



Future  
Agricultures

# The Political Economy of Ministry of Agriculture at the District Level: The Case of Rumphi District

**Blessings Chinsinga**

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## Abbreviations

MoA	Ministry of Agriculture
IMF	International Monetary Fund
SAPs	Structural Adjustment Programmes
DFID	Department for International Development
KNOTS	Knowledge, Technology and Society
IDS	Institute of Development Studies
AEDO	Agricultural Extension Development Officer
AEDC	Agricultural Extension Development Coordinators
AVOs	Assistant Vert Officers
NGO	Non Governmental Organization
EPAs	Extension Planning Areas
SEP	Socio-Economic Profile
DDP	District Development Plan
ECA	Economic Commission for Africa
AU	African Union
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
ODA	Overseas Development Assistance
SADC	Southern Africa Development Community
CAADP	Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme
AGRA	Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa
CSOs	Civil Society Organizations
MoAFS	Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security
ADMARC	Agricultural Development and Marketing Corporation
TCC	Tobacco Control Commission
ARET	Agriculture Research and Extension Trust
IRLAD	Irrigation Rural Livelihood and Agricultural Development
SHIP	Smallholder Irrigation Project
RIEP	Rural Income Enhancement Project
IDAF	Institutional Development Across Food Sectors
FIDP	Farm Income Diversification project
MGDS	Malawi Growth and Development Strategy
GoM	Government of Malawi
ASWAP	Agricultural Sector Wide Approach
DAs	District Assemblies
DCs	District Commissioners
DAESS	District Extension Service System
FBOs	Faith Based Organizations
DADOs	District Agricultural Development Officer
NRC	Natural Resources College
HIV	Human Immuno Virus
AIDS	Acquired Immuno Deficiency Syndrome

MoHP  
FGDs  
ADD  
DEC  
EU  
MGPDD  
CDF

Ministry of Health and Population  
Focus Group Discussions  
Agricultural Development Division  
District Executive Committee  
European Union  
Malawi German Programme on Democracy and Decentralization  
Constituency Development Fund

## 1. Setting the Context

The main motivation of this research is to understand the functioning of the Ministry of Agriculture (MoA) at district level and beyond in a changing context shaped by political and market liberalization in which policy reforms have been greatly driven by the economic reform agenda of the IMF and World Bank (Omamo & Farrington, 2004). These reforms were designed to reduce the role government, cut back on public sector expenditures, improve balance of payments, reduce government deficits, enhance macroeconomic performance and help developing countries achieve higher economic growth rates. Referred to as structural adjustment programmes (SAPs); the key elements of policy reforms included macroeconomic restructuring, privatization of government agencies, liberalization of markets, removal of the government from the agricultural markets and elimination of subsidies. In the agricultural sector, SAPs “forced African governments to dismantle public agricultural research and extension programmes and drop whatever protection and incentive mechanisms existed for their small farmers” (UK Food Group, 2008: 9). The main goal of the SAPs was “to convert the role of the state into that of facilitator and regulator of the private sector” (Omamo and Farrington, 2004: 1). The MoAs would thus act merely as part players and not as the principal architects and drivers of agricultural policies and policy reforms.

The main objectives of the research were threefold: First, to assess the role of MoA in an operative context underpinned by market liberalization and democratic pluralism. Second, to review what the MoA actually does on the ground vis a vis the perception of other stakeholders focusing on what drives and shapes the pattern of its activities. Third, to assess the main drivers of, or constraints to performance

including the extent to which greater stakeholder participation in planning, implementation and/or monitoring of its activities result in improved performance. These objectives were investigated using a political economy framework, motivated by the fact that much of the existing policy research on African agriculture “has focused more on what policy type of questions rather than on the processes by which policy is made and implemented” (Cabral and Scoones, 2006: 5). The resultant policy advice has therefore tended to advocate for ideal but unworkable measures at the expense of less ideal but workable ones. To wit it, “the best remains the enemy of the good” (Omamo and Farrington, 2004: 2).

The political economy framework primarily tracks the underlying interests, incentives and institutions that enable or frustrate change (Synder, 2005 and DFID, 2009). The political economy framework is therefore instrumental for getting to grips with the operational context for MoAs at district level in view of reforms that are being implemented as an integral part of the efforts to revive the fortunes of the agricultural sector. The main strength of the political economy analysis is that it helps understand how interests, institutions and ideas shape action and outcomes at different levels of society. This provides an ideal platform to examine issues beyond the ‘what policy questions’ to the ‘how policy questions’ such as what constrains implementation, how constraints can be overcome or bypassed, and what policy measures have greater or lesser prospects of implementation as well as how power relations play, how the poor are excluded, and what can realistically be done to minimise and reverse such exclusion (Omamo & Farrington, 2004 and de Janvry and Sadoulet, 2008). It is further argued that political economy analysis is vital in identifying where the main opportunities and

barriers for policy change exist as well as inform more realistic expectations of what can be achieved, and risks involved (Synder, 2005 and DFID, 2009). In the agricultural sector, therefore, it is important to understand “not only the technical dimensions of agriculture but also the economic, administrative, social and political aspects of proposed reforms” (de Janvry and Sadoulet, 2008: 20). More attention is needed to implementation constraints such as weak infrastructure, power relations and corruption and how these can be overcome and circumvented.

The political economy analysis is further underpinned by the Knowledge, Technology and Society (KNOTS) conceptual framework of the politics of policy processes (Keeley & Scoones, 2003 and IDS, 2006). This framework highlights the dynamic interaction between narratives, actor/networks and politics/interests and posits that the way in which policies are talked about, and the associated values, power relations and politics frame policies in a particular way. According to Cabral and Scoones (2006), actors coalesce around different policy narratives, forming networks across organizations and between groups of people—academics, think tanks, donors, government agencies and others. Policy outcomes can therefore be explained in terms of the interaction between narratives, actors and interests which either create or decrease policy space as well as options for policy change. Policy spaces are defined as “opportunities, moments and channels where citizens can act to potentially affect policies, discourses and relationships that affect their lives and interests” (Gaventa, 2006: 26). And contrary to the highly stylized perspective, the policy process is less of a linear sequence but more of a political process underpinned by a complex mesh of interactions and ramifications between a wide range of stakeholders who are

driven and constrained by competing interests and the contexts in which they operate.

Policy outcomes are further shaped by the interaction between formal and informal institutions. The former are defined as rules and procedures which are created and communicated through channels widely accepted as official whereas the latter are construed as socially shared rules, usually unwritten, created, communicated and enforced outside officially sanctioned channels. The interface between formal and informal institutions can take four different forms. According to a scheme developed by Helmke and Levitsky (2004), the interface can be accommodating, complementary, competitive and substitutive altogether. And which pattern of interface obtains has significant implications on whether policy reforms are a success or not. The competitive and substitutive modes of interface between formal and informal institutions are a cause of concern because they tend to render formal institutions more or less redundant (Chinsinga, 2009a). It is therefore critical to have an idea of likely modes of interaction between formal and informal institutions in a reform situation. This helps greatly to figure out how policy and institutional reforms that benefit the poor emerge and endure, or in many cases they are blocked. There are thus always tensions between formal rules and informal power relations which often result in the failure of technically sound policy prescriptions. It is therefore argued that “the challenge is not only about garnering new evidence but also about creating new alliances, networks and political configurations” (Scoones, 2005: 110).

## **2. Empirical Setting for the Study**

### **2.1. Rumph’s Geographical Location and Agriculture**

The study was carried out in Rumph, northern Malawi as a third district in the series of MoA

studies at the district level in March 2009. Similar studies were carried out in Dedza and Thyolo in central and southern Malawi respectively in November 2007. These districts were chosen on the basis of some political economy considerations. Rumphu is a major agricultural district in northern Malawi cultivating mainly maize and flue cured tobacco with fairly plentiful land, relatively prosperous and at least well connected to Mzuzu, a major city in northern Malawi. Rumphu was home to Malawi's most prominent politician in the northern region—Tom Chakufwa Chihana—since the return to political pluralism in May 1994. The idea was to explore whether the 'political significance' of Rumphu would have any significant influence in the functioning of the MoA at district level since the political economy perspective helps understand how interests facing different groups in society generate policy processes that may encourage or hinder positive change and development (Synder, 2005).

Rumphu is one of the 28 districts in Malawi located in the northern region of Malawi. It is bordered by Chitipa in the north, Karonga in the north east, Mzimba in the south and Nkhata Bay in the south east. It is situated approximately 70kms from Mzuzu, the northern region's commercial hub and 435kms from Lilongwe, the capital city of Malawi. As a predominantly agricultural district, Rumphu enjoys diverse climatic conditions ranging from cool weather at Viphya and Chikangawa plateaux to hot weather of the Lake Shore areas from Chitimba to Tcharo. In high areas, the district receives well above 1200mm per annum while in the plains and valleys the rainfall ranges between 800-1000mm per annum. Rumphu is blessed with several perennial rivers which gives it a great potential for irrigated agriculture. Thus both rain-fed and irrigated agriculture are practised and diverse types of crops are grown and

animals kept for both consumption and income generation (GoM, 2005).

Although maize and tobacco are the main crops in the district, farmers cultivate a wide range of crops both for consumption and sale. These, among others, include cassava, beans, groundnuts, sweet potatoes, rice, millet, pulses, European potatoes and paprika. A wide range of horticultural crops and vegetables are also cultivated. These included bananas, mangoes, oranges, tangerines, macademia, coffee, guavas, pawpaws, coffee, onions and tomatoes. Tables 2.1 and 2.2 show the production of these crops between 2003/4 and 2005/6 growing season for which data is available.

As demonstrated in Tables 2.1 and 2.2, crop yields are well behind the average potential mainly due to limited use of improved seed varieties, low utilization of fertilizer, low utilization of manure, poor pest and disease management practices. In some parts of the district such as Bolero, Mhujuru and Lakeshore areas, agricultural productivity is constrained by erratic rains and poor soil fertility. Crops in the district are grown predominantly under rain-fed conditions. There are some few areas such as Mwachenga, Mwalweni and Mwankhunkwa where rain-fed agriculture is supplemented by irrigation particularly gravity-fed irrigation, treadle and motorized pumps or residue moisture to either grow a second or third crop.

## **2.2. Capital Finance and Roads**

Business activities are essentially vibrant in Rumphu but entrepreneurs fail to realize their full potential due to capital constraints. Access to finance capital is limited due to restrictive lending practices for those who do not have meaningful collateral in form of assets or financial deposits. Some of the finance institutions in Rumphu district included Farmers World, Agriculture Development and Marketing

**Table 2.1. Crop Production in Rumphi for the 2003/4 and 2005/6 Seasons**

	2006/5	2004/5	2003/4	
Crops	Production	Production	Production	Production Potential
Maize	37601	17562	17107	5000 to 10000
Cassava	95203	75910	64612	30000
Beans	4355	2738	2175	2500
Groundnuts	1625	14095	1475	2000
Sweet Potatoes	19445	19280	19362	30000
Tobacco	6931	4804	7417	2000 to 4000
Rice	64	45	32	3500 to 6000
Millet	205	149	196	2000
Pulses	4512	2938	2372	2000 to 2500
European Potatoes	4321	3073	2047	15000 to 20000
Paprika	157	50	18	2500

Source: Rumphi Socio-Economic Profile, 2006

**Table 2.2. Horticulture Production in Rumphi for the 2003/4 and 2005/6 G Seasons**

	2005/6	2004/5	2003/4	
	Production	Production	Production	Production Potential
Bananas	18117	18372	16878	120 000
Mangoes	21012	12528	17968	-
Oranges	192	171	167	-
Tangerines	132	160	138	-
Macadamia	912	370	408	-
Coffee	657703	388000	675120	-
Tomatoes	3892	3244	2078	50000
Onions	298	256	180	24000
Guavas	758	732	648	-
Pawpaws	1400	1034	847	-

Source: Rumphi Socio-Economic Profile, 2006



Corporation (ADMARC), National Association of Smallholder Farmers of Malawi (NASFAM), Pride Malawi and New Society Buidling (NBS) bank.

Informal sources of finance also exist but they attract extremely high rates. However, unlike the formal finance institutions, the informal sources of finance are highly accessible because lending is based primarily on trust. Interest rates for formal finance institutions range between 24% and 52% per annum while they can be as high as 100% in the informal credit markets.

The road net work in Rumphi is quite extensive but most of it becomes inaccessible for most part during the rainy season. Except for the M1 road which is bituminised, the rest of Rumphi roads are earth with gravel or non gravel. These roads are generally passable during the dry season but pose some serious mobility challenges during the rainy season. The road condition has somewhat deteriorated in recent years due to lack of maintenance on a regular basis due to lack of funds.

### **2.3. Methodology and Organization of the Paper**

The research employed a qualitative case study approach, inspired by the contention that the revival of African agriculture will greatly depend on locally relevant policies that will transform it into a sustainable, competitive and highly productive system (Adesina, 2009). The point is that there is need to design locally specific endogenous approaches that build on existing systems since much experimentation is needed to achieve local best practices. The strength of the case study approach is that it addresses directly specific problems that are evident locally but if interpreted carefully, case studies may underlie local manifestations of a much more general set of problems. The case study approach avoids treating complex phenomena as though they were incidents or events instead treat them as “institutionally embedded processes with distinct histories which needs

to be carefully uncovered” (Omamo and Farrington, 2004: 4). It thus locates factors that account for the behaviour patterns of the given unit as an integrated totality (Kothari, 2004).

The qualitative approach focuses on the reactions, comments and perceptions of participants rather than quantification in the collection and analysis of data. This approach yields spoken words, opinions, and expressions that are of greater value when analysing social, economic, political contexts and institutions (Bryman, 2001 and Campbell, 2002). It is thus concerned with understanding the meanings which people attach to customs, beliefs and values within their social world and understanding the mental mapping process that respondents use to make sense and interpret the world around them. This approach therefore provides the means of acquiring an in depth understanding of human behaviour since it affords the opportunity to explore issues, understand phenomena and answer questions.

The main reason for this is that the approach uses open-ended questions permitting unexpected but relevant issues to be followed up with either additional questions or systematic probing. Where these emerged, they became an integral part of the findings. The main tools for data collection were key informant interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). The key informant interviews were carried out with MoA officials (regular and project staff) at the district and local levels (AEDOs, AEDCs and AVOs); NGO officials; private sector actors particularly the agro-dealers; and local leaders mainly traditional leaders and MPs. FGDs were held with groups of farmers in Mhujuru and Bolero Extension Planning Areas (EPAs) out of the six EPAs in Rumphi district. These EPAs were randomly selected and four FGDs were conducted in each EPA. Two villages were also randomly selected from each EPA where two FGDs were conducted bringing the number of FGDs to four. In total, 8 FGDs were conducted.

The FGDs involved 8-12 participants with at least an equal distribution of men and women. This was specified to the village heads when booking appointments for the FGDs. It was requested that the participants should be at least over 18 years of age and engaged in some kind of farming. The village heads were specifically requested to inform at least 12 farmers, 6 men and 6 women for the FGDs. The intention of holding FGDs in two separate villages in each EPA was to establish whether they would be similarities or differences about the perceptions on how agricultural services are provided by MoAFS staff and other service providers. The results did not, however, show any striking significant differences between the perceptions of farmers across the four villages that were sampled in Mhujū and Bolero EPAs. The key informant interviews and FGDs were complemented by secondary data sources such as the Socio-Economic Profile (SEP), District Development Plan (DDP) and monthly, quarterly and annual reports.

The studies were guided by three interrelated hypotheses inspired by the contemporary operative context for MoAs. First, stakeholder priorities for MoA activities vary according to the degree of local market development and non-government service provision. Second, MoA activities are determined by informal forces as they are by formal planning processes. Third, stakeholder participation in district level budgeting, planning and monitoring improves service delivery outcomes depending on the pattern of accountability which is the strongest. Possible forms of accountability include the following: technocratic, client voice, civil society, formal and informal political systems of checks and balances. The paper is divided into six sections. While the first section introduces the study, the second section delineates the empirical setting of the study by situating Rumphī district geographically, its status in terms of agriculture, finance and road infrastructure as

well as the methods that were used for data collection. The second section discusses the context of agricultural developments in the 21st Century at both continental and country levels. This section briefly outlines the experiences of the agricultural sector within the framework of the competing narratives about the functioning of the MoAs. The fourth section delineates the contemporary operative policy context for MoA in Malawi to set the context for the discussion of the findings. The fifth section presents the key findings of the study while the sixth and final section of the paper offers some concluding reflections.

### 3. Trends in African Agriculture in the 21st Century

#### 3.1. Agriculture in a Continental Context

African agriculture is in a state of profound crisis (Draper, et al., 2009; Adesina, 2009; ECA & AU, 2009). And yet agriculture remains the single most important source of livelihood for the majority of the African people especially those who live in rural areas. It is estimated that agriculture provides jobs as well a livelihood for over 65% of the population of most African countries (ECA and AU, 2009). However, in the last decade, per capita agricultural production has declined by 5% when in other developing countries it has actually increased by 40%. It is estimated that during the same period food consumption exceeded domestic production by 50% and agriculture's contribution to GDP declined from 29.2% during the 1979-81 period to 24.6% during the 2002-04 period (Synder, 2005 and Draper et al., 2009). The decline in the share of agriculture's contribution to GDP does not, however, reflect positive structural transformation associated with technical progress but rather the deepening of binding constraints in Africa's agriculture. African agriculture is still characterized by low input, low output and low valued added to the extent that Africa has "the highest projected gap in meeting the MDG goal

of halving hunger and poverty by 2015" (Adesina, 2009: 1).

While Africa has a huge potential to feed its people, this has not been fully exploited principally due to lack of consistent and/or lack of implementation strategies. Many scholars point to the implementation of SAPs (dubbed as policies of smallholder farmer abandonment) in the agricultural sector as the most significant policy failure. The main reason for this is that SAP policy prescriptions neglected the smallholder altogether and yet they produce the bulk of African food, generating employment for about 65% of the population (de Janvry and Sadoulet, 2008). SAPs dismantled policies and institutions that previously supported smallholder agriculture. Smallholder farmers could not adequately access extension services, credit, guaranteed minimum prices and subsidies for improved seeds and fertilizers. The majority of the farmers were therefore helplessly locked up in poverty, unable to invest in their farms or access to markets (Cook, 2009).

The African agricultural crisis has been aggravated by decades of neglect by both donors and African governments (Adesina, 2009 and Draper, et al., 2009). African agriculture has suffered decades of underinvestment because it was treated as "an impediment to structural transformation rather than an important engine of economic growth and poverty reduction" (Cook, 2009: 1). Yet history provides no case of a country that has developed without building upon a strong agricultural foundation. It is, for instance, estimated that the share of Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) to African Agriculture fell from 5% in 1990 to about 1% in 2004 when the share of African rural poverty in world poverty continued to rise from 15% to 20% over the same period (de Janvry and Sadoulet, 2008). The decline is further amplified when localized at the regional level. Aid to agriculture in Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) member states declined as

a proportion of total aid from 20% in the early 1990s to 8% by 2000 (Draper, et al., 2009). This has greatly contributed to declining per capita agricultural output levels especially of staple foods compounded by frequent bouts of adverse weather and climatic conditions.

There are some prospects for the recovery of African agriculture, however. Agriculture is back on the international development agenda as a key sector for not only kick-starting economic growth but has also a huge potential for poverty reduction (DFID, 2003; Cabral & Scoones, 2006; Cook, 2009). There is now talk of agriculture for development construed as "the capacity of agriculture to respond to new opportunities while at the same time inducing a structural transformation with aggregate growth and poverty reduction" (de Janvry and Sadoulet, 2009: 21). There seems to be high level commitment at political and policy levels to revive the fortunes of the agricultural sector underpinned by the Comprehensive African Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP). Through CAADP, African governments have committed themselves to allocating 10% of their annual budgets to the agricultural sector, the goal being to achieve and sustain growth at a minimum of 6%. It is expected that the increased budgetary allocations to the agricultural sector shall be invested into the provision of support for agricultural research and extension, rural roads, energy, infrastructure and irrigation, all of which are critical for stimulating growth.

Prospects of recovery have been boosted further by the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA) initiative whose goal is to support Africa's own version of green revolution. It focuses on empowering African governments to shape home grown agricultural policies that promote comprehensive support to smallholders. This is motivated by the belief that there is no single policy solution promoting smallholder agriculture. AGRA promotes policies that support farmers in the areas of seeds, soil health,

markets and trade, land rights, equity, environmental sustainability and climate change (Adesina, 2009). The idea is to transform subsistence agriculture practised by millions of smallholders into highly productive and sustainable commercial activities and to end hunger and poverty for millions of Africans. The ultimate goal of the AGRA initiative is to replace policies of abandonment with policies of comprehensive support for smallholders.

### **3.2. Agriculture in Malawi**

In Malawi, agriculture is the main source of livelihood. It contributes over 90% to the country's export earnings and about 39% of the country's gross domestic product (GDP), accounting for 85% of total employment (Chirwa, et al., 2006). Malawi's experiences in the agricultural sector perhaps aptly epitomises the crisis in African agriculture. Growth in the sector has hardly been consistent over time. The aggregate agricultural growth during the period 1970-2005 averaged 4.5% per annum. Agricultural growth averaged 1.9% in the 1980s compared to -2.3% in the 1990s and 0.36% between 2000 and 2005. It has recovered to annual growth rates of over 6% since the introduction of the fertilizer subsidy programme during the 2005/06 growing season (Chinsinga, 2009a).

The instability in agricultural growth rates is attributed to the cumulative negative effects of the SAPs adopted as early as 1981 (Chilowa, 1981 and Chinsinga, 2002). The collapse of the smallholder farmer credit system, combined with the removal of fertilizer and hybrid maize seed subsidies against the backdrop of a sharply devalued local currency made farm inputs virtually unaffordable to the majority of the smallholder farmers. These events coupled with persistent adverse climatic patterns since the turn of the 1990s have had tremendous negative consequences for the food security status of most households in the country. The situation has somewhat changed since the introduction

of the fertilizer subsidy programme during the 2005/06 growing season coupled with favourable climatic patterns for four consecutive seasons. For instance, AGRA notes that government policies, including seed and fertilizer vouchers for poor farmers, have helped transform Malawi from a net importer to a net exporter of maize for four years running and fuelled a national economic growth rate of 7% (Adesina, 2009).

These developments are taking place against the backdrop of three competing narratives about the role and functioning of MoAs (Cabral and Scoones, 2006). The dominance of each of these three narratives can be linked to a particular time period. The first narrative—a strong MoA with capacity and policy clout—to address the major constraints of agriculture. This was dominant during the 1970s and 1980s when there was strong state intervention in the agricultural sector. The narrative projects a vision of a well funded MoA but the principal challenge remains how to rebuild such an organization (Adesina, 2009 and Cook, 2009). The second narrative—MoA that focuses on oversight and regulation as the private sector becomes dominant in a free-market environment—dominated from mid 1980s to mid 1990s. The emphasis is on the state's withdrawal from direct service provision to focus on policy and regulatory functions for the private sector to prosper as a leading engine of growth and development in the agricultural sector. The third narrative is the post adjustment narrative from the mid 1990s to present and emphasises on “getting the institutions right and..... a role of the state in creating the base conditions for market development” (Cabral and Scoones, 2006: 9). MoAs have to work closely with other state agencies in order to address the coordination and intermediation roles in order for markets to function effectively and positively contribute toward poverty reduction.

There are also three competing narratives about the functioning of MoAs in the context of the broad market and privatization narrative. These are: 1) a free market narrative championing complete structural adjustment reforms, relying entirely on private sector development; 2) a coordinated market narrative promoting targeted and sequenced state intervention justified to kick start markets; and 3) an embedded market narrative which sees NGOs, CSOs and farmer associations as providing an alternative to market and state failures (Cabral and Scoones, 2006). The MoA has little or no role beyond the policy and regulatory functions so as to allow the private sector to flourish as a leading sector for agricultural development. In this narrative, the MoA is not only a policy formulator but also regulator (Kaarhaus and Nyirenda, 2006). In the coordinated market narrative, the MoA could play a strong coordination role as well as provision of inputs and financial services. The institutional development support to NGOs, CSOs and farmer associations is emphasized in the embedded market narrative. The failure of market driven reform efforts of the agricultural sector has resulted in the expansion of the involvement of NGOs as service providers in the agricultural sector. MoAs are no longer the dominant player within the agricultural sector which raises a new set of policy and institutional challenges altogether.

## 4. Contemporary Context for MoA in Malawi

### 4.1. Structural Organisation of MoAFS

The operative context for Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security (MoAFS) has greatly changed in recent years. There have been several efforts to reorganize it in order to prepare it for emerging challenges in the agricultural sector. It started off merely as the Ministry of Agriculture; changed to Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation; and renamed Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security (MoAFS) in 2005 (Kaarhaus and

Nyirenda, 2006). The change from MoAI to MoAFS made it imperative to reorganize its constitutive departments. The Department of Irrigation was moved to the Ministry of Water Development and the Department of Fisheries was moved from the Ministry of Mines, Energy and Environment and Natural Resources to MoAFS. The shift of the Department of Fisheries was justified as a strategy of sharpening focus on food security as the primary goal of MoAFS. The emphasis on food security was inevitable because the country has until recently grappled with the problem of endemic food insecurity since the turn of the 1990s. This was attributed to the collapse of the smallholder credit system resulting in high prices of inputs especially improved seed and fertilizer and recurrent adverse climatic conditions especially floods, dry spells, and drought (Oxfam, 2003 and Chinsinga, 2004).

The current nomenclature of MoAFS makes coordination, cooperation and coordination with other ministries and departments imperative besides NGOs and private sector actors. MoAFS has to work closely with the Ministry of Water and Irrigation, Department of Forestry, Ministry of Health and Population, and Ministry of Trade and Industry. It also has to interact with several parastatal agencies that are an integral part of the agricultural sector. These are the Agricultural Development and Marketing Corporation (ADMARC), Tobacco Control Commission (TCC) and the Agricultural Research and Extension Trust (ARET). There are several donor sponsored projects which run as independent projects but within the framework of the MoAFS. Some of these projects include IRLAD, SHIP, RIEP, IDAF and FIDP. While these projects have autonomous management structures, they hugely rely on MoAFS staff to execute their activities especially at district and local levels.

### 4.2. Agriculture as a Priority Sector

Agriculture is considered as a priority sector in the country's overarching development planning framework referred to as the Malawi Growth and Development Strategy (MGDS). The overall goal of the MGDS is to achieve permanent poverty reduction through economic growth and infrastructure development. In the agricultural sector, the MGDS distinguishes three key priorities, namely: 1) agriculture and food security; 2) irrigation and water development; and 3) integrated rural development (GoM, 2006).

These priorities are operationalized through a World Bank sponsored Agricultural Sector Wide Approach (ASWAp). The ASWAp is a prioritized results-orientated framework designed to implement the agricultural components of the MGDS, aiming at achieving harmonized and gradually aligned investments by government and donors. ASWAp's priorities include: 1) improved food security at household and national levels; 2) commercial agriculture, agro-processing and market development; 3) sustainable agricultural land and water management; 4) climate change; and 5) key support services (institutional development, capacity building and extension services) (GoM, 2008).

### **4.3. Decentralization Reforms in the Agricultural Sector**

The MoAFS is decentralized within the framework of decentralization policy reforms launched in 2000. The decentralization policy of 1998 establishes a new local government system made of District Assemblies (DAs) which in turn have powers to create committees at Area, Ward and Village levels in order to facilitate local people's participation in the DAs' decision making processes. Both the 1998 decentralization policy and the 1998 Local Government Act describe decentralization as a means for increasing efficiency, effectiveness and equity of development activities and service delivery

as well as promoting local participation and democracy (GoM, 1998 and Chiweza, 2005).

The implementation of decentralization policy reforms has not proceeded as envisaged in the legislative instruments. Malawi is without elected councillors since May 2005. The maiden group of councillors was elected in November 2000 but fresh local government elections are yet to be held since their tenure expired in May 2005. The major development since May 2005 has been the designation of District Commissioners (DCs) as controlling officers. This has at least provided a framework for devolving functions from the centre to the DAs. The DAs are thus now a legitimate centre of implementation of responsibilities of at least 10 sector functions and services including MoAFS since June 2005 (Chisinga, 2008). Under this arrangement, devolved sectors get their funding directly from the treasury through the DAs and their sector heads report administratively to their parent ministries through the District Commissioner.

The MoAFS has developed a new policy on extension so as to be in tune with the evolving decentralized set up that has seen the entry of a wide range of extension service providers such as NGOs, FBOs, Farmers Associations, private sector actors such as Agro-dealers etc. The extension policy focuses on the provision of pluralistic and demand driven extension services, promoting participatory planning and implementation. The policy describes decentralization as "an opportunity to bring control of extension closer to the people and offer services that fit better with the local situation" (Kaarhaus and Nyirenda, 2006: 28).

The implementation structures of the policy are patterned on the decentralized governance structures extending down to the grassroots for planning, coordination and service delivery. The structures include: 1) District Stakeholder Panels comprising MoAFS officials, service providers (NGOs, FBOs and farmer associations), agro-dealers and representative of farmers; 2) Area

Stakeholder Panels comprising smallholder farmers, farmer based organizations, senior traditional leaders, MoAFs officials and other service providers within the agricultural sector; and 3) Village Stakeholder Panels comprising village heads, farmers and extension workers.

This institutional framework is referred to as the District Extension Service System (DAESS). The main implementation strategy of the extension policy is the model village approach. A model village approach is essentially a process of getting farmers to analyse their situations, articulate demands and needs, generate solutions and options and demand quality extension services from service providers available in their respective areas. The ultimate goal is to ensure that a DA interprets and implements the extension policy in a manner that suits its own unique circumstances (GoM, 2000 and Chinsinga, 2007a).

## 5. Rumphi MoAFS in Perspective

### 5.1. Stakeholder Perceptions of the Role of MoAFS

Two main perceptions about the role of MoAFS were distinguished. While NGO officials and agro-dealers argued for a diminished role for MoAFS in direct service provision, MoAFS officials and farmers prioritized roles of MoAFS that pushes it almost exclusively in the direction of service provision to farmers. Most MoAFS officials indicated that their main role was “to ensure that farmers have access to high quality inputs and extension services as well as access to markets in order to ensure food security”<sup>1</sup>. In projecting the desired role of MoAFS, most farmers were nostalgic about how MoAFS functioned during the one party political dispensation in 1970s and 1980s. They observed that the MoAFS is at least getting back to functioning the way it did in the 1970s and 1980s but emphasized that it is nowhere close to what they describe as “the golden era of Malawian agriculture”<sup>2</sup>. Farmers want a MoAFS whose

primary role is to “facilitate our access to high quality inputs (seeds and fertilizer) through farmers’ clubs and markets that are well regulated”<sup>3</sup>.

The farmers were particularly nostalgic about how ADMARC mediated their access to high quality inputs and functioned as an intermediary in the implementation of policies that were at least supportive of the smallholder farmers. At its peak, ADMARC mediated farmers’ access to high quality inputs and served as a primary market for farmers produce (Nthara, 2002 and Chinsinga, 2004). Most of the farmers observed that that “we do not have markets to dispose of our produce, get agricultural inputs and purchase food at reasonable prices since ADMARC scaled down its operations although we appreciate the efforts of the current government to revive it”<sup>4</sup>. The main concern is that the vacuum left by ADMARC has not been fully taken up by private traders as projected and where they have emerged “they are very exploitative; they offer us very low prices for our produce but resale to us at highly prohibitive prices”<sup>5</sup>. One of the major contributing factors to the failure of private traders to emerge as projected is the substandard state of road infrastructure networks in most rural areas. It is therefore financially too risky or unprofitable for start up entrepreneurs to operate in remote areas (Kadzandira, et al, 2003 and Chinsinga, 2007).

Most NGO officials perceive MoAFS as focusing their attention not on its primary responsibilities. The main argument is that MoAFS is focussing on what it should not; it is oblivious to the fact that it is no longer enjoys monopsony as a service provider in the agricultural sector. As such, MoAFS should disengage from its preoccupation with service delivery programmes and should, instead, focus on policy, regulatory and monitoring functions. In more specific terms, some NGO officials observed that “our expectation is that MoAFS should not concern itself with service delivery; it should

rather focus its efforts on coordination, policy formulation and monitoring activities of other stakeholders in the sector to ensure conformity to acceptable standards<sup>66</sup>. This would be in tune with the new policy on extension that recognizes and promotes plurality of service providers in the agricultural sector. In the view of most non-state actors, MoAFS is failing to adjust to its own policy pronouncements because “they often adopt policies without fully understanding their consequences and implications<sup>67</sup>. In short, NGOs see themselves as service providers while the primary responsibility of MoAFS “is mainly to ensure that an enabling environment exists for us to deliver<sup>68</sup>.”

The private sector actors are mainly concerned with the role of the MoAFS in facilitating the development of robust markets for their products. This is not surprising since as business entities, private sector actors, are mainly concerned with maximizing profit. The main concern for the private sector actors is that the MoAFS is not doing enough to ensure the steady development of markets that can successfully support the development of an agro-dealer industry with the capacity to complement and eventually takeover from shrinking ADMARC. In addition, agro-dealers feel MoAFS does not fully exploit them as “a resource in expanding its apparatus for the delivery of extension by not providing us with basic training about extension requirements for the products we offer to farmers<sup>69</sup>.” In other words, agro-dealers perceive MoAFS as a potential source of capacity building initiatives in order for them to better serve farmers while at the same time supporting the progressive development of their industry.

The divergences in perceptions about the role of the MoAFS between farmers and MoAFS officials on one hand and NGOs and agro-dealers on the other deserves further interrogation. The perception of NGOs as service providers is clearly rooted in the underlying philosophy behind the establishment of NGOs as an

alternative to state agents (Clark, 1991 and Turner & Hulme, 1997). Under the aegis of structural adjustment programmes (SAPs), the justification for the establishment of NGOs is that they provide an efficient, effective and responsive alternative for service delivery to deserving beneficiaries. The state bureaucracy is overextended and extremely corrupt to mediate service delivery in an equitable, just and fair manner. The MoAFS officials champion a service delivery orientation arguably because of the nature of their commitments underpinned by their vision and mission. A list of activities that have been outlined to achieve the vision and mission of the MoAFS prioritize those that border on service delivery, intent to increase productivity levels of farmers and the attainment of food security (GoM, 2005). The policy, regulatory and monitoring functions which NGOs regard as primary functions and responsibilities for MoAFS come towards the end of the MoAFS’s priority activities. In the minds of the MoAFS officials, therefore, activities in the top half of the list are perhaps considered more important than those at the bottom end.

This is perhaps further reinforced by the country’s experience with frequent incidents of food insecurity since the turn of the 1990s. Before the introduction of the fertilizer subsidy programme in the 2005/6 growing season, pervasive chronic food insecurity was a regular feature of most households in rural Malawi. The collapse of the smallholder credit system combined with the removal of fertilizer and hybrid seed subsidies and devaluation of the local currency made farm inputs virtually unaffordable (Mann, 1998 and Harrigan, 2001). The persistent adverse climatic patterns over the last decade simply exacerbated the food security challenges in Malawi. The endemic problem of food insecurity triggered the renaming of MoAI to MoAFS in order to strategically direct its focus toward dealing with this particular challenge. Moreover, agricultural development and food



security is the top most priority of the MGDS which is the country's overarching development planning framework for the period between 2006 and 2011 (GoM, 2006). This is further reflected in ASWAp which distinguishes agricultural development and food security as its main priority through the implementation of the fertilizer subsidy programme that has positively impacted on agricultural productivity for four consecutive growing seasons since the 2005/6 growing season.

The variance in the stakeholder perceptions about the role of the MoAFS raises an important question about the certainty of its future. The key question is whether its disappearance would make any difference or not to the agricultural sector in the country? Most NGO officials indicated that they would not be bothered much if MoAFS were to be disbanded. They argued that "MoAFS no longer claims monopoly of service provision in the agricultural sector; many stakeholders have emerged who are in a position to do exactly what MoAFS does and even better"<sup>10</sup>. It was further stated that "the relevance of MoAFS is rather limited since it does not exploit its comparative advantage; it is obsessed with service provision instead of focussing on policy, regulatory and monitoring functions to create an enabling operative environment for the growing number of stakeholders in the sector"<sup>11</sup>.

Farmers do not, however, think that the agricultural sector would be viable at all if MoAFS would cease to exist. They argue that NGOs cannot replace the MoAFS since "they only function to complement government's efforts"<sup>12</sup>; "their activities are small-scale and only focus in certain areas such that areas without NGOs suffer"<sup>13</sup>; "NGOs do not have their own staff; the closure of MoAFS would totally disrupt their activities"<sup>14</sup>; "NGOs have a limited lifespan; they come and go"<sup>15</sup>; and "NGOs work on what they want and not according to our needs"<sup>16</sup>. There is no doubt that farmers recognize the vital role

that NGOs play in promoting agricultural development but they are not convinced that NGOs would be a perfect substitute for MoAFS. NGOs are perceived merely as complementary to MoAFS which further underscores farmers' nostalgia to go back to a MoAFS that function predominantly as a service provider through intermediaries such as ADMARC.

## **5.2. Stakeholder Perceptions about MoAFS Performance**

Organizational performance is closely linked to its technical capacity as well as the prevailing conditions of service (Cummings and Worely, 1996). Technical capacity is critical because it entails the range of skills, expertise and experience that an organization has in order to deliver on its mandates while conditions of service are instrumental in creating an enabling and permissive environment in which workers are able to put the gallery of their skills, expertise, knowledge and experience to productive use (French and Bello, 1995).

There is generally shared consensus among stakeholders—farmers, NGOs and agro-dealers—that MoAFS has experienced notable improvements in performance during the last three consecutive years. This is generally attributed to the implementation of the decentralization policy reforms and particularly the commitment of national leadership to the agricultural sector. This has, inter alia, triggered improvements in the staffing situation especially at the district level. It was, for instance, observed that the number graduate MoAFS officials has increased from about 5 in 2005 to 20 in 2009. To emphasize this development, one of the stakeholders observed "every truckload bringing people on transfer is for MoAFS to fill a vacancy; new recruits are constantly coming which means its technical capacity is being built"<sup>17</sup>.

The main concern, however, was that most of the graduates that are being employed are generalists who cannot effect the desired

strategic impact on service provision quick enough since "...these are only general graduates who do not possess specialized knowledge which farmers need; they are made to work in positions for which they do not have the prerequisite knowledge"<sup>18</sup>. Nonetheless, RumphidADO is considered to have substantially better staff off compared to the rest of the agencies at district level. One of the stakeholders confessed that "we envy them (DADO); the agricultural sector boasts of having people with at least the necessary qualifications"<sup>19</sup>; and "it is the only sector in the district that boasts of highly qualified staff"<sup>20</sup>. This is attributed to the fact that MoAFS has been designated as a priority ministry within the framework of the MGDS.

However, positive developments taking place at the district level in technical capacity have not been replicated at the field level. Yet it is conceded that the staffing crisis in MoAFS is quite acute at the field officer level (Kaarhaus and Nyirenda, 2006). It was estimated that of 63 positions of field officers only 37 were filled mostly by less qualified incumbents. The extension-worker farmer ratio was estimated at 1:3000 against the recommended ratio at 1: 500. The neglect of the field level was considered as an unfortunate development since "...that's where combustion takes place as it is at this level where there is direct contact with farmers"<sup>21</sup>. Some of the 37 field officers are lead farmers who have been taken on board to address the problem of shortage of field level officers. A lead farmer is a star farmer in a community who is taught different basic technologies and provides extension services to fellow farmers as a stop-gap measure. The main limitation of lead farmers, however, is that they are often competent in a limited range of areas when "the qualified field level officers are, in fact, the jack of all trades; the farmers served by lead farmers are therefore often at a huge disadvantage"<sup>22</sup>.

It has been difficult to improve the staffing situation at the field officer level due to two main

factors. First, the closure of the Natural Resources College (NRC) for more than 10 years since the early 1990s meant there was no pool of qualified personnel that could be recruited into the system. Meanwhile the existing cadre of field officers was being depleted due to, among other things, attrition worsened by the HIV and AIDS pandemic, retirement and massive exodus of personnel for greener pastures particularly in the NGO sector. Second, the reopening of the NRC as a semi-private training institution has not helped at all to address the human resources crisis in the agricultural sector. The NRC reopened in 2003 but as a training institution operating on a commercial basis. Prior to closure, the NRC operated as an entirely government sub-vented institution. All students were offered government scholarships and absorbed by MoAFS upon completion of their studies. Few, if any, at all are getting into government "since the NRC has been commercialized and as such the graduates are motivated to get employment that would allow them to recoup their investment as quickly as possible"<sup>23</sup> and "NGOs and [other entities] are the winners"<sup>24</sup>.

The major drawback is that "NRC's commercialization has turned it into an elite institution and raises the question of who exactly are we training to work in the agricultural sector; kids who have been brought up in town can hardly take up a career in rural areas"<sup>25</sup>. Consequently most stakeholders suggested that MoAFS should adopt the Ministry of Health and Population's (MoH&P) strategy whereby "they have been recruiting and training people to serve as health extension workers within the catchment areas of the health facilities"<sup>26</sup>. It is, however, doubtful whether this initiative would work since even when the government has taken the initiative to sponsor some candidates at NRC they are not staying long in government. Unlike the old generation of field level officers "they have less to lose since pension is not an issue of interest to them; the extension system

should have collapsed but the some old guards are hanging on waiting patiently for their pensions<sup>27</sup>.

There is evidence to suggest that the performance of Rumphu DADO has been negatively affected by the less attractive conditions of service. The main challenge is that while a set of conditions of service exits, they are applied in an ad hoc, inconsistent and erratic manner. Promotions, transfers and training opportunities are quite unpredictable and in some cases non-existent. Field officers are the worst affected when it comes to promotions, transfers and opportunities for further training. The district level staff get promoted, transferred and opportunities for training but these are highly unpredictable. However, sometimes “the rate at which DADOs are transferred creates instability in programme implementation; there was a year in which Rumphu had three different DADOs<sup>28</sup>. The instability in the tenure of DADOs was attributed to “in availability of staff in other districts, promotions to ADDs or headquarters and relationships with local leaders and politicians<sup>29</sup>. The inconsistent application of the conditions of service as attributed to “...one’s chance combined with proximity to MoAFS headquarters in social and physical senses<sup>30</sup>.

It is therefore not surprising that the field officers are the most affected since they are quite distant from the headquarters both in social and spatial senses. The impact of this has been twofold: 1) a good number of field officers has moved on to other sectors particularly NGOs; and 2) the majority of the remaining staff have simply adopted a laissez faire attitude to their work. This is reflected in the sentiments of farmers in the FGDs. They observed that “they [field officers] do not pay much attention to their jobs; they have become farmers like us<sup>31</sup>” they [field officers] spend little time with farmers or at their offices probably between 7-10am and in their own farms afterwards<sup>32</sup>; every field officer that comes here moves out rich through

farming<sup>33</sup>; “instead of helping farmers, they are busy attending to their own farms<sup>34</sup>; and “they [field officers] cease being field officers; they become an integral part of village life<sup>35</sup>.

The laissez fair attitude of the field officers to their work is further compounded by the rather less attractive incentive structures in MoAFS. They do not only have resources such as bicycle allowances to execute their work but also their remuneration pales in comparison with those prying their trade in the NGO or private sectors at the same level. While government field officers receive a monthly salary of about US\$ 90 per month, their counterparts in the NGO or private sector net about US\$ 700. The consequence is either for field officers to leave in search for greener pastures in the NGO or private sector or function largely as implementing consultants for NGOs or MoAFS sponsored projects. NGOs and MoAFS sponsored projects greatly rely on field officers to implement their own activities since they do not often have the requisite institutional framework for implementing their activities and programmes (Chinsinga, 2005). And with the proliferation of NGOs and projects in the agricultural sector, a lucrative market for extension workers is rapidly developing.

There is thus intense demand by service providers for the services of field officers especially since they are limited in number. This is creating competition among NGOs and projects in terms of incentives they have to extend to field officers in order to procure their services. The NGO or project work is therefore prioritized as it generates additional resources for the field officers and in the words of one of the field officers “it is not unusual to find ourselves doing NGO or project work at the expense of [regular] government work....because it is where our bread is fully battered<sup>36</sup>. The impact of incentives on district level staff is not as pronounced as it has been at the field level. The exodus of staff is relatively limited because of some

attractions that are non-existent at the field level. It was, for instance, argued that for district and high level staff “NGOs or the private sector are not an attraction...you see what...in government, we have trainings, allowances and informal perks which NGOs may not have”<sup>37</sup>; and “...there are incentives that make higher level officers to stay in MoAFS, namely: allowances, scholarships (further education), training and refresher courses”<sup>38</sup>.

Farmers have generally a positive view of the MoAFS in Rumphu district the challenges facing the DADO notwithstanding. They observed that the performance of the agricultural sector is picking up and the recovery process is faster compared to the period immediately after the transition to democracy in May 1994. In characterising the performance of the MoAFS, farmers linked the trends in performance to the three different regimes since independence in 1964. They described Dr. Kamuzu Banda’s regime (1964-1994) as “the golden age of Malawi’s agriculture”<sup>39</sup>. At the centre of this narrative were nostalgic feelings about how the state marketing board-ADMARC-functioned in the agricultural sector. It was responsible for providing farmers with credit for inputs (seeds, implements and fertilizer) and also acted as a buyer and seller of farm produce (Nthara, 2002). The question of food insecurity did not therefore arise “since ADMARC was always there to come to our rescue... and sold maize at affordable prices unlike the exploitative traders to day”<sup>40</sup>. In addition to accessible inputs, farmers observed that “the extension system really functioned as field officers were dedicated to their work and almost every other post was filled...we did not rely on lead farmers”<sup>41</sup>. Furthermore, the presidential crop inspection tour acted as “an incentive to us [farmers] to fully take care of our gardens; we wanted our gardens to be chosen for crop inspection by the president; it was a very great honour for one’s farm to be visited by the president”<sup>42</sup>.

The Muluzi regime (1994-2004) was described as “the dark age in Malawi’s agriculture”<sup>43</sup>. This characterization was directly related to the negative effects of the swift implementation of structural adjustment programmes (SAPs). Input subsidies were removed, farmer credit facilities withdrawn and the marketing system of farm produce fully liberalized. The activities of ADMARC were streamlined and this greatly exposed the vulnerability of farmers with tremendous negative consequences (Oxfam, 2003 and Bird et al., 2003). The swift liberalization almost led to the total collapse of the agricultural sector which in the words of some farmers “the institutional support system to the agricultural sector including extension services had frankly speaking collapsed”<sup>44</sup> and “extension workers almost withdrew from active service”<sup>45</sup>. While the changing policy context for the agricultural sector could generally account for the difficulties experienced, farmers argued that the agricultural sector almost collapsed because “the transition to democracy was not properly handled which until now makes it sometimes difficult to implement certain reforms in the agricultural sector”<sup>46</sup>.

The consensus is that the agricultural sector is recovering during the Bingu wa Mutharika regime (2004-todate). Farmers credit the apparent recovery of the agricultural sector to the president’s leadership and commitment at the national level. They observed that “Bingu wa Mutharika just like Kamuzu Banda has keen interest in agriculture; Muluzi did not simply care”<sup>47</sup>; and “we could actually say Bingu is learning from how Kamuzu did it; Kamuzu never gave the MoAFS to anybody, he managed it himself and we are not surprised that Bingu is now the Minister of MoAFS”<sup>48</sup>; “Bingu is fighting for us by introducing the fertilizer subsidy programme and lobbying for better produce prices particularly for cotton and tobacco”<sup>49</sup>; and “...honestly Bingu is reminding us of the good old days of Kamuzu but we are still a long way

to get back there; we would have probably been there if Bingu had succeeded Kamuzu Banda<sup>50</sup>. There have indeed been substantial improvements in the functioning of the MoAFS. The main reason for this is that MoAFS is designated as a priority ministry within the framework of the MGDS. Moreover, agricultural productivity and food security is the top most priority not only in the MoAFS but also within the framework of the MGDS. Farmers stressed the role of political leadership at the highest level in ensuring that the agricultural sector functions in a manner that benefits farmers. They observed that “as long as the national leadership is not committed to, and lacks a clearly articulated vision about the agricultural sector, meaningful progress is inconceivable<sup>51</sup>.”

The NGO sector acknowledges discernible improvements in the performance track record of the MoAFS in recent years. But as observed above, they argue that there is still considerable room for improvement “as long as MoAFS focuses on activities that we do not consider as priorities from our view<sup>52</sup>.” For the NGOs, the MoAFS’s skewed orientation toward service delivery “reflects a continuing state of limited capacity to focus on activities that are extremely vital to transforming the agricultural sector even though there have been notable improvements in the human resource capacity of the MoAFS recently<sup>53</sup>.” The argument of the NGOs is that “MoAFS officials are not properly equipped to creatively tackle the challenges facing the agricultural sector in a way that would spur the desired transformation<sup>54</sup>.” The NGO officials’ perception of MoAFS would greatly change if MoAFS “focuses on policy development, leadership, monitoring and creating and maximizing synergies among stakeholders<sup>55</sup>,” and “initiates information sharing forums as a policy leader within the agricultural sector<sup>56</sup>.” These could be considered as “value addition roles of MoAFS and relevant benchmarks of performance since NGOs are becoming a key player in the

agricultural sector since the MoAFS does not have resources to reach out to all farmers for purposes of capacity building and provision of extension services<sup>57</sup>.”

### **5.3. Coordination, Cooperation and Collaboration among Stakeholders**

The concept of coordination is quite complex. It is often used interchangeably with such concepts as cooperation and collaboration. These concepts are used as if they are not different at all (Denise, undated and Pollard, 2005). All are presumed descriptors of what people need to do so as to work together effectively. Each concept is different and has not only strengths but also limitations. These concepts stand on a continuum with coordination and collaboration at the polar ends of the continuum respectively. Pollard (2005) delineates ‘must haves’ in order for each of these concepts to be utilized effectively in a practice as follows:

- Coordination: shared objectives; need for more than one person to be involved; and understanding of who needs to do what by when.
- Cooperation: shared objectives; need for more than one person to be involved; mutual respect; and acknowledgement of mutual benefit of working together.
- Collaboration: shared objectives; sense of urgency and commitment; dynamic process; sense of belonging; open communication; mutual trust and respect; complementary, diverse skills and knowledge; and intellectual agility.

This means that coordination is the starting point in order to get collaboration. However, the nature of tasks is important in determining whether coordination, cooperation or collaboration would be appropriate but in each case the ultimate goal is to achieve “collective results that participants would be incapable of accomplishing working alone” (Pollard, 2005: 1). Thus to varying degrees, these concepts imply finding

the right group of people in terms of skills, personalities, knowledge and work styles and providing them with an environment, tools, knowledge, training, process and facilitation to ensure they work together effectively.

There are several initiatives in Rumphi district that aim to facilitate coordination, cooperation and collaboration. It was, however, difficult to distinguish which of the initiatives as outlined below are geared toward coordination, cooperation and collaboration since various stakeholders described the forums as meant for coordination, cooperation and collaboration simultaneously. The initiatives include the following:

- The District Executive Committee (DEC) within the framework of decentralization policy reforms convened monthly.
- Stakeholder meetings convened on a quarterly basis.
- Committee on Agriculture within the framework of the decentralization policy reforms.
- Stakeholder panels at the district, area and village levels that have been constituted following the adoption of the new policy on extension.
- Agricultural shows which are held from time to time.

However, most of these forums for coordination, cooperation and collaboration do not function in a manner that would achieve the desired strategic impact. The DEC is the main coordination mechanism within the framework of decentralization policy reforms. It brings together heads of various institutions at the district level (government agencies and NGOs) and serves as a forum for sharing information, exchanging ideas and planning guided by priorities stipulated in the District Development Plans (DDPs) for each sector. The main constraints for the DEC are twofold. First, it rarely meets as reflected in the following sentiments of one of the stakeholders who observed that “DEC is the main

forum with the capacity to facilitate coordination, cooperation and collaboration but the meetings are quite ad hoc....we are supposed to meet at least once every month but often three months elapse without any meeting”<sup>58</sup>. Second, most heads of institutions do not take DEC meetings seriously which greatly affects decision making processes as and when an opportunity for a DEC meeting arises. The tendency for most heads is to “delegate attendance of DEC meetings to rather junior officers who are not in a position to take decisions without referring the matters to their superiors”<sup>59</sup>.

Stakeholder meetings take place rarely because of funding constraints. These meetings bring together stakeholders in the agricultural sector to discuss topical issues affecting the sector. As indicated above, these meetings are supposed to take place quarterly, and the expectation is that stakeholders in the sector would take turns in volunteering to host the meetings. This has reportedly been extremely difficult in practice and “the few stakeholder meetings that have been held have been funded because the stakeholders concerned had issues to discuss that have a direct bearing on their work”. The willingness of stakeholders to facilitate these meetings has been primarily motivated by their self interests and not necessarily to facilitate coordination, cooperation and collaboration.

The Committee on Agriculture was dissolved in March 2005 (Chinsinga, 2009b). It is not possible to constitute it because local governments in Malawi do not have elected councillors in place. Councillors were in place between 2000 and 2005 but new ones have not been elected because the local government elections have been postponed indefinitely since May 2005 (Chiweza, 2009). The plan was to hold fresh local government elections in May 2010 as stipulated in the constitution. Broadly speaking, the constitution provided that local polls should be held a year after the holding of general elections. The

last general elections were held in May 2009; local government elections should have automatically followed in May 2010. However, parliament amended section 147 (5) that provided for the date for the local government elections in November 2009 to read as follows: "Local government elections shall take place after five years on a date to be determined by the president in consultation with the Electoral Commission". The next local polls therefore remain hugely uncertain and so too is the future of the Committee on Agriculture since its existence is contingent on having in place fully constituted and functioning local governments.

Stakeholder panels have not been rolled out across the district although "there are some areas in which they are functioning entirely on a community driven basis"<sup>60</sup>. The stakeholder panel initiative is supported by an EU sponsored project, IDAF. While the project undertook preliminary activities, introducing the stakeholder panel concept at district, area and village levels, follow up activities to institutionalize the system have not taken place. This was attributed to "high level officers at MoAFS headquarters misappropriating funds meant for institutionalization of the stakeholder initiative"<sup>61</sup>. Stakeholders at the district level have essentially sat back waiting for funds to institutionalize the district stakeholder panel while below the district level, "there are some notable pockets of community driven initiatives that are contributing to the institutionalization of the stakeholder initiative"<sup>62</sup>. The conclusion of most stakeholders was that "stakeholder panels exist but largely on paper"<sup>63</sup>. The failure to institutionalize the stakeholder panels has greatly contributed to the limited institutionalization of the new policy on extension as further demonstrated below.

Agricultural shows emerged as a promising forum for coordination amongst stakeholders in the agricultural sector in Rumphu district. While it was widely acknowledged that the potential for agricultural shows to facilitate synergies, unity of purpose and direction in the sector is limited, the preparatory meetings in the run up to the agricultural shows have proven vital to sharing information, exchanging ideas and even joint planning. The point is that "the agricultural shows have offered the platform for stakeholders to discuss pertinent issues in the sector rather than just preparing for the shows"<sup>64</sup>. This is possible because "there is usually special funding for the event but agricultural shows cannot be relied upon because they are irregular and confined to particular periods of the year"<sup>65</sup>.

The evidence from Rumphu suggests that there has been limited success with multi-stakeholder forums as potential platforms for facilitating coordination, cooperation and collaboration. Most agencies interact with each other particularly with MoAFS often on an ad hoc bilateral basis depending on their needs at particular point in time. It was thus argued that most stakeholders are driven largely by self-interest in seeking out opportunities for interaction since "we have different programmes, targets and calendars"<sup>66</sup>.

The rather dismal track record of the multi-stakeholder forums was attributed to three main factors as follows: 1) entrenched culture of allowance which makes it difficult to hold meetings since "nobody is willing to attend sessions where 'brown envelopes' do not change hands... there is commercialization of meetings"<sup>67</sup>; 2) politics among stakeholders underpinned by conflicting interests and sheer competition and reinforced by the fact that "MoAFS led structures are seen as bureaucratic and obstructing initiative by most NGOs"<sup>68</sup>; and 3) apparent impasse in the

implementation of decentralization “which has left some frameworks vital to harnessing the institutionalisation of multi-stakeholder forums in a state of flux compounded by rampant incidents of corruption”<sup>69</sup>.

A combination of these factors has degenerated into “routines in which multi-stakeholder forums are launched with pomp and fan fare but are not sustained long enough to register the desired impact on coordination, cooperation and coordination”<sup>70</sup>. The challenge therefore is that a series of uninstitutionalized multi-stakeholder initiatives is creating a complex institutional milieu “that greatly reduces the chances of subsequent initiatives succeeding”<sup>71</sup>. This is referred to as institutional layering that often is propitious for reform capture (Bierschenk, 2003).

The politics between and among agencies featured prominently as the main stumbling block to the success of institutionalizing multi-stakeholder forums. The interaction between NGOs and MoAFS is a considerable challenge mainly because of the disproportionate resource endowment between them. NGOs are often better resourced than MoAFS hence most overtures for coordination, cooperation and coordination by MoAFS are perceived as desperate attempts on its part to tap on NGO resources. It was, for instance, observed that “if we [MoAFS] initiate interaction they think we want their money”<sup>72</sup>. The NGO concerns are perhaps legitimate to the extent that the allowance culture is deeply entrenched. This, in turn, promotes tendencies for bilateral interaction between MoAFS and various agencies including government departments.

The bilateral interaction between NGOs and MoAFS is mainly as a result of the fact that the former depend on the expertise of the latter to implement their programmes. This is the case because “NGOs are impact oriented and want

results as soon as possible and want to influence our [MoAFS] programmes purely for their own benefit”<sup>73</sup>. There is thus a love-hate relationship between NGOs and MoAFS. However, the degree of interaction between NGOs and MoAFS is quite advanced below the district level. The NGOs are reluctant to invest in their own institutional structures such that they “rely on us government officers to provide them with technical expertise in the implementation of their programmes”<sup>74</sup>. It is therefore not surprising that NGO officials praise extension officers below the district level as “hardworking since many NGOs are handicapped in terms of field level human resource cadre”<sup>75</sup>. There is thus a symbiotic relationship between NGOs and MoAFS below the district level driven largely by NGOs self-interest.

NGOs are less keen to engage in multi-stakeholder forums mainly because “they work against tight deadlines, are preoccupied with satisfying objectively verifiable indicators and reporting on progress to donors”<sup>76</sup>. These constraints induce most NGOs to condemn multi-stakeholder forums as “bureaucratic especially if they are led by MoAFS”<sup>77</sup>. This is supported by taking recourse to the civil service culture which is infamous for “taking things easy when as NGOs we have to meet tight deadlines without fail if we are to remain in business”<sup>78</sup>. NGOs have thus little time to invest in key institutional strengthening activities prior to implementation “since there is intense pressure to clearly demonstrate impact”<sup>79</sup>. Some scholars have also argued that operationalizing multi-stakeholder forums in any sector is a big challenge since “institutionalized involvement of civil society [generally] widens the scope for debate and disagreement on a range of implementation issues rendering the processes volatile and open to interruption” (Farrington and Omamo, 2004: 4).



The private sector is almost entirely excluded from all the multi-stakeholder forums identified in Rumphu district. The private sector entities have not been granted DEC membership status. This is critical because it essentially serves as entitlement to participate in a wide range of multi-stakeholder forums. DEC membership is vital especially within the framework of the ongoing decentralization policy reforms. The main challenges for the private sector actors get involved in multi-stakeholder forums are that “they are highly centralized since most officers stationed at the district level are very junior to make any decision without reference to their superiors”<sup>80</sup> and “they are very much preoccupied with profit maximization which in away affects the degree of collaboration and partnership with other organizations at the district level”<sup>81</sup>.

This is not helped by the mentality of most of the private sector actors. The majority do not see the need for interaction with any stakeholders as long as they are able to make profit. These sentiments are strengthened by the observations of some of the private sector actors who indicated “...we do not need anything from MoAFS as long as farmers know that fertilizer is good for crops and which fertilizer to use at a particular time, there is really nothing we would require from MoAFS”<sup>82</sup>. However, there are some private sector actors who perceive value in some kind of systematic interaction with MoAFS. The interaction with MoAFS “would be beneficial particularly from a marketing point of view since MoAFS is always in contact with farmers”<sup>83</sup>. Such collaboration could lead to further innovation particularly in the area of extension. This could be achieved if “MoAFS could equip private sector actors with basic training in extension pertaining to fertilizers, seeds and chemicals which we could impart to farmers as they procure inputs”<sup>84</sup>.

There is limited interaction between and among NGOs themselves. This has led “to some kind of destructive competition among them including duplication of efforts”<sup>85</sup>. There are thus completely no synergies among NGOs in the agricultural sector. The NGOs are preoccupied with out competing each other in terms of who has had the most significant impact. One consequence of this tendency is that “most of the [NGOs] are courting participation of farmers in their respective programmes by offering competitive incentives”<sup>86</sup>. This is also applicable to government extension officers. Since NGOs rely on the services of this cadre of personnel to deliver their interventions, the NGOs “are offering them competitive incentives in order to secure their services”<sup>87</sup>. This has therefore led to the development of more or less ‘an extension services market’ with the highest bidder getting the nod of the extension officers. This has, in turn, negatively affected the implementation of regular government interventions within the agricultural sector. The NGOs recognize this challenge but are resigned to ensuring that they “emerge as the best at whatever cost”<sup>88</sup>.

The MoAFS has embarked on several coordination, cooperation and collaboration initiatives but the main challenge is that they are rarely fully institutionalized. While different stakeholders have competing notions of these concepts, the major setback is that most of the initiatives that are introduced are almost always never followed through to their logical conclusion. Consequently stakeholders are confronted with layers upon layers of institutional reforms “that are never implemented, making people less enthusiastic about new initiatives because they know right away from the start that the reforms will fail”<sup>89</sup>. The cumulative impact of these experiences is that even the most committed champions of change become demoralized. The point is that the desired

changes cannot be legislated into existence by merely proclaiming the existence of coordination, cooperation and collaboration mechanisms; these need to be operationalized and institutionalized (Ribot, 2002 and Chinsinga, 2005). The challenge is that each project or NGO wants to establish new structures when in fact the introduction of the DAESS could be useful starting point for promoting greater and meaningful coordination, cooperation and collaboration.

#### **5.4. Budgeting, Planning and Service Provision**

The modalities of budgeting, planning and service provision are influenced to a very great extent by the ongoing decentralization policy reforms (Kaarhaus and Nyirenda, 2006). The ultimate goal of the reforms is to fully entrench democratic modalities of doing things in a number of areas including budgeting, planning and service provision. This would ensure that people have stakes in processes that have a direct bearing on their livelihoods.

##### **5.4.1. Budgeting and Planning**

MoAFS budgeting at the district level follows local government modalities. The budgeting process is conceived as a comprehensive process involving several sub-district, district and national level institutions. The process is guided by two key management tools: a budget administrative plan which outlines responsibilities of stakeholders in the budgeting exercise and a budget calendar which spells out the schedule for completing the major steps or milestones in the budgeting process (Leider, et al., 2007).

The budgeting exercise is guided by indicative ceilings provided to MoAFS at the district level by the treasury (GoM/MGPDD, 2006). These ceilings are based on combined projections of locally generated revenues and central government transfers (Chinsinga, 2009b). The budgets are activity based, guided by priorities discerned

out in the field through monthly reports provided by field staff. This is seen as the main means of "ensuring that priorities in the budgets respond to pressing needs of farmers which is in tandem with the goal of decentralization"<sup>90</sup>. The budgeting process is therefore described as "demand-driven on the basis of activities from the field but limited by ceilings provided by the treasury".

The budgeting exercise is closely linked to the planning processes. According to MoAFS officials, work plans should "ideally be based on needs arising from communities as identified and reported by field level staff and on priorities stipulated in the District Development Plans (DDPs)<sup>91</sup>. However, the practice is different. Planning and budgeting are constrained by "priorities in the MGDS and targets dictated by the ADDs"<sup>92</sup>. The MGDS is very crucial to the extent that budgetary ceilings as advised by the treasury are informed by priorities outlined in the MGDS. The operating slogan is that "activities that are outside the MGDS cannot be funded"<sup>93</sup>. This presents enormous challenges for the planning and budgeting processes since "the MGDS priorities do not often coincide with the bottom up generated priorities as MGDS priorities have to be prioritized at whatever cost"<sup>94</sup>. The situation is further compounded by the fact that district level officials are "still subjected to directions from ADDs and MoAFS headquarters even when the proposed set of activities is not in tune with the local level pressing priorities"<sup>95</sup>. This is, however, not unique to the agricultural sector and the salience of these tendencies is attributed to the state of flux of the decentralization policy reforms.

MoAFS officials reported significant improvements in their funding situation since the 2005/06 fiscal year. Prior to the 2005/06 fiscal year "we were used to experiencing significant cuts in our budgetary submissions and it did not bother us because we considered it more or less normal"<sup>96</sup>. These budgetary cuts were

carried out without any explanation. This has, however, changed since “MoAFS is a prioritized ministry since the introduction of the fertilizer subsidy programme during the 2005/06 fiscal year”<sup>97</sup>. The improvement in the flow of funding was linked to the use of the MGDS as a budgeting framework. There are no cuts in the disbursement of approved funding since the ceilings are set by the treasury and this is informed by priorities outlined in the MGDS.

The improvement in the funding situation of MoAFS is considered substantially nominal, however. A large proportion of additional resources directed to MoAFS have been absorbed into the administrative overheads for the subsidy programme. Resources meant for regular MoAFS activities have either remained stagnant or actually diminished. The implementation of routine MoAFS activities is further affected by the irregularities in funding flows since “resources are sometimes made available when they less needed or they are inadequate when they are most needed”<sup>98</sup>. This was attributed to the cash budgeting system used by the government but this does not, however, affect MoAFS’s overall entitlement. All the pledged funding is made available and it is not withdrawn even when it is not needed. The livestock sector was singled out as the sector whose budget line is never exhausted due to the pathetic status of the livestock industry in the country. The industry is in great decline in the country to the extent that Malawi ranks the least in terms of per capita consumption of meat within the SADC region.

MoAFS funding is almost exclusively limited to central government transfers. It, however, accesses some kind of indirect funding from NGOs and government sponsored projects that sometimes facilitate the execution of regular MoAFS work. This support is mainly in form of allowances that enable MoAFS officials to

undertake work that would have otherwise not have been possible without such inducements. The drawback of these inducements is that “MoAFS officials tend to abandon regular MoAFS work, rushing for project and NGO activities because of the allowances”<sup>99</sup>. It is, however, difficult for MoAFS to have a clear picture of the magnitude of resources spent in the agricultural sector because of lack of transparency and accountability on the part of NGOs. For this reason, NGOs were accused of double standards “since they do not tell us [MoAFS] how much they invest in their activities but they are very good at quizzing us as if they themselves are transparent and accountable”<sup>100</sup>.

#### **5.4.2. Provision of Extension Services**

The adoption of the new policy on extension has necessitated some change in the way extension services are provided to farmers. Extension services are provided to farmers on a demand driven basis within the framework of DAESS. The demand driven approach to the delivery of extension services is justified as a means of offering services that farmers really require in order to boost their agricultural productivity. The essence of the demand driven approach is further underpinned by the following sentiments of various MoAFS officials during the fieldwork: “.....previously we training farmers on subjects they were not interested in or already knew”<sup>101</sup>; “nowadays they [farmers] call for specific services which is easier and we know they are interested because they have asked for them”<sup>102</sup>; “.....we cannot go to farmers if they do not demand for our services because it is a waste of time”<sup>103</sup>; and “the demand driven approach ensures sustainability of initiatives because farmers are doing what they are interested in”<sup>104</sup>.

Extension workers plan their work on the basis of what they call ‘Ulendo Programme’. This

is a monthly schedule of activities that each extension worker compiles at the beginning of each month outlining what activities they will carry out including where they will carry them out in their respective areas of jurisdiction. Within the framework of the Ulendo Programme, Mondays are designated as office days and rest are earmarked for fieldwork. According to extension workers, they are preoccupied throughout the year although they indicated that they are relatively busy during the rainy season. Demand for their services “peaks up because farmers are interested to make the best of the farming season due the recent experiences of bad harvests prior to the introduction of the fertilizer subsidy programme”<sup>105</sup>.

Extension services are provided to farmers mainly in groups for purposes of ensuring efficiency and effectiveness. Each extension worker is expected to establish clusters in their respective areas of jurisdictions to serve as platforms for providing extension services to farmers. The group modality of provision of extension services is preferred to the individual modality due to increases in population growth, limited number of qualified extension workers and serious transport constraints. The combination of population growth and shortage of extension workers has resulted in a very high extension worker-farmer ratio. The existing extension workers are unable to fully cover their own areas and those areas without extension workers because of serious transport constraints. Each extension work is entitled to a monthly bicycle allowance pegged at MK 80.00 (about 0.40 US\$). This allowance, set out in the 1980s, is not only inadequate but it is also never paid out to the extension workers. Extension workers use their own resources which makes it difficult for them to carry out their responsibilities efficiently and effectively.

The provision of extension services on a demand driven basis is producing mixed results. On one hand it is argued that the introduction

of this modality of service provision has increased the coverage of extension services. This is attributed to the fact that “the demand driven approach to service provision has been adopted within the framework of decentralization and farmers are asking for services that they really need”<sup>106</sup>. This was emphasized with particular reference to livestock. On the other hand, a critical analysis of the status of extension services reveals that there is an even access of extension services by farmers across the district. It was, for instance, observed that “farmers that belong to cooperatives and associations are very good at demanding for technical meetings from MoAFS officials”<sup>107</sup>. These farmers are able to sponsor visits of extension officers “by paying extension officers’ allowances, accommodation and transport which MoAFS officials often cite as constraints”<sup>108</sup>.

Farmers’ access to extension services is further biased in favour of those areas that have government sponsored projects or NGOs. This is the case because the projects or NGOs are able to facilitate demand for extension services for communities within their respective catchment areas. Extension workers are readily responsive to invitations by projects or NGOs “...because of the attractive allowances that they get for facilitating these activities”<sup>109</sup>. Some extension workers acknowledged that the “intensity of interaction with farmers has rather declined because of the demand driven approach... which is working to the disadvantage of timid communities and to the advantage of hard working communities”<sup>110</sup>. Communities are equally aware of this challenge as observed in one of the FGDs: “the major weakness in our interaction with extension workers is that it revolves around money otherwise their technical response is good”<sup>111</sup>. This is further reflected in the extension workers’ estimates about the nature of extension services that they provide. For most of them, over three quarters (75%) of the services they provide are mediated by third

parties such as government sponsored projects and NGOs. The proportion of extension services demanded directly by farmers is the least.

It is for this reason that extension workers still maintain routine field visits in order to reach out to those farmers that cannot demand extension services on their own. However, routine field visits are not priorities because they face strong competition from demand for extension services mediated by third parties. Demand for extension services mediated by third parties gets priority attention because of the benefits that extension workers derive from these activities. This is further compounded by the fact that many extension workers have interpreted the demand driven approach to extension services as rigidly meaning “those who pay benefit” (Kaarhaus and Nyirenda, 2006: 26). The farmers are thus yet to internalize the demand driven approach to service delivery “coming from many years in which services were taken to their door steps compounded by the rather entrenched culture of handouts”<sup>112</sup>.

The experiences of Rumphu underpin the inherent challenges of the demand driven approach to service provision. This approach generally overestimates the extent to which market forces can be relied upon in the introduction of new institutional arrangements (Cockcroft, undated). Market forces are rather weak in directing the emergence and selection of radically new technological and institutional arrangements of the scale envisaged by the demand driven philosophy. This approach can, if not properly designed, prejudice resource-poor farmers as demonstrated above. It is predominantly those farmers that belong to cooperatives or are attached to government or NGO projects that are realistically benefiting from extension services. The assumption that people can demand for services is deemed rather unrealistic for the majority of farmers

living below the poverty line (ECA and EU, 2009).

While extension workers give the impression that they are dedicated to their work throughout the year, most farmers perceive extension workers as not as dedicated as they claim to be. As observed above, farmers complain that extension workers spend most of their time working on their own farms and serving government or NGO sponsored projects. The attractiveness of incentives associated with these projects is promoting a rent seeking culture that risks undermining the integrity of the extension service system. This is worsened by the failure to establish and institutionalize stakeholder panels that would have provided the framework for entrenching the demand driven philosophy of service provision. The extension workers do not entirely dismiss the farmers’ observations but attribute their failure to satisfy their expectations to the demanding nature of the subsidy programme. They argue that the administration of the subsidy programme impact negatively on the delivery of extension services because it takes a great deal of their time which could have been devoted to the provision of extension services. This can change only if MoAFS can employ a separate cadre of staff to handle the subsidy programme logistics.

## **5.5. Institutions, Politics and Accountability**

### **5.5.1. Institutional Flux and Decentralization Policy Reforms**

The patterns of accountability, authority and influence obtaining in the agricultural sector have to a very great extent been shaped by the success or failure of the decentralization policy reforms. Many reviews of the decentralization policy reforms are not encouraging, however (Chiweza, 2005; Kaarhaus and Nyirenda, 2006; Chinsinga, 2007b). The reviews suggest that the

process of decentralization is negatively impacted by limited political and technical will, lack of clearly defined leadership and limitations with regard to cooperation of all stakeholders in supporting the successful implementation of the decentralization process at central and local government levels. The implementation of the decentralization policy reforms is in a state of flux, resulting in a situation in which “there are new set of rules for competition over scarce resources and for the quests and negotiations over power and autonomy at all levels” (Cammack, et al., 2007:9). The apparent impasse in the decentralization policy reforms is creating politics of its own kind among a gamut of key actors within the framework of local governance.

By virtue of decentralization, MoAFS officials are required to report to both the District Commissioner and to MoAFS headquarters through the Agricultural Development Divisions (ADDs). This means that MoAFS officials have to satisfy both administrative and technical requirements for accountability. According to the decentralization institutional framework, all sector heads are accountable to the District Commissioner (DC) in his or her capacity as head of local government. The powers of the DC are further entrenched through the funding system; all sectors that have been devolved get their funding through the DC (Chinsinga, 2009b).

However, the dual reporting modality is proving to be problematic not only for MoAFS but also for the rest of the sectors that have been devolved. The main challenge is that there is inherent conflict between technical and administrative accountability. The tendency for MoAFS officials “is to prioritize technical at the expense of administrative accountability because career progression is dependent on [our] officers demonstrating technical competence”<sup>113</sup>. This disjuncture in the patterns of accountability is

further compounded if the DC is less competent in his role as a controlling officer of a local government jurisdiction. The DC is much more effective “if he or she possesses effective leadership and coordination skills”<sup>114</sup>. The working relationship between the DC and other sector heads is further constrained if the DC is either at the same grade or even lower than his sector heads. Often sector heads feel that “they cannot take orders from a colleague who is at the same level or below”<sup>115</sup>; and “they [sector heads] tend to undermine the DC because he or she is not a technical man but just a mere administrator”<sup>116</sup>.

The agricultural sector has become progressively politicized since the introduction of the subsidy programme against the backdrop of the primacy of maize in the country’s political economy (Smale, 1995; Sahely, et al, 2005; Chinsinga, 2005). Until the introduction of the subsidy programme, the influence of politics in the agricultural sector was rather limited “even though politicians, especially MPs, have the tendency to take advantage of any initiative to cultivate political capital”<sup>117</sup>. The main preoccupation of the MPs is “to influence the share of subsidy inputs going to their constituents”<sup>118</sup>. The work of MoAFS is further negatively affected by what was described as ‘political podium policies’. Politicians, especially at the highest level, have the tendency to announce policy measures that technocrats are not aware of. They often come to know about them “when farmers query [MoAFS] officials for non-delivery”<sup>119</sup>.

In some cases, the politics associated with the subsidy programme is impacting negatively on MoAFS’s routine work such as water and soil conservation interventions. It was argued that the impact is particularly strong in the context of government/opposition politics. Government MPs are intent on ensuring that such kind of initiatives fail if they are being implemented in

area whose incumbent belongs to the opposition. The government MPs often argue that “soil and water conservation techniques particularly manure are labour intensive”<sup>120</sup>; and “there is no need to bother yourselves with soil and water conservation techniques since government is providing subsidized fertilizer”<sup>121</sup>. Private sector companies have seized on this rhetoric to decampaign such initiatives as well. They see the success of these initiatives as a serious threat to their business. In the words of one of the MoAFS officials “business people perceive MoAFS’s technology portfolio as a barrier to their business”<sup>122</sup>.

Outside the subsidy programme, the attractiveness of agricultural projects is considered quite insignificant. Politicians do not consider agricultural projects as large scale vote spinning initiatives. This is underlined by the fact that none of the MPs across the district invested in an agricultural related project from resources made available through the Constituency Development Fund (CDF) over a three year period since its inception during the 2006/7 financial year. The CDF is a funding mechanism introduced by Parliament to aid incumbent MPs to facilitate small-scale development initiatives in their respective constituencies (GoM, 2006). The main objective of the CDF is to ensure even spread of development initiatives across the country.

The review of CDF projects revealed that MPs are very keen on implementing tangible infrastructure projects such as schools, bridges, health centres, boreholes etc. Projects of this nature are favoured since “MPs want visible ‘trophy’ that they can hold onto during the electoral campaign in order to portray themselves as genuine harbingers of development”<sup>123</sup>. This is not surprising since MPs are largely assessed as development officers of their constituencies and not necessarily on the basis

of their performance in their classical triple role of representation, legislations and oversight (Tsoka and Chinsinga, 2009). According to the 2008 Afrobarometer Survey, 77% of Malawians would rather have an MP who delivers goods and services at community level compared to only 21% who would support an MP with a sound policy and legislative track record at the national level.

### **5.5.2. Chiefs as Progressive Partners in Agriculture**

The MPs were ranked as least helpful in promoting agricultural initiatives compared to councillors and chiefs. The MPs were described as “a nuisance and inconvenience factor except in rare cases”<sup>124</sup>. This is perhaps inevitable since “they tend to see a political opportunity in every initiative”<sup>125</sup>. They are thus intent on exploiting any opportunity that comes their way for political mileage. The major problem with MPs is that “they want to claim credit for any initiative to the extent that treadle pumps were distributed to areas that do not have any potential at all for irrigation”<sup>126</sup>. These treadle pumps have not been utilized but the MPs could not simply let this opportunity go purely for strategic political reasons.

Both chiefs and ex-councillors were considered as progressive and productive partners in promoting agricultural activities. They were considered quite helpful in mobilizing people for agricultural activities without any quest for selfish political gains. They are concerned with “promoting the common good in the agricultural sector”<sup>127</sup>. Chiefs are particularly keen on agricultural activities such that one of the chiefs has been christened as “a traditional DADO as he follows up on issues as if he were an expert in agriculture”<sup>128</sup>. It was argued that chiefs in Rumphu are comparatively much more development conscious because most of them are

educated beyond the basic levels. They are able to creatively harness their influence drawing from both realms of tradition and modernity to promote development. This, however, raises a critical question for the decentralization and democratization agenda since the institution of chieftaincy is widely seen as archaic and target for destruction to pave way for elected leadership. The popular conception is that tradition and modernity cannot co-exist within the frameworks of democratization and decentralization (Ntsebeza, 2003 and Chinsinga, 2006).

### **5.5.3. Upward and Downward Accountability Challenges**

There is limited civil society and client/citizen accountability in the agricultural sector. While civil society organizations are playing a critical role in the agricultural sector, it was argued, mainly by MoAFS officials, an institutional framework for potential accountability does not exist. It was, for instance, observed that none of the NGOs operating in the agricultural sector discloses the magnitude of resources they invest in various projects that they implement. This was attributed to the fact that NGOs are not interested in long-term institutional development for transparency and accountability “since they have a narrow focus intent on pleasing their donors with glittering success”<sup>129</sup>. The point is that NGOs do not mind transgressing the ethos of good governance as long as “what they are doing will enable them shore up their track record for the eyes of their donors”<sup>130</sup>.

Downward accountability to citizens is almost non-existent following the suspension of elected local governments in May 2005. According to the statutes, local governments are scheduled to convene at least four times a year. These sessions are principally provided for oversight purposes. They are designed as forums for councillors to provide checks and balances in so far

as the running of the local governments is concerned. It is during these sessions that councillors serve as the voice of the people as they have the opportunity to engage with the bureaucrats on how they have executed their activities. The Committee on Agriculture is particularly critical for the agricultural sector because members of this committee raise specific observations and concerns in the agricultural sector (Kaarhaus and Nyirenda, 2006).

In the interim, these local government sessions have been replaced by Consultative Committees which meet on quite an ad hoc basis (Chasukwa, 2009). These committees have been established following a central government directive and have been entrusted with the task of managing local government affairs until fresh local government elections are held. The specific functions of the committees include providing direction to the secretariat on how operations should be run, reviewing progress and performance of various sectors, allocating resources and preparing budgets (Cammack, et al., 2007). The membership of the Consultative Committees include the District Commissioner, Members of Parliament, Traditional Authorities in a local government jurisdiction and five representatives of interest groups. The main challenge, however, is that these committees meet entirely at the discretion of the DC who is the chairperson.

In Rumphu district, the committee had only met once three years after its establishment. In addition, most stakeholders, particularly the grassroots, were not aware about the existence of the Consultative Committee as a forum that can be used to engage with service providers at the local government level in the absence of elected councillors. This means that most of the ordinary people are cut off from what happens at district level in the agricultural sector. The track record of the MPs as a channel of



representation is not encouraging at all. According to the 2008 Afrobarometer Survey more than 75% of Malawians were dissatisfied with the performance of their MPs in realm of representation (Tsoka and Chinsinga, 2009). The voice of the in the policy making processes at the district level is therefore quite insignificant in the absence of legally constituted channels of participation.

## 6. Concluding Reflections

The paper has reviewed the performance of MoAFS in Rumphi district using a political economy framework developed by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), University of Sussex, United Kingdom (IDS, 2006). The gist of the political economy approach is to track interests, incentives and institutions that enable or frustrate change. This helps to understand how incentives, institutions and ideas shape action and outcomes at different levels of society. By focussing specifically on the interaction between narratives, actor/networks and politics/interests, the fieldwork in Rumphi has brought up challenges affecting the success of the reforms in the agricultural sector.

Several major conclusions are drawn from the fieldwork in Rumphi district. These include:

- There are divergences in the perceptions of the role of MoAFS between MoAFS officials on one hand and non-state actors on the other with the former emphasizing on service delivery and not policy, regulatory and monitoring functions as do the latter.
- Coordination, cooperation and collaboration among stakeholders in the agricultural sector are quite problematic mainly due to two factors. First, institutional mechanisms to facilitate coordination, cooperation and collaboration do not function properly because they are hardly fully institutionalized. Second, coordination, cooperation and

collaboration are undermined by sheer intra and inter organizational politics fuelled by competing narratives about how certain things should be done.

- Performance of the MoAFS is further challenged by structural constraints created by constant reorganization initiatives, critical shortages of staff especially at field level, less attractive incentive structures, and the apparent impasse in decentralization policy reforms.
- Failure to roll out the demand driven approach to service delivery as provided for in the new policy on extension is mainly due to the inability to institutionalize the frameworks that could have facilitated its implementation and compounded by the entrenched culture and mentality of hand-outs among the people.
- Politics imposes its own challenges in implementing agricultural reforms particularly with reference to the input subsidy programme. The programme is not only politically sensitive given the primacy of maize in the country's political economy but also quite demanding on the part of the agricultural staff at the expense of their routine responsibilities.
- Chiefs are merging as a progressive partner in the local leadership cadre in creating a favourable milieu for agricultural activities. This is a huge paradox given that the institution of chieftaincy is a prime target for destruction since it is regarded as incompatible with the decentralization and democratization agenda.

This paper demonstrates that understanding the context is critical in order to understand why reforms succeed or fail. The opportunities and constraints facilitating and impeding progress in the agricultural sector is to a very great extent the consequence of its overall operative context.

This is a combination of district specific and national level determinants which become clearer by unravelling the operational context. It is therefore extremely important not only to understand the technical dimensions of a sector but also the economic, social, political and even technological aspects. This means that attention is needed to the implementation constraints such as weak infrastructure, power relations and corruption and how these can be overcome and circumvented.

## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> Interview with an MoAFS official However, this view was widely echoed by almost all the MoAFS officials that were interviewed in Rumphu district

<sup>2</sup> FGD in Bongololo village, Bolero EPA

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> FGD in Mtatiza village, Bolero EPA

<sup>5</sup> FGD in Kauland village, Mhuju EPA

<sup>6</sup> Interview with a World Vision official

<sup>7</sup> Interview with a CADECOM official

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with the Branch Manager of the Agricultural Trading Limited, a view widely shared by the private sector actors interviewed in Rumphu district

<sup>10</sup> Interviews with several NGO officials

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> FGD in Thepera village, Mhuju EPA

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> FGD in Kaulanda village, Mhuju EPA

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> FGD in Bongololo village, Bolero EPA

<sup>17</sup> Interview with the District Irrigation Officer

<sup>18</sup> Interview with the District Agricultural Development Officer

<sup>19</sup> Interview with the Director of Planning and Development

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with the District Agricultural Development Officer

<sup>22</sup> Interview with an Agricultural Extension Development Officer (AEDO), Bolero EPA

<sup>23</sup> Interview with the Crops Officer

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Interview with a CADECOM official

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Interview the District Lands Resources Officer

<sup>28</sup> Interview with the District Irrigation Officer

<sup>29</sup> Interview the District Lands Officer

<sup>30</sup> Interview with the District Agricultural Development Officer

<sup>31</sup> FGD in Mtatiza village, Bolero EPA

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> FGD in Kauland village, Mhuju EPA

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> FGD in Bongolo village, Bolero EPA

<sup>36</sup> Interview with an AEDO, Bolero EPA but this view is widely shared by almost all AEDOs interviewed

<sup>37</sup> Interview with the Crops Officer

<sup>38</sup> Interview with the District Forestry Officer

<sup>39</sup> FGD in Bongololo village, Bolero EPA

<sup>40</sup> FGD in Thepera village, Mhuju EPA

<sup>41</sup> FGD in Kauland village, Mhuju EPA

<sup>42</sup> FGD in Mtatiza village, Bolero EPA

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> FGD in Thepera village, Mhuju village

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> FGD in Bongolo village, Bolero EPA

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> FGD in Kaulanda village, Bolero EPA

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Interview with a World Vision official

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Interview with a CADECOM official

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Interview with a NASFAM official

<sup>58</sup> Interview with the District Agricultural Development Officer

<sup>59</sup> Interview with the Director of Planning and Development

- 60 Interview with the Crops Officer
- 61 Interview with an MoAFS official
- 62 Ibid.
- 63 Interview with a World Vision official
- 64 Interview with the Director of Planning and Development
- 65 Interview with the District Agricultural Development Officer
- 66 Interview with an NGO official
- 67 Interview with the District Lands Resource Officer
- 68 Interview with an NGO official
- 69 Interview with the Director of Planning and Development
- 70 Interview with a NASFAM official
- 71 Ibid.
- 72 Interview with Assistant Vet Officer
- 73 Interview with the Director of Planning and Development
- 74 Interest with a World Vision official
- 75 Interview with the Crops Officer
- 76 Interview with a CADECOM official
- 77 Ibid but this view was widely shared among stakeholders
- 78 Interview with a World Vision official
- 79 Interview with the District Land Resources Officer
- 80 Interview with the Director of Planning and Development
- 81 Ibid.
- 82 Interview with a Smallholder Farmers Fertilizer Revolving Fund of Malawi (SFFRFM) official
- 83 Interview with the Branch Manager of the Agricultural Trading Limited
- 84 Ibid.
- 85 Interview with the Director of Planning and Development
- 86 Ibid.
- 87 Interview with the District Agricultural Development Officer
- 88 Ibid.
- 89 Interview with the Project Manager, Farm Income Diversification Project (FIDP)
- 90 Interview with District Irrigation Officer
- 91 Ibid.
- 92 Interview with the District Agricultural Development Officer
- 93 Ibid.
- 94 Ibid.
- 95 Interview with the District Animal health and Development Officer
- 96 Interview with an MoAFS official
- 97 Ibid.
- 98 Interview with an MoAFS official
- 99 Interview with the District Irrigation Officer
- 100 Interview with an MoAFS official
- 101 Interview with an AEDO in Ntchenachena EPA
- 102 Interview with an AEDO in Bolero EPA
- 103 Interview with an AEDO in Katowo EPA
- 104 Interview with an AEDO in Mhujū EPA
- 105 Interview with an AEDO in Bolero EPA
- 106 Interview with an AEDO in Bolero EPA
- 107 Interview with an Assistant Vet Officer
- 108 Ibid.
- 109 Interview with the District Animal Health and Livestock Development Officer
- 110 Interview with an AEDO in Mhujū EPA
- 111 FGD in Thepera village, Mhujū EPA
- 112 Interview with a World Vision official
- 113 Interview with an MoAFS official
- 114 Interview with the District Agricultural Development Officer
- 115 Ibid.
- 116 Interview with the Director of Planning and Development
- 117 Interview with the District Land Resources Officer
- 118 Ibid.
- 119 Interview with an NGO official
- 120 Interview with the District Land Resources Officer
- 121 Ibid.
- 122 Ibid.
- 123 Interview with the Director of Planning and Development
- 124 Interview with an MoAFS official
- 125 Ibid.
- 126 Ibid.
- 127 Interview with the District Animal health and Livestock Development



<sup>128</sup> Interview with the District Agricultural  
Development Officer

<sup>129</sup> Interview with the Crops Officer

<sup>130</sup> Interview with the District Irrigation Officer

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