

# Examining Perceptions of Food Assistance on Household Food Security and Resilience in Malawi

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Malawi is extremely vulnerable to shocks and recurrent food crises (Barrett & Headey 2014). Malawi also suffers from persistently high levels of undernutrition (DHS 2016). Humanitarian aid has played an important role in alleviating hunger during emergencies, such as those in 2015-16 and 2016-17. However, the Government of Malawi and Development partners recognize that emergency responses are not a sustainable solution. This qualitative study examines the characteristics of resilient households and perceived effects of programs to improve food security and resilience from the perspective of the beneficiaries and communities they serve.

## 1 BACKGROUND

In January 2015, a national disaster was declared after floods left 2.8 million people in need of relief. As the aid response was underway, El Niño-related droughts devastated harvests. Another national disaster was declared in April 2016, with 6.5 million people requiring aid – prompting the largest humanitarian response in Malawi’s history. Humanitarian organizations and government collaborated to provide support during the crisis. This study qualitatively assessed the emergency response by exploring community perspectives on resilience and aid support. The study focused along two lines of inquiry:

1. Understanding which households were perceived to be most resilient to shocks, and how humanitarian interventions may have affected resilience.
2. Exploring individual and community perspectives on which interventions were most successful in supporting resilience, as well as the sustainability of these efforts.

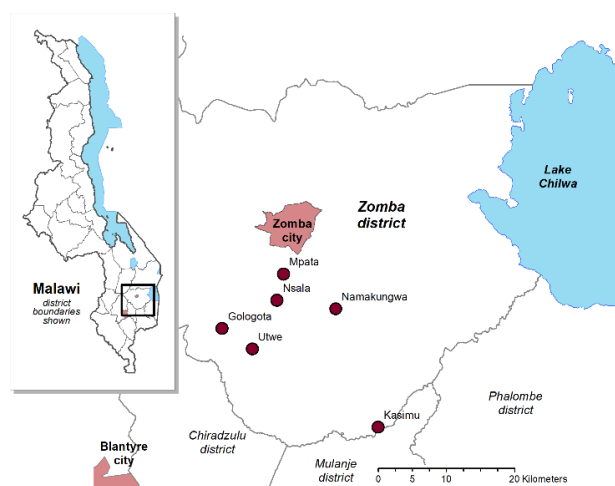
This study provides qualitative insights into socially-constructed beliefs, experiences and perceived impacts of programmatic approaches to improve food security and resilience. This assessment is appropriate given a review highlighting the potential for improvement of the Food Insecurity Response Plan (FIRP) (IFPRI 2017). It can also serve to inform the implementation of the GoM’s 2016 National Resilience Plan.

## 2 METHODOLOGY

This research was nested within an evaluation of the Nutrition Embedded Evaluation Program (NEEP), a nutrition-sensitive agricultural intervention implemented by

Save the Children. The broader research project collected quantitative data over four surveys of 1,199 households as well as qualitative data in Zomba District between 2015 and 2018 (see Gelli et al., 2017). Qualitative data collection for this study was conducted in early 2018. Figure 1 depicts the area of study for qualitative data collection.

**Figure 1. Map of the study area.**



Six communities were purposively selected in this study - all small, rural villages reliant on subsistence agriculture. The research team conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews (IDIs) with male, female, and adolescent household members. This approach captured both individual and household strategies for coping with seasonal food insecurity and allowed for examination of intra-household dynamics. In addition, traditional leaders were interviewed in each village to better understand the impact of community politics and norms on food security and resilience. In total, the research team conducted 45 IDIs and 6 key informant interviews.

At the time of data collection, multiple programs addressing resilience and food security operated in the study area: The Food Insecurity Response Plan (FIRP), the Social Cash Transfer Program (SCTP), the Farm Input Subsidy Program (FISP), the Malawi Social Action Fund (MASAF)’s cash-for-work program, WFP’s Food Assistance for Assets (FFA) Program, as well as the NEEP program.

### 3 RESULTS

#### 3.1 Locally interpreted definitions and characteristics of resilience

In our interviews, respondents defined access to income generation activities as the most effective means to bounce back from shocks. Most understood resilience in a tangible, concrete way: the ability to maintain wellbeing through access to food stocks as well as capital. During the period of our research, more than 60 percent of respondents in this study did not consider their household to have been resilient over the past agricultural year.

*“It’s only a few households that are resilient. These are the few that are able to pay back a debt when you loan them something” (Village Chief, male, Village 2).*

Characteristics respondents associated with resilience were: possession of a small business, sufficient wealth to contract *ganyu* (seasonal, contracted off-farm agricultural labor), larger plot ownership, and the use of agricultural diversification strategies such as cultivating both uplands and wetlands, or household crop production combined with animal husbandry. Respondents emphasized a diversified approach to livelihoods - as dependence on one means of survival was seen as precarious.

##### **Characteristics respondents associated with resilience:**

- Possession of a small business
- Larger plot ownership
- Agricultural diversification
- Crop production combined with animal husbandry
- *Ganyu*
- Acquiring loans
- Membership in social networks

Social capital, in the form of family support, group membership, and sharing within the community was also considered important to bolstering resilience. Social networks provided relational channels through which resources could be accessed.

All households reported utilizing multiple coping strategies to withstand shocks. *Ganyu* was the most commonly mentioned coping strategy. Respondents believed that households that performed *ganyu* were more resilient than those unable to do so. *Ganyu* was preferred over socially stigmatizing strategies such as asking for help from neighbors or begging. Another key coping strategy was the acquisition of loans. Although loans provided necessary capital for small businesses and to alleviate hunger, they were also seen as a high-risk activity for cash-poor households, depending on the terms of the agreement.

Also, social support programs that included income-generation activities were favored over other program approaches. This was especially the case if the activities supported household agricultural production and freed household members from dependence on *ganyu*.

#### 3.2 Perceptions of programmatic approaches to improve resilience

Households perceived aid as being unpredictable and beyond their control. Respondents stated they rarely knew in advance of when support would be delivered. In addition, the composition, type, frequency or delivery mechanism of support was often changed mid-stream without notification to beneficiaries. These irregularities in aid delivery made planning and budgeting difficult for households. In some cases, respondents reported that aid reduced the severity of coping strategies used or lessened frequency of use. Finally, as documented in earlier work (Margolies et al. 2017), the issue of the targeting of support programs continued to generate debate.

Perceptions of each of the main programs operating in the study area are discussed in the following sub-sections.

##### **Food Insecurity Response Plan (FIRP)**

The Food Insecurity Response Plan (FIRP) was the large-scale aid response that followed the 2015-16 humanitarian crisis. In the villages included in this study, the FIRP primarily provided food transfers in the form of maize legumes, cooking oil and occasionally *likuni phala* (a fortified corn-soy blend porridge used for feeding infants). However, multi-partner involvement in the FIRP made it difficult for respondents to identify whether support they had received was part of the FIRP. Overall, respondents favorably assessed the plan’s role in alleviating hunger at a critical time. The FIRP was said to displace or reduce household food purchases, alleviating pressure to earn income. This was particularly important during the lean season, permitting purchase of necessities and even allowing some households to conduct business activities. Households reported that FIRP transfers mitigated negative coping strategies by reducing the frequency of *ganyu*, permitting households to focus on their own production. Respondents also stated that FIRP food transfers aided households by giving them energy for productive activities such as farming. However, many beneficiaries believed that the size of the transfer was insufficient. One reason was the transfer was not enough food for large households, as well as the dilution of transfers due to sharing with kin or other households. The overall number of beneficiaries was also perceived to be low relative to need.

*“When they [humanitarian programs] are giving us food, they take it as food for one person...we realize they cannot share to the whole village, this is why sharing is done...We do it on our own without them knowing because if they know, it becomes a crime” (Male respondent, Village 3).*

Respondents expressed high acceptability of the food basket, especially of the fortified porridge *likuni phala*. The only food rejected by respondents was an unfamiliar legume (moringa seed) that was substituted in the basket for a short time.

A primary criticism of the FIRP was that while transfers alleviated severe food insecurity in the short term, they did not promote longer-term resilience. Generally, households

were focused on making food last longer rather than on increasing the quantity, quality or frequency of meals. Specifically, respondents feared they would be unable to maintain higher levels of consumption after aid was no longer provided. Respondents also believed that chiefs played a role in determining who received FIRP and other programs. The alleged role of chiefs included selection of beneficiaries and deciding the amount of support they should receive.

Although most households accepted programs targeted to specific but easily identifiable vulnerable groups (such as the elderly and the disabled), poverty-based targeting was frequently misunderstood and resented. Externally-imposed “objective” criteria were personalized at the village level, where resources were often redistributed. In some cases, the chiefs took a share of aid regardless of whether they were identified as a beneficiary. This practice was tolerated because households did not want trouble and feared exclusion from future programs. Three allegations were reported of transfers being siphoned off prior to delivery. According to one respondent, *“when the monitors came to verify, we told them that we are getting enough cooking oil because we were afraid to tell them the truth...because they would have stopped supporting the program...In most cases, they used to bring the oil that was either half or three quarters full...People said that drivers were responsible”* (Male respondent, Village 2). However, respondents said the fear of losing access to support precluded reporting such problems to implementers.

#### Social Cash Transfer Program (SCTP)

The SCTP targeted the poorest and most vulnerable – such as the elderly, disabled, and female-headed households – with a monthly cash transfer to support schooling, nutrition and health (World Bank 2018). In the study communities, fewer people benefited from the SCTP than from other support programs. That said, most of the female-headed households in the sample received the SCTP. SCTP targeting was better accepted than that of other aid programs. Both beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries said the SCTP helped recipients cope with difficulty, allowing for purchase of income-generating assets like livestock, fertilizer, and seed.

A small number of beneficiaries reported they purchased more diverse foods, principally animal-source protein, with the transfer. However, most said the transfer was too small to allow households to fully rebound from shocks.

In addition, the bi-monthly delivery of the transfer was reported to cause problems. Beneficiaries preferred monthly delivery to allow for better planning and to cover intermittent expenses like school fees. Some beneficiaries had to take out loans to cover expenses between transfers.

*“They should...run the programs on a regular basis like monthly instead of people receiving money once every two months. Skipping a month makes the beneficiaries [take out] many loans which they settle soon after receiving the money, because they do not have alternative means of supporting themselves”* (Chief, Village 2).

The SCTP was said to be less likely to be shared with non-beneficiaries than support provided by other programs. There were differing opinions on whether the SCTP was shared at all: some said the transfer quantity was too small to share, while others reported social pressure from chiefs to share. The SCTP was more likely than other programs to be associated with punitive measures. Program messaging encouraged use of the transfer to support children’s education, like the purchase of school supplies. Respondents believed beneficiaries would be removed from the SCTP if it was used for other ends, such as buying food.

#### Farm Input Subsidy Program (FISP)

Since 2005, the FISP has provided subsidized agricultural inputs to farmers to address low productivity. Households expressed strong preferences for inorganic fertilizers – inputs considered indispensable to high agricultural yields – and believed resilience was linked to fertilizer access. In 2016-17, the FISP selection process was centralized using computerized targeting. This change diminished the role of chiefs during beneficiary selection. The new process had the potential to promote transparency and avoid manipulation of the distribution of benefits. However, opinions of the new approach were mixed. Respondents said that the FISP database was outdated, particularly in accurately tracking migrating households. This also led to confusion about names being eliminated from the system and differing views on how targeting worked.

*“The [FISP]...showed that there should be the most poor, poor and the better-off, and people had to tick where they belong. I ticked that I am better off - that is why I received a coupon...I think they just wanted someone who is able to buy fertilizer”* (First wife of Chief, Village 6).

Ultimately, the process garnered complaints and demands for increased coverage. Respondents also reported increases in fertilizer prices, often paying cash to top-up the value of the FISP coupon. The program registered complaints over vendors purchasing fertilizer at depots. There were also several reports of falsified inputs such as fertilizer infiltrated with sand and provision of fake seeds.

#### Public Works: Malawi Social Action Fund and Food for Assets

The Malawi Social Action Fund (MASAF) is a public works program providing cash transfers in exchange for labor on community projects (World Bank 2018). Food Assistance for Assets (FFA), implemented by the World Food Program (WFP) and other NGOs, similarly compensates labor on public projects, but with food instead of cash (WFP 2018). In the study area, these programs supported road repair and reforestation. Respondents liked that projects supported local development. The regular work schedule was appreciated because of guaranteed payment after working the expected number of days (approximately 30). However, projects did not always reflect village-level priorities as work activities were allocated at a higher administrative level.

Some respondents reported that public works programs allowed them to reduce *ganyu* and to focus on their own

crops. They were able to do so because public works were not as physically taxing as *ganyu* and because they also received payment in food or cash. That said, some MASAF, participants struggled with waiting for their payments until all work days were completed, which usually took at least a month. Participants had to borrow money or take out loans to bridge this gap. Upon receipt of the transfer, the money was then used to repay loans and interest. In some cases, the total number of work days were informally split to benefit more people. For example, in one village, MASAF work was shared, so that each participant received half of the payment intended for one worker. In another village, beneficiaries shared FFA work and food transfers.

### Nutrition Embedded Evaluation Program (NEEP)

Households who participated in the NEEP program were interviewed to contrast their experiences with those respondents who benefited from humanitarian programs.

The NEEP program was valued by participants for its focus on capacity-building and for bolstering livelihoods. In particular, respondents reported that program activities helped them learn improved agricultural techniques (i.e. ridge spacing, use of manure) for household production of nutritious foods and for improved nutrition practices (i.e. meal preparation).

Seed distribution in the program was highly valued and was said to improve household resilience through input sharing. Households in the NEEP villages appreciated these in-kind investments but acknowledged issues of sustainability, as weather conditions and lack of income prevented the continued use of some agricultural and nutrition practices.

### 3.3 Community feedback on resilience programs

On the whole, respondents struggled to provide program feedback. Beneficiaries avoided criticizing free assistance.

*“A beggar doesn’t dictate what he should be given” (Male respondent, Village 1).*

This reticence extended to input on preferences, such as which foods should be included in aid baskets. Most respondents believed their feedback would not influence programs. Households said they rarely had opportunities to provide feedback or to report problems. In places where suggestion boxes existed, complaints were not submitted because of the following reasons: (1) free support should not be criticized; (2) fear of social repercussions; (3) fear of affecting aid flow; (4) perceived lack of control over external resources; (5) opinions would not be considered and programs were imposed.

## 4 CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The following conclusions and policy implications may be drawn from this research:

1. While coverage by several programs in similar areas may be necessary during crises, program overlap creates opportunities for confusion, anxiety and discord, particularly in the case of targeting.
2. Better consultation and communication with communities regarding program timing, design and delivery could increase effectiveness as well as improve community perceptions of programs.
3. Respondents often felt programs were imposed, a problem which arose from treating participants as beneficiaries rather than clients. Programs could be better tailored to client needs, with consideration of local norms and beneficiary costs.
4. Transparency mechanisms must be greatly improved, including better ways to solicit complaints as well as program feedback despite beneficiary reluctance.
5. Family support and sharing are important factors in household resilience and village social dynamics. This could be considered in program design – as measures to prevent sharing appear to be largely ineffective.
6. Limiting resource co-option would be beneficial but is difficult without improved mapping of local power dynamics, including chiefs’ control over resource redistribution. Including all households in an area rather than targeting by households’ poverty status could help to alleviate this problem.

## 5 RESOURCES

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