

Malawi

A National Rice Platform enables the voices of rice farmers to be heard

Low quality rice in a disorganised market

Malawi is one of the countries worst affected by climate change in Africa. By the end of 2013, heavy rain, floods and drought had left over 1.8 million people dependent on food aid.

In Karonga, northern Malawi, and other areas of the country, rice is the predominant crop, planted twice a year. It is a highly labour-intensive process and productivity is low because of use of uncertified seed and poor crop husbandry practices.

Farmers lack capital, so private traders provide credit at high interest rates. In order to service this debt, farmers end up selling rice early in the season, and this freshly threshed rice commands a lower price. Due to these problems, joining a local rice cooperative was not an attractive proposition.

Research conducted by Christian Aid and its partners ICCO and CISP showed that there was a demand for rice, particularly the fragrant Kilombero variety, through which farmers could meet increasing incomes and address food insecurity. They also identified that farmers could add value at farm level with improved strains of rice, better processing and more modern growing techniques. A programme was developed to improve production at farm level alongside better cooperative management to enable each cooperative to trade on a business basis.

A policy analysis was also carried out gathering input from rice farmers in 12 cooperatives, government officials and private processors as well as business service providers. This process found there were other problems for farmers,



Malawi rice quality is improving, opening up local and export markets.

including illegal exports, a high cost of production and low productivity for Malawi rice which meant it could not compete on the regional market. There are also few mills that are able to mill export quality rice. The stakeholders who took part in the research decided they wanted to come together to address some of these issues by creating a National Rice Development Platform.

Enabling marginalised farmers to influence national policy

Christian Aid, ICCO and CISP worked together to enable the rice sector stakeholders to form The National Rice Development Platform. This platform brings together cooperatives, government, business, farmers, exporters and agricultural experts to develop the rice industry and address issues affecting the rice value chain.

Some of the issues the platform is trying to solve include mechanisation of rice farming, appropriate set-up of a

minimum price for rice, control of illegal rice exports through Karonga border posts, subsidies for rice farmers and support to strengthen cooperatives.

The platform is an institution that is now recognised by government as a voice of rice farmers and other market actors. The government has requested the platform champion implementation of the government's rice strategy. This means that the platform is strategically positioned to influence rice production and marketing in Malawi, ensuring all actors secure a fair value for the role they play in the rice sector.

Henry Kaunda is the Secretary General for the National Rice Development Platform and works for an export company. He said: 'We want to establish links to markets, disseminate information about technology, and we want people to take pride in Malawian rice. We want the rice farmers to be empowered and to produce more and better rice. We want to strengthen cooperatives and help them with a

more business-like approach. We want the farmers to see the benefits of the development of the rice industry.'

These activities mean there is a consolidated effort from all key players for faster presentation of critical issues to policy and decision makers and to deal with issues directly affecting smallholder rice producers. The 18 cooperative members of the platform represent over 18,000 rice farmers ensuring their voices are shaping national policies affecting the rice sector.

Uniting rice farmers

Alongside the market advocacy undertaken through the platform, Christian Aid's partner CISP has been strengthening local rice cooperatives by building their capacity in modern rice production techniques and enabling access to better-quality seeds which are more resilient to climate change. As a result of this work most participating farmers have doubled their yields.

CISP has also provided capacity building to cooperatives enabling them to be better run on a business basis. New village savings and loan schemes enable farmers to obtain capital to purchase seed and obtain loans during the lean period. This means that farmers are no longer in a hurry to sell the rice to traders at low prices early in the season. The reorganisation of the cooperatives make them more attractive, and membership has risen in each organisation on average from 213 to 1,000 farmers.

As a result of these changes the cooperative members managed to pool and buy rice amounting to 340 metric tonnes for onward sale and processing. They are now able to hire competent staff such as marketing managers and

accounts officers. Increased income has enabled them to rent equipment such as rice milling machinery to add value by further processing the rice. They have also opened outlet shops in Karonga, Mzuzu City, Mzimba and Mchinji.

With our facilitation, the cooperatives have also formed the Malawi Rice Union to represent farmers' interests and find new markets requiring large quantities of quality rice. The success of the Rice Union will be very much dependent on stronger, well-organised rice cooperatives and therefore the next phase will be to replicate the strengthening of cooperatives in other rice producing areas across Malawi. These cooperatives are also crucial to the National Rice Development Platform to ensure the voices of rice farmers continue to be heard.

These interventions in the rice sector in Malawi are a good example of the importance of using a holistic understanding of a market to target interventions to address the key blockages and capitalise on opportunities for the benefit of smallholders. Practical support to farmers is increasing yields, access to finance is addressing cash flow challenges, strengthening cooperatives is improving quality.

The creation of representative bodies at cooperative and national level is raising the voice of rice farmers and rice sector stakeholders to influence government policies that affect the sector for the national benefit in the long term. This combination of actions will ensure the rice market is developed in a way that includes, rather than excludes smallholders rice farmers.

'With village savings and loan techniques and technical skills/knowledge on rice farming ... I am able to buy farm inputs like certified seed, fertiliser for my plots as well as some for family use. I know also where I can sell my rice at a very competitive price, Wovwe cooperative is my reliable market now.' **Mr Mweso, rice farmer**

Empowered women in leadership

Rice farmer Witness has doubled her crop and now represents rice farmers and women throughout Malawi on the newly established National Rice Development Platform. She meets with people from the biggest export companies, government ministries, academic bodies and financial services to make the rice industry run better, more effectively and to the benefit of the farmers. She wants to see the development of the rice industry, and she wants to see women benefit from development.

Witness said: 'Ever since we started growing rice, the Malawi government haven't engaged with rice farmers or taken our needs into account. They worry about the tobacco farmers and those who are planting maize, but not rice farmers.'

'I went to the rice platform meeting and we selected a committee. We are only three from the northern region. I am the only woman. They chose me to be the vice-president of the national rice platform. I am happy because I am a farmer and because I am going to talk about the problems of the rice farmer, because I know what problems the rice farmers in the villages face.'

Witness has also been given agricultural support from Christian Aid partner CISP and more than doubled her rice crop. She explained: 'They told us to plant certified seed, not miscellaneous seed. Since they told us, some of us are harvesting 500kg per plot. Before we would have harvested 150kg. That's why I say we are happy, and we are changing now.'

Further information

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