Decentralisation reforms and the new policy extension in Malawi held the promise of a stronger role for districts and lower levels in agricultural governance and increased plurality of agricultural service providers. Such potential is yet to be realised. There is an impasse with the decentralisation process and local government performance and interaction with other service providers face considerable institutional and operational challenges. Such challenges are compounded by the increasing politicisation of Malawian agriculture policy. In the absence of progress in decentralisation or in the development of a diversified and competitive supply of agricultural services, traditional leaders are, in some cases, emerging as progressive actors with capacity to mobilise people to agricultural activities in a developmental way.

This paper summarises the findings of three case-studies produced in Malawi which examine the Ministry of Agriculture’s evolving roles, performance and relations with other players at the district level. Districts covered are Dedza, Thyolo and Rumphi (Box 1). The full case-study reports are available at www.future-agricultures.org.uk.

The promise of decentralised governance and demand-drivenness and plurality in service provision
Decentralisation reforms, ongoing since 2000, have led to important institutional changes in government structures and decision-making processes at local level. District Assemblies were established as a legitimate centre of implementation of responsibilities for agricultural services at the local level, with the aim of improving efficiency, effectiveness and equity of development interventions, as well as promoting local participation and democracy.

In agriculture, such changes have placed a new emphasis on Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security (MoAFS)’s roles of coordination, facilitation and regulation of different players’ activities at local level. District Agriculture Development Offices (DADO) were created, in each of Malawi’s 28 districts, with the aim of making the district the focal point for planning and service delivery, further divided into 154...
The new extension policy, developed in line with the decentralisation process, proposes a bottom-up and participatory strategy for planning interventions and calls for demand-driven and pluralistic supply response to the wide range of extension needs. The policy proposes a middle-of-the-road alternative between paying for extension (privatisation) and the voucher system (conventional public provision) – individual farmers find extension workers to request services (the poorest are at disadvantage) and specifically created forums specify extension priorities and hold service to account for meeting these. These forums, created to implement the policy, extend down to the grassroots level. District, Area and Village Stakeholder Panels were established and each of these brings together the diversity of agriculture sector players, including NGOs, farmer associations, smallholder farmers, traditional leaders and agri-businesses. The forums are expected to: coordinate the planning and delivery of service provision so that there is equitable distribution of services across districts; promote sharing of best practices, particularly with regard to modalities of service delivery; and provide inputs into possible proposals for consideration at the centre through district MoAFS offices, as conveners of these forums.

**Challenges**

Yet, evidence from three Malawian districts suggests that the potential for strengthening local governance and promoting demand-drivenness and plurality in service provision through decentralisation and the new extension policy have not yet materialised. There are factors constraining performance and influence of local government institutions and non-state actors are failing to emerge as sustainable, affordable and accountable service providers.

**Public sector capacity constraints**

Firstly, local government capacity to perform newly assigned functions is constrained by staffing shortages, the lack of incentives to retain and motivate staff, and insufficient and unpredictable budgets. These problems are particularly acute below DADO level.

Personnel issues are a major challenge to operating capacity at local level. Many key positions are either vacant or filled by under-qualified staff. For instance, of the 169 EPA Sections in Dedza District, there are only 82 Agriculture Extension Development Officers to oversee service delivery. In Thyolo there are 56 Extension Officers for 142 EPA Sections, whereas in Rumphi there are 37 Officers for 67 positions Extension worker-farmer ratios are estimated at 1:1000 in Dedza and 1:3000 in Thyolo and Rumphi, against the recommended ratio of 1:500.

The staffing crisis stems from various causes, including: the HIV/AIDS pandemic, the closure and subsequent privatisation of the only accredited extension training institution in Malawi, and low pay and nearly absence of incentive mechanisms in the civil service. The privatisation of the Natural Resources College is looked at with...
particular concern. It has turned the College into an elite institution, compromising future availability of extension workers in the public sector. Graduates look for opportunities to quickly recoup their investment in the NGO and private sectors that offer more attractive working conditions. Few are willing to take up a low paid public sector job in a remote rural area. There has also been a significant exodus towards NGOs and private sector by public extension workers with best qualifications and performance. Most of those who have not left supplement their meagre salaries by either working as extension consultants for NGOs or working in their own farms, to the detriment of their functions as public extension workers. The competition for extension workers is fierce but the huge salary differential indicates that the public sector is at clear disadvantage – government field officers receive a monthly salary of about US$ 90 whereas they can get up to US$700 in the NGO and private sectors.

Low pay and lack of incentives in the public sector are also compromising the objectives of the demand-driven approach adopted by the new extension policy. The approach is leading to uneven access to extension services by farmers across districts. Farmers that belong to cooperatives and associations are better able to access such services as they can afford paying handouts to extension workers. Farmers’ access is further biased in favour of those areas that have government or donor-sponsored projects or NGOs, as the projects of NGOs are able to facilitate demand for extension services for communities within their respective catchment area. Hence, if not properly designed, demand-driven extension is likely to prejudice resource-poor farmers.

Local MoAFS performance is also handicapped by insufficient and unpredictable budgets. Also, funds are normally disbursed on a monthly basis, which makes it difficult to deal with the seasonal fluctuations in demand for agricultural services. Some recent improvements in the funding situation have been noticed, as MoAFS is a prioritised ministry since the introduction of the fertiliser subsidy programme in 2005/06. A disproportionate share of additional resources flowing into the Ministry have been, however, absorbed by administrative overheads for the subsidy programme whereas resource allocation into regular MoAFS activities has either remained stagnant or actually diminished.

Multi-stakeholder coordination failure
Fourthly, coordination across sector stakeholders and investments continues to be insufficient, often leading to unnecessary costs, duplication and inconsistencies.

Multi-stakeholder coordination has been targeted through various initiatives, some related to decentralisation reforms (e.g. creation of District Executive Committee) and the new extension policy (e.g. Stakeholder Panels). Most, however, are not functioning effectively due to lack of funding to support their operation (much needed, given the worryingly chronic culture of allowances within the civil service), lack of capacity to mobilise the right people (senior stakeholder representatives) to participate in such fora, and conflicting interests and competition between sector players.

The private sector has practically been left out most coordination initiatives, while interaction with NGOs is done largely on a bilateral basis, particularly on extension. NGOs are particularly suspicious about government-led coordination initiatives as they tend to perceive them as desperate attempts to tap onto NGO resources. As for coordination among NGOs operating in the sector, this has been constrained by the intense competition for donor funding and public sector extension workers and pressure to show the best results quickly. Attempts to strengthen dialogue and collaboration among NGOs, and avoid duplication of efforts, have failed to generate any tangible results. The
MoAFS is partly blamed for this, as it has failed to play a catalytic role. Therefore, interaction between stakeholders in agriculture continues to happen on an ad hoc basis and driven by particular needs at particular points in time.

**Political resistance to decentralisation**

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, the decentralisation process has stalled. Malawi has been without elected councillors since May 2005 and there have been several signs of recentralisation tendencies. There have been some fundamental amendments to the Local Government Act which suggest a complete reversal of the decentralization process. The implementation of stakeholder panels as a mechanism for rolling out the demand-driven provision of extension services has effectively stalled in the last two years. The fertiliser subsidy policy is by and large a centrally-driven initiative which is quite contrasting perceptions on the role of the state vis-à-vis other players.

The agricultural sector is seen, by some observers, as being increasingly politicised since the introduction of the fertiliser subsidy programme. It has become regular practice for politicians, at the highest level, to announce publicly, often when speaking directly to farmers, policy measures that technocrats are not aware of, as they have not been discussed as part of the institutionalised planning and resource allocation exercise getting a muscular presence of the state back in the sector (Box 2).

Other players look at this revival of the state in agriculture with concern. NGOs criticise the direct intervention approach and argue for a role of the state focused on policy, regulation and monitoring activities. But the NGOs view is in part driven by their own interests in the sector and the fact that they see Government as competition for the services they provide to farmers. The private sector claims that government has not been able to create the required enabling conditions for agri-businesses to develop.

But farmers, or at least some of them, remain hopeful as President Mutharika’s personal commitment and leadership of the agriculture sector is seen as following the lines of Dr Banda’s regime. Others look with concern at the increasing politicisation of agricultural policies and the rise of what is described as ‘political podium policies’ (Box 3).

The revival of agriculture is essentially centrally driven and shaped by political motivations. The challenges discussed above imply that, for the time being, responses from local government are likely to be restrained and the role of other stakeholders expected to remain secondary. Yet, although farmers are sympathetic with having the state as the main service provider they are also aware and suspicious of underlying political motivations. Traditional authorities are seen, in this volatile context, as a developmental actor, concerned with the common good in the agricultural sector. This further challenges democratic decentralisation which aimed to decrease the powers of traditional chiefs and increase the power of elected officials. But does it reinforce or challenge recentralisation tendencies? In Rumphi district, where the levels of education of local chiefs are relatively high, chiefs are better able resist manipulation from politicians and act as a local ‘progressive partner’. By drawing on both realms of tradition and modernity they are able to mobilise people for agricultural activities, and they do it without any quest for selfish political gains.

**Conclusion**

Decentralisation reforms and the new extension policy offered opportunities to rethink the role of the state in agriculture. Decentralisation should have allowed more demand-driven and pluralistic service delivery, but the process is far from complete. To date, government has demonstrated little capacity or interest in stepping beyond its historical role as provider of services, and so the coordination and facilitation of the sector remain thin. Farmers welcome however the revitalised support from the state to the sector. Yet, in a context of strong politicisation of agriculture, traditional leaders are, in some districts, looked upon as an alternative partner for promoting developmental objectives in the sector.

---

**Box 2. Nostalgia for ADMARC**

Malawian smallholder farmers are nostalgic for the period between 1980 and 1993 – before structural adjustment – which they see as a golden era in the agricultural development of Malawi. At that time, agricultural services were dominated by the parastatal organisation, ADMARC – the Agricultural Development and Marketing Corporation. ADMARC had an important role in supplying inputs and providing marketing and extension services to farmers. This made it easy for farmers to access inputs and provided them with a ready market for their produce. ADMARC’s activities were substantially cut back as a result of structural adjustment reforms in the 1980s. Private traders have not stepped in to fill the gap, leaving farmers in these areas without any viable market outlets.

---

**Box 3. The rise of ‘political podium policies’**

The agricultural sector is seen, by some observers, as being increasingly politicised since the introduction of the fertiliser subsidy programme. It has become regular practice for politicians, at the highest level, to announce publicly, often when speaking directly to farmers, policy measures that technocrats are not aware of, as they have not been discussed as part of the institutionalised planning and resource allocation exercise.

Acknowledgements:
This Policy Brief was written by Blessings Chinsinga and Lidia Cabral of the Future Agricultures Consortium. The series editor is David Hughes. Further information about this series of Policy Briefs at: www.future-agricultures.org

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

Readers are encouraged to quote or reproduce material from Future Agricultures Briefings in their own publications. In return, the Future Agricultures Consortium requests due acknowledgement and a copy of the publication.

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