



# Averting 'New Variant Famine'

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## Food security in Malawi

Food insecurity in Malawi is not new. A severe famine affected the country in 1949 and although there were few similar crises in subsequent decades, rural livelihoods have been declining since the 1970s. Staple food production was adequate in the 1980s and early 1990s, but, like other southern African countries, Malawi experienced a serious harvest shortfall in 1992. Domestic food supplies only met 70-90% of national need for the remainder of the decade. In 2002 a food crisis led to hundreds, maybe thousands, of hunger-related deaths – more than any famine in living memory. By February 2002, nearly a third of the population

depended on food aid. Since 2002, food crises have been a recurrent, although not annual, phenomenon.

The causes of Malawi's recent food crises are several. It is noteworthy that the 'production shock' in 2002 was less severe than during the 1991/2 drought. More deaths occurred, because vulnerability was greater, which has been blamed on declining soil fertility, reduced access to agricultural inputs, deepening poverty, erosion of social capital and, interacting with these factors, AIDS. There was not simply a decline in agricultural production but also (arguably more importantly) a decline in purchasing power. Particularly in the south,

low income security may be as important as low maize productivity. Macro-level decisions such as the sale of the strategic grain reserve also played a part. Both production and purchasing power were diminished due to AIDS, as people needed to spend time and resources on medicines and funerals, labour was lost, and the dependency ratio increased. Unlike in 1949, rural people had little recourse to other sources of income such as migrant labour. Although some households had members working in town, most resorted to casual labour (*ganyu*), which tends to render households more impoverished by deflecting their attention from their own land.

## Livelihoods in Malawi

### Producing food

In terms of rural livelihoods, attention tends to focus on agriculture. 78.6% of people over 10 are categorised as subsistence farmers, rising to 90.2% among girls and women. 80% of Malawi-



Irrigated maize farming

ans are said to depend on agriculture for food provi-

sion, although only 15-30% grow enough to last all year, and the poorer households seldom produce enough to last more than a month or two.

Landlessness is uncommon in Malawi, but the aver-

age landholding of 2.8ha is uneconomic for commercial farming and those with less than 0.7ha cannot fulfil their subsistence needs. Struggles over land are intense, especially in the south. Livestock ownership is low.

### Key Points:

- Malawi has experienced several food crises, but the worst was in 2002
- Vulnerability has increased, particularly since the early 1990s
- Most Malawians engage in agriculture, but only 30% of households meet their own food needs
- Opportunities to access food through income generation are limited, but include plantation work and trading
- Recent policy responses have focused on increasing production by smallholders through the use of input subsidies



## Averting 'New Variant Famine'

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### Accessing food

While labour migration to South Africa diminished in the 1970s, internal migration to tea, coffee and



Tea estate, Thyolo District

tobacco estates continues, but often pays below the legal minimum wage. Temporary migration to urban areas also takes place, and in the south there is significant cross-border trade with Mozambique.

Only 7.5% of Malawi's population report their main occupation to be tobacco producers. Only 7.5% of Malawi's population report their main occupation to be tobacco producers, but 61% of households have a member skilled in some income

generating activity, and most of Malawi's estimated 747,000 micro and small enterprises are found in rural areas. For many rural poor, the only way of securing income to buy food is to engage in *ganyu*, a practice that has increased in recent years.

Sharing of resources between households is also diminishing, as social capital declines due to AIDS.

### Policy responses

Food security is highly politicised in Malawi, as state legitimacy depends on maize availability. Nonetheless, because food aid is provided by donors, they strongly influence policy. Strategies, and especially levels of investment in smallholder farming, have fluctuated.

Until the late 1970s, export-oriented plantation agriculture was prioritised. As commodity prices fell, the sector declined, and by the 1990s smallholders were encouraged to grow burley tobacco and hybrid maize. When President Muluzi came to power, he began to invest in peasant farming.

However, the World Bank insisted the agricultural marketing board, ADMARC, was downsized and the fertiliser subsidy removed. The relatively prosperous burley tobacco producers benefited, but the poor majority did not. Without subsidised fertiliser, the poor could not generate adequate yields, and instead sold their labour to those who could afford fertiliser. Maize was displaced in favour of cash crops, which the World Bank considered a preferable route to food security. Removal of price controls, meant to boost demand for agricultural products, left the poorer households (which

depend more on purchased food) worse off.

In 1998 the Starter Pack scheme provided farmers with free seed and fertiliser. This increased maize production by 27%, but violated World Bank conditionality. It has since been scaled down to a Targeted Input Programme aimed at the most vulnerable. Other initiatives include land reform, seen as a way of increasing security of tenure and investment in land. The importance of international trade agreements is recognised, and new social protection measures may offer the poorest greater security of access to food.

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**Project website:** [www.brunel.ac.uk/about/acad/sse/chg/projects/nvf](http://www.brunel.ac.uk/about/acad/sse/chg/projects/nvf)

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