



## Southern Africa on the Brink of Famine?

Recovery from food crisis through resilient, accountable and gender-responsive agriculture

Malawi Policy Brief, September 2020



## 1. INTRODUCTION

The spread of COVID-19 throughout Southern Africa in general and Malawi in particular will worsen already dire conditions of food insecurity and malnutrition. The effects of climate change - persistent drought, flooding and pests – compounded by social and economic challenges, poverty, and gaps in social accountability, have all contributed to an impending food crisis in the region and Malawi has not been spared. As of July to September 2020, close to 1.69 million people in Malawi are estimated to be food insecure representing 10 percent of the population and a 59 percent increase from 2017 (1.69 million people) and a jump of 10 percent from just a year ago (1.2 million people) (OCHA, 2020).

The disruptions resulting from COVID-19 will significantly increase food and nutrition insecurity, worsen the already stressed and ill-equipped health services in the country, undermine the capacity of people to work and earn a living, and further threaten political and social stability (FAO-WFP 2020). COVID-19 restrictions have reduced food access through limiting the movement of persons and commodities, as well as cross-border and national business transactions, which the majority of people depend on for their livelihoods.

Hunger will become more apparent among urban dwellers, reliant on the market for their food needs, as well as rural households that depend on own production, remittances, tourism, and school feeding programs. Signs of urban hunger are already obvious, with nearly 2 million in the country people reported to be struggling to access food. The numbers of people expected to be hungry will significantly increase between October 2020 to March 2021, when most smallholder farming families will have exhausted their own food stocks, many earlier than planned (OCHA, 2020).

Despite higher than usual maize harvests this year, existing ‘stressed’ and ‘crisis’ levels of food insecurity are expected to persist or worsen over the coming months. From October 2020 to March 2021 around 2.62 million (15 percent of the population) are projected to be food insecure this will represent a jump of 72 percent from 2019 ( 1.9 million people around the same time) (OCHA, 2020).

This policy brief, presented by ActionAid International (AAI) and Eastern and Southern Africa Small-Scale Farmers’ Forum (ESAFF) – through the Partnership for Social Accountability (PSA) Alliance – argues that COVID-19 has exposed the existing systemic weaknesses of regional and national policies meant to develop resilient food security in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries including Malawi.

The design and implementation of such policies has been insufficiently grounded in social accountability and gender-responsiveness, therefore falling short of adequately addressing five main factors affecting food insecurity:

- a. reliance on imports for agricultural production and food supply chains;
- b. vulnerabilities in household purchasing power;
- c. sustainability and gender-responsiveness of social protection systems;
- d. social accountability in agricultural policy; and e. resilience to climate shocks, disasters and conflict.

Through urgently implementing short-term measures and, in the long-term, transforming the approach to rural and agricultural development towards improved resilience, accountability and gender-

responsiveness, policy makers in countries like Malawi at local and national levels can prevent an impending, but not inevitable, food crisis – or worse.

### **1.1 Reliance on imports for agricultural production and food supply chains Food availability is about the physical existence of food**

In Malawi, availability of food is influenced by food production, commercial imports; market factors including prices; food exports; and domestic food stocks. Food imports and exports, and therefore their cost, are influenced by the efficiency (or lack) of food supply chain systems, including transportation.

The heavy reliance on commercial imports especially on farm inputs and food aid by Malawi has placed much of the country at significant risk of exposure to global economic shocks, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The travel and transportation restrictions imposed to curb the spread of COVID-19 have slowed imports (both commercially sourced inputs and food aid) into the country, thereby reducing food availability as well as increasing prices of food in the market.

Similarly, exports, mainly agricultural products (including tobacco and tea) are projected at about 2 percent of GDP lower than pre-pandemic expectations in 2020. This is despite solid crop production owing to good weather due to reduced global demand, border closures, and partial closure of Malawi's commodities trading markets (IMF, 2020). While the immediate impact of export restrictions is the loss of export revenue, the long-term impact of COVID-19 will only be felt by the agricultural sector in the next season, in the form of increased costs.

Malawi Government through its National Response COVID Plan is implementing a series of interventions and these include increasing health sector outlays related to containing and managing COVID-19; increasing social assistance spending under the social cash transfer program to help most vulnerable households mitigate the economic impact of the virus; and stocking of maize in grain reserves through ADMARC (IMF, 2020). Programs meant to improve assets rehabilitation, resilience building and risk management have also been scaled up.

### **1.2 Vulnerabilities in household purchasing power is directly linked to access to food.**

Access is ensured when households, whether urban or rural, have enough resources to obtain food in sufficient quantity, quality and diversity for a nutritious diet. An increase in food prices, usually in response to shortages due to reduced availability, has a negative impact on household purchasing power. The loss of income as a result of unemployment or restricted market access, particularly for informal traders and smallholder farmers – as often seen during disasters such as COVID-19 – reduces a household's purchasing power and therefore its ability to access adequate food.

Regular remittances from urban to rural areas, as well as uninterrupted food transfers from rural to urban areas, are essential to ensuring the country's food availability, access and security. The closure of travel and borders in an effort to stop the spread of COVID-19 has undermined the earning capacities of families that rely on formal employment; those that rely on migrant work and the informal sector; as well as those that rely on remittances. In some instances, higher food prices due to reduced imports and a fall in prices of exported commodities such as tobacco have had an impact on the purchasing power of households.

**“The hunger has hit us worse this year because we have had four years of consecutive disasters that have reduced the yield every growing season...We don't have money to buy goods...COVID-**

**19 has led to job losses of many of the people. It's a scary situation. We do not know what will happen next month, or even from now till the next growing season... Government is saying they are relying on NGOs to support them with the food packages, and most NGOs are not operating in the area now. Where should we go? Who will assist us now?" Alice Kapuchi – smallholder farmer in Malawi; Programme Coordinator of Kuchene Women's Forum; member of Coalition of Women Farmers.**

Over 10 percent of the country's rural population, based on data available, are thought to be struggling to access food, either due to challenges in availability of foods or limited purchasing power induced by price hikes (OCHA, 2020). Many poor households in the country's four main cities are expected to be earning little or no income, contributing to 'crisis' level acute food insecurity (FEWS.NET 2020). Risks to food security associated with the COVID-19 pandemic include potential domestic food supply chain disruptions arising from market closures, movement restrictions, and social distancing. As the crisis unfolds, potential risks in the agriculture value chain may include dysfunctional food markets and supply chains and in-country logistics and market disruptions have affected the flow of goods (World Bank 2020)

The ability of farmers to sufficiently invest in high-cost inputs – in particular, hybrid seeds and synthetic fertilizers – for the main agricultural season, due to begin in October 2020, has been compromised by loss of their secondary incomes, as well as increased costs due to restrictions on trade. In response, the Government with support from development partners has urgently intervened to provide cash-based transfers. Development of innovative arrangements can also ensure continuity of smallholder production while access to markets is disrupted, by harnessing locally-available resources and goods. Supply chain adjustments in the urban-rural continuum in food processing, distribution and marketing can assist in bringing a consistent and organized supply of local products to local and domestic markets (FAO 2020a).

While such short-term measures are essential to prevent immediate starvation, COVID-19 has exposed vulnerabilities in the current food system in the country, in particular, reliance by smallholder farmers on high cost inputs, which demands long-term transformation towards more resilient and sustainable approaches to rural and agricultural development.

### **1.3 Sustainability and gender responsiveness of social protection systems**

The dire reality is that Malawi's health and other public infrastructure to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic is way less resourced than elsewhere in the world. Health remains the third spending priority for the Government of Malawi (9.4% of the national budget), but allocations continue to fall short of national and international targets (UNICEF 2020). Public health systems and facilities in the country are severely underfunded resulting in a shortage of equipment, personnel and medicines that undermines their ability to meet the demand for basic health services. Malawi has about 300 doctors, 22,000 hospital beds (only 25 ICU beds), and 37 ventilators, far below the East African average (World Bank, 2020).

Italy, which struggled to contain COVID-19, has an annual health expenditure of 3,620 USD per capita, versus **Malawi only at USD 39.8 year (UNICEF 2020) one of the lowest globally**. While the effects of COVID-19 on public health are yet to be fully quantified, it is already clear that most of the world's public health systems – underfunded for a generation – are likely to be overwhelmed, with low income countries like Malawi disproportionately affected (ActionAid 2020; FAO-WFP 2020).

Health systems and food security in the country have already been affected by previous and ongoing health emergencies, including malaria outbreaks; measles and polio in the country. While the country has made progress to reduce the HIV epidemic at national and local levels with close achievements of reaching UNAIDS targets of 90-90-90, the country's prevalence remains the highest in the world (9.2 percent of the adult population lives with HIV). In 2018, an estimated one million Malawians were living with HIV and 13,000 Malawians died from AIDS-related illnesses (Avert, 2019). Additionally, the prevalence of malnutrition due to food insecurity further diminishes the capacity of people's immune systems to fight off and survive diseases, including COVID-19 (SADC 2018).

Women carry the greatest burden and face the most risk in this crisis, as they do in others. Much of the responsibility of caring for the sick and for children home from school has fallen on women. Women also predominate in low-paid frontline jobs as nurses and care workers, facing the highest risks of exposure (ActionAid 2020). Additionally, women smallholder farmers in Malawi contribute towards more than 70% of total food production, but with fewer economic resources than men (UN Women, 2020). Female-managed plots are, on average, 12 percent smaller than those of their male counterparts and 25 percent less productive as a result of differing levels of knowledge and access to inputs for improving farming efficiency. Thus, women's increased unpaid care responsibilities and exposure risk to COVID-19 will have knock-on implications for household income, food production, child nutrition, and undoubtedly, food security.

Since the announcement of COVID-19 restrictions in Malawi, there has been a corresponding rise in reported cases of gender-based violence (GBV). According to Malawi Government, reports of GBV have increased by 35 percent since the same time last year (UN Women 2020). Additionally, women have less frequently sought out sexual and reproductive health (SRH) and GBV services during the pandemic. When safe delivery, neonatal, and family planning services become inaccessible, women's lives are put at even greater risk.

Malawi's response to the pandemic and its ability to protect the vulnerable is constrained by limited fiscal space, high overall risk of debt distress, and limited capacity. As such, it has limited resources to support the expansion of health services, expand cash transfers, and support affected industries through tax breaks or direct support, and will need to rely on concessional and grant resources for much of the response (World Bank 2020). Thus, critical sectors, such as social protection and social safety nets are predicted to receive diminished support as governments divert resources to the unbudgeted COVID-19 health emergency response (FAO-WFP, 2020).

Current levels of debt servicing – even before the massive borrowing necessitated by COVID-19 – has also had an impact on the ability of countries to invest in public services. Countries that spend more than 12% of their national budgets on debt servicing are invariably forced to cut spending on public services. In 2019, a number of Southern African countries were already far beyond this mark, including: Malawi (20.28%) (ActionAid 2020). The COVID-19 crisis is expected to create economic pressure and worsen the debt vulnerability of the country as revenues are likely to be insufficient to service the debts and more borrowing will be required (IMF, 2020). Malawi is at high overall risk of debt distress, which will be further tested with the crisis. The April 2020 debt sustainability analysis shows that Malawi is at a high overall risk of public debt distress, due to the increased incurrence of high-cost domestic debt (World Bank, 2020).

The COVID-19 crisis has demonstrated the importance of consistent and sufficient public investment and accountable governance of health services, domestic food security, and social protection systems. Long-

term investment in social safety mechanisms – beyond short-term humanitarian assistance – is required, including the expansion of universal social protection, and universal cash and food transfers that reduce women and girls’ vulnerability.

Rather than cutting investment in social services, governments should seek to expand domestic sources of revenue through progressive tax reforms and expansionary macro-economic policies. Malawi alongside SADC member states should join the pan-African call for sustained debt cancellation and suspension of loan repayments in the wake of COVID-19; and the renegotiation of longer-term debt obligations to free up funds to invest in health, climate-transition and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Health systems should be strengthened to ensure they are resilient, even within crises, and can sustainably provide relevant, affordable and quality services (ActionAid 2020).

Social accountability in agricultural policy according to the African Union Commission 2020 Biennial Report on the Implementation of the 2014 Malabo Declaration on Accelerated Agricultural Growth and Transformation for Shared Prosperity and Improved Livelihoods, Malawi was not on track to meeting many of the seven Malabo Declaration commitments<sup>3</sup> (AU 2020). Although the country allocated 8.4% which is relatively higher compared to other countries on the continent, this allocation was lower than what Malawi has consistently allocated in the previous years. According to the Joint Sector Review report for 2019, the sector has experienced a declining trend in budgetary allocation since 2015/16 financial year partly due to the reduction in development budget support from development partners. The low budget allocations are considered to significantly contribute to the country failing to meet the expected agricultural growth target of the sector (minimum of 6% annually). The JSR reports also show that a significant portion of public expenditure on agriculture was skewed towards two intervention areas (farm input subsidy and maize purchases) as compared to other agricultural policy areas. For example, in 2019 the farm input subsidy program was allocated more than 30% of the public budget for the sector at the expense of other key sector priorities (AU, 2020).

Overall, FISPs have become largely top-down ineffective, social transfer schemes that create dependency, and enable significant loss of public funds through elite capture, leakage and diversion (vouchers and/or fertilizers have been reported stolen before reaching the intended beneficiary group). Aside from providing a partial economic safety net, the subsidies have been found to not directly benefit the poor and most vulnerable, who are mostly women. Instead the FISPs have led smallholder farmers to direct their scarce resources towards hybrid maize production, effectively reducing the diversity of food available as well as undermining resilience of rural communities to disasters (ACB 2016).

As documented in a 2019 PSA Alliance policy brief, across four Southern African countries (Malawi, Mozambique, Tanzania, Zambia), the FISPs have faced multiple accountability issues. Smallholder farmers – particularly women – are excluded in the design, implementation and monitoring of agricultural programmes, resulting in a lack of agricultural budget and extension services directed towards farmer support in local (open-pollinated varieties - OPV) seed production, organic farming and agro-ecology. Irregularities, allegations of corruption and misuse of public funds in relation to FISPs have been widely reported. In all four countries, there were varying levels of concern with performance management of FISPs. All found that FISPs were not delivered as planned and budgeted. Smallholder communities reported that they did not have access to key services such as rural extension officers, and that the costs of accessing subsidized hybrid seeds and chemical fertilizers through FISP were too expensive, their quality unreliable, and the seeds provided often failed under harsh weather conditions (PSA 2019).

**“Smallholder women farmers should be empowered to control seeds; and have the power to decide what to grow and what not to grow. We must be able to produce the seed, share the seed and enjoy its benefits.” Ellen Matupi – smallholder farmer in Malawi, president of Coalition of Women Farmers**

Rather than continuing to invest in policies that undermine the resilience of rural communities to withstand climate-induced shocks and disasters (including pandemics), COVID-19 has highlighted the need for a drastic shift in agricultural support in the country. Public investment should instead be channeled towards services that assist the producers of food – smallholder farmers (particularly women) – to adapt in the face of climate change, such as extension services which promote agro-ecology and use of local (OPV) seeds, and are gender-responsive and farmer-led (ACB 2018).

Malawi is globally among the countries most vulnerable to climate. The climate-induced shocks and hazards experienced in Malawi in recent years – especially seen with the 2019 Cyclones Idai – have had significant humanitarian impact. The cyclone struck southern Malawi in March and resulted in severe flooding affecting over a million people—taking lives, ruining crops, and destroying homes, hospitals, schools, and other critical infrastructure. (IMF Country Report, December 2019). Consequently, even prior to COVID-19, prices of basic food stuffs were expected to rise sharply, thereby further limiting access to food for poor, particularly urban, households (SADC 2020).

Effective short- and long- term responses to building resilience in the region’s food systems must address the factors which cause vulnerability to shocks and stresses. Vulnerability is caused by (i) social exclusion, involving the denial of people’s rights on the basis of gender, class, ethnicity, religion, race, and limitations on their participation in economic, social and political life; (ii) limited access to appropriate basic services, such as education, healthcare, information, finance, early warning services, evacuation, fair and stable markets and entitlements such as social protection; and (iii) lack of assets, such as livestock or land, and limited economic opportunities to adopt sustainable and diversified livelihoods (ActionAid 2016).

In the short-term, women must have equal representation in all COVID-19 response planning and decision-making; and efforts to address the socioeconomic impact of COVID-19 must target women and girls. To build long-term resilience to recover from this and future crises, Malawi must ensure all policies, including those related to Disaster Preparedness and Response Mechanism, promote and build locally-owned and women-led institutions, and ensure participation in policy formulation and implementation by all actors. Ultimately, upholding of social accountability through sound public resource management, inclusive and gender-responsive decision-making, and effective government oversight creates better economic conditions from which individuals and communities can draw livelihoods.

## **2. RECOMMENDATIONS TOWARDS BUILDING RESILIENT, ACCOUNTABLE AND GENDER-RESPONSIVE FOOD SYSTEMS IN SADC**

Effective and long-lasting responses to the impacts of climate change and other disasters - as made obvious by the COVID-19 crisis – call for a transformation in the current approach to rural and agricultural development in Malawi. As presented in this policy brief, there is need to ensure robust and purposeful regional and national investment towards building resilience – through supporting agro-ecological approaches, ensuring social accountability, and strengthening gender-responsive public services. Such

initiatives will, in the long-term, build urban and rural systems that can support the health, wellbeing and social protection of their people, preventing food crises, even in the face of disaster.

The major recommendations of this policy brief are to accelerate:

Climate proofing of agriculture and ensure the resilience of food systems in Malawi by investing in sustainable agriculture and rural development, with an emphasis on agro-ecological initiatives, as anchors for improved food availability and household purchasing power. This investment should include, but not be limited to:

1.1 Go beyond fulfilling the Malabo Declaration commitments. *Malawi Government has consistently exceeded the Comprehensive African Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP) recommendation of allocating at least 10% of the national budget towards the agriculture although these has not translated into growth of the sector. Malawi needs to strengthen investments that would reverse the declining growth in the agriculture GDP; and provide for all budgets required to enhance resilience to climate related risks in the agriculture sector;*

1.2 Align national investments in agriculture with farmers' own priorities and focus on financing diversified smallholder support programs such as: extension services, research, climate change adaptation and financing, input support (including development of local – OPV – seed) and improve farmers' access to finance and market.

1.3 Support innovative agricultural research and development as well as the implementation of alternatives to hybrid seeds and chemically intensive agriculture such as: (i) integrated pest management (ii) use of community-based seed systems (iii) improvement of soil fertility through increasing soil organic matter, and (iv) diversification of farmer support programmes and the redirection of funds towards the adoption of agro-ecological practices.

1.4 Strengthen or establish smallholder farmer and CSO-inclusive food and nutrition councils at district and sub-district levels to guide, monitor and oversee food and nutrition strategies, plans, programmes and budgets.

1.5 Establish strong, operational and effective Joint Agriculture Sector Review (JASR) mechanisms from villages to wards, districts to national to inform plans and activities in the sector towards reclaiming women-led resilient and sustainable agriculture, as outlined in the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP) Mutual Accountability Framework.

1.6 Set up independent multi-stakeholder reviews of farm subsidies to help diversify agricultural support away from hybrid seed and chemically-intensive agriculture towards providing support for adopting agroecology at scale.

1.7 Strengthen and reorient rural extension services towards the needs of rural women, girls, youth, the most vulnerable and those living with disabilities or HIV/AIDS.

1.8 Conduct performance audits of agricultural extension services to assess their efficiency and effectiveness in capacitating smallholder farmers, particularly women, to sustainably contribute to the realization of food security goals in the region.



1.9 Conduct forensic audits of all farmer support programmes, with a focus on FISPs, with the aim of identifying and addressing the systemic internal control weaknesses that allow for misuse of funds.

1.10 Build human and physical capacities by ensuring effective land reform, with a focus on benefiting women smallholder farmers;

1.11 Develop a dynamic rural agriculture sector through supporting the development of robust rural non-farm enterprise systems, as well as providing adequate rural infrastructure including roads, energy, water, and information and communication technology (ICT). This should emphasize support for the development of agro-processing in rural areas, closest to where products are produced (as indicated in the National Agriculture Investment Plan 2018 -2022).

2. Decentralization of power to local communities, with a focus on women-led accountability mechanisms, for their full participation in the formulation and implementation of policies and programs that affect them, as well as improving collaborative competences through capacity strengthening of rural institutions.

3. Expansion of sustained investment into local social services and support, including social safety nets, universal cash and food transfers, effective stakeholder participation (inclusiveness) and public social infrastructure such as health and education facilities, and extension services. Further domestic sources of revenue should be opened up through progressive tax reforms and expansionary macro-economic policies.

4. Sustained debt cancellation and suspension of loan repayments for Malawi in the wake of COVID-19; and the renegotiation of longer-term debt obligations to free up funds to invest in health, climate resilience and development programs.

5. Additionally, the strategic grain reserves should be well managed to ensure national food security, particularly in times of crisis.

6. Operationalization of national and regional strategies, in a manner which ensures resilient, gender-responsive, and accountable agricultural and rural development, in particular.

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