

Malawi's Agriculture Ministry: Fit for Purpose?

Malawi's Ministry of Agriculture (MoA) has a mandate to promote and accelerate broad-based and sustainable agricultural development, so as to stimulate economic growth and contribute to poverty reduction. The MoA is responsible for policy formulation and regulation, the coordination of training and collaboration with other stakeholders in the agriculture sector, and supervision of parastatal organisations, for which it also guarantees loans.

Decentralisation policy reforms, ongoing since 2000, have led to important institutional changes in the MoA's structures and decision-making processes at local level. In particular, the changes have placed a new emphasis on the MoA's role in coordinating, facilitating and regulating the activities of different players, as opposed to direct delivery of services. This briefing looks at the successes and limits of the process so far and identifies some challenges for the future.

District-level organisation

At local level, the MoA is divided into 28 District Agriculture Development Offices (DADOs), which are subdivided into 154 Extension Planning Areas (EPAs). EPAs are further divided into Sections - the lowest level of the MoA structure and the main point of service-delivery to farmers.

DADOs were created as a key part of the decentralisation strategy, aimed at making districts

the focal point for planning and service delivery and improving the effectiveness, efficiency and responsiveness of service provision.

DADOs are responsible for providing information, technical advice and training to EPA staff and farmers, as well as managerial supervision of EPA staff. The EPAs are responsible for developing farmers' groups, facilitating farmers' access to credit institutions and farmer education.

Farmers also emphasise the MoA's role in regulating markets – for instance, monitoring the quality of agricultural inputs (particularly pesticides), as well as the promotion of livestock.

Other stakeholders, however, criticise the MoA for largely failing to perform its coordination and monitoring functions. District-level work plans are normally biased towards direct interventions in the sector, while coordination and monitoring require competences

Box 1: 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.

Roles and responsibilities: different views

District-level agriculture officials emphasise the MoA's responsibilities for service delivery, particularly those services that contribute to achieving food security and income-enhancement at household level. They put the Ministry's responsibilities for coordination, policy dissemination and monitoring lower down the list of its functions.

In this regard, their perceptions are closely aligned with smallholder farmers' own expectations.

and resources that are scarce at district level.

Decentralisation and responsiveness

The new extension policy proposes a bottom-up and participatory strategy for planning interventions, in which EPA Sections work with farmers to identify priority extension needs, which are then fed upwards to inform planning processes at higher levels. So far, however, these good intentions have not been put into practice.

Funding constraints, centrally

defined priorities derived from national development strategies and stipulations imposed by aid donors lead local development plans to be revised and compromised at higher levels of decision-making. Managing the tension between locally- and nationally-defined priorities remains a major challenge, particularly in the context of scarce financial resources. In practice, decision-making remains largely centralised.

Another key problem is the fact that DADOs report to both the Ministry of Agriculture (for technical matters) and the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development (for administrative matters). This reporting structure threatens to undermine the coherence of decision-making and budget allocations.

Staffing issues

Personnel issues are a major challenge to operating capacity at district level. Many key positions are either vacant or filled by under-qualified staff. For instance, there are only 82 Agriculture Extension Development Officers (AEDOs) to oversee service delivery in the 169 EPA Sections in Dedza District.

In Thyolo District, there are only 56 AEDOs for 142 Sections. Extension worker–farmer ratios are estimated to be 1:1000 in Dedza and 1:3000 in Thyolo. The staffing crisis stems from various causes, including:

- The HIV/AIDS pandemic.
- The closure of the only accredited extension training institution, more than a decade ago.
- Low public sector salaries and poor incentive packages.

Talented field-level staff are quickly moved to more senior posts within the MoA or leave for better paid jobs in the NGO sector.

The performance of MoA staff is

also handicapped by inappropriate and outdated technical training and unpredictable budgets. Also, funds are normally disbursed on a monthly basis, which makes it difficult to deal with seasonal fluctuations in demand for services.

Gaps in service delivery are being filled by a wide range of actors, including NGOs, farmer associations and, to a lesser extent, the private sector. DADOs can sometimes obtain additional funds from aid donors and NGOs, but these resources are earmarked for specific projects or activities and DADO officials do not have any discretion over how they are allocated. Needless to say, such funding is only available for projects favoured by the donors, not necessarily those wanted by the Ministry.

Coordination

The entry of new service-providers increases the importance of the coordinating role of the MoA. However, internal coordination between sub-units and programmes of the Ministry itself remains poor. These difficulties stem partly from poor communication and partly from internal competition for resources.

Coordination with other public sector agencies is largely non-existent, especially across sectors. The lack of coordination between the MoA's extension officers and the irrigation officers of the Department of Irrigation in the Ministry of Water Development, is a particular problem.

The MoA's interface with other agriculture stakeholders is also poor. A new coordination framework, the District Agricultural Extension Support System (DAESS), has been proposed. It could help to bring together key actors to collectively define the policy agenda and work

towards common goals. However, the DAESS is currently on hold, awaiting funding.

Interaction between the MoA and the private sector is virtually non-existent, while interaction with NGOs is done largely on a bilateral basis. Some NGOs collaborate with the MoA in planning, service provision and monitoring activities, particularly in the field of extension. This kind of collaboration is stronger at EPA level, but the relationship is not free from tensions.

There are also concerns about rivalry between NGOs, which are driven by the intense competition for donor funding and pressure to show results quickly. Attempts to strengthen dialogue and collaboration among NGOs in the sector have failed to generate any tangible results so far. The MoA has been partly blamed for this, as it has failed to play a catalytic role.

Caution: work in progress

Malawi's new extension policy represents an opportunity to rethink the role of the state in the agriculture sector. Decentralisation should allow more demand-driven and pluralistic service delivery, but the process is far from complete. To date, the MoA has demonstrated little capacity or interest in stepping beyond its historical role as provider of services, and so the regulation, coordination and facilitation of the sector remains thin.

In order to operationalise and sustain the new system, certain competences will be required. It is relatively easy to write policies and devise innovative structures, but hard to make them work without the necessary means and incentives.

by Blessings Chinsinga & Lidia Cabral

correspondence to:
kchinsinga@yahoo.co.uk

