

*Full Length Research Paper*

# Elitism in the farmer organization movement in post-colonial Malawi

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**The rise of farmer organizations in Malawi has enhanced the rural livelihood economy and has changed the way in which the majority of the rural agrarian community view their farming enterprise. Farmer organization development in Malawi has, however, been retarded and has failed to meet the needs of its most disadvantaged members. This failure has been attributed to the rise of elitism and elite capture within the farmer organization movement in the country. However, other evidence exists which demonstrate that the participation of rural elites in farmer organizations in Malawi has created far greater benefits than disadvantages. It is however, the prevailing negative self perceptions that member's harbour about their own skills and capacities that creates an environment within the farmer organizations in which only the elite are able to excel. These negative self perceptions are the result of the historical nature of the way in which the Agricultural Extension Service System in Malawi has evolved since the end of the colonial era. Policy recommendations are that there is deliberate need for development agents, practitioners and promoters to create an enabling environment, in which both rural elites and non-elites are able to thrive, participate and benefit fully within rural farmer organizations by changing the prevailing negative self perceptions.**

**Key words:** Farmer organization movement, Malawi, rural elites, agricultural extension, narrative analysis.

## INTRODUCTION

Farmer organizations play a crucial role in the development of the rural agricultural sector in Malawi; which is the core of the economy as it contributes nearly 35% to GDP; accounts for 80% of all export earnings and employees of over 85% of the total population (World Bank, 2008). The majority of the population are subsistence family farmers (85%) who are plagued with decreasing land holding sizes as evidenced by about 70% of small holder farmers that cultivate less than 1.0 ha of land with the average land holding size per household being 0.60 ha of land (Alwang and Siegel, 1999; Chirwa, 2007).

The formation of farmer organizations has hence become a necessity in Malawi as by joining forces under collective action, smallholder farmers become a powerful

economic force that enhance incomes and alleviates poverty (Birchall, 2004 as cited by FAO, 2007). Despite the practical and theoretical benefits, farmer organization development in Malawi has been retarded and has failed to meet the needs of its most disadvantaged members. Amongst the many problems plaguing farmer organization development in Malawi, elite capture had been signalled out as a key factor by many pundits. This paper aims to show that this hypothesis, although indisputable, is not always the case for farmer organizations in Malawi in that elitism in the country has proven to have both positive and negative effects. This paper will illustrate the role that farmer organization members' self perceptions; which are the result of the historical nature of the way in which the Agricultural Extension Service System has evolved; have played in enhancing the rise of elites within the farmer organization movement in Malawi and it will show elitism, has to some extent, positively influenced the farmer organization movement in the country.

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## DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Data used for this study was collected from key informant interviews held with selected members of district farmers organizations in 27 of the 28 districts in Malawi (with the exception of Likoma Island) and from focus group discussions held with farmer organizations that participated in a nation-wide project that was initiated to develop a database for farmers organizations in Malawi and to determine the level of sustainability of existing farmer organizations. Purposive random sampling was used to select key informants and focus group discussants from amongst the participants of the district level meetings that were held. Using a non-linear iterative process, data from the key informant interviews and focus group discussions in combination with observations made by the authors of the electoral process of the nation wide Women Farmers' Forum and the electoral processes in all 27 districts which took place to establish district level farmers unions, were analyzed using both thematic narrative analysis and discourse analysis.

Narrative analysis is a method used to assess individual's stories, speeches, literature or extended accounts of stories which can be collected over a course of one or many interviews. It was selected for this study as it is a useful tool for interpreting past events and because it can provide linkages between individual experiences and social political structures (Reissman, 2003). The thematic approach of narrative analysis hinges on the assessment of the way in which a speech is delivered or the content of a text and it involves the collection of numerous stories which are used to create concepts on which interpretation is carried out (Reissman, 2003). The thematic approach was chosen from the many approaches under narrative analysis as it is a useful tool for developing concrete concepts from across many cases and for understanding the content of respondent's speeches (Reissman, 2003). Discourse analysis was used to assess the interaction between respondents during the electoral process as mentioned. Particularly, it was used to assess the interaction between known elites and non-elites in the existing farmer's organizations in Malawi. Discourse analysis is concerned with interaction between speakers and individuals and it is a useful tool for analyzing social interactions (Stubbs, 1983; Tirado and Gálvez, 2007).

In addition, desk research and a review of past and present policy documents were carried out in order to determine the actual policies and acts of government that have worked or are working towards developing the farmer organization movement in the country.

## AN OVERVIEW OF THE FARMER ORGANIZATIONS MOVEMENT IN MALAWI

Here, an overview of the farmer organization movement in Malawi in terms of their general role in economic development, the commitment of government and the challenges plaguing the farmer organization movement in the country are provided.

### The role of farmer organizations in economic development

Farmer organizations in the form of farmer clubs were introduced in Malawi in 1978 through the Ministry of Agricultural with the objective of making them channels through which agricultural credit and extension advice could be funnelled (Kishindo, 1988). This was in

realization that farmer organizations create opportunities, which allow resource poor smallholder farmers to access essential goods and services such as lucrative input and output markets, financial and extension services and other scarce resources and services such as water and land for irrigation purposes (Peacock et al., 2004; Abaru et al., 2006; FAO, 2007). In addition, they are closer to the smallholder farmer than many other private and public development agencies and as such farmers have a greater sense of ownership of the development agendas that are promoted through farmer organizations.

Farmer organizations also assist resource poor farmers to enhance their bargaining power; to reduce the transaction costs associated with marketing and sourcing agricultural inputs; to access knowledge and information as well as to increase their social capital (Wennink et al., 2007; Hellin et al., 2007). Additionally, farmer organizations can collectively lobby for desired changes and as such they have the potential to positively influence agricultural policy outcomes (Mapila and Haankuku, 2009; Wennink et al., 2007).

### Government's commitment to farmer organization development

In realization of the benefits of farmer organizations to rural producers, farmer organization development and empowerment has become a key rural development agenda for both public and private rural development agencies in Malawi (Elias et al., 2009; IMF, 2007; MOAFS, 2006). Government has shown commitment through the creation of an enabling environment for the creation of farmer organizations and for fostering the growth of the farmer organization movement in the country. This has been manifested in several ways.

First, the government has developed and put in place legislature that allows for the formation and operation of different farmer organizations at different scales including apex/national level, district level and at grassroots level. Apart from specific acts of parliament that encourage the formation of tertiary level farmer organizations such as the Cooperative Societies Act (1998) and Cooperative Society Regulations (2002), many policy documents from different sectors recognize that farmer organization development is a key strategy for growth and rural development. This includes, but is not limited to the following government policies as thus explained (Table 1).

In addition, the Malawi government has placed strong emphasis on promoting farmer organizations in the Malawi Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper in which it clearly stipulates that one of the major medium term strategies for promoting increased agricultural productivity is the strengthening of the linkages of farmers to markets and of developing farmer organizations in the country (IMF, 2007:15). One key activity that has demonstrated

**Table 1.** Summary of policies promoting farmer organization development.

<b>Policy document</b>	<b>Responsible institution</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Article/Section</b>	<b>Brief description of special section</b>
Food Security Policy	Ministry of Agricultural and food Security	2006	Article 3.1.6 section 3.1.6.1	Encourage formation of farmer clubs, association and cooperatives to benefit from financial services
National Nutrition policy and strategic plan	Department of Nutrition, HIV and AIDS, Office of the President and Cabinet (OPC)	2009	Section 6.0 Coordination arrangements	Community level village and area development committees will be used to promote and follow up nutrition activities at grassroots level in rural communities
National Forest Policy of Malawi	Ministry of Natural Resources	1996	Article 2.3.1. Strategy 2.3.1.1	Promote formation and training of village of forestry groups and committees
National Environmental Policy	Environmental Affairs Department, Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Affairs	2004	Article 4.1, Strategy 4.1.3	Facilitate establishment of village and area groups and committees for the management of environmental and natural resources
National Extension Policy	Department of Agricultural extension Services (DAES), Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security	2000		Promotion of pluralism such that DAES becomes a coordinating and facilitating agent for private sector, farmer organizations...

Source: Own compilation.

the Malawi government's commitment to strengthening farmer organizations in the country has been the approval of the establishment of an autonomous national farmers union in 2006. The union's main objectives are not only to act as an apex body for all farmers' organizations in the country and to work towards institutional capacity building, but also to act as a tool for lobbying and advocating government for improved and effective policies pertaining to agricultural and farmer organization development (FUM, 2010).

Second, the restructuring of the agricultural extension system in the country into a pluralist demand-driven approach allows farmer organizations to play a far greater role in determining the development of their communities than in the past as they have representation in the District Development Committees, which are responsible for allocating district development funds and for formulating district level development programs. Furthermore, through the decentralization of key

ministries including the Ministry of Agriculture, the country has decentralized its activities such that some powers especially those pertaining to local rural development have been deconcentrated and devolved to local governments and local farmer's organizations, respectively (Malawi Government, 2003).

Finally, as part of monitoring the status of food security and nutrition in the country, the government of Malawi through the Ministry of Agriculture has put in place and is implementing a system for monitoring and evaluating food security and nutrition policies to determine their effectiveness. As a recognition of the importance of farmer organizations to the food security and nutrition status of the country, farmer sustainability has been included as a key indicator that will be monitored and evaluated as the government recognizes that sustainable well functioning farmer organizations have the potential to alleviate poverty and ultimately affect the food security and nutrition of the Malawi people (Malawi Government,

2010).

### Challenges of farmer organization development in Malawi

Despite the enabling environment, which has been put in place for farmer organization development in Malawi, the farmer organization movement has been plagued with problems and has often failed to meet the needs of its constituents. These problems are three-fold in nature. First, as Chirwa et al. (2005) highlights, farmer organizations in Malawi are hindered by a myriad of problems including organizational, environmental and contextual challenges. Organizational challenges emanate from the formation model of farmer organizations in which public agents were mandated by government policies to establish farmer organizations in order to promote community development.

However, many extension agents lacked the skills and training needed for community development (Chamala and Shingi, 1997) and as such, this created divergences in terms of accountability, leadership and governance issues within the farmer organizations. Poor accountability and leadership as well as malfunction governance structures create an environment of mistrust and animosity within the farmer organizations that contribute to the failure of farmer organizations to deliver benefits to their members and to remain sustainable. These organizational problems are not unique to Malawi, but are common to collective action initiatives worldwide (Ostrom, 2004).

Contextually, farmer organizations in Malawi by their very nature of being agro-based, inherit the challenges that come with bio-physical resources usage such as infertile soils; erratic rainfall; poor transport, water and telecommunication infrastructure as well as inefficiencies in input and output market services. The environmental and contextual challenges coupled with the organizational challenges increase the uncertainties of farmer organization's sustainability.

Secondly, other problems that have attributed to the failure of farmer organisations in Malawi can be looked at from a historical perspective, in that, initially, farmer organizations were established by colonial powers who regarded the input by the native members as irrelevant and this created a lack of ownership on the part of members and thus amplifying the free rider problem. And, although, it has been more than 40 years since the end of colonial rule in Malawi, the colonial style mentality that many small holder farmers held persists amongst current members and plagues many farmer organizations to date.

Lastly, farmer organizations in Malawi are plagued with problems that can be attributed to the historical nature and evolution of agricultural extension delivery systems in the country. Firstly, after colonial rule, Malawi adopted a 'Master Farmer scheme' (*Chikumbi 1* scheme) from the

colonial era in which farmers of high ability and greater wealth were recognized by a prestigious decree through the local extension systems. Farmers were deemed of high ability if they were capable of getting high crop yields of the higher value export cash crops such as cotton, groundnuts and tobacco. In 1969, this scheme evolved into the Progressive Farmer Scheme (*Chikumbi 2*) which was similar to the 'Master Farmer Scheme'. The development of the Master Farmer Scheme and the Progressive Farmer Scheme stemmed from the inability of the extension service delivery system of the post colonial era to reach all smallholder farmers in the country.

Basically, after independence public extension agents were mandated to visit only smallholder farmers on an individual basis, however, due to high extension agent-farmer ratios, public agents failed to do this and generally visited only those farmers that were more responsive and productive (Kishindo, 1988). As a result of this, only better off smallholder farmers were visited and their outputs showcased by the extension agents. In 1996, the government basically formalized this system through the introduction of the progressive farmer scheme (Kishindo, 1988).

Farmers deemed progressive were given a certificate and thereafter they were visited frequently by extension agents and given preference in participating in extension activities and provided with improved agricultural inputs and had greater access to public services such as credit. This scheme therefore, created a class of top rated elite farmers who were not necessarily more educated than their fellow farmers, but who nevertheless had greater social standing in the community and who developed high levels of self esteem. The Master Farmer /Progressive Farmer Scheme was eventually scrapped as it alienated the majority of poor rural producers within the farmer groups and it failed to achieve its intended objectives (Kishindo, 1988; Mkandawire, 1987; Green, 2003).

After the progressive farmer scheme, a new extension service delivery system was put in place in which prizes and decrees were no longer given, but in which public extension agents held training session within blocks in which farmers from the surrounding area were brought in groups to learn about production methods from demonstration plots that were set up on farmer's fields.

Although the block extension method was very effective in transferring knowledge to farmers, it created conflicts and resentment amongst farmers as the establishment of demonstration plots was looked at and it benefits the host farmer who received free inputs for the demonstration plots and crop output at the end of the season. In addition, the system also entailed that extension agents had to pay frequent visits to monitor the demonstration plots throughout the agricultural season and as such, had more contact with the host farmer than with other farmers within the farmer group and as such, this created animosity amongst members as they felt neglected by the

extension agents. These findings are not unique to Malawi as studies conducted on the effectiveness of farmer groups in Botswana found that the high frequency of visits to farmers hosting demonstration plots for a group created hostility amongst group members and led to ineffectiveness in achieving set objectives (Norman et al., 1988).

## THE RISE OF ELITES IN FARMER ORGANIZATIONS IN MALAWI

Here, a description of the two types of elites found in Malawian farmer organizations and in Malawian rural societies in general, is provided. This includes description of the historical and socio-economic elites and their rise to dominance within the farmer organization movement in Malawi.

### Historical elites

The colonial rule as well as the master farmer and progressive farmer schemes that followed and the block extension delivery systems are amongst the important factors that led to the rise of rural elites in farmer organizations in Malawi. These systems created a sense of self worth amongst those that were favoured (e.g. the master progressive farmers and their family members as well as the farmers hosting a demonstration plot) and hence although these systems are currently irrelevant, these families have continued to have a greater sense of self esteem than other community members with whom they share similar socio-economic backgrounds (a class of 'historical elites' who have no greater physical wealth than their counterparts) and as such have greater influence within the community.

An in-depth description of a typical master farmer household is given by Hirschmann (1990) as follows:

"... the household must already have sufficient land to be self-reliant and able to produce surplus crops for sale. Second, it should be a male headed joint household.... The man should be at home permanently and engaged in farming or should regularly visit... and bring home as steady income from his off-farm work. Third, the household will need to have (or to have had) some cash income-form permanent off-farm work ... to enable it to invest in the type of inputs needed for increased yields and to provide it with the financial security necessary to access credit. ... Fourth, the household must be willing to grow improved varieties of maize,.. this implies that the household agrees to comply with the advice of the extension officer, accept inspection visits by them, purchase and apply fertilizer ....Fifth, the household must be willing to take risk with credit. Accepting credit involves not

merely the positive psychological attitude of the 'progressive farmer'... but also a decision based on a farmer's assessment of his or her ability to repay the credit at the end of the season. Finally, 'political connections' and education are helpful, though not essential."

Consequently, the systems inherently created a class of rural producers who were no worse off than their master farmer counterparts, but because they were not recognised as master farmers, they developed negative self perceptions about their own abilities and skills, which they passed on to their descendants as such, they also gave greater clout to the historical elites than to themselves. Hence historical elites are a rural elite class that have similar socio-economic backgrounds as their counterparts and they have been created by not only the positive self perceptions that the former master farmers and their families harbour, but also by the negative self perceptions' of those that were never master farmers and their families. Perceptions are therefore, a key factor in the formation of farmer organization historical elites in Malawi. This agrees with findings that have demonstrated that self perceptions of one's abilities and skills as well as knowledge play an important role in determining the actions of individuals and their participation in development and natural resources management activities (Elix et al., 1998; Beckford, 2002).

At the onset of the farmer organization movement in Malawi, the differences in self perceptions amongst members were manifested in the election of office bearers in the newly formed farmer organizations. The historical elite farmers with better self perceptions of their abilities were far more willing to be elected as office bearers than their counterparts. Additionally, observations from field work and interactions with farmer organizations in Malawi have demonstrated that the farmers with negative self perceptions are often also more willing to vote for historical elites than for other farmers within the groups. Hence the democratic process of electing office bearers becomes the starting point of the dominance of 'historical elites' in the farmer organization movement in the country. As such members self perceptions and the perceptions of one's family's skills, abilities and knowledge are significant factors that created the dominance of elites in farmer organizations in Malawi and hence they cannot be overlooked in any assessment of the farmer organization movement in the country.

### Socio-economic elites

Apart from the historical elites, there exists in Malawian rural societies; another class of elites that are distinguished by material and physical wealth. Being a country where rural producers are not able to meet their subsistence needs and where the majority of the people live below the poverty line (IMF, 2007), an elite is an

**Table 2.** Distinguishing features of socio-economic elites.

Type of asset/capital	Local Description of asset to qualify as elite	Minimum standards of assets for Elite Status
<b>Physical assets</b>		
Housing	Good condition of house	Burnt bricks, corrugated iron sheets, cemented floor
Food	Adequate food	Has sufficient food (maize) to last the whole year. And at times engages others as labourers on his/her farm in exchange for food (maize or other crops).
Livestock	A lot of livestock	May own livestock such as cattle or small ruminants such as goats in large numbers. Will also own a lot of poultry (chickens, and ducks)
<b>Natural assets</b>		
Land	Sufficient land holding/farm land	Has a large amount of agricultural land for producing both cash and food crops (at times one can be an elite even if he/she does not produce cash crops but enough food crops. Household should also have sufficient land to distribute to children as they enter adulthood)
<b>Human capital</b>		
Own Education	Educated	Reasonably literate:- can read, write and count
Family Education	Has children who are educated	Has children in secondary school or relatives who finished secondary school
<b>Other assets</b>		
Leadership position	In leadership position	Holds leadership position in the community. This can be a traditional role (chief; religious leader or traditional healer) or community role (development worker; primary school teacher, or a village technician, political party member) or are retired civil servants.

Source: own compilation.

individual who is 'well to do' and who possesses greater physical and financial assets than the ordinary small holder farmer (Table 2). From Table 2, it can be seen that the classification of an individual as an elite in the rural areas based on assets, is subjective and will vary depending on the socio-economic status of individuals and households in the community. Thus, generally, individuals classified as elites in one part of the country will most likely be elites in any part of the country as the socio-economic status of rural Malawians is generally the same throughout the country. It can also be seen that elites can also be the result of human capital or leadership position that he/she or their relatives have in the community. Furthermore, elites are also usually charismatic leaders who have popular appeal and they tend to have a better understanding of national policies and local government attitudes and often times they have their own ideas on strategies for reducing farmer's burdens and hardships.

Numerous studies have shown that differences in socio-economic characteristics of households lead to disparities in social, economic, marketing and production outcomes of rural smallholder farmers. In Malawi specific studies have shown that access to credit, information and extension services are negatively impacted upon by gender differences, education levels, and by other cross cutting issues such as HIV/AIDS (Mahata et al., 2002; Gilbert et al., 2002). Furthermore, studies by Matiya et al. (2005) have demonstrated that various socio-economic characteristics such as sex, access to credit and total land holding size of a household determine to a large extent the decisions pertaining to livelihood portfolios in some parts of Malawi with households that are constrained in terms of credit and land as well as those that are headed by females having less diversified income portfolios. In general, it has been shown that the inability of individuals to access essential services such as credit, information and extension services leads to inequality

and socio-economic disparities (Chirwa, 2004).

In addition, differences in socio-economic characteristics of rural smallholders are important as they affect to a large extent the level of participating in rural development programs (Ngugi et al., 2003). And for Malawi, this entails that they affect the level of participation in farmer organizations and as such socio-economic elites also dominate leadership positions in farmer organizations for various reasons. First, the establishment of farmer organizations was spearheaded by individuals that were business minded and as such they had better literacy and numeracy skills as compared to other rural smallholder farmers. Hence when local agricultural extension agents promoted the concept of collective marketing and the formation of farmer groups to facilitate it, it was observed that mainly socio-economic elites were the early adopters of the concept and thus were the first to join farmer groups. And because of this, as the concept of collective action become more widely acceptable among the rural smallholder farmers, the socio-economic elites were already well established and rooted within the farmer organizations.

Secondly, as FO's were being established, participatory methods were used to establish criteria of office bearers. In many instances, the criteria called for leaders to be able to read, write, and to have a high degree of numeracy as members felt that office bearers, whose primary role includes scouting for markets and dialoguing with government and NGOs staff, should have higher levels of understanding. With national adult illiteracy levels of 29% (UNDP, 2008), these criteria entailed that only a minority of the smallholder membership could confidently take leadership positions in farmer organizations. Furthermore, this has aggravated the low participation of women in development initiatives as the majority of rural women in Malawi are illiterate (IFPRI, 2005) and the criteria for office bearers in FO's intensifies their exclusion in decision making levels within the community.

### **EFFECT OF ELITISM IN THE FARMER ORGANIZATION MOVEMENT IN MALAWI**

Here, an insight into effectiveness that elitism has had on farmer organization development in the country is provided. It presents not only the negative and widely held views of elitism but also the positive less widely perceived effects.

#### **Negative effects of the dominance of elites in farmer organizations**

In 2007, the Consortium for the Development of a Database for Farmer organizations in Malawi (CoDeDaFO), developed an indicator for measuring the sustainability of farmer organizations. The key indicators identified were governance, business and representation.

With business, the rationale was that farmer organizations need to be thriving business entities for them to survive and generate additional capital for improved services. In terms of representation and governance, it was found that the extent to which farmer organization members are represented in decision making structures has a bearing on their organization ability to influence national policy making processes and their ability to address the needs and interests of their members. Hence business, representation as well as governance were earmarked as the key factors in determining sustainability of farmer organizations in Malawi. Since elites are almost and always elected permanently into positions of power, they pose challenges to the long term sustainability of farmer organizations in Malawi as they threaten both the governance and representation aspects of the sustainability of farmer organizations.

Apart from posing a threat to the sustainability of farmer organizations, elites intensify marginalization of the poor in rural areas as the poor are often excluded from the decision making realm within farmer organizations. This includes not only rural poor women, but also male producers who are non-elite. The exclusion of other members from decision making entails that it is often observed that a few members within a group participate in activities especially those that are deemed prestigious such as participating in trainings and workshops, travelling to other parts of the country for meetings and at times travelling outside the country for farmer meetings. This creates negativity within the farmer organizations and member develop the perception that only leaders and office bearers benefit from the creation of a farmer organization and as such the majority of the membership often silently unsubscribe from the organization and are unwilling to pay membership fees. Hence, the dominance of elites retards the development of the farmer organization movement and hampers collective action. This is not, however, unique to farmer organization development or to Malawi as Ashby (2007) found that elite capture, if often, a serious impediment to the development of the poor in different spheres.

#### **Positive effects of elites in farmer organizations**

Despite all the negatives associated with the dominance of elites in farmer organizations, it has been observed that the participation of elites in farmer organizations in Malawi has had some positive effects especially as the majority of potential members are low income subsistence farmers that have low literacy, numeracy skills as well as poor managerial and entrepreneurial skills. First, since elites are held in high esteem in rural areas, their participation in farmer organizations has created a pull for late adopters of interventions. As such, elites have created a good entry point into the general farmer membership for the delivery of extension services as they act like role models for other small scale farmers

and this helps to strengthen membership and participation in farmer organizations and it also increases technology adoption. This is an important factor as empirical evidence has shown that technology adoption by the rural poor has the potential to reduce their poverty and improve their wellbeing (Thirtle et al., 2001; Mendola, 2005; 2006)

Additionally, the erosion of the public extension services systems has placed rural elites as a linkage between technocrats and farmers as extension agents often train literate farmers in rural communities to become village technicians who assist other farmers with agricultural advisory services in their absence. Despite the fact that these village technicians are often given push bicycles to facilitate their work and travel for trainings, they do not create animosity like the master farmers of the early 1980's because they provide a much needed social service to the community.

Furthermore, elites are often more financially stable than other members within a farmer group and as such they are able to provide a good pool of capital goods which are used as collateral for accessing financial services in rural areas without which it would almost be impossible for rural farmer groups to access credit. And it has been demonstrated that access to improved formal credit has the potential to alleviate poverty (Diagne and Zeller, 2001) through the creation of rural agro-enterprises which can provide much needed incomes for the rural poor. Elites also play a facilitator's role in many activities pertaining to the administration of the farmer organization and this maybe in terms of marketing produce, sourcing inputs or dialoguing with other stakeholders such as finance institutions and farmer organization promoters. Hence the skills that elites bring on board the farmer organization to which they subscribe are essential in the management and promotion of those farmer organizations. Apart from capital assets, rural elites also often have access to other types of resources. For example retired civil servants living in rural areas, who take up farming, have more networks and contacts within government institutions and hence they are able to use these networks to access information for use by their farmer organization.

Lastly, the higher self esteem and exposure to development activities that elites have, provides them with greater confidence and eloquence and this enables them to better interact with potential donors and policy makers and to better articulate the needs and objectives of their group. And, although, at times, elites are known to advance more on their own interests than that of the collective (Platteau, 2004; D'Exelle and Riedl, 2008); the inability of farmer organizations to reach and benefit the majority of the rural poor in Malawi cannot be solely placed on the dominance of elites in farmer organization in the country as the skills that rural elites bring on board work more to benefit the entire membership than to hinder them. However, this is not to say that the

dominance of elites in farmer organizations in the country does not hamper other members, but that other factors in combination with elite dominance play a far greater role in excluding the poor from fully benefiting and participating. Empirical evidence by Schou (2007) demonstrates this points as his findings are that elite capture is minimal in the inability of demand driven poverty programmes to reach the poor, but that other factors such as the negative influence of traditional leaders are far greater obstacles.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper has demonstrated that the dominance of elites in the farmer organization movement in Malawi has been created by not only institutional factors, but also members differing perceptions of their socio-economic status in the community that have been influenced by the adaptation of colonial agricultural and extension policies by the post colonial Malawi government and the institutional evolution of the agricultural extension service systems thereafter. And as such, the dominance of elites in farmer organizations in Malawi has had both positive and negative effects on the participation of the rural poor and women, however, their role in the farmer organization movement in Malawi cannot be deemed either negative or positive as there is the lack of credible empirical evidence. Hence this study concludes that more robust quantitative studies are needed to quantify the actual positive and negative social and economic impacts on the rural poor and women of the dominance of elites in the farmer organization movement in Malawi.

This paper therefore, recommends that there is the need to harness the positives that rural elites contribute towards the development of farmer organizations in the country by adopting the following:

1. Institutionalizing of the concepts of collective action and the spirit of inclusiveness in all farmer organizations. This would work most effectively at the time of group formation, but since many groups are already in operation, it is essential that both private and public development agents who provide support to farmer organizations in the country should promote inclusiveness through capacity building of not only leaders, but more so general members and women.
2. Restructuring of education, training and capacity building programs of public agricultural extension staff to ensure the inclusion of the concepts of social learning, facilitation for capacity building and enabling rural innovation in syllabi to enable them to effectively bring out change processes in farmer organizations.
3. Promoting and intensification of an appropriate Farmer-to-Farmer extension system, which would promote cooperation and social learning to ensure greater inclusiveness



It is essential that apex level farmer organizations make deliberate efforts to raise awareness within their organization of the pro's and cons of elite capture and as such work towards putting in place strategies to increase inclusiveness, in so doing, working towards removing the negative perceptions that hold back non-elite members and in breaking the real and perceived negative influences of both historical and socio-economic elites in the farmer organization development in Malawi.

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