

ABSTRACT

Policy Adrift: A Review of Malawi's Agricultural Extension System

Steve Mndhlanyoka SIBANDE

The justification for agricultural decentralization reforms is that it makes services more efficient and effective by planning and implementing them at the local level, and that participation of farmers ensures that services respond to their needs, hence becoming more relevant. Moreover, service providers are downwardly accountable to farmers and this improves transparency. However, after over a decade of implementing such reforms in Malawi the results are yet not satisfactory.

This study was conducted to find out why a decentralized, demand-driven and pluralistic extension policy launched in Malawi in 2000 and implemented nationwide as District Agricultural Extension Services System (DAESS) since 2005 is not working properly. Previous studies cited incomplete decentralization, weak district capacity, poor stakeholder coordination, and poor farmer organization as reasons for this outcome. While corroborating these studies, reported capacity of districts is limited in time and space, and no analysis has been done on the contribution of centrally managed projects and extension approaches and methods to the challenges in institutionalizing the policy. The current research elaborates these reasons.

The results showed persistently high levels of vacancy rates for government extension staff; inadequate financial resources to cater to both recurrent expenditures and to respond to farmers' demands; and general lack of material resources. Training and skills of most extension staff were not ideal for implementing demand-driven extension services. Centrally managed projects were widely perceived to weaken agricultural decentralization, and hence negate the core of the current policy. Current extension approaches and methods are not implemented using the proposed extension system, in contradiction to the policy. In conclusion, with regard to the principle of subsidiarity, the central government has failed to enable the districts to institutionalize the extension policy. Responsiveness of extension services is largely constrained by lack of farmer empowerment through limited participation, and poor stakeholder coordination, thereby nullifying the benefits theorized in the policy. Obsession with results, outcome and professionalism hampers empowerment, process, participation and responsiveness which are the essence of demand-driven services. Failure to urgently address identified challenges will likely push policy implementation further adrift.