

Unlocking Implementation Challenges: Lessons from the Agriculture Sector

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We recommend:

- Policy making processes be more inclusive and transparent; bring in key stakeholders such as farmers, private sector and civil society.
- Aligning government's funding and allocations to priority programs as set out and approved in national and sectoral plans.
- Streamlining policies and laws within the broad agricultural sector to eliminate conflicts and contradictions.
- Embracing data and evidence to inform policy formulation and projects/programs design.
- Continuously strengthening the capacity of policymakers and technical officers to interpret and use evidence for better policy making implementation.
- Incorporate monitoring and evaluation frameworks and implementation plans in policy and programs/projects design.

Background

The agriculture sector remains the backbone of the economy in Malawi. The sector contributes significantly to the country's economic growth, employment, foreign exchange earnings, and household food and nutrition security.¹ The sector also plays a fundamental role in forward and backward linkages with other sectors of the economy. Despite the crucial role that the agricultural sector plays in the country, the performance of the sector is constrained by a host of factors including low and stagnant yields, limited irrigation, low uptake of improved farm inputs, weak links to reliable and stable markets, ineffective farmer organizations, poor quality control, and market information access asymmetry.

The Government of Malawi has, over the years, devised various development policies and programs/projects to reverse this situation. However, the implementation of these strategies and interventions has remained a major challenge. The poor implementation record is attributed to weaknesses in the conceptualization and design of the strategies.² This brief, therefore, examines the challenges of agricultural sector policy

implementation in Malawi. The specific objectives of the brief are two. First, to identify the key pitfalls facing the implementation of policies and programs/projects in the agricultural sector; and second, to put forward concrete proposals for surmounting those challenges. To achieve its objective, the paper reviews the past literature on this subject and some selected policies, legislations, projects, and programs in the agricultural sector. The brief also relies on information elicited from selected key informants in the sectors. This comes at an opportune time when the Government of Malawi is seeking ways to revitalize the agricultural sector growth for economic prosperity and wealth creation.

Overview of policies and programs implementation challenges

Our analysis unearthed several drawbacks that affect the implementation of development strategies in the agricultural sector. These include but are not limited to:

Non-inclusive policy formulation and program/project design processes: Most of the old policies formulation and programs design lacked

input from stakeholders and beneficiaries. The lead department would take the policy through all the stages of policy processes up to approval. Only then would stakeholders be invited to participate, when it was too late to have their ideas and perspectives incorporated. Lack of participation by beneficiaries in project/program formulation has often led to resistance by individuals who are negatively affected a new policy or program/projects, which can result in implementation delays.

Lack of monitoring and evaluation framework: Lack of inbuilt monitoring and evaluation framework leads to most implementers not regularly assessing implementation process to find out whether the policies and programs/projects are likely to yield the intended outcomes.

Inadequate funding: The biggest challenge impeding implementation of policies and programs/projects is inadequate financing of planned activities. Inadequacy in funding is sometimes the result of over-ambition in activity planning. This is the case whereby the planned activities' financial needs do not match available finances.

Delays in financing: Another problem that affects implementation of policies and programs/projects is delays in release of funds. This problem could result in irreversible negative consequences since most activities in the agriculture sector are time and/or season bound.

Overreliance on external funding: The government does not fully finance policy formulation and programs/projects design and implementation, resulting in reliance on external funding. This could lead to donor-driven policies and programs/projects if the donor's funding objectives are incongruent with the agricultural sector set priorities.

Political patronage and control: Political patronage results in policies and program/projects that are not grounded on good economic foundation and sometimes inconsistent with agricultural sector demands. This may amount to misallocation of

scarce resources. Policies and programs/project founded on political consideration are also susceptible to discontinuities and reversals when a new political regime comes into power.

Lack of coordination among departments: Lack of coordination among departments exists, especially in the formulation and implementation of policies and programs/project that transcend the mandate of one department. Limited coordination between government ministries and departments, the private sector, and development partners can compromise policies and programs/project achievement of broader sectoral goals. This can also lead to duplications, wasted resources, and contradictory policies and programs.

Lack of regulatory framework: Lack of supporting regulatory framework (rules of the game) has constrained the implementation of some policies and program/projects. Some other Acts (e.g. Special Crops Act, Control of Goods Act, and Agricultural General Purposes Act) are outdated and redundant in a relatively liberalized economic environment. The application of some of these laws, for example export bans, has been unpredictable and led to an uncertain environment that stifles the operations of private sector players.

Inadequate personnel and human resources: Implementation of policy and program/project in the sector has adversely been affected by capacity gaps at institutional and individual levels. Many departments are not staffed to full establishment. There are few on-job training and retooling courses to enable technical officers to keep up with the ever-changing skillset demands. Lack of up-to-date technical skills can result in poor translation of policies and program/project into implementable activities.

Inadequate and poor infrastructure: Inadequate infrastructure is a major stumbling block to implementation of programs/projects. The country has poor or inadequate physical and telecommunications infrastructure making some

parts of the country inaccessible or significantly increasing the cost of service delivery. For example, unreliable and expensive mobile telecommunications services make it difficult for farmers to access extension information, limiting the farmers access to modern farming technologies and markets information.

Conclusion and policy lessons

To overcome policies and programs/projects implementation challenges, we suggest some proposals for consideration by the ministries responsible for agricultural and rural development:

- (i) Align government's funding and allocations to priority programs as set out and approved in the national and sectoral plans.
- (ii) Make policy making processes more inclusive and transparent by bringing in the voices of key stakeholders such as farmers, private sector and civil society.
- (iii) Streamline policies and laws within the broad agricultural sector to eliminate conflicts and contradictions.
- (iv) Embracing use data and evidence to inform policy formulation and projects/programs design.
- (v) Continuously strengthen the capacity of policymakers and technical officers to interpret and use evidence for better decisions making and program/project implementation.

(vi) Incorporate monitoring and evaluation frameworks and implementation plans in policy and programs/projects design.

(vii) Facilitate government and private sector investment in infrastructure to enable service delivery.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, effective leadership is the most critical enabler required to address the challenges impeding implementation of policies and programs/projects in the agricultural sector. This underscores the need for country's leadership to commit to, not only designing sound policies and programs/projects, but also to their support implementation.

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1-World Bank. 2020. *World Development Indicators*. Available at:

<https://databank.worldbank.org/source/world-development-indicators>

2-Mapemba, L. 2019. *End of Project Review of the New Alliance Policy Acceleration Support: Malawi Activity*. Final Evaluation Report Submitted to the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Water Development.

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