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THE QUALITY OF AGRICULTURE AND FOOD SECURITY POLICY PROCESSES AT NATIONAL LEVEL IN MALAWI

RESULTS FROM THE 2015 MALAWI AGRICULTURE AND FOOD SECURITY POLICY PROCESSES BASELINE SURVEY

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Over the past ten years, there have been several initiatives in Malawi to strengthen the processes through which national policies, strategies, and programs in the agriculture sector are designed and approved. These processes define how the nation assures the food security and nutrition of its citizens. As a consequence, in addition to the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation, and Water Development (MoAIWD), which continues to coordinate these policy processes, a broader and more diverse range of civil society and non-governmental organizations, firms or representatives of sub-sectoral umbrella organization from the private sector, and agricultural and food policy researchers from various institutions all now engage in the policy processes more regularly. Development partners remain engaged, although more so than in the past their perspectives are now more harmonized through the Donor Committee on Agriculture and Food Security.

Between June and August 2015, about 100 stakeholders in these policy processes were asked to participate in the 2015 Malawi agriculture and food security policy processes baseline survey. Eighty-six stakeholders completed a questionnaire that was designed to capture their opinions on a range of issues related to the current quality of agriculture and food security policy processes at national level in Malawi. This brief reports on the opinions of survey participants related to the current quality of these policy processes – both on the content and inclusiveness of the discussions and debate in the processes and the institutional framework within which the processes take place.

A purposive sample was chosen for the survey that is reasonably representative of involved individuals from the institutions that constitute the institutional architecture of agriculture and food security policy processes in Malawi. Representation in the sample was sought from five different categories of stakeholders – government, civil society, the private sector, donor agencies, and researchers (Table 1). Ninety-nine potential informants in total were contacted. Responses were received from 86. Complete datasets were provided by 54 respondents, with most of the 32 who did not complete all questions omitting responses for less than five questions.

Table 1: Institutional category and experience of survey respondents

Institutional category	Fre-quency	Percent	Years with current organization, mean	Years engaged in policy processes, mean
Government	38	44.2	11.3	12.9
Civil society	13	15.1	9.6	11.2
Private sector	16	18.6	7.1	12.9
Donor agency	9	10.5	5.2	9.1
Research	10	11.6	10.2	14.1
NON-GOVERNMENT RESPONDENTS	*48*	*55.8*	*8.1*	*12.0*
Total	**86**	**100.0**	**9.5**	**12.4**

Modules B and C of the 2015 baseline survey questionnaire consisted of 19 and 21 questions, respectively. These questions probed the respondent's opinion on the general quality of these policy processes (Module B) and of the institutional architecture (Module C) through which these processes were conducted. Four-level Likert scale questions were framed as generally positive statements on various dimensions of the policy processes or the associated institutional architecture. Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with the statement. No 'neutral' or "neither agree nor disagree" option was offered, forcing the respondent to make a judgment on the statement in question.

To analyze the results, the four possible responses were assigned integer values: 0 for a 'Completely disagree' response; 1 for 'Somewhat disagree', 2 for 'Somewhat agree', and 3 for 'Completely agree'. Mean responses to the questions were then computed overall and by the five categories of respondents. Results are presented for Module B in Figure 1 and for Module C in Figure 2.

Perceptions on the quality of agricultural and food security policy processes in Malawi

Module B primarily focuses on the quality of the content and inclusiveness of the discussions and debate in agriculture and food security policy processes in Malawi. An underlying assumption to the questions that were asked is that government

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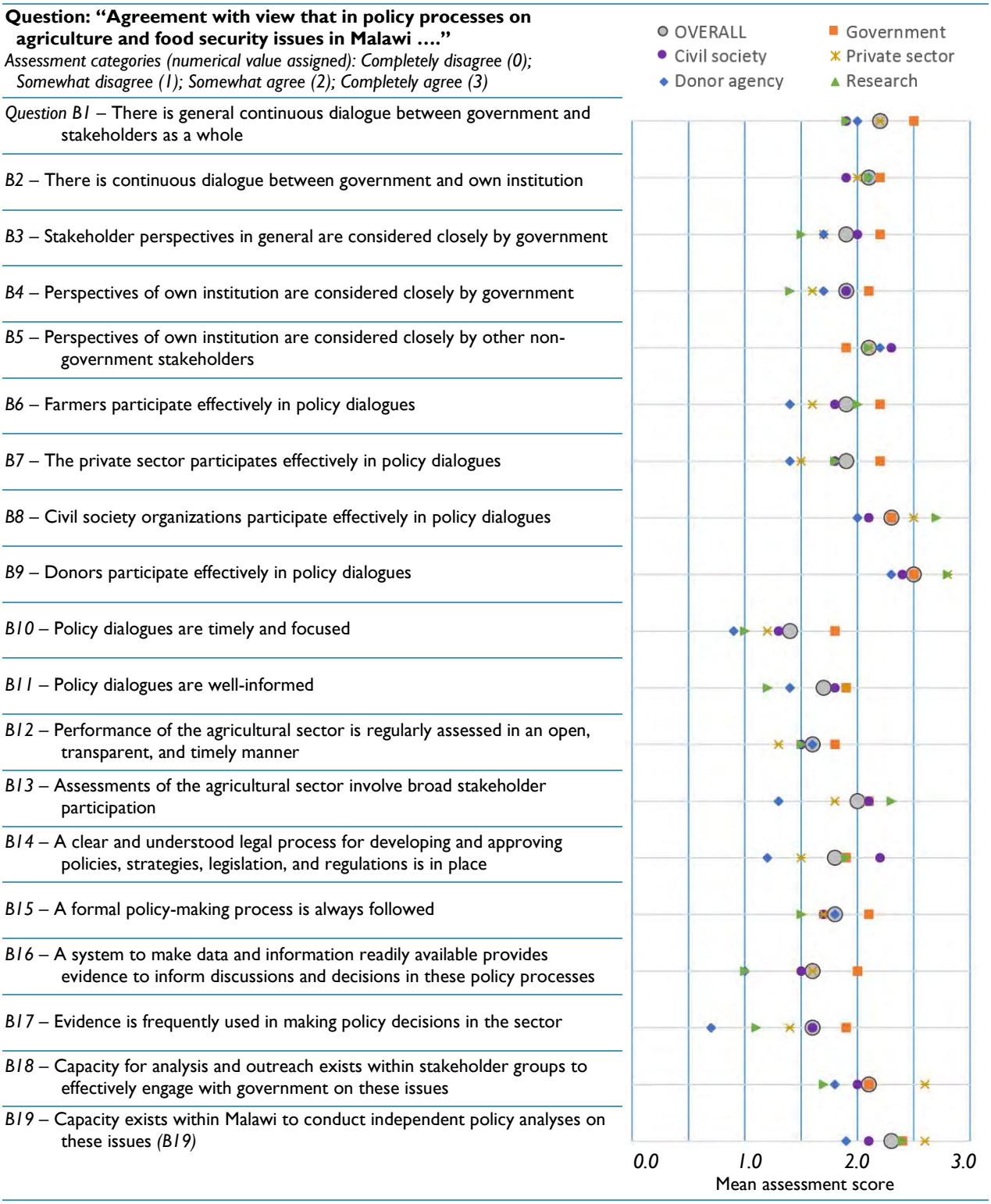
Figure 1: Summary of mean assessment scores concerning perceptions on the quality of agricultural and food security policy processes in Malawi, by institutional type (Module B)



Note: The mean assessment score is the average of the four assessment levels, assigning a score of 0 to 'Completely disagree', 1 to 'Somewhat disagree', 2 to 'Somewhat agree', and 3 to 'Completely agree'. An equal distribution of assessment levels will have a mean score of 1.5.

is the principal convener and organizer of these processes, a role that it has long played. The questions examine the degree to which the perspectives of other stakeholder groups are brought into the government-led processes, how well structured these processes are, and the degree to which evidence has been used to inform the dialogues and debates inherent to them.

The overall question response pattern seen in Figure 1 shows that the average response to the statements posed falls around the 'Somewhat agree' response, with an average assessment score of 1.93 for all questions in Module B for all respondents. Most were generally appreciative of the quality of the processes, while recognizing that there is still considerable room for improvement. However, respondents from government generally provided the most positive assessments across the respondent categories, with an average mean

assessment score of 2.11 for all 19 questions in Module B. In contrast, the average mean assessment score for all non-government respondents for the questions in Module B is 1.81, 0.30 points below the mean score for government respondents.

Among the insights gained from module B are:

- Some skepticism was expressed on the authenticity of the consultative processes – a civil society respondent noted that "Sometimes there is an attitude [by government] of 'we have already decided, but just want to be seen that we have engaged others'." Others noted that the level of consultation is issue-dependent, with some issues not opened for multi-stakeholder consultation.
- The timeliness and focus of these processes is the most negative of all of the assessments made in module B – drawn-out and unfocused policy formulation processes on agriculture and food security issues are more common in Malawi than anyone would wish.
- Most respondents feel that there is room for improving participants' conceptual understanding of the issues at hand to inform discussions in these policy processes.
- On whether a formal policy-making process is always followed in the sector, there appears to be consensus that this sometimes is done, but not always (B15). A member of a civil society organization stated that "political interference has been able to crowd out the ideal processes in some instances".
- Problems with the use of evidence in policy making are felt primarily to stem from neglect of the evidence that is or can be made readily available to guide policy decisions. The capacity in Malawi for policy analysis to be conducted is judged to be reasonably good, but that capacity is not put to effective use.

Perceptions on the quality of the institutional architecture for the policy processes

Module C focuses on the institutions and the policy implementation monitoring frameworks established to facilitate agriculture and food security policy reform processes in Malawi. The questions investigate the degree to which technical and coordination institutions are effective, policy frameworks are respected, and insights are gained through monitoring of implementation of policy reforms.

Average responses to the statements posed fall somewhat below the 'Somewhat agree' response with an average assessment score of 1.80 – so, slightly more negative assessments than were made of the statements in Module B, but not significantly so. It is apparent that most respondents are generally appreciative of progress that has been made in putting in place the institutions and the policy and implementation monitoring frameworks, while recognizing that there is still considerable room for improvement. Again, respondents from government generally provided more positive assessments, with an average mean assessment score of 2.01 for all 20 questions in Module C considered in Figure 2. In contrast, the average mean assessment score for all non-government respondents for the questions in Module C is 1.64, 0.37 points below the mean score for government respondents.

Among the insights gained from module C are:

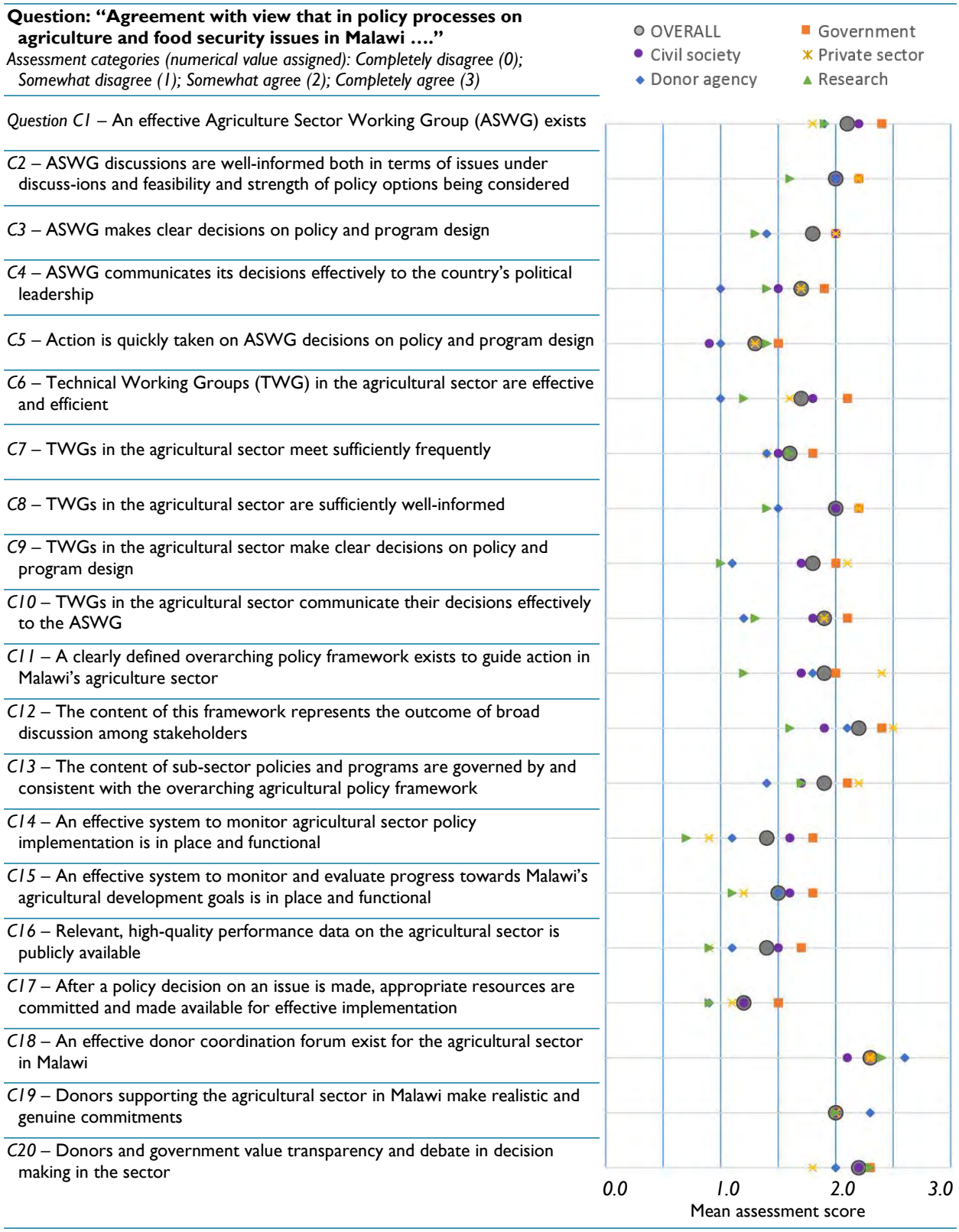
- The Agriculture Sector Working Group (ASWG), the highest-level multi-stakeholder group in the sector, is somewhat effective in fulfilling its terms of reference vis-à-vis the sector itself, but is weaker in making clear and firm decisions and communicating those decisions to the political leadership of the country in order to obtain their buy-in and support. Most stakeholders find that action is not taken on ASWG decisions in any timely manner. Building the ASWG into an effective agency for guiding public actions and investments for agricultural development in Malawi remains a work in progress.
- The Technical Working Groups (TWGs) in the agricultural sector were established to deal at a more technical level than the ASWG with policy issues and program design and implementation. All respondents feel that significant improvements to their operations could be made. A respondent from the private sector, while feeling that TWGs can be effective, has found that they are not efficient, with "time frames [towards resolution of issues] that are too long for private sector appreciation and involvement".
- Respondents generally recognize that a well-defined overarching policy framework on agriculture and food security is in place, highlighting the Agriculture Sector Wide Approach (ASWAp) and the National Agricultural Policy, which was in development at the time of the survey. Some respondents, however, disagree with the statement that sub-sectoral policies and programs are harmonized within the framework (C13), seeing some contradictions.
- A significant number of respondents felt quite strongly that relevant data of sufficient quality are not available to assess the performance of the agricultural sector, adding that there are inadequate monitoring and evaluation staff in place to ensure that monitoring systems are functional.
- The question (C17) on whether appropriate resources are committed and made available to allow for implementation of a clear policy decision by sector leaders generated the most negative responses of all the questions asked in Module C – a mean score of 1.2 with not very wide differences of opinion. Many respondents recognize a risk that, despite important reforms to the policy processes and institutions involved in those processes on agriculture and food security issues, those reforms may result in very little change if they are not accompanied with strong commitments of resources by the political leadership of Malawi to implement the broader strategies of agricultural development decided upon through these processes.

Overall quality of agricultural and food security policy processes in Malawi

The survey responses also were used to develop two aggregate indicators as indices of, first, the quality of the agriculture and food security policy processes in Malawi and, secondly, of the quality of the institutional architecture within which those processes take place. These are to provide baseline indicators for the NAPAS:Malawi project early in its work. The first index on the quality of the policy processes is derived directly from answers to survey question C21:

> *C21: How satisfied are you today with the overall quality of dialogue, coordination, cooperation, and partnership between stakeholders in the sector and government for advancing policy reforms on agriculture and food security issues in Malawi?*

Figure 2: Summary of mean assessment scores concerning perceptions on the quality of the institutional architecture of agricultural and food security policy processes in Malawi, by institutional type (Module C)



Note: The mean assessment score is the average of the four assessment levels, assigning a score of 0 to 'Completely disagree', 1 to 'Somewhat disagree', 2 to 'Somewhat agree', and 3 to 'Completely agree'.

The aggregate mean assessment score for this index is 1.8, a mixed response recognizing some positive developments and strengths in these policy processes, but also that improvements are still needed in the quality of dialogue, coordination, cooperation, and partnership between stakeholders in these processes. The spread in responses between categories is not so great – the most optimistic respondents are in government, with an aggregate score of 2.0, while the most pessimistic are in research and the private sector, both with aggregate scores of 1.6.

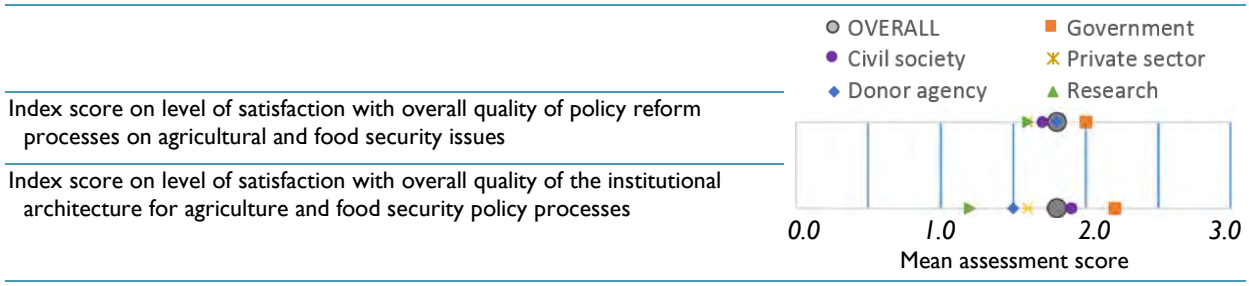
For the second index on the quality of the institutional architecture for agriculture and food security policy processes, no single all-embracing question on the quality of the

institutions was asked of the respondents. In order to generate an aggregate index on institutional quality, we use a mean aggregate score derived from four questions in module C – questions C1, C6, C11, and C14 – that ask respondents to directly assess the efficiency and effectiveness of several components of the institutional architecture for agriculture and food security policy processes in Malawi.

The aggregate mean assessment score for this index is 1.8, similar to the first index. However, the spread in responses between respondent categories for this second index is greater. As with the first index, the most optimistic respondents are in government, with an aggregate score of 2.2, while the most pessimistic are in research (1.2). In contrast to the first index, there are statistically significant differences in the aggregate assessment scores for this index across respondent categories, reflecting relatively sharp differences of opinion on the quality of the institutional architecture for agriculture and food security policy processes in Malawi.

Figure 3 provides a graphical summary of the two indices across the different respondent categories.

Figure 3: Indices of perceptions on the quality of policy reform processes and of the institutional architecture within which those processes take place in Malawi, by institutional type



Source: Analysis of survey questions C21 (first index) and C1, C6, C11, and C14 (second index) .
Note: The mean assessment score is the average of four assessment levels, assigning a score of 0 to 'Completely disagree', 1 to 'Somewhat disagree', 2 to 'Somewhat agree', and 3 to 'Completely agree'.

Conclusions

The immediate motivation for conducting the 2015 Malawi agriculture and food security policy processes baseline survey was to provide a baseline understanding of the quality of those policy processes, primarily for the NAPAS:Malawi project. The baseline indices are both 1.8, indicating that, while some positive developments have been achieved and elements of these policy processes are quite strong, considerable improvements are still needed. A similar survey will be conducted in mid-2017 to develop an end-of-project understanding of changes in the quality of these policy processes. However, the ASWG should consider replicating this survey regularly thereafter in order to better inform decisions on what sort of investments and institutional reconfigurations may be needed to ensure effective and efficient policy processes on agriculture and food security issues in the country. Better quality policy processes will lead to better outcomes in the agricultural sector and ensure that the sector's contribution to the development of the economy of Malawi and the food security of its citizens is optimal.

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