

# Assessment of Youth Engagement in Agriculture and Agribusiness in Malawi: Perceptions and Hindrances

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## Abstract

This study sought to assess youth engagement in agriculture and agribusiness in Malawi. Specifically, the study was aimed at answering questions surrounding knowledge and perceptions of the youth towards agriculture and agribusiness, and attendant challenges that hinder adequate youth engagement in agriculture and agribusiness in Malawi. The study was descriptive in nature and employed both qualitative and quantitative approaches to investigate key objectives, using youth-centric structures at district level as the sampling frame. The sampling techniques employed included a combination of purposive and simple random sampling. SPSS was used for statistical analysis and graphical representation of quantitative data, while qualitative data was analysed using thematic content analysis. The results showed that the youth held high positive perceptions with respect to profitability of agriculture and agribusiness, decent job creation in the sector and career development. Based on a five-point Likert Scale of 'agree', 'strongly agree', 'disagree', 'strongly disagree' and 'no opinion', a considerable majority of the respondents viewed agriculture and agribusiness as a profitable sector in the Malawian economy. The study also revealed the following challenges hindering youth engagement in agriculture and agribusiness; inadequate skills, lack of markets and market information; and the hanging negative perceptions on agriculture and agribusiness.

**Keywords:** Agribusiness, Agriculture, Entrepreneurship, Youth Employment, Decent Jobs

## Introduction

One of the key development challenges that many developing countries including Malawi are facing is youth unemployment. There is a continuing job crisis among the youth in Malawi. As such, a share of young people in employment is declining. Empirical studies show that Malawi's employment opportunities for the youth have not matched the ever-increasing trend in youth population. International Labour Organization (2012) suggests that worldwide, the high youth unemployment is exacerbated by rapid population growth.

Malawi has a youthful population. According to the country's 2018 Population and Housing Census report by National Statistical Office (NSO), more than 46% of the population are below the age of 15, while youth aged between 15 and 29 account for a quarter of the population. These young people continue to face challenges related to unemployment, underemployment and poverty. Malawi's economy is not creating adequate jobs to cater to the rapidly increasing youthful labour force. All along, youth unemployment in Malawi has been reported to be rising. In 2005, youth unemployment was reported to be at 13%; while in 2011, it was reported at 15%. Based on projections, a paper by Chinsinga and Chasukwa (2012) indicates that in 2017, youth unemployment was projected at about 15.2%. There is growing evidence which shows that young people, especially from a rural setting, regularly migrate from their areas in search of better economic opportunities in major urban areas particularly Lilongwe and Blantyre and

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in other countries in the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) region. Mostly, this migration does not yield positive results as they lack the necessary skills to gain employment in the formal sector.

Agriculture is a sector of opportunity in Malawi. A report by the ILO (2017) reveals that as of 2017, Malawi's agriculture accounted for 69.9% of total employment. This implies that the agriculture sector presents a great opportunity for the creation of farm and non-farm jobs to absorb young people and attain food security for future generation. However, a review of literature shows that there is insufficient youth participation in the sector and that the majority of those who are engaged in the sector are old aged. A report by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) reveals that young people due to challenges and misconceptions towards agriculture and agribusiness have not embraced agriculture in developing countries. For example, according to the FAO, young people perceive agriculture and agribusiness as an occupation for the old, illiterate and poor rural people. In Malawi, empirical studies to determine the perceptions of the youth towards agriculture and to investigate the challenges that hinder adequate youth engagement in the sector are scanty.

### **Problem Statement**

A review of literature indicates that despite the recognition of employment creation within the agriculture sector, youth participation especially as farmers in Malawi is declining. Youth have different perceptions which hinder them from engaging in agriculture and agribusiness. It is apparent that the agriculture sector is not looked at as a viable sector of employment and remains highly unattractive to the youth. As such, young people have a negative attitude towards 'blue-collar' jobs. Moreover, the rural youth in agriculture are migrating to cities/towns with little success of securing decent employment, hence ending up worsening the unemployment statistics in the cities. Hitherto, the services and industrial sectors have not created enough white-collar jobs for the escalating youthful labour force. This has worsened the situation of unemployment, underemployment and poverty and may undermine government efforts to drive economic growth through agriculture.

### **Study Objectives**

The main objective of the study was to assess youth engagement in agriculture and agribusiness in Malawi. Specific objectives included to determine the knowledge and perceptions of the youth towards agriculture and agribusiness and to investigate the challenges that hinder adequate youth engagement in agriculture and agribusiness in Malawi.

### **Review of Conceptual Literature Underlying the Study**

#### **The Concept of 'Youth'**

The term *youth* has been defined differently by different scholars. Luckey (2012) defines youth, more flexibly, as the early period in a child's life and development. Youth can also be defined in relation to age brackets. According to the United Nations (UN), youth refers to a category of persons between the ages of 15 to 24 years old. All UN youth statistics are based on this age definition. However, this definition limits youths to specific ages, thereby marginalising those under the age of 15 and over 24, yet this bracket might still require necessary and tailored focus and support. The African Union holds a different opinion, as the African Youth Charter defines the youth as persons aged between 15 and 35 years.

#### **The Concept of 'Youth' in the Malawian Context**

The Malawi National Youth Policy defines youth as all young females and males between the ages of 14 and 25 years. This indicates that the definition of youth in Malawi is not in line with that of the African Union. In their research report, Kadzamira and Kazembe (2015) suggested that the age range, however, is flexible depending on the context, and sometimes in Malawi, it extends to include individuals of up to 35 years of age. As such, for purposes of this study, an age bracket of 14 to 35 was adopted.

## The Concept of 'Agribusiness'

A review of literature indicates that the broad concept of agribusiness was formulated in 1957 by Harvard Business School Professors Ray Goldberg and John Davis. According to Zylbersztajn (2016), the duo define agribusiness to include the sum total of all operations involved in the manufacture and distribution of farm supplies; production operations on the farm and the storage, processing, and distribution of farm commodities and items from them. Sonker and Hudson (1999) revised the definition of agribusiness and defined it as a sequence of interrelated sub-sectors made up of: genetic and seed stock firms; input suppliers; agricultural producers; merchandisers or first handlers; processors; retailers; and consumers. This entails that agribusiness is all about the business of agricultural production.

## Perceptions of Agriculture and Agribusiness among Youth in Developing Countries

Perception plays a vital role in agriculture and agribusiness. A paper by Anyidoho et al. (2012) posits that youth in general do not have a positive perception towards agriculture and agribusiness. Charles (2014) concurs with Anyidoho et al. (2012) and further indicates that many young people perceive farming as a job for school dropouts or a poor man's work which provides no opportunities to achieve personal success. Furthermore, a study by Chinsinga and Chasukwa (2012) found that agriculture is perceived as a less worthy subject or as a last option for the under-achieving students. This has a negative impact as it fuels the negative attitude that the youth have towards agriculture and agribusiness. Afande et al. (2015) adds that the youth also perceive agriculture and agribusiness as something to be pursued after failing in school. Many youth perceive farmers as uneducated and unskilled.

In Nigeria, a paper by Ifenkwe (2012) adds that youth are not interested to engage in agriculture since they do not perceive farming as an attractive career field. Muthoni (2017) concurs with Ifenkwe (2012) and adds that urban youth perceive agriculture as a 'dirty job' which they are not open to pursue. This finding is supported by a report by the Youth in Farming (2011) who revealed that young people perceive agriculture as a profession of

intense labour, not profitable and unable to support their livelihood compared to what white-collar jobs offer.

These poor perceptions towards agriculture by the youth could be attributed to several factors. In most developing countries, these poor perceptions are attributed to culture and education. For example, Okello (2014) notes that schools use agricultural activities as punishment, thus contributing to its negative perception by the youth. In Uganda, for example, agriculture has remained unattractive to the youth partly because schools administer agricultural-related activities as punishment for lack of discipline by students. Moreover, in Kenya, Afande et al. (2015) note that the current education curriculum and teaching methods are directed towards teaching white-collar workers.

As a result, opportunities for agriculture-led growth among the youth are reduced leaving agriculture in the hands of the elderly rural population, hence resulting in low productivity and food insecurity. A study by Muthoni (2017) posits that training and capacity building can therefore transform youth perception towards agriculture.

There is, therefore, need for interventions targeted at building entrepreneurial culture among the youth. A study by Ashoka et al. (2019) in India suggested that there is a need to develop an entrepreneurial culture starting with young people in schools. In their study, Ashoka et al. (2019) emphasized that education can build entrepreneurial culture among the youth in schools. In the context of agribusiness also, there is, therefore, need for the provision of secondary school agricultural education.

## Challenges Hindering Youth Engagement in Agribusiness: A Snapshot

There are notable studies in the context of developing countries that have investigated challenges hindering youth engagement in agriculture and agribusiness; and selected ones include:

### Limited Access to Land

Access to land is fundamental to starting a farm. The FAO (2011) indicates that for youth to engage in farming, they need to have access to land. However, empirical evidence shows that the majority of the youth in developing

countries do not access and own land which is a key resource in agricultural production. Mostly, it is their parents who hold title to the land that the youth use for agricultural production. Other studies in Sub-Saharan Africa show that inheritance laws and customs often make the transfer of land to young women prohibitive.

### **Lack of Basic Infrastructure such as Markets, Roads, Electricity and Schools**

Mibey (2016) reveals that lack of infrastructure leads to high cost of travel and goods transportation making agriculture less attractive to the youth. Limited agricultural services, scarce access to basic needs such as electricity and safe water, telecommunication services and poor road networks make it hard for the youth to start business in agricultural sector. The under-developed infrastructure and rural services translate transaction costs for agricultural producers.

Malawi is a developing country in the Sub-Saharan Africa and hence the challenges hindering youth engagement in agriculture and agribusiness may not be different from those found by scholars in Uganda, Kenya and Nigeria. Though there are many factors that can be comparable among these countries, there is need to investigate the factors hindering youth engagement in agriculture in Malawi so that specific policies and programmes can be designed to deal with the challenge of poor youth participation in agriculture and agribusiness in the country.

### **The Extent of Youth Engagement in Agriculture and Agribusiness in Malawi**

The Government of Malawi has been making efforts to engage the youth in agriculture and agribusiness. Evidence from the Agricultural Sector-Wide Approach (ASWA) reveals that the government explicitly recognises empowerment of the youth as essential for achieving sustainable agricultural development.

The current trend, however, is not encouraging as youths are shunning agriculture even with the increased government support due to various reasons. A paper by Chinsinga and Chasukwa (2012) contends that youths are demotivated to take agriculture as a serious means of livelihood because it is associated with the elderly and school dropouts. There

are also some policies and programmes in the agriculture sector that exclude the youth as their beneficiaries, thereby making them shun agriculture; a very good example is the Farm Input Subsidy Programme (FISP). A policy brief by Chinsinga and Chasukwa (2017) reveals that the youth are excluded in FISP; the principal reason for the exclusion being that the youth do not own land and are energetic enough to work elsewhere to generate income to purchase agricultural inputs on their own.

### **Research Design and Methodology**

A review of literature indicates that there are various models and theories that can be followed to get the youth engaged in activities that can empower them economically. One of them is the push and pull theory of motivation. According to Airth (2013), the push and pull theories of motivation state that the desire to attain certain results comes from different directional forces, either a push or a pull towards the end goal. Mibey (2016) argues that there are factors that push or pull a person towards an end state. This theory is applicable in this study in the sense that there are many factors that either push the youth towards agriculture and agribusiness or pull them away from agriculture or agribusiness. Literature suggests that some of the factors pulling away youth from engaging in agribusiness may be lack of access to markets, lack of starting capital, lack of information on agribusiness and poor infrastructure. As we narrate the study design and methodology, the pull and push factors framework was found to be instrumental in unearthing determinants of youth engagement in agriculture and agribusiness and the challenges that hinder adequate youth engagement in the same.

### **Research Design, Coverage and Sampling**

To achieve its objectives, the study used descriptive research design. According to Creswell (1994), this design helps to present facts about the nature and status of a situation as it exists at the time of study. Descriptive research design provides responses to questions on 'what, when, how, and why'. The study used the design to provide analysis and an explanation of opinions and comments concerning youth engagement in agriculture and agribusiness. The study also used a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods in analysing and interpreting data.

With regard to coverage, the study was carried out in the following administrative districts of the country: Karonga, Salima, Kasungu, Lilongwe, Mangochi, Zomba, Chikwawa, Mzuzu and Mwanza. The districts were chosen because they comprised several communities which are dominated by agricultural activities. The target population of the study were the youth groups comprising the youth aged between 14 and 35 years. The study also targeted district youth officers and agribusiness officers as key stakeholders working in youth programming arena at local government level.

The sample size comprised 13 youth groups. A youth group constituted our unit of analysis and 13 youth groups were considered adequate for the study. A total of 164 respondents were selected through random sampling technique. This sample was representative and adequate to provide reliability because the population under study was similar.

Purposive sampling and random sampling techniques were used to select respondents. Specifically, the researchers used purposive sampling techniques for key informant interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). Simple random sampling method was employed to sample the youth groups as well as the respondents.

Data was collected through desk study, household interviews, key informant interviews and FGDs. The household interview questionnaire used a five-point Likert-type rating scale of strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree and no opinion. The questions were designed to aid researchers in understanding the needs, priorities, aspirations, perceptions, attitudes, perspectives, challenges, youth occupational choice, patterns of engagement and decision-making, particularly

regarding agriculture and agribusiness and identify ways of transforming their mindset and perceptions towards agribusiness. The key informant interviews were conducted with district youth officers and agribusiness officers at the regional level. Through these interviews, the researchers obtained in-depth knowledge regarding the availability and distribution of agribusiness opportunities, and map the current agribusiness programmes and interventions taking place across the country. In conducting the key informant interviews, the interview style was a semi-structured interaction, following interview protocols consisting of key issues/questions, encouraging interviewees to talk freely about their experiences, observations, and concerns and recommendations.

## Results and Discussions

### Socioeconomic Characteristics of Respondents

The interview questionnaires were administered to a total of 164 respondents aged 14-35 who were randomly selected from the youth groups in the study areas. All questionnaires were completed. This represented a response rate of 100%.

*Age:* The respondents' ages ranged between 14 and 40 years. As shown in Fig. 1 below, the majority of respondents (40.9%) were between 16 and 20 years while 29.2% of them were between the ages of 21 and 25. This age bracket is an economically active one and people in this bracket are usually motivated, innovative and productive. This implies that the respondents were of productive age where their energies can be utilised for productive ventures in agriculture.

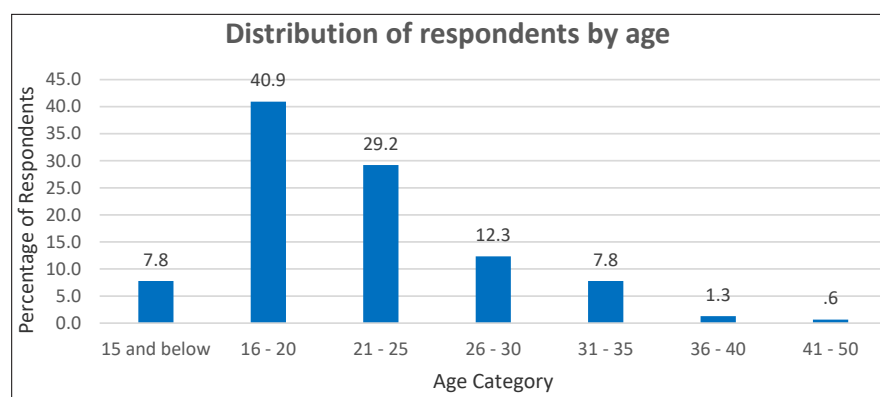
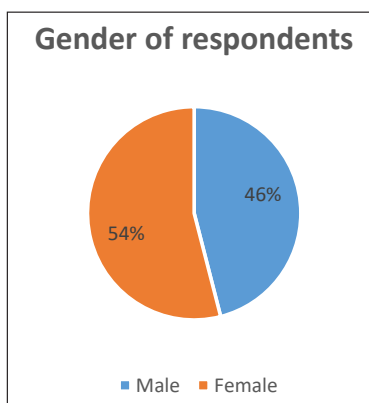


Fig. 1: Distribution of Respondents by Age

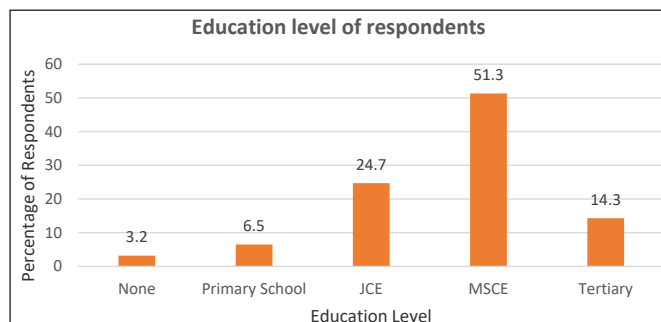
*Gender:* With respect to gender, the descriptive statistics show that the gender split was 54% for female respondents and 46% for male respondents. This shows that all genders were significantly represented in the study, rendering the data collected relevant and reliable for the study. Moreover, the slightly higher number of female respondents supports the argument that the MSME sector is dominated by women. This finding concurs with conclusions by Lalrokhawma and Singh (2019) who argued that females take more interest in starting an enterprise than males.



**Fig. 2: Distribution of Respondents by Gender**

*Education:* Education plays a key role in the all-round development of a person. A report by Lalrokhawma and Singh (2019) further suggests that education is an important factor in starting an enterprise. Findings of their study revealed that education is key to entrepreneurial development. In the same vein, education also affects a young person’s perception, decision-making and productivity of agriculture and agribusiness. In this

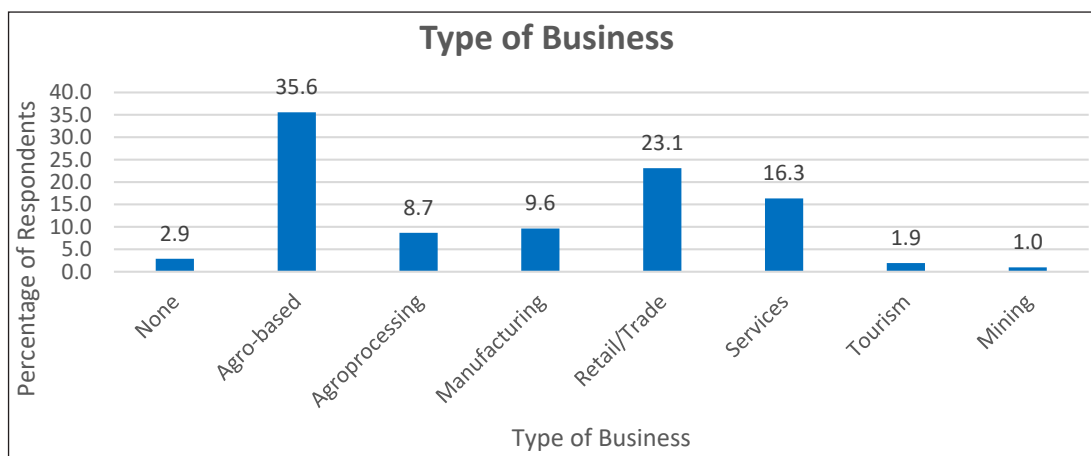
respect, the study sought to enquire the level of education for the respondents. The levels enquired were primary, secondary and tertiary education.



**Fig. 3: Distribution of Respondents by Education Categories**

As shown in Fig. 3 above, about half (51.3%) of respondents reported to have Malawi School Certificate of Education (MSCE), a local equivalent of General Certificate of Education (GCE O Level). Further, 24.7% reported to have Junior Certificate Education while only 14.3% reported to have received tertiary education. The implication of these findings is that the majority of the youth were literate. This also aligns well with a 2016 report by UNESCO that youth literacy rate (literacy amongst people aged 15-24) in Malawi is 75%. As such, literacy is expected to influence perceptions of the respondents towards agriculture and agribusiness.

*Type of Business:* As shown in Fig. 4 below, a considerable majority of the respondents (35.6%) were actively involved in agriculture, as compared to ventures in other sectors.



**Fig. 4: Type of Business**

## Perceptions of Youth towards Agriculture and Agribusiness in Malawi

The study found that a considerable majority of respondents held a high positive perception of agriculture and agribusiness. Regarding profitability, creation of decent jobs and career development, the study found that the youth also held positive perceptions. The results show that a significant majority of respondents (87.2%) had positive and favourable perception towards agriculture and agribusiness as a profitable sector in the Malawian economy. This notion was supported by the results from FGDs held in all study areas, which pointed out that agribusiness is a profitable venture. However, this finding contradicted that of Njeru (2017) who found that young people hold negative perception of agriculture. Further, the study found that 83.2% of respondents were of the view that agriculture is a decent employer of young people in the Malawian economy. This implies that majority of the respondents have positive disposition towards farming as a way of decent employment creation. The study further found that 59.1% of the respondents were seriously considering starting a business in agriculture. This also implies that the youth had positive perception towards agriculture and agribusiness.

The study also found that 58.1% were not of the view that agriculture and agribusiness is an activity practiced by the old and illiterate only. Moreover, a considerable majority of the youth (44.3%) were already actively involved in running agricultural enterprises (agro-based and agro-processing). This implies that the youth had positive perception towards agriculture and agribusiness. This positive perception might be explained by the fact that there are very limited opportunities for white-collar jobs. As such, this act as a push factor directing them to alternative forms of livelihoods.

However, there were few who had negative perceptions. The study found that 15.8% of the respondents did not aspire engaging in agriculture and agribusiness. The negative perceptions by the youth towards agriculture could be attributed to several factors, which were best captured during FGDs. Some participants in FGDs suggested that agriculture is not attractive and not profitable. The respondents also associated agriculture with harsh work and farming conditions.

Findings from FGDs also suggest that students in secondary schools and institutions of higher learning have

negative perception and lack of interest in agriculture due to lack of effective career direction. These results align with the study findings by Tafere and Woldehann (2012). According to Tafere and Woldehann (2012), young people are raised up with career aspirations far beyond agriculture. In Malawi, a study by Chinsinga and Chasukwa (2012) reveals that agriculture is perceived as a less worthy subject or as a last option for the under-achieving students. This entails that agriculture is poorly promoted in secondary schools as well as tertiary learning institutions as a key study area which contributes to the poor interest.

## Challenges Hindering Youth Engagement in Agribusiness and Agriculture in Malawi

When probed about challenges hindering youth engagement in agribusiness and agriculture, results from the questionnaire survey, FGDs and key informant interviews revealed five challenges as follows:

### Inadequate Skills, Knowledge and Information

The study also found that most of the youth lack relevant skills and knowledge required for agriculture and agribusiness. A total of 49.1% of respondents indicated that lack of skilled labour is a challenge that hinders youth engagement in agriculture and agribusiness. Results from FGDs further reveal that most agricultural training programmes do not reach the youth. This is supported by findings by the World Bank (2013) that the youth, especially young women, have poor access to agricultural training due to their demanding domestic chores. A report on Youth Well-being Policy Review of Malawi by OECD Development Centre (2018) concurs with World Bank (2013) and adds that agriculture skills training for youth are less apparent in policies and programmes. As such, the youth lack skills, in-depth knowledge and information pertaining to agriculture and agribusiness.

### Limited Access to Land for Agriculture and Agribusiness

The study findings indicate that access to land by the youth is another impediment hindering their involvement in agriculture and agribusiness. The study found that 44% of the respondents strongly agreed that the land prices in

the study areas were high. This deters most of the youth from entering into farming. These findings concurred with findings by World Bank (2014) that land prices drive away the youth from farming. Kadzamira and Kazembe (2015) further adds that due to high population growth rates and continued cultivation, young farmers inherit marginal land.

When asked whether subdivision of land has resulted into smaller pieces of land for farming, a total of 77.8% of the respondents confessed that family land had been subdivided. This implies that the youth have limited access to arable land for farming since the smaller pieces of land are not economically profitable for farming. This concurs with the findings of Sharma and Sharma (2010) who asserted that family land that is divided into smaller pieces is not economically profitable to do farming on them.

The study also found that cultural background, specifically the patrilineal land holding system, is one of the challenges which hinders the participation of young women in agriculture and agribusiness in some parts of Malawi. Evidence was best captured during FGDs in the northern region. The study found that patrilineal descent dominates the northern region. Findings from FGDs show that women's land rights in the region continue to be inhibited by this patriarchal nature of customary law such as *lobola* system. This patriarchal setting is making it difficult if not impossible for young women to access and own land in their own right. These unequal rights to land put women at a disadvantage, perpetuate poverty and entrench gender inequality in the region.

### Limited Access to Financing

Findings of this study suggest that limited access to finance is a key impediment hindering youth engagement in agriculture and agribusiness in Malawi. The study revealed that the youth who perceived limited access to finance as a highest challenge were 48.4% followed by those who perceived it to be high (26.1%). The study established that access to financing is often tied to availability of collateral (usually land) that young people often do not have.

One respondent lamented,

*'A major obstacle to our participation in agriculture and agribusiness is limited access to finance which is worsened by stringent conditions for loan accessibility. I can tell you that most financial service providers are reluctant to provide their services including credit to us due to lack of collateral and financial literacy'.*

This preceding claim made by the respondent shows that limited access to credit facility hinders youth engagement in agriculture and agribusiness.

In addition, there is consensus among Malawian researchers that access to financing is a challenge due to many factors including high interest rate, short duration of loan repayment and prohibitive collateral requirements. These findings concur with the analyses of a study by Katoch (2018) who confirmed that high rate of interest is a key challenge in accessing finance followed by timely availability of finance, lack of collateral and lack of adequate amount of finance.

### Lack of Agricultural Inputs

The study also found that another pressing challenge hindering youth engagement in agriculture and agribusiness is access to agricultural production inputs. During FGDs, some participants echoed that they had no access to inputs such as fertilisers and herbicides. Evidence to support these findings is apparent in a study report by Chinsinga and Chasukwa (2012). In their report, Chinsinga and Chasukwa (2012) observed that the role of the youth is not featured at all in the success story of Malawi's Farm Input Subsidy Programme (FISP). As reported by Charles (2014), young people in farming communities have less chances of obtaining inputs.

### Limited Access to Agricultural Extension Services

The study also found that a majority of the respondents do not have access to agriculture extension services. This was captured during FGDs with the youth in Mwanza District. Results from FGDs indicate that although a number of youth aspire to join agribusiness, lack of access

to agricultural extension services and inability to access agricultural extension services obstruct them. Through an in-depth interview, a district youth officer concurred with the participants of the FGDs and added that agriculture extension officers do not give the youth much attention.

In his remarks, he added, ‘*mostly the extension workers worked in close collaboration with farmers that are already established*’.

This affects the level of youth engagement in agriculture and agribusiness as extension agents play critical role in increasing the youth’s adoption of new farm practices.

### Lack of Markets and Information on Markets

The study also found that youth engagement in agriculture and agribusiness is also hindered by lack of markets and information on markets. The study established that the youth frequently lack the required knowledge of how markets work, as well as information on prices. Responses from open-ended questions and results from FGDs revealed that the youth face a bigger challenge of access to markets due to the following constraints: limited access to marketing information, non-conformity to agricultural produce and products standards and inadequate markets and marketing infrastructure.

### Negative Impacts of Climate Change

The study findings also indicate that the agricultural sector is prone to high uncertainty due to climate change. For example, FGDs in Chikwawa and Mwanza revealed that agriculture is highly exposed to drought and floods and this prevents the youth from engaging in farming as a source of livelihood.

### Conclusion

The results showed that the youth held high positive perceptions with respect to profitability of agriculture and agribusiness, decent job creation in the sector and career development. Based on a five-point Likert Scale of ‘agree’, ‘strongly agree’, ‘disagree’, ‘strongly disagree’ and ‘no opinion’, a considerable majority of the respondents viewed agriculture and agribusiness as a profitable sector in the Malawian economy. The study also revealed the

following challenges hindering youth engagement in agriculture and agribusiness; inadequate skills; lack of markets and market information; the hanging negative perceptions on agriculture and agribusiness; limited access to land for agriculture and agribusiness; limited access to financing; lack of agricultural inputs; limited access to agricultural extension services; and negative impacts of climate change.

The study also established that the youth can be motivated to engage in agriculture and agribusiness when the following are in place; provision of agribusiness management training; availability of agriculture extension services; provision of agricultural infrastructure; value addition; and positive perception towards agriculture and agribusiness; improved access to land; increased access to capital.

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