

Agricultural input subsidy programmes and dietary diversity: a qualitative assessment in Malawi with implications for policy implementation theory

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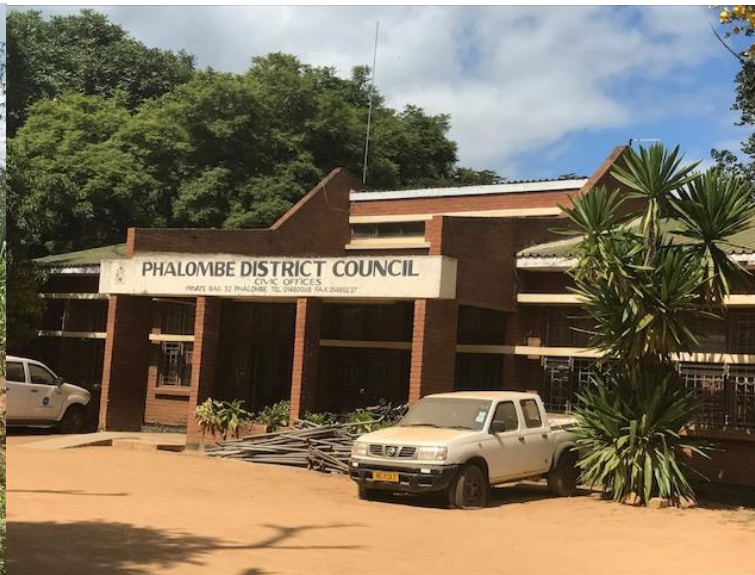
Introduction

- Since early 1990s, many African countries have been investing in agricultural input subsidy (AIS) programmes.
- AISs considered a means of improving agricultural productivity and food security in low- and middle-income countries.
- AISs are a grant given to facilitate acquiring an ag input.
- However, AIS nutritional impact is unclear – and limited evidence on the factors that determine their success.
- Malawi's Farm Input Subsidy Programme (FISP) is a prominent and relatively well-researched AIS.



Aim

- This study builds on existing qualitative work on the political economy of Malawi's FISP, and wider literature of its nutritional impact, to examine implications of FISP policy design and implementation for dietary diversity.
- It does so by engaging with work on the theory of policy implementation.



Background – Malawi and its FISP

- The study undertaken in context of high levels of food insecurity and malnutrition in Malawi.
- The FISP was implemented in 2005/06, and has undergone many changes over time – but remains a significant policy.
- It initially provided subsidies on maize seeds and fertiliser, but since 2008 was extended to include legume seeds.
- Significant programme, at times directly benefitting two-thirds of Malawi's farm households (90% of households).

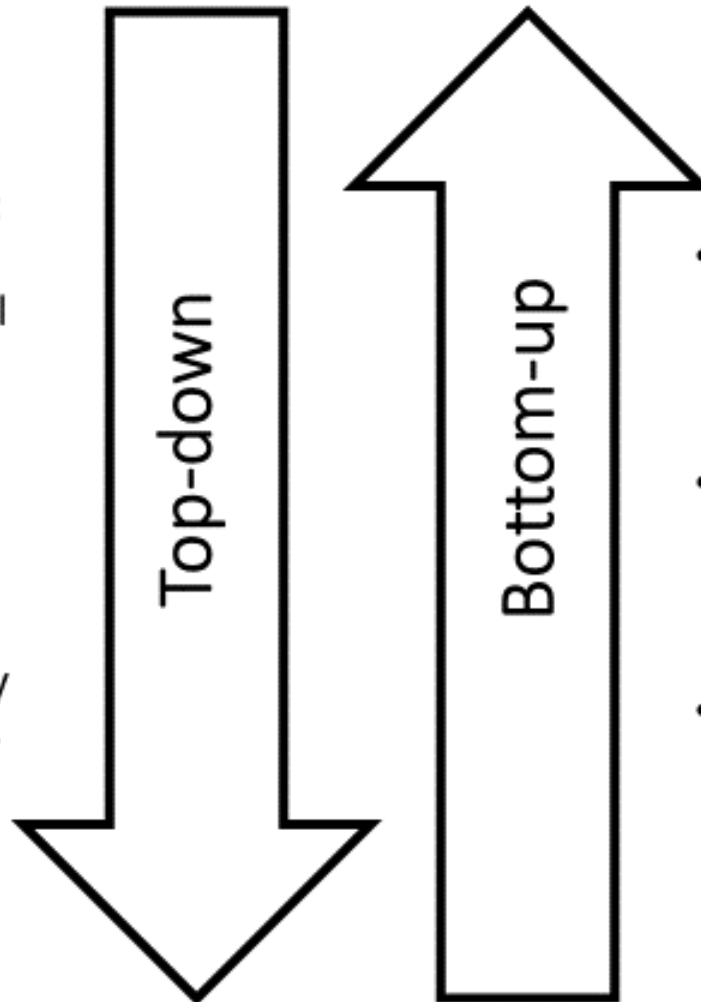
The burden posed by malnutrition in Malawi, and substantial resources given to the FISP, highlight the need to understand the impact of the AIS on food choice and dietary diversity, beyond just impact on consumption of the staple crop.



Policy implementation theory

– top-down and bottom-up

- Implementation seen as:
 - part of a linear and rational, 'stages' model of the policy process
 - managerial, administrative, technical, but not essentially political
- Policy is communicated hierarchically and usually belongs to policy makers at the 'top'
- **Compliance** important



- Emphasizes complexity of policy process, viewing it as an interactive, political process
- Highlights role of 'street level bureaucrats' as active participants in the policy process
- Shifts concern from centre to periphery

Policy implementation theory

– Linder & Peters' synthesis

- Synthesis of top-down and bottom-up approaches, identifying factors that reconcile the two, and play a key role in shaping government policy implementation choices (& impacts):
 - Features of policy instruments
 - Policy style and political culture
 - Organizational culture
 - Context of the problem
 - Administrative decision-makers' subjective preferences



Methods

- In-depth interviews and focus group discussions, 2017-19
- Regional focus: rural areas of Lilongwe and Phalombe Districts

Stakeholder group		Number
Central govt	Ministry of Health; Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Water Development	6 interviews
Regional govt	Lilongwe and Phalombe District Councils	7 interviews
Civil society organisations	One Fund Acre, Nat. Smallholder Farmers Assoc. of Malawi (NASFAM), Civil Society Agriculture Network (CISANET), German development agency (GIZ), The Hunger Project	5 interviews
Community	Village chiefs and village residents (focus groups with men and women separately; over time periods)	6 interviews, 16 focus groups

- Key domains covered
 - Views of FISP; how FISP policy made, key actors involved in FISP; nutrition as an issue in FISP; wider context for FISP
- Conducted with ethical approval



Results – food insecurity and malnutrition in Malawi

- Respondents described severe food/nutrition problems – in context of national recommendations to eat from 6 food groups per day.
 - *“We eat just to ease hunger.” (Focus group, men, Lilongwe District)*
 - *“Like this time we don’t have enough food we can eat once a day so our bodies tend to get smaller and with farming it just gets worse.” (Focus group, women, Lilongwe District)*



Results – food insecurity and malnutrition in rural Malawi

- Different reasons given for the lack of dietary diversity.
- Government respondents often described it as a choice.
- Village respondents described how their inability to afford more diverse foods were due to most products being more expensive than maize, the most commonly grown crop.
 - *“[The health worker] tells us the foods that we need to eat but due to poverty we are unable to get such foods. So we just listen to him... For example to eat balanced diet foods from the 6 groups, myself, I cannot afford at the moment I am just waiting to eat nsima, then that is it.” (Focus group, women, Lilongwe District)*



Results – FISP dietary impact

- Village chiefs were often positive about FISP dietary impact, but other people in the villages described little impact, as agricultural output remained low, and food in markets unaffordable.
 - *“FISP did not change [anything at local level]. Maize price is very low this year. We are making a loss.” (Focus group, men, Phalombe District)*
- Government respondents were often positive about FISP dietary impact, with district level respondents expressing reservations.
- Civil-society respondents mainly expressed reservations, and said the focus on maize did not help diversify diets due to maize being a low-value crop, and expressing support for high-value legumes.



Results – FISP implementation

- Respondents' frustrations/reservations about the FISP – and reasons provided for why the FISP does not result in improvements to ag productivity and nutrition – were particularly in regard to:
 - poor targeting of beneficiaries
 - perceived lack of coupons incl. reductions in coupons
 - coupons arriving late
 - problems with policy coordination of stakeholder groups
 - coupon sharing and selling-on of coupons amongst those in targeted communities.



Results – FISP implementation

- Despite changes to FISP targeting, problems remain.
- Village respondents described how the FISP brings jealousy and conflict. Village chiefs, often supportive of the FISP, also described these problems.
 - *“As Chiefs we have problems with this program... When these coupons are not enough, people turn against us and the questions we normally get are ‘do you think I am rich?’ So normally the Chiefs are in trouble... There are always conflicts.” (Interview, village head, Lilongwe)*



Results – Alternatives & improvements

- Each stakeholder group described alternatives/improvements – and a common theme was diversifying away from maize.
 - *“We think everything is maize but... food is not just maize, food is anything that gives us nutrients. Of course, our staple is maize but we have got other staple foods like sweet potatoes, cassava, sorghum.” (Interview, Ministry of Health)*
- Any changes to the programme, as described by a village chief, need to reflect the importance of sharing and community.
 - *“Firstly its love, if we don’t have love things will not work for us. For example if I receive 10 coupons then I give 5 to my friends to share, then that is selfishness. If they are 6 we need to share equally.” (Interview, village headman, Lilongwe)*
- Discussion held in context of broader drivers
 - e.g. climate change and weather variability.



Discussion/Conclusion

- The findings provide insight into AIS barriers to impact, relating to: policy design, implementation, & target population characteristics.
- Our analysis highlights how decision-making amongst the people targeted by a policy influences policy implementation.
 - & need for a new component to be added to Linder and Peters' model: the influence of factors at the grassroots level, shaped by **characteristics of the target population**.
- FISP reform may be beneficial, but policy likely more nutrition sensitive if focused more directly on increasing smallholder farmer income, and mitigating impacts of seasonality and climate change.
 - Highlights important role for govt. in addressing population nutrition, incl. through provision of public services and infrastructure.
- Applicability to AIS programmes elsewhere.



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We dedicate this study to the memory of our colleague Prof Ephraim Wadonda Chirwa.

