

Agricultural Policy Dialogue on the Future of the Farm Input Subsidy Programme
(FISP) and the Role of Traders
in the Commodity Markets.
23rd February 2012

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Acronyms

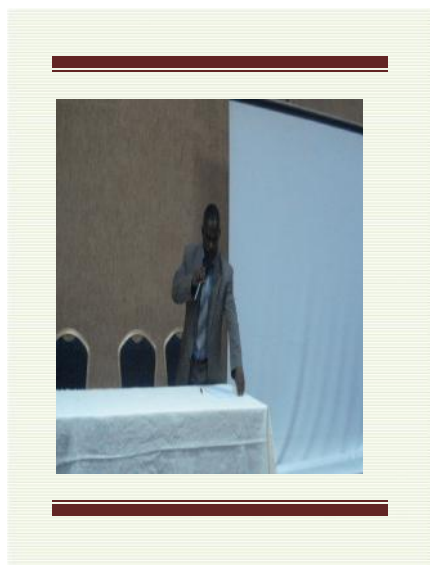
ADMARC	: Agricultural Development Market Cooperation
NGOs	: Non Governmental Organisations
CISANET	: Civil Society Agriculture Network
FISP	: Farm Input Subsidy Programme
OPC	: Office of the President and Cabinet
DIFD	: Department for International Development

1. Introduction

CISANET, with financial support from Irish Aid on Thursday, 23rd February 2012 convened an Agricultural Policy Dialogue Meeting at Crossroads Hotel in Lilongwe from 5:30pm to 8:00pm. During the dialogue meeting, two papers were presented on two hot topical policy issues related to the FISP as well as marketing arrangements and structures after which a plenary discussion ensued. The first presentation was made by Dr Blessings Chinsinga which looked at the Future Scenarios and Policy Options for the Subsidy Program in Malawi. The second presentation was made by Mrs Grace Mhango, the Vice Chairperson of Grain Traders and Processors Association, which looked at the role of Grain Traders in Facilitating Rural Market Access in the 'Post-ADMARC Era'. Therefore, the following are the proceedings from the dialogue meeting.

2. Welcome Remarks

The master of ceremony from CARE International called the meeting to order and welcomed the participants at around 18:00. The participants were asked to go through a round of self introductions. Among the participants were representatives from the Government, NGOs, Private Sector, Research and Training Institutions, Academia, bilateral and multi-lateral Development Partners, other stakeholders as well as individuals who came in their own capacity. The patronage from the various aforementioned multi-sectoral representatives was very impressive and more than anticipated.



In his welcoming remarks, the master of ceremony thanked Irish Aid for supporting the Policy Dialogue Meeting. He further extended another vote of thanks to CISANET for facilitating and coordinating the discussion. The note takers were introduced for purposes of recording and documentation should any participant wish to

submit their written contribution to them.

The master of ceremony partially ran through the agenda of the Agricultural Policy Dialogue Meeting and highlighted its significance as it was providing a forum where issues that affect National Agricultural Development in Malawi could be discussed. He further stressed the importance of the Agriculture sector as it is the main driver of our economy given that the country is largely agro-based economy.

3. Opening Remarks

The Board Chairman for CISANET welcomed the participants and thanked them for sparing their time to avail themselves at this platform. He also commended the gender balance in the participants represented at the dialogue meeting.

He further pointed out that the Policy Dialogue Meeting is the first one to be hosted by CISANET in this year; hence the participants were asked to make it a year long commitment to attend the subsequent Policy Dialogue Meetings scheduled to take place during the course of the year. This is envisaged to strengthen the partnership between them and CISANET. The critical role of CISANET in leading agricultural policy advocacy initiatives was also recognised and he went on to further acknowledge that it had been less proactive for the past few years. He however declared that CISANET is re-branding and committing itself to be being a major force to reckon with in agricultural policy advocacy.



The Board Chairman indicated that CISANET is in the process of developing a new Strategic Plan; as such the participants were invited to contribute to the process. In the same light, he also alluded to the upcoming CISANET AGM scheduled to take place during the end of March 2012. This therefore served as an informal invitation to the participants. In the new CISANET Strategy, the proposed CISANET Thematic areas of focus were outlined as the following: Market Development and International Trade, Climate-Smart Agricultural Development, Livestock and Dairy Development, Nutrition and Social Protection, and National Agriculture Budget Lobby and Analysis. The Board Chairman therefore took this opportunity to extend an informal invitation to the participants to CISANET Thematic Group Meetings at both National and sub-national levels.

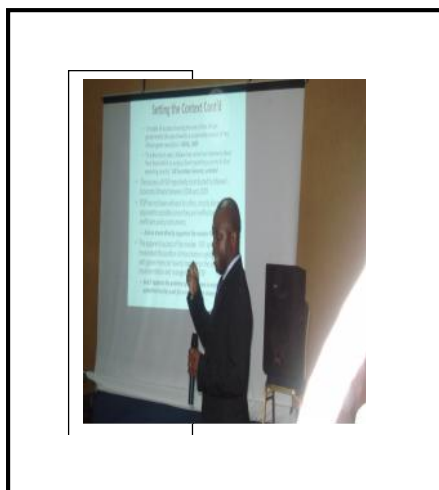
Lastly, the Board Chairman pointed out that FISP has been successful in Malawi, but there are still critical areas for improvement. The social and commercial functions of ADMARC were also recognized but he further pointed out that it needs to be revamped in most rural areas to improve market access. Finally, he declared the meeting officially open and urged the participants to participate actively.

4. Presentations

4.1 Policy Options and Future Scenarios of the Subsidy Program in Malawi – Blessings Chinsinga.

The first presenter alluded to the fact that the study is highly sensitive and was therefore not easy to carry out. The study recommended the following:

- ✓ FISP is a necessary evil for Malawi given the state of Malawi's economy and an apparent national consensus on the desirability of FISP as a way of revamping the agricultural sector
 - *There is so to speak a political-economic bind of the FISP since the question of food security is firmly at the centre of the country's electoral politics*



- ✓ The manner in which FISP is implemented is critical especially in the context like Malawi where the question of food security is highly politicized.
- ✓ Political will to the implementation of FISP is vital but it has to be in such a way that it does not jeopardize efforts by technocrats to effectively engage with policy makers in a bid to improve of the design and implementation arrangements of the FISP.
- ✓ Several possible exit scenarios for

FISP were also explored but the most crucial one is to redesign it with clear exit strategies and implementation arrangements that will allow it to be a catalyst of dramatic and sustainable transformation of rural economies in Malawi.

- ✓ Implementation of FISP in a 'business as usual' way will simply lock the country in the 'Low Maize Productivity Trap' (LMPT) with disastrous consequences should the Programme be discontinued abruptly
- ✓ Food security should be one of those areas that should be insulated from undue political influence in a new negotiated political settlement just as is the case with the Bank of England in the UK.

4.2 The Role of Grain Traders in facilitating Market Linkages in the 'Post AMARC Era' - Grace Mhango.

The second presenter changed the topic of the presentation to "The Role of Traders in the Commodity Market" as she felt this was more relevant and truly reflective of the current situation. The study recommended following:

- ✓ Need for a holistic approach to National Policies, Infrastructure, Investment and credit, Research and Education, Trade agreements and Price policy, Quality control, Inputs and equipment (mechanisation), and Coordination and facilitation.
- ✓ Revisit the following outdated Policies among others: Competition Policy, Integrated trade and Industry policy, and Microfinance policy.
- ✓ Need for development of agribusiness monitoring information system (for effective monitoring of agribusiness activities and projects).
- ✓ ADMARC roles whether social and commercial should be clear and supported accordingly (need for specific budget or facility for price stabilization when food commodity prices are too high and Logistic funding (transport and



handling) for movement of commodities from surplus to deficit areas for easy access during spot food shortages.

5. Plenary Discussion

- ✓ A representative from Irish Aid pointed out that a medium term plan for FISP has been developed to allow for multi donor support like DFID and Irish Aid. She further indicated that during the 2009/10 and 2010/11 growing seasons, there was no overshoot on the Programme's costs, but 2011/12 there was a slight overshoot due to the devaluation of the Kwacha. She also concurred with the presenter that the FISP is a necessary evil for Malawi, however, she disagreed that there is no meaningful technical engagement based on her personal experiences. She credited the Programme as having contributed significantly to national and household food security, reduction of malnutrition, increased children enrolment, and reduction of under-five malnutrition.

- ✓ A representative from Heifer International disagreed with the presenter that the FISP/food security is politically motivated. He argued that everything related to food has a human face; hence he congratulated the donors for their financial support to the



On he that ADMARC perform its social providing functional therefore there was food security at the household level during the one party system. He further emphasized that there was a lot of peace and dignity in our communities as people were prevented from begging. He concluded that FISP is not politically motivated.

- ✓ A representative from Foodsec Consulting commented on the exit strategy. She asked whether the budget for FISP has been declining and if there is need to rethink on the overall goal of FISP. She indicated that production increase and behavioral change at the farm level are some of the notable changes which can be attributed to the FISP. She further indicated that she was optimistic that an exit strategy has already been put in place as she was sure that there have been a considerable number of beneficiaries who were graduating from the Programme. Moreover, she argued that farmers who do not access the coupons for the

subsidized fertilizer find ways to buy commercial fertilizer because they do recognize its importance. Hence, there has been tremendous positive change in the mindset of a substantial number of farmers

- ✓ A representative from FAO commended the FISP for making a significant contribution towards the accelerated adoption of improved cultivars such as maize hybrids, groundnuts and open pollinated maize varieties. As much as these hybrid seeds do have many advantages like being early maturing, high yielding and so on, she however cautioned that there is need to promote and safeguard the preservation of the local seed industry as there is a danger that the indigenous cultivars might become extinct. She pointed out therefore that we need to develop strategies to preserve land race varieties as a country. She further pointed out that inconsistent policies are indeed affecting the agriculture sector. There is need to appreciate that production must respond to market needs. Having programmes to increase production and at the same time putting restrictions on markets is very contradictory, as such there is need to look at policies holistically in a bid to harmonize them.
- ✓ In response to the questions and comments, the first presenter expressed lack of awareness about the medium term strategy being agreed upon by government and donors. He still bemoaned the prolonged and lengthy time it took for the agreement to be reached. For instance, it took about seven to eight drafts before finalization. He mentioned that he got this feedback on the medium term strategy from the people he engaged with. He further cited the reluctance between MoAI&WD and the NSO's reluctance to reconcile and standardize their methodologies and units of analyses like farm families and households when both are clearly Public Sector Institutions. He further wondered and questioned why the targeting criteria keep changing every year. Such inconsistencies mar the goodwill of the Programme though its primary motive is genuine and legitimate. He also pointed out that there has been a change in the focus of the FISP concentrating on supporting maize production rather than tobacco growing since 2008/09 growing season. The presenter was in agreement with what the representative from Irish Aid said regarding the price hike of fertilizer on the international market which made the costs of production to also rise. In the presenter's opinion therefore, if the FISP is to continue, the budget allocated to it will definitely be rising incrementally as it is a major vote spinner. He recommended that there is need to achieve the same food security goals and objectives using cost-effective alternative ways.
- ✓ The first Presenter therefore concluded that Food Security is inevitably at the heart of politics as evidenced by the frequent allusions to improve food security situations by most politicians during campaign and election times. He maintained his stance that the design and the implementation of the FISP leave a lot to be desired in spite of the noteworthy successes which he highlighted during his presentation. He, for example, pointed out that there have been arguments in Parliament whether to use coupons or not in distribution of the subsidized fertilizer as the coupon voucher system seems to have many flaws and loopholes

for those with fraudulent and corrupt intentions. He also pointed out that the Distribution of inputs is favoured to some districts and the program does not exploit comparative advantage. For example, other districts do well in maize production, but one finds that few subsidized fertilizers go to such districts.

- ✓ On exit strategy regarding the FISP, the first presenter indicated that the budgetary allocation has been declining since 2009. The presenter posed a question “*should exit strategy occur by design or default?*”. If the exist strategy is by default, the issue of sustainability automatically arises, in his opinion, he feels that the exit strategy should occur by design and not accidentally. The presenter captured the example of Bangladesh that the program there has been successful by design and not by default due to increased access to credit and markets which massively transformed and revamped their rural economy.
- ✓ One of the interested participants also echoed the similar sentiments about the problem of FISP currently not seeming to have an exit strategy by design. FSIP is a social protection program in the sense of being a productivity enhancing safety net. Malawi, however, needs to step up and find a way to diversify its economy beyond agriculture. Chirwa’s analysis suits the context of agriculture in Malawi and not the example from Bangladesh. In Bangladesh non-farm activities were included; hence Malawi with the current status cannot move out of the problem. Instead, inadequate arable land was deemed as the major problem affecting the FISP. For example, vendors who do not own land are involved in the coupon redemption process because they do not really have enough land to cultivate on so as to construct viable livelihoods.
- ✓ A Soil Scientist pointed out that there is need for people with critical minds to carefully analyze the FISP. Developed countries are also heavily subsidizing their commercial farmers, so it is not a phenomenon in Malawi. Rather there is need to see the benefits from the subsidy in terms of increased production, increased exports, and the subsequent contribution to foreign exchange earnings. He emphasized that in Malawi it cannot happen that we can totally substitute inorganic fertilizers with organic fertilizers; we therefore still need the inorganic fertilizers to move forward.
- ✓ The first presenter indicated that FISP should not be looked at in isolation but it needs to be considered inclusively and holistically with other development programmes so that synergies that promote economic growth can be maximized on. As of now the FISP is being looked at in isolation which is making it impossible for people to step up out of agriculture. Therefore, there is need for complementarities to exist between rural development programmes so that steady progress to transform the rural economy which has been static since 1964 can occur otherwise it even risks degenerating. The presenter agreed that FISP has accelerated the use of hybrids; however, a point was stressed whether this will be sustainable if the program phases out. No country has developed its agricultural sector without vibrant breeding varieties (local seed industry). Subsidy should be integrated as part of our development strategy, and should be designed and

implemented in the way that it will add value to and promote our local seed industry.

- ✓ A representative from Hunger Project Malawi supported the ban on export of maize and soya beans by the government that it should not be portrayed as being a negative government regulatory policy. They might have valid rationales as it may be in a bid to regulate the commodity market and control its local availability for say therapeutic supplementary and complementary feeding. The representative's thinking was that the government bans a commodity being well informed having gotten statistics on the estimates of the same. Such bans are therefore dependent on the production estimates for each particular year. What is important is to have good flow of information between the government and other sectors. There is therefore need to ensure that no information asymmetries exist in the commodity markets as farmers and private traders mostly stand to lose out.
- ✓ A representative from Heifer International wondered whether there is need for a separate agribusiness information management system from the SASCO which is being funded by USAID. He also further questioned "*who is the main beneficiary of the FISP between farmers, Seed Companies, or Fertilizer Companies etc. and who are the losers?*".
- ✓ A representative from Kalondolondo was in agreement that the design of the FISP has many loopholes and flaws in it. For example, selection of beneficiaries and giving out the coupons are effectively being monitored by MoAI&WD, however, once the coupon is in the hands of farmers the responsible Ministry steps away and stops its monitoring role as such most beneficiaries suffer injustices and exploitation due to their being highly marginalized. He further bemoaned the inadequate extension support and price monitoring in the FISP. Key beneficiaries are vulnerable groups; but during Kalondolondo meetings that are held in rural communities, it has been clearly evident that most beneficiaries are not accorded the opportunities to redeem their coupons as there are so many impediments in the whole process. Therefore, FISP has a lot of social opportunity costs which need careful consideration by relevant authorities.
- ✓ In response to the comments by the representative from Kalondolondo, a representative from Karonga ADD indicated that the beneficiary identification process under FISP empowers farmers rather than disempower and marginalize them as was alleged. He also expressed his surprise at hearing that the selection criteria keep changing every year. He pointed out that the selection criteria has been consistent throughout the years where chiefs are charged with the responsibility of beneficiary identification as they are very well familiar with their subjects. On monitoring beyond the coupon distribution stage all the way up to the redemption stage in the markets, he argued that extension officers are effectively doing that. Hence, in his opinion, the FISP can truly be described as "*farmer owned program*" since field days at village level and research have added value to the programme. He therefore concluded that the FISP has improved extension service delivery rather than undermine it.

- ✓ The second presenter responded that she was in agreement that Government sometimes does have to regulate the commodity market by for example effecting export bans. However her problem was that in the example she cited during her presentation, the same government requested her to find an export market for soya beans so that this could help in the generation of forex in light of its scarcity as of now. However, when she had organized women soya beans producers to provide the produce for selling to an export market she had identified in Republic of South Africa, she was later surprised that Government had effected a ban on the same when it was upon their own request so it reneged on its own deal. In response to the question on agribusiness information management system, she indicated that she was aware about the existence of SASCO and that it deals with market linkages therefore she still maintained that there was need for a separate harmonized agribusiness information management system as the two serve slightly different purposes.
- ✓ In response to the question on who actually is the main beneficiary under the FISP, The first presenter pointed out that area for a thorough and comprehensive research is needed to determine who the exact winners and losers are in the FISP and in what specific ways. Using anecdotal evidence however, he noted that



ordinary farmers are not the winners but rather Agro-dealers Companies. On the social cost of FISP, the first presenter concurred with the comments from the Kalondolondo representative and cited an example from his own village where farmers wait three days or more on a queue while waiting to access the subsidized inputs and corruption is highly pronounced. It was emphasized that the first presenter's comments should not be understood as condemning the program; rather pointers on how it can be improved. On beneficiary identification, it was indicated that the process does

not relate to what is on paper. In Malawi's context, it was indicated that it is difficult to pin point the poorest of the poor. As such people living with HIV/AIDS, disabled and Female Headed Households are usually considered; but they are not always the poorest of the poor. Instead their situation of "vulnerability" puts them at an advantage to benefit from the programme.

6. Closing Remarks and Way Forward

The representative of the Principal Secretary from Agriculture, Mr Wilfred Lipita was accorded the chance to have the final word and clarify as well as make comments on the proceedings from the whole discussion. In a nutshell, he was pleased that the first presenter did acknowledge the successes of the FISP and agreed that it is a necessary which should not be discontinued. He also pointed out that Government is cognizant of

the fact that there are still a number of possible areas for improvement to make the FISP better. He indicated that this should be a result of concerted and collaborative efforts from all players in the agriculture and food security sector.

7 Conclusion

It was a successful Policy Dialogue Meeting and it was well represented in terms of gender balance as well as diverse technical experts from various sub-sectors in Agriculture. However, the meeting did not come up with a concrete way forward as it was indicated in the program due to time constraints. It was however announced by the Master of ceremony that the presenters would jointly come up with a report which will later be disseminated to the participants and all other relevant stakeholders. It was noted that FISP is a successful program. However, it needs amendment in its operations to improve its efficiency and effectiveness.

8 Annex

8.1 Program

Time	Activity	Facilitator
5:30-5:45	Registration	CISANET Secretariat
5:45-5:50	Opening Player	Vanessa Kapeleta
5:50-5:55	Welcoming Remarks	Chrispin Magombo
5:55-6:00	Opening Remarks	Edson Musopole
6:00-6:30	Policy Options and Future Scenarios of the Subsidy Program in Malawi	Blessings Chinsinga
6:30-7:00	The Role of Grain Traders in Facilitating Market Linkages in the 'Post ADMARC Era'	Grace Mhango
7:00-7:50	Discussions	Chrispin Magombo
7:50-7:57	Closing Remarks and Way Forward	Tamani Nkhono-Mvula
7:57-8:00	Closing Player	Casterns Mulume
	Dinner	CISANET Secretariat

8.2 List of Participants

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