

Research Application Summary

Analysis of critical factors influencing performance of fish farmer organisations in Dowa and Mchinji district in central Malawi

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Abstract

This study is being carried out to determine critical factors that affect performance of fish farmer organisations in Malawi as part of the RUFORUM Community Action Research programme (CARP). Five fish farmer organisations with a total of 70 farmers in Mchinji and Dowa districts in the Central Region of Malawi are being used as case studies. Specific issues that are being studied include organisational set up and development, characterisation of the organisations, organisational structure and systems and socioeconomic characteristics and profiles of members within the organisations. Preliminary results showed that the fish farmer organisations have loose governance structures and systems which inevitably could 'defeat' collective action. It was also noted that the organisations did not have institutional design principles that act as guide for organisations to achieve intended outcomes. Results also showed that income generation, household food security and access to credit facilities were major motivating factors that acted as incentives for becoming members of fish farmer organisations. This implies that members had various expected benefits from the organisations which if not fulfilled may have significant negative influence on performance of the organisations. Achievement of such benefits could come to realisation if farmer organisations are empowered to undertake sustainable collective action.

Key words: Critical factors, fish farmer organisation, organisational performance

Résumé

Cette étude est menée pour déterminer les facteurs critiques qui affectent la performance des organisations de pisciculteurs au Malawi dans le cadre du programme communautaire de recherche-action de RUFORUM (CARP). Cinq organisations de pisciculteurs avec un total de 70 agriculteurs dans les districts

de Mchinji et de Dowa dans la région centrale du Malawi sont utilisées comme études de cas. Les questions spécifiques qui sont à l'étude comprennent la situation organisationnelle et son développement, la caractérisation des organisations, la structure organisationnelle et les systèmes, et les caractéristiques socio-économiques et les profils des membres au sein des organisations. Les résultats préliminaires ont montré que les organisations de pisciculteurs ont des structures et des systèmes de gouvernance mobiles qui, inévitablement, pourraient empêcher l'action collective. Il a également été noté que les organisations n'avaient pas les principes institutionnels de conception qui agissent comme guide pour les organisations afin d'atteindre les résultats escomptés. Les résultats ont également montré que la génération de revenus, la sécurité alimentaire des ménages et l'accès aux facilités de paiement étaient les principaux facteurs de motivation qui ont agi comme des incitations à adhérer aux organisations de pisciculteurs. Ceci implique que les membres ont divers avantages attendus des organisations qui, s'ils ne sont remplis, peuvent avoir une forte influence négative sur la performance des organisations. La réalisation de ces avantages pourrait être possible si les organisations paysannes sont habilitées à procéder à une action collective durable.

Mots clés: Facteurs critiques, organisation des pisciculteurs, performance organisationnelle

Background

A number of approaches and strategies have been devised to enhance agricultural development in sub-Saharan Africa. The establishment of farmer organisations is regarded as one of the approaches aimed at mobilisation of smallholder farmers to undertake collective action as a strategy to enhance agricultural development. Collective action occurs when individuals cooperate as a group in order to solve a shared problem. Most of the recent agricultural development policies, strategies and implementation frameworks emphasise the need for robust and sustainable vibrant farmer organisations in attaining sustainable agricultural development. Apart from increasing access to extension services and credit, collective action in form of smallholder farmer organisations is essential for reducing market transaction costs and consequently improving performance of smallholder rural markets. By belonging to farmer organisations, smallholder farmers attain some market power, access input and output markets as well as improve their competitiveness on

the market. Through farmer organisations, there is also increased smallholder farmer representation in national and international policy forums. In Malawi, fish farmer organisations play a crucial role in promoting fish farming activities among smallholder fish farmers.

Despite increased emphasis on involvement of farmer organisations in aquaculture fisheries production, the challenge in Malawi is that the critical factors that determine performance of farmer organisations to undertake fish farming have not been adequately investigated. Associated with this, a number of factors have a significant role in motivating communities to participate in various organisations. It implies therefore that when communities do not obtain the expected incentives or benefits in an organisation, this acts as a disincentive to participate in the organisations and hence they may discontinue participating. However, these institutional incentives which are crucial for the performance of farmer organisations have not been adequately understood. This implies that there is no comprehensive and empirical evidence on the critical factors that influence performance of the fish farmer organisations. In the final analysis, lack of in-depth understanding of such factors defeats the whole essence of farmer organisation approach in aquaculture fisheries production. Thus, this study is examining organisational set-up of fish farmer groups, including characterising the membership, and how these factors influence organisation performance.

Literature Summary

Handy (1999) and North (1990) divide the factors that influence performance of organisations into three broad categories. These are the individuals, the organisation, and the environment within which the institutions are situated. The ability of individuals to carry out their role in the organisation has a significant effect on organisation's capacity to meet its objectives and goal. Both Kassam *et al.* (2011) and Stockbridge *et al.* (2003) emphasise that matching the organisational roles to abilities has an important bearing on performance of an organisation. In essence, it implies that the aim and objectives of the organisation should be in tandem with abilities of members of the organisation in order for them to undertake prescribed obligations and responsibility in the organisations. Scott (2004) further attributes performance of farmer organisations to characteristics of farmer organisations. These characteristics include; homogeneity, size, choice of services, commercial activities, access to finance, skills and education, participation, organisational structure,

legislation and focus. Williamson (2000) also asserts that self-reliance and autonomy as well as governance are critical in the performance of farmer organisations. Further, internal cohesion and a membership driven agenda is also an important element to determine performance of the farmer organisations. Handy (1999) found that factors such as small organisational size, homogeneity, face-to-face contact and accountability among members are important determinants of internal cohesion and a membership driven agenda. However, Stockbridge *et al.* (2003) argue that while small size and homogeneity are most important for group cohesion and a membership driven agenda, larger groups are better when it comes to functions such as lobbying with buyers, suppliers and policy makers. Williamson (2000) reveals that the institutional environment has significant influence on farmer organisational development. The institutional environment considers the economic, physical, technological and socio-cultural aspects of the environment within which the organisations operate. Within the environment, there are other organisations that have a set of rules which govern and constrain production within a society. Indirectly, such formal laws and government policies along with informal institutions based on customs and traditions affect the environment for farmer organisational development.

Study Description

The study is being conducted in Mchinji and Dowa districts in central Malawi. The two districts were purposively selected for the study because they are the project sites for Community Action Research Programme (CARP). Within the two districts, four Extension Planning Areas (EPAs) were selected as study sites using non-probability purposive sampling. These EPAs include Mikundi, Msitu and Mkanda EPAs in Mchinji and Nachisaka EPA in Dowa. Five (5) CARP beneficiary fish farmer organisations were selected for the study. These include 4 farmer organisations in Mchinji and 1 farmer organisation in Dowa district. The 5 farmer organisations were divided into two groups in regard the application of community action research. Three groups are treated as impact farmer organisations while the other two are the control group. The three farmer organisations are being referred to as impact groups since they are involved in community action research. Through community action research, the three impact groups will identify challenges or problems affecting their performance and devise possible interventions as solutions to the identified challenges through action research. The control group will not undertake the action research process. The rationale for stratifying the fish farmer

organisations into impact and control groups is to compare their relative performances. Table 1 shows details of the selected fish farmer organisations.

Data collection comprised focus group discussions (FGDs), individual fish farmer interviews and key informant interviews. Data will be analysed in SPSS and STATA. Data analysis will comprise descriptive statistics such as means, percentages and frequencies. Content analysis will be used to summarise data collected through focus group discussions.

Table 1. Details of fish farmer organisations under study.

District	EPA	Traditional Authority	Name of village	Name of FO*	Number of farmers in FO
Mchinji	Mkanda	Mkanda	Chimombo	Chikondi	18
Mchinji	Mikundi	Nyoka	Langa	Gwirampini	11
Mchinji	Msitu	Mavwere	Guwende	Nthawinchuma	14
Mchinji	Msitu	Mavwere	Manthalu	Manthalu	13
Dowa	Nachisaka	Chiwere	Jemusi	Khumbireni	14
Total					70

* Farmer organisation.

Research Application

Since this study is still on-going, a summary of preliminary findings of the fish farmer needs assessment that was conducted using FGDs as part of the community action research process is provided. It was noted that, in Dowa, 95% of respondents were male while only 5 percent were female. In Mchinji, 60 percent were male while women comprised about 40 percent. This reflects the membership of the FOs across the two districts. It was also noted that men took a leading role and were ready to take charge in providing their perceptions on issues of fish farming. While this dominance may be attributed to the fact that normally in the rural societies of Malawi women tend not to take part significantly in discussions in the midst of men, fish farming is also generally regarded as a man's activity and hence men's dominance during the group discussions. Key informants also revealed that 98% of the ponds in the study area were owned by male headed households.

A number of factors influence membership of the fish farmer organisation. Respondents revealed that the major factors that motivated them to become members of farmer organisations included income generation; ensure food security within household; access credit facilities and increase access to free

agriculture inputs. Depending on the current economic situation in Malawi, these factors are regarded as some of the strategies towards poverty reduction at the household level. As such, failure to achieve these anticipated motivating factors may lead some members to discontinue with their membership in farmer organisations.

It was also noted that most of the organisations interviewed were established before the CARP project. However, it was observed that all farmer organisations had loose institutional arrangements since the rules were non-formal. Indeed the rules were not recorded anywhere. Such rules may be regarded as being *de facto* and non-working and may either be challenged easily or become non functional. The informal rules applied in the FOs are based on traditional and cultural lines. It was also noted that all fish organisations did not have constitutions neither did they have an organisational strategic plan which should guide their fish farming activities. Other members did not even know why they needed a constitution or management plans.

Other institutional challenges that were noted include significant dropouts of members especially within Langa and Chikondi farmer organisations. Lack of immediate benefits which some members expected to get from the organisations was mentioned as the major reason for dropouts. It was also observed that some office bearers did not know their obligations in the farmer organisations, and as such it was a disincentive for them to promote collective action in fish farming. Another challenge was that in some organisations such as Nthawinchuma group in Mchinji district had poor organisation structure and systems since all members were office bearers. Sometimes, such systems become counterproductive because of the bossy concept that each member has which may negatively affect collective action (Kassam *et al.*, 2011). Lack of a clearly defined vision and goal was noted as another problem area for the farmer organisations. None of the five groups had these clearly stated. The absence of organisational vision and goal leads to inefficiencies in collective actions since certain targeted outputs or outcomes may not be achieved due to lack of a yardstick to measure the organisational performance (Voigt, 1997). Another challenge facing farmer organisations is the lack of networks with other relevant stakeholders within the fish value chain. Other organisations such as microfinance organisations and extension agencies have a supportive framework for farmer organisations, the absence of which may

affect performance of the farmer organisations. Another institutional challenge relates to irregular and often poorly attended organisational meetings. Some members questioned the rationale for having frequent meetings when they undertook fish farming activities on an individual basis.

Technical challenges included the dry out of ponds during certain periods of the year especially during the dry season. This sometimes acts as a disincentive to continue with fish farming. There was also generally inadequate extension services for the farmer organisations. This results in inadequate technical capabilities for the fish farmers to undertake fish farming as a viable investment. Some targeted operations such as pond construction and management of the ponds are not achieved in time because of inadequate amount of labour force at household level. About 90% of the fish farmers in all the study sites reported that they did not have adequate financial resources to engage in fish farming; this clearly defeats the rationale for community members to engage in fish farming as a viable investment.

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