

The Economics and Politics of Land Reform in Malawi World Bank, Lilongwe

The workshop was held on 17th November 2008 in the World Bank Seminar Room in Lilongwe. The seminar was organised around two presentations by Ephraim Chirwa and Blessings Chinsinga, based on the findings from the Economics and Politics of Land Reform Project funded by the Department for International Development (DFID) under the auspices of the Research Programme Consortium for Improving Institutions for Pro-Poor Growth (IPPG). The presentations were preceded by a brief overview of the IPPG research consortium. This was done to enable seminar participants to situate the research findings in an appropriate context in order for them to appreciate their implications for the Community Based Rural Land Development Project (CBRLD). The workshop was attended by stakeholders from a range of organisations including Malawi's Ministry of Economic Planning & Development, the World Bank, the Economics Association of Malawi and the National Association of Smallholder Farmers of Malawi, as well as from the CBRLD project itself.

Discussions

The presentations raised numerous questions, generated spirited discussions and sparked lively debates. The initial reaction of the CBRLDP staff was defensive, however. They argued that the research findings did not bring up something entirely new; they are already familiar with the issues raised and they have since taken corrective measures to deal with them. The tone and tempo of the discussion session significantly changed when other stakeholders asked the CBRLDP staff to flesh out some details of the corrective measures that they have taken to address the issues raised by the IPPG research findings.

The major highlights of discussions and debates that ensued were:

The Economics Dimension

- The issue of the national fertiliser subsidy programme having a dampening effect on investment and production among farmers attracted particular attention. This was a cause of concern because the subsidy programme is a key agricultural strategy within the framework of the Agricultural Development Programme (ADP)

spanning between 2008 and 2012. Participants were very keen to find out the reasons for this outcome and its implications for the subsidy programme. The response was that this could indicate inefficient use of fertilisers – using it more on local maize seeds or being diverted to other crops rather than hybrid maize.

- There was debate on how tenure security as a variable was defined and introduced into the estimation model. This was raised because some participants felt that tenure differentiation between beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries was insignificant. The tenure arrangement for beneficiaries is transitional since none of the beneficiaries has attained individual titles as envisaged by the CBRLDP. Although there is a difference in tenure of land for beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries the introduction of group based leases attenuated property rights and this masked the differences between the beneficiaries (with group leases) and non-beneficiaries (with customary tenure).

- CBRLDP staff observed that the diminishing productivity among settlers has also been identified in their monitoring activities and they are putting strategies in place to make the benefits sustainable. The poor performance of settlers that have spent more than two years since reallocation is partly a reflection of inefficiencies in the agricultural system as a whole - notably the erosion of extension system.

- Some participants observed that the results may not be definitely conclusive because of the case study approach used. They, nonetheless, acknowledged that the findings raise important issues for consideration in the new design of the project. The recommendation arising from this observation was that the findings of the study should be used as the basis for a much broader study that should include samples from the sending districts as well.

- Participants were quite thrilled by the finding that women headed households tend to be more productive than their male counterparts. They really wanted to know if the study has provided detailed explanations for this difference because that could be the basis for innovative policy considerations.

- Most participants expressed concern about the prospects of CBRLDP's sustainability in view of the evidence pointing to the decline

in productivity the longer the beneficiaries stays in their new home. This generated debate about which is of primary important for poor households: productivity or access to land? However, it is clear from this study that both productivity and access to land are equally important if land reforms are to have positive impact on the livelihoods of the beneficiaries.

- Some participants felt that the declining productivity of beneficiaries can be explained in terms of choice of crops. The reasoning was that beneficiaries cultivate productive crops such as maize and tobacco because they are offered under the auspices of the CBRLDP but then progressively switch to crops of their choice in subsequent years. These crops tend to be less productive compared to maize and tobacco.

The Politics Component

- Some participants felt that the research perhaps assessed the politics of CBRLDP rather too early. The argument was that the CBRLDP institutions are still too much in the formative stage to be subjected to rigorous scrutiny; they need time to grow. They, nonetheless, acknowledged that the problems identified reflect inherent design and management shortfalls that should be discussed and debated and rectified in the course of implementation.

- Most participants asked [or pressed] the CBRLDP staff to share with them the strategies that they have developed to respond to the problems raised by the research. They further observed that that, whilst it might indeed be true that the project is aware of the problems brought up in the findings the major value addition of the research is that it has offered analytical perspectives, or frameworks, within which to fully understand the problems - and more importantly to think about innovative solutions .

- Some participants contended that the findings raised a critical question in terms of what should be the major focus of land reform programmes of this nature. The general feeling was that the CBRLDP had not given much attention to institutional issues in its design stage. They therefore wondered whether the research could offer insight on how the challenges identified can be dealt with particularly with regard to historical,

institutional and structural legacies negatively impacting on the land reforms. CBRLDP staff were particularly keen on this.

- The consensus was that the project faces serious problems because of the institutional, legal and policy context within which it is being implemented. The CBRLDP staff pointed out that it is difficult for the project to achieve its goals because of stalled processes that would have facilitated enactment of an enabling legislative framework. There was thus a realisation that most of the problems raised cannot be successfully dealt within the existing institutional, legal and policy frameworks. According to the CBRLDP, the land disputes at the local level are intractable because the conflict resolution mechanisms that were put in place and which involved councillors, are non-functional. They are non-functional because the District Assemblies have been without councillors since 2005. Local elections have been continuously postponed during the last three years.

Conclusion

The major concern of the seminar participants was: how could scholarly research results of this nature successfully feed into policy processes? This concern was raised because most participants strongly felt the research highlighted critical issues that have to be given serious attention in the design and implementation of land reforms of this nature.

The organisers observed that the research findings had come out at an opportune time. The CBRLDP is up for a major review, which will form the basis for designing the next version of the land reform programme. It was indicated that the papers have been made available both to the CBRLDP and the Ministry Headquarters to form part of the inputs into the review process.

Blessings Chinsinga (Chancellor's College, Malawi) and
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If you would like more information on the research undertaken on the Malawi Land Reform Programme, please see the IPPG website at www.ippg.org.uk

IPPG: The IPPG Programme is the shorthand name for the inter-disciplinary Research Programme Consortium on Improving Institutions for Pro-Poor Growth. The DFID-funded IPPG supports innovative scholarly research, and seeks to influence development policy and practice that contributes to the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). IPPG Programme partners are based in South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America. IPPG funds research projects across all these regions.

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