

Building Farmer Agency Capacity in Malawi: A Comparison of Four Extension Approaches in Six Combinations

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Introduction

Study conducted by:

- Catholic Relief Services (CRS); University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) – represented in Malawi by SANE; and Lilongwe University of Agriculture and Natural Resources (LUANAR)
- The four approaches were tested by CRS under the following projects and partnerships:

District	UBALE Project	TAFIKA Project	MoA Partnership	Save the Children Partnership	CADECOM Partnership	CARE International Partnership	CADECOM Mzuzu Diocese Partnering with MoA
Blantyre	✓□		✓□	✓□			
Chikwawa	✓□		✓□		✓□		
Nsanje	✓□		✓□			✓□	
Kasungu		✓□					✓□
Mzimba		✓□					✓□

Agency Definition and Approaches

- Building “agency capacity” means building farmers’ capacity to address their own issues and problems
- Capacities include:
 - Visualize future goals
 - Plan for transition from survival and subsistence
 - Find sources of information
 - Solve problems independently
 - Speak up in public meetings
 - Communicate, negotiate, and network
 - Identify and demand services
 - Assert rights
 - Resolve conflict
 - Lead collective action
 - Advocate for change

Four approaches believed to enhance farmer and community agency capacity:

Approach	Abbreviation
Farmer Learning Center*	FLC
Model Village	MV
Lead Farmer	LF
Skills for Marketing and Rural Transformation	SMART Skills (SS)

**FLC being the only brand-new approach in Malawi (previously tested in Zimbabwe) and characterized by:*

- A farmer innovation group or alliance that identifies its problems and develops an action, with learning being participatory and involving reflection and sharing with broader community

- A learning activity/plot

- A credible source of evidence and technical support. Must be linked to experts

Combinations of extension approaches

Research combinations	LF	MV	SS	FLC
Lead Farmer Only	X			
DAES promoted	X	X		
DAES promoted + SMART Skills	X	X	X	
Farmer Learning Centres				X
Farmer Learning Centre Plus			X	X
Complete Package		X	X	X

Objectives

- To determine the effectiveness of Farmer Learning Centers, Model Village Approach, Lead Farmer Approach, and Skills for Marketing and Rural Transformation (SMART Skills) Approach in enhancing farmer agency capacity and institutionalization of demand driven extension services. Specifically, whether the extension approaches, individually and in selected combinations, improved farmers' capacity to:
 - Prioritize their needs and plan for action
 - Organize and manage themselves in farmer groups
 - Solve their problems
 - Find information, network and negotiate
 - Request for services and conduct advocacy with service providers.

Methodology

- In each district, the action research was conducted in one section and in one village, with a total of 42 villages
- The following were conducted:
 - 84 focus group discussions (FGDs) – 50% women
 - 21 Key informant interviews (KII) with extension service staff (5 female)
 - 105 semi-structured individual interviews with community members (43.6% women)
 - 390 structured individual interviews with farmers (53.6% women) in a general self-efficacy survey (GSE)

Summary of Sample by Research Method and District:

District	GSE*	FGDs†	KII community level†	KII district level†
Blantyre	51	12	17	8
Chikwawa	104	24	29	2
Nsanje	109	24	25	3
Kasungu	62	12	17	6
Mzimba	64	12	17	2
Total	390	84	105	21

*Quantitative data from the GSE survey was processed using SPSS to generate minimum and maximum scores, mean scores, standard deviation, Least Significance Difference and p values for each questionnaire item by each treatment and district

†Qualitative data from both FGDs and KII was analysed using content analysis

Main Findings and Implications: Prioritizing Needs and Planning for Action

- Different types of groups existed in most of the communities, except in a few cases under DAES promoted (LF & MV), as well as DAES promoted plus SMART skills approaches
 - These groups prioritised their goals for agricultural performance, with most groups prioritized **food security and income issues**
- Most groups in all research combinations developed plans for their groups, which specified the roles and responsibilities of their members, timelines, and resource requirements (except for a few groups in communities under DAES promoted, DAES promoted plus SMART Skills, and LF only)
- The extension approaches **helped** farmers' ability to prioritize needs and plan for action with slight differences
 - Prior training in the extension approaches was important

Group Organization and Management (cont.)

Individual Benefits of Belonging to a Group	Community Benefits of Belonging to a Group
Learning a variety of new skills	Access to new technologies and skills shared by group members
Learning from each other	Recognition of the community by other stakeholders <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Service providers favor group approach - FLC & MV notable as entry points for more service providers
Access to extension service	An increase in development and productivity due to adoption of new technologies and presence of savings and loans scheme
Ability to develop and make progress in their families	
How to behave in groups	

Group Organization and Management

Category	Characteristics
Membership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Membership in all groups is open to all, as long as one is interested and able to meet the demands • Combinations involving FLC and MV were the most open, allowing many farmers to join (Members select groups of their choice after joining) • Most groups charge registration fees to cover operational costs • Character of member is the most important criteria for admission
Leadership, Committees, and Decision Making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leaders were elected democratically, allowing men, women, and youth • There are committees in all groups (More diverse committees were in FLC and MV) • There was greater involvement of members in decision making in all extension approaches, encouraging responsibility for own development activities
Internal Rules and Protocols, Conflict Resolution and Transparency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All groups had internal rules and conflict resolution procedures in place that were being followed due to the group dynamics training given at the beginning • Transparency was evident in all groups (More evident in approaches involving FLC and SMART Skills) • Decision making and resource management done openly and in a participatory manner in all groups
Social Dynamics	<p>The strategies to build relationships among members in all groups includes the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Working together to achieve a common goal • Encouraging and supporting one another in times of happiness and sorrow • Meeting frequently • Being transparent and respecting one another

Problem Solving

Problem identification:

- All groups identified their problems in a participatory manner – through discussions
- All extension approaches increased ability of members to contribute to problem identification, mainly because of training they had at the beginning
- Participation in problem and solution identification increased their commitment to solve the problem

Group Innovativeness:

- All research combinations resulted in an increase in willingness to try new approaches and technologies because:
 - They helped increase productivity and in solving their problems
 - Staff and LF were very supportive in encouraging farmers to try new approaches and technologies.
- Greatest increase in willingness occurred in research combinations involving FLC and SMART skills
 - Their design encourages farmer experimentation and innovation

Finding Information, Networking, and Negotiating

- Groups under all approaches **actively sought and demanded information**, with the ability to find information increasing over time
- They had multiple sources of information – leaflets, posters, and TV (More diverse sources were under complete package)
- LF approach **most responsive sources** of information for farmers
- AEDOs **most preferred** as a useful source of information and most able to help solve problems
- Groups in all extension approaches had **problems** accessing formal markets, with heavy reliance on vendors
- **Positive** experiences were recorded at end line by groups involving SMART skills – namely complete package, FLC Plus, and DAES Plus
- They established marketing committees or elected marketing representatives
- LF approach treatment was **particularly disadvantaged** because lead farmers were stronger on production than on marketing

Requesting Services and Advocacy

- Groups in all treatments were advocating for change in agriculture as well as other sectors such as health
- Working as a group and having action plans **improved** farmers' ability to advocate
- Demand for services was **higher** at end line than at baseline, especially with DAES promoted approaches (LF plus MV) through participating in stakeholder panels (VAC, VDC and ASP); and FLC due to their civic education training
- By end of the project, demand for services from farmers had **increased** because of:
 - Availability of stakeholders
 - Problems that were being faced
 - Availability of stakeholder panels
 - FLCs participated in the stakeholder panels through their village representatives
 - Confidence gained by farmers

General Self-Efficacy

- **No** significant differences in all treatments at baseline
- At end line, farmers involved in all extension approaches **affirmed** that they would be able to perform difficult and unusual tasks as well as survive hardships if they tried hard enough
- There were significant differences: LF only extension approach treatment farmers obtained **significantly lower** GSE scores than farmers under complete package and FLC only approach treatments
- ***Results imply that LF approach implemented alone did not build positive belief of farmers***

Conclusion and Recommendations

- FLC approach and SMART Skills **should be** promoted to increase the skill of experimentation and innovation among farmers
- FLC approach guidelines **should be** developed and widely disseminated to facilitate its up scaling in Malawi, owing to its ability to build the agency capacity of farmers to demand information and services, conduct advocacy, and undertake collective action
- SMART Skills **should be** promoted in order to build farmer capacity in networking and collective marketing
- SMART Skills manuals **should be** summarized and translated into vernacular languages to enable their timely and effective delivery to farmers as they are effective in building capacity in the area of finding markets and negotiating prices
- Lead Farmer approach **should always be** implemented in combination with other extension approaches because on its own, it is generally not effective in building farmer agency capacity and in demanding for agricultural services

