



**Improving food security and economic empowerment for smallholder farmers in
Ethiopia, Malawi and Mozambique**

Malawi Project Mid-Term Evaluation

Final Report

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Executive Summary

The mid-term evaluation of the project '*DIVERSIFY - Developing Integrated Value chains to Enhance Rural Smallholders' Incomes and Food Security Year-round project*' was conducted in November, 2019.

The objective of the review was to assess if the project had achieved what it set out to achieve as well as provide recommendations to improve it. The specific objectives were:

- To determine efficiency, effectiveness, relevance, sustainability, including progress towards project outcomes
- To assess Value for Money (VFM) of the project (efficiency, effectiveness, economy, partnerships and equity)
- To provide information to further plan and improve the regional project, and
- Identify lessons learned and best practice from the project which could be applied to improve the project as well as other similar projects in the region

A mixed method approach involving document reviews, household surveys, Key Informant Interviews, Focus Group Discussions, field observations, and case stories was employed. A total of 227 household interviews were conducted. 11 FGDs, 18 KIIs and 10 case stories were also done. Following the evaluation, a de-briefing meeting was held to provide an overview of the evaluation exercise.

Challenges encountered during the evaluation

- i) During the FGDs, the evaluation questions were translated from English to Chichewa and occasionally into a local language as well and the responses from Chichewa or a local language to English by UP-Malawi staff. This could potentially have led to loss of some information during the interpretation process.
- ii) The evaluation was carried at a time when there were no crops in the field, so it was difficult to ascertain acreages and type of crops grown by the respondents. In some cases, the respondents were called to a central place for interviews. This made it difficult to ascertain or observe some of the assets that they had bought.
- iii) A few of the farmers provided less-than-truthful responses to questions. In some cases, they wanted to appear worse off than they are, perhaps in the hope that doing so may help to attract more support. In other cases, they wanted to appear better off than they are for fear of being judged by enumerators. Additionally, some responses could have had social connotations associated with them that would prevent the farmers from wanting to provide accurate responses.

Key findings

- The project is coherent and highly relevant to the target communities and aligns fully with government of Malawi priorities including those related to food security and poverty reduction.
- The project is very effective and its interventions are achieving the desired change. Successes have been achieved in each of the four results areas and four outcome areas although to varying extents.
- Project beneficiaries and partners felt that they 'owned' the project owing primarily to the fact they have fully participated in all stages of the project and have regularly been updated

on project progress. However, despite this sense of ownership, and the sustainability strategies the project has put in place, the evaluation finds that the project outputs are likely to be moderately sustainable beyond the life of the project, largely because the marketing aspects had not been fully realized by the time of the evaluation. The evaluation identified the formation and capacity building of Associations as a long-term intervention which requires more time of capacity building in aspects of Association management, business planning, marketing planning and management. The tardiness in commencement of OFSP bread production, which created the market linkage of the OFSP producers, resulted into little time for the farmers to gain experience and confidence to handle the marketing side of their produce. A longer duration of the project, of say five years, would have been ideal to reinforce the capacity building and ensure that the Associations are able to transact business more effectively and efficiently. There is a chance that some of these aspects might be dealt with by the end of the project with a lot of marketing activities anticipated from the months of March, April 2020

- The project seems to have placed a lot of emphasis on marketing aspects involving Mother's Holdings compared with the three other alternative markets supported by the project including. supporting small-scale value-added businesses and supporting linkages to other OFSP-processors.
- Good progress has been made in the area of equity, gender, disability, marginalized groups and protection of child's rights. Its beneficiaries include both men and women, people with disability, the poor household and people living with HIV (PLHIV). 57.6 % of project direct beneficiaries are women. The project also made efforts to protect children's rights by sensitizing beneficiaries on the importance of avoiding child labour in crop production.
- The project is good value for money as demonstrated by benefits and outcomes realized as a result of its interventions. Some of its impacts include improved capacity of producers in OFSP production, utilization; and storage (post-handling); increased food security through dietary diversification; improved nutrition through consumption of different OFSP products; increased yields through improved production practices; and increased income from selling potatoes (roots) at household level. Others are improved capacity of government extension workers through training in various aspects; reduction of social injustices due to community empowerment through STAR Circle approach; and increased socio-economic empowerment of women

Lessons Learned

The following are some of the lessons that can be learned from the project:

- Expanding market solutions to development challenges has the potential to address both a market gap and a development gap while growing a sustainable business.
- Training and technical support to farmers is critical to attainment of project objectives and sustainability.
- Farmers need to be cushioned when starting a new venture like supplying to an off-taker and contracts must be clear. If some quantities of supplied products are deducted from their initial supplies e.g. due to weight losses or rotting farmers tend to feel short changed and can be discouraged from participating in such marketing arrangements. In the initial stages of such arrangements, funds should be set aside to compensate farmers for such eventualities.

- Long distances between production sites and off takers can affect linkages between buyers and suppliers.
- Investing in farmers' productivity can increase their income significantly, transform their lives and boost businesses' revenues and profits.
- VSLs are encouraging a savings culture thereby enhancing economic wellbeing:
- Leveraging resources for greater impact.
- Involve the target community in selection of lead farmers for ownership and acceptability.
- Use of farmer clubs enhances adoption of best practices.
- Capacity building of the farmers, lead farmers and extension workers in the project area contributes to increased productivity and incomes at house hold level.
- Proper beneficiary identification is necessary for project success
- Stakeholders consultation necessary for correct identification of project sites:
- Participatory methods can help to identifying and resolving technical issues.
- Deliberate targeting of vulnerable groups is necessary in order to increase their participation:
- Staggering of planting of OFSP helps to extend the period when roots are available as food and for sale with better prices.
- Planting varieties with different maturity periods is necessary for improved food security marketing.
- Partnering with the private sector requires striking a careful balance between development goals and commercial goals of the private sector.
- Distribution of clean planting material of new varieties can have a significant influence on the scale and impact of a project.
- Effective partnerships and collaborations are important in achieving project objectives.
- Working with government partners is important for project sustainability.
- Training of processors in handling of OFSP is important to minimize postharvest losses once they receive their supplies.

Best practices from the project include:

A number of best practices that are likely to lead to desired results in potato and sweetpotato-based food security interventions were identified from this project. They include:

- Use of a systematic traceability system in marketing of OFSP roots.
- Use of lead farmers as extension service providers.
- Use of a demand-driven business approach to ensure a sustainable and viable business model.
- Using of Mjinge stores and a raised granary for storage of sweetpotato to improve shelf life
- Use unpeeled OFSP roots instead of peeled roots for bread processing to avoid huge wastage of potato materials and also associated costs of peeling the roots.
- Use of the STAR (Societies Tackling AIDS through Rights) Circle model to facilitate community engagement in issues of common concern within their area, and how to deal with the challenges.
- Use of Village Savings and Loans (VSL) groups in order to boost household incomes for better livelihoods.

- Using an integrated agriculture-nutrition approach that combines agriculture, nutrition and market interventions to accelerate and sustain the adoption of crops in local farming systems
- Use of farmers clubs for promotion of improved technologies:
- Use collective action through farmers' associations to improve marketing.
- Stakeholders consultation during site selection is important so as to ensure correct identification of project sites.
- Use of nurseries for sweetpotato vine multiplication in readiness for the next planting season.
- Community-based monitoring and review meetings helps in improving ownership of projects.
- Use of exposure visits to facilitate for learning.
- Use of demonstration plots and field days to catalyse adoption of improved technologies.
- Use of OFSP-based bread as a food vehicle for β -carotene to contribute to alleviation of vitamin A deficiency (VAD) and improve health.

Conclusions

The key conclusions of the evaluation are:

- The project is highly relevant. It is addressing the needs and priorities of the smallholder farmers in the target areas including issues related to food insecurity, malnutrition and poverty.
- Good progress has been made by the project in achieving planned results. However, the prolonged delay in commencing production of OFSP bread due to challenges in procuring OFSP processing equipment has meant that only a few farmers have benefitted from this option of marketing OFSP roots-although a huge potential exists.
- The project has made progress in empowering women. They actively participated in project activities and many of them are in leadership positions within their clubs and associations.
- The project is sufficiently inclusive. Its beneficiaries included both men and women, people with disability, poor households and people living with HIV.
- There are a number of lessons learned and best practices that can improve project performance as well as inform future programming.
- Despite the project having sustainability strategies in place, some of the project outputs are likely to be moderately sustainable beyond the life of the project, largely because the marketing aspects have not had time to be fully developed.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the evaluation, we make a number of recommendations and suggestions for improvement of the project. It is recommended that the project should:

- Fully develop the three other alternative markets supported by the project including supporting small-scale value-added businesses and supporting linkages to other OFSP-processors
- Consider having an option of spot payment in formal markets at least for a portion of the total value of produce supplied

- Consider bringing sweetpotato value chain actors together as is the case in the potato coalition to influence national policy and share experiences.
- Hold meetings with farmers and link them directly to buyers as well as assist them on pricing of OFSP. Farmers/their representatives should be more involved in price negotiations with buyers to ensure that prices arrived not only benefit the buyer but also the producer.
- Establish a dispute resolution process and clear consequences for not fulfilling agreements in the contracts
- Encourage buyers/off-takers to pay farmers promptly without unnecessary delays as per agreed contracts.
- Prepare guidelines on how to trouble shoot problems during production and postharvest management of OFSP including sources of vines and extension advice in case of problems
- Make deliberate efforts to determine how increased consumption of OFSP is resulting in improved nutrition
- Improve on timeliness of reporting.
- Consider conducting a partnership health assessment with all partners regularly.
- Consider a longer term approach to the projects' interventions so as to increase the tangible benefits realized by the project. The project's 3-year time frame is too short and ending the project after this phase might cause the investments already made to be lost.
- Consider trialling a local processing model with farmers.
- Assist famers associations to establish an overall committee to lead marketing activities for all the Associations from the 3 districts. Each of the five Associations has a committee which operates on behalf of the Association. However, for all the five Associations to be represented there is need for an overall committee to lead marketing activities for all the Associations from the 3 districts. This will ensure smooth operations and ease decision making processes.
- Stimulate competition among processors by encouraging more of them to venture into processing so as to create more reliable markets for farmers.
- Improve branding of project sites.
- Encourage inter-district learning visits to enable farmers learn from their peers.