

NGABAGHILA CHATATA: An African female agro-entrepreneur and community change agent in Malawi

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SYNOPSIS

Ngabaghila Chatata is a hands-on businesswoman thriving in a male-dominated industry—growing high-value vegetables—and is a self-initiated community change agent. This case study documents her role as an agro-entrepreneur with a heart for youth facing poverty, joblessness, and disillusionment with agricultural livelihoods.

It aims to identify key enabling factors for success of a female agro-entrepreneur; to provide insight on how policy makers can harness agents' efforts to allow scaling up of sustainable and innovative initiatives; and to share knowledge of the role that self-initiated agents can play in contributing to national development goals.

The study delves into low-cost transfer of skills initiatives, and provides insight into how policy makers can learn from such agents to stimulate others, even if they cannot remunerate them, so as to ensure sustainability. Any spin-off initiatives must be driven by agents themselves.

Among the key findings: A large majority of African youth will pursue agricultural livelihoods and many will spend most of their lives in the sector. Despite this reality, there is much evidence to show that youth in Africa have no interest in an agro-based livelihood largely because they lack the capacity (financial and technical know-how).

The main conclusion: Policy makers in agriculturally driven countries like Malawi must work to promote entrepreneurship in all sectors. For agriculture, there needs to be a real effort to improve women's land rights and create an environment that allows women to establish thriving agro-enterprises along with building their financial and technical capacity in agricultural entrepreneurship.

The main recommendations: The government needs to work with such agents as Ngaba to motivate them to give back to the community, harnessing the potential they have to develop others locally. It can do this by documenting and disseminating successful change agents and their local impacts. The government should also establish the right environment to allow entrepreneurs in different sectors to thrive. In this example, the government could provide specialized technical support to farmers. In addition, the government should provide opportunities for networking and further training for people like Ngaba who have demonstrated a real impact.

Introduction

For the African transformation agenda to become a reality, policy makers and development partners cannot ignore the growing disillusionment with agricultural-based livelihoods among youth. This is worrying as over 70 percent of the population in Sub-Saharan Africa is under the age of 30 (United Nations Population Fund 2012).

Yet many of the economies in the region depend heavily on agriculture, which employs roughly two-thirds of the region's population and accounts for one-third of its gross domestic product (World Bank 2013). A large majority of African youth will therefore pursue agricultural livelihoods and many will spend most of their lives in the sector (Proctor and Lucchesi 2012).

Despite this reality, there is much evidence to show that youth in Africa have no interest in an agro-based livelihood, according to Mapila and Kazembe (2015), who cite Sumberg and others (2012) as attributing this to lack of lucrative incentives in smallholder subsistence farming, and lack of skills and resources to exploit opportunities emerging from globalized food systems.

In Malawi, such disinterest is common knowledge in many countries, anecdotally, and is being backed up by robust evidence (for example Chinsinga and Chasukwa 2012).

Many young people are simply forced to stay in the sector due to lack of alternatives, manifested in high youth unemployment: In 2013 for those aged 15–34 it was 23 percent in Malawi (National Statistical Office 2013). However, those wanting to work in agriculture face marginalization arising from an unsupportive land policy environment (Chinsinga and Chasukwa 2012) and many other social and economic obstacles that affect all Malawians.

But one female agriculturalist is helping to train a cadre of young farmers. Ngabaghila Chatata—Ngaba to her friends and colleagues—is a medium-scale farmer in the Central Region of Malawi. She is the co-owner and manager of a flourishing vegetable farm on the outskirts of Lilongwe City,

but has also taken on training young people in integrated farming. Her key motivation is to ensure that unemployed and disillusioned youth see the opportunities open to them and develop the skills to establish their own enterprises. Her secondary inspiration is to be part of transforming Malawi from an importer of high-value vegetables to a producer and, eventually, exporter of them.

This case study focuses on Ngaba's role as a transformational hands-on leader who has succeeded first as a female entrepreneur in a male-dominated industry; and as a community change agent. It was developed through interviews with Ngaba herself and with young people influenced by her, her employees.

African governments recognize that entrepreneurship is key for social and economic transformation, primarily through jobs (Bamkole 2015). In many Sub-Saharan African countries, women are heavily involved in entrepreneurial activities and in some cases more so than men (Kew 2015), though usually women operate in businesses that do not create other jobs.

In rural Malawi, the majority of women (85 percent) are subsistence farmers who also engage in wage employment for additional income. Gender inequities in land rights and land ownership often check women's ability to establish thriving agro-enterprises. For example, in 2010 in Malawi, nationally representative data show that 48 percent of all women owned land, either jointly or alone (Doss and others 2015). But less than 30 percent of women own land as sole individuals (Doss and others 2015). In these latter cases, men's sole ownership is higher than women's by proportion and area.

Policy makers in agriculturally driven countries like Malawi must therefore work to promote entrepreneurship in all sectors. For agriculture, there needs to be a real effort to improve women's land rights and create an environment that allows women to establish thriving agro-enterprises. One key step is to incentivize and celebrate

entrepreneurship (Bamkole 2015), especially that of successful women like Ngaba.

Profile of Ngabaghila Chatata, female agro-entrepreneur

Ngaba owns eight acres of farm land in Likuni, a peri-urban area on the outskirts of Malawi's capital city, Lilongwe. She practices integrated farming, which she started in 2010 with land bought from chiefs in the area under customary law in Likuni. She has since registered the land with the government and is a titled landholder. Since starting her farm she has also held full-time jobs in the development sector in different nongovernmental organizations, and she is a wife and mother of four.

In 2015 she made the decision to go into full-time farming to ensure the growth of her business. Her key motivation was the comprehension that, by working for herself, she could contribute more to society. But self-employment also allows her to create jobs for others, and is flexible, allowing her time for her family. She chose agriculture in particular as she has a passion for seeing the earth reproduce.

Ngaba's vision is to cultivate and supply high-value vegetables to Lilongwe's urban dwellers and supermarkets, eventually replacing imported vegetables. Realizing that this vision could not be achieved alone, Ngaba was one of the founding members of the Horticulture Farmers' Cooperative of Lilongwe. Its key aim is to market high-quality, high-value vegetables to meet rising urban demand and standards of Lilongwe City and its supermarkets.

Her farm is integrated in that she engages in different agro-enterprises including livestock, crops/vegetables, fruits, and spices and herbs (table 1). By-products of her livestock enterprises such as manure are used for making compost as an inorganic fertilizer for her crops. Some crop residues are used as animal feed or in animal feed formulation. This integrated approach makes her farm more environmentally sustainable.

Table 1. Ngaba's agro-enterprises

Livestock	Crops/vegetables		Fruits	
Piggery	Beans	Green pepper	Papaya	Mango
Sheep farming	Broccoli	Cauliflower	Banana	Granadilla
Goat rearing	Onions	Eggplants	Grapefruit	Water-melon
Dairy cattle	Pumpkin	Cucumber	Spice/herbs	
Doves	Cabbage	Swiss chard	Lemon-grass	Turmeric
	Lettuce	Sweet melon	Ginger	Garlic chives
	Tomato		Thyme	Rosemary
			Mint	Coriander
			Flowers	Bird's eye chili

Note: Flowers grown on the farm are for pest control.

The majority of her produce is sold to supermarkets in Lilongwe City, local and international, such as Shoprite and Spar. She also supplies produce to hotels and has a farm shop.

Key innovations on her farm include greenhouses for vegetable production and nursery preparations, as well as animal stall feeding. She has earmarked 1.5 hectares of her land for more greenhouses. She uses drip and sprinkler irrigation, which allows her to cultivate and harvest all year.

With her husband, Ngaba travelled to Israel where they attended a training on production in greenhouses. The trip was cosponsored by the African Institute of Corporate Citizenship, and has given her knowledge and skills that she has since applied to her farm. It also provided invaluable networking opportunities for continued knowledge sharing.

For extension and advisory services, Ngaba has three approaches that set her somewhat apart but that also help make her successful. First, when starting any new enterprise or when she encounters a problem with a current one, she gets information from government extension staff as well as extensionists from Heifer International (for her livestock). Second, she visits other farmers doing similar things and learns from their experiences. Finally, she resolves most of her farm problems by

researching and reading up on innovations, often through the Internet. Based on such researched information she sets up small experiments on her farm before launching fully into any new enterprise.

Ngaba's farm is, in many ways, a replica of local smallholder farmers in that she has mixed farming that includes crops and livestock. Her achievements, however, are in stark contrast to those of neighboring smallholder farmers. Many of them are in low-input, low-output agricultural production that is mainly for subsistence, unable to meet even their household's food requirements because they are cash strapped. Many are forced to sell their produce in the harvest season (the worst time), reducing their subsistence food produce.

Most smallholder farmers across the country have low productivity, lack of adequate extension services, poor soil fertility, high illiteracy rates, and inadequate income to buy inputs such as seed and fertilizer. The associated drudgery is the main reason for disillusionment with farming among youth, creating high rural–urban migration and, often, idleness, despair, and crime among youth staying behind.

Youth engagement

Such poverty and despair prompted Ngaba to open her farm as an informal training ground for interested local youth, who receive training in integrated farming. Her assumption is that many of them have access to customary land through their farming and rudimentary inputs such as the hand-held hoe and some livestock. Her role is to inspire them to use the few resources they have as a starting point for building an agribusiness. Her training takes them through the farm and provides them with knowledge and skills they can apply on their family farms. This includes engaging youth in setting up her farm experiments.

As her business has grown she has become able to employ full-time as well as temporary staff—all of whom are local young people. She has eight full-time staff members, including a farm manager who

is a graduate of the Natural Resources College, an affiliate of the Lilongwe University of Agricultural and Natural Resources. Although she provides employment, she encourages the young people to invest in their family farms, and believes her role is to inspire and enable innovation, fully aware that youth need more than that to thrive, such as capital. Ngaba has been unable to help them financially but encourages them to use any funds earned from employment to reinvest.

She also recognizes the need for education in establishing a successful agribusiness, and so encourages the youth to continue with their schooling, to at least gain a minimum of a high school completion certificate (the Malawi Certificate of Education).

Her farm manager, Innocent Chinkhonde, stated that:

Ngaba changed my life as she provides not only employment but also encouragement that I can do more and become an entrepreneur on my own. I therefore view my employment as a form of hands on training for establishing my own farm in the future.

Innocent used to pass Ngaba's farm to attend the Natural Resources College where he obtained a Diploma in Agriculture. After completing his studies, he and many other graduates found themselves jobless. Unlike his friends he secured a job with Ngaba as farm manager.

Other youth have benefited from the farm's training program, with about 10 having established their own farming enterprises. Ngaba plans to formalize her training program for youth by building a classroom and hostels. Her vision is to turn her farm into a community training center.

A key objective of the youth training program is to inspire upcoming young farmers to establish agro-enterprises using resources their families already have, especially land. The training program also aims to assist young farmers to view farming as a business enterprise rather than purely a means of

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subsistence. Most of those who have joined the program are young farmers who have approached Ngaba. Others have applied for employment on the farm but Ngaba cannot hire.

The program engages youth on the farm in a form of voluntary mentorship program. Youth work hand in hand with farm workers and rotate from one enterprise to another, depending on the season. Engagement varies, from one-time informal visits to more structured three- or four-week programs. In 2015/16 Ngaba's farm is hosting interns from the Natural Resources College. She has five of them who have a structured three-week internship in which they are supervised by lecturers.

Key areas of the formal training program include training on greenhouse construction, establishment of a nursery and vegetable nursery, propagation and management, and livestock production and management. A key success factor for Ngaba's training program is her willingness to provide time to engage with youth. The relationship is mutually beneficial since sometimes youth have ideas to improve the farm.

Some academics argue that such youth engagement in successful agro-enterprises and in policy dialogue is key for shaping youth aspirations, such as Dyer (2013), but the policy environment in Malawi keeps young people at a distance (Mapila and Kazembe 2015; Chinsinga and Chasukwa 2012). The upshot is a multiplicity of policies that do not consider youth perspectives. This is not unique to Malawi of course, but common to many African countries (Mapila and Kazembe 2015).

In Malawi young people view white-collar jobs as a pathway out of poverty, not farming, underscoring the need to change the policy environment for youth engagement in agriculture.

Contributing to national goals

Ngaba's farming enterprise feeds into national developmental goals in the following ways:

- *Sustainable irrigation development.* Ngaba's farm enterprise focuses on irrigation farming, which enables her to produce year-round. The use of irrigation is one of the key priority areas of the National Agricultural Policy (Malawi Government 2015). Increased use of irrigation will reduce volatility in agriculture production and contribute to greater dietary diversity. Only 4 percent of all potentially irrigable cropland is under irrigation in Malawi.
- *Increased vegetable production to meet domestic demand.* Ngaba's farming enterprise is one of many efforts to increase vegetable supply to meet domestic demand, often from supermarkets' demand for high-quality, standardized horticultural products. Increased vegetable production to meet domestic demand is a key national development goal (Malawi Government 2012).
- *Youth empowerment and development.* Ngaba's farm employs youth while providing hands-on training for young people who want to learn more about farming as a business. Anecdotal evidence by youth from her training program suggests that many are motivated to become full-time farmers, with about 10 having started their own enterprises. Youth empowerment (economically, socially, and technically) is another key national development goal (Malawi Government 2015).

Ngaba's efforts are at a local level in one small community in Malawi. Her efforts can, however, be replicated by other community entrepreneurs who have the potential to become community change agents.

But the government needs to work with such agents to motivate them to give back to the community, harnessing the potential they have to develop others locally. It can do this by documenting and disseminating successful change agents and their local impacts. The government should also establish the right environment to allow entrepreneurs in different sectors to thrive. In this example, the government could provide specialized technical

support to farmers. In addition, the government should provide opportunities for networking and further training for people like Ngaba who have demonstrated a real impact. Such government efforts would help broaden the impact of the work of change agents.

Reducing disparities in land ownership between men and women, incentivizing youth to aspire for agriculture-based livelihoods, and fostering entrepreneurship are not on their own a panacea for national transformation. Efforts by individuals such as Ngaba are a nucleus for change in small communities, but national impacts require scaling up, including mobilizing other change agents countrywide. Documentation of other efforts such as these should be considered for future research.

Finally, there is little or no robust evidence on youth aspirations in Malawi. This area requires further research.

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