

Resolving Land Tenure Issues Under Spate Irrigation; A Case of FBLN Malawi

Macpherson Nthara – FBLN Malawi Coordinator

October 2019

Background

The Milepa Catchment in Balaka District, Southern Malawi was identified as a site for the establishment of a Spate Irrigation scheme during an appraisal visits that was conducted in October 2018. The choice of the site was based on the challenges in the management of road run off that were observed in the 2017/18 rainy season.



Road run off



Poor water management in fields

Huge volumes of run off were being conveyed along the road channel causing inconveniences to road users and leading to land degradation in farmer's field. The FBLN Malawi is currently working with communities to establish a Model Spate Irrigation scheme that will utilize the harvested road run off

Land tenure Issues and Spate Irrigation

Due to population pressure, the average household land holding size in Malawi has been declining currently ranging between 0.4Ha – 1.5Ha. The shrinking trend of land holding affects the competence of land users to cope with their problems including investment on improved technologies for water management e.g. run off diversion structures.

Due to absence of clear land ownership rights, farmers cultivate the land under temporary arrangements and expect the land to be taken away from them during certain growing seasons. In Balaka, it was noted that land owners tend to use the land during the rainy season but they would hire it out during off season.

Under these circumstances, farmers perceive investment on a long term land improvement (e.g. construction of high labour input structures) as inappropriate because they are unlikely to reap the benefit of their work. In view of this challenge, the FBLN Malawi is currently engaging local leaders and communities in the development of guidelines and regulations that will enable the establishment of a spate irrigation scheme

During a recent visit to the proposed site, focus group discussions were held with community members and local leaders. During the meeting it was noted that strengthening land tenure security and governance is essential for farmers and landholders to benefit from the water and agricultural opportunities offered by the programme. During discussions, there was a general consensus that consolidation of sizeable irrigation blocks with secure tenure and protection against land grabbing and elite capture would be important for the sustainability of the proposed spate irrigation system.



Discussions with local leaders

The Customary Land Act 2006 (CLA) provides the necessary legal instruments to consolidate the many small parcels of land held under customary tenure into a single group-owned entity. The FBLN Malawi Chapter will use this provision to enable irrigation block formation as a foundational intervention for the development of business Spate irrigation farming. The land which is consolidated will be owned collectively by the group of farmers who have customary use-rights to the land parcels making up the Spate Irrigation Scheme.