FOLLOWING increased concerns about the Fertiliser Support Programme’s poor performance in its seven years of implementation, major pronouncements have been made about the need to review the programme and improve its efficiency and effectiveness.

Cabinet has subsequently issued a directive to recommend proposals to reform the FSP. Recently, a team comprising major players in the agricultural industry was constituted by the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives to look at possible ways of reforming the FSP.

One of the major shifts in the proposed reforms is that of changing the mode of input procurement and distribution, from the current system to a voucher-based input supply system, as well as the change of the programme’s name from FSP to Agriculture Input Support Programme.

Minister of Agriculture and Cooperatives, Brian Chituwo said Government was fully aware of the concerns raised by stakeholders regarding shortfalls of the FSP and the calls to reform the programme.

Speaking at Ibis Gardens in Chisamba when a team of researchers presented the proposed FSP reforms to the Parliamentary Committee on Agriculture and Lands, Dr Chituwo assured agricultural stakeholders that Government was committed to ensuring that the programme was a success.

Presenting the proposed reforms to the committee, study team member, Coillard Hamusimbi explained that a voucher-based input supply system would enable the FSP to empower beneficiaries with requisite purchasing power in form of a discount voucher to procure inputs of their choice at their nearest input outlets, resulting in timely distribution.

“The system will also help to minimise administrative burdens and costs, thereby reducing direct Government involvement in input procurement and importation, and in-country distribution,” Mr Hamusimbi explained.

He informed the committee that the system would further lessen the government’s transport costs through the hiring of trucks to distribute inputs around the country. Private dealers would have to distribute the inputs to various destinations using their own transport.

“In this way, the voucher system will stimulate market competitiveness and in turn encourage the development of a private sector led agro dealer input supply network in agricultural areas,” Mr Hamusimbi said.

He added: “The move will encourage private sector participation in agricultural input importation, manufacturing and in-country distribution amongst other attendant benefits of a well functioning voucher-based input distribution system.

Mr Hamusimbi mentioned other proposed reforms as flexible programme input pack and size, with options of including seeds of other preferred crops and chemicals.

“The team also felt that there should also be an establishment of a functional up-to-date computerised farmer register or database and camp based beneficiary selection criteria,” he said.
The establishment of functional linkages to financial institutions for inputs, stock credit facilities for farmers as well as the improved input utilisation and beneficiaries’ performance monitoring mechanisms, were also seen as key advantages in the proposed FSP reforms.

For the reformed FSP to be effective, Mike Weber from the Food Security Research Project (FSRP) emphasised the need for an agricultural input training programme.

Prof. Weber observed that lack of farmers’ training in input utilisation was one of the major reasons for the failure of the FSP during its seven-year period of operation.

“A Farm Input Training Support project is needed if this programme is to be successful,” said Prof Weber.
“It is a sad story that we have spent about K1.4 trillion in the last seven years to help farmers but nothing has happened.

If we can train the camp extension officers, then they can also train the farmers and the agro-dealers on utilisation of the inputs,” he said.

The Agriculture and Lands Parliamentary Committee members felt that if properly implemented, the proposed reforms could work well in making the input programme a success.

Committee Chairperson, Request Muntanga observed that the key to the reformed input programme’s success was proper implementation.

“You are aware that the FSP was full of extreme malpractices. That is one fertiliser programme which made people rich. Some people were ripping a lot,” Mr Muntanga said.

“Today, we were informed that actually from last year, what was distributed was 50,000 metric tonnes of fertiliser but what went to the farmers as checked on the ground was only 28,000 metric tonnes, meaning that there was 22,000 metric tonnes of fertiliser that did not reach the intended beneficiaries.

Somewhere along the line, people were receiving fertiliser and selling it to other commercial farmers or literally taking it out of the country,” he observed.

The proposed reforms, according to Mr Muntanga, would help to improve the agricultural input supply system in the country.

”One big thing that will be good when they run it properly is that it will liberalise the marketing system,” Mr Muntanga said.

However, it was observed that the agricultural extension services needed to be revived to ensure that camp officers were active if the programme was to be effective.

“The system in Tanzania, Malawi and Kenya is relying on the village committees and the villagers themselves to select the beneficiaries.

They know who the farmer is and which area he or she is going to put the crop,” Mr Muntanga observed.
He explained that the same system could be applied in Zambia where villagers could be involved in the selection process of beneficiaries.
“It will not only be the same extension officers and the very few that may have benefited or may have altered or cheated the system, or may have even entered a fake cooperative which belongs to individuals who will benefit.

I think we should go further where the villagers are involved so that they will be able to give the correct information,” Mr Muntanga said.

He also said that the registration of actual farmers should be hastened and checked to ensure that the information given is true to ensure that actual farmers benefited from the project.

After the system is adopted and accepted, Mr Muntanga explained that members of Parliament (MPs) would go and explain to their constituencies what to expect.

Lupososhi MP, Alfridah Mwamba observed that the government meant well to involve civil servants in the FSP but that it was unfortunate that problems in the programme were generated by the same civil servants.

“These proposed changes are long overdue because problems that have surrounded the FSP since its inception have been ongoing.

So I think it is about time that we came up with innovations to try and manage this system to the benefit of the intended beneficiaries,” Ms Mwamba said.

The proposed reforms, according to Ms Mwamba, would help to address issues such as the delay in input distribution and the selection process of beneficiaries which she said was key in making the reformed programme a success.

“Because it is a government programme, the government felt that civil servants should be involved, but the civil servants involved have themselves been at the centre of the controversy,” said Ms Mwamba.

Other specific proposed reforms to the current FSP presented to the parliamentary committee include the full liberalisation of agricultural input importation and manufacturing, and the establishment of agro dealers supply networks in rural areas.

It is clear through the debates by various commentators that the FSP programme stands as one of the potential strategies in boosting the country’s agricultural productivity through smallholder farmers, thus uplifting their standards of living.

The programme’s success however, depends on its meaningful implementation as observed by analysts.

It is, therefore, hoped that the proposed programme’s reforms will meet people’s expectations in practically addressing the several concerns raised by stakeholders on the performance of the programme with regards to poor targeting, delays in input distribution, limited private sector participation, poor fertiliser utilisation by small-scale farmers, inconsistency of policy implementation and its long term sustainability. – NAIS.

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