OPINION

IT is a great pity that the issue of fertiliser still causes such mayhem on the farming calendar. What is even worse is that efforts such as the Fertiliser Support Programme (FSP), an initiative meant to buttress vulnerable but viable farmers with subsidised inputs, have failed to draw any tangible results in the last seven years.

The FSP was meant to be a way of boosting agricultural production but the way the programme has been conducted cannot be what the Government intended.

It is either the inputs are not delivered on time or if they are, it turns out that it is the wrong input.

This year, there have been disturbing reports that fertiliser has landed in the hands of selfish individuals who are in turn making a roaring business, selling inputs at the expense of the poor.

Agriculture and Cooperatives Minister, Brian Chituwo says a recent research showed that some of the major weaknesses of the FSP have been the mushrooming of bogus cooperatives, which were allegedly benefiting from the programme.

Other reasons relate to poor linkages and monopoly in the distribution of fertiliser.

Currently, only Nyiombo Investments and Omnia Small-Scale Limited have been charged with the distribution of fertiliser.

This means that whenever the two, for one reason or the other, fail to deliver inputs on time, there is panic among needy farmers and the trickle down effect results in low yields, rise in maize prices and subsequent shortages.

It is, therefore, good that the Government is looking at ways to resolve the problems surrounding fertiliser distribution.

From what is coming out, the distribution has everything to do with institutions that handle the poor.

Involvement of these institutions needs to be more than ever before to ensure that only vulnerable farmers are identified as beneficiaries.

Government's energy needs not be exerted on the same issues year in year out.

World Bank vice-president for Africa, Obiageli Ezekwesili could not have said it better at the recent indaba.

"It is not that fertiliser is not important. It is. But agriculture needs more than fertiliser. It needs research and extension. It needs development and trade policies that allow farmers to sell their produce in the most profitable markets."

It is hoped that from the research findings, a more pragmatic and permanent approach will be taken to sort out the muddle in fertiliser distribution.