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Youth in Agriculture Integrating Youth into Extension Systems in Central Malawi

Background and Justification

As food security and community development programming increasingly emphasize sustainability, the relational nature of agricultural extension reaching farmers in the exchange of knowledge, technology, and information has proven to be a viable and established method for reaching disadvantaged rural farmers. Extension systems strive to optimize both access and quality of services delivered to farmers.

Historically, Malawi has struggled to offer both widely accessible and high-quality services to small scale farmers. Gaps in services are especially prominent in 10 districts that Feed the Future has termed as the Zone of Influence (ZOI). Within the ZOI, farmers face acute shortages in extension advising, contributing to chronic food insecurity. The proposed project piloted in ZOI district Lilongwe East, a peri-urban area on the outskirts of Lilongwe.

A 2016 Strengthening Agriculture Nutrition and Extension (SANE) Baseline Report found that less than 45% of farmers in the Lilongwe East district have received any extension advice from agents across all major categories of advising, i.e. agriculture, nutrition, and livestock. For young farmers, gaps in accessibility are even more prominent, as the district did not have any formal youth based extension programming as of 2016. Modern extension delivery services in Central Malawi currently face two primary barriers, namely, cost effective utilization of extension workers given significant budget constraints, and the establishment of effective feedback systems between local, national, and international extension bodies.

Contributing to both these constraints are chronic absenteeism and high vacancy rates that affect nearly all districts. For young farmers in Malawi, namely those aged between 16 and 28, these issues are made more prominent by a lack of representation in community decision-making forums and a lack of extension programming supporting new farmers in developing entrepreneurship and agribusiness skills.

Since 2000, Malawi has worked to develop decentralized, participatory approaches and market driven models that prioritize the integration of small-scale producers into value chains. As support for pluralistic extension has increased among farmers, so have the variety of services offered in Malawi's extension system, with farmers having increased access to educational resources on record keeping, postharvest loss, agribusiness principles, and value chain development.

But anemic economic growth and political uncertainty have hampered progress and required extension stakeholders to reevaluate and innovate approaches in increasingly resourced strained systems. Separate rapid scoping missions of Malawi's extension system completed by Modernizing Extension and Advisory Services (MEAS) in 2012

and 2014 affirmed the country's current legislative framework in place to promote pluralistic extension but commented on many significant barriers facing both farmers and extension workers in creating a demand-driven extension system.

The most prominent challenge was found to be the sheer lack of local extension workers with respect to the number of farmers, with each local worker being responsible for an average of 2000-3000 households depending on area staffing levels. Budget constraints caused further issue for the DAESS committee structure, with many local committees lacking the funding for training, meetings, and general implementation of proposed programs. Finally, a lack of crop diversity, driven by farmers' confidence in maize crops for food security, contributes to further market insecurity and dependency on maize markets.

Within each national district, there are several Extension Planning Areas (EPAs), each averaging 8-20 AEDOs tasked with another subset of households within the EPA to serve. Existing extension in Nyanja and Chitsime is primarily delivered by approximately 30 local extension workers (AEDOs), who are responsible for general advising but also implementation of government programs such as the Farm Input Subsidy Program (FISP). Similar to many other districts in Malawi, Lilongwe East has significant vacancy rates (an average of 25% for Nyanja and Chitsime EPAs) which prevent extension services from being delivered at full capacity. In addition, significant logistical constraints related to long distance transportation often limit extension workers to only visiting their sections 2-4 times per month versus 5-6 days per week for extension workers who live in the communities they work in. Several international NGOs (e.g. UNDP, IITA, IFPRI) also work in the area providing extension services in various capacities.

In response to the MEAS scoping missions, the SANE project was created as a partnering project to DAES to improve the state of existing extension delivery systems. The SANE project, responding to efforts of DAES to increase agribusiness and entrepreneurship capacity amongst the next generation of farmers, began collaborating in conjunction with DAES to pilot a program with the intent of forming Young Farmers Clubs (YFCs) and offering agribusiness training to area extension workers in the Nyanja and Chitsime sections of the Lilongwe East district (maps found on the following page in the Actors, Location, and Timeline section.)

The project was created by the Strengthening Agriculture Nutrition and Extension activity to address the broader concerns of the MEAS Malawi assessment, as well as the programmatic goals of DAES. The project sought to improve the access and quality of services available to young farmers, increase the viability of the YFCs, and engage youth in demand-driven extension processes. YIA was a 6-month pilot project under SANE in the Chitsime and Nyanja areas of the Lilongwe East District, a region within the Feed the Future Zone of Influence.

Purpose and Objectives

The primary goal of the project was to improve access to and quality of extension available to youth in the Lilongwe East District through agribusiness training and the establishment of ABC NGO that would facilitate increased trust, communication, and collaboration between young farmers. By improving agribusiness knowledge and integrating youth into extension platforms, sustainable extension services would become more readily available while driving overall improvements in rural livelihoods.

The YIA project strongly emphasized participatory extension principles and entrepreneurship as means of increasing productivity amongst young farmers. Utilizing field level extension workers as a means of optimizing the quantity of youth engaged in face-to-face learning, weekly workshops were held for area extension workers that served to provide space for workers to reflect on the last week's interactions with youth, discuss methods for improving delivery of services, and learn a new component of agribusiness and entrepreneurship with the intent of transferring this information to youth in a similar workshop structure at weekly meetings.

The specific objectives of the project were to:

- 1) Increase agribusiness knowledge and entrepreneurial skill among young farmers
- 2) Form Young Farmers Clubs led by youth to facilitate knowledge sharing, collaboration in agribusiness, and increased formal participation in local extension systems
- 3) Create sustainable linkages between Young Farmers Clubs and Area Stakeholder Panels to allow young farmers greater voice and decisive power in ASP meetings and the development of extension programming
- 4) Document lessons learned, successes, and challenges in establishing youth clubs and agribusiness programming to inform future best practices in decentralized public extension for SANE project, community members, and relevant stakeholders.

Activities and Approaches

The implementation of the project involved the following stages:

- 1) Identify community strengths, weaknesses, and priority areas in serving youth;
- 2) Develop and integrate existing agribusiness curriculum with participatory approaches to empower both young leaders and participants;
- 3) Provide capacity-building extension workshops to AEDOs;
- 4) Provide backstopping to AEDOs transferring workshop knowledge via YFCs;
- 5) Monitor, evaluate, reflect, learn, and grow from learning tools;
- 6) Evaluate changes in knowledge as a result of workshop training;
- 7) Share best practices, advice, and encouragement with stakeholders and SANE project.

Stage 1: Identify community strengths, weaknesses, and priority areas in serving youth

The goal for this stage was to assess the existing human resources and programmatic assets of the current extension infrastructure while coordinating with community members and leaders to create a development agenda to promote participatory approaches in program design. At the national and district level, early meetings with the DAES office allowed the YIA project to evaluate Malawi's current agribusiness infrastructure, programming, and content as well as discuss the most appropriate districts to implement a pilot program.

These meetings also served to establish an agribusiness officer as a community counterpart to the YIA research assistant to better promote collaboration and communication among project partners and communities. Evaluating community level needs began with attending each area's Area Stakeholder Panel (ASP) meetings to better understand current processes and dynamics for extension delivery in each area. ASPs serve as the community level platform for extension stakeholders to plan and evaluate local extension needs. Several members of each ASP committee were then interviewed to better understand each individual's role in context of the broader committee as well as to understand perspectives of different community leaders.

As these interviews took place, village chiefs and other political leaders (Traditional Authorities), were also met to discuss their broader visions for community development and flourishing, especially in the context of youth. In addition to political leaders, general community leaders were interviewed as well, especially those that often worked closely with youth (i.e. teachers).

To better understand the daily tasks and challenges of extension workers, several days were spent shadowing area extension workers in their sections and meetings with farmers, as well as making field visits to villages implementing similar agricultural initiatives through the Peace Corps. From the beginning, village youth were interviewed informally and semi-formally to identify general trends in vocational goals, employment, and roles in their communities. With this foundation of community context and permission from Traditional Authorities to begin programming, the YIA project began program design primarily through biweekly meetings with each section's extension workers as well as their supervisor, the Area Extension Development Coordinator.

Over time these meetings allowed extension workers to clearly articulate their community's extension strengths, resource needs, and current approaches to reaching young farmers, thus allowing programming to build on current effective practices while addressing relevant needs.

These procedures allowed the project objectives to align with strategic plans of community leadership, while also promoting a decentralized model through relationships and interactions with the ASPs. The participatory approach was essential throughout each stage of the project in enabling trust amongst actors, building relational capital and promoting sustainable interactions, meetings, and goals. During area extension worker meetings, AEDOs were able to corporately discuss goals by need level and the potential barriers that may be met in practice. The highest priority areas identified by area extension workers were:

- 1) Establishing new YFCs while revitalizing existing clubs
- 2) Though DAES documented dozens of youth clubs throughout the Lilongwe East district, many of these clubs were inactive or non-existent. Within the Nyanja and Chitsime EPAs, only 3 youth clubs were active versus 30 clubs that would have been present had each extension worker maintained one club. Even amongst the few clubs that did exist, group dynamics were challenged by members that were no longer the age of most youth, often older men with families and significantly more authority than an average youth in their community. An overview of clubs can be found in Appendix I, and a more detailed demographic analysis of sampled clubs in Appendix X.
- 3) Guidelines for forming new clubs were established in each EPA, where AEDOs discussed visions for the purpose of the clubs, and practical logistics that would help make clubs successful such as age limitations, documentation of attendance, planned activities, and leadership structures. Interested youth were then gathered in their respective communities, where in the initial weeks AEDOs facilitated the formation of a club vision statement and election of leaders within each group. To meet the requirements for the transportation stipend, AEDOs were also responsible for taking weekly attendance via a youth sign in sheet, which they would be allowed to keep to record attendance rates. A full overview of workshop content can be found in Appendix II.
- 4) Increasing AEDO technical knowledge of agribusiness topics and group leadership dynamics Prior to the YIA project, AEDOs and the area EPA AEDC would meet biweekly to discuss general programming logistics, as well as take time for continued professional development, often in the form of a lesson on a certain topic: nutrition, horticulture, etc. In practice, this continued professional development portion of their meetings was often not implemented because of time constraints or other logistical difficulties. Because of this, many AEDOs were eager for the opportunity to continue their professional learning and development in an intentional and structured manner, especially agribusiness in light of its near universal utility amongst farmers, and its unique empowering ability among youth who lack economic power.

Stage 2: Develop and integrate existing agribusiness curriculum with participatory approaches to empower both young leaders and participants

To build on existing resources already being implemented by DAES, YIA partnered with district and national level agribusiness officers within the ministry to identify strategies for teaching content in a more manageable frequency than what currently existed (weekly 2 hour meetings vs. 5 back-to-back full day meetings).

The existing curriculum, Farmer Business School (FBS), was developed by the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) in partnership with the Malawian government.

The FBS contains several agribusiness teaching modules design to be facilitated by an experienced agribusiness officer or extension worker. The curriculum encourages farmers to collaborate as a group, with beginning sessions devoted to group formation, establishing leadership, etc.

The FBS curriculum has been used for several years throughout Malawi, however financial constraints often mean that in any given area only 5-15% of AEDOs may be trained in the curriculum.

To attempt developing a more cost-effective model of facilitation and integrate further guidance in the facilitation and promotion of participatory practices in YFCs, FBS was adapted with several principles from Agriculture as a Business (AAB), a curriculum designed by Engineers Without Borders (EWB) Canada for use in Sub-Saharan African and tested in Ghana.

The augmentation with AAB allowed for the introduction of further lessons on group dynamics, discussion facilitation, and further programmatic time allocated for AEDOs to reflect on current lessons learned.

The AAB curriculum also incorporated a robust set of non-formal participation components throughout the workshops that allowed everyone to bring their own experience, training, and knowledge to discussions where the role of transferring knowledge was between each extension worker while the workshop leader now facilitated these talks.

Small group discussion questions, problem solving exercises, and vision building allowed the diverse array of strengths and skills of each extension worker to be displayed during the workshop. The final resulting curriculum contained 10 trainings and corresponding group activities, one for each week of programming on a range of agribusiness topics, but designed to be comprehensive and holistic in nature.

The final topics taught in training included:

- 1) Group Dynamics and Forming the Mission Statement
- 2) Enterprise Development
- 3) Value Addition
- 4) Principles of Market Research
- 5) Organizational Structure for Entrepreneurs
- 6) SWOT Analysis
- 7) Gross Margin and Breakeven Analysis
- 8) Basic Record Keeping
- 9) Marketing and Finalizing Business Plans

Stage 3: Provide capacity building extension workshops to AEDOs

YIA's activities were designed to build long term capacity and prioritize knowledge and implementation gaps given by AEDOs, namely agribusiness entrepreneurship, small business development, and identifying opportunities in markets. By emphasizing these topics AEDOs can sustainably support and transfer information to farmers far beyond the lifecycle of the project. One core example of movement towards sustainable training was the weekly meeting model which allows AEDOs to have more opportunities to collaborate and learn together versus a traditional isolated training model.

Workshops were held at the Nthenje Resource Training Center (NRTC), a small campus of classrooms outside of Lilongwe funded by the Ministry of Agriculture to facilitate training and learning activities proximally to the field. The NRTC was selected as the venue was close to both EPAs, could be used free of charge, and was located adjacent to a major highway making accessibility significantly easier than individual EPA offices where access requires private transportation. Workshops were held on a weekly basis, often on the same day of each week, though flexibility was often necessary in the case of area-wide programming that had been scheduled before the YIA project began. Since field-level programming is carried out by AEDOs, they were the primary attendees of the trainings, though their supervisors would also attend if modules were relevant to their work.

On average, each workshop had 23 participants, out of 30 total AEDOs. Attendance rates remained relatively constant throughout the duration of the training, with a small decrease in the final weeks as planting season increased time constraints. Since some AEDOs had prior experience with agribusiness through training or on-job experience, the measurement of baseline knowledge of all AEDOs proved to be a helpful tool in identifying knowledge gaps, while also allowing for more tailored lessons that could still stimulate AEDOs with prior training. Because the sessions were co-facilitated by the district Agribusiness officer, FBS content could be presented in context, with relevant stories, anecdotes, and examples for the extension workers.

In addition to this, the presence and weekly contact with district level specialists served as an encouraging motivation for many workers with regards to the responsiveness of extension feedback loops.

Outside of the facilitators, the primary agent of sharing knowledge with AEDOs was their own colleagues. The augmented FBS was designed to leave significant portions of programmatic time allocated to robust discussions between extension workers via the peer-to-peer learning model.

At the beginning of each workshop, AEDOs took time to write and brainstorm through a few pre-written open ended response questions that allowed them to explore their teaching, classroom setting, comfortability with content etc. both as an individual and as a group. This allowed learning rates to increase as AEDOs became more comfortable dialoguing together, demonstrating a viable model for a sustainable, low cost, semi-formal peer-to-peer knowledge-sharing network among area extension workers.

Stage 4: Provide backstopping to AEDOs transferring workshop knowledge via YFCs

AEDOs participating in the workshop were required to transfer their knowledge to the young farmers in their communities by meeting weekly with their YFCs to teach the content in a similar format as they learned during the workshop. The regular transmission of this information increased the frequency and quality of extension services offered to youth while contributing to long term growth in DAES institutional knowledge as extension agents will be able to continue to transfer this knowledge in future program replications.

With each workshop taking place early in the week, facilitators devoted the following several days to supporting extension workers by visiting, observing, and offering encouragement to youth clubs to affirm their time commitments and hard work. Club visits fostered a sense of mutual commitment between district- and project-level workers and their area extension counterparts. Brief, informal evaluations after the club meeting served to provide encouragement, feedback on club dynamics, as well as a positive source of accountability.

Figure IV. Youth Visit and Participate in Nutrition Field Day in Nyanja EPA

By covering only one module per week, one of the primary benefits of the YIA workshops was that AEDOs faced significantly less confusion or feelings of being overwhelmed as compared to when the training was facilitated over a 2 or 3 day period without a clear path as to where to begin teaching youth. And since the workshops themselves were designed to be participatory, the same teaching methods demonstrated in the workshops would also be the ones likely to succeed in the context of their meetings with their YFCs. In practice, YIA workshops often took place on

Tuesday mornings, leaving the rest of the week for AEDOs to meet their YFCs before the next lesson.

Throughout the duration of the training workshops, the workshop facilitators also served in various backstopping capacities by connecting extension workers to further learning resources, site visits to active youth clubs, and local market linkages for various agribusinesses. Each week, reflection forms and a final discussion period gave venues for current AEDOs to request learning resources for further education on any given topic they felt would benefit their community.

For example, in several communities, extension workers were interested in learning how their farmers could unite for the sake of greater competitiveness both in local markets as well as for the acquisition of local land development grants given at the district or community level. The workshop facilitators were not only able to share valuable written resources on proposal development, but also give relevant in-workshop examples of how detailed business plans assist in forming the foundation of competitive collectives.

To promote sustainable practices, the YIA project did not provide direct financial support for YFCs interested in starting businesses. Rather the project sought to assist in creating community linkages and partnerships that would allow businesses to develop through existing markets.

After several weeks of programming, coordination with AEDCs and AEDOs began to help establish youth presence in Area Stakeholder Panels (ASPs). Integrating youth into ASPs was a key step in increasing youth's formal access and representation in local extension forums. Once represented in ASP panels, youth clubs could regularly update extension actors on activity, discuss potential resource needs for future programming, and increase the visibility of young farmers within a community.

When deciding youth representation structures within the ASP, each EPA was allowed their own criteria for selecting the youth they wished to represent the YFCs of their EPA, as well as the responsibility to coordinate with the panel how many youth would be allowed to be present at the meetings.

Finally, several AEDOs and their youth club presidents had the opportunity to visit a national level agricultural commodities exchange commission for a day of learning organized by the YIA team. The commodities exchange visit provided a wealth of advice in the process of mobilizing small-scale holder farmers to engage with commodities exchanges in order to negotiate higher prices for crops.

AEDOs reported feeling significantly more confident in their ability to link their own farmers to formal markets while youth universally felt empowered and encouraged at the viability and efficiency of using exchange markets for their clubs in the future.

Stage 5: Monitor, evaluate, reflect, learn, and grow from learning tools

With the primary goal of improving access and quality of services delivered while measuring changes in knowledge and attitudes surrounding agribusiness, the YIA project utilized a variety of monitoring and evaluation methods to assess and implement programming. Key tools for evaluation and learning were:

- 1) Key informant interviews with community workers, extension workers, local authorities, and government officials;
- 2) AEDO Baseline Knowledge Surveys;
- 3) Youth Baseline Knowledge and Attitude Surveys;
- 4) AEDO Endline Knowledge Surveys;
- 5) Youth Endline Knowledge and Attitude Surveys;
- 6) Weekly qualitative feedback via AEDO reflection forms;
- 7) Field visits to active youth clubs;
- 8) Weekly attendance sheets collected by AEDOs to evaluate involvement and access;
- 9) Update and feedback reports with district level extension officials.

As a project, YIA was committed to the use of monitoring and evaluation not only for impact assessment and accountability, but also for Adaptive Management and to inform strategic decision-making and programmatic adaptations throughout the life of the project. Key informant interviews through the duration of the project not only continued adding to general learning, but also served as critical reflection points where both facilitators and extension workers could evaluate current progress and re-evaluate the optimal way forward.

Baseline knowledge surveys given to youth and extension workers served as a baseline marker of the relative scale and scope of knowledge each respective group had with regards to agribusiness. The extended youth survey allowed us to further explore social and personal attitudes towards agribusiness as livelihood as it is perceived among youth. These same knowledge and attitudes questions were again assessed for youth at the end of the project to attempt to identify causal relationships between agribusiness training and increases in agribusiness knowledge and entrepreneurial skill.

During workshops, AEDOs were asked to complete weekly reflection forms consisting of 5-7 broad questions about their experience in facilitating the content with their youth in the previous week. Since the completion of these forms was required for compliance in receiving their fuel allowance, participation rates neared 100%. Finally, biweekly meetings with district level agricultural representatives allowed for frequent communication of program progress, updates, and potential future challenges, and in turn gave qualitative context to further contextualize data collection.

Stage 6: Evaluate changes resulting from workshop training

Impact evaluation was assessed via both the AEDO and youth baseline and endline surveys, with each respective survey constructed to reflect predetermined indicators centering around measuring knowledge attitudes, with several questions also devoted to youth time usage and current employment activity. To increase the strength of internal validity, both youth who would and who would not be receiving training from AEDOs were included in the knowledge measurement to create an additional comparison group.

Baseline survey data was collected prior to the beginning of the workshops and their corresponding club's activity. Following the implementation of the workshops, many of the same youth (regardless of their participation status) were again visited to measure endline knowledge, so that the test results and relative knowledge changes of both club participants and nonparticipants could be compared over time. Additional key informant interviews, AEDO meetings, and resources added additional qualitative data to contribute to overall project related implementation.

Stage 7: Share best practices, advice, and encouragement with stakeholders and SANE project

To promote knowledge sharing and collaboration among extension actors, the YIA project concluded the project by debriefing SANE staff, district level extension agents, and EPA level AEDCs with successes, lessons learned, and future areas for programming. Youth who successfully created business plans were celebrated at EPA ceremonies presented by the workshop facilitators, traditional authorities, and their AEDOs. In the coming months, the project and its findings will continue to be presented with DAES and other in-country stakeholders throughout the Feed the Future Zone of Influence to explore potential for scaling, further piloting, and incorporation in other areas' District Strengthening Action Plans.

Further analysis of the challenges and opportunities of the programming will be discussed in a SANE project technical note. The findings were presented at the annual Association for International Agricultural and Extension conference, and will continue to be disseminated in other research forums. By presenting findings, lessons learned, and recommendations for future programming, our results will be shared with the broader global extension professional and stakeholder community.

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