

# MALAWI

## Strategy Support Program



### THE NATIONAL EXTENSION POLICY OF MALAWI - LESSONS FROM IMPLEMENTATION

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The Government of Malawi put in place the National Extension Policy in 2000 to promote the provision of quality agricultural extension services. Fifteen years after its introduction, while action has been taken on some components, many key elements of the policy remain largely unimplemented. This note outlines the evidence on why much progress has not been achieved on coordination, stakeholder accountability, demand-focus, and pluralism within Malawi’s agricultural extension services. Over the past decade, public extension services have largely been underfunded while government has focused on implementing its flagship program in the agriculture sector, the Farm Input Subsidy Programme (FISP). The somewhat inconsistent impact of FISP suggests to some experts that inadequate provision of information to farmers on best agricultural production practices might account for this mixed performance. In early 2015, during extensive district-level consultations on the content of the draft National Agriculture Policy, extension services were highlighted by stakeholders as the most important priority area for increasing agricultural productivity in Malawi. However, tough decisions and bold actions, rather than complacency and minor fixes, will be required to transform the extension system to one that contributes significantly to improved agricultural development outcomes. This Policy Note proposes several priority areas for consideration.

#### LOW PRODUCTIVITY IMPACT OF FISP PARTLY DUE TO WEAK EDUCATION AND EXTENSION

The Government of Malawi (GoM) since 2005 has focused on the FISP as its major strategy for increasing maize production, promoting household food security, and enhancing rural incomes. GoM spent an annual average of 9.8 percent of its national budget subsidizing fertilizer and seed between 2005/2006 and 2008/2009 (Dorward and Chirwa 2011). More recently, FISP accounted for 58 percent of agricultural spending by government in 2012/13 (raw data from MoAIWD). This level of spending on FISP left minimal funds for other public agricultural services and programs. Notably, investment in agricultural extension was a meager 1.6 percent of all agricultural spending by GOM in 2012/13 (raw data from MoAIWD) (Table 1).

**Table 1—Public spending on agricultural extension in Malawi, 1991-2014, select years**

	1991/ 92	2000/ 01	2010/ 11	2012/ 13
Budget for extension, (US\$ millions, in 2010 constant US\$)		4.8	5.2	4.2
Percent of extension spending that goes to salaries		64	96	
Percent of agriculture sector spending going to extension	2.0	19.0	3.1	1.6
Spending on extension as a percent of spending on FISP			4.0	2.6

Note: Authors’ compilation from various government budget reports, adjusted using of-ficial exchange rates and consumer price indices (<http://data.worldbank.org/indicator>).

This poor flow of funding for agricultural extension activities raises concerns among experts, who suggest that it might be part of what explains inconsistent impact achieved by FISP (Lunduka et al. 2013). Snapp et al. (2014) suggest that lack of farmer training and extension services may have been a factor in the low nutrient use efficiency (NUE) observed among beneficiaries of the FISP, which limited the productivity and development impact of the program. They show the huge difference in NUE between maize grown in plots following researcher management protocols (14 to 50 kg maize per kg nitrogen) and farmer-managed plots (7 to 14 kg maize

per kg nitrogen). This gap signals the magnitude of the constraints to increased crop production that Malawian smallholder farmers face. A more holistic approach that includes education and extension services on integrated crop and soil fertility management is needed to support programs aimed at enhancing access to fertilizer to improve crop production.

#### WEAK IMPLEMENTATION OF THE 2000 NATIONAL EXTENSION POLICY

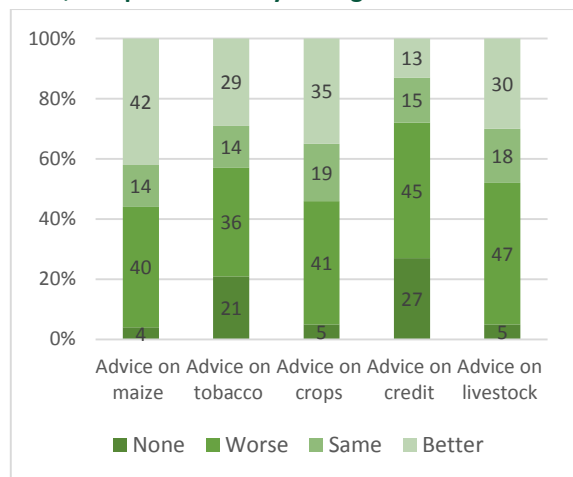
Malawi has undergone several reforms in its agricultural extension system in the past – from the Master Farmer Scheme and the “Achikumbi” or Progressive Farmer Approach of the 1950s and 60s, to the farmer group approach in 1970s, to the training and visit (T&V) system in the 1980s, to, more recently, the passage of the National Extension Policy in 2000 that emphasizes farmer demand, stakeholder accountability, pluralism and coordination in agricultural extension service provision. The Policy and its Implementation Guide (passed in 2006) have good elements and strong intentions to transform the provision of extension services in Malawi. However, fifteen years after the introduction of the Policy, few of the actions laid out in it have been taken and many elements remain largely unimplemented. We outline below the evidence of weak implementation and, consequently, unsatisfactory outcomes of the Policy from a literature review, key informant interviews, and nationally representative surveys.

##### Demand-driven extension service

The Policy envisions a system that would provide demand-driven extension services. Service providers would respond and deal effectively with the diversity of demands from farmers; expertise and specialized services would be available to respond to those demands; and support would be provided for those farmers who lag behind in their agricultural production and in the welfare of their households. Nonetheless, evidence so far suggests that extension service provision across various types of providers remains top-down and supply-driven with little attempts being made to identify the needs of farm communities or incorporate their views into service design and implementation (Masangano & Mthinda 2012; Chowa et al. 2013; MEAS 2012).

The Policy also envisions that all farmers would have access to high quality extension services. Based on the 2013 Malawi Integrated Household Survey (IHS), 40 percent of rural communities reported that the extension services that they received on maize were worse when compared to five years earlier; 14 percent reported no change; while 42 percent reported that extension services improved (Figure 1). Ratings by communities surveyed are worse for advice on tobacco, other crops, credit and livestock. Improvements are needed to ensure that messages and advice are relevant and useful.

**Figure 1—Communities' rating of extension services received in 2013, compared to five years ago.**



Source: Malawi Integrated Household Survey (2013).

The Policy and its Implementation Guide outline structures and approaches that would be useful for organizing farmers' demand for advice. These include the model village concept, involving the use of participatory rural appraisal tools; village-level agricultural committees; and stakeholder panels at area and district levels. However, several studies have shown that most of these panels and approaches are largely non-functional principally due to lack of funding to support their operation (Chinsinga & Cabral 2010; MEAS 2012). At village level, too many roles and positions were created within the large number of committees instituted under the new system. This has been perceived by farmers as both wasteful and time consuming (Chowa et al. 2013; MEAS 2012).

## Pluralism

The Policy envisions various service providers using multiple methods to address agricultural extension issues, with a special emphasis on strengthening farmer-based organizations (FBO). Despite this emphasis on and promotion of pluralism, the government still remains the main provider of advisory services for farmers in Malawi. Based on the 2013 IHS, 27 percent of farming households reported accessing extension services through direct contact with government extension agents, 6 percent through non-governmental organizations (NGO), with only 2 percent receiving advice from the private sector.

The NGOs that provide extension services consists mainly of international NGOs, who can be considered more as donors than as local service providers. They function on external funding, usually operating within short-term project cycles. The sustainability of their efforts is a major issue. In reality, there are only a few local service producers or FBOs that provide extension services (Masangano & Mthinda 2012; MEAS 2012; IDAF 2010). The 2013 IHS data show that less than one percent of households accessed advice from FBOs, indicating limited coverage in extension service delivery among FBOs. This suggests that a major challenge remains in strengthening and supporting FBOs to become effective extension

service providers – this despite the Policy having a strong emphasis on capacity strengthening of FBOs.

## Coordinated extension system

With a vision for increasing diversity and pluralism in the system, the Policy also emphasizes the need for coordination among agricultural extension service providers. There is an increasing diversity of sources and types of agricultural advisory services in Malawi. However, major challenges in coordination have emerged as the system has grown more complex, leading to an increase in inefficiencies, redundancies, and confusion due to conflicting messages to farmers on a specific issue or technology (Chowa et al. 2013; Knorr et al. 2007; Masangano & Mthinda 2012; MEAS 2012). The majority of actors providing agricultural extension services do not interact with others in an operational sense, but instead tend to function as independent information subnetworks within larger national and international spheres of exchange (MEAS 2012).

The Policy and its Implementation Guide outline structures for coordination, such as District Agricultural Extension Coordination Committees. However, due to a lack of funding, most are non-functional (Chinsinga & Cabral 2010; Masangano & Mthinda 2012; MEAS 2012). Very few NGOs, FBOs, and private sector firms coordinate their extension activities with the Department of Agricultural Extension Services (DAES) of the Ministry of Agriculture (Masangano & Mthinda 2012). Most coordination initiatives have left out the private sector, whereas NGO interaction is mostly on a bilateral basis. Coordination among NGOs operating in the sector has been constrained by intense competition for donor funding and pressure to show quick results. NGOs are particularly skeptical of government-led coordination initiatives, as they perceive them as attempts to tap NGO resources (Chinsinga & Cabral 2010).

## Streamlined structures, with fewer but higher quality extension staff

The Policy builds on the public sector reform program of government, which centers on downsizing and streamlining public agencies, reducing staff numbers and simplifying functions. The Policy calls for greater involvement by other actors, especially FBOs, in directly providing advice to farmers, with public agencies involved as facilitators and coordinators, rather than service providers.

**Table 2—Farmer-extension agent ratio in Malawi and other selected countries**

	Total number of agents, '000s	Farmers per agent
<b>Malawi</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>Between 1,800 and 2514</b>
<b>Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)</b>	11	540
<b>Ethiopia</b>	60	480
<b>China</b>	800	620
<b>Kenya</b>	6	950
<b>Indonesia</b>	30	1,670
<b>Tanzania</b>	7	2,500
<b>Nigeria</b>	5	3,330
<b>India</b>	60	5,000

Source: Malawi – Kaunda (2011), GoM 2015, DRC and Kenya – Ragasa et al. (2015); Others – Davis et al. (2010).

Available data suggest that there were about 1,900 extension agents in Malawi in 2011, with 1,000 vacant positions unfilled based on 2,900 established positions (Kaunda 2011). The farmers per extension agent ratio in Malawi is estimated to be between 1,800 (Kaunda 2011) and 2514 (GoM 2015) – much higher than Ethiopia, Democratic Republic of Congo, China, and Kenya, but much lower than in Nigeria and India (Table 2). Based on this ratio,

Malawi is considered among developing countries to be in the middle in terms of the size of its extension staff in relation to its farming population.

One major issue is the large imbalance in extension staff across districts. For example, the farmer-to-public extension agent ratio ranges from 811 in Karonga to 2,005 in Balaka (IDAF 2010). If other service providers are included, the ratio ranges between 642 in Rumphu and 1,279 in Balaka. Other estimates show higher farmers-to-public agent ratios from 1,891 in Salima to 3,951 in Blantyre (GoM 2015). In some areas, there are no field extension staff present (Masangano & Mthinda 2012; Chinsinga & Cabral 2010).

Another major issue is the composition of funding for agricultural extension services – in 2011, 96 percent of the budget for agricultural extension services went to salaries, leaving almost no funds to undertake extension work or to meet farmers' demands for extension services, let alone coordinate responses to their demands (Table 1). In addition, lack of funding for proper training and regular re-training leads to the serious question of the quality of extension staff. Three agricultural advisory service providers interviewed by IDAF (2010) complained that they were unable to recruit all of the technically qualified extension workers that they required.

### Decentralized extension system

The Policy envisions a decentralized extension system where service providers can better respond to the demands of local farmers. However, decentralization in Malawi remains incomplete. Local government capacity to deliver on newly assigned functions is constrained by staffing shortages, lack of incentives to retain and motivate staff, and insufficient and unpredictable budgets (Chinsinga & Cabral 2010). The dual accountability structures – separate technical and financial lines of management – threatens to undermine coherence in decision-making and budget allocations (Chinsinga & Cabral 2010; Kaarhus & Nyirenda 2006). District Assemblies obtain their agricultural program funding directly from the Ministry of Agriculture. While this funding has increased over the years, allocations are still below budget and the timing of disbursements remains unreliable (Kaarhus & Nyirenda 2006).

### Equalization

The Policy states that "... the public sector must make sure that the poorest segments of the population, women, youth, and people with disabilities are not left out of the development process." (p. 25). Based on the 2013 IHS, 62 percent of households received agricultural advice, an increase from 43 percent in 2010. While this shows improvement, it still leaves 38 percent of farming households without access to any agricultural advice. Moreover, analysis of the 2013 IHS shows that access to extension services is biased against some segments of the farming population – poorest households, households with very young or very old heads, and those with limited formal education are less likely to access agricultural advice from extension agents – both from government and from other sources (Ragasa et al. forthcoming).

### Stakeholder accountability

The Policy envisions clear mechanisms for enhancing the accountability of service providers for providing high quality and effective extension services. The Policy states that for market-oriented extension topics, farmers must be able to choose among extension service providers, while for extension topics of public interest, farmers must be provided a voice to guide the way service provision is planned, implemented, and evaluated. Furthermore FBOs must be strengthened and supported to play a key role in this process. Evidence suggests weak monitoring and evaluation at all levels, with extension agents being allowed to function whichever way

they see fit (Chowa et al. 2013, MEAS 2012; Kaarhus & Nyirenda 2006).

While there are mapping exercises of service providers in some districts (see IDAF 2010), there is no system in place for regular monitoring or for examining duplication, complementarities, synergies, and gaps across agricultural advisory service providers in a district. No impact evaluations on extension systems (or any parts of it) have been done, despite being called for in the Policy and in the Guide. The lack of monitoring structures further contributes to poor coordination among actors (Chowa et al. 2013).

### IMPACT OF EXTENSION SERVICES AT FARM-LEVEL

Several experts have studied the impact of farmer's access to extension services and various delivery methods on technology adoption and agricultural productivity in Malawi. The findings are mixed. Chirwa (2005) finds that contact with extension services is insignificant in explaining smallholder farmer adoption of inorganic fertilizers and hybrid maize seed in Machinga district. Kampani (2011) finds that extension service is not significant in explaining smallholder farmer knowledge and use of soybean production practices in Lilongwe district. On the other hand, Kilic et al. (2013) show that access to extension services is significant in explaining productivity levels of both female- and male-headed households; while Maguza-Tembo (2010), in a study of the effectiveness of farmer-to-farmer extension compared with the conventional extension system in Dedza districts, shows that extension services and frequency of extension visits to farmers significantly influenced adoption by farmers of recommended maize production technologies. These inconsistent impacts mirror the many challenges and weakness in extension service provision in Malawi and signal the inconsistent quality and relevance of the messages provided farmers.

A recent study by Ragasa et al. (forthcoming) using nationally representative household survey shows that access to extension services – measured as reported receipt of agricultural advice from any source – has no effect on productivity and food security consistently across all estimated models. However, when the authors further disaggregated access to agricultural advice by the quality of the advice received, they show that farm households which rated the advice they received as 'not useful' have consistently lower productivity and food security measures than those who rated the advice they received as 'very useful'. This finding highlights the importance of ensuring that advice provided farmers is of high quality and relevant if any impacts from agricultural extension services are to be seen on agricultural productivity and food security.

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRIORITY ACTION AREAS

To enhance the impact of agricultural extension services on agricultural productivity, food security, and the incomes of farm households, this Policy Note recommends faster implementation of public sector reforms, including decentralization of extension services and streamlining of functions and staffing. The streamlining process should be guided by a proper mapping of service providers to identify areas of duplication and complementarity and where there are gaps, identification of demand for different types of advice from different types of farmers, and effective training and incentive schemes for fewer qualified extension staff.

The role of the public sector in agricultural extension service provision in Malawi should be thought of as value addition and filling gaps which other actors cannot fill. As the Policy states: "Public funds must be used in the public interest. Hence, government must prioritize and target its budget to extension services..." (p. 24). The public sector must use its limited funds to play the roles of facilitator and coordinator, rather than as service provider. In the short term, government should:

1. Focus on strengthening the capacity of FBOs and other community-based associations to be able to provide extension services to their members, to organize and voice their demands, and to lead the planning, monitoring, and evaluation of extension service provision.
2. While the capacity of local organizations is being strengthened, prioritize extension service provision by government to areas, commodities, and farming households that private sector and NGO extension service providers are not able to cover.
3. Focus on strengthening its capacity for facilitation, coordination, regulation, and certification of service providers.
4. Focus on setting-up and implementing a system of mapping, monitoring, and evaluating extension service provision. Part of this exercise is a regular assessment of extension messages and advice provided by different service providers, and the relevance and usefulness of this advice to different types of farmers.

Several donors are currently supporting the agricultural extension system in Malawi, including the government of Flanders, the World Bank, DFID, USAID, Norway, Germany, the European Union, and various UN agencies, i.e., IFAD, FAO, and WFP. These development partners provide significant resources for strengthening the

extension system, providing at least US\$ 1.5 million per year. In the absence in the short term of government funding for operating costs, donors' resources should support and strengthen the capacity of government in fulfilling its roles in coordination, facilitation, certification, monitoring, and evaluation of extension services, at the same time as the capacity of FBOs and other local organizations is strengthened to enable them to be effective service providers. Donors should also coordinate their efforts, ensuring all are aware of how the support of each complements or duplicates that of others and providing additional support where gaps are identified.

This Policy Note suggests the need in the long-term for greater resources and investments from government for agricultural extension. This way, funding for extension services can become stable and sustainable, rather than relying on external funding.

Malawi has a well-written and well-meant policy on extension services, but one which lacks implementation and enforcement. Commitment and bold actions will be needed to ensure that it is implemented through ensuring that a sufficient mass of local service providers are strengthened and that the role of the public sector in coordination and regulation is played effectively.

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