Limited financial resources and poor infrastructure among barriers to development of African agri-food industries

What is this research about?
The majority of the countries in the Sub-Saharan region of Africa are primarily agriculture-based, and the agricultural industry is typically the largest employer and most important sector of the national economy. Small-scale farmers and small business owners in related areas such as food processing are faced with numerous obstacles to economic growth and long-term sustainability. Identifying these challenges is the first step in supporting agricultural and economic development in African countries. Malawi is an extremely poor, small, land-locked country in southeast Africa with a highly rural population almost entirely dependent on agriculture. The main crops in Malawi are tobacco (especially for export to more developed countries), sugarcane, and tea, and the processing of these crops is the basis for important local industries.

What did the researchers do?
On-site interviews were carried out in Malawi with representatives from the Farmers’ Union of Malawi, leaders of farming cooperatives (such as the Malawi Organic Growers Association, the Bvumbwe Dairy Farmers Cooperative Society, and the Mzuru Coffee Planters Cooperative Union), and owners of small-scale food processing businesses. Interviewees were asked about the challenges facing farmers, agricultural cooperatives, and food processors in Malawi. Food processing facilities were toured to examine the state of the equipment, facilities, and food processing methods. Finally, a discussion-based workshop was held to identify additional challenges to development in the agri-food industry.

What you need to know:
Sub-Saharan African countries such as Malawi face a wide variety of challenges to economic development of their agri-food industries. The most serious obstacles include a lack of money to pay for fertilizer and electricity, poorly maintained transportation and food storage infrastructure, and an undereducated workforce.

Keywords:
Sub-Saharan Africa, economic development, agriculture, food processing, barriers
More than forty distinct challenges were identified and then sorted into twelve basic groups according to their root causes. The most important barrier was found to be a lack of financial resources as a result of reliance on chemical fertilizers and high costs for fuel and electricity. A lack of infrastructure in the form of inconsistent electricity supply, badly maintained roads and railways, and low quality food storage facilities was also a major challenge. Many food processing businesses lacked the technology and equipment needed to remain competitive. A lack of education and training, both for food processing workers and farmers, was also recognized as a problem for the agri-food industry.

Sub-Saharan African governments can use this research to identify and properly manage the most serious barriers to economic development of the agricultural and food processing industries in their countries.

International aid organizations can use this research to better understand how to support economic development in the agri-food industry and address challenges facing farmers and food processors.