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Empowering women through livelihoods orientated agricultural service provision: A consideration of evidence from Southern Africa

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Research Paper No. 2008/01

Empowering Women Through Livelihoods Orientated Agricultural Service Provision

A Consideration of Evidence from Southern Africa

A. J. E. Charman*

January 2008

Abstract

The paper considers the impact of livelihoods oriented agricultural service provision for smallholder farmers on gender relationships and food security. The paper contents that the democratization and liberalization of agricultural services towards participatory, bottom-up approaches, from the early 1990s has brought favourable gender gains to women. The paper examines the background to this shift in agricultural service provision. The resulting gender gains, we argue, should be seen in terms of Sen's notion of entitlements. We examine evidence of these gains from developments and cases in Malawi and Zambia and draw supporting evidence from Zimbabwe and South Africa .../.

Keywords: gender empowerment, food security, sustainable livelihoods, rural development

JEL classification: Q12, J43, J16, O13

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Through a range of interventions – initially driven by NGOs and subsequently adopted within public programmes – women have gained entitlements, including new knowledge of crop production, a firm stakeholding in informal markets, access to adaptable and affordable technologies, and a legitimate role in farmer organizational structures. Through their strengthened legal status and organizational position, women have gained better access to finance and loan package. The impact of these gains is especially evident in the significant expansion of those crops in which women have secured entitlements (in terms of labour, trade and production), notably legumes, vegetables and root and tubers. While the growth in the production of these crops has contributed towards more sustainable livelihoods, it has not translated into improved food security. The paper argues that food security in the case countries remains conditional on maize production, a male controlled crop which underpins patrilial power and political patronage. Until women are afforded full entitlement to produce and own maize, the attainment of food security will remain gender contested.

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1 Introduction

This paper considers the impact of the recent changes in the approach towards the provision of agricultural extension services for smallholders on gender relationships and food security. The hypothesis is that the democratization and liberalization of agricultural service provision towards a livelihoods oriented approach has brought favourable gender gains to women. The paper contends that the resulting improvement in the entitlements of women, as farmers and hence beneficiaries of technical services, has had a noticeable impact on their livelihoods at the micro, mezzo and macro levels, even though the impact on food security is less certain due to male control over maize and cash crops.

Scholars have begun to identify a change in the orientation of smallholder farming systems in Southern Africa. The change is characterized by a move away from the ideals of the green revolution technologies (based on hybrid maize and industrial crops) towards a more diversified cropping system and the strengthening of off-farm linkages. These changes have partially been driven by women, from below, through their response to new opportunities (including markets), their assumption of 'rights' to gender equality, and their empowerment as change agents in rural development processes.

The strengthening of women's entitlements that we identify in this paper must be understood within the context of the political reforms and economic liberalization of the mid 1990s. These reforms coincide with a paradigm shift in development practice wherein the emphasis of technical support has shifted from the objectives of productivity enhancement, using top-down methods, to those of achieving sustainable livelihoods through participation and ownership. The new paradigm is noticeable in the development and institutionalization of participatory, livelihoods approaches towards agricultural service provision.

Whilst many men and women have benefited from these reforms, the poor have also witnessed a decline in livelihoods as a consequence of the general withdrawal of subsidies and market instability. This topic falls outside the scope of analysis. The focus in this study is on how women and men have responded to new opportunities and how women, in particular, have sought to overcome the gendered constraints which had previously restricted their involvement in the agricultural sector. The impact of these entitlement gains are only beginning to emerge and documentary evidence remains fragmentary and subject to caveats. The research draws on accessible secondary sources, empirical and theoretical, and considers case evidence from Malawi,¹ Zambia, Zimbabwe and Limpopo Province, South Africa.

¹ The argument is informed by the author's personal experiences from his involvement in food security and agricultural development programmes in Malawi over the past decade.

2 An overview of gender in smallholder farming systems

2.1 A theoretical perspective

Gender refers to the relationships between men and women and children, over time and in different contexts, whereby these relationships are shaped, formally or informally, by laws, rules, norms, practices, expectations and coercion. Gender relationships are formally structured within institutions, such as those of the nation state, religious orders and the family. Gender theorists recognize the family as an institutionalized realm of gender relationships wherein roles and responsibilities are clearly defined and governed by an overarching power structure. This is applicable in various manifestation of the family, whether as an extended unit or the spatially defined household unit.

In the rural southern African context, the order of power within the family is dominated by men, through the succession of patriarchal control over external family affairs. It should be recognized that the social organization of families (and hence issues such as inheritance) has matrilineal and patrilineal traditions within the range of different ethnic groups. Patriarchy is reinforced through the structure of traditional leadership wherein rules of primogenitor largely apply, with hereditary power assigned to (elderly) male persons.

Gender relationships strongly influence farming decisions. Women provide the bulk of agricultural labour and are largely responsible for the production of food crops. Yet in terms of their status and control over farming resources and income, women remain marginal. The gendered division of influence within the household underpins inequality between men and women in rural southern Africa. Gendered decisions affect what crops are produced, how crops are to be grown, what land can or should be allocated to food crops verses cash crops, how money is invested in agricultural endeavours, how labour is allocated and how crops are handled after the harvest (Uttaro 2002). As a result of patriarchal control, these decisions have historically reinforced male dominance and created two spheres of gendered influence within the agricultural sector: a male sphere, generally oriented towards cash crops and an agriculture dependent on external (high value) inputs, and large livestock (cattle), and a female sphere, oriented towards food production and largely reliant on available inputs, indigenous knowledge and low cost technologies.

2.2 Historical influences

2.2.1 The migrant labour system

The influence of patriarchal control within the family has deep cultural roots. The form of this control has proved highly resilient to external pressures and in some communities remains little unchanged (see, for example, the study on the Nguni in northern Malawi by Kerr 2005). The gendered order was paradoxically strengthened by the emergence of migrant labour dependent societies, characteristic of Malawi, Zambia and the customary areas of Zimbabwe and South Africa. Indigenous African societies were brought within the political economy of the mining and industrialization processes from an early point in colonial contact. In response to the demand for unskilled labour in mines and industry, men left behind their homes and agricultural enterprises, some voluntarily, though most under the compulsive weight of state taxation, and entered into wage labour. The nature of the political economy under colonialism resulted in the

development of migrant labour systems. These systems were characterized by the engagement of young men (18 to 35 years) in relatively short contracts (6-12 months) over a lengthy period of their lives (between 10 to 20 years), thereby oscillating between their rural homes and places of employment.²

Scholars of these colonial (and apartheid) migrant labour systems have highlighted three important gendered outcomes that have shaped indigenous rural society: first, for the employers, the migrant systems transferred the social costs of reproducing the labour force onto the farming system, and onto the women left behind, thus enabling the mines and industry to pay single person wages, second, male control over these farming systems was reinforced through investing in livestock (a male preserve, culturally), whilst minimizing male investment in cash crop production wherever men could not exercise direct control, third, the state complied with the patriarchal order to maintain the status quo (and thereby to ensure the subordination of women in the absence of their related men folk) through essentially freezing the structure of land ownership and channeling all agricultural services through local authorities (chief and headmen).

2.2.2 The post-colonial perpetuation of gender inequality

Political independence gave greater opportunities to smallholders to enter cash cropping, mainly in tobacco, cotton and groundnuts. Such opportunities enabled rural men to choose farming, rather than engage in wage labour to meet their financial obligations and attain independence from their maternal/paternal homestead. The state, in the Malawian case for example, also actively discouraged migrant labour to the mining sector (notably in South Africa), in response to the low status of mine workers and also to create an internal migrant labour force to serve the emerging tobacco estate (i.e. commercial) sector.

In its early approach to agricultural development, the post-colonial state chose to preserve the gendered status that had arisen under migrant labour system. Men, having been historically recognized as the bread-winners of the household, were afforded exclusive control over market-oriented agricultural production, which was based on new food crops (higher yielding maize and rice) and industrial crops (tea, cotton and tobacco). The position of women, engaged in low input, low output (food production oriented) agriculture, utilizing traditional knowledge and technologies, was left undisturbed.

The state in Malawi and Zambia perpetuated the gendered order in the agricultural development programmes implemented in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s (for Zambia, see Byrne 1994). Patriarchal control and dominance of men within the household and family run farming system was underpinned by the provision of technical services, including:

- Public sector agricultural extension services were channeled either through traditional authorities or farmer organizations in which male leadership was firmly entrenched, held by traditional elites (chiefs) and educated men (school teachers, civil servants and religious leaders).

² The emergence and function of these systems has been extensively documented; for the case of Zambia/Zimbabwe in the colonial period, see Van Onselen (1980).

- The transfer of technologies and information, in accordance with the overarching small-farm development paradigm (see below), was targeted at the ‘land owner’ or ‘household head’, in either case, men; whilst the great majority of extension workers were men.
- Access to agriculture credit was conditional on land ownership, whilst most subsidy programmes were designed to benefit the members of farmer organizations, from which women were excluded (the absence of a legal entitlement).
- The main crop technologies promoted, including high yielding maize and rice varieties, necessitated an investment in inputs (seed and fertilizer) and thereby afforded men, through their control of household finance, ownership of the crop. Maize, and hybrid maize in particular, became a ‘man’s crop’, even though much, often all, the labour inputs were provided by women and children (see Box 1).
- Technology diffusion focused on ‘male’ entitlements including their access to finance, education/knowledge, and livestock; while no significant advancement of technology was undertaken to address women’s labour constraints, especially in post-harvest crop handling. All maize was hand shelled by women and children, a practice that has remained unchanged in Malawi and Zambia.
- Market access was restricted to entitled farmers, through their membership of farming organizations, with most rural markets controlled by para-statal monopolies (such as ADMARC in Malawi). Urban trading in informal markets was strictly prohibited.
- The promotion of green technology solutions was accompanied by the systematic degrading and the belittlement of traditional foods and local varieties (including beans, pigeon peas, sweet potato and cassava), crops over which women held entitlement, as inferior foods, while their continued production was seen, at policy level, as an obstacle to national food security objectives.

Where the agricultural agencies and other public sector programmes targeted women specifically, services tended to focus narrowly on issues of home economics or technologies that women neither desired nor needed.

2.3 The influence of democratization and liberalization

In many southern African rural communities, the past decade has seen notable changes in gender relations. Commentators have recognized three aspects of changing gender relations: first, the breakdown of traditional gender roles, caused not least by the HIV/AIDS pandemic, second, the empowerment of women as autonomous actors in the public realm through their acquisition of equal legal status (rights), and third, the growing proportion of single-parent households, headed by women in the main, as a consequence of the death of their husbands or through separation. Women headed households are generally more food insecure than male headed households, largely because female headed households (FHH) have less land, smaller labour units, and are less able to access farm inputs through credit programmes and align themselves with farmer organizations.

Box 1: Maize: a gendered crop

In Malawi and Zambia, food security is synonymous with maize. A shortfall in national production is seen as a food security crisis at the policy level and evidence of hunger at the household level. The post-independent governments saw the achievement of national maize self-sufficiency as a primary objective in the national goal of attaining food security. The political concern with this objective resulted in a disproportionate emphasis within public sector agricultural programmes on maize production. In order to achieve national maize self-sufficiency, the agricultural ministries made available green revolution technologies for small farmers through input subsidies and in-organic fertilizers and hybrid seeds, allied with extension training. Maize production was moreover tied to national crop marketing systems, where prices were fixed (pan-territorially) and the surplus held in abeyance for resale during the late dry season. Access to and control over maize provides so much power that the crop has become the basis for political patronage and linkages between parties and traditional elites (chiefs) (McEwan 2003).

The maize-first policy in these countries was gender biased. Whereas women traditionally had held an entitlement to the growing of local maize (a right that was embodied, for example, in the exchange of seeds at weddings), their entitlement did not extend into the realm of the market. Beyond the household granary, ownership of maize transferred to men. The control of men over maize had a telling impact on the way the crop was grown and the technologies adopted and accounts partly for women's reluctance to raise yields above household requirements. The most celebrated example of this concerns the failure of efforts to promote the intercropping beans and maize in Zambia. Despite the benefit of this cropping practice, in terms of production and soil fertility enhancement, women proved reluctant to follow extension advice. Their argument was that intercropping posed a threat to their entitlement to grow beans, a crop which they controlled, whereas maize, and notably high yielding varieties, was held by men to be a man's crop. Hence women feared that men would appropriate their entitlement to beans and the crop would thereby become a man's crop and sold for cash, rather than reserved for household consumption (Feldstein 2000: 73).

2.3.1 *Post-democracy political reforms*

The end of the cold war enabled far-reaching political changes to occur throughout Southern Africa. The single party dominance in Zambia and Malawi and apartheid rule in South Africa, as three cases to this effect, were ended, giving victory to the sustained public pressure for multi-party democracy. In the democratic reforms that accompanied these changes, women were empowered as autonomous voters and the issue of gender inequality was brought into the political mainstream. The political leaders of the new order responded to this mainstreaming through committing their governments to eliminate gender inequality and prioritizing the socio-economic upliftment of women through programmatic interventions. In the countries under investigation, these interventions have included:

- Widening and improving female access to primary (Malawi and Zambia) and secondary (Zimbabwe and South Africa) education.
- Developing institutional mechanisms, including ministerial representation, for promoting awareness and advocacy on the equality of gender and ensuring gender mainstreaming within all sector programmes.
- Safeguarding the inheritance claims and land security of widows and orphaned children (see Box 2).
- Shifting the focus of agricultural service provision towards the poor and targeting women, as autonomous farmers (rather than farm workers) and caregivers.

Box 2: The reform of inheritance laws in Zambia

The Zambian state has afforded women the right, in conflict with matrilineal principles, to inherit their husbands land and property. In many areas in Zambia, ethnic groupings adhere to matrilineal inheritance principles, whereby a man's goods and lands are traditionally distributed among his sisters' children after his death, but not his own offspring. This system often resulted in incidents of 'property grabbing', whereby the relatives of a deceased man would acquire his land and all his assets, leaving his widow and orphaned children destitute.

The Zambian state has sought to prevent disinheritance from this practice through revising the law: the new law stipulates that the property, and agricultural land, be shared among a deceased man's widow, children and parents or siblings and that at least half of his property be inherited by his children. The law requires an executor to be appointed to ensure the correct disbursement of the inheritance (Parker and Mwape 2004: 24-25).

The political concern to redress gender inequality is evident in the re-formulation of national food security strategies.³ Whereas in the period of one-party rule, food security policies in Malawi and Zambia focused squarely on national food availability, a goal that these governments' sought to achieve through (maize) production, recent policy revisions (including the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers) highlight a clear shift towards ensuring food security at household level. This change has seen the definition of food security broadened to include issues such as nutrition, while the policy emphasis has shifted to improving accessibility to food for poor and chronically vulnerable groups. Female headed households are now seen as a particularly vulnerable cohort, requiring specific targeting measures and sustained safety-net support.

Democratization has also extended to traditional institutions and the broader community now has greater influence at the village level in decision making processes and development interventions. It is now not uncommon for women to be elected to leadership positions in village development committees and farmer organizations.

2.3.2 Market liberalization

In both Malawi and Zambia agricultural markets have been significantly liberalized through a process that began with Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) in the mid 1980s. Market liberalization was taken further under the aegis of the political reforms that led to the emergence of multi-party democratic systems. The withdrawal of state control involved, inter-alia: the reduction of agricultural subsidies, the lowering of trade barriers, the opening of input and farm gate markets to private sector actors through ending the monopolistic status of para-statal marketing boards and the rescinding of legislation which constrained the participation of smallholders in cash crops. The most notable example of the latter reform concerns the liberalization of tobacco growing in Malawi. The gendered impact of market liberalization has not been thoroughly examined. While the topic has received inadequate attention, there is strong evidence

³ Food security is generally understood in terms of its three principal components: national food *availability*, household *accessibility* to food, and *stability* in the national system of food supply (Thomson and Metz 1997). In this paper we recognize that the means of acquiring food, and food itself, must be socially acceptable (i.e. in peaceful and culturally appropriate terms) and environmentally safe (i.e. it should pose no long term negative impact to the beneficiary or their environment).

that the withdrawal of subsidies has had a significant impact at household level and increased food security vulnerability in small and inflexible farming systems (such as the maize/tobacco system).

It has been argued that SAPs, followed by the economic shocks and droughts of the 1990s, have significantly worsened the position of women. One expression of this view, commenting on trends in Zambia, argues: ‘in the absence of new market opportunities, many farmers ... have been forced to use more labour intensive methods of production for self-consumption, with adverse effects on women and children’s control of their time’ (Bangwe 1977, cited in Siegal 2005). A study which argues that livelihoods have eroded through in rural Malawi, concluded that the process of rural stratification, characterized by the poorest households becoming poorer and better off households being able to capture market benefits, has seen women ‘become disproportionately worse off’ (Frankenberger et al. 2003). This trend can be seen in the case of tobacco liberalization, whereby men have acquired an entitlement gain at the expense of their wives and daughters (see Box 3), though the case for a decline in livelihoods is unconvincing.

Women too have gained entitlements from liberalization. These include new opportunities to diversify the production of food crops, new opportunities to produce and market crops (notably vegetables), the lowering of barriers to engage in the production of industrial and export crops, either independently or as beneficiaries of contract grower initiatives. The recent diversification in food production in Malawi in Zambia (the Malawi case is examined in detail below) away from green revolution technologies (hybrid maize) to traditional, female entitled crops (roots, tubers and legumes) should be understood, we argue, as a profoundly gendered outcome, rather than case of disempowerment. The shift was engineered by women in pursuit of their best interests and the well-being of the household. Even in cash crops, liberalization has afforded new opportunities to wealthier women, especially those able to meet the requirements for land and labour to participate alongside their male counterparts. As part of the commitment of these governments to mainstreaming opportunities for women, the state (with support from NGOs) has facilitated the entry of women into farmers clubs, and through these organization, enabled women to gain access to institutional finance and logistical support in marketing.

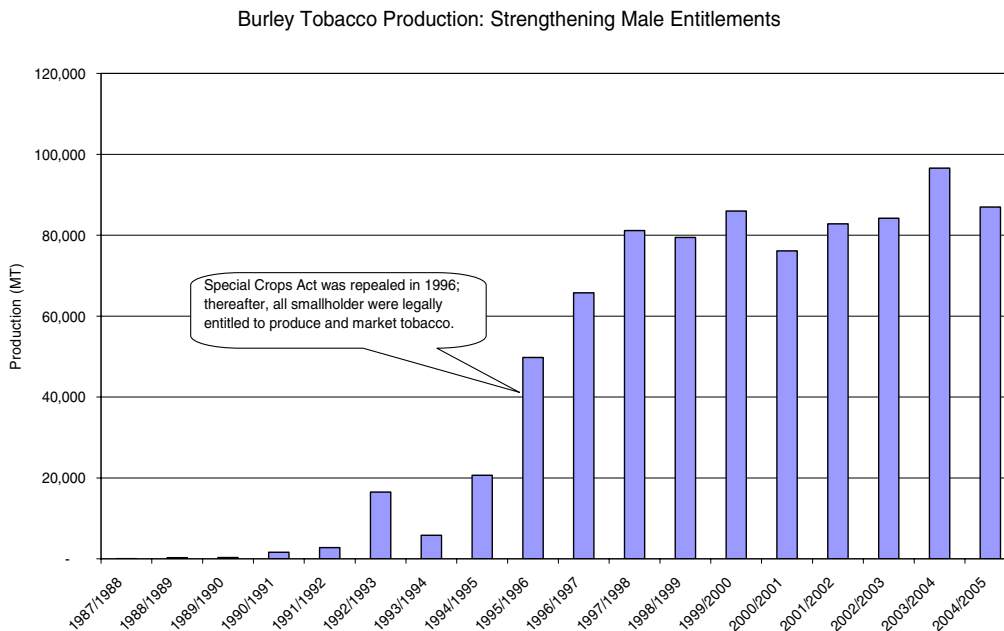
With patriarchal interests focused squarely on cash crops opportunities – tobacco in Malawi and cotton in Zambia – women’s entry into and subsequent dominance of emerging farm gate food markets has gone largely uncontested. These mostly informal markets sprang to life as state control withered. Prior to liberalization, farm gate markets were either run by monopolistic parastatal bodies or tightly controlled by local councils. In the liberalized environment, by contrast, women traders have come to dominate the sale of fresh produce at the vast array of informal markets which take many forms, such as the daily markets found in towns, cities and along transport routes or the weekly circuit markets in deep rural locations. Women producers also dominate the supply of fresh produce (apart from maize) to these markets. Furthermore, the mushrooming of informal market places has also opened a range of small, medium and micro enterprise (SMME) opportunities, again largely dominated by women (and often involving children), in agro-processing, and in the production and sale of food and alcohol.

Box 3: The gendered impact of tobacco liberalization in Malawi

As a result of the repeal of the Special Crops Act in 1996, smallholders in Malawi were able to produce cash crops such as tobacco. Tobacco is the most significant agricultural export in Malawi. The crop is marketed through an auction process which, in the late 1990s, ensured favourable returns due to buoyant global prices and the high reputation of Malawian burley. The auction process would ensure that farmers could sell their entire crop, regardless of quality, at a relatively competitive price.

Male smallholders were quick to grasp the opportunity to grow tobacco. Men held entitlement to all the major barriers to enter tobacco production: land, labour (both their own and that of their household, through their control over the wives and children), access to inputs (seed and fertilizer) through farmer organizations and tobacco growing knowledge. Men had acquired the knowledge to grow tobacco from working as labour tenants on commercial estates. With male advantage secure, smallholder households swiftly re-oriented their farming systems towards tobacco. The net result was that the production of burley tobacco increased, almost overnight, from 20,659 Mt in 1994/95 to 81,181 Mt in 1997/8 (see Chart 1).

Chart 1: Burley Tobacco Production, 1987-2005



Source: Ministry of Agriculture. Final Crop Estimates, 1987-2005.

The engagement of smallholders in tobacco has had a significant gender impact; the impact has involved:

- increasing the financial revenue at the disposal of the household head, thus lessening his dependency on food crops as a source of income,
- demanding more sustained involvement of all households members (women and children) in producing tobacco,
- reducing household labour availability for food production,
- withdrawing arable land from food crop production,
- creating on-farm demand for wage labour/piece work among vulnerable households, such as FFH and households with high orphan dependency.

3 The re-orientation of agricultural service provision

3.1 The small-farm paradigm

SAPs were imposed on most southern African countries from the mid 1980s to address the macro-economic ‘crisis’, characterized by stagnation in the agricultural sector and gross public sector inefficiency in service provision. The affected countries (including Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe) were all heavily reliant on agricultural production for food security and export earnings.

In these three countries the post-colonial state had invested extensively in the agricultural sector, building infrastructure, creating marketing systems, and providing a range of technical services to targeted farmer groups. Their governments firmly ascribed to the ‘small-farm efficiency’ rural development paradigm (Ellis and Biggs 2001). The thinking within this paradigm was that raising productivity of the small-farm sector would both reduce rural poverty and stimulate broader economic growth in agro-processing and exports. Smallholder farmers were seen as drivers of economic growth, a view which justified investment through farm subsidies, trade production and the creation of internal agricultural marketing systems. A central component of state support during the 1970s and early 1980s was the attempt to transfer technologies to farmers through, *inter alia*, promoting mechanization, providing access to higher yielding seed varieties, promoting inorganic fertilizers and introducing irrigation.

The strategy of transferring technologies focused squarely on male actors and specifically the male household head. These technologies were specifically intended for men (only men were trained by male extension workers), whilst their introduction served to underpin patriarchal control over natural resources (requiring a re-division of land resources, for example, as men assumed control over hybrid maize production) and household income. In their endeavour to promote a green revolution, public sector agricultural agencies made no acknowledgement of the complex gender relationships within smallholder farming systems and the diverse role of women in agricultural production. Traditional crops, including legumes, small grains, roots and tubers, which were seen as the preserve of women were afforded little support and no effort was made to foster growth in their production or build markets to improve women’s access to income.

3.2 The T&VE approach

By the mid 1980s, the growth of the agricultural sector in Malawi and Zambia had begun to stagnate, affected by external price and logistical considerations and weighted under by injudicious investments, public sector inefficiency, low levels of technology and skills transfer. The green revolution had simply not materialized. As part of the SAP ‘package’ to stimulate growth in the agricultural sector, the World Bank’s ‘Training and Visit Extension’ (T&VE) was rolled out as a new approach to public sector agricultural programmes. The World Bank’s solution required a paradoxical mix of state withdrawal from market intervention (for instance, reduction of subsidies and opening markets) and intensified public support to transfer technologies onto (male) farmer beneficiaries.

The main innovativeness of the T&VE approach was the idea that knowledge and technology transfer (i.e. extension) required the formalization of linkages between

farmers, extension agents, specialists and allied services (such as research) within a clearly defined hierarchical structure. The rationale for intensified extension drew upon successful experiences in South East Asia and the improved understanding of how small farms functioned as a result of the studies undertaken within the intellectual framework of Farming Systems Research (FSR).

The T&VE approach put extension at the heart of public sector agricultural programmes and reinforced the overarching belief in the possibilities of small farm efficiency. As the World Bank's manual explained, the approach contained 'few ... new ideas, but involved the systematic application of well known management principles', from director level downwards, whilst at the field level, the approach required the availability of 'competent, well-informed village-level extension workers who will visit farmers frequently and regularly with relevant technical messages and bring farmers' problems to research' (Benor and Baxter 1984: 5). While the approach was not gender blind – women were not seen as autonomous decision makers (i.e. 'farmers'), but rather as workers (i.e. 'farm women') (Chapter 24) – it offered no methodology for empowering women.

The T&VE approach was adopted as a blueprint for the successful transference of 'green revolution' technologies to smallholders, planning to succeed where previous endeavours had failed. During the mid 1980s, T&VE programmes were enthusiastically initiated in Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe and afforded significant World Bank investment. Given the high level support, both financial and institutional, a significantly greater number of extension personnel were dispatched into the field, training and research institutions were improved and specialist services were introduced.

After less than a decade of experience in implementation, the impact and (cost) effectiveness of the T&VE approach was questioned. The weak response of the small-farm system, allied with a new intellectual thinking about the nature of rural poverty and detailed research from FSR on the constraints facing smallholders, caused practitioners and intellectuals to question the fundamental approach of 'technology transfer'. An important contribution from FSR was the application of participatory tool kits for learning from farmers, both male and female, and thereby fully incorporating them in decision making about what crops should be tried and how these should be tested. Additionally, the importance of gender as a factor influencing research began to acquire an evidential basis (Feldstein 2000). By the late 1990s, World Bank, once the principle advocate of T&VE, had abandoned the approach. The World Bank thereafter began to turn its attention to the need to build social capital within communities and its attention was re-focused on Community Driven Development (CDD) initiatives which were then rolled out in Malawi and Zambia.⁴

⁴ An important motivation for the shift to CDD and social funds was the desire to circumvent centralized government control through the intention that social funds be semi-autonomous bodies operating independently of normal state channels, such as local municipalities, NGOs and communities.

3.3 The emergence of livelihoods approaches

The intellectual opponents of top-down technology transfer, such as Robert Chambers, found a receptive audience among non-government organizations (NGOs) whose experience had taught them that hierarchal systems and green revolution technologies were inappropriate to resource poor farmers and critically vulnerable groups in sub-Saharan Africa. Vulnerable households had not the entitlements to absorb and execute the ‘message’ or ‘technology’, even where these were potentially beneficial.

The critique of ‘technology transfer’ had its roots in the writings of Sen (1981) and his proposition of entitlement as determining whether individuals were capable and had the means to achieve food security. See Box 4 below. Sen’s notion of entitlement gave impetus to detailed analysis of famines and encouraged cultural/anthropological studies on the role of human agency in shaping household responses to food crisis. The knowledge emanating from these studies galvanized the view that household response to food crises, was determined not simply by the availability of food (or technology) but also the basket of entitlements (or livelihood options) which determined factors such as household accessibility to resources, appropriate technologies and sustainability of agricultural systems. The idea of livelihoods, which emerged as a simplification of Sen’s writings on entitlement, was broadly understood as the capabilities and recourses required for a means of living (Chambers and Conway 1991).

Box 4: Entitlements, food security and gender

The notion of entitlement was developed by Amartya Sen (1981) who defined an entitlement as the ‘set of alternative commodity bundles that a person can command in society using the totality of rights and opportunities that he or she faces’. Sen identified four different categories of entitlement, namely:

- trade-based entitlement, the capacity of an individual to buy, sell or exchange commodities,
- production-based entitlement, the capacity of an individual to produce from accessible resources,
- own-labour entitlement, the capacity of an individual to sell their labour power, and,
- inheritance and transfer entitlement, the power of an individual to exercise ownership rights and receive transfers from the public sector or civil society organizations.

Sen’s notion of entitlement is grounded in legal rights and obligations. This has drawn criticism from scholars who argue that the approach cannot fully account for common property regimes, internal power dynamics within a household, social and political conflict (Devereux 2001). While these points are valid, the entitlement notion nevertheless remains a powerful concept in understanding agricultural development in a context where no external (and violent) crisis impinges on household decision making, as in the countries we examine in this paper.

The provision of agricultural extension services falls into Sen’s category of transfer entitlements. Within the farming systems under discussion, the capacity of individuals to benefit from a transfer entitlement is inextricably tied to other entitlements, such as access to land and markets, the availability of family labour, and membership of a farmer organization, to name but three. A common thread within these various facets of entitlement is the capacity of individuals for autonomous action to pursue strategies that they perceive to be in their best interests for their own well-being and that of their household. From a gender perspective, entitlement by definition is conditional on the forces of patriarchal control and male influence over women’s rights of ownership and freedom of action, within the household, community and society at large.

The paradigmatic shift in thinking about rural development, from the writings on entitlement to the debates on sustainable livelihoods, was translated into ‘bottom-up’, ‘grassroots’, and ‘process oriented’ approaches. International NGOs were the vanguard of this new people-centered paradigm. The livelihoods approach was put into action through research (including FSR) and isolated project experiments in the late 1980s. As a result of the success of these interventions, underpinned by a strong intellectual conviction about their ‘political correctness’, people-centered approaches had, by the mid 1990s been elevated to programme status in leading organizations. CARE for example, one of the pioneers in the intellectual formulation of the approach, adopted ‘household livelihood security’ as its programming framework in 1994.⁵ The adoption of programming approaches, such as that by CARE, signified a more sustained and extensive involvement of NGOs in rural development, shifting from their traditional roles of mitigating food security crisis to having more direct engagement in agricultural productivity enhancement measures and supporting off-farm activities and enterprises.

In Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe the new intellectual mandate of livelihood approaches synchronized with enhanced opportunities for NGOs to support rural people overcome food crisis. In the 1991/1992, NGOs were specifically invited to assist the governments in these countries mitigate the impact of the severe drought that struck the entire southern African region during that time. One such initiative was the Chivi food security project in Zimbabwe (see Box 5). The role of NGOs expanded further after the political reforms of the mid 1990s, both in terms of the number of non-governmental organizations working with rural communities and in terms of their efforts to support the democratization process through development interventions.

People-centered approaches now vary in scope and emphasis between different organizations. Their difference are less a matter of substantial departure from the concern to advance ‘action-oriented’ development (i.e. empowering beneficiaries as change actors), then a matter of ‘development spin’ to mobilize political and financial support within rich countries (Ellis and Biggs 2001). In broad terms these approaches include the following aspects:

- The global consensus on fundamental individual, social and ecological rights, as adopted by conventions, treaties, and protocols,
- The use of participatory methods and toolkits, initially rapid rural appraisals (RRA), and subsequent participatory rural appraisals (PRA) and participatory learning and action (PLA),
- Gender as a fundamental variable in all interventions,
- Recognition of indigenous knowledge systems and resources,
- And, more recently within the paradigm timeline, the promotion of democratic practices and principles and a shift towards interventions which aim to secure, uphold and deepen ‘rights’.

⁵ The intellectual motivation for adopting ‘Household Livelihood Security’, according to CARE strategists, derived from ‘a food security perspective but is based on the observation that food is only one important basic need among several, and adequate food consumption may be sacrificed for other important needs’ (Carney et al. 2000: 61).

Box 5: The Chivi (Ward 21) food security project

In the delineation of a methodological approach to people-centered development, one of the most significant projects to provide a learning experience was the Chivi Food Security Project (1991-1999). The Project was initiated by the Intermediate Technology Development Group (ITGC) in the Chivi district, Ward 21, in Southern Zimbabwe. The Chivi location was chosen because of its poor agricultural potential and the recurrent problem of food insecurity within the community.

At the point of the intervention (1991) the Chivi community had become despondent with green revolution technologies and the top-down technology transfer approach of Agritex, the public sector agricultural extension agency. The new Project was thus conceptualized as a low-input initiative (no free inputs; just technical advice), requiring the participatory involvement of all farmers – rich and poor, men and women, young and old – in finding sustainable solutions to food insecurity.

A Chivi farmer, Mr S. Masara, reported of the first meeting between the ITGC project and the community thus: 'This man, Murwira, he said I have come to work with you to end hunger, but I have no money to give you, no food, nothing. We are going to work together to think about what our problems are and how we can solve them. Then I thought, this man must be mad, or he thinks we are stupid. ... It was only later that we realized his approach was good' (pp: 29). A women farmer, Mai Chiza, found the participatory approach enlightening and an important departure from previous agricultural interventions. She said, in reflection: 'If you came here and said Mai Chiza you are poor, you need a dress, and you gave me one, that may not be what I want. I may take that dress and smile very nicely and thank you very much, but after you go I will turn around and say 'that idiot'. ... So you have to ask me what my problem is and what I want to do about it. Then we agree on how you can help me and if you want to and if I would like you to (pp: 37)'.

The Chivi Project went on to 'beat' hunger through helping individuals pursue strategies that they perceived to be in their best interests, using available resources, for their own and the well-being of their household. The Chivi story has been documented and is now a celebrated example of how sustainable livelihoods can be built through strengthening entitlements of men and especially women (Murwira et al. 2000).

Through the influence of the Neuchâtel group (Box 6) and other forums, donors have since supported a range of initiatives to 'facilitate' public sector change in the provision of agricultural extension services towards people-centered approaches to rural development.⁶ Agricultural ministries have proved receptive to these approaches and in Malawi, Zambia and Limpopo Province, South Africa, participatory extension approaches (PEA) have been given policy recognition (Aihoon 2005 and 2006; Novafrika 2007; McEwan 2003, and Whiteside 1988; MAFF and GTZ 2000). Extension workers are no longer seen as technical messengers, but rather as facilitators whose role is to support rural communities to take ownership of development actions through fostering organization, promoting action learning, and supporting communities to articulate their demand for services. In support of this policy, agriculture ministries have put considerable effort into re-training their extension workers, equipping them with knowledge of participatory methods and facilitation tools, and ensuring their sensitivity to gender issues.

⁶ German Technical Co-operation (GTZ), for example, has sought to facilitating the adoption of participatory extension approaches throughout the region, through the ASSP programme in Zambia (1993-1999), the ASMP project in Zimbabwe, the AES programme in Malawi (1998-2004), and the BASED programme in Limpopo Province (1998-2006).

Box 6: The common framework on agricultural extension in Africa

Among the donor 'community', the debate on how best to provide extension in the African development context was conducted within the 'Neuchâtel Group', organized with the aim of securing a convergence of thinking on the objectives, methods and means of support for agricultural extension (see Neuchâtel 1999 and 2000). By 1999 the Group had successfully shifted opinions towards consensus and it released the 'Common Framework on Agricultural Extension in Africa', consolidating six key principles:

- I A sound agricultural policy is indispensable
- II Extension consists of 'facilitation' as much if not more than 'technology transfer'
- III Producers are clients, sponsors and stakeholders, rather than beneficiaries of agricultural extension,
- IV Market demands create an impetus for a new relationship between farmers and private suppliers of goods and services,
- V New perspectives are needed regarding public funding and private actors,
- VI Pluralism and decentralized activities require coordination and dialogue between actors.

The Neuchâtel principles have since influenced the nature of donor support for small-farm development. The influence has been especially noticeable in terms of justifying the decline in donor funding towards public sector agriculture services, whilst enabling the siphoning-off of developing aid towards NGO initiatives. The 'Common Framework' influence has also been felt within public sector programmes, at policy level, where donors have advocated the removal of (remaining) obstacles to liberalization, and at the operational level, where donors have encouraged the rationalization of services and a focus on 'core functions'.

4 Gender empowerment

In 2001/2002 a severe drought struck southern Africa. On the basis of the predicted shortfall in the maize crop, widespread famine was predicted. The scale of the anticipated famine was reminiscent of the 1992 drought and a massive emergency aid programme was mobilized. But even though food aid took up to a year to reach intended beneficiaries, the famine did not materialize. Hunger nevertheless did occur, especially in inflexible and weakly diversified farming systems, such as the maize/tobacco system in central Malawi. In the Zambian case, one commentator has noted: 'at least by January/February 2003, the predications of impending 'famine' and 'starvation' by relief agencies and reports in the national and international media did not appear to have been borne out. Nutrition surveys undertaken by CARE and other agencies indicate that malnutrition rates have remained stable ... and are below the recognized cut-off of 10 per cent prevalence of global acute malnutrition' (cited in McEwan 2003). So what happened, the researcher asked? The same question was asked by Devereux (2002) of the Malawi context. He had earlier predicted that the drought in Malawi amounted to the country's worst famine, but when this did not occur he was compelled to re-examine the evidence and found that the crisis was largely about maize rather than food.

These questions have elicited a complex, though incomplete, explanation. The consensus of opinion points to the inaccuracy of crop estimation, the role of other food

crops (especially cassava), access to off-farm income, the contribution of naturally occurring foods and the unrecorded volume of cross border trade. These arguments are all valid.⁷ However, what has not been stated is that the strengthening of gender entitlements was of crucial importance because it was women who drove crop diversification so that alternative staples crops were available, women who had disposable income from market gardening and small enterprises to purchase the imported maize, and women who had initiated vegetable gardens that would enable the maintenance of nutritional security at household level.

People-centered development practices, as embodied in livelihoods approaches, have begun to have a significant impact on the entitlement of women farmers. We now turn to evidence and detail how their entitlement gains have directly contributed towards improved food security at the household (micro), at the broader community (meso) and at the national (macro) level.

4.1 The household level (micro)

Participatory extension (embodying sustainable livelihood approaches) has enabled women to better articulate their needs to improve household food security. Their demands for support and services have focused on those crops and other livelihood options, such as small livestock and beer brewing, over which their entitlements are uncontested. Women have generally sought to avoid direct contestation with male control over certain crops (such as maize and tobacco) and farming practices (such as animal traction), instead they have sought to raise productivity and intensify the production of those crops over which their entitlements are secure, using existing technologies. In articulating their agricultural service demands, women's 'needs' have therefore related to the production of vegetables in gardens and the requirements of seeds, micro-irrigation, fencing, pest and disease control and for new varieties of crops like cassava and sweet potatoes. In both Malawi and Zambia, production of these crop has dramatically intensified over the past decade; section 4.3 examines the data.

While women have also expressed the need for knowledge transmission in their articulation of extension demands, their major knowledge requirement has been the 'need' to facilitate community mobilization in support of their vegetable production and other livelihood endeavours. This has often meant bringing men on board, through encouraging their involvement, either independently or in partnership, or securing broad legitimization of women's initiatives, especially where money is involved. CARE's Livingstone Food Security Project in Zambia, for example, was able to secure male support for women's beer brewing activities through involving men in the business training aspects of the Project (Annex 5 in Frankenberger et al. 2000). The Project facilitated group analysis of the profitability of beer brewing and thus men came to realize that women were often making a loss because large amounts of beer were being given away for tasting to husbands and their friends, the Chief and various helpers. The solution, which men then fully supported, was to reduce the volume of the free samples; profits went up immediately and women were able to utilize the extra-income for purchasing food, educating their children and investing in small stock and poultry.

⁷ These issues have been examined in the case of Malawi by Charman (2004) and in Zambia by Chiwele and Sikananu (2004).

There is much anecdotal evidence from project reports and impact studies to show that addressing women's livelihood needs has had a positive impact on household wellbeing. In the Chivi Project, when women were asked how they had benefited from the intervention, they pointed to the financial independence they acquired through its support for market gardening. They also recognized the changing dependency within gender relations which had come about as a consequence. As one informant reported:

Men working in towns knew their wives would come from the village for money. Now they wait for their wives to bring vegetables (Murwira et al. 2000: 102).

Agricultural extension support for market gardening in Zambia has broadened the revenue streams for women (see for example Chilemba 2004) and improved household nutrition, though the impact of vegetable production on food security has been less significant as a consequence of falling maize production. For individuals such as Ms Masiya, a beneficiary of the CARE Livingstone Project cited above, the impact has been profound:

'Before [the Project] our lives were difficult. Crop varieties were long maturing which resulted in hunger. With seed from [the Project], we have learned that early maturing crops are much better ... [The Project] trained us in planting methods, how to utilize crops for our children to have good, healthy bodies as well as to sell crops to buy commodities in the house like chairs, clothes and soap.' (<http://carezambia.org/profile.asp>).

An assessment of household food security in Southern Malawi in the wake of the 2001/2002 drought (Orr and Orr 2003) found that households which had diversified their cropping systems (shifting from hybrid maize to cassava and sweet potatoes) and intensified the production of market garden crops (vegetables) were better able to cope during the crisis. The investigation concluded that hunger was less severe in the Southern region, in contrast to WFP predictions, because these changes had reduced household risks. The study findings applied even to resource poor households, such as FHH. The strengthening of food security entitlements in this case was directly attributable to participatory agricultural extension interventions by Oxfam Malawi and the EU funded Integrated Food Security Project (IFSP).

The rising stature of women as farmers has not gone unnoticed in government programmes. Where women have been afforded equal opportunities to benefit from agricultural services, such as the national cropping trial programme in Malawi in the late 1990s, women proved that they were able to match their male counterparts in productivity (Gilbert et al. 2002). These findings have helped to reinforce the political motivation for gender mainstreaming and women in Malawi have as a result been specifically targeted in input 'starter' pack initiatives to raise maize production.

4.2 The community level (meso)

Livelihood initiatives have had, arguably, their most significant impact through fostering women's organization and their participation in collective bodies such as farmer organizations. During the T&VE period, the organization of women in pursuit of farming interests extended no further than gardening clubs. Women were discouraged from participation as ordinary members, while their appointment to leadership position

within organizations was precluded. Cultural norms were left to rule supreme, as one of the Chivi farmers recalled:

Before the project, it was not easy to nominate another man's wife or someone else's husband to a leadership position in case questions were asked as to how you knew that person's competencies and skills (Murwira et al. 2000: 102).

Through facilitating dialogue, the Chivi Project was able to engender change, firstly in the membership of farmers clubs (where the membership of women rose to 40 per cent) and subsequently at the leadership level where women farmers were ultimately elected to senior positions. At the Chipapa Irrigation Scheme in Kafue District, Zambia, a similar change process has taken place, facilitated by the agency of the WIN project and implemented by the Ministry of Agriculture and Co-operatives. The irrigation scheme committee which manages the scheme, once male dominated, has now equal male and female representation. A study of the gender impact of the Project on the scheme found that the empowerment of women to leadership positions on the committee has advanced women's interests. The benefit includes the approval of women's applications for agricultural plots within the scheme and the decision to afford women priority in the use irrigation water so that they can attend to household chores including child care (Chilembo 2004: 40-42).

As the barriers to women's participation in farmer organizations has diminished, so women have embraced organizational forms as a means of strengthening their entitlements. Membership has brought women direct benefits, including access to institutional finance, inputs and markets. Farmer organizations, moreover, have provided women with the means of overcoming the barriers to cash cropping in the sectors traditionally dominated by men, notably tobacco and cotton. It is important to note, however, that the participation of women has not come about through challenging male interests, but rather through consensus and partnership. The Lubulima Agriculture and Commercial Cooperative Union, one of the largest smallholder organizations in Zambia, for example, has 55-60 per cent female membership. The high level of women membership has been achieved with the endorsement of men, especially in those cases where the male head is absent from the farm and women have been afforded authority to represent the household (Hopkins et al. 2005: 11). The empowerment of women through this role marks an important shift in gender relations in which husband and wife operate in partnership sharing responsibilities and income.

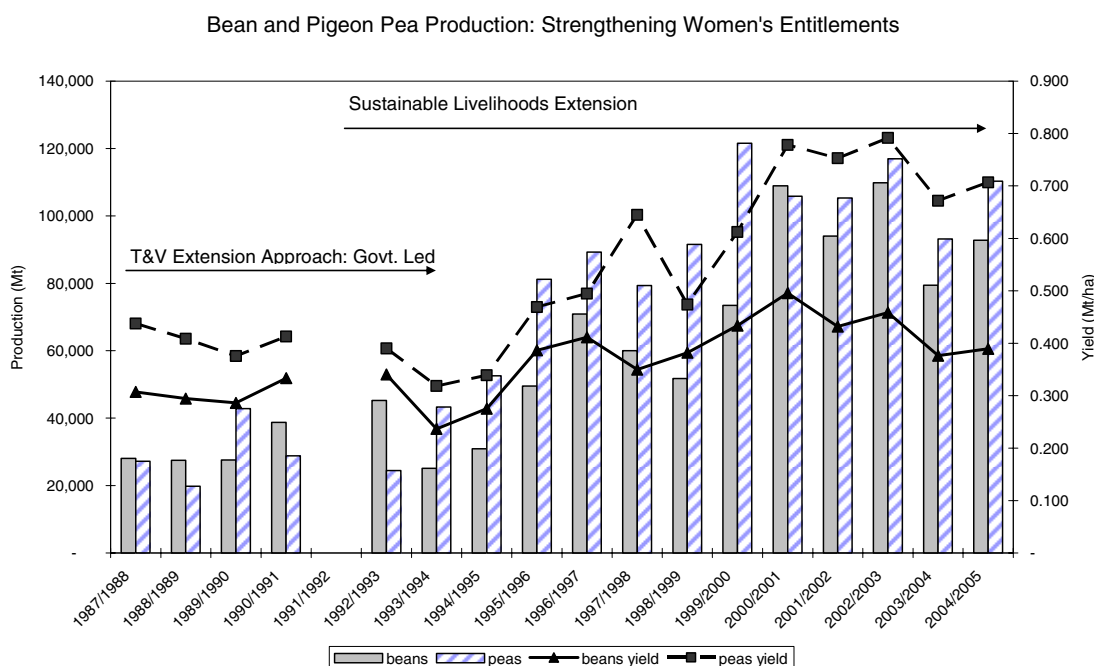
A recent survey of farmer organizations in Malawi found that women are now strongly represented in the majority of district and national organizations, apart from dairy co-operatives and cash crop (tobacco) clubs, and have a particularly strong influence in the poultry sector (Kumwenda and Mingu 2005). The BASED programme in Limpopo, which introduced and institutionalized PEA into the Provincial agricultural extension service, facilitated the establishment of broad spectrum of grass-roots farmers' organizations in which women assumed a strong role in both leadership and membership (where they comprise roughly half the members). One of these organizations, a maize seed co-operative, has enabled women to become leading seed producers, a status publicly endorsed by the seed certification bodies. The co-operative has enabled its members to sell certified maize seed and this enterprise has strengthened their livelihoods and had a broader food security impact on the local community though enabling farmers to access affordable seed that suit local agro-ecological circumstances (Aihoon 2005; Novafrika 2007).

4.3 The national level (macro)

In the decade since the 1991/92 drought there has occurred a significant diversification and expansion of crops in which women's entitlements are largely uncontested. The change corresponds closely to the decline in the T&VE approach and the rise in participatory approaches, drawing upon the sustainable livelihood paradigm. In terms of crop production statistics, the trend is most pronounced in the case of legumes (beans and pigeon peas) and root and tuber crops (cassava, sweet potato and potato). While the production of relish crops (tomatoes, onion, broad leaf vegetables) has also significantly expanded in volume, these crops are not included in official statistics and evidence of the trend remains largely anecdotal.

The dramatic increase in crops over which women hold entitlement can be illustrated with data from the Ministry of Agriculture in Malawi (see Chart 2, Chart 3, and Chart 4 below). In beans and pigeon peas, national production for both crops has grown from approximately 30,000 Mt in late 1980s to in-excess of 100,000 Mt in the early 2000s, with productivity (yield per hectare) also increasing. See Chart 2. The expansion in these crops has been primarily self-driven, undertaken by individuals acting in their best interests, aided with the encouragement for inter-cropping in NGO and government initiatives.

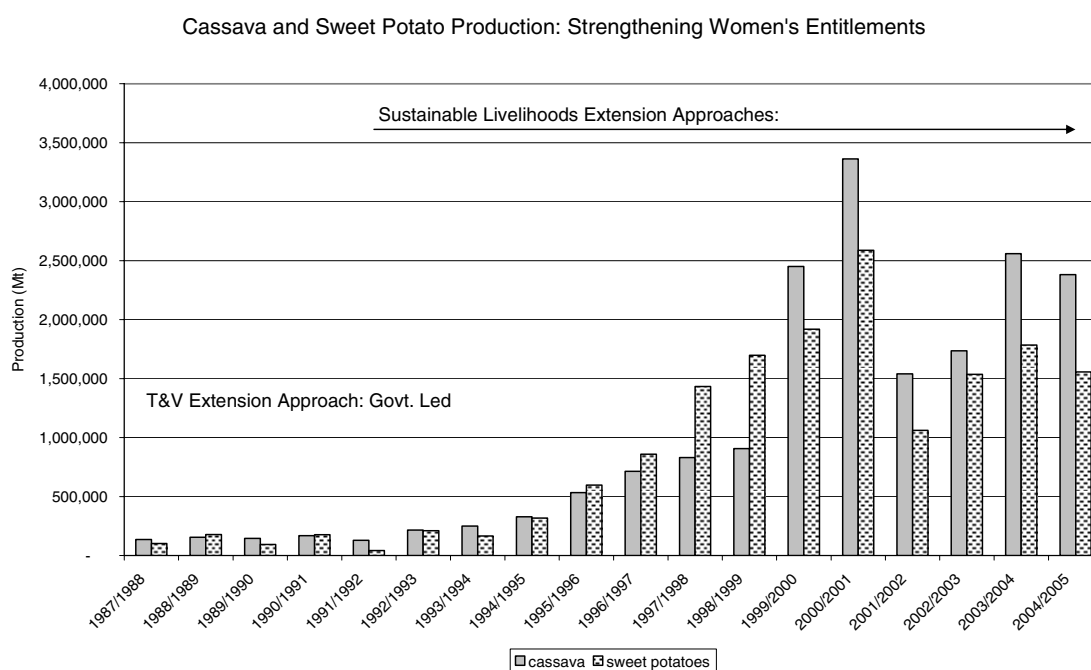
Chart 2: Bean and pigeon pea production in Malawi, 1987-2005



Source: Ministry of Agriculture: Final Crop Estimates.

In the case of cassava and sweet potatoes, the expansion of production has been even more significant as detailed in Chart 3. Cassava production has increased from 134,785 Mt in 1987 to 2,389,944 Mt in 2005 and since 1998/99 production has exceeded the maize crop in volume terms. Similarly, sweet potato production has risen from 101,974 Mt in 1987 to 1,555,605 Mt in 2005.

Chart 3: Cassava and sweet potato production in Malawi, 1987-2005



Source: Ministry of Agriculture: Final Crop Estimates.

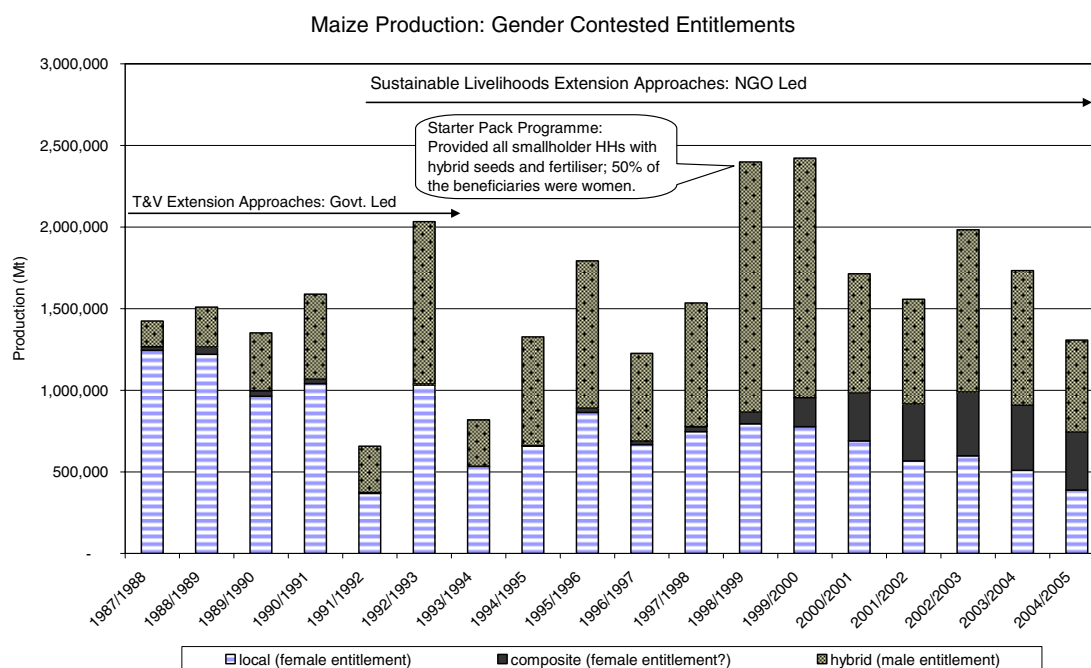
Beans, pigeon peas, cassava and pigeon-peas are all low input crops; seeds and planting material are annually recycled. These crops are all grown under rain-fed conditions without the use of in-organic fertilizers and chemical sprays. The main barriers to their production are therefore the production entitlement of land, seed and technical knowledge and own-labour entitlement.

The increased production of these crops has contributed towards improved food security. The impact of this contribution has been off-set by the comparative stagnation in maize production (see Chart 4). Maize production has only twice exceeded the levels attained in the era of the T&VE; in 1998/99 and 1999/2000. In these years, national production was boosted through the provision of a universal ‘starter pack’ to all smallholders, including FHH, providing them with free hybrid seeds and inorganic fertilizer to produce 0.1 ha. The starter pack programme thus temporarily extended to women (and the poor) the entitlements of fertilizer and seed necessary to grow hybrid maize. Since 2000 this initiative has been downscaled and while the poorest households have been targeted, women are no longer core beneficiaries. Despite shifting resources towards women, men still command those entitlements necessary to produce a surplus crop and the ownership of the crop within the market place remains gender contested. Male dominance over income from maize (through their trade-based entitlement) was clearly identified during the assessment of the starter pack programme. The study found that men retain all money derived from farming in half of male-headed households and make the sole decisions about using it in three-quarters of these cases, with women taking decisions on their own in only about 10 per cent of the households (Levy et al. 2000).

As a result of the shift in extension approaches, rural development projects have started to listen to the ‘needs’ of women and the poor. In maize production, their extension requirements have included the need to access to open pollinated seed varieties

(composites), rather than hybrids, as these can be recycled (for a limited period) and are less reliant on fertilizer. Chart 4 shows clearly an increase in the production of composite varieties, at the expense largely of local varieties, over time, thus suggesting that women have acquired a sufficiently strong entitlement to this technology to begin to relinquish their traditional practices of growing low yielding local varieties.

Chart 4: Maize production in Malawi, 1987-2005



Source: Ministry of Agriculture: Final Crop Estimates.

Similar trends are observable in the Zambian scenario. The most significant shifts in this country have been the reinvestment from maize production to cassava (and, to a lesser extent, sweet potatoes), with cotton production witnessing exponential growth along the lines of the Malawian tobacco case. These changes have been described as a transformation towards a 'more inward looking subsistence production' (Siegel 2005). A further comment is that this change represents a 'return to a more traditional cropping and consumption patterns' (Zulu et al. 2000: 2). But if the trend is indeed reflective of the Malawi scenario, then a closer examination of gender entitlements must be undertaken to determine whether this 'return' is not actually a significant departure towards more sustainable livelihoods.

5 Countervailing pressures

The strengthening of women's entitlements has not gone uncontested. Their cultural and social role within the home has meant that women are more directly affected by pressures on the households, such as the illness resulting from the HIV/AIDS pandemic. The following section will outline some of the major countervailing pressures that have impinged on women's recent entitlement gains. The objective here is not to detail all issues, but rather focus on three areas from which these challenges have most strongly emanated.

5.1 HIV/AIDs

The HIV/AIDs pandemic has had a major impact on smallholder agriculture and rural livelihoods. The extent of the impact is still under debate. Some studies (especially in support of NGO interventions) contend that the disease has had a systemic impact, affecting all aspects of rural livelihoods (social, psychological, cultural and economic), other studies argue for caution, pointing to the different outcomes among different strata and cultural groups and the variance in intra-household gender relations. There is broad consensus, however, that the severity of the HIV/AIDs impact depends on the household's basket of entitlements and its morbidity, mortality and democratic profile. The influence of morbidity factors rest on whether or not, as a consequence of the disease, the household head is chronically ill, the labour dependency ratio and the number of orphaned children incorporated into the household.

Studies have clearly shown how the presence of HIV/AIDs within the family has worsened household vulnerability to food security shocks, causing them to engage earlier and more frequently in coping strategies. The disease has affected both the ill and their caregivers. Children and elderly persons have struggled to make up the loss of labour. In some cases, the incorporation of orphaned children into a household can result in a net labour gain and agricultural benefit (Orr and Orr 2003), though it is generally accepted that households with a high dependency ratio receive less income through each orphan beneficiary.

The impact of HIV/AIDS on women's entitlements has promoted agricultural ministries to intensify their extension support to women in general (as the primary caregivers) and FHH in particular (as the most vulnerable groups) (for the Malawi case, see Malindi 2005). The necessity to reach women has reinforced the case in favour of participatory agricultural extension approaches. In the introduction to an FAO 'pocket guide' for extension workers, written to complement public sector re-training towards this objective, change in the mindset and skills of the extension worker is seen as essential to enable him/her to cope with the 'macro-economic trends' and challenges 'of responding to the fast-paced demographic changes in rural households – in large part caused by migration, rural ageing and epidemics such as HIV/AIDS' (SEAGA 2004). FAO has called for a shift away from the former emphasis on productivity enhancement and crop production to focus instead on measures to secure nutrition under household circumstances of failing health. In this new era, the watchwords for food security initiatives in Southern Africa are off-farm income, safety-net support and (homestead) gardening.⁸

5.2 Food aid and safety net interventions

Food aid and safety net interventions were intensified in Malawi and Zambia in the wake of the 2001/02 food security crisis. Initially, targeting was broadly defined, incorporating whole communities in areas of production shortfall, but over the past five years has narrowed to focus on chronically vulnerable cohorts. The beneficiaries included mothers, female headed households and households with a high dependency

⁸ For example 'HIV/AIDS, gender inequality and the agriculture sector: guidelines for incorporating HIV/AIDS and gender considerations into agricultural programming in high incidence countries'. (November 2004).

ratio and/or dependent orphans. Both the targeting approach and the support services (free food or cash) have had unintended consequences that include:

- alienating the community (the excluded versus included beneficiaries),
- fostering conflict within the household between husband and wife,
- reinforcing dependency on maize as the main food staple,
- distorting labour and food markets,
- exerting deflationary pressure on food prices.

During the 2002 food crisis, strong community pressure was brought on traditional leaders and district administrators to champion for food aid and relief support despite the availability of food at household level. NGOs and donor programmes similarly pressurized their field operations to incorporate food distribution within existing livelihood programmes. In one case in Southern Malawi, the NGO headquarters in Europe demanded food distribution within its local programme, causing the field director to argue that the present development approach [livelihoods extension] had been set back three or four years (Orr and Orr 2003: 24). These pressures have undermined the emphasis within participatory extension approaches on empowerment through self initiatives and ownership.

5.3 Patriarchy and patronage politics

At the institutional level, gender mainstreaming has had limited impact. The development agenda is still set by male priorities and agriculture support services are skewed towards crops, livestock and technologies in which men hold overriding entitlement. The case of maize is illustrative.

Maize is an important mechanism of political patronage in Malawi and Zambia. When a government seeks popular endorsement, as happened in Malawi in 1998/9 (the first post-democracy election) maize seed and fertilizer are distributed to smallholders in a process controlled and mediated by traditional leaders. Maize is also given out at political rallies. Similarly when a food crisis occurs, maize is provided as food aid, regardless of the farming practices or food cultivated within the affected locality. Any other food crop would be regarded, within the prevailing patriarchal view, as no more than a snack or relish. The use of maize as food aid reinforces a patriarchal bond between the government and the household head through the symbolism of a crop to which men have an undisputed entitlement. Government support for maize extends to input subsidies, investment in research, knowledge transfer and market access. No similar level of support has been afforded to other food crops.

At the field level, women's entitlement gains and improved livelihoods through producing saleable crops has not gone uncontested. Where money can be made, men have sought to control production. In the Chivi case, for example, groundnuts were once predominantly grown by women, but when men saw the profits that could be made from groundnuts, they too began growing the crop and would eventually dominate production. Studies have shown that the challenge from patriarchal interests are greatest where women have sought to pursue autonomous livelihood strategies. Yet this threat has been muted where women have advanced their interests through community organizations or where the household (and male head) fully collaborates with their endeavour.

6 Conclusions

The paper argues that participatory, people-centered, agricultural extension approaches have had a profound impact on the entitlements of rural women in Southern Africa. We have argued that these interventions have resulted in the strengthening of women's entitlements, including improving their knowledge of crop production and markets, improving their access to adaptable and affordable technologies, strengthening their capabilities to access markets, mobilizing women in organizational bodies such as farmer organizations and facilitating their collective action in pursuit of their self-interest. Through their strengthened legal status, women have gained access to organizational structures (farmers' organizations) and secured the entitlement to receive finance and input loans for agricultural programmes from institutions, organizations and the private sector. These entitlement gains must be seen within the context of the political reforms, liberalization and shift in development paradigms towards livelihood approaches that began to impact on rural development from the early-mid 1990s. Over the past decade, the political rationale for including women in agricultural development interventions has strengthened and begun to acquire institutional endorsement.

The paper concludes that many rural women have achieved, as a result of these policy changes, more sustainable livelihoods. The entitlement gain by women has enabled them to engage in market gardening (which, in turn, has given women an income stream that they can independently control) and to intensify crops to which their gendered entitlement is uncontested: legumes, root and tuber crops. In the Malawi case, the production of these crops has increased exponentially since the early 1990s, while maize, a male dominated crop, has correspondingly stagnated. The Malawian crop trends underline our second conclusion that while women have gained entitlements that improve their livelihoods, these gains have not translated directly into improved household food security. Food security in the case countries remains conditional on maize production, a male controlled crop which underpins patriarchal power and political patronage. Without institutional and organizational support, women are unable to contest male domination of maize due to the relative weakness of their trade-based and production-based entitlements in the realm of male dominated crops. But in those crops where their trade-based and production-based entitlements are secure, as in the case of legume, vegetable and root and tubers, agricultural extension support has bolstered their endeavours to strengthen their livelihoods and build linkages between farm and off-farm micro-enterprise activities.

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