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AUTHORS	Stephen Mago Costa Hofisi
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Stephen Mago (South Africa), Costa Hofisi (South Africa)

Microfinance as a pathway for smallholder farming in Zimbabwe

Abstract

Microfinance has been viewed as a pathway for smallholder farming. This paper aims to investigate the impact of microfinance on smallholder farming. It examines the role of microfinance in the development of smallholder farming. This paper employs the integrated view of microfinance study, as opposed to the 'credit only' (minimalist) view. Using qualitative research methodology, the paper relies on literature review and primary data. Household level data (primary) were collected from a rural district (Masvingo Rural District) of Masvingo province in Zimbabwe. Data were collected from 250 microfinance participants (household heads) using questionnaires and face-to-face interviews. The findings show that microfinance had positive effects on accumulation of agricultural assets, income from agriculture, agricultural education, agricultural productivity, agri-business, consumption and health. However, the impact is limited due to lack of finance. Basic financial services are essential for the management of their smallholder farming activities. The practical implications are that the study results could be used by the government and development agencies for policy making. The paper recommends that microfinance should be harnessed as a useful intervention that can be employed to economically empower the smallholder rural agricultural sector.

Keywords: microfinance, smallholder farming, integrated view, minimalist view.

JEL Classification: G21, O13.

Introduction

The notion of microfinance has had a long history as a development intervention. Microfinance, as a smallholder agricultural catalyst, is high on the agenda in both developed and developing economies. A large body of literature asserts that microfinance access to finance by smallholder farmers (who are usually in the poor category) promotes their productive efforts (Zeller and Sharma, 1998, 2002; Khandker, 1998; Baumann, 2001; Negash et al., 2002; Zeller and Meyer, 2003; Basu et al., 2004; Vincent, 2004; Nghiem, 2007). Microfinance is viewed as an intervention that can be employed for the promotion of smallholder farming for rural agricultural development. The work of Muhammad Yunus (a Nobel-Peace Prize winner) has been upheld in driving and making visible, the notion of microcredit and later microfinance (Helms, 2006). In Africa and most developing countries, small scale farmers fail to improve productivity for the enhancement of their livelihoods. In Zimbabwe, for example, access to finance by rural smallholder farmers has been a nightmare (Human Science Research Council (HSRC), 2002). Consequently, lack of finance inhibits smallholder farmers' access to essential agricultural inputs, thereby affecting their productivity negatively.

A large body of literature claims that microfinance is an effective tool for the promotion of rural agriculture (Chavan and Ramakumar, 2002;

International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), 2004; All Africa, 2004; FAO, 2006; Department for International Development (DFID), 2007; Honohan and Beck, 2007; Matshe, 2009; SNV, 2009; World Bank, 2013). Using the 'Minimalist-Integrated Approaches' nexus, the paper seeks to establish the link that exists between microfinance and smallholder farming.

With respect to smallholder farmers, the provision of microfinance may have an impact of improving their productivity. This paper adds to the literature on microfinance and small scale farming by using the elements of the 'Minimalist and Integrated Approaches' (Ledgerwood, 1996) to establish the impact of microfinance on small scale farming for rural agricultural development. Investigating the impact of microfinance on smallholder farming in Zimbabwe is significant, since the country has a large smallholder sector and it has immense contribution to food security. SNV Zimbabwe (2009) reported that smallholder farmers contributed 66% of the maize production in 1996. Such a remarkable contribution needs to be sustained and up scaled.

In the Southern Africa, 70% of the people live in rural areas (World Bank, 2013). However, for South Africa, Gordhan (2013) reported in the 2013 Budget presentation that the country's urban population has shifted to 62%, from an average of 30%, leaving the rural areas at 38%. In particular, we focus on Zimbabwe's Masvingo district. Zimbabwe is known for its small scale agricultural activities in the rural areas where the majority of the people reside. The majority (61.7%) of the people lives in the rural areas and they depend on small scale agriculture (World Bank, 2012; Rural Poverty

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Stephen Mago, Durban University of Technology, School of Education, South Africa.

Costa Hofisi, North-West University, School of Basic Sciences, South Africa.

Portal, 2007, 2013). The World Bank Report published in 2012 documented that 61.7% (in 2010) constituted Zimbabwe's rural population. Recently, the Land Reform Program has increased the number of smallholder farmers who were allocated pieces of land. The so-called 'new farmers'¹ are practicing small scale agriculture, but a few were given bigger pieces of land where they are practicing commercial agriculture. The latter are out of the scope of this present paper.

1. Problem statement

The problem identified in this paper is that smallholder farmers in Zimbabwe have very limited access to agricultural finance. They are excluded from the traditional financial system. As a result, their farm productivity tends to be low, thus, they depend upon government food handouts which do not empower them. Another challenge that emerges is that very few suppliers of credit to smallholder farmers follow the minimalist approach, thereby making credit provision unsustainable. The research questions that emerge are: i) What is the impact of microfinance on smallholder farming and ii) Which approach (between 'minimalist and integrated approaches') is likely to support smallholder productivity? These questions beg some answers, hence, they have motivated us to undertake this research.

2. Objective/purpose of the paper

The objective of this paper is to investigate the relationship between microfinance and smallholder farming by examining the role of microfinance in the development of rural agriculture. The integrated view to microfinance (as opposed to the minimalist view) is used. It is anticipated that the use of the 'minimalist and integrated approaches' to establish the relation will contribute not only to academic literature, but also to policy-making.

3. Research methodology

This paper employed the qualitative research methodology as an attempt to answer the questions that emerged under the problem statement. The selected area for this study, Masvingo District is located in the Masvingo Province of Zimbabwe. Masvingo Province and the District, in particular, are semi-arid, making agricultural activities to face some challenges. The District has a mixed economy with agriculture being the main economic activity. A significant portion of the rural population is engaged in smallholder agriculture. However, low rainfall conditions subdue the agricultural activities in the area. This condition is worsened by poor access to finance for the promotion of smallholder

farming activities in the area. A survey research design was adopted for the collection of data from 250 rural households who participate in microfinance programs offered mainly by two non-governmental organizations (NGOs) - Rural Unity for Development Organization (RUDO) and CARE International. Using simple random sampling (SRS), the sample size of 250 households was selected from an estimated number of 800 microfinance participants. The estimated (they were updating their records during the time of the research) figure was provided by the two NGOs. Questionnaires and interviews were employed for the collection of data from microfinance participating household heads.

4. Theoretical and conceptual framework

Microfinance is the provision of small loans to the poor for the promotion of their economic activities that include agriculture. The poor lack collateral security that is required by traditional financial institutions, as a result, they fail to have access to credit. Robinson (2001) defines microfinance as:

"small-scale financial services-primarily credit and savings-provided to people who farm or fish or herd; who operate small enterprises or micro-enterprises where goods are produced, recycled, repaired, or sold; who provide services; who work for wages or commissions; who gain income from renting out small amounts of land, vehicles, draft animals, or machinery and tools; and to other individuals and groups at the local levels of developing countries, both rural and urban" (Robinson, 2001, p. 9).

A large body of literature shares a similar conceptualization of microfinance (see, for example, Kondo et al., 2008; Nghiem, 2007; Armendariz de Aghion and Morduch, 2005; IFAD, 2004; Chavan and Ramakumar, 2002; Ledgerwood, 1999).

"Microfinance" and "micro-credit" should not be used interchangeably, they are conceptually and functionally different (Elahi and Rahman, 2006). Microcredit is a sub-set of microfinance. The latter entails financial inclusion, whilst the former assumes that credit is the only missing piece among the poor. Microfinance gained popularity in the 1970s when Professor Muhammad Yunus (Economics Professor and Nobel Peace Prize Winner), initiated the Grameen Model in Bangladesh (for details see, for example, Armendariz de Aghion and Morduch, 2005; Robinson, 2001; Karmakar, 1999; Kandker, 1998). This model involves the use of group lending where repayments are motivated by peer group pressure. 'Social capital' is also used to cement the people together for effective microfinance. Putnam et al.

(1993) in Akram and Routray (2013, p. 761) define social capital as the “features of social organizations such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate co-operation for mutual benefit”. The Grameen Bank used the group lending methodology as a way of delivering microfinance to the poor people. The poor use “social collateral” as a non-material substitute for physical collateral security. The model uses peer pressure execution among group members to encourage repayment of loans (Kota, 2007; Armendariz de Aghion and Morduch, 2005; Karmakar, 1999). However, such enforcement has had negative effects in some contexts. For example, in the Indian province of Andhra Pradesh, “the microfinance crisis in India which broke out in fall 2010” (Arunachalam, 2011, p. 1). However, Sharma’s (2011) analysis shows the Andhra Pradesh crisis as a ‘once-off’ problem.

Our theoretical reflection is based on the ‘minimalist-integrated approaches’ argumentation to the provision of rural microfinance. Borrowing from the works of Ledgerwood (1996), who discussed the ‘minimalist-integrated’ nexus, we used the perspectives to establish the relationship between microfinance and smallholder farming. The minimalists argue that the only single “missing piece” in enterprise development is credit (Ledgerwood, 1999, p. 66). The ‘minimalist approach’ does not work well for smallholder farmers, since provision of ‘credit only’ without follow-up services is likely to be detrimental. The poor farmers are tempted to use the acquired credit for other uses other than the intended. The ‘fungibility’² behavior is explained by lack of follow-up services, such as training in financial management.

On the other hand, the integrated approach looks attractive and convincing. This calls for the provision of both financial and non-financial intermediation. The latter includes training, social intermediation³, social services provision and enterprise developmental services. Proponents of the integrated approach argues that enterprise development both financial and non-financial services. The approach is holistic. However, according to Ledgerwood (1996), MFIs that offer non-financial services often face sustainability challenges, hence, they need to be sufficiently funded. They can also form strategic partnerships with the government and donor agencies to promote the integrated approach to microfinance provision. Such partnerships are likely to enhance the sustainability of smallholder farmers.

This paper argues that the integrated approach to the provision of microfinance can effectively promote

smallholder farmers and other vulnerable groups of society. Smallholder farmers need government support so as to improve their productivity which also promotes their livelihoods. They contribute towards rural economic development.

5. Results and discussion

5.1. Microfinance program membership. Selected smallholder farmers in the study area (Masvingo District) are members of microfinance programs organized by Rural Unity for Development Organization (RUDO) and CARE International. The membership is voluntary and they are organized into groups, where they receive loans, form savings and lending clubs, receive training and social intermediation. All the 250 members interviewed (100%) indicated that they are into smallholder farming. Before the inception of the microfinance program in the area, it had been difficult to acquire agricultural inputs for their farming activities. During the period of the study, they stated that the microfinance program had allowed them to have access to farming inputs, thus, improving their farm productivity. Below is a discussion of their views about the impact of microfinance on their farming activities and other related variables.

5.2. The effect of microfinance on smallholder agriculture. Data were collected through questionnaires and interviews to establish the perceptions of smallholder farmers on the impact of microfinance on smallholder farming. On average, 79% of the smallholder farmers indicated that microfinance leads to an increase in agricultural related welfare indicators, and 1% said that it decreases them. From the group interviewed, 10% pointed out that microfinance does not bring any change and 10% did not give responses to the question. We can conclude that the majority of smallholder farmers perceive microfinance to be beneficial to rural agricultural development.

5.2.1. Impact on agricultural assets. Agricultural assets are important resource endowments that promote their livelihoods through increased agricultural productivity. Accumulation of assets is a *proxy* for an increase in wealth that contributes positively towards living standards. The vast majority (75%) indicated that microfinance contributes immensely towards accumulation of agricultural assets. Assets such as ploughs, draught animals, planters, harrows, hoes, axes, shovels, scotch carts and other tools were highlighted as very important and useful by smallholder farmers. Moser and Dani (2008) note that assets help people to be resilient to shocks. We also found in our survey that agricultural assets play a central role in improving the productivity of smallholder farmers in Masvingo

District. The high percentage of non-response rate (19%) could be that some were not sure of the effect of microfinance on assets. A “not sure” option to responses could have been included on the questionnaire.

5.2.2. Impact on agricultural education. Agricultural education is a very important factor in the development of human capital that is necessary for livelihoods development. Human capital theories inform that education is a powerful variable in productivity and welfare. According to Lepak and Snell (1999), human capital is a core asset in all settings that require production and competitiveness. Accordingly, the value of human capital is inherently dependent upon its potential to contribute to productivity. Educated people provide productive labor, hence, promoting an improvement in the living standards. An educated society has a very high potential to resist the shocks, as they are innovative.

About 69% of the smallholder farmers stated that microfinance has power to influence agricultural education/training. Smallholder farmers who are in the microfinance programs benefit through agricultural training and sharing of information among members. The organizations that provide microfinance services also provide training services for effective agricultural production. This follows the ‘integrated approach’ to the provision of microfinance. 13% indicated that microfinance does not bring a change to agricultural education and 19% did not give responses. The possibility could be that the respondents were not sure so a “not sure” response alternative should have been included in the questionnaire. The perception of smallholder farmers on agricultural education support findings from other researchers (see Pitt and Khandker, 1996, 1998; Armendariz de Aghion and Morduch, 2005).

5.2.3. Impact on income from agriculture. Income is an important household outcome that alleviates money metric poverty⁴ (Carter and Barret, 2006). 81% of the respondents agreed to the notion that microfinance activities increase income levels of the poor people through improved smallholder productivity. Only 13% pointed out that the activities do not change income levels and 6% did not respond to the question. Their perceptions support the assertions from literature (see Khandker 1998; Armendariz de Aghion and Morduch, 2005; Nghiem, 2007).

5.2.4. Impact on agricultural productivity. Agriculture is considered to be the main source of income in most rural areas of developing countries.

In the study site, there is high reliance on agriculture as a source of household income. 83% agreed that microfinance activities promote agriculture. Only 5% pointed out that it does not bring a change to agriculture and 12% did not give a response to the question. None indicated that microfinance decreases agriculture. This perception supports Zeller and Sharma (1998, 2002) and IFAD (2007).

5.2.5. Impact on agri-business activities. Agri-business is an important aspect of agricultural production. It also contributes towards the generation of household income. Smallholder farmers in the rural areas have a serious constraint of marketing their products. This is mainly because they cannot meet the transportation and marketing costs involved. Rural areas in Zimbabwe over-rely on agriculture which is under siege from climate shifts and effects of global warming, poor market linkages, poor infrastructure, among other things. The majority (74%) indicated that microfinance promotes agri-business. Through microfinance, we found out that the respondents are in a position to take their produce to the market. Before the microfinance programs, their products used to rot due to non-delivery. Microfinance has also helped them to acquire cell phones that are helping them to acquire marketing and pricing information without travelling to town. This has reduced the costs of doing business.

5.2.6. Impact on consumption through agriculture. Consumption is an important indicator of the standard of the people’s living. This variable is strongly influenced by the availability of income and assets. There is, therefore, a strong positive relationship between consumption and the standard of living. Economists argue that consumption is a better measure of the standard of living than income, because income that does not influence consumption may not necessarily change the living standards (Meyer and Sullivan, 2003). They argue that consumption is better measured than income for poor households and that it is a more direct measure of material well-being. 38% of the respondents said that the provision of financial resources to the poor increases consumption. Actually, the poor have an opportunity to smoothen their consumption patterns. Surprisingly, 50% indicated that microfinance does not bring any change to consumption patterns and 12% did not respond. One reason for the 50% response could be that the rural poor are encouraged to accumulate savings and assets, hence, making them to prefer to spend less on consumption.

5.2.7. Impact on health through agriculture. Health is an important indicator of improved or improving living standards. The ultimate goal of microfinance

should be to improve the livelihoods of poor people in the rural areas. Health is one of the variables that should have a positive shift so as to promote well-being and productivity among the poor (Daley-Harris, 2002; Adjei et al., 2009; Adjei and Arun, 2009). The asset model promotes health inequities among the poor (Morgan and Ziglio, 2007), that is, encouraging assets mobilization among poor people as the basis for health revitalization.

Ninety four (94%) indicated that microfinance activities help people to support their health. They gave examples of raising money to pay hospital fees and introduction of microfinance-HIV/AIDS programs. For example, the Chidzikwe microfinance program by CADEC has an HIV/AIDS support component. The HIV/AIDS affected and infected villagers benefit from microfinance activities in the area. They are now in a position to eat healthy foods, since they are encouraged to grow crops using organic methods. Only 6% pointed out that microfinance does not bring change on health.

The responses discussed above are in line with literature that suggests that microfinance has positive impact on economic activities among the poor and low income groups. This supports Khandker (1998), Zeller and Sharma (1998), Karmakar (1999), Robinson (2001), IFAD (2007), Kota (2007), Magner (2007) who state that microfinance contributes to the growth of economic variables and reduction of social problems.

Conclusions

The article demonstrates a positive impact of microfinance on smallholder farming in the Masvingo District of Zimbabwe. Significance of microfinance on smallholder farming was proved by the qualitative responses from practising rural smallholder farmers in the study area. Smallholder farmers tend to be marginalized by the traditional financial institutions. They need to be incorporated into the financial mainstream. Since their productive efforts have a significant contribution toward the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP), access to microfinance will enhance their livelihoods, thus, promoting local economic development. The findings made it clear that the provision of finance to rural smallholder farmers promotes rural agricultural development. Smallholder farmers have willingness and ability to engage in productive farming activities, but the main constraint is finance. For them to have the fullest realization of the available potentials and benefits, farmers require financial support. An integrated approach to the provision of microfinance works well for

smallholder farmers. Credit and other follow-up services (integrated approach) are crucial for the promotion of smallholder farming in the rural areas of Zimbabwe. Improved productivity among smallholder farmers has positive effects on accumulation of agricultural assets, income from agriculture, agricultural education, agricultural productivity, agri-business, consumption and health.

Recommendations

The findings from this paper contain significant lessons to the Zimbabwean government and other development agencies in the country. These could also be replicated in other developing countries. This paper proffers the following recommendations:

- i) The use of an integrated approach for the provision of microfinance to smallholder farmers. As suggested by the approach, smallholder farmers will benefit if they are provided with both financial and non-financial resources. Strategic partnerships could be used to ensure that the integrated approach is pursued.
- ii) Our results support government development policies and those by other development agencies to invest in smallholder farming development. We recommend that the government of Zimbabwe could invest in strategies for supporting smallholder farming in the rural areas. Such an investment will promote food security, improve the livelihoods of smallholder farmers and promote rural community development, among other issues.
- iii) Development of a supportive regulatory framework that will enhance the development of the microfinance sector. The government of Zimbabwe needs to support the microfinance sector especially, in this context, the segment that supports smallholder farming. Conducive policies could be used to promote the growth of the sector.

Notes

¹“New farmers” refers to all the farmers that acquired farm land during the Zimbabwean ‘fast track’ land reform program that started in year 2000.

²“Fungibility” refers to the use of loans for other purposes other than the intended, Sharma and Buchenrieder (2002) note that even if lending institutions impose strict conditions, credit may be used for other purposes such as leisure, repaying loans from other expensive sources, financing wedding expenses, purchasing durable goods, paying for funeral expenses and other related expenses. This could be reduced by putting in place effective monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.

³Social intermediation is defined broadly as a process in which investments are made in the development of human resources and institutional capital to enable the poor to access effectively and productively, the financial services of the formal sector. Such investments, among other things, involve awareness building among the poor on basic formal financial services, basic literacy training required to access

formal financial services, and basic record keeping for community-based financial service operations. (Asian Development Bank (ADB), 2000, p. 18).

⁴This is a poverty measurement that is based on household income. Those with less income are regarded as poor while those with more income are rich (Carter and Barret, 2006, p. 179).

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