



OVERLOADED AGRICULTURE TRANSFORMATION AGENDA IN MALAWI: DEFLATED AT TAKE OFF

Reflection Brief By AICC, June 2021

We contend that agriculture transformation (AT) agenda in its present form is heavily overloaded and will sadly succeed in inaction and thinness of efforts. If we want AT in Malawi, let the agenda squarely fall in the abode of the same. Anything outside – nutrition, early childhood development, water and sanitation – should be tackled in their respective domains or must only come to the table as “meanstreatables” or crosscuttings. In that way, only the essentials will be attended to. Granted that agriculture transformation entails doubling productivity, integrating value chain, efficiency commodity markets and migrating to value addition while transforming major pulling factors of agriculture production; cardinal focus should be on these tenets in both policy and practice.

There is no theoretical contention on how AT occurs. The mechanisms include: (a) higher agricultural productivity of labour, which means that labour can be released from agriculture into employment in relatively better remunerated rural and urban non-agricultural sectors; (b) increased demand for agricultural inputs and services, which stimulates local production and marketing of inputs such as fertilizer and production tools, as well as local provision of services; (c) expanded marketing engagement of smallholder farmers in agricultural value chains, which stimulates commercial distribution and processing activities at the local level; (d) increased profits and exports from agricultural production, which finance imports of key technology and capital that can be invested in non-farm sectors; and (e) higher smallholder incomes, which raise demand for non-food consumer goods and services, thus boosting the diversification of the rural economy with all the resulting multiplier effects. Thus top on the agenda needs to be higher productivity, increased demand for inputs and services, increased market engagement by key actors, more value addition, increased profits and exports and higher incomes for farmers.

The reality though is that the agenda at both dialogue and implementation level is loaded and has taken on board extraneous items that although material to the general developmental discourse, can be attended to by specialized sectors and stakeholders. The NGOs sector is awash with projects styled “transforming agriculture” which at a quick glance have minimal interventions in the key tenets of AT. The flagship AT programmes initiated in the past 3 years mainly by development partners have besides improved productivity (the only unabated transformation item) ironically loaded themselves with early childhood, nutrition and WASH interventions. The overload is not only at implementation level. At policy and practice dialogue, the focus on these extraneous

matters is equally conspicuous. Doubling or tripling productivity on its own is a tall order and should be given the necessary attention and resources. Likewise increasing market engagement by actors and enhancing value addition.

Related to the infiltration of alien and extraneous matters on the agenda is the tendency to “individualize” crop or livestock focus. A focus on an individual crop or livestock line ends up overloading the agenda. Approaching AT with single commodity or value chain on the line is an inefficient method as the issues that stampede the development of value chains are the same. It remains a luxurious approach for a poor country like Malawi to pay a blind eye to efficiency considerations by focusing and delivering a gamut or package of interventions for single crop when a well-crafted package can unlock the myriad potentials in a basket of crops. Malawi’s narrative of horizontal crop diversification is flawed and unattainable as it does not consider a basket of alternative crops but only focuses on an incremental “one-crop-at-a-time” method. Low productivity in rice, maize, millet and legumes is a congruency of same factors likewise for goats and beef production. A package of interventions (extension, inputs, markets etc) would provide an efficient and effective remedial jab. Absence of robust extension services in crop hues cannot be waded-off with a kit of “individualized-crop” gloves. It requires a holistic approach by way of well trained and motivated extension workers overseeing a manageable farmer-population at all stages of value chain profitably participated by or potentially viable to farmers.

Individual “crop-projectization” thrives on a related overload item on which actors to prioritize. There is a systemic tendency to skirt around the question on whether AT should focus on smallholder, medium-scale farmers or large scale farmers. For development partners, “leaving-no-one-behind” ideology and mantra attenuates their objectivity on this question and hoodwinks them to settle for “smallholder farmers”. Not only does the hoodwinking come from the ideology, but also from numbers that smallholder farmers carry. Numbers excite tax-payers in development partners’ countries and working with smallholder farmers legitimizes the expenditure and budgetary allocations. For ruling elite, smallholders are not necessary “small” but “vote-holders”. Anything devoid of direct material transfer to smallholders (such as subsidies) is therefore resisted with impeccable force. The unholy alliance of development partners and ruling elite is on their convergence at smallholder farmer as a unit of focus in AT. With the two on one side, the temerity to question the feasibility of deploying smallholder farmers as fast and catalytic agents of AT is risky adventure on both research and debates. However, for avoidance of doubt, AT is not food security. It transcends beyond this object and as long as we abstract-down the agenda to food security, we will keep on loading the transformation agenda with a focus on smallholder farmers whose ability, speed and prospects to drive transformation is diluted, low and bleak respectively. Designing of special packages aimed at leapfrogging the potential of medium-scale farmers in the transformative drive should be on the top agenda – risky and unpopular as it may

sound. The combined effect of smallholder farmers in commercialization, horizontal and vertical diversification and micro value addition is currently way too low to justify the massive investments by donors, NGOs and the government to them. A paradigm shift of attention horizon to medium-scale farmers and large estates imbued by fiscally-sustainable cushions on smallholder farmers is presently cardinal.

Observably, the agenda overload stems from lack of consensus on what AT aims at achieving. For government, AT is an arsenal of wealth and job creation. For NGOs and development partners, AT aims at alleviating poverty among the smallholder farmers – their favorite darlings. This explains why for NGOs and development partners, the transformative agenda is loaded with “livelihoods” and “resilience” connotations. And since the targeted units of “livelihoods” and “resilience” are smallholder farmers, the entry point of interventions by induction remain the smallholder farmers and not the medium scale and large scale farmers whose vehicles of wealth and job creation cruise at supersonic speed than the former.

Ironically, the agenda overload continues to persist and will likely be the common site. Two factors form the bedrock of this reality. Firstly, key advocates of AT in Malawi (in its flawed version) are the NGOs and development partners whose unit of analysis and focus are the smallholder farmers. Even so, their diverse interest in resilience, livelihoods, WASH, food-as-a-right, early childhood development and nutrition crowds out the real issues on the table. The private sector and its constituents (agro-processors, medium and large scale farmers) are visibly absent in agenda setting yet they are central catalysts in the outcome. Secondly, in instances where the real agenda is set by means of robust policies such as National Agriculture Policy, MGDSIII and MW2063, there has been a continuous “discourse-capture” which suffocates real AT agenda on the table. Discourses are nothing but trending and catchy jargons and phrases which steal the attention of government and NGOs thereby invading the target space of key players in the agriculture sector. Discourses such as “Sustainable Food Systems” and “Food Sovereignty” only succeed in diverting attention towards “additives” that slow down the take-off for a country that is battling with the basics. Stripped to barebones, discourses represent “coloniality of ideas” and must be matched with “de-coloniality”. The only allowable additives in AT are climate change and gender relations. The two must claim their rightful place while the rest should find space in other sectoral, policy and practice spaces.

