MINISTER'S SPEECH AT THE FANRPAN YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN AGRICULTURE STAKEHOLDER DIALOGUE MEETING

- The Minister of Youth, Development and Sports, Hon Enoch Chihana (MP)
- The Executive Director of the National Youth Council of Malawi (NYCOM)
- The Principal Secretary for the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security, Dr. Geoffrey Luhanga
- Directors of various Departments all the Line Ministries represented here
- The Program Manager for Lilongwe ADD
- The District Agriculture Development Officer (DADO) for Lilongwe
- The District Commissioner for the Lilongwe District Council
- The Representative of the Food Agriculture Natural Resources Policy Analysis Network (FANRPAN)
- The Representative of the United Stated Agency for International Development (USAID)
- The National Director of CISANET Mr. Tamani Nkhono Mvula
- The Vice Chancellor of the Lilongwe University of Agriculture and Natural Resources (LUANAR) Prof. Kanyama Phiri
- Representatives of the Donor Community and Development Partners gathered here
- Representatives of various NGOs, Farmer Organizations, FBOs, CBOs present here
- Representatives of various Private Sector Institutions present here
- Representatives of various Faith Groups
- Members of the Media
- Ladies and Gentlemen

Allow me to firstly express my profound gratitude at being afforded this wonderful opportunity to grace this very special meeting. I would like to join my colleague, The Minister of Youth, Sports and Culture in thanking the Civil Society Agriculture Network (CISANET) for organizing this very important dialogue meeting. I would like to the Food, Agriculture and Natural Resources Policy Analysis Network (FANRPAN) for providing the resources that have made this dialogue meeting possible.

As a way of background, we all should be aware that our country’s economy is largely driven by the Agriculture Sector. This is evidenced by the substantial contributions it makes towards the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), Foreign Exchange Earnings as well as Employment being the largest employer of the Country's Labour Force. My Ministry is actively involved in various activities to ensure that the Country’s aspirations as contained in the 9 priorities within priorities of the Malawi Growth and Development Strategy (MGDS) II are achieved. One of the priority areas out of the nine in the MGDS II is on Child Development, Youth Development and Empowerment. This is because children and youth constitute a significant proportion of the population of Malawi which makes it imperative therefore that substantive investments are geared towards promoting the same. In the medium term, it is expected that there will be equitable access to quality child development services; and increased absorption
of skills, technology and innovations by the youth. The specific strategies to be implemented include those seeking to promote early childhood development and pre-primary education; protecting children against abuse; eliminating harmful cultural practices; improving the youth's technical, vocational, entrepreneurial and life skills; and improving the youth’s access to credit facilities for entrepreneurship. It is the latter two components that are of especial importance as the focus of our gathering today.

The Director of Ceremonies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to point out that notable strides have been made in the sub-theme of Youth Development and Empowerment. In particular, I would like to draw your attention to the increased access to capital through the establishment of the Youth Enterprise Development Fund. Expansion of the University intakes over the recent past as well as the construction of more secondary school boarding facilities for girls are also some of the commendable boosts that have largely improved the human resource capacity of the youth. There have also been massive improvements in the access to sexual and reproductive health, HIV & AIDS services by the youth coupled with the scaling up of establishing information centres. These milestones have however been rather too generic and not necessarily biased towards the agriculture sector in spite of it being the major mainstay of the country’s economy as explained earlier as well as being the largest sector that absorbs most of the labour in the country.

The Director of Ceremonies, Ladies and Gentlemen

The point I am trying to underscore is that there is need for deliberate efforts to win over the hearts of these uncaptured highly productive group for better returns in agricultural development. It is almost common knowledge that the prevalent perception out there amongst the youth is that agriculture is a “dirty” profession which is not very appealing, rewarding, fulfilling, lucrative and what not. The traditionalist and primitive agronomic practices that still predominantly characterize smallholder agriculture do little to dispel such myths but rather serve to further perpetrate and enforce such negative stereotypes. The million dollar question therefore is “how do we win over the youth and garner their support to be involved in the sector where it is very apparent they under-play when they really shouldn’t?” Is there a way through which we can actually captivate the interest of the youth to find this inevitably crucial sector appetizing? I will leave that to the plenary discussion that is scheduled to take place later on in due course. But suffice to say, trying to get the youth involved in agriculture is not an altogether hopeless cause which is impossible to be realized. It is obvious that a mindset change is required to necessitate this desired shift. There might be a need to repackage, reconstitute, and partially overhaul education systems but also to challenge the prevalent thinking, knowledge; attitudes and practices related to agriculture in general if indeed such an endeavor is to pay off the anticipated dividends.
The Director of Ceremonies, Ladies and Gentlemen

We might all appreciate that times are drastically changing at an exponential rate and the need to stay relevant is ever greater than before. With technologies that have been way overtaken by history such as hand hoes in such a highly mechanized world which some postulate to be in the space age or even post-modern era, it is undoubtedly expected that the youth would be the least enthused to undertake such menial enterprises characterized by massive drudgery. This is a generation of young people that are so abreast with the ever evolving technologies and feel the urge and need keep up and fit in so if our agriculture remains to be pre-historic type, no wonder they will ask themselves, “what’s in it for us in this seemingly dull sector?”. A sector that to them seems to be very foreign and repulsive to them, much more suited to as a last resort to people who have outlived their usefulness in the land like the “retired” or the irrelevant cadres of the populace who are bored and have really run out of options in life. But is agriculture really such a dishonorable field? Is it truly a profession for the “rejects” of society. This could not be further from the truth and the fact that we have been and will still continue to be agrarian until the foreseeable future at least proves that it is an indispensable discipline in this Motherland. It is highly needful but should not really be perceived as a necessary evil that we have no choice but to just live with and go with the motions as it were. There are genuinely a lot of dividends that can be realized from agriculture and it has the potential to fully live up to its high standing as the biggest sector to prove to be as exciting and exhilarating as it possibly can be.

The Director of Ceremonies, Ladies and Gentlemen

I would like to clearly state that my humble duty this morning is not really to identify the panacea to the problem of the minimal participation and the limited representation of the youth in the Agriculture Sector as I will leave that to the reliable expert opinion of all you technocrats gathered here. We also have the benefit of hearing from the very horses’ mouths with a lot of youth represented here so let me not preempt the upcoming discussion. My noble duty was just to tease out ideas and get us thinking along the lines of the objectives of the meeting already spelled out by the Director or Ceremonies. So without much ado, the Director of Ceremonies, Ladies and Gentlemen, allow me to rest my case here as I wish you all very lively, healthy, interactive, engaging and fruitful discussions.

Allow me therefore at this juncture, on behalf of the Malawi Government to pay tribute to our Cooperating Partners, the USAID for funding this Dialogue Meeting through FANRPAN. A special vote of thanks is also extended to FANRPAN itself for choosing to work with Malawi and CISANET in particular as one of its Node Hosting Institutions.

I THANK YOU ALL FOR YOUR ATTENTION!!!