

Butcher men of Balaka cut to the heart of the problem in goat markets



Group of butcher men
formulating the goal

The butcher men of Balaka in southern Malawi are a group of rough-and-ready men, often considered shrewd and unscrupulous, and almost always overlooked in development projects. No one could have imagined that these middlemen – the least represented group in the initial CLIM² Innovation Platform meeting – would play such a pivotal role in improving the goat value chain.

‘Fixing’ the market for goat farmers by working with the butcher men is crucial in moving goats from the farm gate to the final consumer.

As Project Leader, Dr Andre van Rooyen expressed in the Innovation Platform meeting, farmers are motivated to progress with an enterprise when they can make more income from it. Likewise, when the butcher men make more money from selling more and better quality goats, the demand for quality goats will increase, translating into higher market prices for goat farmers.

“You don’t necessarily have to work directly with farmers to have a direct impact on farmers,” said Dr van Rooyen. “Working with 20 to 40 butcher men to set up systems and working infrastructure such as fixing the market efficiency, can ultimately increase the earnings and improve livelihoods of many more farmers.”

Sharpening the knives (Preparatory work)

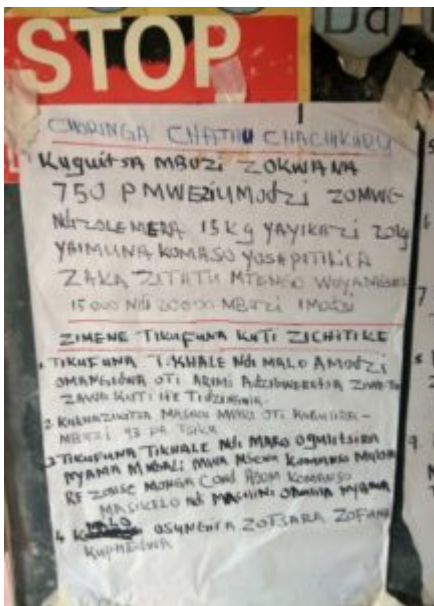
The EU-funded CLIM² project, which aims to improve the livelihoods of rural farmers through sustainable diversification and integration of market-

oriented crop-livestock systems, is initiating a series of activities with a group of butcher men at Phalula Trading Centre, in Balaka district. The process was conducted in collaboration with government extension staff of Phalula Extension Planning Area, the aim being to formalize the group as a registered association, and to guide them to generate goals, strategies and activities for their enterprise.

After deliberating in sub-groups, the butcher men presented the proposed goal by answering the following set of questions: How many goats can we sell per day? What quality of goats does the market demand? At what price can we buy from farmers?

The task of presenting the goal of the butcher men was taken up by the secretary, Mr Frank Chingulube, who pierced the room with his compelling voice, saying, "As butcher men, we want to slaughter and sell 25 goats a day, which are younger than three years old, and the goats should be of the following carcass weight: 15 kg for females and 20 kg for males, at a price of MK15,000 and MK20,000 respectively (US\$20 and US\$27 respectively)."

Cutting up the carcass (formulating strategies)



The articulated goal

With the clearly articulated goal in sight, the men went back into their groups to identify ways to attain it. The sub-groups were facilitated by project and extension staff who, as the need arose, would explain technical aspects, for example, the carcass weight of goats of a specific age.

One of the strategies the butcher men came up with involved the construction of a sales pen for goats, which would facilitate purchase of larger numbers of small livestock in a day. Currently, they must cover long distances, either on foot or by bicycles, going from farm to farm in search of farmers willing to sell their goats, and buying one or two goats at a time. This is a time-consuming process and, in business, time is money!

Dr van Rooyen welcomed the idea of the sales pen, and urged the group to continue collaborating and communicating with farmers the way they had started doing during the IP meeting, as this collaboration would play an important role in the two parties understanding each other's needs.

"Start involving farmers in your discussions and engage in dialog with actors who will be involved in the process," he said.

Another member of the group suggested that they set specific market days for the sales pens; others agreed and immediately decided to set two days a week aside for business to be conducted at the sales pen. Further, one of the set days would be before the Trading Centre's market day so that they could buy stock in order to target market day.

The Chairman of the butcher men, Mr Gilbert Frazer, explained that currently they slaughtered and sold six goats a day, going up to 12 goats a day when demand was high or when there was no beef in the market. The goat meat is sold at MK 1,800 per kg (US\$1.50 per kg).

When asked if selling 25 goats in a day was an attainable target, he immediately said yes. The leader of the group said that they were not only targeting the market around the Trading Centre, but also traffic on the Blantyre-Lilongwe Road as they have a vision of a transformed enterprise with a more modern butchery along the road, with display fridges and well-processed and graded meat, as well as a car park and a prominent signpost advertising their products.

The meeting ended with a visit to the slaughterhouse, a facility built and run by the town council. It was immediately evident that the slaughterhouse needed an urgent upgrade: there were no hooks for hanging goat carcasses; although there is electricity, there were no electricity sockets; there were no livestock holding pens, pit latrines or disposal pits.

Another challenge facing efficient operations of the butcher men is that they are not formally registered as an association or club. They operate informally under a committee that runs the day-to-day activities. It includes about 30 members who, due to inconsistent supply of goats, have goats to slaughter and sell only on alternate days. Consistent supply could see them each slaughtering and selling daily.

A member who has slaughtered a goat has to pay a fee of MK500 per goat (US\$0.70) to the council for using the slaughterhouse; they also pay a local market tax for selling goat meat at their makeshift sales facility. All these costs are paid individually, and have made the group realize the need to be formally registered as an association. As one of the butcher men commented, this would enable them to access loans and enter into other contractual agreements.

The butcher men's tools (Capacity building needs)

During the participatory planning meeting, Mr Frazer highlighted the capacity-building training in which the group would like to be engaged. This

included training in business planning in order for them to shift to formal business; training in group dynamics to be familiar with issues of leadership, roles and responsibilities; and, most importantly, training in meat handling and processing to improve hygiene and quality of the product.

It was clear at the end of the meeting that not only did the butcher men believe in their goal, but that more organized structures for them must be created to improve the goat value chain.

“The sales pen will enable us to purchase more goats and, at the same time, farmers will benefit from higher prices for quality goats,” said the chairman.

There are many benefits to structured and efficient agri-businesses.

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