capacity Building: Ministries of Agriculture in Malawi and Kenya

Although fluctuating in intensity, debates about the role of the state remain fundamental to strategies for rural development and poverty reduction. Under structural adjustment African states were scaled back to play a minimalist public goods provider role, motivated in large part by the weakness and over-extension of the state prior to that. Whilst there is now broad recognition that a more activist, coordinating role is required to stimulate market development (World Bank, 1997, Dorward et.al. 2004), this places extra demands on the capacity of the state. Meanwhile, most African states are almost two decades into a transition to democracy. Whilst the median voter in most of these states is rural and poor, it remains unclear as to whether democratic politics can generate the incentives for the creation of "developmental" states that will serve the needs of such voters.

Smallholder agriculture has a particular role to play in growth and poverty reduction in Africa. In Maputo in 2003 African leaders pledged to allocate 10% of their national budgets to agricultural development following years of crisis and neglect. This policy brief draws on research in seven districts of Kenya (Eldoret West, Mwingi, Nyeri South and Rachuonyo) and Malawi (Dedza, Rumphi and Thyolo), conducted during 2007-09, that examined the role and performance of the Ministry of Agriculture at district level, using interviews with key informants and focus group discussions. The research explored stakeholders' views as to the role that the ministries should be playing in different contexts, what they actually do and why, and what factors impede the performance of their roles. The full case study reports can be found at www.future-agriculture.org.

Performance of Ministries of Agriculture: Increasing Resource Allocation …

In all seven studied districts, farmers' perceptions of the performance of the Ministry of Agriculture over time are dominated by national policy trends and the priority that national leaders give to agriculture. These factors have determined the volume of resources flowing to the ministry offices at district and sub-district levels. By contrast, none of the initiatives to improve the efficiency with which the ministry uses these resources at local level have made sufficient difference to service delivery to be commented upon within focus groups[1].

Under their first presidents, both countries are considered to have pursued reasonably effective policies for agricultural and rural development (World Bank 1981). Both then entered a period of increasing corruption and neglect of agricultural development. When Presidents Kibaki (December 2002) and Mutharika (June 2004) came to power, both saw the opportunity to gain popularity by delivering improved public service delivery, including in agriculture. In both Malawi and Kenya the budgets available to ministries of agriculture and rural development have increased under the current presidencies. This has translated into extra resources at district level, although a large share of the additional resources received at district level in Malawi has been absorbed in the administrative overheads for the subsidy programme. In Kenya much of the credit for the increased resource flow can be given to a small group of influential technocrats in Nairobi, who made the case for renewed investment in agricultural services. Latterly, Minister Ruto has also pushed for a higher budget share for the agricultural sector, drawing on the 2003 Maputo Declaration figure of 10%, a stance that may reflect broader political ambitions.

… but Co-existing with Considerable Inefficiency

van de Walle (2001) describes African states as 'neo-patrimonial', with legal-rational elements (interested in state building) in tension with the exigencies of patronage politics. In Kenya the influence of patronage politics, reducing the efficiency with which additional resources are used by the Ministry of Agriculture, can be clearly seen. This is evidenced most clearly by the proliferation of so-called agriculture sector ministries in the country since the advent of coalition government under President Kibaki in 2002-03. As more coalition partners have needed to be rewarded with ministerial positions, the number of such ministries has risen to nine, through a series of sub-divisions. This immediately creates a need to coordinate activities at district level. Fortunately, local staff know each other and often remain in adjacent offices, which facilitates coordination. Coordination is also sometimes enforced by resource shortages, with, for example, one office having a vehicle but no driver and their neighbours having the opposite. However, the allocation of resources across ministries was clearly sub-optimal in all the studied districts, given local agro-ecological conditions - the result of multiple, independent planning processes.

More recently, there has also been a proliferation of districts within Kenya, with many former divisions being upgraded to district status. This is popular with residents (for status reasons) and may help secure increased resource flows under the anticipated new constitution. However, in the short term it spreads resources even more thinly, as additional district-level posts are created, pulling staff away from the extension frontline. In Malawi, as a result of the political fallout between Mutharika and the party that ushered him into the presidency, the subsidy programme has been greatly used as a tool for building support for his own political party. Evidence suggests that district allocations for the fertiliser subsidy programme favoured those districts considered strategically important in shoring up support for the president's party. In these districts, a disproportionate share of increased resource flow has invariably been absorbed in the administration of the subsidy programme.

Within the Ministry of Agriculture in Kenya allocation of basic staff and financial resources is fairly even across districts. In 2006 both Nyeri South and Eldoret North, historically favoured districts, lost significant numbers of staff in a nationwide redistribution (referred to within these districts as the "tsunami"). This is evidence of the efforts of technocrats within the ministry to build even state capacity across the country. By contrast, in Malawi there were three times as many officers of graduate level in Rumphi district Ministry of Agriculture office as in the other two districts combined. We have not obtained consolidated figures for project resources going into the studied districts, but there is a perception in both countries that inequalities in resource access across districts comes not so much from the distribution of the basic ministry budgets as from the ability of some districts (with connections to Minister or President, for example) to capture a disproportionate share of extraordinary resources from donor projects or special government programmes.

When one looks within the budget of a Ministry of Agriculture district office in either country, several sources of inefficiency are apparent. The first is the well-known imbalance in the budget share going to salaries (staff are difficult to fire) as opposed to operational expenditure. One manifestation of this in all districts is the inadequate provision of transport to get staff based in offices out into the field. This is particularly unfortunate given that the second big imbalance is between office-based and frontline staff. For example, in Rachuonyo in 2007 there were 31 office-based professional staff and nine administrative staff to "support" seven frontline extension workers, whilst 31 divisions lacked a frontline extension worker[2]. This situation, mirrored to a greater or lesser extent in all the other districts, is the result of a long-term moratorium on new hiring, combined with efforts to upgrade the training of existing staff and the reward for higher qualifications being to occupy an office-based position (in Kenya meaning either divisional or district level).

The scarcity of frontline staff is particularly remarked by farmers, who still believe that extension staff should be engaged in visiting farmers in their homes and fields. Moreover, the rigid equation of grade with formal training is a major cause of demoralisation amongst remaining front-line extension staff, some of whom have remained at the same grade for 10-20 years due to lack of training opportunities. In addition to modest pay, these staff feel that there is no reward for additional effort in getting out and serving farmers. A further complaint in both countries is that bicycle allowances for frontline staff (to compensate them for wear and tear when using their own bicycles for work business) are either woefully inadequate (Malawi) or have been abandoned altogether (Kenya).

In Kenya performance contracts have been introduced to try to raise the work rate of staff at all levels. Frontline staff report that these have been used to increase the number of farmer contacts per month considerably over the past decade. However, we cannot confirm whether the real increase is as great as that reported. Some farmers (especially those identified by extension staff!) did comment upon improved extension effort in recent years, but many are yet to experience extension contact with any regularity. In Malawi, meanwhile, complaints that poorly paid and resourced extension staff have "gone native", spend more time on their own fields than on their official duties and principally serve as implementing consultants for NGO programmes to earn extra remuneration featured prominently in interviews.

The improvement in resource flow to Ministries of Agriculture in both countries notwithstanding, these experiences demonstrate that most of the longer-standing sources of inefficiencies have not been addressed. The initiatives taken in Kenya, introducing performance based contracts and relocating personnel across districts are commendable, but do not go far enough to address the underlying systemic and structural sources of inefficiencies that have impeded improved performance. These relate in particular to the procedures for hiring, promoting and firing staff that are deeply embedded in the way the national civil service operates.

Political Incentives for Building State Capacity for Service Delivery

The mixed picture of increased aggregate resources, but considerable inefficiency in the way in which available resources are used, highlights the question of the incentives for improving state performance, in agriculture or elsewhere, under a democratic political regime. Both Presidents Kibaki and Mutharika saw an opportunity to gain popularity by delivering improved public service delivery, including in agriculture. However, the example of the proliferation of agriculture sector ministries in Kenya shows that efficiency in service delivery was not an overriding policy objective. Indeed, both presidents have sought quick wins in service delivery, not fundamental reform of their state apparatus so as to achieve long-term, sustained improvements in service. These quick wins were sought through an initial resource injection (including salary increases), plus additional upward accountability for performance by ministry staff (through performance contracts in Kenya and greater reporting requirements for senior personnel in Malawi). The immediate objective was to create an impression of progress in time for the president's re-election campaign. Both elements could gradually be relaxed or reversed during the president's second term, as neither president has the opportunity of standing for further re-election.

By contrast, building state capacity is a long-term agenda that involves the tackling of intractable systemic problems. For example, changing how the performance of civil servants (such as Ministry of Agriculture officials in district offices) is monitored and rewarded requires the forging of a policy consensus, the passage of any necessary legislation, then implementation of the new procedures, before any change in behaviour is observed. Such reforms can expect immediate opposition, even if only from bureaucratic vested interests[3], whilst politically, any dividends will only be reaped by a president's second term (at the earliest), which is really too late! Indeed, classic second term behaviour by a president who cannot himself stand for office again is to fill senior government positions with his own people (his legacy to them), and this may be made more difficult by comprehensive civil service reform. Thus, competitive electoral politics alone is unlikely to produce the incentives for the creation of "developmental" states. Instead, in countries such as Kenya and Malawi, a national consensus on the importance of state building may be required, so that any president and party that comes to power continues the agreed work. Such a consensus does not exist in either Kenya or Malawi, not least because there is little constructive dialogue on long-term policy issues between government, opposition and civil society.

Technocratic Attempts to Enhance Efficiency: Lacking Political Will?

These arguments provide a context for examining measures introduced to improve the efficiency with which ministries of agriculture in Kenya and Malawi use resources at local level. As already noted, none of these has had a sufficient impact to be remarked upon by farmer focus groups charting trends in ministry performance in their district over time. A common element is that these measures have been promoted by donor programmes, with limited domestic championing.

In both countries there have been moves towards a more "demand-driven" approach to extension in recent years[4]. This is seen by proponents (including sympathetic local technocrats) as a half-way house to either privatisation (fully private for those who can afford it; NGO provision for those who cannot) and/or decentralisation of service provision. It has proceeded furthest in veterinary services, due both to the nature of curative services plus the fact that livestock farmers are considered better off than average. The district case studies suggest that the "demand-driven" approach is unpopular with farmers in both countries. In Kenya extension staff do seem to make themselves available (at specific points within a given location at a given time each week) for farmers to seek their advice. They like the fact that they are now dealing primarily with motivated clients, but recognise that more needs to be done to sensitise other farmers to the principles of the new approach. In Malawi the roll-out of the new approach was supposed to be preceded by the establishment of stakeholder panels (at district, area and village level) for both sensitisation and expression of demand. However, none is in place in any of the three studied districts. The technocratic vision of stakeholder panels was completely overshadowed by the success of the fertilizer programme, which enjoys strong backing at the highest political and policy levels. The narrative of the programme's success, which has seen the state act largely alone, effectively crowded out any space for alternative visions for improving performance of the Ministry of Agriculture.

The view of other stakeholders in Malawi is that Ministry officials have interpreted the "demand-driven" approach as an excuse for not getting out to farmers, because the latter have not demanded advice. In both countries farmers seem to resent the fact that they have to find and approach an extension worker, when their view is that extension staff should be visiting them in their fields[5]. Meanwhile, there is little evidence that the "demand-driven" approach will become a stepping stone to the privatisation of extension services. Instead, it could simply be a way by which extension services manage the problem of excess demand for extension whilst they remain extremely resource constrained.

Finally, decentralisation of extension service provision, as part of a more fundamental reform of local government administration, is seen as a promising policy option amongst some in the international community. In Malawi decentralisation has been promoted by donors such as UNDP, NORAD and GTZ since the early 1990s, but implementation of the decentralisation programme has been stalled (not for the first time) since 2005 and suffered a major reversal with the amendments to the 1998 Local Government Act that were passed in early 2010. By contrast Kenya has historically been a highly centralised state. However, there is some prospect of greater decentralisation (domestically driven) as a result of the new constitution expected in 2010.

The evidence collected by the case studies suggests that, in Kenya at least, greater efficiency in the delivery of extension services could be achieved through decentralisation. This assumes that local agents – ideally the current stakeholder fora, reconstituted as advisory committees to the district administration – are empowered to shape the budget and priorities for agricultural and rural development service provision in their areas. Greater local control could then lead to a better fit with local needs, recognising the considerable agro-ecological diversity within the country[6]. A single local budget could correct the current imbalance in resource allocation both across "ministries" – even if the proliferation of ministries remains in Nairobi – and across budget lines – leading to a greater proportion of staff being field-based, but also adequately equipped with transport. In theory, there could also be greater local input into the monitoring and rewarding of staff performance, although this is controversial and would not be an automatic part of decentralisation reform[7].

However, a big question with decentralisation is whether the national political elite is sufficiently committed to it to make it work. The ownership of the decentralisation programme by the Malawian elite has always been questionable. Two long delays in holding local government elections (from 1994-2000 and from 2005 to the present) have occurred because those in power have feared that local elections would highlight the limited reach of their parties around the country (i.e. outside their regional heartlands). By contrast, the championing of "majimbo" by Prime Minister Raila Odinga in Kenya suggests that the policy could one day have sufficient local ownership to be implemented fairly wholeheartedly. This could be good news for the budgeting for, and delivery of, agricultural and rural development services to smallholder producers around the country.

End Notes

[1] A partial exception here was the Training and Visit extension system, implemented in Kenya in the 1980s. However, even the impact of this was more than offset, in farmers' memories, by declines in extension staffing that started in the second half of this decade.

[2] As in many other parts of Kenya, Rachuonyo has subsequently been subdivided into multiple districts.

[3] Over the past decade, several functional reviews of the Ministry of Agriculture in Malawi, initiated by donors such as World Bank or UNDP, have been blocked by ministry officials before completion.

[4] In Malawi this has been promoted by UNDP, which has funded the "communication" component of the fertiliser subsidy programme, by the World Bank and by NORAD, although the latter have now withdrawn (in some frustration at lack of progress).

[5] Similar reservations were expressed regarding the focal area approach promoted by the SIDA-funded NALEP project that concentrates extension effort in one chosen "focal area" within a district for a whole year.

[6] A striking example of the need for local prioritization was observed in Rachuonyo, where the striga weed was endemic in maize fields and required a concerted local strategy to eradicate it – something that, up to that time, had clearly been lacking.

[7] One of the arguments advanced in Malawi for reversing some of the decentralisation measures to date is that local discretion over hiring, firing and promotions leads to people appointing their own kinsmen to jobs, i.e. nepotism and regionalism. However, even if this does occur, it is a matter of debate whether this is a problem for extension staff. Indeed, in Malawi the Ministry of Health is now consciously appointing local people to work in health centres, an approach pioneered by Millennium Villages Project (MVP), apparently with positive results. There are many O level graduates in villages, who could work as extension staff with additional training.

References

Dorward A, Kydd J, Morrison J and Urey I (2004) A Policy Agenda for Pro-Poor Agricultural Growth. World Development 32(1): 73-89

van de Walle, N (2001) African Economies and the Politics of Permanent Crisis, 1979-1999. Cambridge University Press, New York

World Bank (1981) Accelerated Development in Sub-Saharan Africa. World Bank, Washington DC

World Bank (1997) World Development Report, 1997: The State in a Changing World. World Bank, Washington DC

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

FAC appreciates the support of the UK Department for International Development (DfID)