

Henry

It must be understood that the smallholder sector in Malawi contributes about 80% of the country's agricultural productivity. At the same time, this is the sector that is facing a lot of challenges. Challenges like inadequate access to extension services and poor access to good quality seeds and other farming inputs. They lack bargaining power for better prices and in general find it hard to access sustainable, stable markets which offer just prices for the farmers' hard work. When I say 'just', I mean some markets are quite exploitative. So smallholder farmers lack access to reliable and consistent markets.

My organisation NASFAM is a democratically governed national association for smallholder farmers. Currently it has 43 associations which are located in all three regions of Malawi, in all 14 districts. NASFAM is modelled on the concept of collective action which aims at giving smallholder farmers some united power so that they can really have a voice - a voice to influence government policies; other issues about farming, commodity trading, tax, access to farming inputs and other areas which affect their farming business. As NASFAM we are also interested in issues of crop production and commodity trading, capacity building in good leadership and governance issues.

We also have a development programme for social issues for farmers. We look at issues of gender promotion, and socio-economic development of smallholder farmers. First and foremost, we are bringing gender equality awareness to rural communities where the smallholder farmers live. We make it clear that to develop equal opportunities and equal participation will benefit them. For instance there are very pertinent issues like land tenure. In general, before we campaign, there will be some kind of discrimination. Men want to dominate in production of key cash crops. Men act like the managers who make decisions and keep the money and their wives are like the workers. Gender campaign and awareness hence helps to bring an understanding that both men and women are equal and should have the same roles to play in decision making and leadership.

HIV/AIDS is a serious issue in Malawi as in all sub-Saharan Africa. Promoting awareness and promoting prevention is part of our development. So far the government and non-governmental organisations have done a tremendous work in bringing awareness to the communities on awareness and prevention of HIV/AIDS. I can safely say that you wouldn't go to any corner of the country and find a person who does not know how you get the AIDS infection. More focus now needs to be placed on promoting behavioural change.

We also develop agriculture and small-scale business management. If the farmers make some profit, we advise them to set aside a small part of their income and develop small-scale businesses to generate income and to improve nutrition at household level, or to support orphans from the AIDS pandemic. For example, farmers make fritters that they can sell to make more money. We train them to build energy-saving stoves. This mitigates the effects of climate change. They can also sell them and make some little money.

We also provide farmers' training in fruit tree propagation and grafting so that they raise food seedlings for household use and for sale. We also do adult literacy because some of our members are less privileged and have not had an education. We teach some literacy and some numeracy so they can read and write. They need that to run a small business.

We also do grain bank programmes. We know that the smallholder farmer's cash flows are not even. Sometimes money – some times no money. They run the risk of being food insecure. They'll have to sell everything and become vulnerable to food insecurity in the lean times. Now farmers sell food crops to the association. The grain bank gives access to the food at the lean times. This is when the market values go up but we sell at the same price, so food is secure.

We also offer services on marketing. NASFAM has a subsidiary commercial company called Nascomex. What Nascomex does is buy the different crops produced by smallholder farmers. But we do the business differently. We secure the orders differently. We secure orders for what we know has been produced, so we are kind of guaranteeing them a market. We do it differently. We have an inclusive system, meet farmers before, look at costs of producing every crop, look at a fair price. Always we want farmers to get a fair profit for their work.

And as a way of making sure there is a steady consistent market we have invested in some farm machinery. Nascomex has invested in machinery for producing soya. We also buy ground-nuts (pea-nuts) and we process to peanut paste and we hope very soon to make peanut butter. So the whole idea is to ensure that there is a consistent market for the farmers. Nascomex is a commercial company but it links to us and social responsibility is built into how it operates.

We have a Farm Services Unit which is doing a lot of training and technical improvements in farming practices. They are in crop production. We have a publications and radio department, which disseminates information about improving agriculture and other general social development issues. So we have two radio programmes per week where farmers tell about their transformations, share with listeners how they have changed.

We are committed to democracy and follow democratic processes in all our leadership and governance. All of the elected members are trained in good governance and leadership. Democratic process is core to our work

I love my job. There is nothing more fulfilling than seeing the results of what you use your time for actually transforming the lives of poor people. You get a lot of joy actually seeing your work making a difference.