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ASSESSMENT ON THE FACTORS LIMITING THE GROWTH OF YOUTH-FARMER BASED GROUPS AT MPINGU EPA.

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ABSTRACT :

Malawi's economy relies on agriculture, with youth small-scale farmers playing a key role in growth. This study explored factors limiting youth-farmer groups under the Mpingu Extension Planning Area, focusing on their significance, challenges, and coping strategies. Using a qualitative design, data from interviews and focus groups were analyzed thematically. Findings showed that groups are vital for development but face limited land, competitive markets, financial constraints, and low skills. To cope, they set rules, used local resources, cut labor costs, and formed networks. Targeted support and further research on education's impact are recommended.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

This study aims to assess the factors that hinder the growth of youth-farmer groups in Malawi. The chapter presents the background of the study, problem statement, objectives, research questions, and the significance of the study.

1.1 Background of the Study

Agriculture is the backbone of Malawi's economy, contributing about 42% of GDP and employing nearly 80% of the population, most of whom live in rural areas. Smallholder farmers produce about 83% of the total agricultural output. To support them, farmer groups and cooperatives have been promoted as a strategy for improving access to markets and enhancing productivity.

Despite these efforts, many youth-farmer groups struggle to grow and remain productive. The youth, who make up more than half of Malawi's population, face high unemployment and low participation in agriculture, even though the sector offers great potential for job creation and economic empowerment. Addressing the challenges faced by youth farmers could greatly contribute to national development.

1.2 Problem Statement

Although the government has recognized youth empowerment as key to agricultural growth—through initiatives such as the **AGCOM** and **TRADE** projects—youth participation remains low. For example, only 28% of AGCOM beneficiaries are youth, despite forming over 50% of the population. Many youth-farmer groups fail to meet requirements for such programs, and no formal study has been conducted to identify the reasons behind their limited growth. This study therefore focuses on identifying the factors that hinder the growth of youth-farmer groups in **Mpingu EPA, Lilongwe District**.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

Main Objective:

To assess the factors limiting the growth of youth-farmer groups in Mpingu EPA.

Specific Objectives:

1. To assess the significance of youth-farmer groups.
2. To identify the challenges faced by youth-farmer groups.

3. To explore the solutions adopted by these groups.

1.4 Research Questions

1. How important are youth-farmer groups in agriculture?
2. What challenges do they face?
3. What solutions do they adopt to overcome these challenges?

1.5 Significance of the Study

The study will provide information to help policymakers and stakeholders address challenges affecting youth-farmer groups, thereby improving their participation in agricultural commercialization. It will also guide future strategies for empowering youth through agriculture and serve as reference material for future research.

1.6 Chapter Summary

This chapter outlined the study's background, problem statement, objectives, research questions, and significance. The next chapter presents the literature review related to the study.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter reviews key literature on youth farmer groups, their formation, operations, challenges, and the theoretical framework guiding this study. It defines key terms such as "youth" and "farmer groups," explains their roles and development in Malawi and other Sub-Saharan countries, and highlights factors affecting their growth.

Definition of Terms

The Government of Malawi (2013) defines youth as persons aged 10–35 years, while the National Youth Policy specifies ages 14–25. Globally, youths aged 15–24 form about 18% of the population, with most living in rural areas and engaged in agriculture (Fernando, 2012; UNPF, 2012). In Malawi, youth represent about 50% of the total population (NSO, 2018), making them central to national development.

According to FAO, a *farmer group* is a voluntary organization formed to improve members' economic welfare by providing services such as marketing, credit access, technical training, and input supply (Kassam et al., 2011). These can be informal self-help groups or formal cooperatives registered under national law (Esham, 2012). This study focuses on youth farmer groups operating at the community level.

Group Dynamics and Principles

Tuckman's (1965) model outlines five stages of group development: forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning. In Malawi, farmer cooperatives are guided by principles such as voluntary membership, democratic control, member participation, autonomy, education, cooperation, and community concern (Cooperative Development Policy, 2021).

Reasons for Formation of Youth Farmer Groups

Youth farmer groups are formed to:

- Improve access to agricultural technologies and development programs (Gibson et al., 2008).
- Enhance market access and collective bargaining power (Mbowa et al., 2012).
- Facilitate access to credit and financial security through group collateral (Mutoro, 1997).
- Promote value addition, infrastructure development, and natural resource management (UN, 2010; Nyakaana & Edroma, 2008).

In general, farmer groups help mobilize members for joint action, improve agricultural productivity, and influence policies that support rural development. In countries like Tanzania and Ghana, they play a key role in poverty reduction, extension services, and marketing (Salifu et al., 2010).

2.1.5–2.1.10 Summary: Factors, History, and Policies Affecting Youth-Farmer Groups

Successful youth-farmer groups depend on both internal and external factors. Internal factors include competent leadership, clear governance structures, effective communication, and transparency (Eliasi, 2011). External factors involve supportive government policies, access to finance, and institutional backing.

History of Cooperatives in Malawi:

Cooperatives were first introduced in 1946 by the colonial government to integrate natives into the cash economy (Kachule, 2009). After independence in 1964, the system was dismantled and replaced by ADMARC, which controlled produce buying and input distribution. However, informal

cooperation continued through farmers' clubs (Kachule, 2004).

Policy Framework:

The *National Agricultural Policy (2016)* aims to empower youth, women, and vulnerable groups in agriculture. It promotes access to land, inputs, credit, and agribusiness training to overcome barriers limiting youth participation. The policy recognizes youth as key to agricultural growth and poverty reduction (Ministry of Agriculture, 2016).

Agricultural Commercialization (AGCOM) Project:

AGCOM, funded by the World Bank (2017–2023), supports the commercialization of agriculture through matching grants. It targets farmers, producer organizations, and agribusinesses, emphasizing youth and women inclusion to improve productivity, quality, and market access.

TRADE Program:

The *Transforming Agriculture through Diversification and Entrepreneurship (TRADE)* program (2020–2026) seeks to boost rural livelihoods by commercializing smallholder farming. Funded by IFAD and OFID, and implemented by the Ministry of Local Government, it supports innovative youth-farmers with agribusiness skills and financial endowments across 11 districts.

Youth-Farmer Cooperatives in Sub-Saharan Africa:

Across Africa, farmer groups play a key role in agricultural development. In **Senegal**, strong institutional frameworks and peer learning programs ensure sustainability (Salifu et al., 2010). In **Ghana**, over 10,000 farmer groups operate under the Ministry of Food and Agriculture, supported by training and investment programs (Asante et al., 2011). In **Tanzania**, over 9,000 farmer organizations benefit from supportive policies and government-led cooperative structures (Uliwa & Fisher, 2010).

2.1.12 Youth Participation in Agriculture

Youth engagement in agriculture is influenced by both **internal** and **external motivations** (Juma, 2017). External factors include family, peers, media, and extension officers, while internal factors involve interest, perception, and willingness to participate. Agriculture plays a crucial role in creating employment and ensuring food security in Africa. It remains the largest source of employment in Sub-Saharan Africa and has the potential to reduce youth unemployment (Eissler & Brennan, 2015; Anyidoho et al., 2012).

However, several **challenges hinder youth participation** in agriculture. These include unemployment, lack of access to credit, rural poverty, limited access to land, and inadequate institutional support (White, 2012). According to Juma (2017), access to resources such as education, skills, and experience—termed as **human capital** in the Sustainable Livelihood Framework (SLF)—is essential for successful participation in farming activities.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by the **Participatory Development Theory**, which emphasizes people-centered development. The theory emerged after World War II as a response to the limitations of modernization and dependency theories that failed to bring sustainable development in developing countries (Davids, 2009). Participatory development focuses on involving people directly in decisions affecting their lives and ensuring that development is community-driven (Roodt, 2001).

2.2.1 Participatory Development Theory

Participatory development promotes the idea that communities can shape their own future through cooperation rather than being passive recipients of aid (Swanepoel & De Beer, 2011). Beneficiaries, including youth, should be involved in **planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation** of projects (Theron, 2009; Dinbabo, 2014). This approach values local knowledge, resource mobilization, and capacity building (Kapoor, 2002).

The **key elements** of participatory development include:

1. **Inclusion and Equity** – Everyone, including youth and marginalized groups, should be involved in decisions affecting their lives (Davids, 2009).
2. **Transparency** – Open communication and information sharing prevent hidden agendas (Swanepoel & De Beer, 2011).
3. **Empowerment** – Participation builds confidence, self-esteem, and skills.
4. **Sharing** – Encourages exchange of knowledge and experiences among community members and facilitators.

Such participation ensures that youth voices are heard and their potential is realized in agricultural and community development (Cornwall, 2003).

2.2.2 Chapter Summary

This chapter reviewed literature on youth participation in agriculture and identified the challenges affecting their involvement. It also presented the Participatory Development Theory as the framework guiding this study, emphasizing inclusion, transparency, empowerment, and collaboration. The next chapter discusses the research methodology.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.0 Introduction

This chapter outlines the research methods used, including the study area, research design, target population, sampling techniques, data collection and analysis procedures, and ethical considerations.

3.1 Research Design

The study used a **qualitative research design** to explore the challenges faced by youth-farmer groups. This design helped gather in-depth information through open-ended questions, allowing participants to express their experiences and views freely (Nkhata, 2009; Cresswell, 2014). It also enabled the researcher to build rapport with respondents and gain deeper insights into the issues affecting group growth.

3.2 Study Area

The research was conducted in **Chitipi and Nasala Primary School areas in Chigwirizano Unit 6, Lilongwe District**, where several youth-farmer groups operate under the **Malili Youth Network**. The groups engage in agroforestry, horticulture, livestock farming, and other income-generating activities such as yogurt and charcoal briquette production.

3.3 Target Population

The study targeted **members of youth-farmer groups**, particularly active members and group leaders. There were **33 youth groups** in Mpingu EPA, 15 of which were involved in agriculture, while 18 operated VSLA activities.

3.4 Sampling Technique and Sample Size

A **purposive sampling technique** was used to select only youth groups involved in agriculture. From 15 groups, data was collected from **11 groups**, totaling **17 respondents** (Ross, 2010). This ensured that only relevant participants provided data based on experience and knowledge.

3.5 Data Collection Methods

Data was collected through **interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs)**.

- **Interviews:** Conducted with key informants using an interview guide containing open and closed questions to reduce bias (Braun & Clarke, 2006).
- **Focus Group Discussions:** Conducted with group members to explore shared experiences and uncover unanticipated findings (Schutt, 2003).

3.6 Data Analysis

Data was analyzed using **thematic analysis** (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This involved identifying, organizing, and interpreting recurring themes and patterns to develop a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by youth-farmer groups.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

The researcher obtained official authorization and ensured **informed consent**, **voluntary participation**, **confidentiality**, and **anonymity**. Participants were free to withdraw at any time, and pseudonyms such as “Respondent 1” were used to protect identities.

3.8 Chapter Summary

This chapter presented the research design, area, population, sampling, data collection, analysis, and ethical considerations. The next chapter presents the research findings, analysis, and interpretation.

CHAPTER FOUR

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents and discusses the study findings obtained from interviews with 12 youth-farmer groups (17 participants in total). The findings are organized according to the study's three specific objectives and interpreted in line with the participatory development theory.

4.1 Demographics of Study Participants

A total of 17 respondents participated, including 2 group chairpersons interviewed as key informants. The participants' ages ranged from 16 to 30 years, with 10 males and 7 females. Those aged 16–20 made up 35%, ages 21–25 represented 47%, and ages 26–30 accounted for 17%.

In terms of education, 18% had completed primary education, 35% had reached junior secondary (JCE), and 47% had completed secondary school (MSCE). This shows that most youth-farmers have basic education, which helps them understand and apply agricultural knowledge.

4.2 Significance of Youth-Farmer Groups

The first objective was to assess the significance of youth-farmer groups. The findings revealed that the groups play an important role in engaging the youth, equipping them with agricultural and management skills, and providing practical experience.

Some participants noted that joining these groups gave them meaningful activities and hands-on training related to what they learned in school. For instance, one respondent shared that they applied classroom knowledge about chicken diseases to solve real challenges in their group's poultry project.

The groups also promote self-reliance and teamwork. Members learn business management through collective activities such as chicken rearing and selling. These experiences help build entrepreneurial and leadership skills. However, some respondents expressed frustration over lack of visible progress and limited profits, suggesting that while the idea is beneficial, poor management or lack of resources hinders impact.

These findings align with Juma (2017), who stated that youth participation in agriculture is influenced by both internal (interest, motivation) and external (support, access to markets) factors. Similarly, as noted by Salifu et al. (2010), youth-farmer groups help members access programs like AGCOM and TRADE, which provide training, market linkages, and credit facilities. Collectively, these findings confirm that youth-farmer groups are valuable platforms for skills development, empowerment, and agricultural participation among young people.

4.3 Challenges Faced by Youth-Farmer Based Groups

The study aimed to investigate the challenges encountered by youth-farmer groups engaged in agricultural activities such as livestock farming, agroforestry, and horticulture. Findings revealed that these groups face multiple challenges, notably limited access to land, competitive markets, and lack of financial resources—similar to findings by White (2012) and Mbowa (2012).

1. Limited Access and Ownership of Land

About 58% of respondents reported being greatly affected by lack of land ownership, while 33% were less affected since they owned or inherited land. Many youths depend on land allocated by village chiefs, which often has poor soil quality and limits production. Some groups resort to renting land or engaging in small-scale enterprises like briquette making to supplement income. The lack of land ownership restricts productivity and long-term investment in agriculture. These findings align with White (2012), who emphasized land access as a key factor influencing agricultural participation and productivity among youth.

2. Competitive Markets

Seventy-five percent (75%) of respondents indicated that market competition significantly affects them. High transportation costs, long distances to markets, and oversupply of similar produce force them to sell at low prices. As one respondent noted, the availability of similar products at cheaper rates compels them to reduce prices, leading to minimal profits. Government-controlled prices for staple crops such as maize and soya further limit income. Although farmer groups are meant to enhance access to profitable markets (Mwaura, 2012), youth-farmer groups still struggle to compete effectively.

3. Ownership and Control of Finances

Another major challenge affecting 75% of participants is inadequate financial capital. Most groups are self-funded through member contributions, which are often insufficient to cover operational costs. Many lack bank accounts, making financial management difficult. Some members fail to meet contribution requirements, leading to inconsistent funding and poor financial control. Consequently, these groups struggle to access credit facilities or external funding, despite the importance of financial capital for sustainable agricultural growth (Mbowa, 2012).

Overall, the study established that youth-farmer groups face intertwined challenges that hinder their growth and sustainability in agriculture.

4. Lack of Knowledge and Skills by Team Members

The study found that **58%** of youth-farmer groups were affected by limited knowledge and skills. As shown in the demographics, **47%** of respondents

had MSCE, **35%** had JCE, and **18%** had PSLCE as their highest education level. Many were still in school and often missed trainings organized by professionals, hindering their ability to acquire relevant agricultural skills. One key informant noted that few members attended a training on organic manure production by GIZ, and although they shared the knowledge, progress was slow since not all members grasped it easily. This lack of skills led to stagnation and poor decision-making within the groups.

However, groups that received training experienced notable improvements, including reduced livestock diseases and increased crop yields. Despite this, only **25%** of respondents reported benefiting from formal training. According to key informants, poor communication between farmer groups and training organizations contributed to missed opportunities. This aligns with Eliasi (2011), who emphasized that effective communication systems are essential for the success of farmer groups. It also supports the **Participatory Development Theory**, which highlights the importance of engagement and knowledge sharing in empowering communities.

Aside from major challenges, **33%** of respondents cited overdependence on external assistance as a minor but notable issue. Many youth-farmer groups lacked funds or equipment to sustain activities independently. One respondent shared that their group's charcoal briquette production halted after losing access to a borrowed machine, reflecting findings by GoM (2010) that youth farmers often rely heavily on external aid.

4.4 Solutions Adopted by Youth-Farmer Groups

To address these challenges, the groups adopted several strategies:

1. **Establishment of Group Regulations:**
   Groups created rules requiring members to make monthly contributions to fund their activities, reducing dependency on external support. Members who failed to comply were fined. This aligns with Malawi's **Cooperative Development Policy (2021)**, which encourages member control and economic participation.
2. **Use of Locally Available Resources:**
   Groups began utilizing local materials such as chicken droppings, cow dung, maize husks, and other agricultural by-products to produce manure and animal feed. This reduced production costs and promoted sustainability, supporting Mbowa & Mwaura's (2012) view that local resource use enhances value addition and self-reliance among farmer groups.
3. ***Renting Land for Cultivation***
   Many respondents who lacked access to land explained that they resorted to renting land for farming. A few groups were temporarily allocated land for cultivation. However, renting only provides a short-term solution as costs increase over time. One of the main reasons for forming farmer groups is to promote financial security and natural resource management (UN, 2010), but this is not the case in Malawi. Most youth lack financial resources and cannot fully participate in land management and conservation, which limits their agricultural potential.
4. *Cutting Labor Costs*
   To cope with financial challenges, most respondents reported performing their own farm labor instead of hiring workers. One participant stated that doing their own work saves money and helps them gain practical farming skills. This supports the Participatory Development Theory, which emphasizes the importance of individuals actively engaging in all processes to build confidence and competence.
5. ***Network Formation***
   The study also found that youth-farmer groups formed networks where chairpersons and representatives meet monthly to share experiences, discuss challenges, and provide feedback. These meetings strengthen collaboration and ensure communication with the District Youth Officer (DYO). Similar findings in Ghana and Tanzania showed that farmer networks are essential for mobilizing farmers and influencing agricultural policies (Alawa & Fischer, 2004; Salifu et al., 2010).
6. ***Discussion of Findings***
   The study identified five key challenges affecting youth-farmer groups: limited access to land, competitive markets, lack of financial control, inadequate knowledge and skills, and overdependence on external support. These challenges hinder youth empowerment and agricultural productivity. Despite these barriers, youth-farmer groups remain dedicated to farming and have developed coping strategies such as renting land, forming networks, reducing labor costs, using local resources, and setting internal rules. However, most of these strategies are temporary and unsustainable.
7. The study also revealed that government and stakeholders have introduced programs to promote youth participation in agriculture, as highlighted in the National Agricultural Policy. Nonetheless, many youth-farmer groups still struggle due to inadequate resources, poor communication, and limited training support from duty bearers. Although they are committed and resourceful, the persistence of these challenges continues to hinder their progress and long-term sustainability.

CHAPTER FIVE

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

This study assessed the factors limiting the growth of youth-farmer based groups. Based on the findings, several recommendations and conclusions are presented.

5.1 Possible Solutions to Challenges

1. **Better Access to Loans/Grants:** Financial constraints limit the progress of youth-farmer groups. Easier access to loans or grants would enable groups to fully carry out their activities and achieve better results. Adequate funding allows youth-farmer groups to reach their potential and contribute more effectively to the agricultural sector.
2. **Commitment from All Parties:** Lack of commitment from group members and duty bearers hinders progress. When members are committed, they embrace new ideas and overcome challenges. Similarly, consistent support from professionals and community leaders can improve training, communication, and overall youth empowerment.

5.2 Recommendations

- Investigate why most youth-farmers have only MSCE-level education, especially considering campaigns for female education.
- Conduct follow-up research to understand why youth-farmer groups may not be fully effective for individual members.

5.3 Strengths and Limitations

Strengths:

- The qualitative approach provided rich, detailed insights into the challenges faced by youth-farmer groups.
- Clear operational definitions and adherence to ethical standards ensured meaningful, voluntary, and confidential participation.

Limitations:

- Only two key informants participated, limiting broader understanding of challenges.
- Limited literature on youth-farmer groups in Malawi restricted comprehensive analysis; findings cannot be generalized to all groups.

5.4 Areas for Further Study

Future research could explore challenges faced by other farmer groups, particularly women and the elderly, to gain a wider understanding of agricultural barriers.

5.5 Conclusion

The study revealed that youth actively participate in farmer groups but face numerous challenges that hinder group growth. Solutions such as accessing loans and fostering commitment help mitigate these challenges. Overall, youth-farmer groups are important for agricultural development, but addressing their limitations is crucial for maximizing their impact.

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