

Many actors, little coordination

As with other countries, agricultural extension and advisory services (EAS) in Malawi are provided by public, private, and non-profit organisations. While it has become commonplace to refer to this collection of actors as a system, this claim is only valid in the loosest of terms, as many of the component parts do not functionally interact with others in an operational sense, tending rather to function as independent sub-networks within larger national, and international spheres of exchange. The potential for interaction and exchange between these component parts defines the potential for positive synergism, whereas the disconnect defines sources of inefficiencies, redundancies and conflict.

The Malawian Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Water Development revised its extension policy in 2000, launching a number of highly progressive reforms, including the introduction of decentralised co-ordination and the principles of stakeholder accountability, gender equality, and demand-driven and pluralistic service delivery, among others (MAI, 2000). Since the introduction of these reforms, the importance of greater market integration, currently articulated through the value chain development concept, and the key challenges of climate change mitigation and adaptation have moved to the fore and are being built into the revised Department of Agricultural Extension Services strategy under preparation.

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■ Governmental extension system

The Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Water Development (MAIWD) Department of Agricultural Extension Services (DAES) is by far the largest extension provider in the country. DAES technical branch heads reported a total of 2,415 field and office staff members. However, staffing levels within DAES, across all levels, were reported to be approximately 70 per cent of the established positions, or a 30 per cent vacancy rate. DAES is the only nationwide extension provider and the only organisation working across all agricultural value chains and other services areas (e.g. health and nutrition).

Structurally, the governmental extension system is around a four-tier administrative hierarchy:

1. DAES at the national level: led by a director, and assisted by the heads of the five technical branches: Extension methodology and training services (EMS); Agricultural gender roles extension support services (AGRESS); Food and nutrition (FN); Agricultural communications; Agribusiness.



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2. Agricultural development divisions (ADDs, 8): led by programme managers, chief and assistant chief agricultural extension officers, and principal subject matter specialists (SMS) representing each of the DAES technical branches, in addition to SMS from other MAIWD departments (Animal Health, Crop Development, Fisheries, Irrigation and Water Development, Land Resource Conservation and Management, Planning).

3. District levels (28): led by district agricultural development officers, their assistants, and SMS for each of the DAES branches and other MAIWD departments.

4. Extension planning areas (EPAs, 187): agricultural extension development co-ordinators (AEDCs) supervise and coordinate the activities of



Photo: G. Heinrich

Members of the area stakeholder panel getting ready to meet. These area stakeholder panels are evidence of the move towards demand-driven extension programming in Malawi.

ing for the same contracts lead to an operational context by a large number of actors employing variations of the same approaches and technical themes. Most NGOs depend on engaging the Ministry's extension officers to implement the work at the local level and achieve scale. Some NGO programmes provide both technical training and financial and/or logistical support, which enables the AEDOs and lead farmers to work more effectively and efficiently. When the objectives of the NGO and Department of Agricultural Extension Services (DAES) are not well-aligned, however, this approach to project implementation may distract the AEDOs and lead farmers from implementing their locally established priorities and, in the worse cases, lead to confusion and conflict.

To staff their initiatives, NGOs tend to recruit the best DAES staff members into their agricultural programmes by offering better terms of service than the government. For example, whereas the DAES agricultural extension development officers (AEDOs) have push-bikes for transport and some cell phone airtime for communication (for use with their personal cell phones), the average front line worker for a large NGO has a motorcycle for transport, a full set of extension materials, a cell phone, a laptop computer and connection to e-mail via a "dongle" that connects to the Internet through the cell phone network. Such additional benefits, in addition to generally higher salaries, make it relatively easy for NGOs to fill their programmes with the best and brightest from the DAES ranks, even if they are often not able to offer long-term contracts. The same is true for the field operations of the many donor-funded, contractor-implemented projects.

the agricultural extension development officers (AEDOs), the frontline extension staff members who operate at sectional levels comprising five to 15 villages each.

■ NGOs and project extension efforts

A large number of NGOs, including more than 10 international NGOs, are providing agricultural extension and advisory services (EAS) to smallholder farmers in Malawi. Working independently or under subcontracts with these international NGOs are a larger number of domestic NGOs, some of which also provide limited extension type services.

Most NGO activities are funded by external donors through implementation contracts with predetermined targets and centralised control. The relatively small size of NGO efforts and the drive to differentiate themselves technically and operationally from other EAS service providers compet-

■ For-profit companies

Malawi has a wide range of for-profit companies operating in the agriculture sector. Some of these companies provide extension and/or advisory services to farmers, although the services provided vary widely in breadth, depth and quality. The key for-profit companies that provide EAS include tobacco production and purchasing companies, cotton companies (organised around ginning facilities), milk, tea, coffee, sugar and grain buyers/processors, input supply companies such as the seed and fertiliser supply companies, and large and small agricultural input retailers

The various types of companies can be grouped according to their underlying characteristics as *pull* or *push* business models, which influence the types of advisory services that each provides its clients. The relationships that evolve under the *pull* of commodity production, exhibited through outgrower schemes and contract farming (e.g. tobacco, cotton, chilies) where advisory services are offered to farmers to ensure the maintenance of a constant supply of a primary commodity, are significantly different from those that evolve under client-product sales contacts. *Pull*-based business models often include some concern for producer welfare and economic viability because they recognise the need to maintain farmer productivity and sustainability to ensure returns from significant fixed-asset investments (e.g. ginning and other processing facilities). In practice, this can include offering advisory and material services beyond the target commodity, such as tobacco companies offering inputs for maize as well as tobacco to ensure that those inputs provided for tobacco production are used for that crop and not diverted to maize. The advisory services offered to farmers tend to include the full range of techniques related to production of the target crop, not just those related to the use of a single input (e.g. ferti-



Photo: B. Simpson

An example of collaboration between state and non-state actors.

and how to apply them. The support they provide to farmers, however, is generally limited to guidance on what to purchase and how to use various products.

■ Farmers' organisations

The main umbrella body representing the interests of farmer organisations in Malawi is the **Farmers Union of Malawi (FUM)**. The **FUM** was established in 2003 through the assistance of the Department of Agricultural Extension (DAES) in an effort to consolidate and establish a representative voice for independent smallholder farmer associations and co-operatives. The union currently has 93 member organisations representing a reported 350,000 smallholder farmers (the largest is TOBACCO with 87,000 members; the average union member size is 1,000 to 4,000). The FUM is recognised by the Government as the official representative of smallholder farmers' organisations in the country. As primarily an umbrella advocacy organisation, the FUM serves to convene its members to address national policy issues. It also provides some services to member organisations to strengthen their internal management and advocacy capacities, and develop increased market access. The FUM, however, does not appear to provide any direct technical extension or advisory services to farmers. Furthermore, it is largely donor-funded.

By far the largest farmer association in Malawi is the **National Smallholder Farmers' Association of Malawi (NASFAM)**, a self-described "independent smallholder-owned membership organisation". The **NASFAM** evolved out of a USAID-funded tobacco project in 1994 and reportedly includes about 108,000 smallholder members organised into 43 membership associations.

liser). Data provided to the assessment team indicated that, in the previous season, independent tobacco producers did not profit from their tobacco crop, but those who received advisory service assistance from at least one tobacco company did profit, presumably because of the higher quality extension service that the farmers received.

Product *push* businesses are typified by over-the-counter sales (e.g. seeds, fertiliser). The success or failure of the individual farmer/client has less bearing on the success of the supply business because the nature of the products on offer (and the profit margin) and the associated advice are much more limited and there are fewer fixed-asset investments at stake. In cases where the *push*-based business is a retail outlet of a larger chain or carries products of a single supplier, there is greater concern over brand loyalty and customer satisfaction, and potentially greater prospects exist for the provision of additional value-added advisory services as a means of attracting and retaining clients. Because of the nature of the *push*-based business model, which links retail profits with product sales and the influential role that information may play in purchasing decisions, the source and veracity of the information supplied are critical.

The major commodity purchasing companies operate what are effectively outgrower schemes. For example, one

tobacco company provides the growers in its farmer clubs with all of the necessary inputs for both tobacco and for maize. All inputs are provided on either a cash or credit basis and are physically delivered to the farms. Credit is arranged through a partnering bank, and payment is deducted from the value of the crop once it has been harvested and sold to the tobacco company. The company provides five field trainings for its supervisors during the year, and these are disseminated in cascade fashion down through the field technicians to the farmers' clubs. The trainings include technical advice on both maize and tobacco production, as well as planting of trees for fuel and establishment of "live barns" for the tobacco curing. They also include advice on the production of legumes.

The operating model for input suppliers and agro-dealers is significantly different. For example, although seed companies may conduct demonstrations of their varieties, the companies do not employ extension agents or provide advisory services on production issues. Rather, they tend to engage local agricultural extension development officers (AEDOs) to help organise field days and mobilise farmer participation. Some agro-dealers have received training through past projects in subjects such as seed selection and storage, safe handling and storage of herbicides and pesticides, and various types of fertiliser

The NASFAM works nationwide, essentially operating as a *pull*-based business, to assist development of diversified crop marketing opportunities for its members.

The core of the NASFAM operations is its association membership structure, starting with clubs made up of 10 to 20 farmers. The clubs are grouped into group action committees and further aggregated into associations (currently 42) that are managed collectively under 14 geographically based association management centres. The division of tasks and services between the commercial and development branches is unclear, especially the extent to which the provision of development services serves as the inducement for farmer participation in the commercial activities.

The NASFAM employs 135 staff (18 per cent women), including five subject matter specialists (SMS). The latter are responsible for technical programming and providing training and technical backstopping for field officers. NASFAM employs more than 70 field officers, all of whom are attached to one of the 42 associations. The field officers in turn work with 1,458 volunteer farmer trainers, who provide the actual farmer training on best practices to the NASFAM club members. The regional SMS train the field officers, who in turn train the farmer trainers, each of whom works with up to 100 farmers at the club level. The farmer trainers manage demonstration plots on their land or another member's land, and make individual farm visits. They are equipped with push-bikes, rain gear, and NASFAM-produced extension crop bulletins, crop calendars and other materials. In addition, NASFAM produces a twice-weekly 30-minute radio programme and a quarterly newsletter, and has produced one documentary on conserva-

tion agriculture. At the Department of Agricultural Extension Services (DAES) EPA level, NASFAM field officers reportedly participate in the area stakeholder panels and work with the DAES district staff to co-ordinate placement of demonstration plots so as to avoid duplication of efforts. Nationally, NASFAM receives financing through at least eight donor-financed projects.

■ Other stakeholders

There are several other key actors in Malawi's pluralistic EAS system. The most notable of these are the **University of Malawi, Bunda College** and **Natural Resources College**, which provide basic training for EAS frontline extension workers and advanced degrees for subject matter specialists (SMS) and EAS managers.

Radio also plays an important role in extension – it is estimated that 60 per cent of Malawi's smallholder farmers have access to radios. **Farm Radio Trust (FRT)** uses what it terms a participatory radio approach to working with rural listener groups. Programming is developed on the basis of the results of focus group interviews (organised around gender, age and enterprise) that are conducted by the home office staff working with the DAES agricultural extension development officers (AEDOs) at the extension planning areas (EPA) level. On the basis of identified infor-

mation gaps, Farm Radio Trust locates technical experts from Bunda College, Department of Agricultural Extension Services (DAES), Department of Agricultural Research Services (DARS) and the NEPAD regional office to develop its content. The programmes, which are aired weekly, with at least one repeated broadcast, include live responses to calls and SMS messages from listeners. FRT has a five-year agreement with DAES on technical cooperation and joint programming. Currently most of its finances come through donor projects.

■ Conclusion

This short case study describes a somewhat typical pluralistic EAS landscape. One is reluctant to call it a system, as the various players are actually not well co-ordinated, nor are potential synergies being exploited. The plurality of actors masks the strong dependency on donor funding. The value of services provided by the public sector to projects is generally underestimated and under-acknowledged.

The article is a summary of a report prepared by Brent Simpson (Michigan State University), Geoff Heinrich (Catholic Relief Services), and Grace Malindi (consultant). For the full report – including a set of recommendations – see:

➤ www.meas-extension.org → country studies → Malawi.

At the main DAES office in Lilongwe: Several hundred bicycles had recently been received from China. They are intended to improve mobility of frontline extension agents.

Photo: B. Simpson

