

## **An Enduring or Dying Peasantry? Interactive Impact of Famine and HIV/AIDS in Rural Malawi**

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**B**etween 2001 and 2003 the rural population of Malawi experienced widespread hunger. During the same time period, Malawi's HIV prevalence was the eighth highest in the world (UNAIDS 2004). Speculation about the links between famine and the HIV/AIDS epidemic followed. De Waal and Whiteside (2003) postulated that a "new variant famine" had arisen among a rural population made more vulnerable to food insecurity by AIDS-related morbidity and mortality. The declining welfare of the Malawian rural population in the context of rising HIV prevalence before the famine was readily apparent (e.g., Ngwira, Bota, and Loevinsohn 2001; Frankenberger et al. 2003).

This chapter concentrates on the material conditions and attitudinal perspectives of local villagers, drawing primarily on transcripts of key informant interviews and focus group discussions from three villages to examine the interactions between HIV/AIDS and famine in rural Malawi. Our investigations were part of a CARE International/RENEWAL study carried out between December 2003 and March 2004 in Lilongwe rural district, Central Region.<sup>1</sup> The chapter focuses on the response of Malawian peasant farmers to the combined threats of famine and HIV/AIDS and quotes extensively from our interviews and discussions in order to convey how rural peasant farmers perceive the challenges they face. The first section provides background on rural livelihoods in Malawi and various historical influences shaping the peasantry over time, followed by a consideration of changing famine coping strategies.

### **The Malawian Peasantry**

Both the colonial and the postcolonial government under Hastings Kamuzu Banda<sup>2</sup> prioritized plantation cultivation of tea and tobacco over smallholder household production, leaving peasant households to rely first on subsistence production and secondarily on migrant labor to Malawi's plantations, the mines of South Africa, or other employment in the surrounding regions. Thus, Malawi's peasant household production units have, for many decades, not been strictly agrarian or self-sufficient in food production. Physical separation of household family members became a norm as a result of male labor migration. Left in the hands of women and older men, the farming household survived largely on subsistence food production and cash remittances from male migrants. The government's indifference to food crops and agricultural extension for female farmers, together with women's lack of money to purchase agricultural inputs, has resulted in a legacy of "female farming" of subsistence crops (Boserup 1970; Bryceson 1995) in addition to exceptionally low levels of agricultural productivity compared to neighboring countries (Ellis and Freeman 2005).<sup>3</sup> Moreover, an overreliance on maize limiting the variety of the country's food crops has magnified the risk of harvest failure.

According to recent estimates, over half of Malawi's smallholder farmers have less than 1 hectare of cultivable land and are unable to produce enough food to feed themselves (Malawi 2002). Because of the changing economic and political dynamics of the region, opportunities for male labor migration to other locations in southern Africa have been mostly eliminated, and wage labor on Malawian plantations has also been diminishing. At the same time, tobacco production by Malawian smallholders has stagnated (Frankenberger et al. 2003).

Malawian villages are remote and insulated in many ways. Typically, traditional authorities at village level are male elders with little formal education. The villagers' worldview is generally restricted to local events and concerns. For the most part, welfare and property rights are determined by sustaining good relations with relatives in one's area of birth. The pervasive low educational attainment of rural adults, which stems from the very late introduction of universal primary education after Banda left the presidency in 1994, reinforces the sense of traditionalism. Throughout the nearly 30 years of Banda's rule, lack of investment in rural areas resulted in a peasantry strikingly lacking in access to agricultural, health, and education services in comparison to surrounding countries. Parastatal market controls hampered rural markets, and road building in rural areas was not prioritized. The 2001–02 famine struck within this economic and cultural setting.

### **Contrasting Peasants' Age-Old and Current Responses to Famine**

Food security for Malawian peasants is affected by wide variation in rainfall from year to year. In contexts like these, farmers have long been known to be risk-averse in their farming practices and to prioritize food self-sufficiency at the household level (Allan 1965). Paradoxically, the poor harvest and severe food shortages of 2001–02 were preceded by a bumper harvest. Some observers have remarked that the level of famine Malawi experienced was unwarranted by the harvest shortfall in those years, claiming that the Agricultural Development and Marketing Corporation's (ADMARC) decision to export grain stocks was poorly timed and edged the country toward famine (Bookstein and Lawson 2002; Frankenberger et al. 2003).

Despite the extreme duress they faced during the recent famine, only 15 percent of households received food-based assistance from extended family members, and only 19 percent obtained food aid from outside sources such as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).<sup>4</sup> Most households were forced to fend for themselves. In contrast to the 1949 famine, in 2001–02 the mitigating benefits of migrant labor were mostly lacking. Those with family members in urban areas had some recourse, but most rural households could not rely on kin in cities and towns because of the very low levels of urbanization that define Malawi. Instead, their central means of coping was *ganyu* labor.

Characterized by the exchange of labor for goods, services, or cash, *ganyu* has long been an important form of labor transaction between peasant households (Englund 1999; Bryceson 2006). By definition, *ganyu* is a system in which a household of any socioeconomic status that lacks adequate labor can access additional labor on a seasonal basis, but it is typically associated with the sale of labor by people from poorer households to wealthier households in exchange for cash or goods. During peak agricultural seasons, *ganyu* labor increases and often causes disadvantaged casual wage laborers to divert work from their own fields when they can least afford it. Traditionally, a *ganyu* contract between people with family ties was more balanced and reciprocal. Our oral interviews suggest, however, that this reciprocity degraded under the prolonged stress of hunger, and *ganyu* wages generally declined, as was also the case during the 1992 famine (Peters 1996).

Among peasant farmers elsewhere in Sub-Saharan Africa, the need for alternative off-farm income has been somewhat mitigated by households' ability to fall back on subsistence activities. Most rural households in Malawi, however, have no consistent year-round subsistence fallback. Increasingly, they have been forced to provision their needs one day at a time, operating within the shortest of time horizons.

We rely on *ganyu* and cannot carry out income-generating activities because we have no capital since the little we earn from *ganyu* must be spent on food. (Women's FGD in matrilineal village Chitukula TA, December 3, 2004)

The paradoxical situation of unused labor and land within peasant households, as observed by Ellis, Kutengule, and Nyasulu (2003), has resulted from their increasing reliance on off-farm *ganyu* to meet their urgent need for food. In addition to the growing reliance on *ganyu* with remarkably unfavorable bargaining terms, rural people are also disadvantaged in newly appearing factor markets by their lack of literacy, numeracy, and understanding of the market. To obtain cash to buy food or fertilizers, male farmers are entering into word-of-mouth agreements for share-cropping, land-leasing, and labor arrangements with urban and other patrons. On terms determined by the patron, they receive immediate cash and/or agricultural inputs in exchange for the promised delivery of harvested crops later. These factor markets are poorly documented in the literature on the Malawian agrarian sector to date, but it is readily evident that asset-poor rural households' access to crop harvests, land, and means of livelihood are being further eroded as they rent out acreage to better-off farmers or outsiders.

The rural population's faith in smallholder farming as a way of life seems to have badly eroded. One reason for this may be that they had always supported their rural households through something that is no longer viable: heavy dependence on migrant labor. Another explanation may be the deteriorating yields that have plagued them since the elimination of the fertilizer subsidy (Edriss, Tchale, and Wobst 2004). Moreover, the effect of AIDS on the household labor force may also be a significant blow to their faith in farming. Most likely, the confluence of all these factors has led to a state of heightened vulnerability, demoralization, and defeatism.

Villagers have reached a turning point in agricultural asset management. With the removal of the fertilizer subsidy and the diminished crop-marketing role of ADMARC, rural dwellers are prioritizing casual labor to address the routine hunger they face. In the matrilineal village women's focus group discussion, for example, the harvest was approaching, and near-ripe crops surrounded them, but, in a growing trend, many of these crops were not theirs. The women told us that they devoted all their productive hours to "looking for food," a euphemism for *ganyu*. No one viewed *ganyu* as a sustainable solution, however, and even the village headman stated that he discouraged *ganyu* because he felt it sacrificed long-term viability for short-term gains.

Accordingly, the villagers did not have sufficient recourse to assistance from either external agencies or extended family, nor could they fall back on at-home

subsistence food production. The women were exchanging their labor on highly unequal terms, and the men were renting out their land for quick income, leading to a precarious hand-to-mouth lifestyle. Households had also reached a highly individualized state in which they were afraid or unable to seek help from neighbors. Their self-reliance had the unfortunate net effect of overwhelming the local labor and factor markets, driving down wages and fueling impoverishment. Only a small segment of local farmers with the means to hire labor benefited from these circumstances. *Ganyu* laborers sought to sell their labor to those with salaried income such as local teachers or health service personnel, or they journeyed outside their local area to towns in search of short-term contract work (Bryceson 2006).

In so many places around the world through the millennia, the longevity and viability of peasant household production has hinged on the production of subsistence food and agricultural commodities in combination. This strategy helped households use commodity or labor market sales to counter the negative effects of poor food harvests. Conversely, peasants could respond to adverse commodity and labor markets by upping their subsistence production. At present, the land and capital constraints Malawian peasants face offer limited commodity production choices in addition to setting severe constraints on any increase of subsistence production. The long-standing, two-pronged strategy to minimize risk is slipping away.

### **HIV/AIDS: The New Challenge to Peasant Survival**

HIV/AIDS, unlike famine, is a relatively new menace for rural Malawian households. As a “long-wave” phenomenon, the AIDS pandemic in Sub-Saharan Africa has been unfolding for only 25 years. In 1985, estimated HIV prevalence was 2 percent (Taha et al. 1998), rising to 14.2 percent among adults 15–49 years of age at the time of our study (Malawi and NAC 2003). The adult prevalence in urban areas of 23 percent contrasts with a prevalence of 12.4 percent in rural Malawi, although the gap between urban and rural prevalence narrowed from a factor of 5 to 2 during the 1990s. HIV-positive rural dwellers now exceed their urban counterparts by approximately three to one.

Malawians have had very little time to develop coping mechanisms in response to this burgeoning epidemic. Over the past decade, HIV/AIDS has spread against a backdrop of depeasantization and food shortages, traumatizing communities and overwhelming local economies. Given the suddenness and extent of the sickness and death experienced, these initial years of coping have been accompanied by denial and fatalism.

Sex was traditionally perceived as a joyful activity in Malawi (Kadzandira 2002; Matinga and McConville 2003). Men and women were responsible for maximizing

sexual pleasure for their partner and themselves. To this end, several ritualized, extramarital events were scheduled throughout one's lifetime to help enhance sexual performance. *Chidzeranu*, or the exchange of wives, was prevalent in some areas. Young male and female virgins were traditionally coached in having sex by a trainer (*fisi*) of the opposite sex. Males would undergo circumcision, although, because of pressure from Christian churches, perhaps not as commonly as in many other African countries. Additionally, adolescents underwent initiation ceremonies with the local chief playing an important role. These rituals also included the sexual cleansing of women after initiation ceremonies and funerals by a *namandwa*, and many patrilineal groups practiced *chokolo*, widow inheritance, expecting the wife of the deceased man to marry one of his brothers. These practices were more closely linked to norms of inheritance than to sexual pleasure, however.

The National AIDS Commission (NAC) has been training traditional counselors in villages to help them reduce risk by altering cultural practices. As a result of the NAC's efforts and public campaigns, villagers are for the most part more aware of the dangers of sexual cleansers and trainers, widow inheritance, and used razor blades in circumcision ceremonies. Chiefs are increasingly mindful of safety measures, and traditional health procedures such as circumcision are now far more likely to be performed with clean blades. There is also evidence that traditional sexual rituals may be performed with condoms or are becoming less frequent in some areas (Shah 2002; Matinga and McConville 2003).

Although some chiefs and other traditional figures are increasingly promulgating safer practices, different media outlets are prescribing conflicting sexual behavior. Under Christian discourse, sexual relationships outside of marriage are socially unacceptable. Because of their perceived role as devices facilitating extramarital sex, condoms are seen as immoral, a viewpoint that contradicts the efforts of the government and donors to make condom usage more widespread. In our study villages at present, the majority of adults view condoms as either abnormal or immoral.

For our study populations, extramarital sex within the village embodied both traditional and new elements. In connection with their market activities and recreational drinking habits, men frequented pubs and in many cases engaged in sexual liaisons fueled by the disinhibition of alcohol.

Generally, people like having extra- and premarital affairs in the village. It is an old culture that looks normal, and other people are used to it. (Men's FGD in patrilineal village, Khongoni Tribal Authority, August 12, 2003)

There is a bad system of sleeping with each other's wives in this village. Mostly it is the rich men who do this to poor men's wives because it

offers them money. The women don't refuse due to their poverty. This is spreading HIV. (Men's FGD in patrilineal village, Chitukula TA, April 12, 2003)

Men . . . go to pubs, where they sleep with prostitutes who infect them.  
(Women's FGD in patrilineal village, Chitukula TA, April 12, 2003)

Both men and women in these villages were increasingly concerned about *kusokola* (looking for food), a practice seen as a famine coping mechanism that exposes women to compromise in the form of transactional sex. During the 2001–02 famine, without commodities or services to sell, women resorted to exchanging sex for food, earning cash or in-kind payment by traveling to trading centers, Lilongwe and other nearby towns (Shah 2002). Sexual activity was being progressively incorporated into women's *ganyu* contracts, a practice that worsened with deepening household impoverishment. In the patrilineal village we sampled closest to Lilongwe, for example, the women had been making frequent trips to the grain mill in a nearby semiurban area out of desperation, collecting the leftover maize bran from the milling process. Staying overnight was often required to gain favored access to the bran. Men working at the mill offered *ganyu* contracts to the women, capitalizing on their vulnerability. In one of the patrilineal village FGDs, the women's husbands relating the situation explained their reaction: "The men [at the mill] offer them the *ganyu* but also entice them to sleep with them. Since the women are bringing food [maize bran home], we cannot object [as husbands]."

"Transactional sex" is not the same thing as "prostitution," which involves earning a livelihood through the solicitation of sex. Prostitutes are part of a service market and create various rules for economic and physical survival in their line of work. Women prostitutes have a professional interest in safe sex and are in a far stronger position to insist on safe sex practices as a condition of service to their clients (Campbell 2003). Thus, it is important to distinguish prostitutes from women who engage in occasional transactional sex. The latter are not professionals selling sex as an occupation. They happen into chance sexual encounters, compromised by their impoverished circumstances and their household's need for food, and are ill-equipped to bargain the terms of the transaction. Given this disempowerment, and the unpredictable nature of transactional sex, the adoption of safe sex practices is problematic.

As deaths from AIDS have increased, villagers have become more and more aware that they face an escalating problem. When discussing causality, villagers tend to blame particular categories of people whom they believe are responsible for the spread of HIV. Women fault the extramarital sex that often accompanies men's heavy drinking (Bryceson 2002c; van Dijk 2002). Men are increasingly vocal about

the role of women's *ganyu* earning activities in fueling growing HIV prevalence in the village. Adults complain that young people are especially promiscuous these days, in part because of increasing alcohol consumption. While admitting that they are taking part in these activities, youth blame the poor example that adults set in their social and sexual behavior. The allocation of blame still takes place amid a general consensus that poverty is the root cause of their predicament. Men who have withstood the injury of lost income-earning opportunities over the last few decades now face the embarrassment of their wives' desperation-driven sexual activities. Up until recently, men were accustomed to earning the household's cash income while women were preoccupied with subsistence farming. It would be difficult for men to avoid conflicting emotions about their wives' food-procuring activities.

### **Conclusion**

The last 25 years have been challenging for rural smallholders throughout Sub-Saharan Africa, but this has been particularly true in Malawi over the past half-decade when the impacts of HIV/AIDS and famine in combination have relentlessly undermined household welfare. The peasant household's strength as a unit of production is collapsing as household assets and livelihood portfolios have simultaneously veered, first, from self-sufficient unpaid labor performed within the household, particularly by women and children, toward *ganyu*; second, from agriculture toward nonagriculture with income earning shifting increasingly to trade and services, including sexual services; and, third, from household toward individualized labor, in which every able-bodied person, including women and youth, works to earn cash for subsistence needs. These are fundamental changes to peasant household labor patterns reflective of deagrarianization and depeasantization trends (Bryceson 2000, 2002a, b). Women and girls are now finding *ganyu* outside of their villages. In view of the shortfalls in household food provisioning, their men-folk are acquiescent.

Depeasantization in Malawi differs from the situations in many other parts of Sub-Saharan Africa. Rural income diversification, a significant aspect of the depeasantization process, is proceeding in Malawi unaccompanied by the relatively secure subsistence fallback that smallholder households have relied on so heavily in other African countries (Bryceson 2002a). Rural Malawians face acute food insecurity because of very low agricultural productivity in combination with relatively high rural population density and land shortage. The cessation of the fertilizer subsidy threatened peasant households' subsistence food production even further. The

majority of households no longer have access to adequate land and/or agricultural output to guarantee basic household food needs throughout the year.

In his insightful book, *Famine that Kills*, de Waal (1989, p. 227) argued that during the Sudanese famine of 1984/85, farmers in Darfur preferred to go hungry rather than sell off the livestock that they knew would ensure their long-term survival. In doing so, they preserved a material foundation for continuing to work as agrarian producers. Furthermore, they endeavored to preserve social cohesion in their communities. In Malawi, this knee-jerk response by smallholder peasants was not prominent. Most had little if any livestock to sell.<sup>5</sup> Instead, they prioritized off-farm *ganyu* casual labor to address their immediate food needs over longer-term staple food planting and harvesting cycles on their own household landholdings, causing seasonal underutilization of household land and labor. A vicious cycle of impoverishment is in progress, propelling more and more into abject poverty, undermining smallholders as viable agricultural producers, and eroding their well-being and solidarity as peasant communities.

Most rural dwellers view food insecurity as the most important indicator of poverty (Malawi and NEC 2002, p. 15). Village leaders estimated that the upper stratum of farmers, constituting a small proportion of households, is food self-sufficient year-round. Middle-stratum households have sufficient maize to last 5 to 6 months after harvests, but poor households may only have a month's worth or less of food supplies each year. The extent of the shortfall in food supply and the year-by-year repetition of this shortfall erode household self-esteem.

Famine threatens peasant households and villages in the immediate term, while HIV/AIDS menaces individuals and the peasant population in a more insidious longer-term way. Famine safeguards have been integrated into the cultural fabric of the peasant society, in contrast to the more recent threat of AIDS, which people have yet to come to terms with. In our interviews and group discussions, we were told repeatedly that hunger was the most fundamental problem for individual and household survival.

HIV/AIDS is not very threatening compared to the hunger which most households face. In fact it is hunger, which is contributing to the rise in HIV infections in the area. (Religious leader in patrilineal village, Khongoni TA, August 12, 2003)

Risk assessment involves gaining knowledge on which one weighs the odds and chooses the best course of action to minimize adversity. In this case, the Malawian peasantry, specifically peasant women, are successfully addressing the immediate food shortfall. However, with the increasing frequency of food shortages<sup>6</sup> and

declining assets and income, they are in effect forestalling death by engaging in what could be termed the most essential exchange: sex for food.

## Notes

This is an edited and condensed version of a more detailed paper (Bryceson and Fonseca 2006). We are grateful to CARE International and the Regional Network on HIV/AIDS, Rural Livelihoods and Food Security (RENEWAL), facilitated by IFPRI, who sponsored the study on which this chapter is based. Special thanks go to the CARE Malawi staff and John Kadzandira of the University of Malawi for their contribution to the data collection and analysis.

1. The three villages surveyed were: Dzama in Chitukula Tribal Authority (TA), 29 kilometers from Lilongwe, Vizimba in Khongoni TA, located 60 kilometers from Lilongwe, both of which were primarily patrilineal villages, and the matrilineal village of Chimponda (Chitukula TA, 30 kilometers distance from Lilongwe). Our field methodology began with gender- and age-segregated focus group discussions and key informant interviews. Village heads were contacted a few days in advance to arrange times for our focus group discussions and key informant interviews. A random sample survey of 141 households was conducted between February 27 and March 3, 2004, with the aim of providing background demographic data. At the time of our investigations, more than a year after the famine, there were still people on food-for-work programs and roughly 600 chronically ill receiving direct food transfers in the two tribal authorities where we conducted interviews.

2. Banda became Malawi's first prime minister on February 1, 1963, after the end of British rule and became president in 1966 when Malawi was declared a one-party republic. He declared himself president for life in 1971 but was defeated in the country's first multiparty elections in 1994.

3. Ellis and Freeman's (2005, p. 43) four-country comparative study recorded net average agricultural outputs per hectare (US\$/ha): Kenya 297, Uganda 282, Tanzania 182, and Malawi 64. "Net agricultural output" refers to the gross output produced per hectare, multiplied by farm-gate sales prices minus purchased inputs and labor costs, then converted to US\$ at the current prevailing exchange rate for purposes of comparison of mixed product outputs.

4. Data from our survey of 141 households, which included questions on famine coping strategies.

5. This was because of the lack of recovery of household livestock assets arising from their sale during the 1992 famine as well as a widespread problem of rural livestock theft during the post-Banda era.

6. At the time of writing (February 2006), severe food shortages were again being experienced in rural Malawi, putting an estimated 5 million people at risk (approximately 40 percent of the total population), reported by the Famine Early Warning Systems Network (<http://www.fews.net/centers/innerSections.aspx?f=mw&m=1001810&pageID=monthliesDoc>).

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