

Implications of the Challenges Affecting Capacity of Fish Farmer Organizations in Dowa and Mchinji Districts in Malawi

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ABSTRACT

This study examines farmers' perceptions on implications of challenges affecting farmer organizations in promoting fish farming. Data collection comprised face to face interviews and focus group discussions with members of the farmer groups. Key informant interviews with leaders of farmer groups and extension workers were also conducted. Data were analysed using content analysis, critical discourse analysis and descriptive statistics. Results showed that lack of training resulted into members' inadequate knowledge on appropriate recommendations for organisational development and fish farming practices. It was also observed that inadequate commitment of members resulted due to mismatch between actual benefits and expected benefits from the organizations, laziness of some members and weak leadership. The study has shown lack of trust among members was a result of heterogeneity on various socioeconomic aspects among members. Another study with a larger sample of farmers and farmer organizations should be carried out as a follow-up to this study.

Keywords: Implications, capacity, challenges, fish farming, farmer organizations

INTRODUCTION

Farmer organizations in Malawi and other sub-Saharan African countries face a number of challenges in their operations in enhancing agricultural production (David and Asamoah, 2011). Mapila *et al.* (2010) and Chirwa *et al.* (2005) observe that the problems that affect capacity as well as performance of farmer organizations are three-fold in nature. These problems take the form of organisational, environmental and contextual challenges. Organisational challenges emanate from the formation model of farmer organizations in which public agents such as agricultural extension officers are mandated by government policies to establish farmer organizations in order to promote community development. According to Chirwa *et al.* (2005), it is in the historical context that many government agencies develop national policies for rural development and design policy frameworks to help rural people become organised so that the delivery of services could be channeled through the various types of farmer organizations or groups. These policies also provide blueprint structures for farmer organizations in order to provide various input, marketing and educational services to farmers (Stockbridge *et al.*, 2003).

However, many extension agents lack the skills and training needed for community development (Dorward *et al.*, 2008). As such, some of the extension agents resort to shortcut methods to establish farmer organizations while others present government policies in an oversimplified way to rural communities which defeats the rationale for establishing the farmer organizations. This scenario also creates divergences in terms of accountability, leadership and governance issues within the farmer organizations (Mapila *et al.*, 2010). Consequently, poor accountability and leadership as well as malfunctioning governance structures create an environment of mistrust and animosity within the farmer organizations and subsequently contribute to failure of such organizations to deliver benefits to their members and to remain sustainable (Rout, 2013; Mapila *et al.*, 2010; Shiferaw *et al.*, 2009).

Farmer organizations also lack critical factors that would ensure their effectiveness such as capital, credit facilities, technical skills and a supportive institutional environment. The environmental and contextual challenges coupled with the organisational problems increase the uncertainties of farmer

organisation’s effectiveness (GoM, 2006). In addition, a number of studies (Fischer and Qaim, 2011; Mapila *et al.*, 2010, Kachule, 2004) have shown that differences in socio-economic characteristics of households lead to disparities in social, economic, marketing and production outcomes of rural farmer organizations. Differences in socio-economic characteristics of rural smallholders have an important bearing on performance of farmer organizations as they affect to a large extent, the level of community participation in rural development programs (Mapila *et al.*, 2010).

Shiferaw *et al.* (2009) further observe that some of the costs and challenges that farmer organizations face emanate from within the membership of the organizations themselves. These are internal problems which may include lack of trust between members, high internal transaction costs and the problem of free riding. With regard to members’ trust, Stockbridge *et al.* (2003) observe that poor management and the subsequent breakdown of trust among members are some of the main reasons which negatively affect the success of the organizations. When a farmer organisation is made up of heterogeneous groups of people with different interests and objectives, it can be difficult to manage, especially when the farmer organizations become larger (Mapila *et al.*, 2010). A lot of time and effort is needed for consultations amongst the members to develop consensus on important issues for governing their organizations. It is easy to forget the importance of maintaining the trust and commitment of members or to feel it is too costly to continue to put such effort into maintaining social capital (Shiferaw *et al.*, 2009). However, it is crucial to the sustainability of the farmer organizations.

Masangano and Mthinda (2012) further reveal that sometimes farmer organizations lack resources and technical skills to form associations and cooperatives on one hand while the extension agents lack the organisational and technical skills to support farmers on the other hand. In addition, Mapila *et al.* (2010) observe that most smallholder farmer organizations have weak or no linkages with policy makers which consequently negatively affect performance of the organizations. These challenges show different implications or effects on capacity and performance of the farmer organizations (Kaunda *et al.*, 2010). This study therefore examines the implications of these challenges on capacity and performance of fish farmer organizations. In this study, implication of the challenges point to the effect of the challenges on performance of the farmer organizations.

METHODOLOGY

This cross-sectional study was carried out in Mchinji and Dowa districts. The sampling frame comprised five fish farmer organizations which operated under Community Action Research Programme (CARP) Fish Project. The farmer organizations comprised a total of 68 farmers. Considering farmers’ experiences in fish farming as a result of the previously implemented fish farming projects, it was assumed that members of fish farmer organizations would be appropriate to provide necessary information for the study. Purposive sampling method was employed to select the five fish farmer organizations and the members of the farmer organizations. Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected in May 2014. The data collection methods comprised focus group discussions (FGDs), key informant interviews and face to face interviews. The FGDs were carried out among members of the farmer groups. Key informant interviews with leaders of the farmer groups and the District Fisheries Officers (DFOs) were further conducted to collect data on insights of the challenges affecting the organizations. Lastly, face to face interviews were conducted in order to understand perceptions of farmers on challenges affecting the farmer organizations. Data were analysed using content analysis, critical discourse analysis and descriptive statistics.

RESULTS

Results (Table 1) show that the main implications emanating from lack of knowledge and skills on appropriate recommendations for organisational development included; lack of institutional vision and goals, unclear roles for office bearers and the ordinary members, inadequate mechanisms for conflict resolution and management and lack of graduated sanctions meted on offenders. Results show that 82%, 88% and about 74% of the members reported that unclear roles of office bearers and committee members, inadequate mechanisms for conflict management and resolution and lack of graduated sanctions, respectively were major outcomes resulting from the challenge of lack of knowledge and skills in the fish farmer organizations.

Results further show that a considerable percentage (about 46% and 66%) of members mentioned other outcomes resulting from lack of knowledge in organisational development. These included lack

of institutional vision and goals in the organizations, dominance of leaders where it was reported by members that the leaders did not consult their members before making decisions affecting the organizations and lack or inadequate awareness of rules by members of the organizations.

Table1. *Implications of challenges on performance of fish farmer organizations*

Challenges	Implications	Percent of members
Lack of knowledge and skills on appropriate recommendations for organisational development (n = 68)	Lack of institutional vision and goals.	66.2
	Unclear roles for office bearers and committee members.	82.4
	Dominance of organisational leaders. Some leaders made solo decisions and dominated in activities of the organizations.	51.5
	Inadequate mechanisms for conflict management and resolution.	88.2
	Lack of graduated sanctions meted on offenders.	73.5
Inadequate commitment of members in governance of farmer organizations and management of fish ponds (n = 68)	Reduced initiative to use some of their own resources in fish farming activities.	79.3
	Members always expected handouts in form of money and tools and equipment used in fish farming.	50.0
Lack of trust among members (n=68)	Inadequate cooperation among members in undertaking fish farming activities.	42.6
Inadequate access to extension services (n = 18)	Lack of encouragement by extension workers	88.2
	Extension workers have irregular and intermittent visits to fish farmers.	80.8
Inadequate knowledge in fish farming (n = 68)	Poorly implemented fish farming activities.	70.5
	Low fish production realised.	51.5
Inadequate inputs such as fingerings and tools and equipment (n = 68)	Poorly implemented fish farming activities.	76.4
	Low fish production realised.	58.8

Inadequate commitment of members in governance of farmer organizations and management of fish ponds had various implications as well. Results show that 79% of members of the farmer organizations pointed out that there was low initiative and willingness among the fish farmers to use some of their own resources in undertaking the fish farming activities. The members noted that since the fish farming activities were supported by a project, they expected that all necessary resources and inputs would be provided to them by the project. On the other hand, they also had high expectations on benefits derived from the project for example, the need to be invited for training session to a residential training centre in order to get money in allowances. All this speaks to reduced ownership as well as commitment of the members to effectively carry out the organisational roles.

In terms of lack of trust among members, with exception of Gwirampini club, about 43% of the respondents across the four farmer groups reported that as a result of lack of trust, there was inadequate cooperation among members in their respective organizations. Focus group discussions with members indicated that lack of cooperation resulted in increased conflicts among members with eventual reduction in performance of the groups.

Intermittent and irregular visits to fish farmers by the extension workers and other technical staff and lack of encouragement by extension workers were the implications resulting from the challenge of inadequate access to extension services. Farmers reported that there were no extension workers specifically trained in fisheries and aquaculture at the local level. They therefore relied on the two District Fisheries Officers who acted as government extension workers. These were based at district headquarters and were supposed to undertake extension activities at district level. Considering the number of farmers they were supposed to visit and the distances to be covered, they were inadequate to effectively provide extension services which led to intermittent visits and reduced encouragement for the fish farmers.

On the challenge of inadequate knowledge in fish farming, 71% and 52% of the farmers reported that as a result of this challenge, fish farming activities were poorly implemented and reduced the production of fish, respectively. Similar effects were also reported as a result of the challenge of inadequate inputs where results show that 76% and about 59% of the members suggested that there was poor implementation of fish farming activities which consequently led to reduced fish production.

This occurred against a backdrop that the farmer organizations did not have any networks or linkages with funding agencies such as microfinance organizations neither did the members devise strategies such as establishment of a revolving fund to sustain their access to resources and inputs.

DISCUSSION

Results have demonstrated that the main implications emanating from lack of knowledge and skills on appropriate recommendations for organisational development were: unclear roles for office bearers and the ordinary members of the farmer organizations, inadequate mechanisms for conflict resolution and management and lack of graduated sanctions meted on offenders. Lack of institutional vision and goals in the fish farmer organizations and dominance of leaders were the other effects which emanated from members' lack of knowledge on appropriate recommendations for organisational development. These had a significant influence on capacity of the farmer organizations in promoting fish farming. In the absence of clear organisational roles coupled with lack of institutional vision and goals, members had varied personal interests that motivated their participation in their groups. Such personal aspirations made it difficult to establish internal cohesion characterised by a common sense of purpose, which could be crucial for successful cooperation amongst members in an organisation (Adong *et al.*, 2012).

In addition, inadequate mechanisms for conflict resolution and lack of graduated sanctions meted on offenders influence farmers organisational capacity; the absence of which promotes rule breaking among members (Ostrom, 2010). These findings are supported by Mapila *et al.* (2010) who observed that unclear roles of the members, inadequate mechanisms for conflict resolution, lack of graduated sanctions meted on offenders and lack of institutional vision were the most common constraints affecting the farmer organizations in Malawi and other sub-Saharan African countries. Therefore, absence of clear roles for the members, mechanisms for conflict management, graduated sanctions, institutional vision and goals coupled with dominance of the leaders, where the leaders made decisions without consulting the ordinary members was another precursor for failure in the fish farmer organizations to promote fish farming.

Results further showed that inadequate commitment of members in governance of farmer organizations and management of the fish ponds had its own negative implications. These included reduced willingness for members to use their own resources in fish farming activities and members always expected handouts in form of money and tools and equipment from the project. Reduced willingness or initiative to use their own resources coupled with the members' high expectation for handouts had a significant influence on both the governance of their farmer groups and participation in fish farming activities. For instance, although they agreed to make member contributions in form of money for establishing village loans and savings and for supporting their various internal affairs e.g. during illnesses and funeral ceremonies, most of the members failed to contribute. Over and above this, reduced willingness to use their resources and their overdependence on handouts affected the general management of the fish farming activities more especially procurement of the necessary resources such as fingerings, fish feed and construction and maintenance of the fish ponds. As a consequence, there was a marked inevitability for poor performance of the farmer groups which made the goal of increasing fish production highly out of question. It implies therefore that lack of willingness to contribute towards the activities of their farmer groups promotes dependency syndrome which affects the motivation and the members' capacity to effectively manage the fish farmer organizations (Beal *et al.*, 2003).

The challenge of lack of trust resulted in reduced cooperation among members of Nthawinchuma, Phindulathu, Khumbirani and Chikondi farmer organizations farmer clubs. However, this challenge was not mentioned by members of Gwirampini club. Focus group discussions and face to face interviews with members of the four clubs indicated that within their groups, they experienced an increase in conflicts among the members. This was largely as a result of inadequate cooperation among the members. Poor cooperation affected internal cohesion which constrained the organisational activities such as formulation of institutional arrangements. In other words, lack of cooperation among members defeats the whole essence of the fish farmer organizations as a strategy for enhancing fish farming. This assertion agrees with Cinner *et al.* (2011) who argue that cooperation among members is a significant element contributing towards the success of farmer organizations in enhancing fish farming.

Results further showed that intermittent and irregular visits to fish farmers by the extension workers and other technical staff and lack of encouragement by extension workers were the implications as regards the challenge of inadequate access to extension services by the fish farmers in Nthawinchuma and Chikondi clubs. This was the consequence of lack of field extension workers who were specifically trained in fish farming. This made it difficult for local communities including members of the fish farmer organizations to access adequate extension services at the local level since they depended on the District Fisheries Officers to provide the necessary extension services.

Lastly, the challenge of inadequate knowledge in fish farming contributed significantly towards reduced fish production across the farmer organizations. Results showed that inadequate knowledge in fish farming resulted in poorly implemented fish farming activities which consequently led to low fish production. Overall, this had a negative effect on achieving the overall objective of the fish farmer organizations which was to increase production of fish.

CONCLUSION

Results have shown that the major implications emanating from the challenges affecting the capacity of the fish farmer organizations include lack of institutional vision and goals, unclear roles for office bearers and the ordinary members, dominance of organisational leaders, inadequate mechanisms for conflict management and resolution and lack of graduated sanctions meted on offenders. Other implications were reduced initiative for the members to use some of their own resources in fish farming activities, inadequate cooperation among members in undertaking fish farming activities as well as lack of encouragement of fish farmers by extension workers. The section has finally shown that these implications affect the general performance of the farmer groups which ultimately culminate into poorly implemented fish farming activities and low fish production.

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