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Executive Summary

The agriculture and food systems sector in Malawi has the potential to provide employment and income opportunities for underemployed and unemployed youths. However, this potential is not fully utilized, and there is a lack of comprehensive information regarding opportunities and challenges for Malawi's youth's successful participation in agrifood systems. Consequently, this study was designed to examine the barriers and opportunities for youth in the country's agricultural sector. Further, the study provides policy options and interventions to support and enhance youth engagement in agrifood systems. The study used a mixed methods approach, including a desk review of literature on youth engagement in agriculture from the country, region, and globally. It also involved focus group discussions to validate and enrich the findings from the literature review. Practical lessons were also drawn from the National Youth Conversations Initiative organized by the National Youth Council of Malawi.

From a policy perspective, the results of the review revealed that the current regulatory frameworks in Malawi, including policies and strategies, are tailored to meet the needs of youth in agriculture and agripreneurship. However, these policies lack clarity on specific strategies and actions needed to effectively engage the youths in agriculture and agripreneurship. The absence of clear policy provisions and mechanisms for implementing youth quotas in large-scale government investments as stipulated in the Malawi National




Youth Policy of 2023 is also a pressing issue, calling for urgent attention to ensure the meaningful involvement of the youths in agriculture development investments and programs.

The potential of the agricultural sector to offer employment and income opportunities for disadvantaged and unemployed youths in Malawi is hindered by a multitude of challenges. These include limited access to land and land tenure security, low profitability of agricultural enterprises, inadequate access to financial services, lack of agricultural skills and knowledge, limited attractiveness of the agrifood employment and systems sector, and start-up capital and insufficient access to technology, knowledge, information, and education. These challenges are not only barriers to youth engagement in agriculture but also pose significant threats to the sector's sustainability and growth.

Despite the challenges, the agricultural sector in Malawi offers a range of opportunities that could attract the youth to pursue viable and rewarding careers. These opportunities include entrepreneurship, the prioritization of high-value chains, the availability of agriculture finance, government-led initiatives such as mega and anchor farms initiatives, regional integration and international trade, and the potential for leveraging digital technologies and innovations for data-driven decision-making and sector modernization. By capitalizing on these opportunities, the sector cannot only address the challenges but also foster a vibrant and sustainable youth engagement in agriculture.

Based on the findings of our study, the study recommends the following to enhance youth participation in agriculture:

1. Establishment of a special agricultural funding facility for the youths.
2. Enhancement of financial literacy and inclusion among the youths.
3. Supporting the development of agricultural youth groups or associations.
4. Modernization of agriculture and food systems sector;

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5. Designing, strengthening and implementing youth-focused policies, initiatives and programs, including developing a national youth strategy on youth engagement in agriculture
 6. Defining and setting up mechanisms for implementing youth quotas in various agricultural programs and investments
 7. Creation of vibrant youth-focused and inclusive platforms for policymaking processes.
 8. Raising awareness of the diverse opportunities available for the youths within the agriculture and food sector.

1. Introduction

Youth unemployment and underemployment remain significant policy challenges in Malawi. The majority of Malawi's population is youthful, with 80 percent of its population aged below 35 (Botha, 2022; OECD Development Centre, 2018). The Malawi National Youth Policy of 2023 (Government of Malawi, 2023) considers individuals between the ages of 10 and 35 as youth. The segment of the population between 15 and 34 years constitutes about 30 percent of the population. According to the 2018 Labor Force Survey by the International Labour Organization (ILO), 21.7 percent of Malawi's youth, defined as persons aged 15-24, are neither employed nor in education or training, and approximately 27 percent of those with a job are underemployed (Mkandawire et al., 2023). Youth unemployment and underemployment in the country are caused by rapid population growth, low levels of education and skills mismatch (education vs. job requirements), lack of assistance programs for the unemployed youths, and corruption, among other factors (Cassim et al., 2022; Gondwe et al., 2020; Matabwa & Umar, 2021; National Planning Commission, 2021). The majority of the employable active youths in the country are engaged in low-quality and skill jobs in the informal sector (manufacturing and services sector), either self-employed or unpaid family members (Gondwe et al., 2020; National Planning Commission, 2021).

Currently, the government is under immense pressure to create more and better jobs for Malawi's young and rapidly growing population. The high rates of unemployment and underemployment among the youth underscore the urgent need for effective interventions to provide this group with gainful employment opportunities and engage them in productive activities. The country's youth offers unprecedented economic opportunity if the group is fully employed in productive activities (Muyanga et al., 2020). The group represents a crucial untapped potential and can act as an important strategy towards an efficient, effective, resilient and sustainable agrifood

systems transformation in the country. Thus, the youthful population, if harnessed through putting in place supportive regulatory frameworks and adequate investments in education, skill development, and job creation, could significantly propel the country's inclusive economic growth and development (Daudu et al., 2023).

The agriculture sector presents a vast untapped opportunity for employment, particularly for the youth. If this potential could be harnessed effectively, it could significantly contribute to reducing high youth unemployment in the country, thereby instilling a sense of hope and optimism for their future. However, there are knowledge gaps regarding the youth participation in agriculture in Malawi, and especially on opportunities and pathways for youth engagement in the agriculture and food systems sector. This lack of information makes it difficult to understand the challenges and opportunities for young people in the sector.

Malawi has various existing regulatory frameworks, including legislation, policies, and strategies, that highlight the need to involve the youth in agriculture and *agripreneurship* (Table A1). These include Malawi2063, the National Agricultural Policy (2016), the National Youth Policy (2023), the National Trade Policy (2016), and the Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSME) Policy (2019). However, these policies do not have clear and specific strategies and actions needed to effectively engage young people in agriculture and *agripreneurship*, as well as how to address the challenges hindering their participation in these areas. Moreover, the National Youth Policy of 2023 calls for the development of guidelines that promote the allocation of at least 15% of resources in all national projects and programs toward youth. However, the absence of clear policy provisions and mechanisms for implementing the youth quota in accessing large-scale government investments is a pressing issue, as it is crucial for ensuring the meaningful involvement of young people in development investments and programs.

Therefore, the objective of this study is to examine the barriers and opportunities to youth engagement in agriculture and to highlight policy recommendations to support youth employment in agriculture in Malawi. The study employed mixed methods to achieve its objectives. It involved a comprehensive review of national, regional and global literature on youth engagement in agriculture and employment. Additionally, a grey literature review of government reports, programmes, strategies and policies, among others, was conducted. The study also conducted focus group discussions (FGDs) with the youths to validate and enrich the findings from the literature review. The FGDs offered a platform for a diverse group of young people to discuss their dynamic perceptions of employment opportunities available to them within the agrifood systems sector and the challenges that hinder their participation in agriculture.

Moreover, the study drew practical lessons from the Inaugural National Youth Conversations Initiative organized by the National Youth Council of Malawi (NYCOM) in May 2024 under the theme "The Role of Youth in Food Systems Transformation in Malawi-Walking the Talk on the Agriculture, Tourism and Mining Strategy (ATM)". The monthly National Youth Conversations initiative aims to empower youths in Malawi by providing a regular forum for dialogue and collaboration on national development issues, making it a valuable resource for our research.

2. Barriers to youth engagement in Agriculture

Studies in Malawi and other countries in sub-Saharan Africa have revealed enormous complex and interwoven challenges and barriers that impede effective youth engagement in agriculture (Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA), 2015; Boye et al., 2024; Chinsinga & Chasukwa, 2012, 2018; FAO et al., 2014; FAO & WFF, 2023; Geza et al., 2021; Kabuli et al., 2024; Lindsjö et al., 2021; Mkandawire et al., 2023; Mulema et al., 2021; Ninson & Brobbey, 2023; Zidana et al., 2020). These obstacles include limited access to land and land tenure security; inadequate access to financial

services and start-up capital; insufficient access to technology, knowledge, information and education; limited attractiveness of the agrifood employment and systems sector; low profitability of agriculture enterprises or poor returns on investment; limited access to reliable markets; absence of workable and feasible schemes and programs; exclusion of youth from policymaking processes and generalizing the youth demographic. Unless these obstacles are addressed, they will continue to hinder the agricultural sector's untapped potential to offer employment and income opportunities for the vast numbers of disadvantaged, underemployed and unemployed youths. Moreover, overcoming these barriers is essential for leveraging agriculture's capacity to enhance food security and propel economic advancement in the country. If these barriers remain unattended to, they could significantly impact MW2063's efforts to drive Malawi's economic growth through investments in the agriculture and food systems sector (Kadzamira & Kazembe, 2015; Leavy & Smith, 2010). The main challenges affecting youth involvement in agriculture are discussed in more detail below.

2.1 Limited access to land

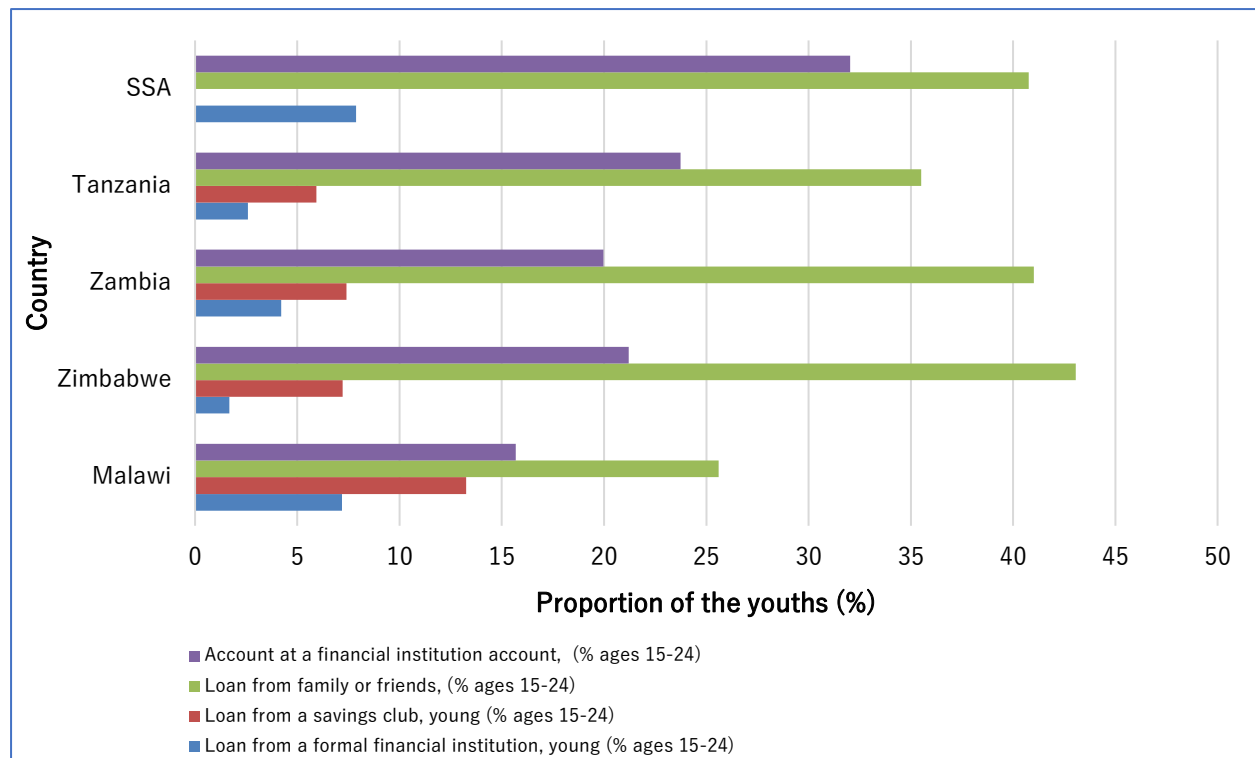
Land and land tenure security plays a crucial role in rural transformation, diversification and choice of agricultural investments. In Malawi, the acquisition and scarcity of land among the youth cannot be undermined (Chinsinga & Chasukwa, 2012; Lindsjö et al., 2021). The youths acquire land either through inheritance, gift, lease, tenancy agreement or purchase. Land ownership remains a significant challenge for youth in Malawi, as traditional inheritance laws and customs often prioritize older family members. Tiny land parcels characterize these customary laws due to the ongoing partition of property among various family members. Land grabbing due to weak and ill-defined land rights of customary laws has also been reported to hinder youth's involvement in agriculture (Bae, 2021; Chinsinga & Chasukwa, 2012; Kumeh & Omulo, 2019). The high cost of land in Malawi coupled with limited financial capital

opportunities has also been reported as a major barrier, deterring the youth from participating in agriculture and exploring prospects within the agribusiness sector (Bezu & Holden, 2014; Boye et al., 2024). This issue, if not addressed, could potentially stifle the youth's potential in these sectors. The land rental market has emerged as a successful strategy for enhancing land accessibility among the youths in various countries across the SSA region (FAO et al., 2014). This promising trend could potentially revolutionize the youth's participation in agriculture and agribusiness.

2.2 Inadequate access to financial services and start-up capital

Access to financial services, including savings, credits, and insurance, is crucial for enabling youth to establish businesses and enhance agricultural productivity. Limited access to finance and low levels of financial inclusion are cited as the significant constraints limiting youth engagement in agriculture in Malawi and the SSA region (Boye et al., 2024; Ninson & Brobbey, 2023; Zidana et al., 2020). Most financial service providers, mainly formal financial institutions, are hesitant to provide loans to the youths due to their lack of collateral and financial literacy. Figure 1 starkly illustrates this, showing that less than 10 percent of the youths in Malawi have an account with a financial institution and obtain a loan from them. Most of the youth resort to securing loans from their friends or families, a testament to the challenges they face in accessing formal financial services. Formal institutions are associated with tight lending terms that are restrictive to the youths, such as high interest rates, unfavorable repayment arrangements, and collateral requirements (Sadler et al., 2016).

Figure 1: Youth Financial Inclusion in Malawi and SSA



Source: 2021 World Bank financial inclusion database

2.3 Limited access to technology, knowledge, information and education

The youth currently need access to crucial agricultural information, extension services, and modern technologies that could enhance their productivity and efficiency. The combination of limited internet connectivity, high data bundles and low levels of digital literacy further compounds this challenge, ultimately limiting access to information among the youth. But, the youths have a higher propensity to learn and master the use of digital tools such as Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). Furthermore, the levels of education amongst the youth, particularly those based in rural areas, may not necessarily have agricultural skills, knowledge, and technical training to effectively engage in modern farming practices. Muyanga et al. (2020) found that most of the youths may not access high-paying jobs along agricultural value chains due to a lack of knowledge and information, and as a result,

they end being labourers. The education system may not adequately prepare youth for careers in agriculture. Moreover, the current climate change and environmental degradation pose significant challenges to agricultural productivity in Malawi. Youth farmers may lack the resources and knowledge to adopt climate-smart practices and adapt to the impacts of climate change on their livelihoods.

2.4 Limited attractiveness of the agrifood employment and systems sector

The youths may find employment opportunities within the agrifood sector unattractive for several reasons. This is due to a variety of factors, including the perception of agriculture as backbreaking work (labor-intensive) with low returns, lack of modernization and innovation in farming practices, and insufficient support for young entrepreneurs in this field. Moreover, low levels of education, as indicated in section 2.3, and limited access to finance limit the Malawian youths to join high-rewarding segments of the agricultural value chains. Among the youths, agriculture is often considered an old-fashioned, unrewarding, dirty occupation for poor, elderly, and rural people (Chinsinga & Chasukwa, 2018). Consequently, this diminishes the sector's potential to attract fresh talent and hinders the transition towards more sustainable and productive agricultural methods that the younger generation could spearhead (Chidozie, 2019; Yami et al., 2019). However, the active involvement of young and emerging entrepreneurs could be a game-changer in revitalizing the sector and making it more attractive to the younger generation. Promoting the use of modern technologies such as greenhouse farming and hydroponic, aeroponic, and aquaponic systems, which require minimal land, could revolutionize agriculture for the youths in Malawi. Addressing these issues is not just important; it is crucial for revitalizing the agrifood sector and making it a viable and appealing option for youth engagement and investment. The urgency of this matter cannot be overstated, as the sector's future sustainability and productivity depend on it.

2.5 Low profitability of agriculture enterprises or poor returns on investment

The financial health and profitability of an enterprise are essential measures to consider when assessing the sustainability, long-term viability, and prospects of a farm business. These factors are important when devising future investments and identifying potential growth opportunities. Compared to other enterprises, the agrifood system sector is generally perceived as an enterprise with low profits and offers suboptimal returns on investment (Betcherman & Khan, 2015; Mulema et al., 2021; Sadler et al., 2016). This perception, coupled with the allure of more stable and lucrative career paths in the agrifood systems sector, is a crucial factor contributing to the youth's disinterest in agriculture. Additionally, it is viewed as a risky investment. This perception is compounded by the sector's vulnerability to external shocks and stresses, including environmental unpredictability and market volatility, which are characteristic of certain agricultural commodities. These factors, combined with the perception of low profitability, contribute to a general disinterest in agriculture among the youth, leading to higher youth rural-urban migration, increased urban unemployment, and a potential shortage of experienced and motivated future young farmers (Kadzamira & Kazembe, 2015; Leavy & Smith, 2010).

2.6 Poor infrastructure and limited access to reliable and well-structured markets

Access to reliable input and output agricultural markets is crucial for farmers and youths to engage in viable and sustainable agriculture and agribusiness ventures. Studies have consistently shown that most youths in SSA, including Malawi, face multitudes of constraints in accessing well-structured and reliable markets for their produce. These include high transport costs, poor infrastructures (e.g., roads), lack of structured markets, poor price monitoring system of some commodities, limited information on market opportunities, presence of middlemen which pose a threat to

youth's price gains and frequent price manipulations, thereby affecting youths' participation in agricultural markets in Malawi (Abay et al., 2020; Chitete et al., 2024). The results from an action research experiment in Central Malawi underscore the urgent need for improved market structures. The findings revealed alarmingly low levels of awareness and the use of structured markets (such as commodity exchanges and warehouse receipt systems) among traders and farmers (Abay et al., 2020).

2.7 Exclusion of youth from policymaking processes

The policymaking process involves different stages, including conceptualization, formulation, implementation and evaluation of changes in the policies. The effective engagement of youth in priority setting and policy development stages is crucial for designing and implementing inclusive, progressive and sustainable agriculture policies, programs and initiatives that are aligned with the youth's perspectives, aspirations and needs. Studies across the SSA region, including Malawi, have found that youths are usually neglected in policymaking processes, and most African agriculture policy frameworks do not respond to the specific needs of the youths, leading to their disenfranchisement in the policymaking process (Chinsinga & Chasukwa, 2018; Kadzamira & Kazembe, 2015; Mapila, 2014). However, their inclusion can bring innovative ideas and fresh perspectives, which are essential for the development of effective and sustainable policies. The current lack of representation of youth in national-level agricultural policy forums and platforms where crucial agricultural policies are made is a significant contributing factor to their marginalization. This exclusion leads to minimal youth participation in agriculture and food systems, a situation that calls for immediate attention and rectification.

2.8 Limited access to social protection and safety nets

Youths in Malawi are grappling with limited access to essential input subsidy programs (e.g., IAP), productive social protection schemes, safety nets and other

assistance programs. In Malawi, social cash transfer target the bottom 10 percent of the poverty strata households who are ultra-poor and labour-constraint(elderly, women, orphans, people living with disabilities). The youth's access to social protection and safety net programs is not just a matter of their well-being but also a critical factor in building and enhancing their resilience to the impact of economic shocks and natural disasters. There is no age criterion for age eligibility for cash transfer programs and subsidy programs such as affordable input programs (AIP). A study by Nyondo et al. (2023) delved into the impact of youth participation in the AIP program on agricultural productivity and household income. The study found that youth participation in AIP led to a notable 17 percent increase in their agricultural productivity. This underscores the potential benefits of improved access to social protection and safety net programs for youths in Malawi.

2.9 Generalizing the youth demographic

Studies have shown that policymakers tend to generalize the youth demographic, yet the youth is not a homogenous group. This eventually becomes a hindrance to designing and implementing effective and inclusive youth engagement policies in agriculture and food systems (Chidozie, 2019). This generalization can lead to policies that are not tailored to the specific needs and aspirations of different youth groups, thereby limiting their effectiveness and inclusivity. The youths are heterogeneous, and their perceptions of agriculture vary extensively depending on their age, geographic location, social class, gender and other factors. The government and other stakeholders must recognize and account for inherent diversities among the youths and develop targeted policy interventions and implementation actions that address their specificities and contextual differences, thereby ensuring the sustainability and inclusivity of our agriculture and food systems. Thus, policymakers must avoid a one-size-fits-all solution for the youths engaged in agriculture.

3. Opportunities for youths in the agriculture and food systems sector in Malawi

The agriculture and food systems sector offers numerous and diverse prospects for the youth despite the complex and interwoven challenges described in Section 2. These include; entrepreneurship, the prioritization of high-value chains, the availability of agriculture finance, government-led initiatives such as mega and anchor farms initiatives, regional integration and international trade, and the potential for leveraging digital technologies and innovations for data-driven decision-making and sector modernization, among others.

3.1 Broad range of agricultural entrepreneurship opportunities

Malawian youths perceive agriculture as a less appealing, low-prestige and income-paying job despite the diverse opportunities it offers. Agriculture and food systems can provide a wide range of employment and entrepreneurial opportunities that vary in scope and scale for the underemployed, unemployed and disadvantaged youths in the country. Thus, the youths may be engaged in non-farm activities that can drive agricultural growth and transformation as well as rural markets. These may range from small-scale agribusinesses to large-scale commercial enterprises. They may be involved in various entrepreneurial activities along the agricultural value chain, including primary production, value addition and agro-processing (food processing, preservation, packaging), marketing and distribution (storage and aggregation markets), biofertilizer production, agricultural input and services (seeds, pesticides, fertilizers), provision of agricultural insurance services, among others

3.2 Availability of profitable and high-value chains

Our study has established that our youths are involved in low-agricultural value chains. Recently, the government and other stakeholders have called for investment in

high-value chains such as wheat, legumes, soybeans, groundnuts, and livestock (poultry, dairy and aquaculture), among others. The youths can produce high-value chains through their own production, contract farming, out-grower schemes, or by organizing themselves into youth groups or cooperatives. The youths could leverage government-led projects such as the Agriculture Commercialization Project (AGCOM) to access grants and loan service providers such as the National Economic Empowerment Fund (NEEF) to assist them in venturing into profitable high-value agricultural chains.

3.3 Agriculture finance

The availability of agriculture finance and credit can empower the youth to acquire assets and essential inputs for production, processing and transportation. Various financial service providers and microfinance institutions, including the Malawi Agriculture and Industrial Investment Corporation (MAIIC), the National Economic Empowerment Fund (NEEF), and the Smallholder Agricultural Finance and Investment Trust (SAFIT), are prepared to offer loans and support to youth engaged in agriculture and agripreneurship. These agricultural finance opportunities could also help Malawi's youth transition from subsistence to commercial farming. Moreover, several banks, such as Standards Bank, Centenary Bank, and NBS Bank, among others, have also committed to providing loans to the youths backed by reputable organizations like the Clinton Development Initiative (CDI).

3.4 Mega and anchor farms initiative

The government has embarked on the mega and anchor farm initiative aimed at transforming the country's agrifood systems. The government has idle agricultural schemes and former young pioneer bases that youths could use as mega-farms. The Malawi Mega Farm flagship program focuses on the development of anchor medium and large-scale farms and youth incubator farms to accelerate agriculture

commercialization. The government has identified a comprehensive list of value chains for the mega and anchor farms initiative, including oil seeds (soybean, groundnut, maize, sunflower, other legumes); legumes (pigeon peas, beans, sesame); horticulture (mango, pineapple, avocado, chilies) and macadamia. Mega farms are also prioritizing livestock production (dairy, goat, sheep, piggery, and fish). The National Youth Council of Malawi has been urged to collaborate with the Mega Farm Unit in the Ministry of Agriculture to ensure that our youth can fully benefit from the Mega Farm Initiative.

3.5 Modernization of agriculture

Modernizing agriculture through digitalization and innovation not only has the potential to transform our agrifood systems but is also seen as a game changer for engaging youths in agriculture. With the increasing internet access and high penetration of smartphones, the youth are naturally inclined towards digital technologies and innovations. The diversity of social media platforms and video-based information sharing platforms is a huge opportunity that can address the challenges in physical and face to face information sharing. The youth can harness the power of android phones, drones, satellite imagery, the Internet of Things (IoT), and artificial intelligence (AI) to make data-driven decisions in precision agriculture and smart farming. For instance, they can develop technical applications to monitor soils, crops, and livestock, manage waste, and provide service applications for weather, drought, early warning and disaster monitoring. This empowerment extends to the use of blockchain technology in the agrifood supply chain.

3.6 Regional integration and international trade

Youths require platforms where they can actively participate in meaningful regional agriculture-related value chains and international trade. Africa has several initiatives aimed at fostering regional value chains, increasing market access, and promoting economic integration and intra-trade in Africa. One such initiative that

recognizes the youth's role in accelerating Africa's trade and industrialization is the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) through its Protocol on Youth and Women. The AfCFTA Protocol on Women and Youth in Trade aims to promote sustainable and inclusive socioeconomic development, providing equal opportunity for women and youth in intra-Africa trade and the structural transformation of African economies. Apart from the youth protocol, AfCFTA has three digital-based instruments that provide equal opportunities for youths to take advantage of the opportunities it offers, and these are the African Trade Observatory, AfCFTA Digital Trading Hub, and the AfCFTA Digital Payment Hub. The AfCFTA can be a game-changer for Malawi's youths as it holds immense potential to provide the youths in the country with vast trade opportunities. However, for this potential to be fully realized, Malawi must develop clear strategies and appropriate support programs that outline how the youths can benefit from it.

3.7 Shift to health and sustainable consumption patterns

There has been a rising demand for healthy foods, including organic foods, around the world due to consumer awareness on shifting to health and sustainable consumption patterns (Mkhize & Ellis, 2024). The Malawi 2063 also calls for the production and exportation of high-value crops and organic foods. This offers a great business opportunity for Malawian youths to venture into organic farming to meet the demand for health needs at the national, regional, and global levels.

3.8 Education, skills development and incubation programs

Malawi is home to a multitude of educational and skills development programs for youths interested in careers in agriculture and food systems. These programs are offered by institutions such as Lilongwe University of Agriculture and Natural Resources (LUANAR), Mzuzu University, Chancellor College, Malawi University of Business and Applied Sciences (MUBAS), University of Livingstonia, Catholic

University, and Malawi University of Sciences and Technology (MUST). The skills are instrumental in shaping the future of the agrifood industry. Notably, Technical, Entrepreneurial and Vocational Education and Training (TEVET) Malawi and technical colleges are at the forefront of technological advancements, developing low-cost innovative solutions for use in agriculture. Incubation and acceleration programs have also been implemented by different organizations to support the youths and small-scale entrepreneurs to build their entrepreneurial capacity. Through these programs, the youths have been supported with business start-ups, training, mentorship and access to resources (e.g. loans, grants).

3.9 Enabling policy frameworks for youth empowerment

Malawi has existing policy frameworks, for instance, the Malawi2063 Vision outlines the nation's development aspirations and recognizes the youth as the drivers of change in Malawi. However, these policies treat the policies treat youth as a homogenous group, and hence, poor implementation. The vision acknowledges that the economic empowerment of the youth serves as a significant catalyst for the country's transformation, particularly in the context of agricultural development. By placing the youth at the forefront, Malawi aims to achieve an inclusive, wealthy, and self-reliant nation. This goal is pursued through strong linkages with sectors (e.g., agriculture) that drive manufacturing, ultimately leading to sustainable growth and prosperity. Various international frameworks and action plans, such as the United Nations 2030 Agenda, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and African Union (AU) Agenda 2063, Africa's blueprint and master plan, have pledged to support the agriculture and food systems sector as an avenue for creating entrepreneurial opportunities for the youths.

4. Conclusion and policy implications

The agriculture and food systems sector offers a wide spectrum of productive and entrepreneurial opportunities for the youths. This study explored the opportunities for and barriers to youth engagement in agrifood systems. The study has established that youth engaged in agriculture and agripreneurship in Malawi are faced with numerous challenges, including limited access to land and land tenure security, inadequate access to financial services and start-up capital, insufficient access to technology, knowledge, information and education, limited attractiveness of agrifood employment and systems sector, low profitability of agriculture enterprises or poor returns on investment, limited access to reliable and well-structured markets, exclusion of youth from policymaking processes, limited access to social protection and safety nets and generalizing the youth demographic.

Despite these challenges, the agriculture and food systems sector provides various opportunities to the youth such as; agricultural entrepreneurship opportunities, production of high-value chains, availability of agricultural finance, mega and anchor farms initiatives, modernization, digitalization and innovations, regional integration and international trade, shift to health and sustainable consumption patterns, availability of education and skills development programs as well as policy frameworks for youth empowerment.

To better harness the greater potential of the youth in the agriculture and food systems sector, there is a need to empower and support the youth across all levels of the agricultural value chain. Among others, the study makes the following recommendations:

(a) Establish a special agricultural funding facility for the youths

The youth require support to access agricultural inputs and other agricultural-related irrigation equipment, such as motor pumps and solar-powered pumps. There is also a need to support the youth entrepreneurs engaged in processing agricultural produce with appropriate equipment for their enterprises. The fund can also be used to support the agricultural mechanization drive among the youth.

(b) Enhance financial literacy and inclusion among the youths

The availability of high-quality financial services, such as savings accounts, credit, and insurance, is crucial for young people engaged in agriculture. These services are essential for establishing, sustaining, and expanding their businesses or farms. To address this, there is a need to develop targeted and tailored financing mechanisms (sensitive and youth-inclusive) that will encourage, empower, and facilitate the youths' access to productive assets, markets, and modern technologies, among others. Additionally, advocating for youth-led saving schemes, such as youth saving and lending (YSL) groups, can give them a sense of ownership and responsibility.

(c) Support the development of agricultural youth groups or associations

The organization of youth into associations or cooperatives not only provides access to agricultural inputs, loans, credit, and extension services but also fosters a sense of belonging, community and collaboration. These youth farmer organizations serve as effective platforms for developing and enhancing entrepreneurial and leadership skills and crucially, increasing youth's negotiating power in bulk production, aggregation, market linkages and value addition. They also promote innovation and creative thinking, providing a space for young individuals to share ideas with peers and establish strong support networks.

(d) Modernize the agriculture and food systems sector

Modernizing agricultural production systems could significantly reduce Malawian youths' disillusionment with and disinterest in agricultural and food systems-based livelihoods. By promoting youth-led innovations and leveraging digital tools for the modernization and mechanization of agriculture and food systems, the youth could be motivated to actively engage in agriculture. The youths are seeking rewarding, profitable, and decent livelihoods within the agricultural sector.

(e) Design, strengthen and implement youth-focused policies, initiatives and programs

The existing policies and laws, including the National Agriculture Policy and Malawi2063, have recognized the roles of Malawi youths in driving agricultural transformation in the country. However, they are not fully implemented. When developing and implementing these policies, strategies, plans and initiatives, they should consider the heterogeneous nature of the youths. Additionally, the country needs to develop a comprehensive "*National Youth Strategy for Youth Engagement in Agriculture*." Other countries, such as Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania, have developed this strategy to provide a strategic framework that will promote and facilitate coordinated implementation of interventions regarding youth engagement and employment in agriculture. Moreover, deliberate investments are needed to create more opportunities for youth across the value chain.

(f) Define and set up mechanisms for implementing youth quotas in various agricultural programs and investments

Youth are often excluded from receiving necessary government support and programs to encourage their involvement in the agricultural and food systems sector. Our study has established that Malawi's youth currently have limited access to social safety nets, AIP programs and other major investments. This is partly due to the lack of clear policy provisions and mechanisms for implementing youth quota in accessing

large-scale agricultural investments as stipulated in the National Youth Policy of 2023, which is crucial for ensuring meaningful youth involvement in development programs to guarantee youth's meaningful involvement in agriculture. Immediate and deliberate efforts are required to increase the number of youths benefiting from productive social safety nets and large-scale agriculture investments, thereby improving their access to production inputs and enhancing agricultural productivity.

(g) Create vibrant youth-focused and inclusive platforms for policymaking processes

Malawi's youth continue to be systematically marginalized within agricultural policymaking networks. To promote youth engagement and facilitate the exchange of their experiences related to their involvement in the development and implementation of agricultural policies, strategies, plans, programs, and actions, it is essential to establish vibrant platforms and enhance youth-led dialogues within the agriculture sector to enable them to interact with policymakers and their fellow youths.

(h) Raise awareness of the diverse opportunities available for the youths within the agriculture sector

Our study has revealed that there are humongous economic opportunities for the Malawian youths within the agriculture and food systems and along the agrifood value chains. Therefore, it is vital to improve access to information and enhance the youth's knowledge of these opportunities by raising and strengthening awareness of agripreneurship and employment prospects that the agriculture sector offers in order to reduce barriers to entry. This will be done through lobbying and advocacy. A study by Magagula & Tsvakirai (2020) found that the level of awareness among the youths in Malawi positively influenced them to venture into agripreneurship.

5. Future research

The study has identified a number of research gaps that need further research:

- (a) Take stock of the initiatives and programs in agriculture and food systems that the youths are currently actively engaged or may benefit from. What are their experiences? (e.g. accessing grants and loans from AGCOM, NEEF etc). This will assist NYCOM in coordinating and strategizing how the youths may benefit from these initiatives.
- (b) Understand if the youths are benefiting from the AfCFTA and, if not, how the government can help the youths benefit from it.
- (c) Are the new land laws enacted restricting youths from participating in agriculture?
- (d) To what extent are the youths benefiting from the government loan facilities as well as large-scale investments implemented by the government and other stakeholders
- (e) Assess the effectiveness of the incubation and acceleration programs implemented by various organizations in Malawi?

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Appendices

Table A1: Key Policies on Youth in Agriculture and Agripreneurship

Name of the policy	Policy goal	Policy objectives	Priority/Focus areas
Malawi2063 Vision	To transform Malawi into an inclusive, wealthy, and self-reliant industrialized upper-middle-income country by the year 2063	To empower the youths economically in order to drive the country's transformation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agricultural productivity and commercialisation • Industrialisation • Urbanisation
National Youth Policy (2023)	To create an enabling environment for the youth to develop their full potential towards sustainable personal and national development by 2028	To empower the youth to deal with the social, cultural, economic and political challenges in order to exploit various opportunities towards the fulfilment of their potential	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Youth employment, enterprise and skills development • National youth service and nation-building • Transformative leadership and youth inclusion in governance systems • Education and social skills development • Science, technology and innovation • Health and nutrition • Youth and social well-being • Youth in sports, creative industries and culture • Environmental restoration and climate change • Coordination, mainstreaming and financing of youth agenda
National Agricultural Policy (2016)	To contribute to the attainment of national food security, poverty reduction, and national economic development objective	To raise the profile of the agricultural sector so that it can effectively contribute to the national development aspirations of turning the country from a predominantly consuming to a producing and exporting nation targeting all value chain stages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inputs use and markets • Agricultural production • Agricultural markets development • Gender, HIV/AIDS and agricultural development • Climate change and environmental issues • Biofuels and agricultural development

National Trade Policy (2016)	To make Malawi a globally competitive export-oriented economy, generating higher and sustainable livelihoods through trade that recognizes the role of MSMEs and the vulnerable groups	To address the weak linkage between trade and overall development objectives and binding constraints that have hindered Malawi's ability to take full advantage of existing and emerging market access opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Market access for Malawi's exports • Improve the business operating environment • Narrow productive base: investment and skills • Promoting and reducing entry costs to pro-poor trade • Trade mainstreaming and support
Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSME) Policy (2019)	To attain an open, supportive and sustainable policy environment necessary for rapid national economic growth	To address key constraints that inhibit the competitiveness and growth of the MSME sector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Legal, regulatory and institutional environment for MSME growth • Access to finance • Access to markets • Entrepreneurship development; • Business information and skills • Operation of value chains • Business infrastructure; • MSME networks and clusters • Cross-cutting issues

Source: Author's compilation