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**BROKERING IN PRACTICE:
THE EXPERIENCES OF THE RIU MALAWI COUNTRY PROGRAMME**

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DISCUSSION PAPER SERIES

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The views expressed, and any errors, in this report are my own.

BROKERING IN PRACTICE: THE EXPERIENCES OF THE RIU MALAWI COUNTRY PROGRAMME

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Abstract

Commissioned by the Central Research Team (CRT) of RIU, this study develops an institutional history of the Research Into Use Malawi Country Programme. It has sought to focus on the specific mechanisms associated with ‘innovation platforms’ and the function of the country programme as a brokering or intermediary within wider innovation and development landscapes. What emerges is an account of a programme that was willing to break away from the usual ‘silo thinking’ and ‘turf wars’ that had characterised past development interventions in the agricultural sector. At the same time, however, conveying its intentions to an audience accustomed to working through a triad of actors (researchers-extension agents-farmers) would prove to be far from straightforward. The situation was made more complicated by the restructuring and redefinition that happened within the programme itself. The country programme would negotiate a series of tensions between the expectations of local stakeholders (‘a pot of money’, ‘an input dissemination project’), overall RIU programme management (‘getting research outputs off-the-shelves’, ‘building networks to enable innovation’ and ‘generating lessons on innovation processes’) and its donors (‘quantifiable numbers of beneficiaries’). Nonetheless, RIU-Malawi appears to have located niches within which to begin transforming interactions, working routines, policies, as well as the production and use of knowledge. By all accounts, however, it is too soon to tell to what extent these niche-level changes can reverberate at broader scales.

Key words: Research Into Use, Agricultural Research, Innovation, Policy, Institutional Learning, Malawi

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

ACP	-	Africa Country Programme
ADD	-	Agricultural Development Division
ADMARC	-	Agricultural Development and Marketing Corporation
ADP	-	Agricultural Development Programme
AICC	-	African Institute for Corporate Citizenship
ASSMAG	-	Association of Smallholder Seed Multiplication Action Group
ASWAP	-	Agriculture Sector Wide Approach
CAADP	-	Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme
CGIAR	-	Consultative Group for International Agricultural Research
CIAT	-	International Centre for Tropical Agriculture
CRT	-	Central Research Team
CSDP	-	Country Strategy and Programme Development
DAHLP	-	Department of Animal Health and Livestock Production
DARS	-	Department of Agricultural Research Services
DCP	-	Department of Crop Development
DFID	-	Department for International Development
FAO	-	The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization
FISP	-	Farmer Input Subsidy Programme
GALA	-	Grain Legumes Association
IFFN	-	Innovative Fish Farmers' Network
IOD/PARC	-	International Organisation Development

IRDP	-	Integrated Rural Development Projects
JICA	-	Japan International Cooperation Agency
KIT	-	Royal Tropical Institute (Koninklijk Instituut voor de Tropen)
LINK	-	Learning INnovation Knowledge
MDGs	-	Millennium Development Goals
MEGS	-	Malawi Economic Growth Strategy
MGWIPA	-	Mugwirizano Pig Association (Mulanje)
MLC	-	Monitoring and Learning Coordinator
MPRS	-	Malawi Poverty Reduction Strategy
MRFC	-	Malawi Rural Finance Company
MTR	-	Medium Term Review
NAC	-	National Aquaculture Centre
NARS	-	National Agricultural Research System
NGO	-	Non-Governmental Organisation
NIC	-	National Innovation Coalition
NIDA	-	Nkoola Institutional Development Associates Ltd.
NRDP	-	National Rural Development Programme
NRI	-	Natural Resources International
OVOP	-	One Village One Product
PIAD	-	Presidential Initiative for Aquaculture Development
R&D	-	Research and Development
RIU	-	Research Into Use
RNRRS	-	Renewable Natural Resources Research Strategy

S&T	-	Science and Technology
STAM	-	Seed Traders' Association of Malawi
TR	-	Technical Review
UK	-	United Kingdom
UN	-	United Nations
USA	-	United States of America
VSO	-	Volunteer Services Overseas

1. INTRODUCTION

Commissioned by the Central Research Team (CRT) of the Research Into Use (RIU) programme — funded by the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) — this study chronicles the institutional history of the RIU country programme in Malawi. In documenting the evolution of the programme, the study was asked to focus on two aspects: the specific mechanisms associated with 'innovation platforms' and the function of the country programme as a broker or intermediary within wider innovation and development landscapes.

The report draws on documentary analysis and a combination of informal, unstructured discussions and more formal, semi-structured interviews that were held in Lilongwe and Salima between January 24 and 28, 2011. Respondents included all members of the country programme team, representatives of the three innovation platforms², two of whom were platform champions, along with representatives of the National Innovation Coalition. The respondents were affiliated with government agencies, farmers' organisations, private companies, as well as national and international research organisations. In addition, key informant interviews with individuals familiar with the overall evolution of RIU were held at the inception of the study. The interviews were coded to ensure respondent anonymity, and the final report was validated by the country programme coordinator. The specific points of discussion varied with each respondent. Collectively, however, they contributed towards getting a measure of:

- What factors shaped the evolution of the country programme, and what were their consequences
- What RIU does at present, how it carries out these activities and what allows it to do so
- How the platforms function and what they do

² One representative of the Cotton Development Partnership (CDP), three representatives of the legumes platform, one representative of the livestock platform and one representative of the fish farming platform.

- What in the operational and organisational design makes the outcomes and impacts of the country programme more or less pro-poor and amenable to impact at scale

A database on the innovation platforms was compiled and submitted to the CRT and the country team in support of this report. A timeline was constructed with the help of the RIU-Malawi country coordinator (see Annex 1) to chart the key milestones in the programme's evolution. The report itself provides more detailed narratives of the events, their triggers and the factors that enabled or constrained action on the part of the country programme. In addition, the overall evolution of the portfolio of RIU-Malawi-supported platforms is depicted in Annex 2.

All respondents were generous with their time and insights. However, the five-day visit was insufficient to triangulate certain claims or to reach 'saturation' in responses. This report, therefore, reflects the views of a select group of individuals.

What emerged is an account of a country programme that clearly bears the hallmarks of the early vision of RIU. This has subsequently been described as being concerned with disseminating research results through the establishment of 'universal innovation systems architecture'. Indeed, by some accounts, the setting up of this architecture became an end in itself. Although the RIU's Africa Country Programmes (ACPs) were accorded some freedom to redefine themselves following the mid-term review of RIU and technical reviews in 2009, RIU-Malawi continued to pursue the course that, by this time, had been firmly set. Perhaps the most visible change that it made was to scale back the number of platforms that it was running, in the process redefining its approach towards farmer empowerment and building individual facilitation capacity.

Sticking to its guns in such a way may have carried the risk of failing to see other innovation prospects that a new programmatic outlook — adopted after the 2009 reviews — could have brought to light. Nonetheless, within its chosen trajectory, RIU-Malawi has found niches to begin transforming interactions, working routines, policies, as well as the

production and use of knowledge. Most respondents agree that it is too soon to tell to what extent these niche-level changes can reverberate at broader scales.

Such nascent institutional change has been made possible by the innovation brokerage that both the RIU-Malawi country team, as well as the stakeholders in the innovation platforms, have engaged in. Box 1 **on the next page** summarises some key insights from existing literature on innovation brokering. These tend to treat brokering as a product of three factors: demand articulation, network building and innovation process management within such networks (Leeuwis, 2004).

Box 1: Innovation Brokering

What is brokering?

- Providing information about potential collaborators
- Negotiating a transaction between parties
- Mediating, serving as a go-between
- Seeking advice, funding and support for innovation activities
- Making explicit innovation needs and demands regarding technology, knowledge, funding and policy
- Facilitating linkages between relevant actors
- Making norms, values and incentives compatible
- Encouraging the building of trust, the establishment of working procedures, reflective learning and conflict management

What are some of the common characteristics of a broker?

- Often publicly funded to provide a brokering role
- Neutrality
- Strongly embedded in operating context
- Has surfaced organically; can rarely be imposed in a top-down manner
- Activities are often intangible, and beyond the scope of conventional indicators
- Brokerage may not be the primary role of an organisation

Who might act as a broker?

- NGOs
- National/ international NGOs
- Descendents of special projects
- Donors
- Experiments within NAR programmes
- Farmers and industry organisations
- Research organisations
- Specialist third party organisations
- Government organisations
- ICT-based brokers
- Innovation consultants
- Peer networks
- Systemic instruments (at higher levels; beyond government or private sector interests)
- Internet
- Research councils with innovation agency
- Education brokers

Source: Author's own construct based on Klerkx, Hall & Leeuwis (2009) citing Howells (2006), Johnson (2008), Van Lente, et al. (2003), Klerkx & Leeuwis (forthcoming), Smits, et al. (2004), Kristianson, et al. (2009) and Harqadon (2002)

Given the prominence of the innovation platforms in the country programme, these are the arenas within which most of the brokering occurs. It is not only the RIU-Malawi team that performs such functions; other individuals or groups of individuals have assumed brokering roles throughout the programme's lifetime. This is partly attributable to a deliberate

strategy of devolving responsibility over activities and progress to platform members and other project stakeholders. It also reflects past findings, which suggest that individuals appointed from the outset may not necessarily prove to be the most effective brokers. Where they fall short, others step in to carry out such activities, often unexpectedly, but with more legitimacy and commitment. Indeed, the experiences of RIU-Malawi suggest that brokers' legitimacy is not necessarily derived from their perceived neutrality. Rather, openly declaring vested interests, which coincide with those of other stakeholders, earns trust in a broker's dedication to pursue collective goals.

The report is structured as follows. The subsequent chapter outlines the policy and institutional context in which RIU-Malawi emerged, while Section 3 delves into the initial programme architecture and activities. Section 4 outlines the changes that the programme experienced following the 2009 reviews, while Section 5 describes the current programme core — three remaining innovation platforms — in more detail. Section 6 attempts to extract lessons on brokering, institutional change and programme impact from the overall history of RIU Malawi.

2. RIU MALAWI PROGRAMME CONTEXT AND EARLY ACTIVITIES

Locating RIU's niche in Malawi

The evolution of Malawi's agricultural sector reflects that of many others in the region: a post-independence period dominated by wide-scale state involvement; the adoption of structural adjustment programmes, and a shift towards market-led development; and, more recently, a renegotiation of space between the state and the market, coupled with the emergence of a new set of actors straddling the conventional public sector/private sector divide (see Box 2). This operating context has prompted a search for new working arrangements: "how to coordinate the complementary services for the promotion of agricultural growth in a liberalised market in which most markets are still thin and working imperfectly; how to develop the private sector and to ensure that it operates efficiently; [and] how to achieve scale in the product markets for export crops and the role of the state in the market" (Chirwa, et al., 2006; p. 3).

Agriculture has consistently featured high on the development agenda of Malawi. In the past 15 years alone, the Framework for Poverty Alleviation (1995), the Malawi Vision 2020 (1998), the Malawi Poverty Reduction Strategy (MPRS) (2002), the Malawi Economic Growth Strategy (MEGS) (2004) and the Malawi Growth and Development Strategy (2005) all identified agriculture as a critical element in promoting economic growth (Chirwa, et al., 2006). However, the overlapping timeframes of these policy instruments have led to uncertainties, with each having proposed somewhat different strategies for the transformation of the sector. The Malawi Poverty Reduction Strategy, for instance, identified smallholders and small-scale enterprises as the drivers of economic growth through domestic markets. The Malawi Economic Growth Strategy placed greater emphasis on export-oriented agriculture, both among large- and small-scale farmers. Tea, sugarcane, cotton and tobacco were identified as priority crops (small-scale farmers are mainly involved in the production of cotton and tobacco), and cassava, legumes and rice were also felt to have export potential (*ibid.*)

The change in government in 2004 set in motion the process of integrating the MPRS and the MEGS. Coupled with the emergence of regional and continent-wide frameworks for agricultural development (including the Comprehensive Africa Agricultural Development Programme; CAADP), the Malawian government was compelled to clarify its priorities for the agricultural sector and to align them with international efforts. This led to the formulation of the Agricultural Development Programme (ADP; 2007), a touchstone for the early design of the Malawi Country Programme. The more recent Agriculture Sector Wide Approach (ASWAp) encapsulates the country's current priorities for the agricultural sector (Chirwa, et al. 2006).

The trend seems to have been towards more private sector involvement and business orientation in — particularly smallholder — agriculture. However, the specific means through which especially vulnerable, agriculture-dependent households might capitalise on the business potential of the sector is not entirely clear. A recent United Nations Country Assessment noted that “[most of the analysis, programming and policy making in [the agricultural sector] is done without specifically focusing on poverty impacts and vulnerability reduction, possibly due to the presumption that the sector is inherently pro-poor and that given the low baselines, one cannot really miss the target” (UN-Malawi; p. 6). Moreover, although there has been no shortage of policy statements, the capacity and political will to act on them has been found wanting (Chirwa, et al., 2006).

When RIU began to develop the country programme in Malawi, the group of consultants tasked with its preliminary design was confronted by this arabesque of policies, along with various actors and initiatives pursuing rural development. An array of projects were targeting rural households, alongside government bodies, farmers' organisations, CGIAR centres, NGOs, credit agencies (spanning commercial banks and micro-finance institutions), as well as small-, medium- and large-scale companies specialising in input supply, processing, distribution and/ or marketing. Although there were gradual moves towards harmonisation, there was little coordination or communication between or within sub-sectors (Ellis-Jones, et al. 2007a).

Box 2: Negotiating Space for Public and Private Sector Involvement in Agriculture in Malawi

The policies of the immediate post-independence era defined a critical role for the state in smallholder agriculture. Driven by the goal of attaining national food self-sufficiency, newly independent Malawi put in place large-scale, aid-supported projects (Integrated Rural Development Projects; IRDPs). These expanded rural road infrastructure, along with market and storage facilities, and integrated crop-specific marketing boards into a parastatal Agricultural Development and Marketing Corporation (ADMARC). The state became the major supplier of seed and fertiliser, as well as the buyer of smallholder produce. These efforts amounted to a system of subsidised fertiliser, credit and ‘transaction facilitation’. The costs of such services, along with the actual administration of the IRDPs, became prohibitive and, in 1976, the IRDPs were incorporated into a nation-wide National Rural Development Programme (NRDP) (Chirwa, et al.; 2006).

The NRDP consisted of smaller scale, still aid-supported projects that were managed by eight Agricultural Development Divisions (ADDs). This did not alleviate the high cost of the programme and aid for the IRDPs began to dwindle. Support for the vast system of assistance now had to come from the government. However, with structural adjustment programmes beginning to take root in Malawi, the government was advised to reduce substantially its financial contributions to such efforts. Fertiliser subsidies were phased out and agricultural credit for smallholders was transformed to operate on a commercial basis (managed by the new Malawi Rural Finance Company; MRFC). Funding for extension services and agricultural research also declined throughout the 1990s (Garforth, 2005; as cited in Chirwa, et al., 2006).

According to Chirwa, et al. (2006), “[t]he liberalisation of markets and state withdrawal in [sic] various markets has led to the erosion of complementary services [extension services, provision of agricultural finance and interventions in product and input markets] necessary for the promotion of agricultural growth” (p. 22).

The void left by state withdrawal has partially been filled by the (product and input) market(s); however, this is said to remain out of reach for many smallholders. For instance, their access to credit appears to be a problem after the contraction of ADMARC. Some interviewees explained that commercial banks and microfinance institutions remain wary of lending to smallholders as a result of the uncertainty of the natural environment (and hence rainfed agriculture), which leads to irregular income streams.

The tide seems to be turning on the desirability of subsidies; the verdict seems to be that “most smallholder agriculture (particularly that of poorer farmers) cannot develop without state support” (Chirwa, et al, 2006; p. 6). Indeed, the government has re-introduced an agricultural input subsidy programme, which is providing a ‘market-pull’ for the legumes platform (see Section 5).

It is against this backdrop that RIU-Malawi emerged. An individual, who was closely involved with the development of the country programme and with in-depth knowledge of the agricultural sector, noted that RIU-Malawi came onto the scene as a stimulus for greater coordination and a unified vision. It appeared to be a venture that was willing to break away from the usual 'silo thinking' and 'turf wars' that had characterised past development interventions in the sector (interview RIUM11). At the same time, however, conveying its intentions to an audience accustomed to working through a triad of actors (researchers-extension agents-farmers) would prove to be far from straightforward. The situation was not helped by the restructuring and redefinition that happened within the programme itself. The country programme would negotiate a series of tensions between the expectations of local stakeholders ('a pot of money', 'an input dissemination project'), overall RIU programme management ('getting research outputs off-the-shelves', 'building networks to enable innovation' and 'generating lessons on innovation processes') and its donors ('quantifiable numbers of beneficiaries').

3. ESTABLISHMENT OF RIU-MALAWI

Programme development in Malawi began in early 2007 with a country assessment. This was based on extensive consultations, which were led by a group of consultants and select in-country individuals with intimate knowledge of Malawi's agricultural sector. Some of these individuals would later become members of the Country Strategy and Programme Development (CSPD) team.

The subsequent Malawi Country Strategy (Ellis-Jones, et al., 2007b) diagnosed the state of agricultural sector as follows: “[it]remains confronted with the problems of low yields, over-dependence on rain-fed farming, low level of irrigation development, and despite a seed and fertiliser subsidy programme, low use of improved farm inputs. As a result smallholder agriculture remains largely unprofitable. This low profitability has been exacerbated by weak links to markets, high transport costs, and few functioning farmer organisations at the grassroots level, poor quality control and lack of information on appropriate technologies, markets and prices” (p. 4). RIU-Malawi was going to address this situation by mobilising outputs from research on natural resources — particularly those generated under DFID's RNRRS (Renewable Natural Resources Research Strategy) programme — that had hitherto been ‘under-utilised’. Despite this point of departure, the CSPD team was clear that RIU-Malawi was not going to support research or extension in the conventional sense. Drawing on the concept of innovation systems, the programme was instead intent on encouraging the use of knowledge in productive ways.

3.1 The platforms take shape

Multi-stakeholder platforms were always going to be at the core of such endeavours. The RIU programme envisioned a platform as a group of partners driven by a mutual interest to further development, by generating, modifying and using research-derived knowledge in new ways (Report of first livestock platform meeting).

While the country strategy team made recommendations as to which platforms might be put in place, it emphasised that the full development of the platforms would have to be led

by committed individuals or groups of individuals in each sub-sector or area of focus (Ellis-Jones, et al., 2007a; 2007b). During the programme development phase³ and beyond, the types of platforms that RIU-Malawi would support evolved significantly. The bulk of them would be formed around specific commodity sectors (legumes and cotton, for instance), while others were envisioned to tackle thematic issues (such as input-output supply). In addition, platforms were planned for more homogeneous sets of stakeholders (including farmers and process facilitators) as peer-to-peer learning mechanisms. A knowledge, communication and information learning group would traverse all the platforms in efforts to strengthen the provision of agricultural information. All of these were expected to operate on a national level. District- and area-based platforms, in turn, would build momentum on a more grassroots level (CSPD team, 2008).

The first round of platform meetings took place between May and September, 2008. These followed a common format: participants were introduced to the RIU programme and taken through a participatory value chain analysis exercise to identify implementation priorities and roles for each platform member. In addition, participants' expectations of RIU were gauged. The exercise brought to light their often highly divergent starting points: while one hoped to carry out 'technology development and dissemination', another anticipated 'farmer empowerment', while others still were looking to 'improve industry' (see reports of first platform meetings). The task of the RIU-Malawi team was to negotiate such expectations, guide the identification of common interests and make a compelling case for the benefits that collective action could yield.

The RNRRS legacy is evident in the earlier design of the RIU country programmes. In identifying the issues facing each commodity sector, attention was given to the role that RNRRS and other research outputs could play in resolving them; this was the sense in which RIU-Malawi was strengthening the 'demand-pull' for RNRRS outputs. According to an individual involved with these early activities, research outputs represented ready-made

³ Approximately from early 2007 (the compilation of the country assessment) until mid-2008 (the official launch and the inauguration of the first commodity-based platforms).

solutions in search of problems. As a result, platforms were instilled with a culture of ‘unblocking constraints’ as opposed to ‘pursuing opportunities’ (interview RIUM4).

There was a sense that this mentality resonated with national development actors, who had, in the past, been exposed to a range of problem-oriented methodologies through donor- and NGO-mediated projects. This approach is still said to dominate interventions in various sectors, although alternative approaches — such as building on appreciative inquiry — are starting to emerge. As one respondent explained, these take as their starting points an analysis of the strengths of a system and the implementation of reinforcing measures with cascading effects. Such approaches are thought to achieve their objectives in a shorter space of time, since actors are motivated and able to build up momentum quickly. Problem-oriented efforts, in contrast, divert resources to overcoming deeply-held frustrations (interview RIUM4).

The Malawi country strategy team, along with key actors from the agricultural sector, developed concept papers for the platforms and canvassed widely for potentially interested members. These would consist of individuals with a significant stake in a well-functioning system. Those with extensive networks within — and a sound grasp of — the commodity sectors became the initial ‘platform champions’. They were expected to be able to commit considerable time to driving the platforms, instilling a business culture into their operations, searching for opportunities that could increase the benefits to platform members, sustaining actors’ motivations to collectively address innovation challenges, convening task forces to investigate specific issues, and overseeing the human and financial resources of the platforms (CSPD, 2008).

Researchers from national agricultural research centres or international agricultural research institutes were elected to serve as champions of the fisheries, livestock and legumes platforms by the platform members (see reports of early platform meetings). This is perhaps some indication of the primacy that was given to agricultural science as the source of solutions to agricultural bottlenecks. Still, these individuals were valued not only

for the technical advice that they could offer, but as one respondent explained, their authority also rested on the networks that they could mobilise in support of platform goals (interview RIUM5).

The cotton platform (or the Cotton Development Partnership, as it became known) opted for an alternative tack; it elected the managing director of a large input supply company as its champion. Individuals closely associated with the platform interpret this as part of the platform's ambition to cultivate a more business-friendly environment within a sector that had long been steered by government (interviews RIUM11 and RIUM4). The platform would stage demonstrations to showcase improved varieties, alternative management practices and the use of inputs. Although at first glance this may seem like an apparently conventional approach, one member of the Cotton Development Partnership suggests that this did represent a break with the past; instead of public sector extension services disseminating technical advice and pre-packaged inputs, the demonstrations served as 'trade fairs' for input, marketing and processing companies to showcase their activities and compete for farmers' business (RIUM11).

It was not only platform champions who were to play a critical role in sustaining momentum around the individual platforms. The country strategy team also envisioned a set of platform facilitators who would support champions by managing the day-to-day activities of platforms — facilitating meetings and documenting proceedings, monitoring progress, as well as building networks among platform members and between the platform and other actors — and sustaining momentum 'on the ground' and in between platform meetings (Ellis-Jones, et al., 2007b; CSDP, 2008). RIU set up an 18-month capacity building programme with the intention of training a pool of facilitators in innovation systems, organisational development, process facilitation, action research and team development and leadership. The facilitators formed a peer learning group (a further platform under RIU-Malawi) to support such efforts (see reports of the second meetings of the livestock and fish farming platforms). As Section 4 will detail, this component of the programme was scrapped following mid-term and technical reviews, and the roles envisioned for the facilitators were

appropriated by other stakeholders. In the end, only the livestock platform would make use of dedicated facilitators (see Section 5).

At their initial meetings the platforms deliberated the range of commodities that they could address. The livestock platform, for instance, considered including beef, poultry and goats into its remit. It was only later — after agreeing on the quick returns that it could offer to small-scale, resource-poor farmers — that the platform settled on piggery as its main focus. Dairy was also a strong contender and, indeed, the platform put in place initial activities focused on this sector. Ultimately, however, members felt that dairy was not a similar 'orphan sector' as piggery.

At this stage, a platform for fish farming was not even among the options that had been put forward. However, it was through the lobbying of a senior researcher from WorldFish Centre — a key informant to the CSDP team, and the eventual platform champion — that the fish farming platform was eventually also included. Likewise, horticulture would only be proposed subsequently by dedicated platform facilitators (interviews RIUM4, RIUM6 and RIUM11).

3.2 A support fund to enable innovation

Once the platforms had articulated key challenges that they would tackle, they developed project proposals with desired outputs, indicators for monitoring progress, budgets, timelines and focal points responsible for progress. The proposals were submitted to the National Innovation Coalition (NIC; see Section 3.6.) for review. If the proposals were accepted, RIU-Malawi allocated 'seed money' (sometimes used interchangeably with 'platform grant') to the platforms (interview RIUM11).

Indeed, a support fund to enable innovation had been mooted in the early stages of programme design. In its initial form, this was to stimulate farmers' innovativeness and

encourage more responsive service provision through strengthening organisational management practices, creating new enterprises or adding value to agricultural produce (Ellis-Jones et al., 2007b). Subsequently, this seed money became available to platforms on the condition that it would ‘trigger the flow of research outputs into use’, ‘catalyse activities that stakeholders could continue on their own’ and was ‘not be used for development project-like efforts’ (see report of the second fish farming platform meeting). It consisted of £30,000 as grant money, and £10,000 for training or consultancy services (*ibid.*).

The second round of platform meetings was dedicated to preparing platforms to receive the seed money (see reports of second platform meetings). This was considered a part of the country programme’s capacity building remit; platforms would gain skills in innovation fund management, which would prepare them to handle future investments for other sources. The allocation of money towards activities that were stated in the proposal was at the discretion of the platforms. In most cases, part of the seed money has been used as a grant, with no expectation of repayment to either RIU or the platform. The remainder has been given as a loan to certain platform members, with the expectation that it would be repaid into a revolving fund that the platform could use to finance other activities (interviews RIUM5 and RIUM6).

The platforms elected treasurers and set up financial sub-committees with auditing responsibilities. Indeed, most platforms put in place other transient or permanent sub-structures, such as task forces or working groups, to tackle specific issues that emerged during platform deliberations (interviews RIUM5, RIUM6, RIUM8, RIUM9). The fish farming platform, for instance, convened task forces to develop guidelines for operating hatcheries; revitalising a network of fish farmers whose activities had subsided after the withdrawal of the donor that initially brought them together; examining the taxation of imported fish farming inputs; as well as devising a marketing strategy for hatcheries that were members of the platform (see Section 5). The cotton platform, in contrast, devised more permanent working groups around research, extension and production; credit and financing; marketing and pricing; as well as policy and regulation.

The concept of a fund, dispersed by the programme to support innovation enabling activities, has been retained to this day. More recently, following the 2009 technical review, RIU created a Flexibility Fund, which could be dispersed at the discretion of country programme teams to pursue opportunities for pro-poor innovation that may not have been identified in the initial programme design (see Section 4).

3.3 Farmer empowerment: Correcting the knowledge supply-demand balance

The initial orientation of the innovation support fund is indicative of the early focus of RIU-Malawi: it sought to redress ineffectual farmer organisations that lacked the capacity to articulate farmers' interests and to pursue them. This stemmed from an analysis of the innovation system that existed at the time of programme development. The diagnosis was an imbalance between 'the supply of knowledge' from the CGIAR system and the national agricultural research system, and 'the demand for knowledge' on the part of farmers and their representative bodies. "Strategic weaknesses, gaps and market failures between demand and supply provide many opportunities for RIU to strengthen the demand side. A key role identified for [the Malawi country programme] is to facilitate a process of farmer organisation development and help create an environment in which information and knowledge flows effectively between stakeholders. This requires a facilitation process of capacity building so that the voice of the excluded majority is heard and demand for information is enhanced and effectively used in increasing productivity and improving livelihoods" (CSPD, 2008; p. 5).

Among others, this entailed the setting up of a farmer empowerment learning group (another platform, according to some respondents) of farmers' representative organisations. They would gain capacities in engaging in policy negotiations, exchange experience on governance and establish common advocacy positions. As Section 4 will discuss, farmers and their organisations showed little enthusiasm for the platform. Moreover, with hindsight, the strategy adopted was deemed too ambitious for the available timeframe. Following programme reviews, the platform was dismantled, and farmer empowerment mainstreamed into the remaining, commodity-based platforms.

3.4 Finding a host

This early focus on farmers was also evident in discussions over a programme host (Ellis-Jones et al., 2007a; 2007b; CSDP, 2008). The Farmers Union of Malawi and the National Smallholder Farmers' Association were considered as possible 'organisational homes' for the programme. Other options included an independent secretariat that would support the platforms or the devolution of secretariat functions into each platform. The Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security was also considered a possible host at this stage. Indeed, the Ministry is said to have been keen on implementing the programme. The concern, however, was that the culture of a government agency — with the tendency to hold several meetings and the expectation that participants receive generous allowances — would divert time and resources from concrete programme activities (interview RIUM4).

Nonetheless, the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security was clearly a critical entity to have on board. In the end, the head of Agricultural Extension and Technical Services became the patron of the country programme. The patron was expected to facilitate interactions with policy communities.

The country programme would find an eventual host in the African Institute for Corporate Citizenship (AICC). Indeed, it was considered necessary that in addition to being registered and having a legal standing with a proven track record in project management, the host should have synergies with RIU's aims, including networks within the agricultural sector and a commitment to promoting smallholder agriculture (Ellis-Jones, et al. 2007a; 2007b; CSPD 2008). During the programme design phase, the AICC was itself preparing for the inception of a public-private partnership in cotton development. Given that the country strategy team had considered cotton as a priority area, there appeared to be a natural gravitation towards seeking mutual ground with AICC (interviews RIUM4 and RIUM7).

In the end, AICC would provide the country programme with basic project infrastructure (office space, telecommunications and transport) as well as oversee the administration of its funds from RIU headquarters in the United Kingdom. This arrangement effectively removed

financial administration from the purview of the country coordinator. There was a sense that this had caused delays in programme implementation (in the absence of signatories for the release of funds, for instance) (interviews RIUM5 and RIUM9).

RIU-Malawi also had an influence on AICC's activities, broadening the constituency of its cotton initiative beyond a conventional public-private partnership and embedding its business development aspirations for cotton within wider networks of innovation (interviews RIUM4 and RIUM11).

3.5 Monitoring, evaluation and learning

In its early form, RIU-Malawi coupled monitoring, impact assessment and learning. It was envisioned that these activities would, as far as possible, be carried out by in-country organisations and individuals. Priorities would be identified in consultation with stakeholders, and within a 'Performance and Learning Framework' that would be articulated at the overall programme level. The activities of the platforms would be documented, and reflected against an initial baseline assessment to record changes. Lessons would also be extracted from platform experiences and incorporated into future activities. RIU-Malawi was to set up mechanisms for representatives of different platforms to exchange experiences through, for instance, the farmer empowerment and facilitators' platforms (Ellis-Jones, et al. 2007a; 2007b; CSPD, 2008).

The integration of monitoring, impact assessment and learning with other programme activities was a challenge. According to respondents, this is partly attributable to the programme management structure that was in place at the overall RIU level (the RIU programme was managed by a consortium of companies.).

The country team would come to consist of a Country Coordinator, a Process Facilitator and a Monitoring and Learning Coordinator (MLC). The set-up was such that the MLC did not report directly to the country coordinator; rather, his or her reporting line led to one of the companies in the consortium managing RIU, which was responsible for the monitoring and

evaluation of the RIU programme. The country coordinator and facilitator, in turn, answered to another company.

As it evolved, the RIU programme would alter its overall management structure, and along with it, the arrangement through which it carried out monitoring and evaluation and extracted lessons from its experiences. Country teams would assume responsibility over the former; the latter would be set up as a research programme in its own right (see Section 4).

3.6 Influencing policy

It was not only the country strategy team, the country team and the patron that were envisioned to play critical roles in setting up the country programme. The Country Programme Strategy (December 2007) and Implementation Plan (February 2008) also called for a Malawi Coalition for Innovations in Agriculture (later dubbed the National Innovation Coalition), which would consist of 5-10 individual or institution-based ‘innovation champions’, who were receptive towards the RIU ethos and who were already implementing RIU-like approaches. The Coalition was envisioned “to provide the energy, stimulus, resources and critical mass of effort to facilitate the greater use of research-based knowledge in the agricultural and wider natural resource sector to reduce poverty, improve livelihoods and sustainable use of the environment” (Ellis-Jones, et al., 2007b; p. 16).

As with the other platforms, NIC would elect a chairperson (and later, an alternate chairperson). Further down the line, NIC expressed its desire to formulate a constitution and become a legal entity, capable of forging contracts, engaging in fund-raising and accessing loans on behalf of the other platforms (interview RIUM11).⁴ This aspiration reflected an evolution in the role of the NIC from providing programme development support — including managing the launch of the Malawi Country Programme in June 2008 — to a more concerted strategic oversight role. Indeed, the NIC was envisioned to develop into an

⁴ The motivation for seeing this through is reported to have dissipated of late, and it remains to be seen whether NIC will formalise its status in this manner.

effective board of RIU-Malawi, while the country team carried out day-to-day management of the programme⁵ and the AICC provided administrative support.

Among others, the NIC reviewed proposals for platforms and decided upon the allocation of platform grants. In addition, its members were thought to be effective conduits between policy communities and the individual platforms (Ellis-Jones, et al, 2007a; 2007b.; CPSD, 2008). However, the coalition was not the only mechanism for interfacing with policy. Members of the RIU-Malawi team also actively networked with policy communities, among others, by securing meetings with the directors of the various departments to showcase the activities of the platforms. Moreover, the RIU-Malawi patron was expected to provide a direct link between the RIU-Malawi programme and government, in particular the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security.

In addition — and according to respondents, partly through happenstance — each platform would come to have a link with their respective ‘line departments’ within the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security (interviews RIUM5, RIUM6, RIUM9 and RIUM11). In the case of legumes, for instance, the Ministry would establish a task force to devise sub-sector policy. The legumes platform champion became a member of this task force, thereby establishing access for the platform to the formulation of sector policy (RIU-Malawi Annual Report, 2009). The livestock platform, in turn, would count among its members a senior representative from the Department of Animal Health and Livestock Development. Through this connection, which has been reinforced by sustained communication by the country programme team, the department’s director has been kept informed of activities. Indeed, he recently expressed the intention of the Malawian government to seek funding for the replication of the platform’s decentralised pig markets elsewhere in the country (RIU website).

In 2006, prior to the inception of RIU-Malawi, the Malawian government had launched the Presidential Initiative for Aquaculture Development (PIAD) in an effort to significantly

⁵ Raising awareness of innovation systems approaches; coordinating interactions between NIC, the platforms and other actors; facilitating capacity building; sourcing technical support for the platforms; ‘information brokerage’; as well as programme planning and management.

increase the practice of fish farming to curtail the pressure on wild fish stocks through fishing in open waters. The initial Process Facilitator (who would subsequently become the Country Coordinator) of RIU-Malawi was invited to serve as a member of an ad hoc committee tasked with translating the aims of PIAD into practice. The connection was further strengthened when the head of extension services at the Department of Fisheries, who also served as the PIAD coordinator, joined the platform. Through these connections, the implementation plan of the fisheries platform became a recognised mechanism through which PIAD would be realised (RIU-Malawi Annual Report, 2009).

The cotton platform, in turn, would create a number of issue-specific working groups, including the Policy and Regulation Working Group. Members of the working group actively lobbied government to review the Cotton Act (seen as discouraging the business potential of the sector, particularly for small-scale producers) and to establish a Cotton Council to oversee sector policy (RIU-Malawi Annual Report, 2009).

These platform-specific connections to policy communities would serve RIU-Malawi well, as the NIC struggled to fulfil the policy advocacy expectations that had been placed upon it. Indeed, in its most recent incarnation, the coalition appears to have become a forum for cross-platform learning. There were other — perhaps more intentional — means through which the RIU-Malawi programme sought to ensure effective use of its resources, build sustainability into its activities and avoid replication of past projects. Among others, it looked for alignment with ongoing or planned initiatives that would support its objectives, and made an effort to build on the outcomes of past projects. The fish farming platform, for instance, would situate its initial efforts at a location that had high numbers of fish farmers, was in the vicinity of national and international fish research institutes, and had witnessed a number of past projects on fish farming. Thus, RIU's fish farming platform sought to build cohesion into the existing architecture (see Section 5).

Having charted the establishment of the RIU-Malawi programme, the subsequent chapter casts its sights to the spring of 2009, the end of the first year of programme implementation. By this time, the programme had built up a substantial portfolio of activities, each of which demanded considerable input from the country team. Moreover,

the team regularly played host to various out-of-country consultants who would carry out monitoring or training. There was a growing sense that the country programme had cast its net rather ambitiously and that it relied heavily on outside expertise. At the same time, changes were taking place at the overall RIU programme level. Following a mid-term review, the RIU programme would be streamlined and reorganised, with several consequences for the functioning of the Africa Country Programmes.

4. TURNING POINT

4.1 Taking stock

By March 2009 RIU-Malawi had put in place five commodity-based platforms (cotton, legumes, livestock, fish farming and horticulture), two learning groups (farmer empowerment and platform facilitators), one district-level platform (in Zomba) and two sub-district level platforms. In addition, it was providing support to the NIC (RIU-Malawi annual report, 2009).

Individuals involved with the programme in these early days recall a series of platform meetings and various workshops, which would be organised collectively by the country team, the NIC, platform champions, as well as out-of-country consultants (interviews RIUM4, RIUM5 and RIUM11). Indeed, the country programme seemed to play host to a roster of such consultants, who — despite the emphasis on in-country, stakeholder-led development of activities — were said to have had substantial say in shaping activities. Although there was palpable enthusiasm among stakeholders around this new programme, and the commodity-based platforms were convened quickly and set about identifying priority issues within their sub-sectors without delays, there was also a sense of frustration regarding ‘the amount of talk’ around ‘very abstract ideas’ (interview RIUM5). While unavoidable in the initial stages of an endeavour of this nature, some individuals now describe the frequency of meetings as ‘exaggerated’ (interview RIUM11). Moreover, the reliance on out-of-country consultants to guide monitoring and evaluation, capacity-building and other areas of activity put considerable pressure on the financial resources of the programme. It also delayed the building up of trust and credibility in the country team itself among stakeholders: at most encounters at this early stage the country team was accompanied by a foreign consultant (interview RIUM4).

In addition, the country team was expected to revert to the overall RIU management for much of its decision-making. This was felt to lead to delays in implementing activities, and on occasion, to different interpretations as to what would be the best course of action. Any

momentum that existed on the ground seemed at times to be held back by a heavy management structure at the overall RIU level and a large cohort of advisers (RIUM1 and 4).

In March 2009 the country programme made an assessment of the extent to which its activities were taking off (RIU-Malawi annual report, 2009). The commodity-based platforms appeared to have built up momentum. The fish farming platform set about enhancing the availability of fingerlings of an improved variety of tilapia. The legumes platform, in turn, had identified the multiplication of improved varieties of soybean, groundnut and beans as a bottleneck to the development of the legumes sub-sector. In particular, it would seek to enrol legume farmers in the process of producing certified seed, a practice from which farmers had been excluded in the past.

The livestock platform had set its sights on enhancing the dairy and piggery sub-sectors. Here, marketing was identified as a particular challenge. The platform would embark upon the construction of decentralised pig markets in efforts to balance domestic supply and demand and dissuade processors from importing meat from foreign markets. The cotton platform, in turn, was banking on demonstration plots to raise awareness among farmers of high-yielding, disease-resistant varieties. The horticulture platform intended to increase the production of seedlings of high-value horticultural crops by supporting farmers' organisations.

Sensitising stakeholders to the innovation systems concept proved to be a challenge. The country team and the NIC members speculated that it would take time for actors to internalise and appreciate the notion and its consequences for the agricultural and its allied sectors; its influence on policy would be gradual (RIUM4, RIUM5 and RIUM11). Nonetheless, there was growing recognition within the platforms of what operating in 'innovation systems' and 'value chain' modes entailed. According to respondents, linkages and information flow among platform members were developing, and they were beginning to appreciate the roles expected not just of them as individuals, but also of their organisations (interviews RIUM5, RIUM6 and RIUM9). Still, these were early days; it would take sustained efforts to translate these tentative dynamics into more sustained and broader-scale change.

4.2 Two decisive reviews

It was at this point in time that the programme underwent two, by all accounts, decisive reviews: a mid-term review (MTR; in March 2009) and a technical review (TR; in August 2009). The conclusions of both of these exercises had widespread consequences for RIU-Malawi. Among others, the programme was accorded greater autonomy; it gained access to a flexibility fund, intended to support innovation-enabling activities beyond those identified in the original project design; and it reduced the numbers of innovation platforms, in efforts to pursue ‘impact at scale’ through only those that showed highest potential (RIU programme annual report, 2009; interview RIUM1).

The reviews cast the programme in new light. Overall, the set-up of the country programmes came to be seen as ‘mechanistic’, concentrating on the establishment of structures (mainly platforms and national innovation coalitions) that would act as conduits for, what seemed to be, rather conventional technology dissemination efforts (Dijkman, 2010). This was attributed to a normative reading of innovation systems, with the result that each country programme was expected to put in place largely identical programme architectures (interview RIUM1).

Following the reviews, a redefinition was taking place at the overall programme level as well, regarding its ‘getting research-into-use’ and ‘learning about research-into-use’ mandates. A Central Research Team was established to coordinate the latter. The role of innovation systems theory was rearticulated; instead of offering ‘an ideal type’, the literature was deemed to suggest basic principles that would play out in different ways in different contexts (*ibid*). The shift was perhaps subtle in terms of semantics, but significant in terms of the modes in which the country programmes would continue. They were given the leeway to pursue strategies that made sense in their specific operating contexts, even if that entailed altering the workings of — or even taking a step back from — platforms.

With most of the platforms and other architecture already well-established in Malawi, the actual room for manoeuvre for the country team at this stage was rather confined. The commodity-based platforms continued as the bedrock of the country programme. These, it was felt, had the highest potential of ‘demonstrating impact at scale’ (interviews RIUM1 and RIUM4). The country programme was asked to devise an ambition statement, indicating the numbers of farmers who would be reached through the remaining platforms (see RIU-Malawi ambition statement). While the country team would continue to focus on the day-to-day management of activities towards such ends, a dedicated research fellow from the CRT would be appointed to chronicle its approaches (see RIU-Malawi research narratives). This careful process of analysis was expected to yield up-scalable lessons on innovation for development.

Although still at the core of the country programme, the numbers of platforms operating under RIU-Malawi were reduced significantly. The horticulture platform was discontinued as of the commodity-specific platforms in place, it was the one that had yet to roll out its activities in full (interview RIUM11). The district- and area-based platforms were also scrapped; the country team — located in Lilongwe — did not have the resources to provide the regular, in-person support that such grassroots presence would have required (interviews RIUM4 and RIUM11). According to respondents, engagement at this level would also come to be seen as beyond the remit of the ‘new RIU’ that was emerging as a consequence of the reviews.

Further down the line, the cotton platform would be deemed to have reached a level of maturity that warranted RIU-Malawi’s withdrawal as a funding source; this was not, though, a direct consequence of the reviews. Indeed, the reviews recommended a phasing out of the livestock platform (interview RIUM1). The country programme team, however, felt that the livestock platform showed promise and should be retained. Meanwhile, the cotton platform had built up critical momentum and succeeded in securing financial contributions from other programmes. RIU-Malawi would continue to play a facilitative role for a period of time, but eventually take a backseat in terms of such activities as well (interviews RIUM4 and RIUM11).

Although the farmer empowerment learning group had been set up, it appeared to generate a lacklustre response among participants (RIU-Malawi annual report, 2009). The decision was taken to mainstream capacity building through the commodity-based platforms. The country team would now target those farmers' groups and associations that were embedded within the platforms. This appears to have been a reorientation in terms of building capacity among actors, who were already situated within wider innovation networks, as opposed to targeting them in isolation.

Efforts to build up a critical pool of facilitators were also brought to a close; in the end, the platform champions, the project team and individual members would carry out facilitation. As one respondent explained, the closure of the capacity building programme for facilitators was something of an upshot of the post-review decision to focus on commodity-based platforms. The trainee-facilitators had not initially been aligned to specific platforms. As such, supporting a detached capacity building effort was seen as a strain on the country programme's resources (interview RIUM4).

The knowledge, communication and information learning component of the country programme had also struggled to get underway (RIU-Malawi annual report, 2009). This was an activity area in which the country programme requested further guidance from the RIU programme; however, respondents suggested that the programme itself was struggling to devise an effective implementation plan for it (interviews RIUM1 and RIUM4). Following the review, the RIU opted to discontinue this component throughout the Africa Country Programmes (RIU programme annual report, 2009-2010).

The termination of entire platforms, whose activities had already begun, had repercussions for the legitimacy of the programme among its stakeholders. An individual closely associated with RIU-Malawi to this point recalls disenchantment not only among the members of discontinued platforms, but also among observers in government, NGOs, the

donor community and the private sector (interview RIUM11). On the other hand, there was recognition that the restructuring of the country programme released it from its dependence on external advisers, and the resource-consuming responsibility of arranging successive consultation and evaluation visits. RIU-Malawi could now build an identity more strongly rooted in local ownership and context-appropriate solutions.

There were also changes to the RIU-Malawi team following the mid-term and technical reviews. The Country Coordinator was relieved of his duties by RIU Management in March 2009 without sharing the reasons with the Malawi team, and the Platform Facilitator took over, initially on an interim basis but subsequently in a permanent capacity. The technical review had pinpointed a chasm between the monitoring, impact and learning component and other activities of country programmes. The review recommended that the post of the MLC be terminated in all ACPs, and where possible, that the individual be given a new job description. In Malawi, the MLC also left the programme. Monitoring and impact evaluation tasks were now incorporated into the remit of the remaining country team members (interviews RIUM1 and RIUM4).

With the departure of both the initial country coordinator and the MLC, the Malawi team was reduced to a single individual between July 2009 and January 2010, when a programme officer and a communications officer joined the team. The programme officer took on the responsibility for facilitating the platforms, and coordinating monitoring and evaluation. The communications officer post was created anew, with the intention of improving the outreach activities of the programme. A media strategy was developed and the RIU team began to support the platforms in devising promotion material, including short documentary films and brochures. Most recently, the country team has been joined by a research fellow, responsible for documenting and analysing the programme's activities in enabling innovation (interviews RIUM1 and RIUM4).

Although programme activities may have slowed down during this period, they did not cease. The remaining platforms continued to pursue their implementation plans. The cotton

platform was engaged in negotiations with the government and private ginneries to set the market price for cotton. This was in attempts to thwart the events of the previous season: the government had acted unilaterally to set an artificially high price for cotton and the cost of the commodity became prohibitive for several ginneries, causing some of them to fold. The fisheries platform, in turn, was pursuing productivity gains and developing the business acumen of fish farmers by supporting the production of improved tilapia fingerlings by private hatcheries. The livestock platform had become focused on the piggeries sub-sector and had put in place activities to develop decentralised markets across the country. Finally, the legumes platform was in the process of renegotiating the institutional arrangements involved in seed multiplication (RIU-Malawi annual report, 2009).

In support of these ongoing platform activities, the country coordinator continued to interface with policy communities. Among others, the coordinator secured a private meeting with the Permanent Secretary for Agriculture and the heads of the different departments. This was an opportunity for each of the platforms to showcase their activities to high-level policy-makers. In addition, the fish farming platform had by now developed draft guidelines for hatcheries operations in efforts to set standards for fingerling and table fish production. These were presented to the Director for Fisheries for a first round of review in November 2010. Finally, a portion of the newly established Flexibility Fund was allocated to representatives of all platforms to support their participation in training on agricultural innovation systems. This turned out to be the only payment that has been made out of the Flexibility Fund to date. Section 6 will consider some of the reasons for this.

These activities were indicative of a transformation in the roles of country teams “from active implementation to the facilitation of the necessary linkages or the elimination of obstructions” (RIU Annual Report, 2009-2010; p. 33). Such innovation brokering was to be at the core of the redefined country programmes. Importantly, innovation platforms now became one among many approaches deployed by country teams to enable innovation. In Malawi, given the concentration of efforts in establishing the platforms and the fact that several of them had taken strong root, they remained the main arenas under which

brokering could be observed. The subsequent section considers these platforms in greater detail.

5. INNOVATION PLATFORMS

With the reorientation of the RIU programme following the mid-term and technical reviews, the ACPs were given space to pursue alternative approaches. In the case of the country programme in Malawi, which had gotten off the ground fairly soon after the inception of RIU, its agenda and working customs had been set. The platforms would remain at the programme core, albeit in reduced numbers.

The following sub-sections discuss the three remaining platforms — fish farming, legumes and livestock — in more detail.

5.1 Fish farming

Although it was flagged up at initial consultations during the programme design phase, fisheries was not identified as a sector that the programme should engage with in the immediate term. It was soon after the establishment of the NIC, however, that one of its members — a senior researcher from WorldFish Centre — succeeded in convincing the coalition of the potential for impact that existed in fish farming (interview RIUM4). A Presidential Initiative on Aquaculture Development (PIAD) had been launched in 2006 with the intention of increasing the economic returns from fish farming and cage aquaculture. Fishing in open waters had been depleting fish stocks in Malawi. Given its importance to household food security and income, the government was in search of mechanisms to allow fishing to continue while avoiding the exhaustion of resources. According to respondents, PIAD was one of several initiatives launched by various arms of government to promote the fisheries sector. A platform offered a means to ensure coordination across such efforts, and to translate policy intentions into action (interviews RIUM4 and RIUM8).

With nascent momentum already detectable on the ground, the platform was quickly brought together. Given RIU's ancestry in the RNRRS programme, the initial team of

consultants and the eventual country strategy team gravitated towards key figures in research institutes — whether international agricultural research centres, the national agricultural research system or academia — as sources of information on the Malawian agricultural sector and the role that RIU could play therein. It was in this manner that the senior researcher from WorldFish became involved in early discussions around programme content, and eventually, put himself forward as a candidate to head the fish farming platform (interview RIUM4). Other research bodies also joined the platform. The Department of Fisheries and Aquaculture of the Bunda College of Agriculture, together with WorldFish, offered technical expertise, particularly on fish feed and hatcheries operations. The Department of Economics from Chancellor College, in turn, contributed expertise on setting up market linkages on the basis of a recent research project on agricultural markets (*ibid.*).

Government was represented on the platform by the head of extension services at the Department of Fisheries, who also served as PIAD coordinator. The National Aquaculture Centre (NAC), a sector research institute under the government, also became a member (*ibid.*).

Several non-governmental organisations also opted to take part. As country team members recall, Project Concern International — a US-funded organisation — had its offices at the NAC campus. It was implementing the C-Fish project among fish farmers in Chingale and had gained experience in sourcing high quality fish feed and building access to markets for table fish. Project Concern International would be represented by its manager, who also served as a conduit between the platform and fish farmers participating in C-Fish. Solace Farm International, in turn, was a Malawian social enterprise with a vast portfolio of activities that included fish farming (interviews RIUM2 and RIUM4).

According to one member of the country team, World Vision had a long history of implementing fisheries programmes in Malawi, particularly around Chingale. In addition to contributing lessons from its experiences in the fisheries sector, the organisation would also

eventually buy improved fingerlings from platform-supported hatcheries. The organisation has been represented by its agricultural manager, who would also serve to relay messages between the platform and the broader fish farming community (interview RIUM2).

In addition to NGOs and ongoing development projects, fish farmers' organisations were an obvious way of enrolling key stakeholders into platform activities. The Innovative Fish Farmers' Network (IFFN) is an umbrella organisation for small- and medium-sized fish farmers' associations that were intent on pursuing fish farming as a business. It was established under a Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) -funded project. According to respondents, as the project came to an end, so too did the energy behind the network. A handful of individual farmers maintained contact with each other and some joined the platform in a private capacity. Subsequently, they persuaded the platform to revitalise the IFFN as part of its broader system-strengthening efforts (interview RIUM8).

Zomba Fish Farmers' Association, in turn, is a farmers' organisation that represents mainly small-scale farmers who produce fingerlings and table fish. It was established by the Department of Fisheries under a USAID-funded Community Participation for Sustainable Resource Management project. The association represents fish farmers across the entire Zomba district (interview RIUM2).

The platform also attracted participation from commercial-scale fish farmers. Indeed, the private sector had shown considerable interest in fish farming, given growing demand for fish among consumers. Among the commercial entities to join the platform were Mandevu Integrated Farms, African Novel Resources and Maldeco Aquaculture Limited, which produce both table fish and feed. More recently, Chikondichao Gardens — a medium-sized company that operates an integrated farm that has recently branched out into fish farming — also joined the platform. Another commercial-scale enterprise, Chambo Fisheries, was also an early member of the platform. However, its level and mode of production did not reflect the concerns of most platform members; according to one respondent, Chambo

Fisheries operated an expensive, high-tech facility. The project was unable to align the interests of the majority of its members with a company of this nature (interview RIUM4).

The Opportunity Investment Bank of Malawi was also an early member of the platform. The bank had given loans to farmers in Chingale and saw the platform as a way of encouraging repayment. However, the initial representative left the bank; with his departure, the bank's involvement in the platform also came to an end (*ibid.*).

As the discussion above suggests, Chingale has gradually evolved into a centre for fish farming. WorldFish, NAC and Chancellor College are located in the vicinity, and Chingale has played host to various NGO and government projects that have promoted fish farming, including a long-term World Vision initiative. This has created a favourable environment for other projects to move in; there is a critical mass of fishermen in the area, some of whom are engaged in fingerling production and who have at their disposal the necessary — if outdated — infrastructure.

At its first meeting in June 2008, the platform opted to prioritise support for small-, medium- and large-scale production of competitively priced fish from both fish farming and aquaculture. It identified five critical bottlenecks to achieving this: a lack of fast-growing strains, a lack of good quality fingerlings, a lack of nutritious and affordable fish feed, an incoherent investment environment, and a lack of regulatory guidelines (Report of the first fish farming platform meeting).

The initial activities of the platform would centre on multiplying and disseminating an improved strain of *Oreochromis shiranus* that had been developed by NAC. The production of good quality fingerlings would form the starting point for platform activities. The platform identified three potential hatcheries operators, whose facilities would be upgraded using seed money from RIU to yield a first round of fingerlings: Solace Farm International, Mandevu and African Novel Resources. NAC had also engaged in fingerling production.

However, as a research centre, this was not deemed to be within its remit. The platform decided to allocate the bulk of the seed money as a loan to the hatcheries; they would be expected to repay this using the profits from the sale of fingerlings into a platform-administered, rotating fund. The loan would also allow hatcheries to procure brood stock of the improved strain of *Oreochromis shiranus* from NAC, and to purchase feed and other critical inputs. The remainder of the seed money would be used by the platform as a grant to develop guidelines for hatcheries operations. Among others, this entailed contracting consultants to provide technical input (see fish farming platform meeting reports; interviews RIUM4 and RIUM8).

The hatcheries were to grow hatchlings (fry), and to distribute these to satellite stations across the country, which would rear them into fingerlings. This would serve to decentralise access to fish fingerlings away from the traditional hubs. The satellite stations, however, would have to be upgraded to serve in this capacity; RIU-Malawi made available seed money in support of this. In the meanwhile, the established hatcheries would grow the fries to the fingerling stage.

The development of the hatchery guidelines, in turn, was led by a task force of volunteers from the platform, assisted by consultants. The guidelines were envisioned to contribute towards a system of certified fingerling production, which, in turn, would minimise losses to farmers; stunted fish were often sold as fingerlings on markets. Another task force was set up to investigate tax waivers on inputs and equipment for aquaculture, while a third pursued a marketing strategy for the fingerlings. A further task force was convened to look into the quality and cost of available fish feed (interviews RIUM4 and RIUM8).

The platform would submit another proposal for funding in October 2009 to support capacity building of the IFFN. The intention was to revitalise the community of fish farmers through, among others, a mentoring scheme between medium-sized and smaller scale producers. This was expected to build the cohesiveness of a broader network of fish farmers, which would ultimately benefit producers of all scales: the bigger the pool of

business-oriented fish farmers, the stronger their demands for more responsive extension services, supportive subsidies, as well as access to new markets or expansion into existing ones (interview RIUM8).

Some stakeholders have found the platform to serve as a springboard for their advocacy efforts. One of the private companies, for instance, had struggled on its own to convince government regulatory authorities to approve sex reversal technology, which could accelerate the growth rate of table fish. According to respondents, upon hearing of the platform, the company was nonetheless reluctant to join; the benefits of participating were not immediately evident to its management team, which suspected that the platform was another ‘talk shop’ that staged a series of meetings without any concrete activities (interviews RIUM2 and RIUM4). The country coordinator and the platform champion approached the managing director, introduced the platform, its goals and its functions, and suggested that a collective lobbying effort might lead to results. The approval of the technology would also benefit the small-scale farmers, who were platform members; they would be able to produce marketable fish in a shorter timeframe. The general manager attended a platform meeting and the platform expressed its support for pursuing technology clearance collectively. Those platform members who had been involved in studies on fish productivity were also able to provide technical data to support the advocacy efforts. The platform champion was asked to present the sex-reversal technology to the government’s Technology Clearing Committee, which subsequently approved it (*ibid.*).

Having achieved its goal, the company’s interest in the platform appeared to wane. This appears to be indicative of the dynamics that exist in multi-stakeholder platforms. At any one time, the interests of a minimum number of stakeholders will coincide and this will drive collective action. Some described the expectation that all stakeholders would remain equally motivated throughout the lifetime of a platform as ‘unrealistic’ (interview RIUM8). In the case of the private company that appeared to withdraw once its interests had been met, the country programme coordinator held one-to-one discussions with the managing

director in order to re-enrol it into platform activities. Its presence was important; it offered lessons for smaller scale producers on business management and production techniques.

Thus, both the RIU country team and the platform champion play important roles in moving the platform forward and sustaining the interest of individual platform members. They also ensure alignment between its intentions and the wider policy setting. The fish farming platform, for instance, has become the recognised mechanism for implementing PIAD. This came about through the participation of both the country coordinator and the platform champion in a small task force assigned to formulate a one-year workplan for the initiative. Coinciding with the life span of the task force, the platform completed its implementation strategy. Reflecting the ambitions of PIAD, the implementation strategy was subsequently endorsed as the framework for pursuing PIAD goals. Indeed, respondents noted that the ability of individuals to use their leverage within wider networks on behalf of the platform represents a crucial resource (interviews RIUM2 and RIUM8).

More recently, the RIU country team arranged a meeting between the Director for Fisheries and members of the fish farming platform. This was an opportunity for the platform to advocate a reformulation of PIAD in support of private sector hatcheries. The hatchery guidelines are a complementary element in this; the final guidelines were submitted to the Director for Fisheries in November 2010 (interview RIUM4).

Indeed, there appears to be a window of opportunity for the platform to advocate for clearer policy vision and sectoral cohesion. The importance of fisheries — in terms of its contribution to diets, household incomes and its potential as an export commodity — is widely accepted. Yet, respondents explained that the sub-sector struggles to be taken seriously on an agricultural policy agenda that until recently has been dominated by crop cultivation, particularly that of maize. One platform member illustrated the chequered history of the sector by referring to the recurrent changes in the sector ministry responsible for fisheries. Fish farming is not a new practice, but its encouragement has been piecemeal, the respondent maintained. For example, technical advice emanating from government

extension services changes on a regular basis between ‘more ponds’ to ‘bigger ponds’ to ‘deeper ponds’. Under such circumstances, it is very difficult to make a business plan, unless a fish farmer can afford to experiment on his or her own (interview RIUM8).

In addition to meeting regularly, forming task forces to examine collectively-identified issues, dispensing funds from platform grants and engaging in policy advocacy, the platform has also proved to be a forum for forging business agreements. In 2010, one of the upgraded hatcheries entered into an agreement with one of the participating NGOs to supply fingerlings to its fisheries projects (interview RIUM4). The current activities of the platform include expanding the range of hatcheries beyond the initial, largely commercial-scale unit to include smaller scale producers as well. The hatcheries are reported to sell the fingerlings to small-scale fish farmers at favourable prices in efforts to improve their access to quality fingerlings, which to date have been mainly produced by commercial-scale operators (interview RIUM2).

In between platform meetings and other organised events there is said to be a fairly active exchange of information between platform members on markets, management practices and upcoming events. These are tentative signs that strong relationships are being forged between individual members of the platform. Nonetheless, one member felt that this has not yet been translated into strong, more sustainable interactions at the organisational level. There was a sense that the expected termination of the RIU-Malawi programme would disrupt this maturation process (interview RIUM8).

Indeed, there are signs of greater levels of self-organisation among the platform members. According to one respondent, the role of the RIU country team, for instance, has changed over time. In the early days, the team actively facilitated discussions at platform meetings, but today, increasingly only observes proceedings and provides back-up support. According to the respondent, although RIU’s ability to provide a ‘kick-start grant’ was critical, resources would not be a stumbling block to the platform’s activities. The benefits — at

least for commercial farmers — are sufficient to warrant financial input from members themselves. However, RIU's mediatory role remains relevant (interview RIUM8).

5.2 Legumes

The legume sub-sector was identified as a priority early on in the country programme design phase. Legumes represent an inexpensive source of vegetable protein and vitamins. Moreover, a number of grain legumes fetch higher market prices than cereals and provide an additional source of revenue to farming households. The cultivation of grain legumes also serves to enhance soil fertility; their ability to fix atmospheric nitrogen can help reduce expenditure on inorganic fertilisers, and protect soil and water from the negative effects of excessive fertiliser use (Ellis-Jones, et al., 2007b; CPSD, 2008; see also reports of the first and second legume platform meetings).

The legumes platform found a cause in seeking to strengthen the position of legumes in Malawi's largely maize-based crop production systems. The country strategy team, along with key actors from the legumes sectors, considered a range of crops that could be incorporated into the portfolio of the platform, ultimately settling on beans, soybeans and groundnuts. Several possible entry points were also identified, including a lack of cohesion and coordination among key actors in the sub-sector: marketing agents failed to pass on information to farmers in a timely manner and extension agents faced difficulties in accessing the latest information on varieties and crop management practices. Markets and inputs (in particular credit) were out of reach for several farmers and farmer empowerment was felt to warrant attention. Nonetheless, the platform singled out productivity as the issue that it would tackle in the immediate term. Low productivity itself was seen as a product of a number of factors; at its crux, however, was the lack of improved and certified seed (*ibid.*).

As the platform was getting off the ground, the Malawian government announced its intention to include legume seed — specifically beans — into the packs that would be made

available to farmers through the Farmer Input Subsidy Programme (FISP). This provided an impetus for the platform to focus on bean seed; FISP represented a ready market for its output and allowed the platform to build capacities not only in seed production, but also business management and marketing (interviews RIUM5 and RIUM9).

The zeroing-in on bean seed influenced the composition of a group of platform members, who would act as drivers of platform activities. A senior researcher from CIAT, with experience in coordinating the regional bean seed research network, would become the platform champion. The platform appointed an operations manager from the largest commercial bean seed producer in Malawi as a ‘technical team leader’. The seed sector would also be represented by the Seed Traders’ Association of Malawi (STAM), an umbrella organisation for seed traders. In addition to maintaining records of seed production, only traders who are registered with the association can supply inputs for FISP (*ibid.*).

The platform would also include representatives from the Department of Agricultural Research and Extension Services (DARES) as well as the Department for Crop Productivity, both from the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security. The former is represented by the national coordinator for legumes research, while the latter serves as an important source of information on seed demand and oversees FISP (*ibid.*).

Two farmers’ organisations would also become active participants of the platform: ASSMAG and GALA. They represent medium-scale farmers who produce both open-pollinated varieties and hybrid seed. Indeed, according to respondents, seed production tends to be dominated by larger scale producers, since it demands a certain level of organisation and a critical availability of assets, including land (interviews RIUM5 and RIUM10).

Under the formal seed system, only registered breeders can produce breeder seed from germplasm collections. Breeders typically come from the national agricultural research system or international agricultural research institutes, although some private companies

also employ their own breeders. The breeder seed is transformed into basic (or foundation) seed after a first harvest and certified seed after a second harvest. The Seed Certification Unit registers breeders, monitors the conditions under which seed is produced and assesses the quality of the final seed (interviews RIUM5 and RIUM9).

However, research institutes — in this case, CIAT along with its NARS partners — did not have the resources to produce breeder bean seed in the requisite volumes. The platform would succeed in negotiating a new, still experimental working practice for seed production, whereby breeder seed is produced by other actors under the supervision of breeders from research institutes and seed certification authorities.

With the first grant that it received from RIU-Malawi, the platform procured pre-breeder seed from CIAT and contracted the commercial seed producer to multiply this under irrigation to breeder seed. The remaining grant was allocated as a loan to ASSMAG farmers to purchase breeder seed from the platform and to multiply it to basic seed and, eventually, to certified seed. In order to see the certification process to completion, farmers would have to register with the Seed Certification Unit and meet incidental costs related to the monitoring of seed production and other steps in the process. ASSMAG farmers would then be in a position to sell the basic seed — or, indeed, the final certified seed — to interested buyers and, with the profits, repay the loan. This was equivalent to the ‘rotating’ or ‘revolving’ fund that had been set up by the fisheries platform; the money in this fund would subsequently be used for farmer capacity building activities as well as the production of promotional material. The commercial seed company was explicit about its interest in purchasing, processing and packaging certified seed from ASSMAG farmers; it was among the companies that have an agreement with the government to supply seed for FISP. The farmers, however, were free to sell to the bidder of their choice (interviews RIUM5, RIUM9 and RIUM10).

Platform members succeeded in producing certified bean seed and supplying it to FISP at the end of the 2010 season. Nonetheless, there were signs by this point that the

commitment of platform members had begun to falter. At a platform meeting in June 2010, the RIU country team raised its concerns over low attendance at platform meetings and a lack of reporting by the platform on progress. The RIU team also noted that platform activities were at the moment concentrated on seed multiplication; despite initial intentions, the platform did not appear to be pursuing policy influence and the development of marketing strategies in equal measure. The platform was also encouraged to seek more permanent institutional changes to seed supply systems that could be outscaled beyond the market opportunity presented by FISP (see report of the June 2010 platform meeting).

The platform responded by nominating an alternate champion to steer platform activities when the platform champion was otherwise committed. Indeed, the champion's busy schedule prevented the platform from convening more regularly and led to delays in the implementation of activities. In addition, the platform nominated a new set of individuals as 'drivers' for each activity in its implementation plan. It also deliberated means of tackling low attendance at platform meetings. One option was the provision of an allowance. While this was thought to attract more regular participation by public sector representatives, who were accustomed to receiving an honorarium to attend meetings, some members felt this might undermine the commitment that others had shown to the platform in the absence of such an incentive (see report of the November 2010 platform meeting).

One respondent also suggested that the apparent lack of consistent energy on the legumes platform may be explained by the seasonality of legume seed production; compared to the other RIU platforms, which have shown more sustained momentum, activities on the bean platform reach a peak with the arrival of the rains. Moreover, the production of certified seed is long-term in nature, spanning several harvests (interview RIUM2).

That is not to say that the platform had entirely neglected areas beyond seed production. In 2009, the government had set up a task force on legumes, modelling its approach on the platform. The task force has been commissioned to strategise the legumes sector under

FISP. The platform champion became a key member of the task force and serves as a direct link between the platform and policy communities. In addition, the platform can call upon the representative from DARS (who is the coordinator for legume research) or DCP (who is the FISP coordinator) to advocate on behalf of the platform within the Ministry of Agriculture. In 2009, the platform — with additional assistance from the RIU country team — organised a field visit by the Permanent Secretary for Agriculture and his deputies to Demeter to inspect the fields growing breeder seed (interviews RIUM4 and RIUM5).

The platform has been intent on promoting a system that is distinct from the one that is popular in the NGO sector (interviews RIUM5 and RIUM9). Here, organisations tend to distribute landraces within participating communities as a means of achieving household-level food security. The platform, instead, has sought to build the capacities of farmers, create value addition stages to seed production (certification) and forge linkages to markets. Through platform activities, farmers are said to gain experience in distributing seed through various outlets and package sizes. Respondents also noted that the platform has allowed farmers, breeders and seed service providers (inspection and registration) to regularise interactions between them. In addition, farmers have been trained in seed multiplication (field management, monitoring and the registration process) along with fund management.

Respondents also note that the RIU country programme has played an important role in ‘keeping the platform in check’ by attending meetings and probing the platform about the frequency of its meetings, progress towards goals and financial spending. Its provision of platform grants has also been pivotal to allowing the activities to take off. One respondent suggested that the legumes sector has never had collective organisation across the entire value chain and doubts whether this would have come about without the involvement of the RIU country programme. Respondents also acknowledge RIU’s role in bridging organisational prejudices, particularly between the public and private sectors, and the confidence-building measures that it has put in place for farmers. The country programme has also assisted the platform in generating communication materials, with plans to produce a documentary to showcase its activities (interviews RIUM5, RIUM9 and RIUM10).

The activities are currently concentrated on bean seed production, but the platform foresees expanding its efforts to bean, soybean and groundnut. Moreover, farmers from GALA have also become enrolled in seed production efforts. At present, FISP is the main market that the platform is targeting. Nonetheless, it is mindful of the opportunities that exist elsewhere, including in export (interview RIUM4).

5.3 Livestock

Livestock had a place on the RIU-Malawi agenda from the outset. However, the specific focus of the platform was left open. Goats, beef and poultry were mooted during planning discussions and debated at the initial platform meetings. In the end, piggery and dairy held sway. In due course, the former would become the main area of activity for the platform. Pig rearing was a relative 'orphan issue' compared to dairy (interview RIUM6).

Nonetheless, the practice was widespread across Malawi and had been the focus of several interventions in the past that had promoted particular management practices or breeds. Indeed, farmers had seen improvements in productivity, but expressed their frustration at a lack of domestic markets for their produce. Simultaneously, processing companies were reported to have been importing meat from South Africa in response to what they saw as a supply gap in the domestic market. It was this gap that the livestock platform would address through the establishment of four decentralised market structures in Mulanje, Mzuzu, Balaka and Dowa (more on these later on in this sub-section). These were envisioned to provide formal slaughtering facilities — and, as a consequence, contribute to the containment of African Swine Fever — along with permanent, easily accessible locations for selling both pigs and processed meat (RIU-Malawi annual report, 2009; report of the first livestock platform meeting).

There are a few marked characteristics of the livestock platform that distinguish it from its legumes and fish farming counterparts. Firstly, farmers form the clear majority of

participants in this platform. Secondly, it continues to make use of 'platform facilitators' in the four locations where the decentralised markets are being constructed. Indeed, piggery associations from Mulanje, Mzuzu, Balaka and Dowa, along with the facilitators who were tasked with ensuring that progress occurs as planned, would become the core members of the platform. They are supported by a cohort of ADD-, district- and sub-district level officials, as well as a platform champion from the Bunda College of Agriculture, a national level representative from the Department of Livestock, and the RIU-Malawi team.

While the platform has no alternate champion, the champion is said to be able to rely on the facilitators for ensuring progress in his absence; among others, they can serve as signatories for the release of funds. Some of the platform members (particularly those in the research and government sectors) encounter each other outside of formal platform meeting at other livestock-related events. These offer opportunities to exchange information. In addition, the periods in between meetings allow stakeholders to discuss initiatives that can subsequently be debated at a broader forum. According to respondents, one of the piggery associations put forward proposals to allow the sale of quality, well-priced pig feed at the decentralised markets (interviews RIUM2 and RIUM6).

As with the other platforms, the grant provided by the RIU country programme has played a pivotal role in getting activities off the ground. RIU-Malawi has provided advice on the use of finances, thereby building the capacities of the platform to manage funds from other sources in the future. The country programme has also facilitated interactions between platform members and the authorities responsible for overseeing the construction of the markets as well as the quality of the produce that is traded at the facilities. The platform meetings are opportunities for producers and buyers to exchange information on supply and demand. There have been discussions around fixed contracts between the two sides, although none had been signed at the time of data collection. More recently, the RIU communications officer has been asked to provide assistance in preparing promotional material (interviews RIUM2 and RIUM4).

i. Mulanje

Efforts to develop the four decentralised markets soon diverged into distinct trajectories. In all locations, piggery associations have taken on board much of the responsibility for the building of the structures. Indeed, they are seen as being among the primary beneficiaries of functioning markets. Progress in Mulanje appears to have been most rapid; the market was officially launched by the Director of Animal Health and Livestock Development in January 2011. Several individuals attribute this advancement to the commitment of the piggery association in Mulanje (MGWIPA) and a facilitative process that is embedded within the local government structure. In addition, the actual market structure in Mulanje is said to be simpler compared to those at the other locations (according to respondents, the former has four holding pens, while the latter each has eight) (interviews RIUM2 and RIUM6).

The head of the Department of Animal Health and Livestock Productivity within the Blantyre ADD serves as the facilitator for the Mulanje activities. At times, the individual devolves responsibility for follow-ups to the Mulanje district agricultural officer, as well as the assistant veterinary officer, who works at a sub-district, extension area level. The actual market is situated within this area. The assistant veterinary officer is the daily point-of-contact between the piggery association and the local government; the district agricultural officer also has regular, albeit less frequent, contact with the platform (interview RIUM2).

The district and extension planning area level authorities are reported to have been very committed towards supporting the construction of the market, despite the fact that such an activity falls outside their conventional remits. One individual closely associated with the livestock platform suggested that these authorities had first-hand experience of the inability of traditional extension practice — passing on new husbandry techniques or disseminating improved brood stock — to respond to the current needs of pig farmers. Indeed, the RIU initiative comes at the heels of two previous projects (one led by government, the other by an NGO) that had increased the numbers of pigs that were reared in the locality. The task at hand now was to find a marketing outlet for the produce (interview RIUM6).

The two individuals were able to mobilise different channels of communication within the local government structure. The net result is that authorities at the market location are aware of developments and their support for activities can readily be sought. In parallel, MGWIPA members may also approach local government officials in person to follow up on the conditions of building permits or compliance with environmental regulations. The Mulanje facilitator, along with three to four representatives of the Mulanje piggery association, as well as the assistant veterinary officer and the district agricultural officer, attend livestock platform meetings, thereby engaging in an exchange of local experiences within a wider forum (interview RIUM2).

In March 2010, the Mulanje piggery association formalised its status from a club to a cooperative. It cited the example of its counterpart in Mzuzu, which had made a presentation of its structure and activities at a livestock platform meeting, as inspiration for the measure. This was felt to offer several advantages: a greater degree of organisation to pursue collective marketing opportunities, easier access to loans from banks and other credit facilities, and the expectation that benefits would be distributed more equally among members on the basis of share ownership. Today, MGWIPA consists mainly of smallholder farmers (with 10-20 pigs), although one of its members has over 200 (interviews RIUM2 and RIUM6).

Recently, MGWIPA approached One Village One Product (OVOP) with a proposal seeking support for the purchasing of meat processing machinery and cold storage equipment (RIU-Malawi Annual Report, 2009-2010). This allows farmers themselves to process the meat that is not sold on the markets, thereby allowing them to add value to their produce. According to respondents, the other decentralised markets are also looking into the possibility of securing support from OVOP to diversify their activities. The intention is to expand the farmers' roles from producers to processors and traders. The associations also envision setting up kiosks at market locations to sell meat products, in addition to live pigs and pig meat (interviews RIUM2 and RIUM6).

ii. Mzuzu

The development of the market in Mzuzu has showed similar dynamism to that in Mulanje. Again, this is partly attributable to the close interactions between the piggery association driving the construction of the market and local government authorities. The head of the Department of Animal Health and Livestock Production in Mzuzu Agricultural Development Division (MZADD) facilitates activities at Mzuzu. Here, as in Mulanje, the assistant veterinary officer and district agricultural officer interact with the piggery association on a regular basis and are able to relay information between the platform and their reporting lines within local government structures (interviews RIUM2 and RIUM6).

In contrast to Mulanje, however, in Mzuzu the interactions between the piggery association and local government are strengthened further by the composition of the association; most of its members are former government agricultural officials who have recently taken up livestock rearing (either following retirement or as a career change). As a result, they have good networks with the local authorities. An upshot of this has been, for instance, the acquisition of an unused government building as a facility for the association. In addition, the Chief Executive of the city assembly has indicated his intention to introduce a directive preventing the informal slaughter of pigs within the city and naming the Mzuzu pig market as an authorised venue for butchering (interview RIUM2).

The Mzuzu piggery association functions as a formal cooperative. Members own shares in the cooperative and there is a cap on the number of shares an individual can own. Its members tend to be highly educated and are described as showing a great degree of self-initiative and willingness to experiment with alternative practices.

Despite these connections, the market at Mzuzu was yet to be launched at the time of data collection. There have been delays as a result of unexpected structural problems at the intended location. A deeper foundation had to be dug for the market, which set back efforts both in terms of time and financial resources. The market was scheduled to be launched in February or March (interview RIUM4).

iii. Dowa and Balaka

The piggery associations in Dowa and Balaka resemble less formalised farmers' clubs. Both were set up under a Community Development Project, administered by the Ministry of Gender and Community Development. Indeed, community development officers — as opposed to their counterparts from the agricultural sector — act as day-to-day points of contact with the piggery associations in the two locations. They mobilise farmers and liaise with veterinary officers and other service providers on behalf of the associations (interviews RIUM2 and RIUM6).

The facilitators for Dowa and Balaka are both livestock processors (one small-scale; the other medium-scale). This is in contrast to their counterparts in Mulanje and Mzuzu, who are government insiders. As a result, the piggery association, community development officers and facilitators have struggled to secure the commitment of the Kasungu ADD⁶ veterinary department to visit the piggery association in Dowa.

Simultaneously, however, the facilitators are said to interface 'more directly' (through fewer intermediaries) with farmers in these two locations (interview RIUM2). The facilitators' main responsibilities revolve around the supervision of construction work and the provision of assistance in the administration of the platform grant by the piggery associations. In Mzuzu and Mulanje, in contrast, the facilitators are said to act more as an interface between the piggery associations, local government and the RIU country programme, and serve less in an oversight capacity.

According to respondents, what the Dowa and Balaka facilitators lack as a result of their 'outsider status', they make up for in entrepreneurial spirit and goal-orientation (interviews RIUM2 and RIUM4). The contrast in working cultures between the facilitators might be caricatured as a concern with 'getting things moving' (the private sector facilitators in Dowa

⁶ The Kasungu ADD oversees agricultural development in Dowa district.

and Balaka) versus ‘getting the process right’ (the public sector facilitators in Mulanje and Mzuzu). Indeed, one of the facilitators — the manager of the commercial-scale processing company — has openly stated the direct interest that the company has in seeing markets in place. As such, the manager has been particularly active in seeing activities to completion.

Nonetheless, progress has been slower in Dowa and Balaka: both facilitators are based in Lilongwe and are unable to travel frequently to Dowa and Balaka. Moreover, the piggery associations in Mulanje and Mzuzu received platform grants before their counterparts in Dowa and Balaka, which may help to explain their comparative advancement. Construction material has not been as readily available in the latter two; time and financial resources have gone into transporting inputs over long distances (interview RIUM4).

The processing company of one of the facilitators is felt to set an example to smaller scale producers; it gives an assurance of the market potential of pig rearing and helps clarify the quantity and quality of pigs that the market demands. There is also a sense that the company’s role in promoting the construction of the markets is forcing public agricultural authorities to rethink the content and method of delivery of their services — in particular their capacities to provide business advice.

iv. What next?

The markets will eventually be owned by the piggery associations, although each is expected to devolve operational management to dedicated staff. The Mulanje market is being run on an interim basis by the marketing sub-committee of MGWIPA. The association represents farmers from distinct zones. Each zone has a marketing group that maintains statistics on the numbers of pigs kept by each farmer. The association will ensure that each zone has an equal opportunity to sell pigs. In order to secure funds for the operation of the market, MGWIPA intends to charge for bringing pigs for slaughter at the market (interview RIUM2).

Indeed, the markets must now secure customers for the live pigs, pig meat, or processed meat. In Mzuzu and Balaka, the piggery associations plan to sell live pigs to NGOs to distribute onwards to farmers who are participating in their projects. Hotels and catering services for industry have also been identified as potential markets for pig meat (*ibid.*).

The RIU approach in the livestock sub-sector is attracting interest from other organisations and initiatives. The Volunteer Services Overseas (VSO) in Malawi is pursuing a value-chain approach in its “Making the markets work in the dairy sector in Malawi”, and has had discussions with RIU on its methodology and how the initiative might be incorporated into the livestock platform (RIU Annual Report, 2009-2010; interview RIUM4). More recently, the Director for Animal Health and Livestock Development has expressed the intention of the Malawian government to seek funding for the construction of similar markets elsewhere in the country.⁷

5.4 What constitutes ‘platform membership’?

When the platforms were being conceived, there were discussions as to whether members would be asked to sign memoranda of understanding to formalise their involvement. In the end, the plan was discarded. It was recognised that participants’ levels of commitment and interest would vary with time; a binding obligation towards the platform in the absence of genuine motivation might create resentment.

Indeed, platform membership is today described as flexible. Each platform has witnessed the emergence of a core group of dedicated stakeholders, who regularly attend platform meetings and are actively involved in implementing commonly agreed-upon tasks. In the case of the livestock platform, this core group consists largely of farmers. This contrasts with the cotton platform, which was described as dominated by the private sector. This is said to be intentional; one of the objectives of the platform is to ‘break the government monopoly’

⁷ <http://www.researchintouse.com/news/110201pigmarkets.html#H> (last accessed 4.4.2011).

on the cotton sub-sector (interviews RIUM4 and RIUM11). The core groups within the fish farming and legumes platforms appear to be more heterogeneous.

Alongside core groups, there is a set of 'dormant' stakeholders; individuals or organisations that may not at present see clear benefits from their active involvement in the platforms, but which recognise that subsequent platform activities would be directly relevant for them. In the case of the legumes platform, for instance, this includes grain traders and processors, who are waiting for grain producers to generate higher volumes of improved varieties. Some of the larger seed companies are also waiting to see whether the new system of seed multiplication, currently built around OPVs, could be harnessed for hybrid seed (interview RIUM9). In the case of the fish farming platform, on the other hand, credit facilities remain reluctant to fully commit to the platform. They appear to be waiting for fish farming to demonstrate its business potential more clearly; their lack of participation is often attributed to the perceived high risks associated with lending within the fisheries sector (interview RIUM8). On the livestock platform, a large meat processing firm (Kapani), which is currently importing pigs from South Africa, is reported to be waiting to see whether the decentralised markets will facilitate access to domestic producers (interview RIUM4). The RIU country team continues to keep such dormant stakeholders updated on programme and platform activities; minutes of platform meetings are often shared with them and informal discussions take place when the team encounters such stakeholders at other events.

There are also examples of stakeholders exiting platforms. This was the case with a feed company that was initially enrolled into the fish farming platform. One respondent speculated that the company was expecting the platform to provide a ready market for its produce. However, when representatives of the research sector expressed reservations on the quality of its feed relative to costs, the company's interest in the platform waned. Access to quality feed remains an issue that the platform must tackle (interview RIUM8). Likewise, other members have joined the platforms since their inception. A medium-scale farmer, formerly a member of the IFFN, heard of the platform when he approached

WorldFish and NAC in a personal capacity for technical advice. He had initially been compelled to contact the research institutes directly as a result of what he felt was a failure of extension services to meet his requests for information. The farmer joined the platform in August 2009 and has proved to be one of its most active members (interview RIUM4).

5.5 What are the roles of platform members?

The early vision was that platform champions would play important roles in stimulating and sustaining members' interest. As mentioned above, however, due to their often limited availability, this function has not materialised as intended. In response, the fish farming and legumes platforms have opted to elect alternate champions to ensure that activities do not come to a halt in the absence of the platform champion. Nonetheless, the champions — being well-networked and respected individuals in their respective sectors — have proven to be very effective in mediating interactions between the platforms and policy communities.

In addition, individual platform members can also serve as conduits between the platforms and broader policy constituencies. For example, the Department of Livestock is represented on the livestock platform by an individual from the headquarter level. This, however, does not necessarily guarantee a rapid response at the ADD-, district- or sub-district levels. In their meeting with the Director for Fisheries, the fish farming platform, for instance, raised the need to build business support skills among extension agents working at the grassroots level. One respondent reports few indications of new staff competencies within his local extension service — an indication perhaps of organisational inertia (interview RIUM8). Forging direct channels of engagement between platforms and policy communities appears to partly compensate for the ineffectiveness of the NIC in playing the policy advocacy function that was expected of it.

Some platforms may choose to designate the leadership of task forces or working groups to private sector actors under the assumption that this will ensure efficacy in generating, and

timely delivery of outputs. In the case of the fish farming platform, one respondent notes that the presence of larger fingerling and table fish producers on the platform exposes their smaller scale counterparts to alternative modes of approaching fish farming. By providing examples of various aspects of business management, the large producers seem to make up for the lack of responsiveness on the part of extension services. Private sector stakeholders tend to also play important roles in accounting for the platform grants; they are viewed as having experience in administering finances (interview RIUM2).

This role may also be played by the international agricultural research institutes (the fish farming platform recently requested that WorldFish oversee the administration of its platform grant); they are thought to offer robust financial accounting capacity (interview RIUM8). In addition to providing platform champions and backstopping financial administration, the most obvious contribution of the research sector is technical advice. In the case of the fish farming platform, NAC supplied the brood stock of the improved strain of tilapia that the platform elected to grow. NAC was able to provide the requisite information on rearing practices, hatcheries conditions and feed quality to support fingerling producers. That is not to say that the provision of technical advice is limited to the research sector; peer-to-peer exchanges of information between producers operating at different scales are said to occur as well (interview RIUM2).

Some respondents were able to detect differences in the working cultures of stakeholders from particular sectors. In the case of the livestock platform, government actors are perceived to be more concerned with 'getting the process right'. Private sector actors, on the other hand, are said to be driven by 'getting the process going'. The novelty of the RIU-Malawi programme overall, and the platforms in particular, are often described as 'not doing NGO work'. This is taken to imply a concern with isolated interventions and the direct dissemination of inputs (pigs, seeds or fingerlings) to project stakeholders, as opposed to setting up systems, pursuing value addition or fostering institutional change (interviews RIUM8 and RIUM9).

5.6 Why do stakeholders participate in the platforms?

Although there is no formal membership, platform participants use a variety of strategies to build a sense of common purpose and willingness to engage in reciprocal exchanges. A member of one platform recounted how, as a result of volunteering to head task force activities, hosting field visits to his farm and attending meetings at his own cost, he is able to accumulate social capital. He expends this on gaining market information, insights on new management practices or technologies and access to government authorities (interview RIUM8). Indeed, the platform provides a group affiliation to its members — ‘places them on the map’ — giving them credibility to pursue objectives that they would not have been able to as individuals. The enrolment of Maldeco into the fish farming platform to join a collective advocacy effort for the clearance of sex-reversal technology is an example of this.

In other instances, members are motivated by opportunities for expanding business (such as the largest bean seed company in Malawi, which participates actively in the legumes platform) or the promotion of new technologies or research findings (such as research institutes on both the legumes and fish farming platforms). Others may be motivated by the tangible benefits from RIU seed money: the upgrading of infrastructure (such as in the case of the hatcheries involved in the fish farming platform), access to markets (for example, the piggery associations on the livestock platform), access to critical inputs (this is the case for ASSMAG and GALA farmers on the legumes platform), as well as skills development (such as the recent training in seed multiplication for ASSMAG and GALA farmers on the legumes platform).

Remuneration for participating in platform meetings is rarely a strong enough incentive to sustain active involvement. This may work for certain stakeholders, such as those from government who are accustomed to receiving payment for attending meetings. Farmers, on the other hand, tend to find that the sums entailed are not high enough to compensate for the ‘significant sacrifice’ of being absent from their farm-related responsibilities for a day or more (interview RIUM9). When RIU-Malawi organises platform meetings or other events —

which tends to be the norm — it provides participants with a small allowance to cover travel costs and accommodation. However, if stakeholders themselves offer to stage activities, they rarely provide payment for those attending.

5.7 How is momentum sustained?

Respondents suggested that although many members had experienced immediate benefits from participating in platforms, longer-term livelihood improvements are unlikely to materialise before the expected RIU end date (for instance, interviews RIUM6 and RIUM9). They remain, nonetheless, motivated by the steady evolution of activities. In the case of the decentralised pig markets and the upgrading and operation of hatcheries, progress can be detected in very tangible terms. This helps to visualise the benefits that are likely to be incurred from sustained involvement. The legumes platform provides a contrasting example. The production of certified seed is a time-consuming process, which is susceptible to seasonal weather patterns. Here, an added effort is expected from the platform champion, the alternate champion and the RIU team to sustain momentum within the platform (interview RIUM2).

It is not only meetings that are thought to sustain the interests' of stakeholders. Platforms have also facilitated skills development for their members. Most recently, the legumes platform organised training for farmers on seed production techniques. Although the financial resources for the training came from the RIU country programme, the platform champion, the alternate champion and the farmers' organisations were responsible for organising the event. Beyond dedicated capacity building programmes, members report gaining negotiating and networking skills, along with insights into policy advocacy and organisational change (interview RIUM10).

With the appointment of the RIU-Malawi communications officer in January 2010, the platforms have requested assistance from the country programme in developing promotional material to assist in marketing. Among others, the legumes platform plans to

stage a field day to showcase its activities beyond the platform and its immediate networks. This is also envisioned to serve as a marketing mechanism for its produce.

The platforms seem also to have supported different forms of institution building. The fish farming platform set up a task force to reinvigorate the Innovative Fish Farmers' Network, while the Mulanje piggery association was inspired to change its status from a club to a more formal cooperative through its exposure to the Mzuzu cooperative through the livestock platform. There has been talk of pig buyers also organising themselves into an association.

Several individuals felt that what happens outside of platform meetings — at times, without the active facilitation of the RIU country team — is crucial for maintaining members' commitment. Referring to the fish farming platform, respondents report a fairly active exchange of information on market opportunities and prices, different management practices and news of upcoming events outside of platform meetings (interviews RIUM2 and RIUM8). The piggery associations, in turn, call each other regularly in between meetings to report on progress, solicit advice and exchange information on potential buyers (interview RIUM6). The RIU country team sees such interactions as a desired output of the platforms — interactions that continue to exist even in the absence of a formal platform mechanism.

Nonetheless, all emphasise that RIU's planned withdrawal in June 2011 comes too soon; the three remaining platforms are not yet seen to have reached a sufficient level of maturity to carry on in RIU's absence. The interaction that takes place between platform members outside of meetings or other RIU facilitated gatherings remains localised and does not extend beyond small groups of organisations and individuals. Moreover, it tends to exist particularly among similar groups of stakeholders, such as farmers or researchers. In the absence of regular platform meetings for some time still, there is a risk of falling back to isolated pockets of activities.

The livestock and fish farming platforms are said to have been the most dynamic of the three in terms of moving towards platform objectives and self-sustainability; the slower pace of the legumes platform may at least partly be attributable to the seasonality of legume seed production (interviews RIUM2 and RIUM4).

5.8 What role has RIU-Malawi played in the platforms?

Several individuals single out the catalytic role that the RIU country programme has played in the platforms. It has been in a position to provide seed money — a critical investment that has allowed collective activities to get off the ground. Indeed, in the case of cotton, RIU's main contribution appears to have been the initial grant. This allowed a burgeoning coalition of actors with sufficient mutual interests to mature into the Cotton Development Trust. The seed money also supported the staging of field demonstrations. Beyond the provision of the grant, the country programme is attributed with sensitising the initial group of actors to an innovation systems perspective, which subsequently expanded the range of stakeholders that would have otherwise been invited to take part. However, at the time of its involvement, the country team's role was decidedly hands-off compared to the other platforms.

According to respondents, members of the RIU country team are present at each platform meeting. A member of the fish farming platform stated that the country team increasingly only observes proceedings rather than facilitate them, and clarifies what the country programme is in a position to do or not to do. At livestock platform meetings, the country team is said to ensure that discussions remain focused and the agenda is adhered to. Some platform members described the country programme's role as that of a secretariat: it organises meetings, prepares agendas on the basis of consultations, follows the platform's calendar of events and liaises with AICC on the administration of seed money. The team documents platform activities and brings together representatives of the different platforms to exchange experiences.

The RIU-Malawi team has also kept abreast with policy, market and other developments that are relevant to the respective commodity sectors. It has informed the platforms of these opportunities, and supervised their alignment with such prospects. Matching the intentions of PIAD with the implementation plan of the fish farming platform is an example of this. In the case of the livestock platform, the RIU country team instigated interactions with pig buyers, who were invited to platform meetings to share information on their market needs.

Although commonly expected to be a responsibility of platform champions or facilitators, the country team also follows up on activities that are pursued by individual members or task forces on behalf of the platform. The country team provided assistance in the preparation of the platform proposals and monitors progress towards the objectives. This entails regular visits to the locations of the livestock markets to assess progress. The team also sustains the involvement of platform members. They may call or have one-on-one meetings with particular members to convince them of the value of remaining a part of the platform activities.

Several individuals described RIU-Malawi as ‘different to other projects’. In most cases, this referred to the level of responsibility that was accorded to platform members themselves. They contrasted the programme with other development initiatives: these, it was felt, often hire several staff members, set up their own offices and directly implement activities. In the case of RIU-Malawi, however, the programme team is small, it is not seen to be ‘wasting money’ on project infrastructure and its stakeholders are said to be able to immediately cross-check activities and take corrective measures, if needed.

From the outset, RIU-Malawi has sought to avoid using money as an incentive. As such, the level of involvement that appears to exist among platform members (or at least those who participated in this study) suggests that the country team has been successful in identifying common interests among often very different types of stakeholders and persuading them of the advantages of collaboration. According to respondents, the perceived neutrality has

allowed the country team to do so. Indeed, many felt that this was a necessary attribute of any individual or organisation seeking to stimulate the formation of a coalition from anew.

These are all facets of innovation brokering. The subsequent section discusses the lessons that the evolution of RIU-Malawi has to offer on this, and other topics.

6. LESSONS

A. Brokering

The case study of RIU-Malawi reveals that brokering has occurred largely through platform-related activities. It has been carried by various elements of the country programme — the country team, the National Innovation Coalition, platform facilitators, individual platform members, the patron and the host.

i. RIU-Malawi country team

The country team's brokering role is most evident in its involvement with the platforms. While the platform grant has played a critical role in brokering new relationships and working practices, the RIU country team has also mobilised its network building, capacity strengthening and mediatory resources to bring together a pool of stakeholders willing to act in concert. Here, its contribution has evolved from direct, day-to-day administration of the platforms to a more hands-off approach. The country team has also sought to delineate the boundaries of its role to exclude active management of the platforms; indeed, the intention from the outset was to encourage devolution of responsibilities to platform members themselves as a way of building capacity and ensuring sustainability. While this allows an organic maturation of the platforms, it carries the risk of dissipating momentum and may further deter from a proactive pursuit of opportunities by platforms themselves.⁸

The platforms themselves show varying degrees of self-direction, which influences the involvement of the country team in supporting them. In the case of the cotton platform, the main input was the start-up seed money. While this was an important contribution to the other three platforms as well, these demanded more direct participation by the country team. The country team, alongside the NIC and other key stakeholders, canvassed for potential platform members during the programme design phase; together with the initial platform members, defined priority areas of action; assessed the potential roles of each member; gauged levels of motivation; and helped to articulate the potential gains that

⁸ I am grateful to CRT Research Fellow Elias Madzudzo for sharing this insight.

participation in the platform offered. Once the constellations of innovation actors were in place (in a flexible arrangement), the country team shifted its attention towards making the interactions between them functional. This entailed gaining an understanding of the incentives and reward systems of both stakeholder organisations and their representatives on the platforms; making explicit the often implicit norms, values and frames of references according to which they operated; and seeking to make these compatible. One of the ways in which this appears to have occurred is through the creation of ‘a third culture’ that was unique to platforms, or particular collaborative arrangements. This culture never fully reflected the customs and mores of any single stakeholder; it was also more than a sum of their parts.

The payment of an allowance for attendance at platform meetings or other events provides an example. While this seemed to serve as a motivating factor for representatives of public sector agencies (provided the allowance was large enough), others — particularly commercial-scale farmers — saw this as a poor inducement. Most platforms resolved the issue by covering the expenses of those participants who had to travel long distances and spend nights away due to platform-related commitments. This reflected the country team’s insistence that RIU was ‘not a pot of money’, while also recognising that some level of financial support would also facilitate platform activities.

Another brokering role played by the country team was to negotiate power relations within platforms. According to members of the country team, in the early stages of some of the platforms farmers were reluctant to speak up in front of researchers. They would approach the country team in private to express their viewpoints. The country team felt that it could not voice these issues on behalf of the farmers during platform meetings. This would deter from the country programme’s attempt to empower farmers to pursue their own interests and agendas and potentially compromise the confidence of other platform members in the country team. The legitimacy of the latter was seen to rest on its role as a ‘neutral arbitrator’. The country team’s task, therefore, was to talk the farmers through the issue and assist them in devising an approach for raising it at platform gatherings.

The country team's brokering function has also entailed fostering collective learning. As respondents highlighted, platform members have had access not only to capacity building programmes on seed production, but have also been exposed to networking, negotiations and business management practices. Platform task forces, in turn, serve to build the skills of their members in data collection and analysis and help to raise awareness on issues that shape the innovation environment (such as tax breaks on equipment for fish farming and aquaculture). As the next sub-section describes, the responsibility of platforms for the management of the platform grants has also enhanced members' capacities in financial administration.

In the case of RIU-Malawi, collective learning has occurred not only within platforms — facilitated by platform champions, dedicated facilitators or the country team — but also across platforms. The NIC evolved into the main forum for the latter, marking a clear departure from its initial identity as a 'board' with strategic oversight. NIC meetings provided an opportunity for the legume and fish farming platform champions to identify a common agenda in pursuing certification mechanisms as a means of building value-added stages into production and processing. They subsequently requested the country coordinator to approach the RIU-Malawi patron within the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security to lobby for formal guidelines and standards in the legumes and fisheries sub-sectors. Indeed, this reflects a further role that was assigned to the country team: ensuring alignment between platform aspirations and the wider policy settings.

ii. Platform champions

Platform champions, in turn, were envisioned to serve a multitude of functions; among others, they were expected to 'drive' the platforms, instil a business culture into their operations and sustain members' motivation. The fish farming, livestock and legumes platforms found their champions from within the research sector. As Section 5 suggested, the main brokering role currently played by platform champions appears to centre on policy advocacy; as a result of their limited availability, the other roles initially envisioned for them have been taken on by alternate champions, platform facilitators (where present), the RIU-Malawi team and in some instances, individual platform members. The fish farming

platform champion, for instance, has played a critical role in facilitating the clearance of sex-reversal technology, as well as the alignment of PIAD and the platform implementation plan. The legumes platform champion, in turn, serves on the Legumes Task Force, which strategised the inclusion of beans into the packages that are distributed through FISP.

iii. Platform facilitators

The livestock platform is the only one with dedicated facilitators, whose purview is to assist the progress of the decentralised livestock markets. As indicated in Section 5, the four facilitators perform their brokering roles in different ways. All rely to some extent on a cascade of ‘sub-facilitators’ — staff of decentralised, community development or agriculture sector agencies — in interacting with the piggery associations and other actors at the market locations. Nonetheless, one of the facilitators — the manager of a private meat processing company — is said to have taken an active role in supervising the actual construction of the markets in Dowa and Balaka. Several possible explanations were given for this: the business growth that may follow the completion of the markets; a goal-oriented, ‘private sector mindset’, said to ensure the attainment of objectives in a timely and efficient manner; and the facilitator’s status as an outsider *vis-a-vis* local government, necessitating closer personal involvement in ensuring that the requisite processes are in motion.

This is in contrast to the situation in Mulanje and Mzuzu; the facilitators are staff members of local ADDs. They are embedded within government structures and aware of the procedures that must be followed in setting up the livestock markets. They are said to be in a stronger position to broker transactions between the piggery associations and local authorities. The situation in Mzuzu appears to be further bolstered by the fact that the piggery association in charge of setting up and subsequently managing the market consists largely of former government agricultural officers; they have their own networks among local government officials and agriculture sector stakeholders more widely. Such linkages appear to have contributed towards the rapid progress on the Mulanje and Mzuzu markets, even if the perception of the private sector as ‘being able to deliver’ remains.

iv. Individual platform members

Individual platform members can also carry out brokering roles. In the case of the fish farming platform, for instance, one of its newest members (a medium-scale fish farmer) has proven to be an active driver in rebuilding the flagging Innovative Fish Farmers' Network (IFFN). He, along with other members of the task force assigned to explore means of strengthening the network, have carried out the “scanning, scoping, filtering, and matchmaking of...partners” (Howells, 2006, as cited in Klerkx, Hall & Leeuwis, 2009; p.11) typically associated with a broker. In the case of the legumes platform, in turn, one of its most committed members (a manager at the largest bean seed producing company in Malawi) has recently been elected as the alternate champion in recognition of his dedication to seeing the platform objective to completion (and in response to the limited availability of the platform champion).

v. The patron

During the programme design phase, there were deliberations around the possibility of situating the entire programme within the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security. While this option was eventually discarded (the Ministry was seen primarily as a policy-making, not project-implementing, body; this may have had implications for the availability of dedicated staff to drive the project forward), the function of a ministry-based patron was developed to signal the endorsement of RIU-Malawi by the lead agriculture sector agency. The patron was also expected to further facilitate linkages between the country programme and policy circles. As described in Section 5, the role of the patron is still considered important by the country programme, although the interactions between the patron and the programme have not proved to be as effective as had been hoped.

vi. The host

Finally, the country programme host — AICC — is said to have contributed a brokering function through its administration of RIU-Malawi, including overseeing the platform grants. While recognising the competencies of AICC to carry out this role, the country team noted several drawbacks in this arrangement, primary among which were delays in releasing funds to platforms or other elements of the programme which stalled programme progress. Still,

when asked which organisations or individuals could continue to advocate an RIU approach towards rural development once the country programme is phased out, AICC was among those identified by the country team. It cited the expansion of the initial cotton sector public-private partnership to a more encompassing platform as evidence of its assimilation of RIU tenets.

Some of these findings are in line with what is already known about brokers. Firstly, the role can rarely be imposed in a top-down manner (see Box 1). The examples of the patron and platform champions serve to illustrate this point. Although they have played important roles in supporting the project, these are not the ones that were initially expected of them. The appropriation of ‘network building’ and ‘innovation process management’ functions by the country team, platform facilitators and individual members of the platforms suggest that a broker tends to emerge organically from the specific innovation circumstances that exist on the ground. Secondly, many of the contributions that brokers make are described as pivotal to project progress. However, they remain largely intangible and beyond the scope of conventional measures of impact and success. This issue, along with the question of attribution, is considered further on in this section.

Other insights query existing understandings of innovation brokers. The legitimacy of brokers is often thought to be a product of their neutrality; with no apparent ulterior motives, brokers are able to quickly build trust among divergent stakeholders. This seems to hold true for the country team: its credibility is said to rest on its sole mandate as an intermediary in innovation processes.⁹ Indeed, according to country team members, an impartial intermediary is particularly critical in the early stages of a collaborative process. In an ideal situation, once a common rapport has been established, and all parties accept the benefits of working together, the intermediary may begin to phase itself out and collective action can continue with the momentum built.

Respondents suggested that during such subsequent stages, it is precisely the vested interests of a broker that confer confidence in him or her. The medium-scale fish farmer,

⁹ This is a perception among some individuals. This is not to imply that the country team does not have its motivations.

who is steering the revitalisation of the IFFN, is seen as a legitimate broker because he has been explicit on the benefits that he will incur if the effort succeeds (a stronger lobby to advocate for a more business-friendly environment for fish farming). He is, thus, considered to be committed to achieving the common goal.

B. Sustainability

At the time of data collection, the individual platforms were preparing to formulate exit strategies for RIU-Malawi's expected phasing out in June 2011. Nonetheless, the programme has sought to build sustainability mechanisms into platform activities from the outset. The decision to devolve responsibility over progress to the platforms was made with this in view. In addition, the expectation that the platforms prepare comprehensive proposals (with budgets, workplans, etc.) for platform grants was seen to enhance their fund-raising skills for the future. Overseeing the platform grants and (where in place) the revolving platform funds gave an opportunity for the platforms to develop a track record in financial administration. Some of the platforms have undergone a process of learning in this respect as well; AICC has reportedly demanded stringent reporting on expenditure, prompting platforms to nominate platform treasurers, set up financial sub-committees and, in the case of the fish farming platform, an internal audit committee.

Indeed, the platforms are said to remain grant-dependent for the time being. Nonetheless, they have pursued revenue-generating opportunities for their members, particularly small-scale producers. The sale of fingerlings and table fish, basic or certified seed, as well as live pigs, pig meat or processed meat at decentralised livestock markets (and, indeed, the management of these markets) are examples of this. These activities were enabled by platform-administered loans, which are to be paid back to the revolving funds. The platforms can use these to finance a further round of initiatives, if deemed necessary. In this way, the platforms are also thought to persuade their members of the benefits that investing in collective action to enable innovation can yield. As will be discussed later, there are tentative indications that fee-based brokering services might be in demand.

A further way that the programme has sought to ensure the sustainability of its efforts is by building on the momentum of existing projects, as opposed to setting up parallel structures

or activities. The piggery associations in Dowa and Balaka were established under previous government-led community development projects and several of the pig farmers on the livestock platform have benefited from earlier NGO-led projects that had disseminated improved breeds and management practices. Likewise, the fish farming platform has tapped into ongoing projects and is seeking to breathe new life into the entities that were established under previous projects.

Importantly, most respondents felt that the platforms are transient structures, aimed at kick-starting stagnant sectors. Still, they felt that RIU-Malawi was coming to an end too soon. Embryonic changes have been catalysed, but they have yet to reach maturity.

C. Institutional Change

RIU-Malawi's remit has evolved from an initial concern with promoting research outputs to fostering innovations for development. The use of alternative vocabulary is significant.

'Innovation' evokes a broader range of practices through which socio-economic transformation can be sought: the formation of new — or changes in existing — interactions, working routines (both within and between stakeholder organisations), policies, funding mechanisms (by the private sector, government or donors) as well as the production and use of knowledge.

Respondents flagged up examples of shifts in mindset, which may eventually prompt more systemic adjustments. These are perhaps most evident in the activities of the platforms. The legumes platform has negotiated a new working practice for seed multiplication, while the fish farming platform has sought to strengthen the policy regime that governs the fisheries sector through the guidelines for hatchling production. The livestock platform, in turn, started out seeking alignment between meat producers and processors. In the process, it has contributed towards improving public health and food safety. Indeed, respondents suggested that 'micro-harmonisation' — that is, the formation of nascent innovation systems — has occurred at the level of platforms. Many maintained, however, that it is too soon to tell whether these will translate into changes at broader scales.

RIU-Malawi has inculcated alternative perspectives elsewhere as well. AICC, for instance, was said to have responded to the innovation systems perspective that RIU-Malawi contributed during the formation of the Cotton Development Partnership by expanding the constituency of actors who would be involved. VSO, in turn, was keen to explore RIU's approach in its dairy farming project (interview RIUM4). The Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security, in turn, formed the roots and tubers task force to emulate the legumes platform in terms of the system-wide outlook that it would assume, and the range of stakeholders that would come together under its auspices. The Ministry requested RIU's input on how to work in a systems-mode, carry out diagnostic exercises, secure stakeholders' commitment and seek additional funds. The RIU-Malawi country coordinator was invited to facilitate the first meeting of this task force in May 2010. The country team interpreted this as a signal of the ministry's receptiveness towards the notion of multi-stakeholder consultations and collective action as a response to common challenges (interview RIUM4).

More recently, the Director for Animal Health and Livestock Development has expressed the intention of the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security to seek funding to establish more decentralised livestock markets. Whether the construction of these infrastructures will be an embedded part of broader system support remains to be seen (interviews RIUM2 and RIUM4).

It is not only in-country programmes or national stakeholders that have sought to better understand the RIU approach. In January 2011, RIU-Malawi held roundtable discussions with the World Bank, DFID and the Chinese Ministry of Agriculture on the activities of the fish farming platform. The delegation was seeking inputs into the design of its planned regional support programme for fisheries (interview RIUM4).

But, change is slow to take root. The RIU-Malawi team cited the lack of suitable proposals for its Flexibility Funds as an example of the persistence of old habits: most plan to perpetuate conventional 'NGO-type' activities. 'Cultivating an RIU mindset', according to respondents, is a difficult and time-consuming process. Moreover, there are several other framings that are competing for legitimacy. Some respondents remarked that there was a

detectable sense within the Malawian agricultural sector that its current malaise was the result of a lack of business development programmes (interviews RIUM11, for instance). In response, the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security, for instance, is said to have recently established a department to oversee farm business management. Among others, it provides training to this effect, particularly to small-scale farmers. While such activities undoubtedly have a role to play in unlocking the potential of the agricultural sector, they are but an element in the approach that RIU is predicated upon. The task at hand seems to be to ensure that RIU-Malawi is understood as something more than a business development initiative (interviews RIUM4 and RIUM11).

Moreover, there appears to be a risk that ‘cultivating an RIU mindset’ translates into ‘creating more platforms’. Again, while the platforms seem to have been well-received and popular among stakeholders, these are just one of several mechanisms that can be deployed to support innovation.

D. The Difficulty of Measuring Impact

While the examples cited above were given as tentative signs that institutional change is beginning to take root, capturing its full scope is a challenge. Firstly, it is difficult to gauge the extent to which what transpires at the platform level reverberates beyond individual members to influence action within stakeholder organisations. This is evident, for instance, in the case of the highly motivated extension agent at Mulanje: on a personal level, the country team sensed that he is interested in and motivated by the alternative approach to livestock development, which RIU-Malawi has facilitated. However, country team members recognise that he is embedded within an organisation that has a deeply entrenched culture that continues to see research as the source of new technologies that can improve agriculture, and its own role as that of a technology disseminator from research to farmers.

One of the ways in which RIU-Malawi has tried to ensure that its activities resonate within the organisations represented on the platforms has been to forge relationships with their directors. The directors themselves participated in the programme design phase and attended the first platform meetings. Some continue to represent their organisations in person, although most have nominated representatives. Nonetheless, the country team

continues to engage with the directors when possible, not only to assess whether they are kept informed of programme progress, but also to get a sense of current organisational priorities and prospects for ‘piggy-backing’ on internal change.

Looking at the situation more broadly, is there a reliable means through which the consequences of RIU-Malawi’s brokering activities can be measured? Attribution appears to be one challenge: literature from other sectors and countries suggests that the effects of brokerage — of the kind that RIU-Malawi has engaged in — on profits and income are often indirect (Howells, 2006; as cited in Klerkx, et al. 2009). The orthodoxy of relying on quantifiable indicators to gauge impact further complicates matters. Capturing the range of consequences of innovation brokering is very different to ‘measuring how many farmers receive fingerlings’, respondents point out.

Indeed, this speaks to some of the tensions that the RIU-Malawi programme appears to have had to negotiate. It has had to manage the simultaneous — and, at times, ambiguously framed — agendas of the RIU programme as a whole: putting research into use, and learning about how to put research into use. While the former might be measured in terms of hard numbers, the latter tends to lend itself to qualitative analyses that yield process lessons.

E. How is RIU-Malawi perceived today?

Nearing the end of its planned implementation phase, how is RIU-Malawi perceived by stakeholders? One respondent suggested that RIU-Malawi has succeeded in overcoming the isolation that has characterised past interventions. It has brought together self-interested actors, and allowed them to determine ‘what to do, when and how’ (interview RIUM6). Indeed, the devolution of responsibility to stakeholders was another defining feature of the programme: the programme had averted ‘coming in and prescribing answers (interview RIUM11)’. Respondents also noted that RIU-Malawi had ‘not thrown money at the problem’ (interview RIUM5). Rather, it expected platform members to collectively analyse their sub-sectors, prioritise areas of action and devise implementation plans, prior to disbursing platform grants. Indeed, these were cited by several respondents as critical pieces in the puzzle. Others also expressed appreciation towards the capacity building that they had

experienced. One respondent noted that this went beyond conventional crop management practices and included lessons in managing group dynamics, leadership, marketing and quality control (interview RIUM10).

RIU-Malawi now has three years of experience in incubating innovation. Did stakeholders feel that there was demand for similar services in the future? The response was a tentative 'yes'. There was a need for an entity to bring stakeholders together, make the relationships between them functional, facilitate diagnostic and prioritisation exercises and provide back-up support for implementation. Indeed, there was enthusiasm for more platforms to be formed around the issues that had been identified during the programme design phase in 2007. Such activity, it was felt, would have to be supported by a combination of grant money (to get activities off the ground in the initial phases) and private investment (once tangible outputs would begin to materialise).

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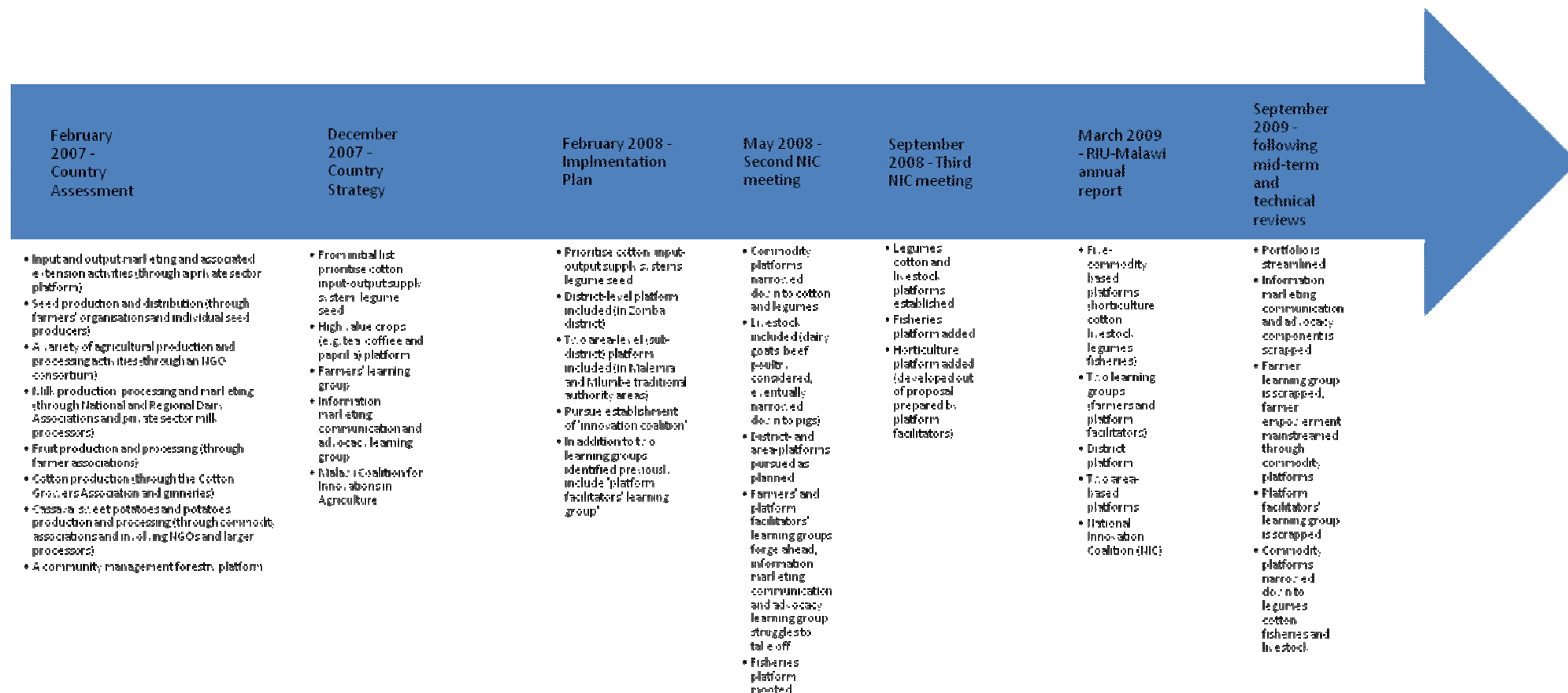
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ANNEX 1. TIMELINE OF PROGRAMME EVOLUTION

July 2006	RIU established
August 2006	
September 2006	
October 2006	
November 2006	
December 2006	
January 2007	
February 2007	Malawi Country Assessment completed
March 2007	
April 2007	
May 2007	
June 2007	RIU inception phase end date
July 2007	
August 2007	
September 2007	
October 2007	
November 2007	
December 2007	Malawi Country Strategy Completed
January 2008	
February 2008	Malawi Implementation Plan Completed
March 2008	First Country Coordinator hired
April 2008	First NIC meeting
May 2008	National Monitoring and Learning Coordinator and National Platform Coordinator hired
	Second NIC meeting
June 2008	First Farmer Empowerment Learning Group Workshop
	First Legume Platform Meeting
	First Fisheries Workshop
July 2008	RIU-Malawi Programme launch
	First platform facilitators' training
August 2008	First livestock platform workshop
	Cotton Development Partnership Workshop
September 2008	Second Farmer Empowerment Learning Group Workshop
	Third NIC meeting
October 2008	Zomba Area Stakeholder Panel Baseline Study
November 2008	DFID commissioned mid-term review
	Fourth NIC meeting
December 2008	
January 2009	Extraordinary NIC meeting (to discuss platform proposals)
February 2009	Platform Facilitators Workshop
	Second Fisheries Platform meeting
March 2009	Legumes Platform Baseline Study
	Annual Report of RIU-Malawi
	Discussions on possible collaboration with Fairtrade
	Discussions on collaboration with Bunda College and CIAT on McKnight Foundation Legume Project
April 2009	New RIU Programme Director is appointed
	Livestock Platform Baseline Study
May 2009	Third Farmer Empowerment Learning Group Workshop
	Joint NIC & PC's meeting
	Fish farming baseline study
June 2009	Horticulture platform meeting
July 2009	Technical review of Africa and Asia country programmes. RIU-Malawi platforms

	consolidated to fish farming, legumes and livestock.
August 2009	Third fisheries platform meeting Livestock platform meeting
September 2009	RIU recruited a new team to implement the business plan. Partners: LINK (learning-Central Research Team), TANGO (M&E), NRinternational Changes. Strengthened management structures, improve communication, create stronger vision, ACP country programs get more freedom, more control over budget (flexibility funds)
October 2009	CTA training workshop on Agricultural Innovation Systems
November 2009	Presentation of draft guidelines on hatchery operations to Director for Fisheries
December 2009	Best Bets initiative launched Presentation to Permanent Secretary for Agriculture on RIU and platforms
January 2010	New Communications Officer and Programme Officer are recruited Fish farming stakeholders' meeting
February 2010	Livestock Platform Workshop PIAD stakeholders' workshop
March 2010	Fifth fisheries platform meeting Presentation of RIU at Ministry of Agriculture (agriculture sector projects)
April 2010	Discussions on technical assistance to establish Roots & Tubers Platform by Ministry of Agriculture, modelled on RIU IFFN workshop (Northern Province)
May 2010	IFFN workshop (Central Province and Southern Province) Submission of proposal to call by CARP ("Enhancing Fish production and Marketing for Food Security and Rural Income of Small-Scale Producers in Malawi") First Roots & Tubers Platform meeting (facilitated by RIU Country Coordinator)
June 2010	Legume platform meeting Departure of Programme Officer
July 2010	RIU meeting in Nairobi New Programme Officer joins Second Roots & Tubers Platform meeting
August 2010	Fish farming platform meets with the Director for Fisheries
September 2010	
October 2010	
November 2010	Livestock platform meeting Fisheries platformmeeting
December 2010	Training of (63) GALA seed producers
January 2011	Launch of the pig market in Mulanje Roundtable discussions with delegation of Chinese, World Bank and DFID representatives on the fish farming platform, and exploring opportunities for collaboration and support
February 2011	
March 2011	
April 2011	

ANNEX 2. EVOLUTION OF PLATFORMS



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