

Youth engagement in agricultural policy processes in Malawi

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This study assesses the nature of networking between youth and agricultural policy-makers – given youth disillusionment with agricultural livelihoods. Using the Malawi case, a mixed-methods approach shows, first, that local government departments which are mandated to work on youth issues are the main hubs of information for youth in agriculture. The Ministry of Agriculture plays a secondary role. Second, the study shows that youth in agriculture have little or no direct interactions with each other. Therefore, youth remain on the periphery of agricultural policy-making and their role in shaping agricultural policy dialogue is negligible. This is attributable to both lack of a deliberate government policy to include the youth and lack of a unified youth platform. The onus is therefore on the youth to ensure that they are effectively engaged in agricultural policy dialogue. The study concludes with policy recommendations relevant for countries with a ‘youth/agriculture’ problem like Malawi.

Keywords: agricultural policy processes; young farmer; Malawi; social network analysis; youth problem

1. Introduction

Africa dominates as the continent with the second largest youth population in the world, with 17% of all youth globally living on the continent (United Nations, 2014). In Africa south of the Sahara, more than one-third of the total population is below the age of 24 (United Nations Population Fund, 2012). Also, many of the economies in the region are highly dependent on agricultural production; with approximately 65% of the total population in the region being employed in the sector. As such, many youth in Africa south of the Sahara will pursue agricultural livelihoods (Okali & Sumberg, 2012; Proctor & Lucchesi, 2012). A large body of emerging literature suggests that there is growing disillusionment with and disinterest in agricultural-based livelihoods among the youth (Leavy & Smith, 2010; Anyidoho et al., 2012; White, 2012). This is attributable to the lack of lucrative incentives in smallholder subsistence farming in many low-income countries; and the lack of necessary skills and resources amongst the youth with which to take advantage of emerging opportunities arising from current trends towards globalised food systems (Sumberg et al., 2012).

The disillusionment of African youth with agricultural livelihoods raises concerns for the future of agriculture for the developing world. This is because this disillusionment can lead to higher rural–urban migration, increased urban unemployment, and insufficient experienced and motivated future farmers. Strategies to revitalise and expand the agricultural sector in Africa south of the Sahara should incentivise and motive the youth to actively participate and stay in the sector for the long term (Leavy & Smith,

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2010). Currently many agricultural policies in Africa are not responsive to the needs of young farmers and there is generally low investment in the development of youth opportunities within the sector (Proctor & Lucchesi, 2012). This can be attributed, first, to the fact that in many developing countries youth are not given priority in any areas of policy-making and in the policy formulation process, not just in agriculture (Bennell, 2007:5). In addition, young people are often neglected not only in the policy-making process but also in the society and in the literature (Panelli, 2002). In many instances, policy documents portray youth as a problem that needs to be addressed; this results in policies that do not take into account youth perspectives (Anyidoho et al., 2012). Increased engagement of the youth in agricultural policy processes can result in youth-friendly agricultural policies and can also incentivise the youth to remain in the agriculture sector. A youth-friendly agricultural policy is one that would be developed with active engagement of the youth and one which empowers and recognises the youth as a differentiated group as a result of social, economic and cultural differences. Any youth-friendly policy must respond and meet the needs of the youth, which include but are not limited to capital/finance, land with secure tenure, lucrative markets, and entrepreneurship and farm business/agro-enterprise skills training (Leavy & Smith, 2010; White, 2012).

Evidence exists within the agricultural sector, as well as other sectors, which shows that greater youth engagement in the policy formulation process leads to improved policy outcomes (Ginwright & James, 2003; Joselowsky, 2007; Zeldin et al., 2013). For the agricultural sector there is some evidence from Africa south of the Sahara that increased youth participation contributes positively towards changing agricultural policy (United Nations, 2003). In the past the concerns of the youth in many societies were articulated and channelled through traditional means, such as elders and community leaders. However, it has been realised that – although in good faith – the outcomes of well-intentioned adults often failed to protect interests of the youth (United Nations, 2003). Traditional channels do not foster a sense of ownership in the youth of the actions or policies instituted on their behalf (United Nations, 2003; te Lintelo, 2011). Despite the realisation that youth engagement is an essential part of improving policy outcomes, youth participation/engagement is generally under-measured and under-reported (Bacalso, 2013). This study set out to meet this gap using Malawi as a case study. The study specifically aims to assess the nature and depth of networking and interactions between youth representatives and policy-makers within the agricultural sector in Malawi using social network analysis.

Malawi is an interesting case study because the youth make up more than half of the country's estimated 13.1 million people (National Statistical Office, 2008). Despite being in the majority, the youth in Malawi lack appropriate incentives and the skills to engage effectively in lucrative agricultural markets (Malawi Government, 2010). Furthermore, the youth in Malawi – as with other farmers – are challenged by poor land tenure, lack of ownership of productive land, lack of well-functioning social structures of inheritance, lack of access to credit and financial services, lack of advisory services and missing markets (Malawi Government, 2010; Chinsinga & Chasukwa, 2012). Second, the government explicitly recognises empowerment of the youth as essential for achieving sustainable agricultural development. This is articulated in the Agricultural Sector-Wide Approach – a strategic development and investment plan for Malawi's agricultural sector, which provides for monitoring and evaluating the participation of the youth in decision-making, policy formulation and

implementation processes within the sector (Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security, 2011).

Insights from this research can be used to increase policy-maker knowledge of the issues affecting the youth in agriculture in the country. Greater understanding of youth issues in agriculture can go far in ensuring the development of youth-responsive agricultural policies. Such policies are needed to revive the popularity of farming among youth in Malawi as well as in the region and in order to create greater opportunities for youth in the sector.

2. Data and methods

This study employed social network analysis to assess the nature and extent of interactions between and amongst youth in agriculture, with policy-makers and non-state actors. We employed purposive random sampling to collect data from key players working on the agriculture–youth sector nexus in Malawi. Types of organisations interviewed included those in the public sector (government ministries/ departments and parastatals that are mandated to work on either youth and/or agriculture issues), those in the private sector (service providers such as finance institutions) and youth-led advocacy organisations working on youth in agricultural issues (Table 1). Ministries included have national mandate, scope and reach – thus they cater for all regions and districts and reach both rural and urban areas. This is also the case for the National Youth Council. Local government offices sampled are case studies, and therefore for this study included only those working in Lilongwe district (covering both rural and urban Lilongwe). The majority of youth-led advocacy organisations have (in theory) national scope and mandate as they work to advocate for changing the lives of both rural and urban youth involved in agriculture throughout the country. The private sector included finance institutions working in the agriculture sector in both rural and urban areas. Data collection from institutional heads used a semi-structured, limited-choice questionnaire.

Table 1: Organisations included in the study

Government ministry/department/ parastatal	Ministry of Youth, Sports, and Culture Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security Ministry of Irrigation and Water Development Ministry of Local Government – Lilongwe District Youth Office National Youth Council of Malawi
Youth-led organisations in the agriculture sector	Farmers Forum for Trade and Social Justice (FAFOTRAJ) Foundation for Irrigation and Sustainable Development (FISD) Youth Empowerment and Civic Education (YECE) Organization for Sustainable Socio-Economic Development Initiative (OSSEDI) Youth Watch Society (YOWSO) Network for Youth Development Lilongwe Youth Urban Network Centre for Youth and Children Affairs (CEYCA) Counselling of Adolescents and Youth Organization (CAYO)
Other organisations	Trade Line Corporation Community Finance

Public entities included the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security; the Ministry of Youth, Sports and Culture; the Ministry of Irrigation and Water Development; and the Ministry of Local Government, specifically the Lilongwe District Youth Office. In addition, the National Youth Council of Malawi, a parastatal organisation focusing on youth issues in all sectors in the country, was also included. Ten youth-led advocacy organisations were included in the study. The youth-led organisations sampled are those that are currently active, as well as registered and recognised by government. A commonality of the different youth-led organisations is that all of them have a focus on promoting the needs of the youth in agriculture. The organisations sampled were those that represent young farmers in general at the national level, with some being those that are working at the district level. In addition, two private-sector organisations were interviewed (Tradeline Corporation and Community Finance). These organisations were identified by the sampled youth-led organisations as being key service providers of finance. In social network analysis it is standard practice to include all actors identified by the sampled respondents to fully map the network. The sample is nationally representative because, first, all public entities mandated to work on youth and/or agriculture at the policy level were interviewed. Second, the youth-led organisations that were sampled all work at a national level with their mandate as stipulated in their vision and mission statements focusing on both rural and urban youth.

Social network analysis is an approach that analyses structural patterns of social relationships and provides measures to identify and analyse networks within and between organisations (Wasserman & Faust, 1994; Chu et al., 2013). The analysis helps to identify information pathways, brokers and gatekeepers, and supports processes of knowledge sharing within and between organisations. The study focused on several indicators in order to understand the strength and depth of interactions between the youth and agricultural policy-makers in Malawi. First, the size of the network shows the number of other actors with which one has direct linkages – it shows the level of activity of an individual actor within the network. Second, the reach efficiency measures the number of actors within ‘friend-of-a-friend’ distance and is concerned with how much secondary contact is gained through each unit of primary contact. If reach efficiency is high, then the actor is successful in reaching a wider audience through each primary contact. If the primary contacts have few secondary contacts that the first actor does not have, then reach efficiency is low.

Other key indicators that give insights into the power and influence of individual actors or members within the network are centrality measures – we focus on two: closeness and betweenness. Closeness centrality determines a member’s integration within a network (Scott & Carrington, 2011). Higher closeness centrality indicates that a member is able to reach out (i.e. is ‘close’ to many other members). Low closeness centrality indicates higher individual member dependency on other members. Betweenness centrality measures how often an actor acts as a connector between other actors within the network. High betweenness centrality helps identify knowledge brokers and gatekeepers (Scott & Carrington, 2011). All of the different measures in social network analysis help identify influential members in the network. Some additional key terminology used in social network analysis is as follows:

- Node: an individual actor, group or organisation within the network.
- Ego: a focal node – an ego network is therefore the personal network of the focal respondent (node).
- Ties: the strength of connections between nodes in a network.

Network analysis is an approach that analyses complex structural patterns of social relationships and provides measures to identify and analyse networks within and between organisations (Wasserman & Faust 1994; Chu et al., 2013). In addition, social network analysis has an added advantage in that it provides both a visual and mathematical assessment of social interactions and flow/exchange of knowledge and information. Through the visual maps, it provides a quick approach for visually assessing weak and/or non-existent linkages between actors in a network. The main weakness of social network analysis is that it does not provide information on whether the communication or exchange of information between actors is effective or ineffective (Helms et al., 2010). In other words, social network analysis does not identify bottlenecks that exist in information exchange between actors. Furthermore, social network analysis is unable to explain the motivation which drives actors to establish linkages and to share or not share information with certain actors within a network (Tzatha & Schepers, 2009).

Apart from social network analysis, there are other approaches for mapping interactions and the exchange of information. A close alternative to social network analysis as used in this study is net mapping. Net mapping is an approach that collects and maps social network data such as information exchange, knowledge sharing and interactions. However, net mapping is most appropriate if the study objective is to go beyond understanding the structure of the network in order to work with network actors; for example, to develop shared visions and strategies to achieve a common goal. In addition, net mapping uncovers sources of conflicts as well as potential areas for collaboration (Schiffer & Hauck, 2010a). A key limitation of net mapping is that for larger networks there is need to complement the tool with more quantitative mapping approaches (Schiffer & Hauck, 2010b). In this study, therefore, we opted for social network analysis because it provides outright both a visual (qualitative) and a mathematical (quantitative) assessment of a network.

3. Results and discussion

3.1 Social network analysis results

This section presents the social network analysis results as a network map (Figure 1) and network measures (Table 2). The linkages in the network map represent flow of information between actors. Flow of information can be either unidirectional or bidirectional. Results presented in Table 2 show that the Ministry of Youth, Sports, and Culture and the Lilongwe District Youth Office have the largest ego networks of all the actors interviewed (size = 12). This implies that, among the sampled organisations, these two government departments interact directly with most of the sampled actors. The Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security and the National Youth Council have the second largest ego network (size = 10). As such, the Ministry of Youth, Sports, and Culture and the Lilongwe District Youth Office are possibly more important hubs of information and knowledge among agriculture youth organisations in the country than the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security or the National Youth Council. Differences in the number of direct interactions with the youth-led organisations between the Ministry of Youth, Sports, and Culture and the District Youth Office with the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security is attributed to the fact that the National Youth Council and the Ministry of Youth, Sports and Culture have a core mandate to deal with the youth. The Ministry of Agriculture and

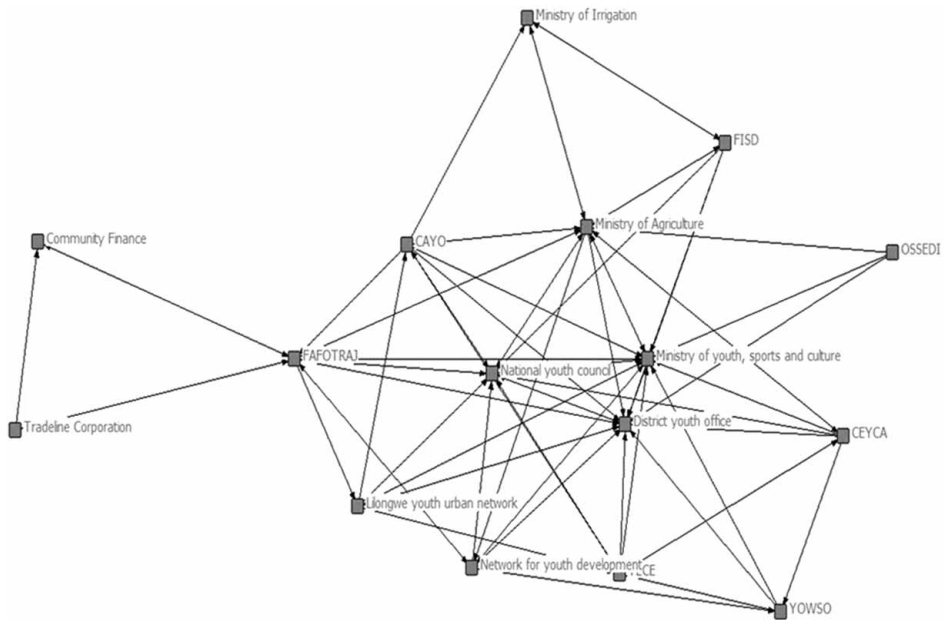


Figure 1: Social network analysis – Malawi youth agriculture network

Food Security, on the contrary, has a broader core mandate of national agricultural development, with youth being one of the many actors that the Ministry deals with.

An assessment of the number of connections (ties) among all actors in the network for each of the four organisations having the largest direct interactions with many of the key players in the network reveals several key issues. First, organisations with the same network size do not necessarily have the same number of direct interactions. This is the case for both organisations with the largest and the second largest network size. For example, the Lilongwe District Youth Office has a larger number of direct interactions with actors in the network (ties = 46) as compared with the Ministry of Youth, Sports, and Culture (ties = 44). This is the case despite both organisations having the same network size. This observation shows that Lilongwe District Youth Office has stronger interactions with their primary (direct) contacts as compared with the Ministry of Youth, Sports, and Culture. In addition, we also observe that the National Youth Council has a larger number of direct connections with other actors in the network (ties = 39) as compared with the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security (ties = 30). This is the case despite their network size being the same. This observation shows that the National Youth Council has stronger connections to its primary connections compared with the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security. From all the organisations sampled, the results in Table 2 show that the Lilongwe District Youth Office and the Ministry of Youth, Sports, and Culture are important players who play an essential role in facilitating the exchange of information and knowledge with the youth in agriculture in the country. Also, this was demonstrated by the large broker measures of 44 and 43 for the Ministry of Youth, Sports, and Culture and for the Lilongwe District Youth Office, respectively. These measures mean that these two institutions act as knowledge and information brokers – they collect information, which they then share with youth in agriculture. This finding does

Table 2: Social network analysis network measures for the sampled agricultural youth network in Malawi

	Size	Ties	Reach efficiency	Broker	Betweenness
Government ministries/departments					
Ministry of Youth, Sports, and Culture	12	44	17.24	44.00	17.50
Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security	10	30	20.27	30.00	32.67
Ministry of Irrigation	3	3	52.17	1.50	0.50
Lilongwe District Youth Office	12	46	17.24	43.00	17.50
Youth organisations					
Farmers Forum for Trade and Social Justice (FAFOTRAJ)	9	25	22.06	23.50	33.17
Foundation for Irrigation and Sustainable Development (FISD)	5	12	27.66	4.00	1.50
Youth Empowerment and Civic Education (YECE)	7	19	22.03	11.50	12.00
Organization for Sustainable Socio-Economic Development Initiative (OSSEDI)	3	4	38.24	1.00	0.00
Youth Watch Society (YOWSO)	5	10	27.91	5.00	0.00
Network for Youth Development	6	18	25.86	6.00	5.00
Lilongwe Youth Urban Network	6	18	25.86	6.00	9.17
Centre for Youth and Children Affairs (CEYCA)	6	16	23.21	7.00	9.33
Counselling of Adolescents and Youth Organization (CAYO)	8	27	21.74	14.50	4.42
Other organisations					
National Youth Council of Malawi	10	39	18.52	25.50	6.33
Trade Line Corporation	2	2	81.82	0.00	0.00
Community Finance	2	2	81.82	0.00	0.00

Source: Author calculations generated from UCINET, a software package used for social network analysis.

not imply that the Ministry of Agriculture (broker = 30) does not have or collect information. Nevertheless, it can imply that the ease with which the youth are able to access information from the different institutions differs. The two ministries sampled have relatively weaker connections when compared with the district-level youth office and the National Youth Council. This is the case despite the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security having the same size network as the National Youth Council, as is also the case with the Ministry of Youth Sports and Culture and the Lilongwe District Youth Office. Key informants' (both youth and policy-makers) perceptions are that bureaucracy and hierarchical systems limit youth interactions with government ministries. National-level government systems create bottlenecks that hinder access by youth to information, other resources and, in some cases, personnel. Many youth representatives also perceive government as being secretive – in contrast to non-governmental organisations. From the results in Table 2, this perception does not include the Lilongwe District Youth Office, which is also a public entity. This can be attributed to a high frequency of interactions between the district youth office and the youth, but more importantly to the perception of the ease of interaction. District youth offices in Malawi are part of the Ministry of Local Government housed at the District Commissioners Office – where many other social services are on offer and to which

all actors are freely able to walk in. The District Commissioners Office also acts as the main entry point for all stakeholders working within a district. The type of interaction between youth and government is mainly information sharing by government and consultation with the youth. There are little or no established partnerships.

These findings show that any efforts to engage the youth must utilise existing government systems and structures at the local level that already act as hubs for social services and information. To a lesser extent, policy-makers stated that other factors restricting networking with the youth is mistrust of their motives for seeking information, as well as general disregard for youth opinions. The Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security, however, remains essential for any efforts to improve the engagement of the youth in policy processes and to link the youth with other actors outside their own immediate networks. As [Table 2](#) further shows, among the larger actors the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security has relatively high reach efficiency and the highest betweenness measures. This implies that the Ministry of Agriculture has reach beyond its primary points of contacts, with secondary contacts in their network also being important. In addition, this implies that the Ministry of Agriculture can have great influence over what information flows to different stakeholders, including those with whom they do not have direct interactions – hence, they are an important link between youth in agriculture and other actors, such as development partners.

From [Figure 1](#) and from the network measures in [Table 2](#), we observe that there are very few direct connections/interactions between the youth organisations. Many of the indirect connections are weak with the distance between the youth organisations being very long. Owing to the lack of direct connections between the youth, there is the lack of knowledge of other youth in agriculture and their initiatives. In cases in which the youth are knowledgeable of each other, they have insufficient financial resources to organise themselves. Mistrust and secretiveness are the key factors perceived as restricting youth to youth networking. In many instances, youth organisations are competing for scarce resources from a limited pool of public and private funds. These factors combined prevent the youth from working effectively as a collective to form a consolidated platform, if they had wanted to do so. Amongst the youth organisations, we observe that the Farmers Forum for Trade and Social Justice (FAFOTRAJ) has a relatively large number of direct connections. FAFOTRAJ also acts as a broker for information and knowledge, as observed by high broker measures; and it acts as a linkage between many actors that do not have direct connections (as observed by high betweenness measures). This implies that among the youth organisations sampled, FAFOTRAJ has good connectivity with many actors in the network and is thus an important player in the youth–agriculture nexus in Malawi.

3.2 Perceptions of factors affecting effective engagement of the youth in policy networks

To substantiate the results of the social network analysis, key informant interviews were conducted with representatives of the sampled institutions ([Table 1](#)). Representatives interviewed were by design heads of the sampled institutions, with their subordinates providing the interview in case of their absence. All key informant interviews were personally administered using an open-ended checklist that focused on gathering information pertaining to opportunities and challenges for youth engagement in policy

processes within the agricultural sector in Malawi. The interview centred on gathering information based on the key informant's experiences (within the institution) pertaining to youth engagement in agricultural policy process.

A synthesis of the key informant interviews show that both the youth and policy-makers concur with the findings of the social network analysis – in that youth are not effectively engaged in agricultural policy processes in Malawi. In addition, there is general agreement that policy-makers do not make deliberate efforts to engage the youth in agricultural policy process. This is due to the lack of a tangible policy or programme for youth engagement within the agricultural sector.

A summary of perceptions from the youth of the factors preventing the effective engagement of youth in agricultural policy process in Malawi are as follows:

- Lack of awareness of agricultural policy processes: youth lack knowledge about agricultural policy processes. In cases in which youth are aware of a policy debate, they lack the knowledge of getting involved. Many attribute this problem to the failure of policy-makers to inform the public about policy processes and to the lack of pro-activeness on the part of the youth.
- Lack of appropriate support mechanisms: in cases in which the youth are aware that a policy process is taking place, they lack the ability to get themselves involved. This is attributed to a lack of government policy to deliberately engage the youth at different levels of the policy-making process.
- Lack of government initiative to engage the youth: the youth perspective is that the government does not make an effort to engage the youth either through the sharing of information or facilitating youth participation.

Factors hindering effective engagement when the youth are involved are as follows:

- Capacity constraints: when youth engage with policy-makers, they often lack the capacity to articulate their ideas effectively. In many cases, advocacy for the ideas of the youth fails due to the lack of proper presentation skills.
- Inadequate financial resources: often policy process activities, such as consultation workshops and meeting, take place in central locations (e.g. city or district centre [*boma*]). Youth that are in isolated rural areas are unable to have their voice heard because they lack the financial resources with which to travel and attend meetings.
- Youth attitudes: the youth perceive farming as an enterprise for people without alternatives. In addition, there is a general perception that farming is not a business but a way of life for those in the village. Many youth hope to exit the agricultural sector when they make sufficient money to invest in another type of business or when a different opportunity comes up.
- Culture of 'respect by silence': the youth stated that in general the Malawian cultural norms do not allow the youth to express their opinions amidst elders. Therefore, policy dialogues reflect the culture of 'respect by silence'.

On the other hand, policy-makers brought forth three points in which all policy-makers had a consensus:

- Youth are generally not engaged in policy processes. This is not limited only to the agricultural sector, but is the case in many other sectors as well. The youth are usually involved only at the implementation stage of a policy, but rarely during the process.

- Policy-makers are inappropriate people to represent the youth in policy-making processes. Inappropriate representativeness entails that the voice of the youth remains unheard and the dynamic and diverse views of the youth remain silent in policies.
- All of the youth are willing to be involved in policy processes, but policy-makers have not made deliberate efforts to engage the youth.

Many of the policy-makers stated that agricultural policies are essentially silent about the youth or provide only minimal focus on them. A review of some policies and strategies of the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security shows that this is not always the case. A document review shows that several agriculture policies and strategies of Malawi specifically mention the youth. Other policies and strategies do not explicitly refer to the youth, but they have general statements such as: 'All men, women and children'; 'All men, women, boys and girls'; 'All vulnerable members of society'; 'All farmers'; 'Child-headed households'; 'Households'; 'People'; and 'Malawi's population'. These statements implicitly include the youth.

Policy documents that implicitly refer to the youth far outweigh those that explicitly refer to them. It is perhaps for this reason that the majority of policy-makers sampled felt that policy documents are silent on the issue of the youth. It is possible that the perspective of the policy-makers regarding policies and strategies of the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security being silent on the youth emanates from their involvement in reviewing and evaluating the implementation of policies and strategies. Similarly, it is possible that the policies, which both explicitly and implicitly refer to the youth, do not specially target the youth in their implementation. An assessment of how youth targeting takes place in policy implementation is outside the scope of this study – this is an area for future research.

Apart from youth farmers' difficulties in engaging at the policy process level, there are many other factors that confound youth in their pursuit of agricultural livelihoods in Malawi. Youth perceptions from this study included, but are not limited to, the following:

- Young farmers lack access to sufficient finance for investing in their farm enterprises.
- Rising costs of farm inputs, such as improved seeds and inorganic fertiliser, as well as high transaction costs associated with attempts to gain access to high value markets.
- Land issues – owing to high population growth rates and continued cultivation, young farmers inherit marginal land. This is the result of the traditional inheritance system of the country in which family land (under customary law) is sub-divided and given to the younger generation as they come of age. Often the youth are given portions of land that are degraded due to over-use or marginal land that is not in use. Land that is more fertile is often under cultivation by elders, parents and/or older siblings. Young farmers' perceptions are that such marginal land which they inherit requires high investments (such as investment in enhancing soil fertility) in order to yield good returns. Owing to the financial constraints, youth farmers are unable to invest in order to improve the land that they inherit from their parents.
- Inadequate government support programmes to the agricultural sector: one particular example given was of the fertiliser subsidy programme that provides

coupons for subsidised inorganic fertiliser and hybrid maize and grain legume seed. Youth farmers felt that the programme could have been more effective if it also included the provision of farm equipment and machinery. This would go far in reducing the drudgery associated with smallholder farming systems, thus improving efficiency.

- Lack of linkages to high-value markets and the lack of skills to source such markets: markets are problematic for young farmers due to either lack of information about lucrative markets or the lack of resources with which to produce sufficient quantities at the quality required by high-value markets. Many felt that government support programmes should include an element of improving young farmer’s linkages with markets. Such a support programme should go hand in hand with the provision of subsidised inputs and equipment.

In order to overcome the factors limiting effective networking with policy-makers and among the youth, key informants suggested different solutions. A summary of these solutions is presented in Table 3.

The consensus between policy-makers and youth advocates is that there is need for deliberate and more effective engagement of the youth by policy-makers in agricultural policy-making processes. The youth advocates call for improved networking amongst youth-led organisations, which would create opportunities for information sharing. In addition, the youth advocates also call for deliberate efforts by the public sector to involve and engage the youth in the agricultural policy dialogue.

Table 3: Key informant solutions to overcoming networking hurdles for youth in agriculture

Demand side (youth)	Supply side (policy-makers)
Improved networking among the youth for improved information sharing. This would create familiarity and thus be a step to remove the mentality that youth organisations are in competition (for scarce resources and recognition).	Need for a deliberate agricultural sector policy to engage the youth in policy processes. To ensure that such a policy is enacted, the ministry should establish a section under the directorate of the Agricultural Extension Services that focuses on the youth.
	Need to improve access to information such as ministry reports and other documents pertaining to agricultural policies.
Need for deliberate effort by government to involve the youth. This should be facilitated by organisations such as the National Youth Council that are mandated to promote empowerment of the youth but also that have convening power as well the human and financial resources with which to mobilise the youth.	Policy-makers need to have greater interaction with the youth as a separate constituency from other stakeholders in the sector. This can be done through informal dialogue sessions at different levels (e.g. national or local government level through the district commissioners or district youth officers).
	Conduct awareness campaigns for the general population of agricultural policy issues. This will solicit public interests to provide input during the policy process.

Source: Author summaries from key informant interviews with the youth and policy-makers from the sampled institutions presented in Table 1.

Many views of policy-makers mirror the views of the youth advocates. Policy-makers support the idea of the deliberate engagement of the youth in agricultural policy dialogue, and the need for the public sector to make information sharing with the youth easier. They also advocate for greater interaction between policy-makers and the youth as a separate constituency from other stakeholders within the sector. Finally, policy-makers also stated that, as part of increasing awareness of agricultural policy dialogues, there is need for public awareness campaigns. These campaigns would be used to provide the public with information about current and forthcoming policy issues as well as providing an opportunity for the public (including the youth) to provide input.

4. Conclusions

Using social network analysis, we have analysed the nature of interactions and networking between the youth and agricultural policy-makers in southern Africa using Malawi as a case study. The study findings are, first, that public departments mandated to work on youth-related issues are the main hubs of information and knowledge for youth in agriculture, with the local government youth offices acting as the main hub for information for youth in agriculture. Second, the study finds that the youth in agriculture have weak or no direct interactions with each other. As a result of this as well as other factors, such as the lack of active engagement efforts by government, the youth remain on the periphery of the agricultural policy-making network and their role in shaping policy dialogue is negligible. There is therefore a need for government, in consultation with all relevant stakeholders, including the youth, to develop a policy that ensures the deliberate engagement of the youth in all agricultural sector policies and programmes. Such a policy, however, can only be effective if the youth are empowered to engage with policy-makers and with the issues at hand. This requires the government in partnership with the private sector to invest in building the capacity of the youth, either as individuals or as youth organisations, to engage with policy-makers. Any capacity-building efforts should encompass the diverse range of the youth in Malawi – both rural and urban youth, youth that are already pursuing agriculture as a livelihood, smallholder subsistence farmers as well as those youth that are idle and unemployed. A key focus of capacity-building programmes should be on improving young farmers' understanding of pertinent agricultural policy issues, of policy processes and of the role that the youth can play in shaping policy dialogue. Such programmes should also work to improve the articulation and communication skills of youth to enable them to engage effectively with policy-makers.

Any efforts to engage the youth must utilise existing government systems and structures at the local government that are already acting as hubs for social services and information. From the findings of this study, it would be prudent to assess the feasibility of using existing District Youth Offices within the Ministry of Local Government as 'agriculture youth units'. Finally, this study concludes that the onus is on the youth. In order to ensure that the youth in Malawi and in other countries in the region that have similar socio-economic development are engaged on a sustained and effective basis with agricultural policy-makers, there is need for a concerted effort by the youth in farming and agriculture to create a vibrant platform for engaging with policy-makers. This is imperative for empowering rural youth. Currently there are many youth-led organisations working at promoting youth in farming and agriculture.

However, they do not have a common and vibrant platform for lobbying and advocacy. By creating a joint platform, the youth can consolidate their ideas and combine financial and technical resources to create a powerful movement for lobbying and advocating agricultural policy-makers. This will ensure effective engagement of the youth in the development of these policies. Future areas of research should be to assess the factors that hinder the effective engagement of the youth in agricultural policy processes. Specific focus of such studies should be to quantify the latent factors determining effective youth engagement of both rural and urban youth.

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