

# Kasungu District consultations and Focus Group Discussion with about 25 women in Mtunthama EPA

## **Meeting Notes**

Katherine Snyder

Author affiliation     Stockholm Environment Institute

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The [Sustainable Intensification of Mixed Farming Systems Initiative](#) aims to provide equitable, transformative pathways for improved livelihoods of actors in mixed farming systems through sustainable intensification within target agroecologies and socio-economic settings.

Through action research and development partnerships, the Initiative will improve smallholder farmers' resilience to weather-induced shocks, provide a more stable income and significant benefits in welfare, and enhance social justice and inclusion for 13 million people by 2030.


Activities will be implemented in six focus countries globally representing diverse mixed farming systems as follows: Ghana (cereal–root crop mixed), Ethiopia (highland mixed), Malawi: (maize mixed), Bangladesh (rice mixed), Nepal (highland mixed), and Lao People's Democratic Republic (upland intensive mixed/ highland extensive mixed).

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## Abbreviations and acronyms

<b>ADMARC</b>	Agricultural Development and marketing Corporation
<b>EPA</b>	Extension planning area
<b>NGO</b>	Non-Governmental Organization
<b>VSL</b>	Village Savings and Loans
<b>CSIR</b>	Council for Scientific and Industrial Research – Ghana

## Introduction

District meeting with Principal Agricultural Office, Irrigation Engineer, Livestock Officer, Food and Nutrition Office, Planning Officer

All 8 EPAs have similar crop production patterns and similar challenges. Main crops – maize, beans, cassava, sweet potato, groundnuts, cowpea, Bambara beans, soybean and tobacco. Some rice is grown in Sante EPA. Livestock include goats, cattle, pigs, chicken and sheep. There is variation in topography in the district with some EPAs having steeper slopes and thus even more challenges in soil erosion. Overall, soil degradation was listed as a major constraint in agriculture in the district due to continuous cultivation and severe rainfall events.

Significant challenges to farmer include: access to improved seeds (most farmers cannot afford so rely on recycling and sharing seed through social networks); getting decent prices in markets as venders keep their prices low; pests and diseases; climate change; water scarcity. Food security is often a challenge particularly in poor rainfall years (or flooding) and farmers earn cash to make up for food deficit by *ganyu* labor and by petty trading and selling soya, sunflower and tobacco for cash. There have also been food for work programs that provide assistance. In terms of groups in the area, there are a few cooperatives organized around crops as well as VSLs which help provide loans to members. However, what members pay in is so low that the loans do not provide significant assistance.

Farmers in the area have experience with a variety of SI technologies such as intercropping, relay cropping, doubled-up legume, fodder trees, soil erosion prevention practices (vetiver grass), and agroforestry. It is not clear from this brief discussion how many of these practices have been adopted at scale.

Focus group with women (about 25 women in total) in Mtunthama EPA

## Challenges

Women farmers face many constraints common to most farmers across Malawi:

- lack of enough resources (land, inputs, cash, water, livestock, etc.).
- They have had great difficulty accessing fertilizer this year and improved seeds are out of reach for most of them.
- Soya rust
- Markets are a major challenge as most women sell at the farm gate and are subjected to low prices by the 'venders'.
- When asked about access to land, they stated it was a big challenge but this seems to be more about access to significant land size, than access in general. They stated that they farm plots together with their husbands and make decisions jointly. Indeed, several suggested that they guide most of the decisions about what to plant and where. When I asked why they have so much say over what to grow and farming practices, they responded: *"because we pay attention"*.
- Men control livestock. Women may care for the livestock but decisions over cattle, goats, and sheep are made mostly by men who also secure the profits from sales. Men also focus more on tobacco as their interest is in cash crops. This pertains to soya as well but both men and women grow soybean.

If they can raise the cash, women can rent land but this is quite difficult to achieve. Some present reported that they do rent to augment what they farm for the household.

## Farming system

Farming practices include intercropping maize with legumes; agroforestry; and crops are the mix elaborated on by the district. They construct ridges on their fields to prevent waterlogging and wash outs from heavy rains. They recycle seeds or obtain from others as costs of seeds at agrodealers is too high. Agricultural Development and Marketing Corporation (ADMARC) is no longer present and providing access to inputs.

They recognize and have many different local tree species on their land and value their benefits in providing shade (for people and animals), for selling poles and firewood (and using firewood), for addressing soil erosion and soil fertility, for providing fodder for livestock.

Due to the lack of fertilizer and its high cost, women (and men?) have been making their own fertilizer (*Mbea*) combining 1 kg of inorganic fertilizer with animal manure, water, ash and crop materials and waste. It takes 21 days to cure. They stated that while inorganic fertilizer may lead to higher yields, the local fertilizer mixture keeps more moisture in the soil and does not leach as many nutrients. The challenge to this mixture is assembling enough local materials.

## Markets

Venders are a major challenge for women as they say they give them bad prices and also trick them. Cash that is earned from sales is, they claimed, shared in the household (for earnings by both men and women). There are some cooperatives around but none of them claimed to be members. When asked why they said “no one has asked us to join”. They are members of various VSLs, but the cash in circulation is so little that it does not provide that much assistance.



## **Innovations/technologies of interest to them**

The women gathered expressed an interest in the following technologies and resources:

Irrigation

Varieties with improved nutrition

Better market access

Off-farm opportunities related to agriculture (value adding, etc.)

Livestock: while women said men control livestock, if they are able to purchase or obtain their own, they can have control over them.

Soil fertility improvement innovations

## Reflections

Women suggested that while they may struggle to get access to resources, they do have a fair degree of freedom in making decisions about farming and that they are interested in expanding into areas mostly controlled by men such as livestock ownership (for chickens, they have ownership, but cattle and goats are more difficult). **Soil erosion** and **soil fertility** were discussed as major constraints and they already try a variety of practices to address this – such as intercropping, fodder trees that fix nitrogen, making their own fertilizer mixtures. Building upon these existing practices and strengthening them would be a good start as it can address issues that they have raised. It would be good to know if local or international NGOs in the area are working with women's groups to improve VSLs and cooperatives or if they have initiatives on business skills training, adding value to agricultural products, etc. Working with partners, even if funding is not a part of the collaboration, would allow for greater opportunities to work with community members in areas of their concern.

Regarding social science research: it would be very important to know more about decision-making on farms but also about how **markets**, or the lack of them, affect local farming decisions. What kinds of mechanisms would improve farmers' access to markets or better prices on them? What **social networks** are in place locally and how does this affect access to resources, knowledge, and markets? Seasonal calendars that collect data on both farming practices, but other non-farm activities and temporary migration would be useful for understanding labor patterns and availability of resources during the year. A netmap exercise would provide information on what actors/organizations influence farmers through power relations, resources and communication. Knowing the actors and these flows would enable the project to work through these sources or how to influence them.



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