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A Systematic Review of the Performance of Agricultural Marketing in Malawi

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Abstract

The main purpose of this study was to review the performance of agricultural marketing in Malawi. Using a systematic review, the study synthesizes factors affecting performance of agricultural marketing in Malawi. It identifies key issues such as a lack of an efficient market system, information asymmetry in the market, inadequate agricultural marketing policies for non-food crops, price uncertainty, and lack of export incentives to encourage and boost agricultural exports. To that end, the study urges the necessity for a thorough examination of agricultural marketing policies that places an emphasis on dealing with important challenges in the agricultural sector that are supported by empirical data in order to foster economic growth.

Keywords
Systematic review, agricultural marketing, policies and strategies, market information, market environment

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Introduction

Agricultural markets offer households opportunities to engage in productive activities through investments in diversified livelihood strategies and sell both labor and products (Sibande et al., 2017). Vibrant and efficient agricultural marketing systems are often lauded for their potential to catalyze agricultural and economic growth through foreign exchange earnings, job creation, and rural income generation (FAO, 2020). In addition, efficient agricultural marketing systems can stimulate growth in non-farm industries due to an increase in demand for consumer goods (Praburaj, 2018). In Malawi, Mangani et al. (2020) reported that Smallholder agriculture accounts for approximately 70.0% of the sector's output, while the rest is from better managed estates. It is widely accepted that small farmers' participation in markets is one of the most important factors necessary for economic growth and poverty reduction in developing countries (Sibande et al., 2017). More broadly, Louhichi et al. (2020) emphasized that smallholders have a unique role to play in the new global development agenda—the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which world leaders agreed upon in September 2015. Agriculture, especially if well-integrated into a diversified rural economy and agrifood value chains, can contribute even more to inclusive growth and employment generation (Gomez y Paloma et al., 2020). However, the resource poor small-scale farmers are largely subsistence and they face high transaction costs (TCs) and have poor access to information that limit their market participation (Chikuni and Kilima, 2019). This has resulted into slow economic growth as these smallholder farmers face a myriad of challenges in agricultural marketing. The slow overall economic growth mirrors the performance of the agricultural sector (Mangani et al., 2020).

To this end, it can clearly be seen that agricultural growth can provide the economy with much needed stimuli such as capital, labor, and foreign exchange for finance and can fuel growth in nonagricultural sectors (Mango et al., 2018). However, agricultural markets in developing countries like Malawi are characterized by poor competitiveness, fragmentation, inefficiency, presence of excessive middlemen, and frequent price manipulations thus affecting economic growth (GoM, 2017

To understand agricultural marketing, it is essential to recognize its definition as a series of interconnected activities, physical processes institutions and infrastructure involved in facilitating the flow of agricultural goods and services from areas of production to the ultimate user (DFID, 2005). The institutional component of agricultural marketing is largely concerned with the policy environment within which marketing takes place (Jari and Fraser, 2009). For example, the market liberalization programs that several African countries including Malawi embarked on, attracted private traders into the farm gate buying and retailing of smallholder farmers' agricultural commodities (Mango, 2018). The private sector is free to set the prices according to competitive markets, although the government may issue indicative (non-binding) prices. However, the Malawi government introduced some price controls on farm gate prices to protect the smallholder farmers from unscrupulous traders. Market competition induced by these private traders does not, however, appear to benefit smallholder farmers. Some evidence indicates that there is collusion among private traders in the smallholder subsector produce market (GoM, 2017).

Although the importance of agricultural marketing for better economic outcomes and sustainable agricultural development in agrarian nations is widely acknowledged, one cannot discuss agricultural marketing within the context of economic growth without briefly examining the ongoing debate among scholars. Whether agricultural expansion is a prerequisite for economic growth in rural economies is the larger question at the center of this discussion (Awokuse, 2009; Bair et al., 2019; Berhanu and Poulton, 2014; Scoones et al., 2016). The theoretical and empirical investigations carried out on the subject have revealed mixed and oftentimes divergent results (Awokuse, 2009). To date, while some scholars posit that agricultural development is quintessential to economic growth in agrarian countries (Adedoyin et al., 2021; Carletto et al., 2017; Udemba,

2020), contrarily, some contend that since economic growth is multifaceted and agriculture cannot supply the necessary impetus for significant economic expansion (Adebayo et al., 2023; Soyer et al., 2020). Advocates of agricultural-led growth argue that, in developing nations (especially those with agrarian economies), investments in agriculture are likely to spur economic growth overall due to their influence on institutional and infrastructure development (Diao et al., 2010). In the same line, some scholars have noted that while some agrarian countries have attempted to achieve economic growth without increasing the agriculture sector, these efforts have only led to modest economic growth rates and observable socioeconomic disparities (Matchaya et al., 2014). To this end, advocates of agriculture-led development often agree that in the early stages of a country's development process, agricultural development could lead to substantial economic growth (Diao et al., 2006), and this is the view that underpins this study.

Although the relationship between agriculture development and economic growth is still an empirical dispute, recent statistics point to agriculture remaining pivotal to global economic growth and development, particularly in economies that rely on agriculture (Girma and Kuma, 2022). According to the World Bank, "agricultural development is one of the most powerful tools to end extreme poverty, boost shared prosperity, and feed a projected 9.7 billion people by 2050" (World Bank, 2021). Agriculture accounted for 4% of the global Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2018 (World Bank, 2021), and it employed 1 billion people globally (Girma and Kuma, 2022). For agrarian economies, the agricultural sector accounts for 30%–60% of GDP, employs 40%–90%, supplies the majority of food, and is a source of income for more than half the population of most developing countries (Girma and Kuma, 2022). Studies have also shown that agriculture is more likely to raise the incomes of the poorest than any other sector of the economy (De La O Campos et al., 2018; World Bank, 2021). Indeed, these statistics are a testament to agriculture's potential to steer economic growth in agrarian economies. While several factors drive agricultural growth, Jayne et al. (2021) are of the view that agricultural marketing is among the key drivers of agricultural growth and an essential component of economic transformation. For agricultural marketing to substantively contribute to agricultural development and consequently economic growth, the institutional, infrastructural, and physical processes involved in agricultural marketing must be well developed and coordinated (Jari and Fraser, 2009).

To understand agricultural marketing systems and contribute to their efficient performance, many scholars have carried out research on the subject. In Malawi, for example, a substantial body of information is available regarding the country's agricultural marketing landscape. Scholars have used different avenues to investigate the Malawian marketing system. For instance, Ochieng et al. (2020) assessed smallholder farmers' and traders' access to market information and structured markets; Mtumbuka et al. (2014) investigated the degree of market integration among local bean markets. Furthermore, Magreta and Jambo (2012) assessed the challenges and opportunities associated with bean markets and youth involvement in those markets. Still trying to understand Malawi's marketing system, some scholars chose to study the performance of select crop markets like soybean markets (Nzima and Dzanja, 2015), bean markets (Chitete et al., 2023a, 2023b; Lifeyo, 2017), groundnut markets (Chitete et al., 2021), and tobacco markets (Shaba et al., 2017). This body of evidence could influence agricultural marketing policy action. However, it is fragmented. This fragmentation could affect the comprehensiveness of the design, implementation, and monitoring of agricultural marketing policies, strategies, and programs. In addition, evidence on core elements of agricultural marketing like the institutional environment is scanty. Without a strong agricultural marketing policy foundation, the performance of the whole marketing system could be undermined. There is thus a need for synthesized evidence on the Malawian agricultural marketing system in order to adequately guide policy action.

A study on Malawi's agricultural marketing would be incomplete without considering the sector's development over the years and the significant role it has played in shaping policies and practices in the country. There are several scholars who assert that Malawi's colonial past has greatly

influenced its agrarian development, underpinned by patterns of continuities and discontinuities that reflect efforts to either perfect the colonial heritage or to take a completely new trajectory of agrarian development and transformation (Green, 2007, 2011 in Chinsinga et al., 2021).

Due to the country's transition from a one-party dictatorship to a multiparty form of government, it is now possible for agricultural policy to be drastically revised in a way that benefits smallholder farmers, who make up the majority of the electorate (Chinsinga, 2021; Poulton and Chinsinga, 2018). Several studies demonstrate that the policy environment is still biased against the interests of smallholder farmers despite claims to the contrary (Chinsinga, 2012; Chisinga, 2021). Following the World Bank's 1981 Berg report, which claimed that developing countries were having significant economic problems because they had overextended their state apparatuses, Malawi was one of the first few African nations to be subjected to SAPs (Chisinga, 2021; Chitete et al., 2023b).

The key argument was that developing-nation governments were unable to effectively promote development and change because they had taken on too many duties (Chisinga, 2021). This paradigm change had an effect on the type and extent of reforms carried out in the nation's agricultural sector (Chinsinga, 2004; Chisinga, 2021). The Produce Marketing Commission and the Agriculture Development and Marketing Corporation (ADMARC) were two reforms in the agricultural industry. The Agricultural marketing Act of 1987, which permits private traders to engage in the sale of agricultural products, was created as a result of the decision to liberalize the marketing of smallholder produce. These changes made it possible for smallholder farmers to grow burley tobacco. This was justified in order to improve farmers' access to cash income, which would improve both their general quality of life and food security (Chisinga, 2021). Even now, smallholder farmers in rural Malawi still struggle to make a profit on the sales of their products. The poor state of the road network in the majority of rural areas and the failure of the private sector to adequately fill the gap created by ADMARC's withdrawal are the main causes of this (Chisinga, 2021).

Numerous attempts have been put into place to improve the smallholder agricultural products marketing system. Most of these programs, which are normally headed by non-state actors and development partners, have mostly been facilitated by the state. Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), in collaboration with a few state authorities, have helped clubs, associations, and even cooperatives expand (Chimombo, 2018; Chisinga, 2021). Through group bargaining, these initiatives aim to improve smallholder producers' marketing capacities. The failure of most of these organizations to find viable markets, especially if they are working on their own without linkages to any institutions and the widespread poverty among the majority of the farmers are two factors that have limited the success of these initiatives. These farmers would want to sell their produce as quickly as possible to meet their basic survival needs. We may consider how agricultural marketing has affected the economy and the formulation of policies now that we are more aware of how it has evolved. According to Chirwa et al. (2008), agriculture policy significantly influences Malawi's economic development and growth strategy.

At this juncture, one could pose the question of whether and how Malawi's current policy environment is equipped to advance agricultural marketing and consequently sustain agricultural and economic growth. One could also ask whether Malawi's policy landscape reflects the significance of agricultural marketing systems to the country's agricultural and economic goals. The country's current overarching medium-term development strategy is the Malawi Growth and Development Strategy (MGDS III; GoM, 2017) which is complemented by several agricultural specific plans and initiatives that aim at promoting agricultural development. These plans include the National Agriculture Policy (NAP; MoAIWD, 2016) and National Agriculture and Investment Plan (NAIP; MoAIWD, 2018). The three documents converge on the need to harness agriculture to create wealth and reduce poverty (GoM, 2017). In addition, in 2020, the country established the Malawi 2063 as the long-term shared vision for Malawi's transformation to a wealthy and self-reliant nation (National Planning Commission, 2021). Like the MGDS III, Malawi 2063 finds its anchorage in regional, continental and global policy frameworks like the SDGs and the African

Union Agenda 2063. Malawi 2063 echoes existing local development strategies' position on the need to use agricultural productivity and market participation toward economic growth (National Planning Commission, 2021).

Despite Malawi leveraging agricultural policy to guide efforts toward enhancing agricultural marketing systems, agricultural development and economic growth, information on whether these policies and strategies have translated into the desired outcomes is limited and fragmented. This study, therefore, systematically reviews information on Malawi's agricultural marketing system to assess its performance on economic growth outcomes. Specifically, the study hopes to support agricultural marketing policy-decision-making through following the pathways (1) by pooling fragmented evidence on the agricultural marketing system with the aim of making this information easily accessible for coordinated policy use and design; (2) by reviewing the nature and adequacy of the available evidence on the performance of agricultural marketing systems in Malawi thereby identifying gaps or opportunities for improvement in policy action; and (3) by investigating the entire agricultural marketing system for a more harmonized approach to future policy development.

Methodology

Selection of articles

The study hovered around the research question "What has been the landscape of agricultural marketing in Malawi?" The study was conducted through a systematic review process that involved searching specified key words related to the research gap at hand on Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, and Scopus. We followed a six-step systematic review framework developed by Koutsos et al. (2019). These steps include scoping, planning, identification and search, screening articles, eligibility assessment, and presentation and interpretation. In this study, the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) statement protocol (Moher, 2009) was chosen to ensure we achieve quality in the systematic review. PRISMA was preferred because it offers a wide range of advantages that include definition of clear research questions that eventually guides one in systematic search; the inclusion and exclusion criteria are specified; and it offers a room to evaluate and examine large database of literature (Sierra-Correa and Cantera Kintz, 2015).

The objective of this paper was to review the performance of agricultural marketing in Malawi. To that extent, we used the search term "Agricultural marketing in Malawi" to ensure a full coverage of the topic specifically related to Malawi. Consequently, only articles focusing on agricultural marketing in Malawi were included, while articles unrelated to both agricultural marketing and Malawi were excluded. The initial search yielded 38 articles on Google Scholar and 2121 articles on ScienceDirect and Scopus, resulting in a total of 2159 articles. Furthermore, two key articles were identified as highly relevant: (1) "Malawi: Refining the state's role in agricultural marketing," cited 28 times, and (2) "Agricultural marketing and price policy in Malawi," cited two times.
Thus, initially, a total of 2189 articles were included for the study. However, out of the initial 2189 articles, 987 articles were excluded from the study due to title mismatch with the topic. Thus, only 1202 articles were considered after the full search.

The abstracts of the 1202 articles were carefully screened. After the abstract screening process, it was noted that 252 articles were not specifically focused on agricultural marketing as they covered topics on climate smart agriculture, agricultural extension service delivery, social safety nets, food security, and malnutrition. Consequently, these articles were excluded from the study and a sample of 950 articles remained and subjected to further screening using other criteria. Furthermore, 211 articles were excluded because they did not pertain to Malawi's agricultural marketing context. Thus, 739 articles remained. Among these, 512 articles were not eligible because they were considered too old to provide insights on recent reforms carried out in the Malawi's agricultural marketing system. Furthermore, 112 articles lacked full tests and were excluded from the review.

Ultimately, a total of 115 articles were included in the final analysis. The inclusion and exclusion criteria are specified in Figure 1.

We used content analysis to examine the data, wherein several themes were developed and coded. The coding process led to the development of the following five overarching themes. These themes include (1) *market information*: this theme generally includes discussions on efficient marketing information systems and information asymmetry, where one party in a transaction possesses more or better information than the other party; (2) *policies and strategies*: this theme mainly examines agricultural marketing policies and strategies before and after market liberalization; (3) *efficiency of agricultural market*: this theme, among others, explores studies on spatial market integration or how the movements of prices in one market affects the prices of other related markets across different geographical locations. It also covers studies on market integration which is defined as the extent to which different markets for a commodity are interconnected; (4) *pricing mechanisms*: includes studies on the role of foreign investments and trade; (5) *agricultural exports*; and (6) *agricultural commercialization*: this theme focuses on studies related to the shift from cultivating crops solely for personal consumption to cultivating some or all crops for sale.

Results and discussions

Market information

Approximately 16.5% of the studies included in this review focused on market information. Market information has long been recognized in most studies as an enabler to an efficient and effective marketing system (Ali and Kumar, 2011; Behera et al., 2015; Jensen, 2010; Lio and Liu, 2006; Magesa et al., 2015; Mangina and Vlachos, 2005; Ogutu et al., 2014; Zhang et al., 2016). Agricultural markets in Malawi and most developing countries have often failed due to lack of proper market information to guide marketing decisions (Chitete et al., 2023b; Katengeza et al., 2010). Smallholder farmers' inability to acquire market information and the pervasive issue of information asymmetry between farmers and buyers are two common causes of agricultural markets failing to meet their needs in Malawi (Fafchamps and Gabre-Madhin, 2006). The articles point out that a lack of accurate and timely information on agricultural market prices, as well as information on input and output quantity and quality, significantly raises TCs (Fafchamps and Gabre-Madhin, 2006; Jayne et al., 2010; Myers, 2013), leading to poor performance of markets.

Access to lucrative markets for smallholder farmers has for a long time been undermined by poor access to markets in Malawi (Borda-Rodriguez and Vicari, 2014; Lall et al., 2009). Some of these studies included in this review show that the performance of agricultural marketing is greatly

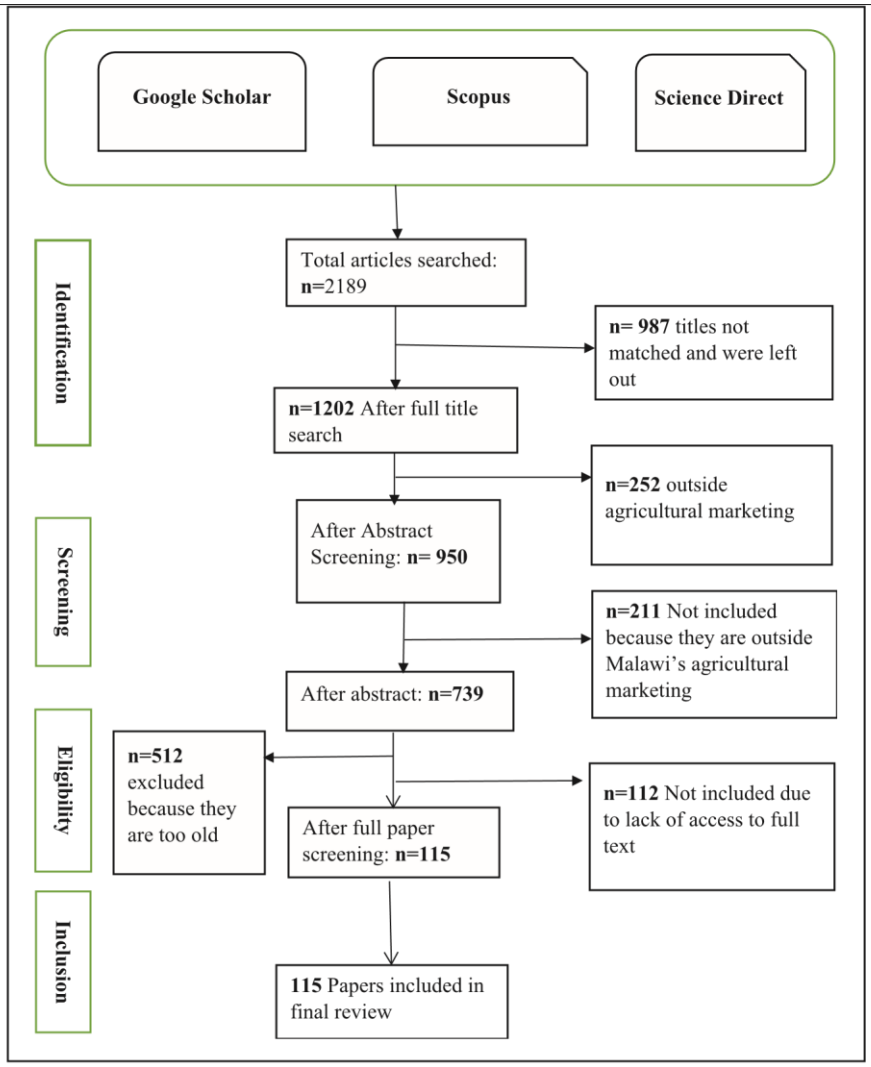

Figure 1. Systematic selection of relevant articles.

undermined by asymmetry of agricultural information (e.g. Chikuni and Kilima, 2019; Fafchamps and Gabre-Madhin, 2006; Gelli et al., 2020; Katunga et al., 2021; Kilima and Chikuni, 2021; Mtumbuka et al., 2014; Phiri et al., 2019; Ragasa et al., 2021; Sibande et al., 2017). Farmers are unable to make rational production and marketing decisions because of the asymmetry of information. Efficient market information enables farmers to negotiate with traders from a position of greater strength, as noted by Katengeza et al. (2010), who found that agricultural marketing information empowers farmers with bargaining power for better prices in the market. Market information also enables farmers to make decisions on what to produce based on demand. Information brings stability in product supplies and prices in time and space, thereby reducing TCs in input and output markets (Katengeza et al., 2013). The use of modern technology is one aspect that is important in agricultural marketing. The modern use of modern technologies in agricultural marketing reduces TCs. The literature reviewed shows that most traders do not use technologies in the marketing of their commodities. To ensure that quality commodities are bought, traders have to

travel to places where commodities are sold, resulting in high TCs (Fafchamps and Gabre-Madhin, 2006).

While there is a need for an efficient marketing information system in Malawi, there are a lot of challenges facing smallholder farmers' access to market information, which leads to the exploitation and sale of products in local markets at very low prices, thus not achieving the needed economic thrust. Studies included in this review have revealed a number of factors hindering access to market information. The studies have identified a number of factors hindering smallholder farmer's access to marketing information, such as education, access to phones, physical access to markets, access to advisory services, a lack of trainings on the identification of markets, market infrastructure, income, membership in farmer groups, distance to agricultural field offices, and land size (e.g. Chikowi et al., 2021; Chirwa, 2009; Jayne et al., 2010; Katengeza, 2012; Katengeza et al., 2011a, 2011b; Katunga et al., 2021; Kilima and Chikuni, 2021; Nkhoma, 2011; Ricker-Gilbert et al., 2014).

But some studies have demonstrated how effectively Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) can increase farmers' access to market information. For instance, Tione et al. (2013) urge greater usage of contemporary ICT, particularly at farm gates. It is necessary to increase the availability of contemporary ICT to all producers in order to provide them with a variety of marketing data. To support measures to lessen market information asymmetry, market infrastructure also has to be enhanced (Katengeza et al., 2013). In addition, Fafchamps and Gabre-Madhin (2006) discuss how farmers' associations might be used to help smallholder farmers get access to market information. Although information communication technologies are effective at improving market information, Chalemba's (2016) analysis reveals that, in comparison to Ghana, Malawi needs to put in more effort to improve service delivery for its ICT-based market information system programs. According to Chalemba (2016), the main areas for development include low-income smallholder farmers' access to the Internet and mobile phone subscriptions, as well as the viability of providing these services without heavily depending on national and international donor organizations. To this end, the country has made some efforts to implement some of its strategies. For instance, to improve the flow of market information among stakeholders, the country established the Agricultural Market Information System (AMIS; IFPRI, 2013). AMIS is an institution under the ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Water Development responsible for the collection of weekly market data and disseminating it (MoAIWD, 2016). While these efforts are commendable, the impacts of the AMIS initiative on farmer or trader productivity have not been thoroughly established, even amid reports that AMIS is not consistent with its duties (IFPRI, 2013).

Policies and strategies

Analysis of the market environment for agricultural marketing was one of the research themes in the study. It was observed that 3.5% of studies in this review have been conducted to characterize the market environment for agricultural marketing. These articles characterize the market environment from before liberalization to after liberalization. In the pre-liberalization era, agricultural marketing was highly controlled by ADMARC. ADMARC was (and is) owned by the state and was the only institution mandated to buy and sell agricultural inputs and outputs. Analysis of the policy aspect of the articles has revealed that most policies and strategies are concentrated on maize, which is a staple food crop. Food security is largely defined as access to maize, and maize self-sufficiency is seen as the best strategy for improving access to food in Malawi. For this reason, food crops have received too much policy consideration compared to other crops (Jayne et al., 2010). According to MGDS III, NAP, NAIP, and Malawi 2063, the country will have to overcome some market-linked hindrances to agricultural development if it is to achieve the much-needed economic development through agriculture (GoM, 2017; MoAIWD, 2018; National Planning Commission, 2021). One of the key hindrances to agricultural development, as identified by the country's policy documents and strategies, is the low participation of the country's crops in local, regional, and global

markets. This low participation is often attributed to a lack of market information, poorly designed policies, inefficiencies in the agricultural marketing systems, low levels of agricultural commercialization, and a low export base. To improve Malawi's marketing prospects, the policies and strategies suggest the need to promote value addition (transforming raw agricultural products into higher value products) and the use of structured markets (regulated markets). The policies and strategies also propose the need to harmonize agricultural market information, improve access to finance, and invest in transport and storage infrastructure (GoM, 2017; MoAIWD, 2018; National Planning Commission, 2021).

The government regularly bans the export of maize when the domestic price is high or there is some uncertainty regarding the size of the next harvest (Chirwa, 2009). As a result, most exports are carried out either by the government as part of government-to-government sales or in the form of cross-border trade (Chirwa, 2009). It is for this reason that maize farmers have remained disadvantaged, thus not achieving the needed economic thrust. In this regard, marketing is largely affected by food requirements, so producers are forced to sell the produce at the government-set prices, which has made them not achieve the much-needed economic thrust. While food crops are largely controlled by ADMARC, cash crops are controlled by various institutions under different legislation. Tobacco is one cash crop that is controlled in terms of growing and selling under the Tobacco Industry Act 2019. The purpose of the act, among other things, is to provide for the regulation, promotion, and development of the tobacco industry in Malawi. Indeed, tobacco is regulated. The regulations aim at avoiding exploitation of the farmers by the buyers and stabilizing the price (The Nation, 2013). The act provides for contract farming, where the buyers provide inputs to the buyers at an interest rate. While this system is applauded for improved access to input loans resulting in the doubling of average tobacco yields and a considerable improvement in leaf quality, improved access to production information due to the multiplicity of players offering extension services, and farmers compliance with global tobacco marketing requirements such as seed integrity and traceability, among other benefits (Mantchombe et al., 2015). However, despite the benefits mentioned, the system has some challenges that impede on the economic growth of the farmers, such as overcharged input, the introduction of unverified technologies, unclear forward pricing, low prices as compared to auction prices, and that while the interests are very high, in the long run, farmers are not benefiting from the system (Mantchombe et al., 2015; NyasaTimes, 2016).

Efficiency of agricultural marketing system

In this review, 24.3% of included articles discussed marketing efficiency. Most of these studies have focused on making smallholder farmers achieve market efficiency. These studies can be divided into studies that have used cross sectional and panel data; and those that have used time series data. Most of the time series data studies have studied markets in the context of spatial price transmission and market integration.

Approximately 9.6% of the studies that have explored market efficiency used a number of indicators including efficiency indicators, marketing margins, profitability analyses, and price efficiency among others. Some studies have characterized some markets as efficient (e.g. Bocher and Simtowe, 2016; Chitete et al., 2023a; Chowa, 2014; Magreta et al., 2013; Nakhumwa, 2015; Nzima and Dzanja, 2015; Nzima et al., 2014; Phiri et al., 2022; Robinson, 2016; Tione, 2011). However, some articles have shown that agricultural markets in Malawi are not efficient (e.g. Bocher and Simtowe, 2016; Nyakwawa et al., 2022; Robinson, 2016). Most of these studies explain that agricultural markets are not efficient in Malawi due to high TCs. The removal of price controls, market liberalization, and the restructuring of ADMARC are some of the strategies that have been put in place to increase market efficiency.

Furthermore, market efficiency has been studied through spatial price transmissions in various agricultural markets. The studies have used time series data to study price transmission and

integration of various commodities in the markets. A great deal of these studies has all come to a conclusion that most agricultural markets in Malawi are weakly integrated (Abdulai, 2007; Baquedano and Liefert, 2014; Chalmers et al., 2019; Chirwa, 1999; Chitete et al., 2021; Goletti and Babu, 1994; Goletti and Christina-Tsigas, 1995; Katengeza, 2009; Mapila et al., 2013; Mtumbuka et al., 2014; Nyondo et al., 2013; Nyongo, 2014; Nzima and Dzanja, 2015; Tione, 2011; Twea, 2017; Zant, 2010). Although markets are integrated, it takes long time for prices to revert to equilibrium. Most of these studies have attributed the weak integration and long periods of adjustment to asymmetry of market information and market infrastructure. However, some have shown that for maize, markets are well-integrated in periods when there is food shortage, and weakly integrated when there is surplus (Nyongo, 2014).

Pricing mechanisms

In order to achieve sustained development, policies that open up an economy to foreign investment and trade are required (IMF, 2001). In order for many developing nations to create competitive advantages in their products, economic openness to the global market is crucial (IMF, 2001). The IMF (2001) goes on to say that nations gain the most from liberalizing their own markets, particularly their agricultural markets. Market liberalization has brought in players in the marketing of agricultural produce. While several players are involved, that is, ADMARC, vendors, and private traders, the pricing of agricultural commodities create a lot of price uncertainties for farmers in rural areas and in most cases, this uncertainty does not seem to motivate farmers to respond to price developments positively. This uncertainty is in both food and cash crops. For example, Chirwa et al. (2005) reported that ADMARC offers the lowest maize producer and consumer prices. Such prices are fixed and stable throughout the season and are not discriminatory across sellers and buyers. Large-scale private traders, however, offer the highest producer prices for produce including maize. In the same manner prices in cash crops are determined by the commissions regulating the cash crop. For instance, Tobacco minimum prices are set by Tobacco Control Commission at the beginning of the selling season. Quite often buyers have bought tobacco below the minimum set prices. The practice has left the buyers selling at a loss. Prices in the food crops are also volatile and some traders tend to price discriminate and negotiate for lower prices, with smallholder producers that have no countervailing power (Chirwa, 2009). Vendors tend to offer intermediate maize producer prices between those offered by ADMARC and those offered by large-scale private traders, but charge substantially higher maize consumer prices than ADMARC (Jayne et al., 2010). In this regard, these pricing mechanisms exploit most farmers as there is a high gross margin and do not provide the much-needed thrust for farmers to achieve improved economic wellbeing. Even though the government sets minimum selling prices for most crops every year, farmers still sell their produce below the minimum price due to lack of information by farmers and enforcement of the prices by the government.

Agricultural exports

Malawi's economy heavily relies on tobacco's exports to earn foreign earnings and ensure economic growth. As such, Malawi's tobacco exports are positively related to its GDP. Variability in Malawi's tobacco exports leads to slower economic growth because GDP falls by a relatively large amount in response to a given decrease in exports (Persaud and Meade, 2011). In total, 2.6% of the studies have reported a number of challenges that affect the export of agricultural commodities in Malawi. Such challenges force farmers to sell their commodities in local markets at very low prices. Furthermore, macro-economic prudence has been identified as a crucial factor if farmers are to benefit more from exports. For example, FAO (2017) reported that the devaluation of the currency created an immediate inflationary effect, doubling import and export prices in kwacha, but these

higher prices were not fully transmitted to the farmers due to several market failures due to imperfect competition. Furthermore, fiscal policies have been recognized as creating disincentives for farmers. FAO (2017) also reported that in the tobacco value chain, the withholding tax creates low producer prices, resulting in low economic gains for smallholder farmers and thus not achieving the needed economic thrust. As such, policies should focus on creating export incentives for farmers in various value chains in order to reduce the over-reliance on tobacco. Recent initiatives have been streamlined toward improving the exports of other commodities like legumes, cotton, and sugar, among others. For instance, tea exports stand at 35 metric tons a year and contribute about US$11.9 million of the total export earnings through exports to European, American, and Asian markets (MITC, 2023). Sugar exports account for 9.5% of Malawi's total exports (MITC, 2023). One potential deterrent to the export of soya is the cost and time required to complete the export process. The costs and time delays are related to Malawi's geography and accompanying transport challenges. They are further driven by complicated export procedures and policy uncertainty (Aberman and Edelman, 2014). Aberman and Edelman (2014) further indicate that non-tariff measures put in place by the government are critical obstacles to increasing exports. However, there are several potential solutions to these complicated and costly export procedures, including the streamlining of the official export process through increased cooperation among different government bodies and the strengthening of an export promotion agency. Studies also show that the difficulties faced by potential exporters oftentimes lie in the details of executing the export process itself. It is reported that more than 62% of exporters surveyed reported administrative delays and complicated procedures as being the most burdensome challenges related to exporting, more burdensome than high fees and charges, poor facilities, or the arbitrary behavior of officials (Aberman and Edelman, 2014).

Agricultural commercialization

Agricultural commercialization is one of the themes that has been interchangeably used with market participation. The studies mostly attribute an increase in commercialization to subsidized fertilizers. For example, Sibande et al. (2017) observe that subsidized fertilizers increase smallholder maize farmers participation in the market as net sellers, increase the amount of maize sold at the market, and promote maize commercialization. Subsidies increase the likelihood that farmers will be observed as net sellers, which increases the amount of maize sold. The studies further observe that the most significant hurdles are "poor farmer group organization" and "lack of market knowledge and awareness," which have the strongest driving forces and make the other barriers worse (Tuni et al., 2022). On factors affecting market participation, the studies document that farmer characteristics, access to credit, asset ownership, size of land, forward contracts, farmers' participation in cooperatives, access to storage facilities, price expectations, and land tenure affect farmers' agricultural commercialization (Asfaw, 2018; Katunga et al., 2021; Lifeyo, 2017; Lunduka et al., 2010; Matita et al., 2021; Radchenko and Corral, 2018; Tsusaka et al., 2016; Wood et al., 2013; Van Campenhout and Nabwire, 2022). Among the studies analyzed in the review, agricultural commercialization comprised a 9.6% presence.

Conclusion

The study provides a systematic review of the literature on the performance of Malawi's agricultural marketing system with a keen eye toward achieving economic growth and development. Despite being a relatively new piece of literature, the study embraced different approaches in order to obtain multidisciplinary findings on the current matter. This involved reviewing both gray literature in form of national policies and strategies, and peer reviewed literature in form of articles that assessed the constraints, challenges, and opportunities in the Malawian agricultural marketing system. This was essential to assess the response of the policies to the key challenges found by different scholars. The

following six key themes emanated from the findings: (1) market information, (2) policies and strategies, (3) efficiency of agricultural marketing system, (4) pricing mechanisms, (5) agricultural exports, and (6) agricultural commercialization. Studies on agricultural marketing accord that market information is a crucial contributor to poor market performance. It is well acknowledged that information asymmetry is the main factor contributing to agricultural marketing's subpar performance. Asymmetry of information has contributed to agricultural markets' inadequate cointegration, which has prolonged the time it takes for the markets to return to equilibrium. Malawi needs to implement measures to improve market information for both smallholder farmers and other market participants at a higher level.

It is observed that government's set up policies and strategies governing the marketing and production of various crops. These policies are partially adhered to by buyers, incapacitating the operation of the policy and rendering the farmers vulnerable to the manipulation of the traders. Despite the removal of price controls, liberalization of the economy, and restructuring of the ADMARC board, there is low market efficiency that could spearhead economic growth. High TCs are thought to be a contributing factor to agricultural markets' inefficiency. Thus, the study notes a lack of an efficient market system coupled with market information asymmetry, which contributes to the meager performance of the sector. Price uncertainties, forward pricing in a volatile economy, and a lack of export incentives to stimulate and boost agricultural exports beyond the three cash crops of tobacco, sugar, and tea hamper economic growth.

Recommendations

The analysis of policies in this study reveals several shortcomings in the examined studies, since the majority of them concentrated on the analysis of pre- and post-policy changes in the continuum of structural adjustment policies while ignoring the effects of recently adopted policies. The study recommends a need for an intensive agricultural marketing policy review that emphasizes addressing key issues backed with empirical evidence in the agricultural sector to ensure economic growth and development. To constantly support improvement in agricultural policies and the subsequent performance of agricultural marketing, we promote long-term partnerships among various research institutions, universities, governments, and the private sector.

There should be deliberate research efforts in the quest to support initiatives to lower TCs through advancements in market infrastructure, the road system, the market environment, agricultural market technology, and strict regulation of policies, among other things. This is because the majority of reviewed studies still claim that lack of market information; and inefficiency of agricultural marketing are still affecting agricultural marketing.

A serious examination of strategies to increase the competitiveness of agricultural exports should be conducted by both the public and private sectors as it was observed in most reviewed studies that the Malawi's exports are concentrated on very few commodities. Policies and strategies geared at expanding export base; and smoothening export transaction processes should be highly supported.

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