



Research paper

Uptake and resistance: The rural poor and user-pays agricultural extension in Malawi

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Private service provider
User-pays
Demand-driven extension
Smallholder farmers
Malawi
Africa

ABSTRACT

The shift to pluralistic agricultural extension services in Malawi sets the context for this article's focus on the private service provider (PSP) delivery model. The role of the PSP, the alacrity and resistance of smallholder farmers to pay for PSP services, and the challenges experienced in implementing this user-pays approach are examined. We draw on the analytic framework of credibility, salience and legitimacy as germane to understanding uptake and resistance to the PSP model. This article is based on empirical data from a longitudinal qualitative study. Interviews with approximately 50 PSPs and nearly 100 stakeholders from the public, private and non governmental sectors across Malawi were supplemented with focus group discussions with 30 farmer groups in Malawi representing close to 600 smallholders. The results reveal the complexity of shifting to a user-pays system and that PSPs play important roles in delivering services that respond to farmers' needs. What we are finding in this ongoing research is the uptake by smallholder farmers of the user-pays approach is more likely when all three characteristics of the framework for uptake are attended to – credibility, salience and legitimacy. This article compliments the extant, largely quantitative, literature on willingness to pay by qualitatively teasing out the nuances of farmers' responses to a user-pays approach in order to explore acts of alacrity and resistance. The findings highlight some practical challenges for agricultural advisory service providers to operationalise the user-pays principle in the Malawi agricultural extension policy. This original empirical research adds to the discourse on farmer development processes. It provides an important example to be learned from in seeking to improve plurality in agricultural extension in sub-Saharan Africa.

1. Introduction

Smallscale agricultural enterprise development is nowadays considered essential to improving rural livelihoods and reducing food insecurity associated with subsistence farming (DFID & SDC, 2008; Heemskerk & Davis, 2012: 204; Jaleta, Gebremedhin, & Hoekstra, 2009; Pingali & Rosegrant, 1995). This realisation has led to the demand for capacity building in agribusiness, marketing and entrepreneurial skills of the rural poor. At the same time, governments and development agencies are experimenting with alternative approaches to pluralistic agriculture extension (Kibwika, Wals, & Nassuna-Musoke, 2009: 5) with the demand-driven extension model gaining favour (Parkinson, 2009: 417). This article draws on the case of Catholic Relief Services' private service provider (PSP) model in the context of Malawi's pluralistic extension policy. It explores the alacrity and resistance of the rural poor for uptake of the user-pays approach in agricultural extension by applying the analytic concepts of credibility,

salience and legitimacy.

Agricultural extension features strongly in international development as a means to catalyse the reform of the agriculture sector (Anderson & Feder, 2003; Parkinson, 2009) where up to 75% of the rural poor rely on agriculture for their livelihoods in developing countries (Chowa, Garforth, & Cardey, 2013: 148). Parkinson (2009) draws our attention to the interwoven neoliberal and participatory ideologies underpinning demand-led agricultural extension in sub-Saharan Africa. With the broad global uptake of neoliberal economic development policies of the Washington Consensus, the role of the state in the provision of extension was heavily reduced and NGOs (non governmental organisations) increasingly play a bigger role, leading to a diversity of approaches in extension delivery (Aben et al., 2002 cited in Parkinson, 2009: 418) aimed at 'cost-sharing' service delivery, somewhat of a neoliberal euphemism for user-pays. At the same time, participatory development was championed by NGOs in extension work with popular participation incorporated into many of their livelihood

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wdp.2018.04.005>

Received 6 July 2017; Accepted 4 April 2018

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interventions (Chipika & Friis-Hansen, 2004; Parkinson, 2009).

Drawing on the works of Chipeta (2006), Leeuwis (2004) and the Neuchatel Group (1999), Parkinson (2009: 418) defines demand-driven agricultural extension as a system that 'depends upon an actual or simulated market in which farmers, individually or collectively, buy advisory and support services to help with their farming'. Extension services are those where the service provider is responsive to the needs of clients (Neuchatel Group, 2002). Parkinson (2009) argues that for this system to work smallholder farmers must demand services from private service providers, and importantly, must have the capacity to pay for the services. Indeed, research indicates that smallholders express a desire for 'increased entrepreneurial knowledge, better market linkages, enhanced access to credit, and better marketing opportunities' (Friis-Hansen & Aben, 2010; KIT, Faïda Mali, & IIRR, 2006; Webber & Labaste, 2010).

Where smallholders are subsistence farming and have weak linkages to markets due to remote location, lack of disaster preparedness, and have high transportation costs, the demand and supply for agricultural extension services require 'special intervention' (Parkinson, 2009). Consequently many NGO programs organise farmers into groups so they can receive training in financial savings, market information, and support for agribusiness. Such interventions aim to improve incomes of the rural poor through doing farming as a business and 'commercialising their agriculture' (Chapman & Tripp, 2003; Chipeta, 2006; Connolly, 2004; Kid et al., 2000; Roth, 2001 cited in Parkinson, 2009). This transformation of subsistence agriculture into smallscale agribusinesses has necessitated a role for private extension (Saravanan & Babu, 2015).

This article responds to Parkinson's (2009) critical observation that the challenges in a demand-driven extension system revolve around a) the availability and quality of service providers who fill the gap left by the under-funded public system, combined with b) the capacity and enthusiasm of the rural poor to express their needs, seek services and pay for them. Our research broadly is interested in the process of how Catholic Relief Services trains private service providers to address a) as above. This article specifically addresses b) the alacrity and capacity of the rural poor to pay for extension services. The smallholder farmers that are the beneficiaries of CRS projects have limited capacity for agribusiness risk, they focus on food security, and rely on multiple sources of small income (local agricultural labour, vegetable gardening, petty trading, and others). The rationale is that PSP services that support efforts by smallholder farmers to organise in groups, work co-operatively and participate in group marketing will make it easier to address economies of scale and to share risk, increasing their income and livelihood opportunities. We explore the alacrity for uptake of the user-pays approach that underpins the PSP model.

Much research exists on the willingness to pay (WTP) for extension services in developing countries, typically discussed in the economics literature in terms of measuring farmer WTP using quantitative methods such as the contingent valuation method and broadly indicating willingness to pay for private extension services (see Ajayi, 2006; Bebe, Mwangi, & Ozor, 2016; Budak, Budak, & Kaçira, 2010; Charatsari, Papadaki-Klavdianou, & Michailidis, 2011; Chukwuone, Agwu, & Ozor, 2006; Ozor, Garforth, & Madukwe, 2013; Sulaiman & Sadamate, 2000; Uddin, Gao, & Mamun-Ur-Rashid, 2014). We deliberately steer away from using the terminology of WTP for extension services because of the quantitative and economic nature of most WTP studies. These studies are valuable for the insights they share about the services that smallholder farmers are willing to pay for. However, a qualitative longitudinal study such as this aims to tease out the nuances of farmers' responses to a user-pays approach in order to explore acts of alacrity and resistance. The qualitative mode of data collection is significant for the findings and the implications for producing fundamentally different conclusions (Davis, 2004). We propose that one of the strengths of this article is that it is based on empirical, longitudinal, qualitative research with smallholder farmer groups, many since 2013. This mode of research enables us to consider more

cautiously their alacrity and resistance to the uptake of fee-for-service agricultural extension in Malawi.

Interestingly much of the research on WTP for agricultural extension services comes out of Nigeria (see Ajayi, 2006; Chukwuone et al., 2006; Horna, Smale, & Von Oppen, 2007; Olaniyi & Ismaila, 2016; Ozor et al., 2013). This article draws on the distinctly different African context of Malawi, which is a very small landlocked country, with a small population. While many of the quantitative studies find high willingness to pay, in contrast there are examples in our research where smallholder farmers are resisting the user-pays approach to agricultural extension thus bringing the question of legitimacy, salience and credibility to bear on user-pays approaches. In this article we borrow from the literature on the uptake of science into policy (Cash et al., 2003; Crewe & Young, 2002) as a lens to understand the uptake of a user-pays approach into rural development. There are many analytic approaches for assessing the uptake of science into policy (Cash et al., 2003; Crewe & Young, 2002; Wood, Apotsos, Caffrey, & Gibbs, 2017). We have drawn on the concepts of credibility, salience and legitimacy (Cash et al., 2003; Cook, Mascia, Schwartz, Possingham, & Fuller, 2013; Wood et al., 2017) as germane to understanding uptake and resistance to the PSP model. These characteristics have application to the context of rural livelihoods where subsistence farmers have limited capacity to take risks and are used to a climate of state-led agricultural extension that is free and therefore the targets of a user-pays approach may resist or reject it by questioning its quality (credibility), relevance (salience), or its underlying assumptions (legitimacy) (Wood et al., 2017). The importance of these three components for the uptake of the approach by the rural poor is to consider that they are perception-based characteristics and therefore Wood et al. (2017: 447) say we must be conscious of asking: credible to whom; salient to whom, and legitimate to whom?

1.1. The context: Malawi's pluralistic agricultural extension policy

Economic development in Malawi is dependent on the agriculture sector which employs 80% of the labour force (Giertz et al., 2015). While the smallholder sector is fraught with resource constraints, it is the main producer of food commodities such as maize and rice with an estimated 70% of Malawi's agricultural GDP stemming from the smallholder sector (Chowa et al., 2013). Agricultural development is being targeted as the driver for poverty reduction in Malawi, where the agricultural extension system is transforming from supply driven to demand-led in line with the country's decentralisation efforts (Chowa et al., 2013; Garforth, 2011). Like in other southern African countries, 'this has increased space for pluralistic service provision from public and private sectors to respond to diverse demands and needs for agricultural innovations' (Kibwika et al., 2009: 6). Kamputa (2000: 20–21) defines pluralism as 'changes in governance and development ... such as public and private sector partnerships, so that all extension stakeholders have a say and play appropriate roles in extension planning and implementation'. The Malawi agricultural extension policy encourages private sector and client involvement in extension service provision and financing (GoM, 2000). It represents a neoliberal market-driven approach to extension service delivery. Three of the seven guiding principles of the Malawi agricultural extension policy specifically highlight this: those who benefit pay, the promotion of pluralism, and the promotion of demand-driven services (GoM, 2000).

'Those who benefit must pay' implies that extension services that promote private interests must be paid for by the user and public resources should only finance extension services that promote national policy objectives of environmental sustainability, poverty reduction and food security. The user-pays principle advocates that enabling business is more effective than charitable giving for smallholder farmers to generate income and livelihood opportunities. Similarly, the principle of 'the promotion of pluralism' was designed to encourage the private sector as well as farmer organisations to participate in the provision of extension service. The assumption is that having more

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