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Searching for a Holy Grail? The Nexus between Agriculture and Youth Unemployment in Malawi

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1. Introduction

The question of youth unemployment is a pressing policy problem not only in Malawi but also across the African continent. This also rings true in the global context mainly due to the rapidly expanding share of youth as a proportion of the global population. It is estimated that the youth (in the 15-24 age bracket) make up as much as 1.2 billion of the global population currently pegged at 7 billion which represents a 17 percent increase since 1995 (de Gobbi, et al., 2008). The main concern, however, is that the youth population boom is unevenly distributed across the globe since as much as 87 percent of the total global population of the youth live in developing countries. Existing evidence suggests that the population of the youth is growing much faster than can actually be accommodated in the labour markets most of which have stagnated due to the enduring economic crises. According to Aggarwal, et al., (2010), the share of the youth who are employed declined from 4.9 to 4.5 percent between 1997 and 2009 which resulted in the total number of unemployed youth burgeoning from 63 to 71 million. Sub-Saharan Africa experienced a disproportionate increase in the number of youth who became unemployed, rising from 8 million to 10 million in 2007. It is against this backdrop that Valle (2012) estimates that youth unemployment in sub-Saharan Africa is about three times higher than in other age groups.

The Malawi situation is not far off from Valle’s (2012) estimates. While the official unemployment in Malawi is estimated at 9.3 percent that of the youth is projected at about 15.2 percent which clearly indicates it is a very serious problem, requiring urgent attention especially since Malawi is a predominantly youthful nation (Chinsinga and Chasukwa, 2012). The main concern is that chronic youth unemployment could have disastrous and enduring long-term consequences for the social, economic and political fabric of society unless appropriate measures are taken to deal with it. Consequently, this chapter examines the nexus between agriculture and youth unemployment in Malawi motivated by the fact that although agriculture is officially described as an engine of economic growth and is the largest employer, efforts to address the question of chronic youth unemployment have concentrated elsewhere (Chinsinga, 2008; Chirwa, 2008; Chapota, 2009). Neither does the Technical Entrepreneurship and Vocational Education and Training Authority (TEVETA) offer its apprentices options in any agricultural related trades nor does the latest draft youth policy explicitly pay any attention to the agricultural sector even though its central theme is promotion of youth empowerment. The main argument of this chapter is that the problem of youth unemployment in Malawi will be successfully dealt with only when the agricultural sector as the engine of economic growth and the biggest employer is at the centre of such efforts. An agricultural led industrialization strategy has potential to create decent jobs for youth because it would likely foster the development of other aspects of the value chain that are currently
underdeveloped such as input supply, processing, storage, marketing and distribution (Kamchacha, 2012).

The main challenge is that nearly all the efforts that have been implemented to address the question of chronic youth unemployment have been captured by politicians for their own selfish goals. These initiatives are primarily designed as a means to capture the youth as a voting bloc and not as a reflection of genuine commitment to bringing about sustainable changes in the livelihoods of the youth. These initiatives are not often well thought out in terms of institutional design, implementation modalities and the underlying theory of change. This has greatly contributed to the marginalization of the agricultural sector in the efforts to combat youth unemployment even though it is officially designated as the leading engine of economic growth and by far the country's biggest employer. Political imperatives clearly take precedence since these initiatives are often launched either just before or after general elections and their implementation are often marred by excessive political interference. The marginalization of the agricultural sector in combating the problem of youth unemployment is further reinforced by the fact that the emphasis is still very much on primary production which is less attractive to the youth compared to the other aspects of the agricultural sector value chain such as input supply, processing, storage, marketing and distribution.

The rest of the chapter is organized as follows. The next section puts the youth unemployment situation in Malawi in relation to the agricultural sector with particular emphasis on the potential contribution of the sector to concerted efforts to deal with the problem of youth unemployment. The third section examines briefly how the youth have featured in the country's agricultural policy portfolio as well as the extent to which the youth policy features the agricultural sector as a potential catalyst for youth participation in mainstream economic activities and empowerment. The fourth section discusses how agriculture has been neglected in the efforts to combat youth unemployment with particular reference to some post 1994 initiatives such as the Youth Development Credit Scheme (YDCS), the Youth Enterprise Development Fund (YEDEF) and the Youth Job Creation Initiative (YJCI). The fifth and final section offers some concluding remarks.

2. Youth Unemployment Situation in Malawi

De Gobbi, et al., (2008) projects Malawi’s total labour force at 6.1 million out of the total population of 15 million. The majority of this workforce plies their trade in the informal sector since only 2.5 percent work for private business; 1.1 percent work on estates; and 3.6 percent work in the public sector. This translates to about only 442,000 people engaged in formal sector employment which means that over 90 percent of the total working population in Malawi is engaged in the informal sector.

The dominance of the informal sector implies that the majority of Malawians earn their livelihoods as smallholder farmers. Women dominate the informal sector as they make up only 20 percent of wage employment. Thus women are less likely to be engaged in informal sector work than men (Durevall and Mussa, 2010). The majority of women work in the agriculture, forestry and fisheries sector. It is estimated that out of the 6.1 million potential workforce, about 5.7 million are either unemployed or underemployed in subsistence farming or in the formal sector.

National Statistics Office (NSO) paints a grim picture about the status of youth unemployment in Malawi (GoM, 2008). It estimated that 82 percent of the youth (15-29) were neither employed nor actively seeking for work while only 18 percent of the unemployed youth were actively seeking for work. It was further estimated that only 18 percent of the youth are self-employed and this is taken as a proxy indicator for the involvement of the youth in the informal economy. Actually, the Methodist Relief and
Development Fund (2012) ranked Malawi second in the world in terms of the magnitude of youth unemployment.

The prognosis for youth unemployment is generally bleak. It is proving difficult for young people to get absorbed into the labour market due to the very low absorption rate of new entrants. In 2008, for instance, 14 percent of the youth had completed tertiary education but they had serious problems getting formal sector employment. Furthermore, Malawi is not doing well in terms of generating a pool of young people with basic numeracy skills, which is one of the critical requirements to increase employment prospects for the youth. It is estimated that as high as 8.6 percent of the youth (10-29) years drop out of school before completion of primary education (GoM, 2008 and GoM, 2010). Youth unemployment is particularly worse in rural areas where so many individuals depend on very small parcels of land for survival (Smith, 1999 and Chinsinga, 2008).

Yet the agricultural sector has huge potential to generate massive employment opportunities for the youth. The statistics clearly indicate that agriculture is the single most important sector of the Malawi economy. It contributes about 37 percent to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), employs about 80 percent of the workforce, and contributes to over 90 percent of foreign exchange (Chinsinga, 2008; Chirwa, 2008). It is, of course, important to note that Malawi’s agriculture is dualistic, compromising of the smallholder and estate sectors. It is estimated that smallholder farmers cultivate as much as 2.4 million hectares, and although they are constrained by limited capital and technology, they produce about 80 percent of Malawi’s food and 20 percent of agricultural exports (Chirwa and Matita, 2012). The dominance of the agricultural sector in the country’s economic portfolio has been further reinforced by the progressive decline of the contribution of the manufacturing sector to GDP. It has steadily declined since the early 1990s from 16 percent to 11 percent. According to Chinsinga (2008), agro-processing constitutes 26 percent of manufacturing, less than 3 percent of GDP. This shows that the various aspects of the agricultural value chain remain hugely underdeveloped.

Although agriculture is the biggest sector of the economy, there are some concerns that it is not as productive as it should have otherwise been (Kamchacha, 2012). This means that the agricultural sector’s full potential is yet to be fully realized. The agricultural sector employs about 80 percent of the total workforce yet it contributes only about 40 percent to GDP. The rest of the GDP is produced by the remaining 20 percent of the workforce (Khaila, 2012). The limited productivity of the agricultural sector is mainly due to an overemphasis on primary production, neglecting altogether the complementary aspects of the sector’s value chain (Kamchacha, 2012 and Chinsinga & Chasukwa, 2013).

The key question is why is that the agricultural sector is not prioritized in the efforts to address the problem of chronic youth unemployment in the country? The agricultural sector is not only officially designated as the engine of economic growth but it is also the biggest employer (GoM, 2008 and Chirwa, 2008). Furthermore, it has great potential to grow since it is currently underexploited as very little or no attention is paid to the other aspects of the value chain apart from primary production. Given the country’s demographic structure, the youth should have been a deliberate target since the country is predominantly youthful. It is estimated that up to 60 percent of the total population in Malawi is under the age of 20; 48 percent is under the age of 18; and 40 percent is aged between 10 and 29 years (GoM 2008 and GoM, 2010). The paradox therefore is that while agriculture is the largest sector of the economy, it is not the largest employer of the largest demographic group in the country. This raises some serious questions about how the problem of youth unemployment features in the policy processes and in strategic decision making.
3. Youth and Agricultural Policy

The country’s history of policies let alone agricultural policy is not very long. The country has witnessed the proliferation of policies for specific sectors following the transition to democracy in May 1994 (Chinsinga, 2007). Following the 1965-1969 development plan, the country developed two ten year statement of development policies (1970-1980) and (1987-1996). These were basically programmatic outlines of the country’s development endeavours in various sectors of the economy. They provided the long-term developmental perspective which in turn guided the medium term and annual planning.

Although the statement of development policies did not specifically pay attention to the youth, they were well taken care of by the establishment of the Malawi Young Pioneers (MYP) in 1963. The MYP provided for an elaborate strategy for dealing with the question of youth employment and preparing them to take meaningful roles in society. According to Rupiya (undated), the MYP was structured around the Kibbutz model of Israel. The MYP established training bases across the country which implemented entrepreneurship, technical, agriculture and leadership programs among the youth (Kamchacha, 2012). These training bases were established in 21 out of 24 districts across the country. This initiative therefore ensured that Malawian youth were self-employed in agriculture, trade, construction and carpentry after a three year rigorous training.

The MYP enrolled all sorts of youth from primary school dropouts to university graduates. Regardless of one’s qualification, the youth had to undergo a three year rigorous training exercise that emphasized respect, discipline, physical fitness and dedication to duty (Mandiza, undated). Those with better educational qualifications were enrolled with various training colleges whereas the bulk of the primary school dropouts returned to their respective communities with a clear mandate to fight three deadly enemies, namely: ignorance, disease and poverty. The impact of the MYP recruits returning to their respective communities was reportedly quite significant. In one of the interviews it was, for instance, pointed out that “youth training at MYP had significant multiplier effects at community level because when back to their communities, the MYP recruits were working with everyone to promote modern methods of farming which guaranteed food security”¹.

While the MYP initiative is viewed positively as an avenue that linked youth to agriculture and various vocational training activities, it was condemned for also functioning as a paramilitary wing of the former ruling party, the Malawi Congress Party (MCP). The MYP was discredited because it progressively became an instrument of political control and social militarization of the Malawi society. Thus in addition to promoting agricultural production, various vocational skills and entrepreneurship, the MYP acted as the vanguard for the defense of the nation (Rupiya, undated and Mandiza, undated).

The love-hate relationship with the MYP was expressed as much in the interviews with various stakeholders. While acknowledging the positive side of the MYP, they condemned its use as an instrument of political control and terror that led to its abandonment in 1993. For instance, one of the interviewees described the MYP as “being a very good initiative that allowed youth to become meaningful and useful members of society but it was tainted because some of the youths were used to harass and torture the people that did not agree with government on some of its policies and practices”². The abandonment of the MYP has created an institutional vacuum for rural youth which stakeholders are struggling to fill to date.

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¹ Interview with a Project Officer for YONECO, Ntcheu, 27th January 2013.
² Interview with a Principal Officer at the Ministry of Sports and Youth, Lilongwe, 23rd January 2013.
The transition to democracy in May 1994 was accompanied by the swift implementation of structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) which has had significant implications on the role of the state in matters of employment. According to Changuta (2002), the apparent vacuum that followed the abandonment of the MYP is not surprising because SAPs relegate a passive role of employment creation to the Employment is seen as a derivative of the overall economic resuscitation to result from the economic restructuring exercises. This means that the state should not take deliberate strategic planning and active measures aimed at employment generation, especially youth employment creation.

The debilitating effects of SAPs invariably popularized what White (2012) calls ‘do it yourself employment strategy for the youth’. Instead of encouraging the state to actively drive the employment creation process, international organizations such as the International Labour Organization, World Bank and the United Nations Industrial Organization are encouraging them to promote entrepreneurship among the youth as a strategy to get them employed.

The currency of this philosophy was clearly reflected in the 1996 youth policy which was designed to take care of the vacuum following the disbandment of the MYP. The major weakness of this policy is that “it did not foresee the need to link the youth to agriculture as a priority area” (Kamchacha, 2012: 13). This linkage is still absent even in the 2010 revised draft youth policy. Although agriculture is widely regarded as an engine of economic growth in Malawi, there is no clear link between the youth policy and the agricultural sector.

The revised draft youth policy whose mission statement is to create an enabling environment for all young people to develop their full potential in order to significantly contribute to personal and national development, identifies six priority areas but none of them makes explicit linkages to the agricultural sector. These priority areas include: 1) education, science, technology and environment; 2) sports and culture; 3) health and nutrition; 4) social services and recreation; 5) youth participation and leadership; and 6) youth economic empowerment. This means that the failure by the draft youth policy to close this gap and ensure linkage to agriculture “will make it fail achieve the intended goal of youth participation in key development activities” (Kamachacha, 2012: 14). It would, indeed, be difficult to ensure that youth are involved in the country’s mainstream economic activities when agriculture, the leading sector of growth, is excluded altogether.

There has generally been blackout on youth in major policies that have been formulated in Malawi since May 1994. This is evident in the critical reviews of these policies (Chinsinga and Chasukwa, 2012). Young people are not treated and targeted as a distinct category needing attention either in the Poverty Alleviation Programme (1994); Vision 2020 (1998); the Malawi Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (2001); One Village One Product (OVOP) (2001); the Malawi Growth and Development Strategy (MGDS) (2006); or the Malawi Growth and Development Strategy (MGDS) (GoM, 2012). Young people do not even appear in the sections on crosscutting issues dominated by gender, HIV/AIDS, environment and technology. Similar observations were made by Bennel (2007). He argued that young people as a group are not a priority of most governments in low income countries. Consequently, Ministries of Youth are generally subsumed or combined with other government responsibilities, most commonly culture, sports and education.

Youth are not given attention in the Agricultural Sector Wide Approach (ASWAp) which is the Comprehensive African Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP) inspired document. Through CAADP, African governments have committed themselves to allocate at least 10 percent of their annual national budgets to the agricultural sector and aim to achieve 6 percent growth target per year (Chinsinga, 2012). The critical review of the ASWAp suggests that the youth are not an integral part of
the efforts to revive the fledging agricultural sector in the country. According to the National Coordinator of the Civil Society Agriculture Network (CISANET), ASWAp “has overlooked the importance of youth in agriculture...yet youth make up the biggest proportion of the national population”. He emphasized that this is not unique to the ASWAp. It is actually the trade mark of all agricultural orientated policies. They do not “actually talk about youth; they simply talk about males and females....and in the minds of the policy makers the distinction between youth and adult farmers does not really matter”.3

The neglect of agriculture as a possible source of employment for rural youth is manifested in the country’s curricula for vocational training. According to Valle (2012) the curriculum shows a lack of connection between the demand of the labour market and the preparation of the government of the new generation. While 85 percent of the population lives in rural areas and agriculture accounts for 39 percent of GDP, over 80 percent of the labour force, over 90 percent of total exports, agriculture is not among the courses offered by the Technical Entrepreneurship Vocational Education and Training Authority (TEVETA). The apparent neglect of agriculture explains why various aspects of its value chain remain hugely undeveloped for it to be fully exploited as a source of viable employment opportunities among youth. Agriculture is viewed mainly in terms of primary production activities that are described by the youth as “unattractive since they make farmers dirty on a daily basis yet these activities are not rewarding at all”.4

The reviews of TEVETA among youth are not encouraging either. They described it as lacking capacity to train as many youth as possible as was the case with the MYP but also that its training is perceived as substandard. In an FGD, Likhubula youth club members contended that “those who have undergone TEVETA programs are not as competitive as those who undergo ‘Trade Tests’ (sic)”. Moreover, there are concerns that rural youth are marginalized in TEVETA activities because they do not often have adequate information about these opportunities. While these opportunities are meant mainly for rural youth “they are monopolized by the urban youth since they do not only have ready access to information about these opportunities but they also exploit their networks and connections”.5

4. Behind Agriculture Neglect

The apparent neglect of agriculture as a potential source of employment for the youth is mainly due to the political imperatives associated with a democratic political dispensation in a neopatrimonial setting. The political elites are preoccupied with devising strategies that can maintain them in power in the four or five year electoral cycles. According to Poulton (2012), ideally politicians in a democracy are expected to exchange good policies with votes and as such politicians should be inclined to respond to the priorities of the most dominant constituency. However, Joughin and Kjaer (2010) argue that democracies may or may not promote technocratic policy making that addresses the interests of the median voter. This is often the case because the multiplication of demands on the state resulting from the universal franchise of the citizenry makes democracies more inclined to direct rather than indirect methods of policy implementation, which include subsidies and related handouts.

The preference of direct over indirect methods of policy implementation suggests that politicians prefer policies that benefit a large number of people in the short term and are highly visible such as social policies. They thus prefer to win votes by delivering clientelist privileges rather than the more

3 Ibid.
4 FGD with members of Likhubula Youth Club, Zomba, 2nd February 2013.
5 FGD with members of Tithanidzane, Tigonjetse and Tipewe Youth Clubs, Ntcheu, 28th January 2013.
unattainable development or even public goods (Lindberg, 2003). This implies that elections could be a double aged sword in the policy processes in a democratic dispensation within a neopatrimonial context. Competitive elections may reinforce clientelism rather than counteract it because the governing elite would need to have an even tighter grip on material and coercive resources in order to prevent competitive patronage networks from engaging and threatening the state from within the system.

The main question politicians often ask about each policy before is how will it help us either to capture power or stay in power? This disposition shapes the kind of policies elites chose and how they are subsequently implemented (Whitfield and Therkildsen, 2011). The bottom line is that ruling elites want to stay in power, and staying in power requires building and maintaining a political organization which can be achieved through clientelistic or programmatic means. The rest of this section therefore demonstrates how political imperatives have contributed to handling the problem of youth unemployment in Malawi since the transition to democracy in a manner that more or less neglects the agricultural sector yet it is a leading sector of the country’s economy.

4.1 The Fertilizer Subsidy Programme (FISP)

While the implementation of FISP has led to the dramatic expansion of the volume of resources to the agricultural sector, it has at the same time taken off agricultural transformation from the agenda (Chinsinga, 2012). The implementation of the FISP since the 2005/06 growing season has greatly raised the profile of the agricultural sector in terms of resources yet they are spent almost exclusively on FISP neglecting other potentially transformative activities such as extension, research, irrigation and infrastructural development. Since the launch of the FISP, the share of the agricultural sector in the national budget has fluctuated between 10.1 and 16.7 percent. This is in line with the 2003 Maputo Declaration on Agriculture and Food security that underlies the Comprehensive African Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP).

However, FISP has degenerated into a political tool as it is widely seen by politicians as a quick fix to the problem of food security that often affects the country (Chirwa, et al., 2013). It is seen as such because it plays a critical role in shoring up a government’s legitimacy as it has become the basis for a social contract between the people and rulers (Sahely, et al., 2005). There is thus so to speak a political-economic bind of the FISP since the question of food security is firmly at the centre of the country’s electoral politics. Consequently, it is difficult for politicians to ignore FISP as it has become the single most important vote winning issue (Chinsinga, 2010). This has greatly affected the way in which FISP is regarded by politicians and how its dynamics of implementation are shaped up. They look at it primarily as a programme to fix the problem of food insecurity and not a programme that would catalyze fundamental agricultural transformation in the country. It is therefore viewed as a standalone programme without any linkages to a wide range of ongoing rural development interventions because its main concern, especially from the politicians’ perspective, is simply to guarantee food security for the people so that they maintain themselves in power.

It is therefore not surprising that there is little or no effort at all to ensure strategic and balanced investments in the agricultural sector so as to spearhead fundamental and sustainable structural transformation. It is estimated that up to 75 percent of the budget for the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security (MoAFS) is spent on FISP. The amount of resources directed to the provision of extension services, conducting research and rural infrastructural development is quite negligible yet these investments are very critical to facilitating sustainable development of the sector (Khaila, 2012).
The argument is that the youth are overlooked in the implementation of FISP because of the apparent political capture of the programme (Chinsinga and Chasukwa, 2012). The criteria for identifying beneficiaries of FISP exclude the youth. The main reason for their exclusion is that “they do not own land and are energetic enough to work elsewhere to generate income to purchase agricultural inputs on their own from the market”\(^6\). This means that FISP operates on the premise that the youth have adequate skills to make them competitive on the labour market, and that employment opportunities are readily available yet existing statistics show that it is almost impossible for the youth to get employment both in the formal and informal sectors.

The obsession of politicians with FISP as a vote spinning machine has made it impossible to shape its implementation dynamics in a way that it would make the agricultural sector more productive and attractive to young people. This is the case because FISP is narrowly focused on principally bolstering production of smallholders growing maize whose availability equated to food security (Smale and Jayne, 2003). This means that even if the youth were to be included in FISP, it would not readily contribute to solving the unemployment problem among the youth. The youth are not interested in primary production but rather in other value chain aspects of the agricultural sector such as marketing, processing, storage and distribution. These are, of course, an integral part of FISP but they are monopolized by the political elites and their cronies (World Bank, et al., 2011). In one of the FGDs, the participants actually observed that “time for us to stick to traditional understanding of farming as in growing maize is long gone. We have seen our grandfathers and fathers growing maize but this has not made any difference in their lives. Farming has ended up being a source of misery. We should aim higher than them and this involves going beyond their way of understanding and practicing farming”\(^7\).

The persistence of the traditional conception of agriculture as exclusively primary production is a cause of concern because it has contributed to the youth’s negative perception of agriculture as an occupation of choice. In fact, agriculture does not feature at all among the youth as one of the reliable livelihood strategies. They generally view agriculture as old fashioned, an occupation of the poor and an inconsequential enterprise. In an FGD with a youth club in Ntcheu district agriculture was characterized as “an enterprise without a future...if it had a future our parents would have changed their status yet they have been farming since we were young”\(^8\). This just shows that that the various segments of the value chain in the agricultural sector are not well developed. The point is that activities such as “input supply, processing, storage and marketing and distribution could provide smart employment with status equal to white collar employment” (Kamchacha, 2012: 10).

### 4.2 Youth Empowerment Initiatives after Malawi Young Pioneers (MYP)

The youth initiatives that have been implemented after the abandonment of the MYP initiative have almost entirely ignored the agricultural sector. The main initiatives include the Youth Development Credit Scheme (YDSC) and the Youth Enterprise Development Fund (YEDEF) (Chinsinga and Chasukwa, 2013). The lack of an explicit linkage of these initiatives to the agricultural sector might be attributed to the framing of the youth policy. Both the initial and revised versions of the youth policy do not prioritize the agricultural sector as a potential catalyst for sustainable employment opportunities for the youth. The main contributing factor to the apparent lack of policy coherence of the youth initiatives has to do with the underlying motivations of the politicians when they propose and implement these policies.

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\(^6\) Interview with the District Agricultural Development Officer (DADO), Ntcheu District, 4th February 2012.

\(^7\) FGD participants with Likhubula Youth Club, Zomba district, 2\(^{nd}\) February 2013.

\(^8\) FGD participants with Bwalo la Ana Youth Active Community Organization (BLAYACO), Ntcheu district, 27\(^{th}\) January, 2013.
These initiatives are often conceived by politicians without any significant technical input and they are “driven primarily by political imperatives rather than a well thought out vision to transform the livelihoods of the youth”\(^9\). The political imperatives of these initiatives are underpinned by the timing of these initiatives. They are either launched just before or after elections “because they either target the youth as a significant voting block or a way of saying thank you to them for voting the politicians into power”\(^10\).

4.1.1 The Youth Credit Development Scheme

The YDCS was funded to the tune of MK 70 million and was launched in August in 1996 with financial support from the Commonwealth Credit Initiative. It was conceived as a revolving credit facility and it was managed by the now defunct Small Enterprises Development Organization of Malawi (SEDOM), a quasi governmental body. The YDCS targeted both young men and women who had developed viable business plans and were ready to get started. It was a credit facility with concessionary interest rates pegged at 15 percent against the prevailing market interest rates in the range of 20-25 percent. The YDCS targeted youth aged between 15 and 30 (Chinsinga, 2002).

4.1.2 The Youth Enterprise Development Fund (YEDEF)

The YEDEF was launched in 2010 with an initial capital of MK 3 billion. The main objective of YEDEF is to provide easily accessible loans to youth entrepreneurs in form of capital equipment and working capital to venture into various areas including the agri-food sector (Chinsinga and Chasukwa, 2013). The loans are provided to youths in groups of at least ten people or in some rare cases to individuals who have gone through a self-selection process duly appraised by the YEDEF district committee. When it was introduced in 2010, YEDEF targeted youth between 18 and 30 years of age but the eligibility age bracket was extended to 35. According to its guidelines, the fund caters for out of school youth, both skilled and unskilled who are expected to engage in various trades such as agricultural production, construction, carpentry and joinery, panel beating, welding and metal fabrication. The vision of YEDEF is to support groups of youth that have proven technical business skills as a means for them to earn independent livelihoods and even create employment for fellow youths particularly in rural areas.

4.3 Performance Review of YDCS and YEDEF

A critical review of both YDCS and YEDEF shows that they have not been very successful. The dismal performance of these initiatives is attributed mainly to the fact that they were characterized by excessive political interference. Even though they were championed as youth initiatives, “the primary targets were youths that were aligned to the parties in power at a particular moment”\(^11\). Both initiatives have failed to pass the sustainability test because they have been heavily politicized (Chinsinga, 2002 and Whitby, 2012). The administrators of these initiatives are often forced to skip the laid out procedures by politicians. The argument is that “politicians put pressures on us to disburse loans to groups or individuals of their choice regardless of the laid out procedures. All they want is to gain political mileage”\(^12\). With particular reference to YEDEF, this became more or less the official policy.

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\(^10\) Interview with an NGO official, Lilongwe, 31\(^{st}\) January, 2013.

\(^11\) Interview with an NGO official in Zomba district, 6\(^{th}\) February 2013.

\(^12\) See “YEDEF for DPP Youth”, The Nation, 6\(^{th}\) March 2010.
when President late Mutharika publicly declared that “priority in disbursing YEDEF loans should be given to DPP youth cadets”\textsuperscript{13}.

It is therefore not surprising that both YDCS and YEDEF have had dismal track records. YDCS could not be sustained as a revolving fund because the repayment rate was less than 10 percent (Chinsinga, 2002). A recent assessment shows that the repayment rate for YEDEF is as low as 23 percent (Chinsinga and Chasukwa, 2013). The prominence of politicians in deciding who should benefit or not from these initiatives has “created the impression that the money given out is free money”\textsuperscript{14}. Consequently, the popular perception about YEDEF is that “the loan was meant to be a thank you to all those youth that contributed to the landslide victory of the party in the 2009 presidential and parliamentary elections”\textsuperscript{15}. The decision to extend the age bracket to 35 for YEDEF’s beneficiaries was therefore meant to “expand the catchment of patronage as a strategy to mortgage the youth in readiness for the 2014 elections”\textsuperscript{16}.

While in its design, YEDEF is also expected to serve as a source of readily accessible credit to graduates from various vocational education training institutions, the review revealed that this linkage does not exist in practice. No graduates from vocational training institutions have benefited from YEDEF (Whitby, 2012). Priority consideration is given to youths who are politically connected. Even if the graduates were to benefit from YEDEF, this could not have had positive impact on the agricultural sector. As noted earlier, the TEVETA curriculum does not include any modules on agriculture (Valle, 2012). Nevertheless, under the auspices of its Skills Development Initiative, TEVETA offers short term trainings in agriculture but only upon request from communities (TEVETA, 2010). The demand for such training is essentially non-existent because communities are expected to shoulder the costs of delivery which they cannot afford. The failure of this initiative to take off further reinforces the marginalization of the agricultural sector in the efforts to combat youth unemployment especially since the majority of new agriculturalists shun working in rural areas. They are reluctant to work in rural areas because “they cannot fulfill their dreams as a network generation”\textsuperscript{17}. They can't imagine themselves living in areas without electricity and Internet connectivity. This is greatly contributing the emergence of an orphaned generation of farmers who are hardly supported by a coherent system of provision of extension services which is quite critical to spearheading potential agrarian transformation.

### 4.4 Bringing back Agriculture into Youth Development?

The Youth Job Creation Initiative (YJCI) launched by President Banda on 15\textsuperscript{th} March 2013 appeared poised to bring back agriculture to the fore of youth development. The YJCI was launched in pursuance of the aspirations of the national youth policy and the Malawi Growth and Development Strategy (MGDS II) (GoM, 2012). It was further justified as a strategy for dealing with the problem of chronic youth unemployment by exporting unskilled, skilled and semi-skilled labour to countries where they could acquire skills and knowledge that would in turn be put to productive use here at home upon return. The target countries for youth labour export included South Korea, Kuwait and United Arab Emirates.

The YJCI targets youth aged between 19 and 25 with aspirations to work in the service, tourism and agricultural sectors. It was announced at the launch of the YJCI that the government had secured a

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{14} Interview with the District Youth Officer, Zomba district, 3\textsuperscript{rd} February 2013.

\textsuperscript{15} Interview with one of the Senior Officials of Ntcheu district council, 24\textsuperscript{th} February 2013.

\textsuperscript{16} Interview with an NGO Official, Lilongwe, 23\textsuperscript{rd} January, 2013.

\textsuperscript{17} Interview with the Chief Economist in the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security (MoAFS), Lilongwe, 18\textsuperscript{th} January 2013.
youth labour export contract with South Korea under which up 100,000 youth would be engaged\textsuperscript{18}. The Ministry of Labour floated two adverts for employment opportunities in South Korea, one of them generic in nature while the other one had particular emphasis on the agricultural sector. The generic advert stipulated the following attributes of the prospective applicants: a) must be Malawian aged between 19 and 25; b) should have a minimum of the Malawi School Certificate of Education (MSCE); c) should be able to communicate in English; d) must be willing to undergo medical test at a designated hospital; e) should have a valid passport or be able to acquire one; f) should be able to raise money to pay for visa; and g) should have no criminal record\textsuperscript{19}.

The advert with some bias toward the agricultural sector orientated jobs asked for applicants with: a) degree in agriculture specializing in livestock management; b) degree in chemistry or bachelor of science degree with chemistry as a major subject; c) degree in electrical engineering particularly women; d) advanced certificate in information technology; and e) grade 2 or above trade test certificate in welding or equivalent qualification. This was touted as a programme that would “build capacity for the youth by engaging them in productive agricultural activities throughout the period of the contract and at the end of the contract, the youth would put into practice the knowledge and skills gained as part of youth participation and empowerment”\textsuperscript{20}. The YJCU was further described as an opportunity to make most youth productive since “most of our youth are just sitting idle in villages and towns, they are not working, they are not in school, this is an opportunity for them to be productive”\textsuperscript{21}.

The YJCI has more or less fallen through. It hit a dead end when the government of South Korea denied having sealed a youth labour export deal with the Malawi government. The rebuttal came through the African Division of South Korea’s Foreign Affairs Ministry observing “our government has not received any official request from Malawi that they want to send their workers to our country”\textsuperscript{22}. Meanwhile the future of the initiative hangs in balance. The first batch of 336 successful recruits who were ready to take up their posts in South have been told to wait for fresh communication as to when exactly they will leave for South Korea.

Had the YJCI succeeded, it had huge potential to contribute to the development and subsequent transformation of the agricultural sector. The agricultural sector in Malawi is quite backward and the exposure of a good number of the youth to the South Korean advanced agricultural system could have contributed to the drive to modernize the country’s agricultural sector. The exposure should have contributed to the transformation of the Malawian agricultural sector because the youth are characterized as a ‘Cheetah’ generation that is not only receptive to new ideas but also readily adopts them.

However, a critical review of the YJCI raises some serious doubts as to whether it would have facilitated the achievement of the desired transformation of the agricultural sector. The review shows that the institutional design of the YJCI would have made it extremely difficult for it to contribute meaningfully to utilization of the skills and expertise that the beneficiaries would have acquired at the end of their contracts in South Korea. This is the case because the recruitment of the youth for South Korea job opportunities was done entirely by the District Labour Offices without the involvement of their counterparts from the agricultural sector. Moreover, no programme document was produced that

\textsuperscript{18} See “The Widening Gyre of Korea Saga: A Chronology”, Sunday Times, 9\textsuperscript{th} June 2013.
\textsuperscript{19} See The Nation, 22\textsuperscript{nd} March 2013.
\textsuperscript{20} See The Nation, 28\textsuperscript{th} May 2013
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{22} See Africa-Asia Confidential “Youth Export Palaver”, Vol. 6, No. 8, June 2013.
“stipulated how upon returning to the country, the youth would be taken on board so that they fully contribute to the country’s socio-economic endeavours particularly in the agricultural sector”\(^{23}\). This shows that YJCI’s linkage to the agricultural sector was very much a political rhetoric than a well thought out linkage at the technical level within the broader scheme of national development efforts.

It is therefore not surprising that the YJCI has been equally condemned as a strategic ploy to woo the youth vote ahead of the May 2014 general elections. Just like with YDCS and YEDEF, the popular perception is that YJCI is motivated more by political imperatives of winning an election than the genuine commitment to bringing about sustainable changes in the livelihoods of the youth who constitute about 60 percent of the total population. The youth are thus the biggest single voting bloc. This perception was rendered more credible when the Minister of Labour said that “…for the initiative to be fairly implemented there is need for the involvement of MPs who will help us identify youths from their respective constituencies”\(^{24}\).

### 4.5 Structural and Funding Constraints

There is an acknowledgement that the promotion of youth visibility in a coherent fashion in policy circles is undermined by structural constraints and limited funding for the sector (GoM, 2012). In terms of structural constraints, there is destructive competition between the Ministry of Youth Development and Sports (MoYDS) and the National Youth Council of Malawi (NYCoM). This is the case because there is lack of clarity regarding their mandates. This has resulted in fierce contests between the two bordering on who is best positioned to champion the youth agenda. The persistent conflictual relationship between MoYDS and NYCoM has made it difficult for the two institutions to work together in championing the cause of the youth with the sense of purpose and unity of direction. This has made collaboration with other stakeholders difficult which has not worked in favour of the youth especially in view of the fact that youth issues are crosscutting in nature. The failure to collaborate with other sectors, particularly agriculture, is underlined by the absence of any reference to it in the revised draft policy which makes it difficult to ensure that the youth participate in key development activities (Kamchacha, 2012).

The youth sector is not amongst priority ones in terms of funding and expenditure. The youth constitute the largest proportion of the population yet funding for the sector has been quite negligible as a matter of routine. In the 2010/11 financial year for instance, it was allocated only MK 826.69 million which is hardly adequate to empower the MoYDS and NYCoM to implement their activities on notable scale and in a transformational manner. Funding projections in the MGDS II to the youth sector are not encouraging either (GoM, 2012). It is projected that by the 2015/16 fiscal year, government will have increased budgetary support for Child Development and Youth Empowerment from 1.6 percent of the 39.1 percent of resources allocated to Social Development from 1.4 percent of 38.6 percent allocated to Social Development in the 2013/14 fiscal within the framework of the MGDS\(^{25}\).

### Concluding Remarks

There is no doubt that Malawi grapples with the question of chronic youth unemployment. This is, of course, not unique to Malawi. It is a serious problem across the developing world. It is cause of concern

\(^{23}\) Interview with an agriculturalist at Bunda College of Agriculture, Lilongwe, 10\(^{th}\) April, 2013.
\(^{24}\) See “Malawi to Export Youth Labour to South Korea: President Banda Launches Initiative”, Malawi News Agency, 15\(^{th}\) March 2013.
\(^{25}\) The MGDS II identifies Child Development, Youth Development and Empowerment as one of the key priority areas under theme of Social Development.
in Malawi because the country is predominantly youthful with as high as 60 percent of its total population falling into the youth category (Chinsinga and Chasukwa, 2013). The future socio-economic prosperity depends on the youth getting adequately prepared for, and finding opportunities to put their skills and expertise to proper use. The problem of chronic youth unemployment threatens to put to waste the potential demographic dividend that comes along with predominantly youthful populations (USAID, 2012).

There have, of course, been concerted efforts on the part of the government to address the problem of chronic youth unemployment. However, apart from the MYP none of the initiatives developed to combat youth unemployment has paid particular attention to the agricultural sector despite it being the leading employer in the country. This has further been reinforced by the fact that both the initial and revised versions of the youth policy have not made an explicit linkage between having a vibrant agricultural sector and youth empowerment. The preoccupation of politicians with agriculture as primary production focused principally on growing maize for purposes of ensuring food security has made it difficult to develop other aspects of the value chain of the sector that would have made it attractive to the youth (Anderson, 2011). Moreover, the support programmes to the sector do not include the youth which makes it impossible to fully exploit the potential of the sector as the biggest employer in order to combat the problem of chronic youth unemployment.

The efforts to deal with youth unemployment such as YDCS and YEDEF are often not well thought for them to achieve the desired strategic impact regardless of the fact they do not explicitly put particular emphasis on agriculture. The reviews of these programmes have been quite discouraging. This is the case because the programmes are principally conceived and implemented to satisfy political goals and not necessarily as a genuine commitment to improving the livelihoods of the youth. Both in terms of their timing and modalities of implementation, these programmes are designed to either capture or appease the youth as a vocal political constituency. It is clear that policies or programmes directed at youth empowerment are driven by short-termism, motivated by the selfish desires by politicians to maintain themselves in power. This has greatly contributed to the marginalization of the agricultural in the efforts to deal with youth unemployment although it has the potential to create decent jobs since it would likely foster the development of other aspects of the value chain that are currently undeveloped such as input supply, processing, storage, marketing and distribution.

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