

The rise of ganyu in Malawi

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A quiet but important transformation is taking place in Malawi’s rural labor markets. Increasingly, rural Malawians are working fewer hours on their own farms and spending more time in ganyu – an informal labor arrangement based on day- or piece-work, typically requiring very low levels of skill and offering low and uncertain pay. While ganyu has long existed in Malawi, its scale and role in rural livelihoods have changed markedly. It is no longer merely a short-term coping strategy but has become a central source of employment for a growing share of the rural population.

This shift is especially pronounced among men, young people, and individuals with little land and limited formal education. At the same time, those who rely more heavily on ganyu are finding it increasingly difficult to secure adequate and stable access to food. The rapid expansion of ganyu has important implications for the kind of policies that will advance inclusive development in Malawi.

Shifting labor schedules

Those are some of the conclusions coming out of a recently published paper (De Weerd, Duquennois and Oliveres-Mallol, 2026). Nationally representative data from 35,819 rural working-age individuals were analyzed to construct monthly labor calendars for 2010 and for 2019. In 2010 rural Malawians worked on average 910 hours per year across four income-generating activities: own-farm, casual labor, household off-farm enterprises and wage employment (Table 1). That translates to 17.4 hours per adult per week across these four activities. The labor calendar followed a strongly seasonal pattern linked to the agricultural calendar, peaking at a total of 24.6 weekly hours during the planting and weeding months of December and January and falling to just 12.6 hours per week in the post-harvest period of July and August.

Table 1: Annual hours worked in selected income-generating activities

Annual hours worked	2010	2019
Own farm	577	504
Casual (ganyu)	103	249
HH off-farm enterprise	98	134
Wage employment	131	98
TOTAL	910	985

Nine years later, by 2019, rural adults were working 8% more hours across the four activities – on average 985 hours per year, but still well below what might be considered a full work schedule. Underlying this change is a marked shift in the composition of rural labor. Time spent on household farms declined substantially, falling from 577 to 504 hours per year. Some of this labor moved into household off-farm enterprises, where hours increased by more than one-third, particularly in the post-harvest months. Yet the most dramatic change occurred in casual labor. The average rural adult worked nearly 2.5 times more hours in ganyu in 2019 compared to 2010. Furthermore, the share of rural adults doing any ganyu work in a typical week more than doubled, from 15 percent in 2010 to 32 percent in 2019.

In the full paper we show how the expansion of ganyu occurred throughout the year but was especially pronounced during periods when agricultural labor demand is highest. The evidence therefore points to a growing substitution away from working on one's own farm toward working as hired labor on other farms or in similarly informal activities.

Who is experiencing these shifts

The rise of ganyu has not affected all rural Malawians equally. Over the 2010–2019 period, structural changes in the labor market reshaped how individual characteristics and asset endowments translate into labor outcomes. Our paper documents larger shifts away from own-farm work and into ganyu among men, young people, and individuals who did not complete primary education. In contrast, the expansion of household off-farm enterprises was more pronounced among older adults and those with at least a basic level of education.

Land scarcity plays a central role in these dynamics. Shrinking landholdings seem to have pushed many households away from own-farm labor into ganyu. Location also matters. Rural areas close to large cities experienced faster growth in total labor hours, including greater engagement in both ganyu and own farm work.

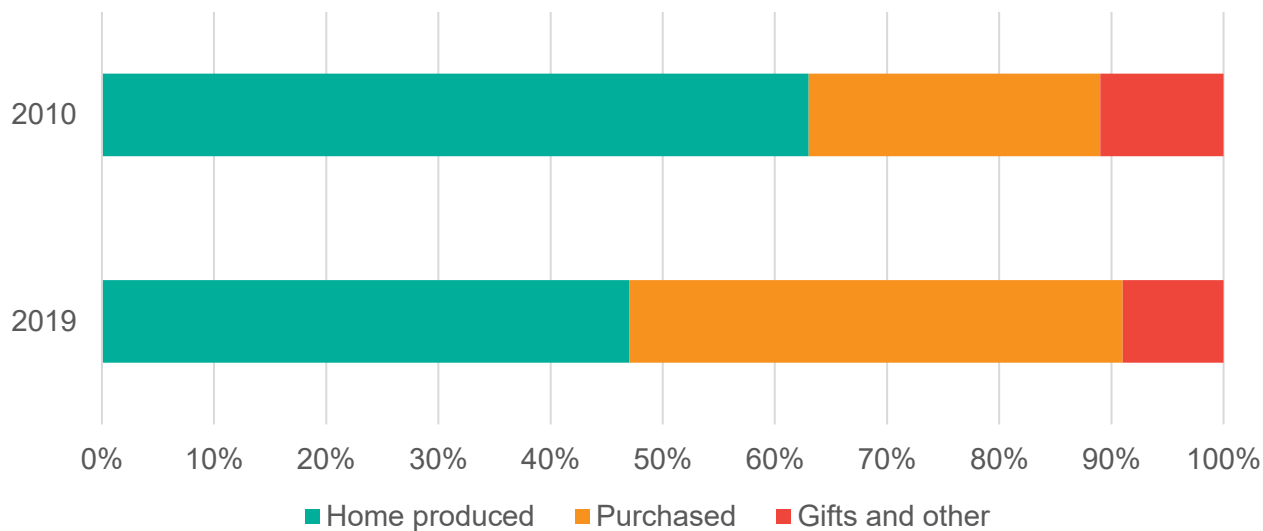
Increased reliance on markets

These changes in labor allocation have been accompanied by important shifts in welfare and food security. Between 2010 and 2019, the share of rural households reporting food insecurity in the previous 12 months rose sharply, from 51 percent to 73 percent. Households increasingly attribute their food insecurity to high food prices. The share of respondents citing expensive food as the main cause of food insecurity quadrupled over the nine-year period, pointing to a growing exposure to market risks.

This is consistent with clear evidence of rising reliance on food markets. Over the nine-year period we study the share of maize, the country's main staple, consumed from own production declined from 63 percent to 47 percent, while the share of purchased maize grew from 26 percent to 44 percent (Figure 1).

These trends are closely linked to the expansion of ganyu. As households devote less labor to their own farms and rely increasingly on ganyu, they become more dependent on both labor and food markets to secure their livelihoods. Yet ganyu typically offers low and volatile wages, and its growing importance in Malawi has not been accompanied by gains in food security. On the contrary, over time poverty and food insecurity have become more strongly associated with engagement in casual labor, making the rise of ganyu a growing concern from a welfare perspective.

Figure 1: Sources of maize consumption, 2010-2019



Policy implications

Malawi’s rural economy is undergoing a complex transition away from a system centered on household farming toward one increasingly shaped by markets for labor and food. Yet many policy frameworks continue to assume that most rural households primarily rely on subsistence production. The rapid rise of ganyu challenges this assumption and calls for a rethinking of policy priorities (Changaya et al., 2026).

First, policymakers must recognize that most rural households are now net buyers of food for a significant part of the year. As reliance on markets grows, food price stability becomes a central food security concern. Investments in market infrastructure, regional and international trade, and rural financial systems are essential to reduce price volatility and help households smooth consumption across seasons (Chiwaula et al., 2024).

Second, while the growth of household off-farm enterprises has been slower than the expansion of ganyu, these activities play a crucial role in providing employment during the agricultural off-season. Supporting this sector through improved access to finance, infrastructure, and skills can help create more stable and higher-return alternatives to casual labor, particularly for younger workers (Benson and De Weerd, 2023).

Finally, urban-adjacent rural areas have distinct labor market dynamics, opening opportunities to better leverage urbanization and its spillovers. Proximity to major cities is associated with reduced underemployment and growth in hours worked on the own farm, in household enterprises, and in casual labor. Strengthening urban-rural linkages can deepen and reinforce these existing connections, while investment in a wider network of secondary cities can extend spillover benefits horizontally to more remote rural areas (Van Cappellen and De Weerd, 2025).

As Malawi continues its structural transformation, policies must move beyond viewing ganyu as a temporary coping mechanism. Instead, attention should focus on ensuring that the labor and food markets on which rural households increasingly depend function well and offer realistic pathways out of vulnerability, while household farming continues to serve as an essential – though no longer dominant – pillar of rural livelihoods.

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