

## **F. ESTABLISHMENT OF AN AGRICULTURAL POLICY SUPPORT UNIT**

### **1. Findings**

USAID/Malawi's assistance to the development of the country's rural and agricultural sector has, virtually from its inception, included an effort to develop a professional capability to support the GOM's agricultural policy-making process with applied and empirically based research in the sector. The implicit model for this effort has been the U.S. Land Grant University system producing, as it has, a body of research-based policy recommendations, and a cadre of policy-analysts, trainers, and researchers, that has had an influence on many levels of US policy relating to its agricultural sector. The rationale for these efforts in Malawi has been that, while a number of high caliber officials can be found in the GOM, they have little or no ongoing access to pertinent research work undertaken by independent professionals or by other governments.

To address the issue of policy research, substantial resources have been allocated to establishing the Agricultural Policy Research Unit (APRU) at Bunda Agricultural College. Bunda is a constituent college of the University of Malawi, located some 30 km outside of Lilongwe. It was felt that an academic base of this type would provide a good research environment, while maintaining some distance from the ongoing functions, meetings, and pressures of the Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation (MOAI). Bunda was interested in developing its research capabilities, and key officials in MOAI were looking for an independent unit that could undertake professionally competent work that was both objective and relevant to the Ministry's concerns.

USAID/M was a strong supporter of the Agricultural Policy Research Unit (APRU) initiative. A number of US academics were funded to work with local professional staff in designing the institution, and in carrying out surveys and other studies that were thought to be pertinent to Ministry policy. The strategy included a staff and professional development program involving the sending of Bunda College professors for graduate studies at US universities. In addition, approximately US\$ 3.4 million was put into physical facilities at Bunda, to house and equip the Unit.

In the process of developing APRU, serious difficulties and conflicts arose among the various interested parties. Bunda College saw APRU as one of the four units, along with food processing, pest management, and training, under its proposed Center for Research on Agricultural Development (CARD). Apart from the training activities, which had some World Bank (EDI) involvement, none of the other units were funded. Bunda administrators also saw APRU as being an integral part of the college, with staff employed by, and funding coming through normal college channels.

Partly because of the view that university pressures were pushing APRU work into a conventional academic direction, rather than toward applied, policy-oriented work, both MOAI and USAID/M became increasingly dissatisfied with the ability of APRU to meet Ministry needs. An additional factor was that APRU terms and conditions were not adequate to attract and maintain staff with the experience and stature to undertake credible, policy-oriented research, or to communicate at a senior level within the Ministry. Even the students who had gone overseas as part of APRU's staff development program, joined the faculty of the College, or took other jobs where tenure security and other prospects were better, rather than pursuing

their careers within APRU. The result was that APRU appointees were largely lower level faculty and others at the very early stages of their careers, and lacked the experience and the credibility to interact fruitfully with senior Ministry personnel.

To address these issues, additional resources, better terms of service, and a degree of independence from the controls and procedures of the College were deemed necessary. There were also serious doubts as to whether the College was the appropriate body to select and appoint APRU staff. The result was serious disagreement among the College, the Ministry, and USAID/M. Charges were made that USAID/M was trying to control the content and character of APRU's work, and to use it to promote its own policy agenda. Eventually, the College agreed that APRU could become a separately-funded, autonomous unit at the College, but by that time, APRU's withdrawal from Bunda was already underway, followed by a (short-lived) effort to set up a separate unit in Lilongwe.

APRU is currently left with a substantial physical facility at Bunda College (though much of the computer equipment is now seriously out of date). The only problem is that nothing is going on inside the Unit. In the meantime, senior Ministry officials have no access to a functioning institution that is capable of initiating and conducting research pertinent to the policies that they must address on a daily basis.

## **2. Conclusions**

The efforts to establish or refurbish APRU have fallen victim to the conflicting agendas of USAID/M, Bunda College, and the MOAI. Mistrust, the struggle for control, and competing claims to available resources, appear to have undermined the various efforts to develop a domestic, academically based institution, capable of undertaking professional work that is useful to the MOAI and to other policy-makers. The key issue of APRU's autonomy in setting a research agenda driven by the requirements of MOAI, was never satisfactorily resolved at the College.

APRU has an extensive physical facility at Bunda College, but is currently without a cadre of researchers to give it substance. Given the right conditions, a number of capable people could be brought together to develop a useful research program. Without a resolution to the institutional and management problems and uncertainties that have dogged it so far, however, it is unlikely that funding alone will create a functional unit.

While the MOAI has serious institutional and budgetary problems of its own, it also has a number of capable and knowledgeable people who express considerable interest in seeing the development of a competent institution undertaking research that is relevant to its policy-making. These Ministry people also express considerable frustration that the efforts to establish such an institution have, for one reason or another, been thwarted.

Without access to such work, on an ongoing basis, the danger is that Ministry officials will become increasingly isolated from the reality of the issues and problems faced by the various producers and traders in the rural and agricultural sector. In these circumstances, superficial solutions and generalizations tend to substitute for research-based analysis of these issues, and as to what can fruitfully be done about them.

### **3. Recommendations**

#### **Recommendation 1**

A Ministry can be enormously strengthened by a functional research establishment that undertakes pertinent empirical and analytical work, as the basis for sound and up-to-date policy-making. The same cannot be said for a Ministry without any interest in the findings of policy-oriented studies, or a university institution bent on pursuing conventional academic research and publications, to the exclusion of addressing the policy issues facing GOM.

#### **Recommendation 2**

Any attempt to recreate APRU as an independent, academically based institution, doing research work that is relevant to government policy, must face the reasons for its past difficulties, including conflicting agendas, disagreement over scarce resources, and tenure within the university system.

#### **Recommendation 3**

If APRU were to be re-established, there are clearly good reasons why APRU appointees should not be College staff, or subject to College terms of employment. Their jobs must be, and be seen to be, the conduct of research activities aimed at addressing the policy issues facing Government. Their terms of service should be far more flexible than those of the University, permitting APRU to attract and retain the international caliber of professional staff required to perform its functions.

Any such cadre of professional staff would be enormously strengthened by an ongoing linkage with an interested external university (such as one of the US Land Grant institutions) or research establishment (such as IFPRI). Such an institutional link could provide critical assistance and interaction with APRU, developing longer run professional relationships, assisting with the definition and content of a pertinent research program, staff and professional development, and the interchange of staff. Such relationships pose familiar problems (such as providing additional channels for a brain drain), but they can enormously strengthen the ability to develop the professional capabilities of staff, and the quality and credibility of the research activities. Given Malawi's budgetary problems, there is virtually no chance that any of this will happen without significant outside funding. If USAID/M has the resources and intention to strengthen the analytical and policy analysis capability of MOAI, it may be that the most useful approach would be to have an appropriate person working within the Ministry, rather than in a separate unit.

### **4. Lessons Learned**

- ▶ It is essential that any discussions relating to reviving APRU at Bunda should include all the interested parties, including both MOAI and the College authorities. Misunderstandings and conflicting perceptions regarding the roles of the various parties in the funding and management of APRU, and in the use of its personnel and services, were behind many of the earlier disagreements that finally paralyzed the initiative. If the Bunda facilities are to be refurbished and used, it is particularly important for the College

to be “brought on board”, in terms of understanding APRU’s task of undertaking independent, applied, and policy-oriented research for the Government.

- ▶ A second lesson is that experienced and professional staff, capable of undertaking research that is both credible and useful to senior government policy-makers, does not come cheap. In particular, they are unlikely to be recruited or retained at regular Bunda College terms of service. Graduate students and other less experienced research staff have a very important role, not least in terms of gaining experience and building up their research and professional skills. Nevertheless, APRU’s credibility, and therefore its ability to contribute to the policy dialogue within Government, will depend heavily on the reputation and on the expertise of its staff.
  
- ▶ The final lesson is that it is relatively easy to build and equip buildings and facilities designed to house a desired institution. It is far harder to establish the functioning institution itself to make use of these facilities. Key components of such an institution may include: personnel, organizational relationships, incentives and productivity systems and the quality of the inter-linkages with its clientele. If these components are not there, the buildings may pass into other uses or, at worst, become empty shells.