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Agriculture in a Transformative Policy Space: An Introduction

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Introduction

The agricultural sector landscape in Zambia has been inundated with policies designed and implemented by successive governments to enhance broad-based agricultural development. Since 1964, each policy adopted for the sector has had its own set of objectives and with time, new goals have been identified and incorporated in subsequent policies in response to changes in the socio-economic environment. To assess the effectiveness of the myriad policies in achieving intended objectives, agricultural policy analysts (those in academia, line government ministries, the national agricultural research system, civil society and independent policy think tanks) have been on hand to provide evidenced-based analysis. Therefore, as we began discussions about putting together a special issue on agriculture, it became clear that the issue had to focus on emerging topics in the Zambian agricultural policy analysis space that are supported by empirical evidence. Ultimately, we envisaged that our platform would also contribute to widening the audience exposed to current policy debates and options for an improved agricultural sector, through the articles included in this special issue.

The papers presented in this special issue are those selected from a number of excellent working papers written by researchers at the Indaba Agricultural Policy Research Institute (IAPRI) and their collaborators¹ Papers for publication were selected after a writers' workshop conducted by the Southern African Institute for Policy and Research (SAIPAR) with support from Michigan State University (MSU) and IAPRI. The workshop brought together 23 participants from IAPRI including researchers, interns and recipients of Student Competitive Grants for master's research. Through the various presentations and group activities facilitated by SAIPAR resource persons, the workshop surveyed participants' research interests and motivated them to publish their work in peer-reviewed journals. Thus, this special issue is an outcome of the writers' workshop that comprises a set of papers with a strong emphasis on policy, organised around three themes: (i) political economy and agricultural policy, (ii) agricultural technology and productivity, and (iii) emerging issues in agricultural development. In addition, there are two book reviews at the end of this issue that speak directly to the three identified themes.

Political economy and agricultural policy

The political economy framework has been used by development scholars to understand government interventions in the production and marketing of agricultural goods. Political economy theorists focus on the allocation of public resources in the political market and have emphasised the behaviour of politicians, voters, pressure groups, and bureaucrats motivated by self-interest. (Swinnen and Van Der Zee, 1993).

The first paper in this issue written from the political economy and agricultural policy perspective by Chapoto and a team of other experts within and outside IAPRI, interrogates the policy-making process with respect to Zambia's so-called political crop: maize. The paper aims to elicit an understanding of who holds the keys to change and how to influence agricultural policy changes within the maize subsector. The paper unpacks three main issues pertaining to the politics of maize. Firstly, the executive branch of government (Cabinet/State House) is identified as the most powerful player in commanding other actors in the subsector. Secondly, powerful lobby groups with links to the executive have been influential by either advocating for high maize prices (in particular, producer lobby groups) or low prices of the commodity (mainly millers) irrespective of the market conditions in a given season. The food price dilemma, producers wanting higher food prices while consumers demand low food prices, imposed by the aforementioned competing interests has a negative effect on maize and the whole agricultural sector. Thirdly, the authors identify what they describe as a "Command Triangle" consisting of the president, Minister of Finance and Minister of Agriculture and submit that this triangle holds the keys for sustainable policy changes in the maize sector. The paper concludes that in order to bring about long-lasting changes to maize marketing policies in Zambia, there is a need for strong collective action within the command triangle, as they possess the most influence.

The second paper authored by Chapoto and others, using the political economy framework proposes reforms to the country's signature farming input and output subsidy programmes, providing alternative approaches that will work better for both individual Zambians who rely on the state for support, and the country as a whole. Over the years, the Farmer Input Support Programme (FISP) and the Food Reserve Agency (FRA) have not addressed the challenges they were intended to tackle. For both subsidy programmes, the authors contrast the objectives with reality, reality which is informed by empirical evidence, to demonstrate that the two programmes have been ineffective. The paper submits a number of proposals to transform the subsidy programmes, among them, specific ways that spending on the subsidy programmes can be scaled back and funds redirected to support economic growth and social development. In

conclusion, the authors caution that, “maintaining the *status quo* is likely to be very costly politically given that the country can no longer afford the continued financial haemorrhage from the current operations of the FISP and FRA”.

Agricultural technology and productivity

The second theme focusses on appropriate use of land-saving agricultural technology, inorganic fertilisers, to enhance smallholder farmer productivity. Only one paper authored by Chapoto, Chabala and Lungu is presented in this section. Their study evaluated the continued promotion of blanket recommendations of inorganic fertiliser application, a practice that is common across Africa (Kaizzi et al. 2017; Rware et al. 2014) despite widespread recognition that improved productivity is best achieved when recommendations are informed by conditions specific to a location. Using a multidisciplinary approach to address this complex issue, the paper augments household survey data analysis with soil analysis techniques to show which approach between location specific fertiliser application and blanket recommendation has potential to raise crop productivity. The authors discuss two main findings. Firstly, they show that soil fertility, as expected, varies across the country based on soil analysis results of key parameters such as soil pH, soil organic carbon and soil phosphorus. Secondly, the soil testing results point to the need for Zambia to promote location specific fertiliser recommendations and do away with blanket fertiliser recommendations not best suited across the entire country. The paper builds a case for promotion of mobile soil testing as part of extension service provision and goes a step further to propose inclusion of soil testing as a requirement to access inputs through the FISP.

Emerging issues in agricultural development

The final paper in this issue, written by Zulu-Mbata and Chapoto, examines the gender dynamics associated with adoption of conservation agriculture and the impacts on several livelihood outcomes of smallholder households in Zambia. Analysed at plot level, the study shows that conservation agriculture adoption has a positive effect on households’ ability to diversify crop production decisions which in turn has a positive effect on dietary diversity. But, the results indicate that the impact of conservation agriculture on either crop diversification or household dietary diversity diminishes if the farmer is a female household head or the farmer (male or female) is in a female headed household. The authors conclude that promotion of conservation agriculture should consider “the gender differences at household level and within the household, as well as female farmer’s access to productive resources”.

Final remarks

This IAPRI special issue presents four papers that provide insights into a range of issues of policy relevance along three thematic areas. The policy debates and proposals submitted in the papers have widespread applicability given the similarity in agricultural policies implemented in Zambia and other countries in the sub-Saharan African region. Intervention in agriculture production and marketing by governments, extension messages that continue to promote blanket recommendation of fertiliser application, and promotion of nationwide input subsidies constitute policy positions that are not unique to Zambia. In sum, this special issue packages papers that are both accessible and insightful regarding policy options relevant to stimulating agricultural growth in a context similar to Zambia. We highly recommend them to those interested in the topics covered.

Endnotes

¹ IAPRI is an agricultural policy research think tank whose mandate is to utilise empirical evidence to advise and guide the Zambian government and other stakeholders on agricultural investments and policies.

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