

Land Reforms in Malawi: Where are we?

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There is consensus that President Mutharika's first term of office has been a tremendous success especially on the economic development front. All indicators are that Mutharika has managed to lay a solid foundation for the potential transformation of Malawi from being a poor, primarily importing and consuming nation into a self-reliant, producing and exporting nation.

The economy is no longer in a feeble state. In the last three years, the economy has consistently registered growth rates above the 6% threshold which is critical for a country to fight poverty successfully. According to the Economic Intelligence Unit, Malawi is projected to grow by 8.3% by the end of 2009. At this projected growth rate, Malawi is expected to replace Angola as the fastest growing economy in Africa by a 0.1% margin. Globally, Malawi ranks the second fastest growing economy in the world after Qatar which is projected to achieve an annual growth rate of 13.7%.

According to the 2007 Welfare Monitoring Survey, Mutharika's government has made a significant positive dent on the country's poverty situation. The overall incidence of poverty is estimated at 40% down from 52% in 2005. The proportion of the ultra poor has declined from 22% to 15% during the same period. However, urban and rural areas have not benefited equally from this success. As much as 41% of the people living in rural areas are poor compared to only 11% of their urban counterparts. Perhaps more critically important is the fact that the incidence of poverty wears predominantly a female face. About 48% of individuals living in female-headed households are more likely to be poor compared to 38% of those in male-headed households.

There could be one critically important missing link in the efforts to fight rural poverty in the country. Studies have consistently shown that Malawi's rural poverty is directly correlated with people's access to land. The single most important conclusion of these studies is that the majority of Malawians are poor because they lack access to adequate land, generally acknowledged as the key productive resource. On average every Malawian cultivates 0.22 hectares. The average for poor households is 0.16 hectares while for non-poor households is 0.28 hectares. It is estimated that one in every three smallholder farmers cultivate between 0.5 and 1 hectares of land. And findings from an October 2008 study carried out to assess the political economy of the Community Based Rural Land Reform Programme (CBRLDP) raises some interesting insights that may be useful in informing the land reform debates and strategies moving forward.

It is important noting that the question of land reform was one of the flagships of the struggle for democracy in the early 1990s. The pro-democracy activists actually promised to undertake sweeping land reforms once ushered into power that would ensure equitable ownership of this very important productive resource, which potentially holds the key to sustainable poverty reduction and prosperity for all. To echo President Mutharika's sentiments: "Democracy is about giving people new hopes for a better future. Democracy is about fulfilling promises made to people. Democracy is about economic growth and transformation and about moving people from poverty to prosperity".

While the question of land reform was firmly placed on the government's agenda immediately after the May 1994 founding democratic elections, very little has been achieved to date. A land policy concluded in July 2002 still remains in draft form, the supportive legislative framework for the policy is yet to be worked out and stakeholders, notably, traditional leaders are still contesting some of the key provisions of the land policy.

The CBRLDP stands out a major initiative that has been undertaken to address the question of land since the 1967 land reforms. In vernacular, this initiative is popularly referred to as the "Kudzigulira malo" programme. The CBRLDP is a World Bank sponsored initiative being implemented on a pilot basis in Thyolo and Mulanje designated mainly as sending districts and Machinga and Mangochi designated mainly as receiving districts. The main objective of the CBRLDP is to increase the incomes of about 15,000 poor rural families in the four pilot districts by providing land to the landless and the land poor. The CBRLDP was launched in 2004.

Under this programme, each beneficiary receives a uniform grant of US\$ 1, 050 for land administration and farm development, with 30% devoted to land acquisition, 10% to cover settlement costs and 60% meant for farm development. This grant is provided in the first year of resettlement and households have to find their own resources in subsequent years for developing the land.

While the CBRLDP has enhanced access to land by farmers with little or no land and bolstered their productivity, it has also generated quite unanticipated consequences which really provide some food for thought as we attempt to address the question of land reform as a nation.

The CBRLDP's impact on productivity has been quite unprecedented. The mean maize produced among beneficiary households has increased from 219kgs before the programme to 1, 4 11 kgs after the programme. And there are statistically significant differences in maize production between beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries in favour of beneficiaries with a mean difference of 814kgs per household.

The CBRLDP has also impacted positively on technological adoption particularly in terms of the use of improved seed. Up to about 63% of the beneficiaries devote their landholding to hybrid maize production compared with only 31% of land devoted to hybrid maize by non-beneficiaries. Strikingly, female-headed households adopt advanced farming technologies such as the use hybrid seeds and chemical fertilisers much than male-headed households. Education also plays an important role. Households with higher education adopt improved technologies much more widely than those with low or no education at all.

However, differences in productivity levels between beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries are significant only when distinguished by the year of resettlement. It is thus only those beneficiaries that have recently resettled that produce more maize compared to non-beneficiaries. This is attributed to the farming support that new settlers access during the first year of relocation. Once the support is discontinued at the end of the year, productivity levels slump to 'normal' levels.

The implementation of the CBRLDP has been negatively been affected by the institutional framework of the 1967 land reforms. The beneficiaries of the 1967 land reforms have an interest in the existing land tenure patterns. They are not prepared to give up vast tracts of land accumulated under the aegis of the 1967 land reforms that simply perpetuated the colonial land tenure patterns.

There is evidence that the CBRLDP has been captured by local elites, particularly traditional leaders, by steering its implementation in ways that largely benefit them in both sending and receiving communities. Traditional leaders are reportedly influencing the composition of

committees tasked to identify and recommend beneficiaries to the programme so that they have influence in their decisions; the committees are demanding bribes for households to be included as beneficiaries; and they are prioritising relatives and friends as beneficiaries primarily to benefit from the resettlement grant.

Traditional leaders are protesting against the CBRLDP by not taking their quasi judicial role seriously in dealing with land disputes involving the new settlers and the local residents. This has resulted in widespread and unresolved land disputes underpinned by a forceful discourse of dispossession that equates rights to land with citizenship. This creates some sort of insecurity among the people about the newly acquired land.

These findings raise several important policy implications going forward. The findings draw attention particularly to the fact that land reforms are not merely a technically neutral exercise; they are hugely political. The point is that the context in which the reforms are taken and the range of stakeholders involved matters in determining outcomes, successes and failures. Understanding the interface between formal and informal institutions in the context of the reforms is important in terms of anticipating and dealing unexpected consequences.

The findings further suggest that land reforms without a well thought out supportive infrastructure in the short to medium terms are unlikely to be sustainable. This is to say that land reform is more than just access to land; land reforms must be accompanied by access to non-land assets, access to credit, access to extension services and training of beneficiaries in modern farming techniques. The functioning of other markets such as transport, output, labour and financial markets is critical for households to maximise the benefits from access to land and improved tenure security.

And finally, a gender balanced selection of beneficiaries would enhance the positive impact of any land reform initiative. The participation of female-headed households in the CBRLDP is limited yet the economic analysis reveals that male-headed households invest less in hybrid production compared to female-headed households. The level of education is also important in promoting the adoption of improved farming technologies such as hybrid seeds and fertiliser.

The political climate seems quite propitious to push the land reform agenda to its logical conclusion in a bid to further cement the foundations for Malawi's transformation from a predominantly consuming and importing to a predominantly producing and exporting economy. However, this cannot be fully achieved if the question of land remains unresolved. Taking the land reform agenda forward would, however, require some decisive movement on the land legislation development exercise. Without a new Land Act in place, the land reform agenda cannot move beyond the current impasse. It will like putting new wine in the old bottles. And yet the hopes for a prosperous future are hugely dependent on the fate of the reform agenda.

The study is available at www.ippg.org.uk