

On the ground the programme is highly appreciated by beneficiaries (however, only two beneficiaries were interviewed). It addresses key bottlenecks in the production system of smallholder farmers (access to credit facilities for farming inputs) and offers viable solutions as gauged by the repayment capacity (although this point still needs to be verified by actual field data) according to beneficiaries and implementers.

Despite the fact that the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives is collaborating in the implementation of this programme and that conservation farming has been adopted as the key approach for its extension service provision it shows surprisingly little interest in and ownership of the programme at the field level.

Recommendations

For future scaling-up interventions the following recommendations can be made:

- Harmonise programme reporting procedures on implementation (technical level) with programme monitoring and evaluation at outcome and impact levels.
- Develop clear and binding monitoring structures and procedures in line with implementation structures.
- Streamline loan collection system of the revolving fund by having it run through the cotton company. The involvement of an intermediary player is likely to reduce the efficiency and eventually sustainability of the fund due to reduced volumes of funds being turned around.
- Instil ownership of the programme by MACO through involvement and capacity building of their field staff. Monitoring and evaluation of joint projects and programmes should to be harmonised with the Management Information System of the Ministry so that lessons learnt can easily be internalised.

Informants: Collins Nkatiko, Project Coordinator
Immanuel Sapanoi, Field Supervisor
John Fynn, Technical Advisor / ZNFU
Calvin Butts, Farmer Monze – beneficiary
Joy Hatontola, Farmer Magoye – beneficiary

Documents: Programme for Promotion of Conservation Farming and Crop Diversity for Improved Rural Food Security, Programme Estimate No (1).

suddenly appreciated drastically against the dollar reducing the margin between input costs charged by the cotton company and income earned from cotton sales which drove a lot of his fellow farmers out of cotton production this year, Mr. Butts is determined to continue. He is confident that the enhanced productivity through the application of CF technologies and the expanded area of cultivation using draft animal power will reap benefits for him and his family.

The second farmer visited was Mrs. Joy Hatontola near Magoye in Mazabuka District. Mrs. Hatontola was introduced as the beneficiary farmer, although she was joint by her husband during the interview. When asked how they share responsibilities, land and workload both answered that they would work together most of the time but that for this project the wife took the lead. Both farmers had previous experience with conservation farming techniques. Apart from CFU, several other organisations (DAPP, GTZ and PLAN) promoted conservation farming in this area. They adopted CF already a long time ago and found the main benefit its contribution to yield stability: "CF is better because we harvest something even when the rains are not so good". Mrs. Hatontola received two oxen from the programme in the 2005/6. She was very proud to announce that she had already paid back 1.3 million Kwacha last year. This year she is planning to repay 1.8 million and in the last year 2 million Kwacha. According to her it was not difficult to repay because her yields have improved due to early land preparation and generally increased the household income since they can use the oxen to ferry produce into town where the prices are better. The profits from the cotton production will be used to pay school fees for their children. Additionally Mrs. Hatontola claimed that this year for the first time she will be able to hire people to help with the harvest of the cotton and will not have to rely on their children for help. She is practicing crop rotation. Last season they planted 1 ha of cotton, 1 ha of maize, 2 lima of cowpea and 2 lima of sweet potatoes. The latter two are mainly for home consumption and selling to neighbours. In the past they also grew groundnuts but it was difficult to find a market for them. Apart from the 2 oxen the family owns only small livestock (goats and chicken). Mrs. Hatontola is keeping records of her activities aided by the record forms supplied by the programme. She claimed that it helps her to remember what activity has to be carried out when. In summary she pointed out that the programme gave her and her family the opportunity to expand and improve their farming operations and increase their household income.

Conclusions

First of all it should be kept in mind that this programme is a pilot measure. A pilot is meant to field-test new approaches or technologies. In order to be able to draw lessons learnt from them, monitoring of the implementation and evaluation of the impact has to be a key component of the design. A detailed log-frame and indicators were developed for activities but apparently no feasible procedure and consolidated structure for capturing and compiling information at outcome and impact level has been established before hand.

Implementation procedures for the programme activities are covered at great detail in the project document, however, the issue of sustainability of the revolving fund management has not been sufficiently anchored in the design. Thus the loan recovery system was flawed in the first season and the suggested remedy appears to be overburdened by administrative layers and associated costs. The most natural solution would be for the cotton company to administer the revolving fund since they are already supplying inputs to farmers on a loan agreement basis thus simply adding another element to their service provision package.

- Impact level: Apparently the ZNFU carried out post-hoc⁴ baseline surveys and is planning to conduct an impact survey on beneficiaries this year (2007), supplemented with an in-depth study on a smaller number of farmers re-sampled from the baseline survey.

The project document is very detailed with regards to “technical and administrative implementation arrangements” which focuses on financial accountability. Assuming that the general aim of a pilot measure is to gain experience with new technologies / approaches and collect information to extract lessons learnt for the scaling-up of interventions it is surprising that the project document does not give clearer or more explicit guidance on this issue. Furthermore, despite the fact that several institutions are involved in the implementation and monitoring of the programme at various levels, apparently coordinated by the ZNFU headquarters, no information could be made available at this stage. During the field interviews it transpired that the Ministry is not even requesting for the farmer activity record forms indicating a lack of ownership of the programme. The ZNFU was mandated to coordinate monitoring and evaluation of the programme at outcome and impact levels. Although this work is still under way it appears that the adopted approach is rather on an ad-hoc / post hoc basis than in a systematically planned and pro-actively executed fashion.

Benefits to farmers

In order to get a feel for the appreciation of the programme by the target group beneficiary farmers were visited. The first one was Mr. Calvin Butts a smallholder cotton farmer in Monze district. Mr. Butts used hired labour for weeding and harvesting of his cotton fields in the past. He participated in an earlier conservation farming promotion programme where he learnt about pot-holing, crop rotation and crop residue management. Most of these techniques he implemented in his fields. Due to limited labour (or rather capital to higher more labour) he cultivated only about 3-4 lima of land. He even experimented with ripping using hired oxen at some stage. Thus Mr. Butts had considerable experience with CF, including ox-driven systems. His crop rotation included cotton, maize, groundnuts and sunflower. The only problem with practicing crop rotations is the marketing aspect of it according to Mr. Butts. Cotton production is on a contract farming arrangement and therefore market availability is not a concern. The Food Reserve Agency is offering an output market for maize at a good price but after selling to them last season he still hasn't been paid for his produce. Formal output markets for the other crops (sunflower and groundnuts) are simply not existent. Hence his family consumes these commodities themselves and tries to sell some of it to neighbours.

In the past the lack of access to capital for investment into his own farming equipment and to hire sufficient labour limited the scope of his farming operations. Although Mr. Butts participated in business management trainings, conducted by several NGOs he did not see much point in implementing such skills due to the stunted dimension of his operations. This changed in 2005 when he received 2 oxen from the programme. Mr. Butts was able to increase his production area to now close to 5 ha. Encouraged by the programme he started to keep records of his activities, expenditures and income. Hence he keeps track of his loan repayment schedule, calculates the profitability of his operations and consequently is able to improve his management. For him this was a great leap forward in turning farming into a business. Despite the heavy knock the cotton industry including the smallholder producers had to absorb last year when the Kwacha

⁴ Based on farmers' memories on their performance in previous seasons (2004 to 2006).

However, it is not without failures and short-comings. For instance the collection of loans for the packages should have been carried out by Dunavant by setting it off against cotton sales by the farmers. This was not done due to miscommunication between the various partners about their roles and responsibilities on the ground. Thus repayment rates were as low as 11% in the first season. When the CFU staff realised the problem and subsequently, took over the loan collection the season was already advanced hence farmers had utilised, consumed or reinvested their earnings already. Nevertheless, recovery of loans increased to 68 and 23% for the oxenisation and FSP, respectively. CFU staff claims the capacity to repay the loans was 100% at the time of the cotton sales. The poor result merely reflected the confusion on the implementer's side. Although this could be put down to teething problems of a new programme the CFU saw a principal problem in the, eventually, conflicting roles as loan collectors and extension agency. It was felt that these functions need to be kept separate to ensure the integrity of the extension workers as service providers in the perception of farmers.

Consequently, a new arrangement was found for the current season. Dunavant as a member of the Agri-Business Forum (ABF), an association of private sector players promoting contract farming, entrusted ABF with the coordination of the loan collection for the 2006/07 season. Obviously this will still be done through Dunavant structures since the ABF has no presence at field level. The repayments will be used to set up a revolving fund which eventually (from next season onwards) will be administered by the Micro Bankers Trust (MBT). Neither the ABF nor the MBT were members of the Steering Committee and thus involved in the programme from its beginnings. The level of ownership with the programme objectives is hence questionable. Another factor likely to impact negatively on the establishment and continued running of the revolving fund will be the fact that ABF as well as MBT will deduct service charges from the collected loans to cover their own overheads. The programme document stipulates in great detail implementation procedures and guidelines of programme but remains surprisingly silent on the issue of loan recovery and the establishment of a revolving fund. This turned out to be a weak point of the programme design.

Programme Monitoring and Evaluation

The logical framework of the programme contains narratives of objectives (goal and purpose level) and results (relating to activities), as well as objectively verifiable indicators, sources of verification and assumptions. The framework is hierarchically structured and the different levels logically linked. The indicators (with a few exceptions, e.g. second bullet under result two is rather an activity than an indicator) are clearly relating to and measuring activities and results, respectively. The information for these indicators is obtained from various institutions that are collaborating in the implementation of the programme.

- Field level: 4-fold activity record forms to be filled in by the farmer and counter-signed by extension staff, to be kept with CFU, Dunavant, MACO and the farmer.
- Implementation level: quarterly summary implementation reports on expenditure, activities / results, problems and next quarter activity plans. The reports are meant to be distributed to members of the steering committee. According to the programme log-frame the main sources of information for these reports are from a combination of ZNFU, CFU and independent M&E reports as well as from the Cotton Company and GART records.
- Financial accountability: Audits are to be carried out at the end of each year.

The value of the package was calculated at 5.1 million Kwacha including interest at the ruling bank rate.

Component 2: The Food Security Pack aims at the “poorest of the poor” (4500 farmers) and is moulded after a similar intervention approach by the Programme Against Malnutrition, PAM. The beneficiaries under this component were selected by the district committees of the Disaster Management Mitigation Unit (DMMU). The difference to the PAM approach is that the programme allows individual farmers to participate, instead of being tied to farmer groups. In the original design this component was planned as a grant. After objection by CFU, however, a loan based approach was adopted. Additional to the selection process of the DMMU the beneficiaries had to be active or past cotton growers with Dunavant.

Package: One Shaka hoe
 Inputs for 2 lima of maize (incl. seeds, fertiliser and lime)
 Seeds for 1 lima of cowpea
 Seeds for 1 lime of cotton
 All seeds were “inoculated” with a biological coating to enhance crop performance

The value of the package was calculated at 410.000 Kwacha in year one and reduced to 340.000 Kwacha and 310.000 Kwacha in the second year for packs with and without lime, respectively. This saving was possible due to farmers accessing fertiliser through the Government programme at a subsidised price.

Programme implementation and impact

The CFU set up a project facilitation and coordination structure. To complement the supply of packages with extension services on conservation farming techniques eight extension officers and two field supervisors were employed and equipped with motorbikes. This extension unit conducted field days, farmer exchange visits, and farmer study tours apart from extension visits by field staff. In order to enhance its effectiveness and efficiency the extension staff operated through farmers groups set up by the cotton company (Dunavant distributor system). These farmer groups are visited on average 4 times a month and group meetings are followed up by individual visits of approximately half of the group members. The actual delivery of the goods or packages is subcontracted to mostly private sector companies.

The extension to farmer ratio in this programme is comparable to the 1 to 100 ratio recommended by the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives. However, farmers perceived the programme intervention as far more effective than the Government services. Several factors can be assumed to play a role in this, firstly MACO does not meet its own target of 1 extension officer to 100 farmers due to a considerable number of un-manned camps in the districts. Secondly and probably more importantly the CFU staff is more mobile and more motivated. Motorbikes and a blend of complementary activities aid in the distribution and adoption of extension messages. Thirdly, the alliance with a commercial company provides farmers with an outlet market for their increased production, thus ensures the successful application of a business approach. Additionally, the focus on cotton growers provided an organisational structure of beneficiaries that is based on self-motivation and business interests. These factors set the intervention apart from the official agricultural service delivery system approach.

Background

The 3-year programme started its operations in the 2005/6 season. During the first two years all activities were implemented and in the third year a revolving fund will be set up which should be administered by a private financial institution, the Micro-Bankers Trust. Financing for the programme is provided for under a grant arrangement of the European Development Fund in the order of € 2 million. The current intervention was conceived as a pilot and is planned to be followed up by a larger programme. The pilot is implemented in six selected districts of Southern, Central and Eastern Provinces, where most farmers lost a substantial part of their livestock herds to disease outbreaks (corridor, CBPP and foot and mouth) in recent years. Consequently the loss of livestock-based farm power lead to a reduction in farmers' capacity for land preparation, which is aggravated by the impact of HIV-Aids on the rural work force. The project was jointly implemented by the Conservation Farming Unit of ZNFU, Dunavant and the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives, MACO.

Programme design

The purpose of the programme is to enhance the use of low-input conservation farming techniques and increased crop diversity among viable cotton out-growers, in order to improve productivity with the ultimate goal of contributing to poverty reduction and household food security. The project has two components which aim at different target groups. Input supply interventions in both components were loan based in order to instil ownership and entrepreneurship among the beneficiaries.

Component 1: The Pilot Oxenisation Programme targeted middle level small scale farmers (240 farmers¹) engaging in cotton production who lost their cattle to disease outbreaks and practiced hand-hoe agriculture for a minimum of three years. Information on the history of individual farmers was obtained from records of a previous CFU-Dunavant-MACO programme. Each beneficiary had to comply with the following criteria:

- a) growing of at least 1 lima of cotton
- b) growing of at least 3 lima of maize
- c) growing of at least 1 lima of legumes (sunhemp or cowpeas)
- d) demonstrate the capacity (access to land) and willingness (attitude) to increase to 5 ha of production within the next three years
- e) have a proven track record of repayments with Dunavant over the last five years

Package: One pair of oxen²
 Tools (chain and ripper)
 Seeds (20 kg sunhemp or other legumes³)
 Mineral leaks and veterinary kit
 Insurance against death of animals for year years

¹ However, the consulted programme document mentions a target of 290 and 4000 farmers as targeted beneficiaries for the oxenisation and food security packs components, respectively. It is likely that the targets were shifted due to the outbreak of CBPP preventing the movement of livestock.

² (in first year only, changed to one oxen and one heifer in the second year to encourage restocking)

³ The programme had a third component on supply of appropriate leguminous crops for rotation implemented by GART. This component was not covered by the monitoring trip.

Monitoring Trip Report

“Programme for Promotion of Conservation Farming and Crop Diversity for Improved Rural Food Security”

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