



Rapid assessment of gender dynamics of soybean contract farming

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Executive summary

The assessment provides a gender analysis of an intervention piloted by the Malawi Oilseed Sector Transformation Programme (MOST) to facilitate access to inputs for soybean farmers in Malawi. The intervention provides in-kind loans to smallholder soybean farmers, which are re-paid in kind upon harvest. Soybean is commonly viewed as a ‘woman’s crop’ that is mostly grown and controlled by female farmers in Malawi. However, commercialisation of farming of crops traditionally grown by women is frequently associated with greater interest and participation of men, that can lead to a crowding-out of women farmers as chiefly responsible for this particular crop on the family farm. Contract farming can, potentially, exacerbate this shift, as contracts might be more likely to be signed with the head of the household (commonly the man).

To ensure that MOST’s intervention is gender responsive, this assessment aims to further understand the gender dynamics of soybean production (Is soybean indeed a woman’s crop?; If so, what does that mean?) and to ascertain if the introduction of soybean contract farming has equally benefited female or male farmers and has impacted on gender dynamics of soybean farming households.

The rapid assessment finds no support for the generic view of soybean as a ‘woman’s crop’ that is, *per se*, mostly grown by female farmers and that women are chiefly in control of and/or responsible for. In fact, the findings of the assessment suggest that the claim of control or responsibility over a crop does not seem to be rooted in the nature of the crop itself but seems to be based on the use of the crop (cash or food), coupled with a perception of what the main source of family income is. If the crop is used mostly for consumption, it is likely to be controlled by the woman in the household. If the crop is mostly commercial, it is likely to be controlled by the husband, unless it is not the main cash crop of the family farm or the family has another chief income generating activity (eg employment/business).

Critically, however, even in cases where women hold the contract and carry out most of the work on soybean production, it seems to be their husbands who control and carry out the sales. This significantly reduces women’s control over income generated from soybean production, critically weakening their bargaining position on the allocation of income at the household-level.

Division of labour seems to have remained the same after the introduction of contract farming and most labour is carried out jointly. However, there are significant discrepancies in perceptions between female and male respondents from the same household, with women reporting that they do more work than men say they do, and vice-versa.

The assessment concludes that the intervention would more equally benefit women and men if female contract holders’ role in sales could be increased. This could be done by making sales at the warehouse more attractive, as women reported to have more control over this point of sale than other selling points, such as vendors. In addition, due to the fact that much work on soybean is carried out jointly by the husband and the wife, it seems important that both receive training on GAP. The assessment therefore recommends to actively encourage the participation of the contract holder’s spouse in IBCF trainings. Active encouragement is necessary, as simply having open meetings does not necessarily enable wives of contract holders to participate, as many stated that they can only attend if their husbands explicitly instruct them to do so.

Introduction

The Malawi Oilseed Sector Transformation Programme (MOST) is supporting the implementation of a pilot project to facilitate access to inputs for soybean farmers in Malawi. To this end, MOST has partnered with ACE, AISL, and CDI to provide in-kind loans to smallholder soybean farmers. Loans are paid back in kind by smallholders upon harvest. The project commenced in the 2015/2016 season and is currently in its second season. In the first season, 327 farmers signed up to the scheme, of which 74% were female. In the second year, the scheme was extended to 1,987 smallholders, comprising 45% women and 55% men.

One reason for the focus on soybean was that the crop is commonly viewed as a ‘woman’s crop’ that is mostly grown by female farmers in Malawi. Although the concepts of ‘woman’s crop’ and ‘female farmer’ are difficult to define and no actual and reliable figures on the proportion of female soybean farmers in Malawi exists, anecdotal evidence suggests that soybean is indeed a mostly grown by female farmers. Various assessments undertaken by MOST on soybean seem to support this, as most studies on soybean smallholders that randomly selected respondents featured a clear majority of female farmers. It was, therefore, expected that this intervention will significantly benefit female farmers.

However, commercialisation of farming of crops traditionally grown by women is frequently associated with greater interest and participation of men, that can lead to a crowding-out of women farmers as chiefly responsible for this particular crop in the family farm. Contract farming can, potentially, exacerbate this shift, as contracts might be more likely to be signed with the head of the household (mostly the man). This could further contribute to women losing control over the crop.

This pilot project lends itself very well to further understand the gender dynamics of soybean production (Is soybean indeed a woman’s crop?; If so, what does that mean?) and to ascertain the extent to which the introduction of soybean contract farming has particularly benefited female farmers and has impacted on gender dynamics of soybean farming households. Specifically, the following questions will be addressed:

1. Is soybean perceived as a ‘woman’s crop’, a ‘man’s crop’, or a ‘family crop’? Has this changed with the introduction of contract farming?
2. What is the division of labour in mixed-sex soybean farming households? Has this changed with the introduction of contract farming?
3. How are decisions on the use of the soybean harvest sales and use of income generated taken? Has this changed with the introduction of contract farming?
4. Does it matter who signs the contract? How so?

Methodology

This rapid assessment is based on a short questionnaire and nine Key Informant Interviews conducted with female and male farmers currently under contract for soybean with ACE. Respondents included female contract holders, male contract holders, husbands of female contract holders, and wives of male contract holders.

Key informants were randomly selected by MOST. The KII question guide and the questionnaire can be found in annex 1.

Summary of profile of respondents	
Number of female contract holders	5
Number of male contract holders	2
Number of wives of male contract holders	1
Number of husbands of female contract holders	1
Male-headed households	8
Female-headed households	0
Jointly-headed households	1
Married - monogamous	6
Married - polygamous	3
Not married (widowed, divorced, single)	0

In addition, the study draws on the findings of a gender assessment of a quantitative study on the impact of soybean inoculant in Malawi carried out by MOST in 2016. The assessment is based on survey data from over 650 respondents.

1. Perceptions of gendered-division of control over soybean

Soybean is traditionally viewed as a ‘woman’s crop’ in Malawi that is mostly grown by female farmers and that female farmers are chiefly responsible for. Yet, the rapid assessment found no support for this generic view of soybean *per se* as a ‘woman’s crop’. Indeed, the findings emphasise the complexity of gendered-division of control over crops and highlight the need to use labels such as ‘woman’s crop’ very carefully.

Although the majority of contract holders under the scheme to-date have been women, and a number of female respondents stated that they are chiefly responsible for growing soybean in their household, the findings of the assessment suggest that the claim of control or responsibility over a crop is not linked to any specific crop as such, but rather to the use of the crop (cash or food), coupled with a perception of what the main source of family income is. If the crop is used mostly for consumption, it is likely to be controlled by the woman in the household. If the crop is mostly commercial, it is likely to be controlled by the husband, unless it is not the main cash crop of the family farm or the family has another chief income generating activity (eg employment/business). For instance, as was the case with three respondents, if a family grows soybean and tobacco, it is likely that tobacco is the main cash crop. In such a constellation, it is likely that the husband is mostly responsible for tobacco and the wife for soybean. In families where the husband runs a business or is employed, and this activity is the main income generating activity for the family, it is also likely that the wife is responsible for soybean as a cash crop. In both cases, it is likely that the wife signs the contract to receive soybean inputs. However, in households where growing soybean is the, or one of the, main income generating activity, husbands tend to be in control, and are likely to be contract signatories. This finding is further corroborated by the MOST gender assessment of sesame contract farming.

The introduction of contract farming has not changed this trend. However, contract farming for soybean has encouraged farmers to scale-up their soybean production and

commercialisation of the crop, often alongside tobacco. This may be resulting in more women engaging in scaled-up commercial soybean farming. However, if farming households move away from tobacco, towards soybean as their chief cash crop, control over soybean may be shifting more towards men.

2. Division of labour

The assessment found that, overall, most respondents reported to carry out most tasks relating to soybean production jointly. The only task chiefly carried out by women was winnowing, which seem to be based on a strong perception that this task is ‘for women’, especially when carried out using sieves, as is commonly the case. When probed, however, respondents could not explain why the task itself is unsuited to men, suggesting that the perception of winnowing being only ‘for women’ is cultural and not linked to the actual task itself.

In addition, sourcing of markets and selling was exclusively reported to be dominated by men, regardless of the gender of the contract. This is further discussed below in section 4.

In cases where both the husband and his wife were interviewed, the findings indicated stark discrepancies between the two respondents, indicating that women and men have a different perception of who does what, or a different normative bias regarding what they think they ought to be reporting. Overall, women reported to do more work than men think they do and vice-versa. Men are also more likely to report ‘jointness.’

All of the above findings are further corroborated by a quantitative gender assessment of the impact on inoculant carried out by MOST, which was based on more than 650 respondents.

The findings suggest that the introduction of contract farming has not altered the division of labour on soybean production.

3. Workload

The introduction of contract farming, and increased commercialisation of soybean overall, does not seem to have increased the workload for farmers, whether female or male. This is mostly due to the fact that many farmers seem to have switched from growing tobacco to growing more soybean. Since tobacco is considerably more labour intensive than soybean production, the overall workload for the family farm, and men and women within it, seems to have decreased with the shift to increased soybean production.

It has not been possible to ascertain the impact of increased winnowing – a task solely carried out by women – as farmers had not yet harvested their increased soybean yields this season and none of the respondents had significantly increased yields last season.

4. Control over sales and income

The assessment found strong dominance of men over all aspects relating to commercial sales, including sourcing markets and conducting the actual sale.¹ This was so regardless of the gender of the contract holder and is further corroborated by the quantitative assessment of over 650 soybean farmers mentioned above. Respondents attributed this male control over sales to men’s position as the household head and the resulting obligation for wives to leave control over financial transactions to them. Female respondents noted that if they were to

¹ The only exception to this male control over sales seems to be when women produce small quantities of soybean for consumption and are left with a small amount for sale. Respondents indicated that they were able to sell these small amounts themselves and have control over the income generated from this sale.

challenge male dominance over sales, they would be ‘accused’ of not trusting their husbands, risking conflict in their marriage.

Although seemingly accepted as culturally appropriate, some female respondents expressed discontent with this division of labour, as it limits their ability to know how much income has been generated. This, in turn, severely weakens their bargaining position in discussions on the use of income. One respondent reported that she has resorted to asking her son to accompany her husband to the market and to – secretly – record all the transaction the husband carries out. This suggests mistrust in the household and discontent with the status quo division of labour and control, but also a certain level of fear of repercussion if the current power-balance was to be challenged.

Decision-making on the use of income appears to be done jointly by the husband and the wife in most farming households, regardless of the gender of the contract holder. However, as noted above, women’s bargaining position is severely weakened by their lack of knowledge on sales and actual income generated.

5. Does it matter who signs the contract?

Although being the contract signatory does not seem to change the power-balance of control over sales and income generated from soybean at the household-level, a number of female contract holders reported a sense of pride of being the signatory and most reported that they would like to continue being the contract holder. This suggests a somewhat intangible, yet critical, sense of pride and empowerment associated with being the contract holder.

In addition, respondents noted that being the contract holder brings with it the benefit to be able to attend trainings sessions, etc. Although some respondents seem to already attend training sessions with their spouse, female contract holders stressed that, if their husbands were to hold the contract, they would only be able to attend the trainings if their husband asked them to, even if trainings were open for all to attend. When probed, they stated that they would not be able to ask their husbands whether they may attend, but would have to wait for the husband to make the suggestion, which some felt was rather unlikely. All respondents felt that it was very beneficial to attend the trainings as it improves their knowledge on how to grow good quality soybean. Spouses who attended the training do not seem to adequately pass on knowledge to others in the household.

Conclusion

The rapid assessment found no support for the view of soybean as a ‘woman’s crop’ and suggests a cautious approach towards such labels. Chief responsibility over soybean production (barring sales), with or without contract farming, seem to be related to the main use of the crop (consumption or commercial) and, if the crop is commercial, whether the crop is the main income generating source for the household or not. Women tend to be responsible for food crops and cash crops if they are not the main income-generating source of the household. Men tend to be responsible for the main income generating activity in the household.

Since a lot of beneficiaries of the project also grow tobacco, a key cash crop and likely the main income-generating crop in the household, women are more likely to be responsible for soybean and hold contracts for the crop.

However, even in cases where women hold the contract and carry out most of the work on soybean production, it seems to be their husbands who control and carry out the sales. This significantly reduces women’s control over income generated from soybean production, critically weakening their bargaining position on the allocation of income at the household-level.

Tackling this issue is complex and beyond the scope of MOST. However, some female contract holders stated that they are responsible for transactions at the warehouse as they hold the contract. If the warehouse provided an attractive market for soybean, they think they would be able to retain control of this point of sale, thereby extending their control over soybean sales and income generated.

The assessment also found that the division of labour seems to have remained the same after the introduction of contract farming and most labour is carried out jointly. Yet, there are significant discrepancies between female and male respondents from the same household, with women reporting that they do more work than men say they do and vice-versa. In any case, the fact that much work on soybean is carried out jointly by the husband and the wife, it seems important that both receive training on GAP. To this effect, it is recommended to actively encourage the participation of the contract holder's spouse in IBCF trainings. Active encouragement is necessary, as simply having open meetings does not necessarily enable wives of contract holders to participate, as many stated that they can only attend if their husbands explicitly instruct them to do so.

Annex 1: Questionnaire and KII guide

Questionnaire

Date:

Village name:

Name		
Do you have access to a mobile phone?		
If yes: tel		
Marital status		
Polygamous/monogamous		
Age		
# & sex of adult & child household members sleeping under the same roof	Male - adults	
	Female - adults	
	Male – child (U18)	
	Female– Child (U18)	
Household headship	Female	
	Male	
	Joint - husband & 1 wife	
	Joint - husband & multiple wives	
Position in the household	HH	
	Joint head	
	First wife	
	Second wife	
	Other (specify)	
Are you the contracted farmer? (yes/no)		
If no, who is?		
How many years have you grown soy?		
Soy yields last season		

Assessment Tool: Key Informant Guide

1. Division/allocation of land

- What is the total land area of your family farm?
- What do you grown?

Crop	Land allocation	Cash or food

- How did you decide to allocate x amount of land to soy? Did one person decide or was there discussion?

If discussion:

- Who was involved?
- Did everybody speak in the discussion?
- Was there disagreement?
- How was this resolved?

If no discussion, did one person decide?

- If yes, who?
- Why?
- What was the decision based on? (knowledge/information; advice from fellow farmers; tradition; etc)
- (for mixed-sex households): Do you have a plot that you are mostly responsible for and a plot that your spouse is mostly responsible for?
- If yes, how big are the plots;
- If yes, what do you grow on the different plots and why?

2. Division of labour and perceptions on responsibility

- Who in your household is mostly responsible for growing soy? (to get participants' perception, not to take at face value)
- Who does what on your soy field? (complete table)

Soy							
Task	Who does it?						
	H	W	FC	MC	R	L	O
Land preparation							
Seed treatment							
Planting of seed							
Weeding							
Application of herbicides							
Harvesting							
Transporting							

Threshing							
Winnowing							
Sourcing of packaging materials							
Sourcing of markets/where to sell & how much to sell?							
Transporting to market							
Sale							

(H: husband; W: wife; FC: female child; MC: male child; L: labourer; R: other relative; O: other)

- Form the beginning of the season up until now, how have you been spending your time? What time do you get up, etc?

Task	Approximate time spent/day (proportion)
Growing soybean	
Growing other crops	
Supporting spouse on the spouse's field	
Household	
Recreation	
Other (please specify)	

3. Sales

- During the last season, how much soy did you sell (proportion) and how much did you keep (a) home consumption or (b) other use (gifts, etc)?

Use	Proportion
Sales	
Home consumption	
Other	

- How did you make this decision?
If discussion:
 - Who was involved?
 - Did everybody speak in the discussion?
 - Was there disagreement?
 - How was this resolved?

If no discussion, did one person decide?

- If yes, who?
- Why?
- What was the decision based on? (knowledge/information; advice from fellow farmers; tradition; etc)

4. Income

- How did you use the income generated?

Purpose	Proportion of income spent
Food	
School fees/uniforms	
Household goods	
Health	
Farm inputs	

Recreation	
Savings	
Others (please specify)	

- How did you decide on the use of the income generated?

If discussion:

- Who was involved?
- Did everybody speak in the discussion?
- Was there disagreement?
- How was this resolved?

If no discussion, did one person decide?

- If yes, who?
- Why?
- What was the decision based on? (knowledge/information; advice from fellow farmers; tradition; etc)

5. Contract

- How did you decide who in your household signs the contract with Ace for soybean?

If discussion:

- Who was involved?
- Did everybody speak in the discussion?
- Was there disagreement?
- How was this resolved?

If no discussion, did one person decide?

- If yes, who?
- Why?
- What was the decision based on? (knowledge/information; advice from fellow farmers; tradition; etc)

- Does it matter who signs the contract? Does this person have more say on how the inputs are used? If yes, please give an example.
- (if not the signatory): Would you like to sign the contract in the next season? If yes/now, why?
- For male signatories: Would you mind if your wife signed the contract in the next season? If yes, why?
- If inputs are accessed on credit, is the debt seen as a household debt or a debt of the individual who signed the contract?
- If you received a reward for paying back your loan, what would you like it to be?
- If you received a bicycle as a reward for paying back your loan, etc, who in your household would use it? For what purpose?