



MALAWI

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

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ABSTRACT

Improving social assistance programs is imperative to addressing problems of poverty and vulnerability in Malawi. Emergency aid has played an important role in alleviating hunger during humanitarian crises 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 to address vulnerability. This qualitative study examines the characteristics of resilient households and perceived effects of programs to improve food security and resilience from the perspectives of the beneficiaries and communities they serve. This beneficiary-centered approach explores socially-defined concepts of resilience, associated coping strategies, norms and political dynamics affecting programs. These findings can provide useful insights to improve the effectiveness of social assistance programs in this context.

ABBREVIATIONS

CBCC – Community-based childcare center

CFW – Cash-for-work

FFA – Food Assistance for Assets (FFA)

FIRP – Food Insecurity Response Plan

FISP – Farm Input Subsidy Program

GoM – Government of Malawi

IDI – Individual in-depth interview

MASAF – Malawi Social Action Fund (MASAF)

MNSSP – Malawi National Social Support Program

MVAC – Malawi Vulnerability Assessment Committee

NEEP – Nutrition Embedded Evaluation Program

NGO – Non-governmental organization

SCTP – Social Cash Transfer Program

STC – Save the Children

TA – Traditional Authority

VDC – Village Development Committee

VSL – Village Savings and Loans

WFP – United Nations World Food Programme

1. INTRODUCTION

A critical issue in Malawi is how aid can be improved to ensure food security and nutrition. This support is urgently needed as Malawi is particularly vulnerable to shocks (Barrett & Headey 2014), recurrent food crises and persistently high levels of undernutrition (DHS 2016). Improving food security in the long term, however, depends on strengthening the resilience of smallholder farmers that compose the majority of the population. Improving social assistance programs is of great concern to organizations and donors who aim to sustainably address problems of poverty and vulnerability. Although humanitarian aid has played an important role in alleviating hunger during emergencies, these responses are neither financially sustainable nor address the causes of vulnerability.

The Government of Malawi (GoM) and development partners endeavor to “break the cycle” of unsustainable emergency humanitarian aid. In January 2015, a national disaster was declared when 2.8 million people required relief after flooding. As the flood response was underway, El Niño-related drought devastated harvests. Another national disaster was declared in April 2016, with 6.7 million people requiring aid – the largest humanitarian response in Malawi’s history. The response, called the Food Insecurity Response Plan (FIRP), was led by the Malawi Vulnerability Assessment Committee (MVAC) and implemented by the GoM, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the World Food Programme (WFP). The FIRP took a hybrid approach, providing cash, vouchers, food and longer-term resilience measures such as conservation agriculture training (MVAC 2017).

The FIRP, interchangeably known as MVAC but referred to hereon as FIRP, involved multiple implementing actors and programs. The diversity of program approaches under FIRP was also a unique opportunity to explore relative successes in supporting resilience. Further, during the crisis, NGOs concurrently maintained longer-term livelihood programs. Questions remain about whether these programs can preclude humanitarian responses, as do questions concerning cost-effectiveness and sustainability. This assessment is timely given increased focus on bolstering resilience and in light of the results of a recent review that highlighted opportunities for improvement in the FIRP (IFPRI 2017). The GoM developed a National Resilience Plan in 2016 to address the linkages between climate change and food security. This information is also critical for the development of future programs, as projections predict a decline in agricultural production in 2018 due to drought and fall armyworm, a pest which has already affected nearly 22 percent of maize production (World Bank 2018).

This study builds on ongoing research on the FIRP and an evaluation of an agriculture-nutrition program, the Nutrition Embedding Evaluation Program (NEEP), both of which addressed food security and resilience. This research is part of a mixed-methods longitudinal evaluation that includes four rounds of surveys of 1,199 households in Zomba District (Gelli et al. 2017). This study provided a unique opportunity to compare and contrast different programs from the perspectives of the populations they serve.

1.1 Objectives

This study focused on research questions related to understanding and building resilience in rural Malawi and the persistence of program effects to improve food insecurity and resilience. These were:

- i. Understanding which households have been most resilient to shocks, and how interventions supported building that resilience;
- ii. Exploring individual and community perspectives on which interventions/programs were most successful in supporting resilience, and the sustainability of these effects.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Conceptual framework

To answer these questions, this study explored the collective social understanding of issues related to food security and resilience by capturing the experiences, opportunities and challenges faced by subsistence households. Originating from ecological literature on the resilience of ecosystems, there are differing perspectives on the meaning and application of resilience within the development context. There are multiple resilience frameworks from diverse academic fields, and no consensus has yet been established on an overarching definition. For the purposes of this study, the following definition was used: *“The ability of countries, communities and households to manage change by maintaining or transforming living standards in the face of shocks or stresses without compromising their long-term prospects”* (DFID 2011).

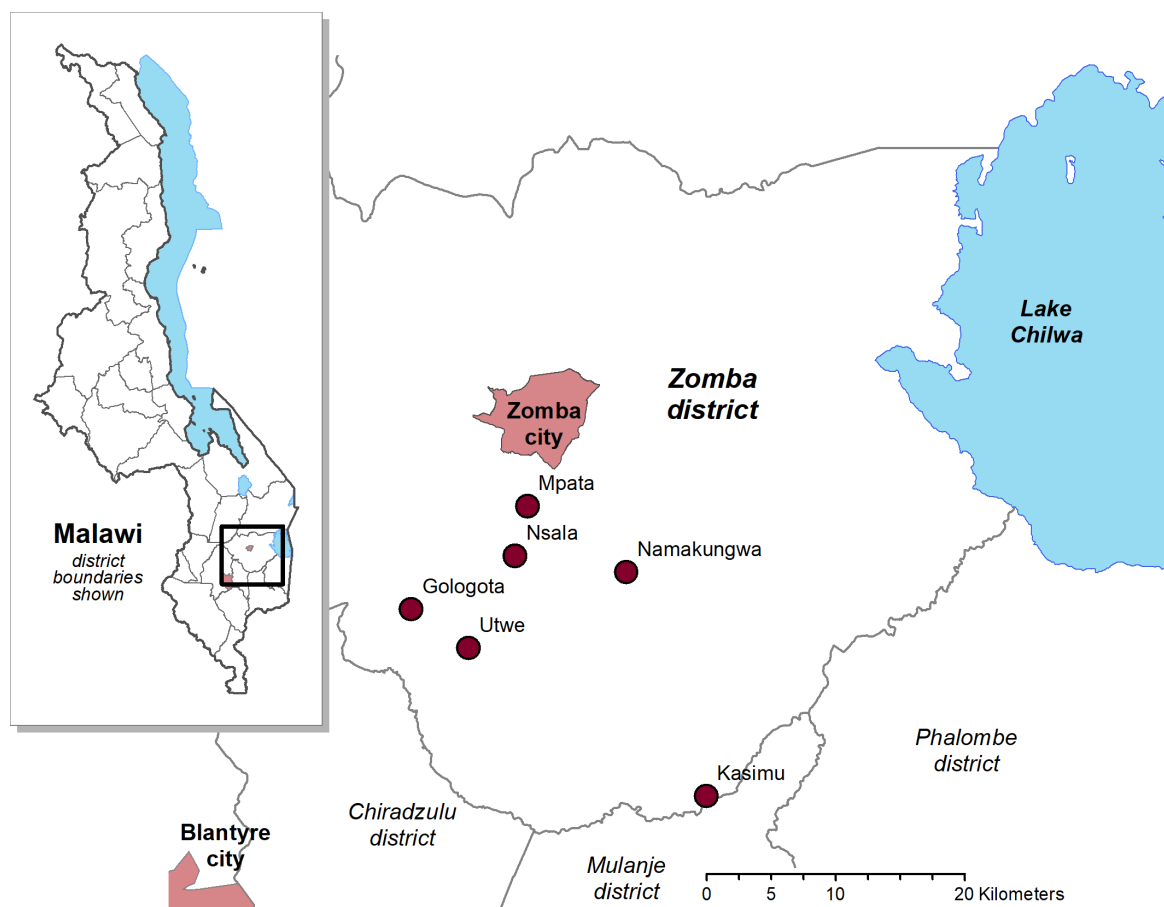
Interventions that build resilience include both humanitarian and longer-term development approaches to improve livelihoods and reduce vulnerability. *“Resilience interventions are about strengthening the ability of households to choose from a whole ‘portfolio’ of options what they perceive at that time as the ‘right’ response(s), rather than be forced by circumstance to pick the only option they have at their disposal at the moment, which might be detrimental overall”* (Béné et al 2015). To that end, understanding coping strategies – or responses household use to react to shocks - which can range from income generating activities to selling assets, is an important part of examining whether vulnerabilities have been reduced.

However, quantitative measures alone cannot capture the qualitative elements of wellbeing and the ability to recover from shocks. Additionally, quantitative measures of resilience may not capture relationships between chronic seasonal and acute shocks, and the complexities of intra-household dynamics. Further, individual perceptions of vulnerability are not well captured by surveys. While a large amount of resilience research is centered on measuring asset indices, these relationships may not be linear and underemphasize other dynamics that affect resilience, such as socio-cultural aspects (Hoddinott 2014). The importance of socio-cultural dynamics in resource-sharing and on perceptions of social assistance programs have been highlighted through prior work on this project (Margolies et al. 2017). This study takes a qualitative approach to investigating beneficiary-centered perceptions of how humanitarian and development interventions affect resilience and the various strategies households employ to adapt to shocks.

2.2 Study area

This study builds upon several years of work conducted in 60 selected communities in Zomba District under the Nutrition Embedded Evaluation Program (NEEP) implemented by Save the Children (STC) (Figure 1). A cluster-randomized controlled trial was conducted of the integrated agriculture and nutrition intervention delivered through community-based childcare centers (CBCCs). This study leverages data collected over the course of the program to draw broader lessons and identify trends relevant to understanding resilience dynamics in other locations in Malawi. In the first two rounds of data collection in the ongoing NEEP impact evaluation, a sub-sample of households was selected for qualitative individual in-depth interviews (IDI) and household observations which examined life events and interventions, associated perceived effects, resources and capacities as related to food security and resilience. In this round of data collection, we returned to interview the women, men and adolescent girls of those households included in the previous qualitative sub-sample. Thus, as one component of a broader mixed-methods research program, this study provides qualitative insights into socially-constructed experiences, beliefs, and perceived longer-term impacts of various approaches to improve food security and resilience.

Figure 1. Map of the study area.

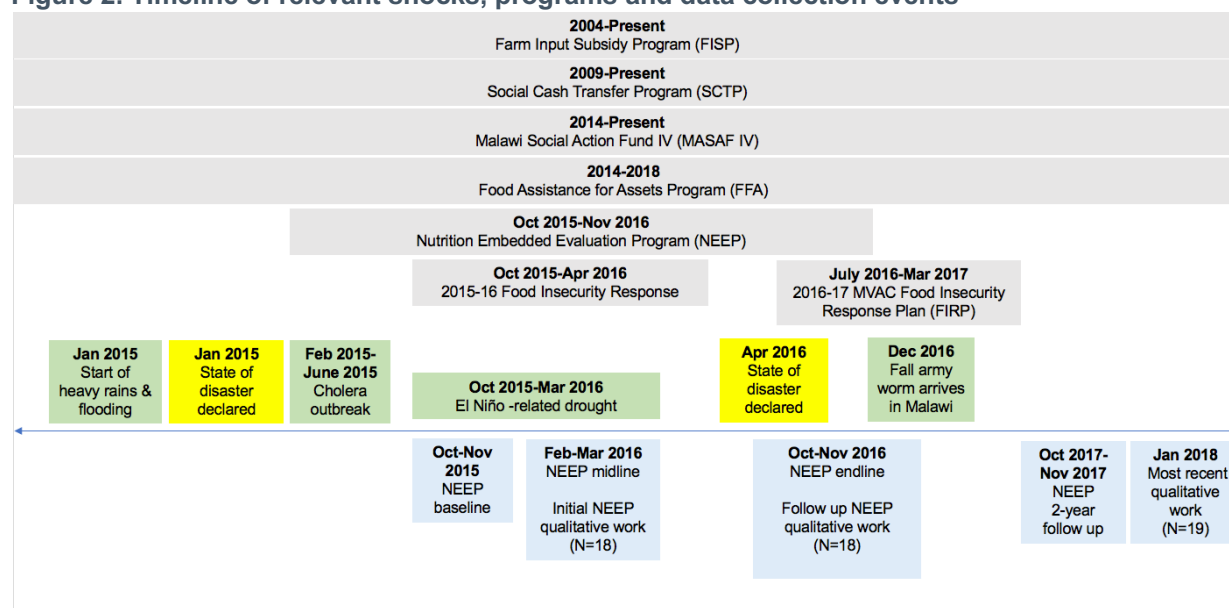


Major programs and interventions operating in the study area

At the time of data collection there were multiple programs operating in the study area that addressed household resilience and food security: the Malawi Vulnerability Assessment Committee (MVAC) 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, the World Food Program's (WFP) Food Assistance for Assets (FFA) Program, and NEEP. The SCTP and MASAF composed part of the GoM's second Malawi National Social Support Program (MNSSP II), which was designed to integrate various support programs to promote resilience and human capital development. However, these two safety net programs covered only 25 percent of the population in 2016, as compared to 33 percent coverage by FIRP and 37 percent by the FISP (World Bank 2018).

The FIRP was the massive aid effort following the 2015-16 humanitarian crisis which was carried out by multiple implementing actors. In the villages included in this study, the FIRP primarily provided food in the form of maize flour, legumes, cooking oil and occasionally *likuni phala* (a fortified corn-soy blend porridge). The Social Cash Transfer Program (SCTP), implemented by the GoM, targets the poorest and most vulnerable groups such as the elderly, disabled and female-headed households with a monthly cash payment to support schooling, nutrition and health (World Bank 2018). The SCTP has been shown to increase food consumption, among other positive impacts on schooling and investment in productive assets (Ralston et al. 2017). Since 2004, the FISP has provided subsidized agricultural inputs to farmers to address low productivity. In 2015-16, FISP reached 1.5 million smallholder farmers, and after reforms in 2016-17 the number of beneficiaries was reduced to 900,000 for the 2017-18 agricultural year (EP&D 2016; EP&D 2017, EP&D 2018). Maize production has increased significantly since the FISP began, improving food availability but not necessarily access to food for smallholders, and has failed to reduce vulnerability to increasing weather shocks from climate change (Haug and Wold 2017). The Malawi Social Action Fund (MASAF IV) is a World Bank-funded public works program to alleviate poverty and one of the GoM's longest-running safety net interventions. MASAF provided cash transfers in exchange for labor on community projects (World Bank 2018). The Food Assistance for Assets (FFA) Program, implemented by WFP, functioned similarly to MASAF. However, FFA supported the creation of productive assets through payments for labor in food instead of cash (WFP 2018). Finally, the NEEP program, implemented by Save the Children, was an integrated nutrition-sensitive agriculture program delivered through early childhood development centers (CBCCs). This program provided seeds of nutritious foods, nutrition and agricultural training as well as chickens, in addition to encouraging community contributions of labor and food at the CBCC level for pre-schoolers.

Figure 2. Timeline of relevant shocks, programs and data collection events



Sources: Authors, IFRC 2015, OVP and DoDMA 2016, EP&D 2018.

Note: Dates are approximate, and width of bars is not necessarily proportional to the length of the event.

2.3 Sample selection

The sampling of participants was drawn from poor rural communities sustained by subsistence agriculture. Sampling was purposive, following a sub-sample from an evaluation of the NEEP program. Data collection was conducted in six villages across three Traditional Authorities (TA) in Zomba District. The sample included both NEEP intervention and control villages, with three villages purposively selected from each group. Villages 1, 4 and 6 were NEEP treatment villages and Villages 2, 3 and 5 were control villages. Three households were sampled from each village, with differing composition but all with at least one child between the ages of 3 and 5 years old, as stipulated for inclusion in NEEP. These households included traditional, male-headed households; female-headed households; households with adolescents; and one polygamous household (Table 1).

Table 1: Sample respondent characteristics

TA	Cluster	Village	Sex of HHH	Sex of chief	Programs (2015-17)	# of adults (adolescent)	Total Interviews
Ntholowa	Utwe	1*	M (2) F (1)	F (1)	FIRP, SCTP, FISP, MASAF, FFA, NEEP	6 (2)	8
	Nsala	2	M (3) F (1)	M (1)	FIRP, SCTP, FISP, MASAF, FFA	9 (1)	10
Chikowi	Namakungwa	3	M (2) F (1)	M (1)	FIRP, SCTP, FISP, FFA	6 (1)	7
	Gologota	4*	M (2) F (1)	M (1)	FIRP, SCTP, FISP, MASAF, NEEP	6 (1)	7
Ngwelero	Mpata	5	M (2) F (1)	M (1)	FIRP, SCTP, FISP, MASAF, FFA	6 (1)	7
	Kasimu	6*	M (1) F (1) M poly (1)	M (1)	FIRP, FISP, MASAF, other food-for-work, NEEP	6 (0)	6
Total						39 (6)	45

Note: *Indicates a NEEP treatment village. HH= household; HHH = household head; M = male, F = female, poly = polygamous (households monogamous unless otherwise stated). Program acronyms detailed at the beginning of the paper.

2.4 Data collection and analysis

The methodology used was qualitative *household case studies*. In-depth semi-structured interviews (IDIs) were conducted with both male and female household members as well as adolescents involved in agricultural activities. This approach captured both individual and household strategies for coping with seasonal food insecurity, examining intra-household dynamics through interviews with women and men. In addition, in each village we interviewed traditional leaders to better understand the impact community politics and norms have on food security and resilience. The sample included 45 IDIs from 19 household case studies and 6 key informant interviews with chiefs. Data collection was conducted in January 2018.

Interviews were recorded by digital handheld audio devices. Audio recordings were transcribed from Chichewa and translated into English by native Chichewa speakers. Audio recordings were saved in a password-protected Dropbox folder. De-identified transcripts were submitted to the research team for coding. Analysis was conducted using the NVivo software.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Locally interpreted definitions and characteristics of resilience

Individual definitions of household resilience centered around access to income generation activities as the most effective means to bounce back from seasonal and stochastic shocks. In particular, respondents believed that households using multiple income generation strategies return to wellbeing more quickly after a crisis;

“Resilient households are those that can also easily generate money...these households already have start up resources. They use the same resources to invest in their garden by employing people to work in their gardens. Sometimes they rent additional gardens to increase their farm produce

level. During the harvesting period, such people will have higher yields. In addition, some have a business” (Female head of household, Village 1).

During the period covered by the study, more than 60 percent of respondents did not consider their households to have been resilient over the past agricultural year. Interestingly, in seven households there were differences in opinion between male and female partners. In six of the seven households the women reported the household was not resilient while the male head asserted the opposite opinion.

Respondents likewise noted that few households in their villages were consistently resilient to shocks;

“They [households] were all the same. I could look at the whole community and see that we are all the same” (Female respondent, Village 6).

“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).

Most households understood resilience in a tangible, concrete way: the ability to maintain wellbeing through access to food stocks as well as capital;

“Wellbeing starts from having food...when you have money and food things work well. Sometimes you might have maize but no money to take it to the maize mill. So, it is important to have both the food and money” (Female respondent, Village 5).

“Bouncing back from the shocks means that everything is available at home like food, water and money is readily available. This also means that there is good diet at home” (Male respondent, Village 2).

Unsurprisingly, perceptions of the resilience of households was dependent on the means of access to such resources;

“I think what makes a household resilient is money and food. These are the two things that make the household look happy” (Male respondent, Village 1).

Respondents attributed the difficulties of achieving resilience to the fact that households rely on subsistence agriculture and are ultimately subject to, and suffer from, the same covariant shocks;

“In terms of droughts, people experience the same things. We are all under the same sun” (Female head of household, Village 3).

3.2 Household and village-level changes in resilience, 2016-2018

The communities in this study are small, inter-dependent villages primarily reliant on subsistence agriculture. Rainfall and weather patterns affect harvests but also income generation opportunities like informal contract agricultural labor, or *ganyu*. Households perform this additional labor to supplement poor harvests in order to purchase food. It follows that a reduction in *ganyu* results in less cash circulating locally; a phenomenon which also drives produce sales for household small businesses.

Respondents universally related that 2016-17 agricultural year was more difficult than the 2017-18 agricultural year. Clear differences were reported in the general success of household harvests between the two agricultural years. All households, with the exception of only three respondents, reported that the 2016-17 agricultural year was more difficult than the 2017-18 agricultural year. This was primarily due to insufficient harvests, with periods of hunger and difficulty to perform *ganyu* in 2016-17. Respondents stated that they did not have cash available to purchase food. Further, maize was scarce in markets and there were limited alternative income generation opportunities. Many respondents reported relying on resources from social support programs that were received or shared.

The following harvest in the 2017-18 agricultural year was significantly better in terms of yields as compared to the harvest of 2016-17. This change was attributed to improved rainfall patterns, growing conditions and ample opportunities for *ganyu*. Maize prices were reported to be low; a boon for households purchasing food. *“This year food is not really a problem. It is even cheap at the market. The little money that they have can be able to buy food”* (Village Chief, male, Village 5). Conversely, the low prices garnered complaints from households hoping to withstand the lean season through maize sales;

“Many people have been complaining about these low prices at the market since 2017...people were unable to solve the many problems they thought they would solve with selling farm produce” (Female respondent, Village 1).

Additionally, respondents reported there was broader social support program coverage in the lean season of 2016-17. These programs brought an influx of external resources, supplementing good agricultural conditions which increased household production. Social support program modalities covering the study area and mentioned by respondents included cash, food, cash or food-for-work, and fertilizer transfers from international organizations such as the Adventist Development and Relief Agency, Emmanuel International, STC, World Vision, and WFP, as well as from religious institutions and the GoM. Social support programs were said to have provided important protective effects against downward household trajectories in the 2016-17 agricultural year.

In particular, those households that did not have good yields from the 2017-18 harvest complained of a lack of access to inputs. These responses reflect strong beliefs that yields – and by extension, the ability to rebound from shocks – are heavily dependent on access to fertilizer. Although the 2017 harvest was generally improved, respondents also noted problems with the presence of fall armyworm, a pervasive agricultural pest which has been particularly harmful to Malawi’s maize crop.

At the time of interviews in January 2018, many households were still consuming the previous year’s maize harvest. Others had only recently finished consuming their stocks. Despite these apparent improvements, most households did not feel prepared for the 2018 lean season. Households related that even if they had started preparing their gardens and fields properly, the lack of rain was concerning. Pessimism was expressed about the upcoming 2018 harvest due to dry spells. One respondent expressed her frustration with an inability to break the cycle of hunger; *“Now back to being poor, it’s a cycle”* (Female respondent, Village 6). Further, there was anticipation that common coping strategies would be constrained because of the drought. Households complained in January it had already been difficult to find *ganyu*, and that the problem would likely continue through the lean season; *“The maize is wilting and so there is no one who is employing people to do casual work again”* (Adolescent girl, Village 3).

Use of coping strategies

Households in subsistence villages face many common shocks. The strategies that households use to cope with these shocks are critical to their ability to be resilient. In this study, all households reported utilizing diverse coping strategies to withstand shocks. The majority of households related that the employment of multiple concurrent strategies was imperative to survival. This approach was particularly salient during the lean season when resources were scarce. However, there was some variation of the types of coping strategies used, as well as how extreme a given strategy was perceived to be by respondents. Commonly discussed coping strategies included: 1) having a side business, 2) *ganyu*, and 3) taking out loans.

Ganyu was the most commonly mentioned coping strategy. *Ganyu*, paid either in-kind or in cash, was performed at larger agricultural estates, across the border in Mozambique, as well as for slightly wealthier community members. Households were inured to years of their own insufficient harvests. Thus, households depended on *ganyu* or selling garden crops such as tomatoes, beans, turnips or greens to save money to purchase maize after consuming their last year's maize harvest and prior to the harvesting of their new crop. *Ganyu* was considered a common, but detrimental practice, as it co-opted household agricultural labor. Regardless, respondents believed that households that could perform *ganyu* (those with people who are able-bodied, sufficient strength, ability to travel) were more resilient than those that could not. Further, while *ganyu* was demanding, it was normal practice. *Ganyu* was preferred over socially stigmatizing strategies such as asking for help or begging;

"I made sure I take my responsibility like a father of the household. So, I went out to look for casual work and this made me provide for the family. I did not want to start begging but to make sure I eat from my sweat" (Male respondent, Village 2).

Dependence on frequent *ganyu* for survival, however, was considered to negatively affect resilience. These practices were said to affect household production because members neglected their own fields. This was said to result in reliance on food purchases during the lean season and the need for doing more *ganyu* to access food or to money to purchase food.

Another coping strategy noted was acquiring loans. Although loans provided necessary capital for small business or for ameliorating hunger, depending on the source and terms of the agreement, they were a high-risk activity for cash-poor households. For example, one household reported "double-dipping" in two different village savings and loans (VSL) groups, borrowing from one group to pay off loans from the other. There was also a perceived risk of asset repossession from external loans. For loans provided by NGOs such as One Acre Fund, respondents struggled with high interest rates that could not be easily repaid until after harvest. Village banks, or informal VSL groups, were considered to be less punitive, though they carried some risk that the other members would not repay;

"Sometimes they [organizations providing external loans] even get the thing you loaned and sell it, if you have failed to pay back...They use force, whether you like it or not...A loan from Village Savings and Loan is flexible on the repayment period because we are from the same village so we understand each other. You can tell them I will not be able to pay on this date but if you extend with a month, I will manage to pay. So, if you fail to pay on the date you promised that means you are a thief" (Female respondent, Village 3).

Social support programs with income-generation activities were favored, especially if the activities supported home production and freed household members from *ganyu*. However, households believed that aid could not be relied upon and therefore maintained other livelihood strategies in parallel;

"I can't say that you can solely rely on aid. That means your kids will have a lot of problems, because the aid is there just as a starter to give you time for your next plan" (Male respondent, Village 3).

Respondents also mentioned that the extent to which programs bolstered resilience was closely tied to the timing of support. For example, in the case of fertilizer or a voucher for agricultural inputs it was critical for households to access inputs at the ideal point in the planting season. Similarly, when well-timed food support during peak lean season alleviated hunger and loosened budget restrictions, *“It helped us very much because we received the items at a time when we had no food at all. So, we used the food and were able to send the children to school through that support.”* (Female respondent, Village 2).

3.3 Characteristics and capacities associated with resilience

It is also important to better understand the relationship between the unique capacities and resources of different households and their subsequent ability to respond to shocks. Characteristics associated with household resilience were possession of a small business, such as the sale of own produce or handicrafts, sufficient wealth to contract *ganyu*, large land ownership, and the use of agricultural diversification strategies (both upland and wetland cultivation, or household crop production combined with animal husbandry). These characteristics also relied on a diversified approach to livelihoods, as dependence on one means of survival was seen as precarious;

“It means that the budget for their farming does not only lean on one aspect of farm produce (yields), but also they have enough livestock” (Village Chief, male, Village 3).

Possession of a small business enterprise was associated with resilience. The most common businesses involved the sale of garden produce, maize or prepared food snacks such as *mandasi* (doughnuts), groundnuts or rice porridge, firewood, charcoal, handicrafts, tools, animal products or ownership of a bicycle taxi. Some households earned money by purchasing vegetables wholesale and reselling them at retail markets. However, respondents complained that these enterprises required an amount of start-up capital, however small, that households did not possess. They also mentioned the risks and minimal profits associated with these endeavors;

“The business is not working... I cook some kalingonda [hyacinth] beans. I cook them and sell them and the money I get out of it is very small. It cannot even cater for the household needs. You may cook them and sell, you get K700 after selling. So, imagine what K700 can buy. We have so many household needs” (Female head of household, Village 3).

Again, households with multiple income generation opportunities - in this case, several businesses - were considered to be better able to rebound from shocks.

“My husband made plans to get us food...So my husband tried doing business, selling chickens but it was not enough for us to bounce back...some of them [households] have different livestock. It was possible for one household to have three different types of livestock, doing business” (Second wife of Chief, Village 6).

Respondents also identified animal husbandry or ownership of livestock as a key characteristic of resilient households. Livestock were highly valued as a social insurance mechanism, as they could be sold at most times of year and better retained value despite market price volatility. Livestock was widely perceived to be among the best means to buffer against idiosyncratic shocks such as a poor harvest or medical bills, *“It’s more like a backup plan, if they have failed to harvest well they rely on selling the livestock. They can easily contact the butcher man and sell the livestock”* (Village chief, male, Village 2). For example, households reported it was easier to find money from the sales of eggs or goats than from crop sales. In case of an emergency, livestock could also be consumed. However, consumption was considered to be an undesirable choice as livestock had high inherent market value and accessing the staple food, maize, was prioritized over purchasing expensive animal-source foods. A cultural factor related to resilience mentioned by respondents was religion. Whether based in the Christian, Muslim or traditional belief systems, faith was seen to play a role in household resilience during periods of hunger through the maintenance or currying of God’s favor;

“They [households] had problems but God helped them. They grew some irrigated crops and managed to come out successful” (Female head of household, Village 2).

Some households believed God included them in social programs that helped them survive the lean season, or with the timing of the rains or the abundance of the harvests;

“Only a few names were selected as beneficiaries and we considered them lucky. Each time they received the transfers they were sharing with others...So, God really favored us. We had energy to farm until we harvested...With the help of God we managed to survive until we had our crops matured in the farms” (Male respondent, Village 3).

“Some [households] managed to bounce back because of the good rains and they managed to harvest something that God had in store for them” (Male respondent, Village 1).

Social capital, in the form of family support and community sharing, was also considered important to resilience. The level of support provided varied by season and quantity. Kin, whether from the matrilineal line (*mbumba*) or through other familial relationships, provided resources to households particularly during the lean season when they were most needed. *“They shared through the clans. Whenever people received maize, they would remove them from sacks and share using basins”* (Chief, Village 1). Respondents reported that family or community support provided a range of resources including food, cash, fertilizer, seeds, medicine, clothes and soap. Other community members also provided support, for example by sharing small household items or resources from aid programs. On occasion, estranged partners contributed to household needs for children from prior relationships. Social capital contributed to household resilience by providing relational channels through which resources could be accessed. Further insights into sharing dynamics are found in Margolies et al. (forthcoming).

Social capital was also affected by group membership. Village committees and groups such as Community-based Childcare Centers (CBCC) or Village Development Committees (VDC), VSL groups and others provided opportunities for members to participate in local development. CBCCs are community-based preschools that were supported by the NEEP program and were also used as a platform for the intervention. CBCCs were developed to create a space for the promotion of early childhood development as well as for the provision of school meals for young children. CBCCs do not possess paid staff, rather they are built, run and maintained by community volunteers. CBCC committees are groups of volunteers, primarily parents of pre-schoolers, who meet regularly to keep schools functioning and to encourage contributions by others in the village. Members who participated in CBCC committees stated that the primary benefit to volunteering was access to trainings and per diems (cash payments for attendance) and to VSL membership. Parenting trainings were also given to CBCC volunteers in both control and NEEP treatment villages, with NEEP treatment villages receiving additional nutrition and agriculture trainings.

In villages where the NEEP program was being implemented, CBCC committees and VSL groups were purposefully linked by the intervention to make capital available for CBCC and households. Participants in VSL groups in both treatment and control villages said borrowing helped them to be resilient. However, some complained that voluntary participation was mocked by those not serving;

“When people started receiving the seeds they started mocking the committee and sometimes they would say, ‘what do you think you are benefitting from this?’ Look, for us as parents, this is what we are benefitting” (Female head of household, Village 1).

Members reported that non-participating households expressed jealousy over access to trainings or were suspicious that volunteers were being paid;

“No one works for free in this world unless they are serving God...I think there are some people who are benefitting from being volunteers, not through the right way and that is why I think it is not good” (Male respondent, Village 6).

Others, however, valued the less tangible, longer-term benefits of committee participation despite such negative feedback;

“We get insulted by people that we are volunteers, as old as we are we work without pay [laughs]. But for me this also gives me encouragement because it is what I chose to do, to develop our area. Those who do not have CBCC-going children talk more and do not always contribute when we ask for contributions” (First wife of Chief, Village 6).

The importance of social capital extended to family cohesion: separated households or those with relationship conflicts had greater difficulty accessing or sharing resources and in preparing for shocks;

“Life is hard, when two people [husband and wife] have a misunderstanding, things do not go well in the family. Even the children are affected. As you know, farming depends on early land preparation and planting. When you have a disagreement in the household and you spend two days without going to the farm, everything gets messed up and it is hard to correct” (Female respondent, Village 4).

Finally, there were several other characteristics or strategies for resilience that were uncommon but deserve mention. Regular full-time employment was considered a characteristic of resilient households but was rarely mentioned: it is not common for these poor agrarian households to have access to salaried work. Salaried full-time work was highly valued but was considered incompatible with an agricultural livelihood. Other strategies infrequently mentioned in relation to resilience included migration for employment and cash cropping of tobacco or cotton.

3.4 Programmatic approaches to improve resilience

Broadly, households perceived aid as being unpredictable and beyond their control. Respondents rarely knew in advance when interventions would be delivered. Often the transfer composition or type, frequency or delivery method of such support was changed mid-stream without notification to beneficiaries. According to participants, these unpredictable program dynamics made household planning and budgeting extremely difficult. Additionally, beneficiaries reported that aid programs did not eliminate the need to use alternative coping strategies;

“The coupons were just one strategy...Do you think that should stop us from trying our own means of survival?” (Male respondent, Village 3).

That said, respondents also felt that assistance could reduce the severity of coping strategies used or lessened the frequency of use of these strategies. For example, households may rely less on temporary agricultural labor (*ganyu*). In some cases, operational or logistical programmatic hurdles impeded program effectiveness. Finally, as previously documented in earlier work (Margolies et al. 2017), targeting of aid was a topic that continued to generate debate.

Food Insecurity Response Plan (FIRP)

Implementing organization(s)	Implementation timeframe	Study area (coverage)	Aid modalities, restrictions on use, and other details
Government of Malawi; various NGOs	July 2016 – March 2017	6.7 million people targeted; coverage was nearly 40% of population in 20 districts	Mix of in-kind food or cash transfers or some combination of the two; beneficiaries received cereals and oil in-kind, maize vouchers, cash, and/or mobile money

Source: IFPRI 2018, OVP & DoDMA 2016

The FIRP response in the study area was primarily characterized by food transfers. However, the multi-partner engagement in the response resulted in difficulties for respondents to parse out which aid was FIRP versus other programs.

Overall, respondents favorably assessed the program's role in alleviating hunger at a critical time during the humanitarian crisis;

"The major change has been the coming of NGOs who greatly helped us survive the hunger up to this moment" (Village Chief, male, Village 2).

Households reported how the transfer mitigated negative coping strategies by reducing the frequency of *ganyu*, permitting households to work on their own production. Respondents also stated FIRP aided households by giving them energy for productive activities such as farming.

"In October it is usually sunny and you can't go to the garden without eating. In addition, here we usually go to the garden twice, in the morning and afternoon. Without food, it is difficult that you can maintain going twice to the garden...You end up sleeping without working" (Male respondent, Village 3).

FIRP was said to displace or reduce food purchases, alleviating pressure to earn income particularly during the lean season when work opportunities were scarce while permitting purchases of other necessities. "Since we started to benefit from this program, we haven't spent any money on buying food items. It is easy to support the children's school needs. For instance, if they need any money at school, it is easy to support it because we have a basic need - food" (Female respondent, Village 2). Moreover, some households were able to conduct their own business activities, like selling fritters, as their food security was ensured by the transfer.

However, many opinions of FIRP were that the transfer quantity was insufficient. One reason stated for insufficient quantity was household size;

"The food was received and it gave us a start-up food...the quantities were enough for one person to last at least a month but for a household I think it was not enough especially for big families" (Village Chief, male, Village 2).

Another reason given was the dilution of the quantity of food transfers due to sharing with others;

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

The overall number of program beneficiaries was also blamed;

"Nobody was left out and no area was skipped [during first president Kamuzu Banda's era]. But currently, most food support programs have a target figure. I don't know why these changes have emerged. I am not sure whether it is because the population has increased so most organizations feel that they cannot manage" (Village Chief, male, Village 3).

In general, respondents expressed high acceptability of the content of the food basket, especially of the fortified porridge *likuni phala*. A few households acknowledged that while *likuni phala* is best for children, it is also occasionally consumed by adults. The porridge was eaten by adults because it was filling in times of hunger;

"Especially the likuni porridge...is very important to the children as well as to people like us. Sometimes we would eat the porridge and skip lunch. The porridge was enough on its own to sustain you past the lunch time...We used to like it very much" (Male respondent, Village 2).

There was one exception to the acceptability of the foods in the basket – there was a legume type that was unfamiliar to households;

“Some people received the legume type they did not know like Moringa seeds as relish. They had not eaten these legumes before and it was difficult for them to eat these seeds” (Village Chief, male, Village 1).

Several other challenges were noted about FIRP food support. A primary criticism was that while transfers effectively alleviated severe food insecurity on the short term, they did not promote longer-term household resilience.

“When [the] program ends we fall back to hunger” (Male respondent, Village 4).

Beneficiaries continued to maintain the use of various coping strategies, including ganyu, to supplement diets and to provide cash for other non-food purchases like clothes and school supplies. Households expressed a desire to maintain their frugal consumption habits in anticipation of the end of program support. They feared they would be unable to sustain these higher levels of consumption after the aid disappeared.

“We didn’t change our farming crops because the organization only helps you partly. They emphasize that ‘we are not your relatives, and we’re going to help you only for 6 months’...I shouldn’t lie that I changed amount of food I was giving my family because I know that when you change the amount of food you give to your children they will demand for the same amount even when they have stopped giving us the aid. Because you let them get used to it” (Female respondent, Village 3).

Generally, households were focused on making food transfers last longer rather than on increasing the quantity, quality or frequency of meals. While some households reported the food allowed them to increase the size of meals, many were wary of making changes to the amount they consumed;

“If you are used to eating the small quantities and later you change because of the aid; what if the aid stops, can’t this affect you negatively?” (Male respondent, Village 3).

Another obstacle for households was that the distributed maize required milling, which required them to also have cash on hand. The unpredictability of transfer timing also confounded household budgeting and decision-making. Without information on when aid would arrive, respondents found it hard to plan and manage their agricultural production strategies to maximize household food security;

“Sometimes people decide to sell their produce (maize) in April because it is the harvesting period. Without proper planning and budgeting people can oversell the crops and run into hunger” (Female respondent, Village 2).

Although most beneficiaries believed the support came at the right time - when hunger was at its peak - others believed the support arrived too late;

“The time the support came in, we were already suffering...the challenges for last year started soon after harvesting...they started supporting us in September. We did not harvest anything from the gardens so struggled to eat from April to September. This is when they started assisting us” (Female respondent, Village 1).

Despite a general reluctance to complain, respondents openly stated that they believed village heads played a role in determining who received FIRP and other programs. The alleged role of chiefs in selection processes included making judgments on which members were deserving of support and how much support they should receive;

“What the chief did was that everyone should only be in one program. Those in the Disaster Risk Reduction [program] were not supposed to be in MVAC [FIRP]” (Female respondent, Village 6).

Although most households understood and accepted programs targeted to specific but easily identifiable vulnerable groups such as the elderly and disabled, they were often resentful of poverty-based targeting. Official program targeting guidelines were frequently misunderstood and resented. These externally imposed targeting criteria were personalized on village level where resources were often redistributed through relational channels. In some cases, the “chief’s share” of aid was tolerated mainly because households did not want to cause trouble and feared leadership would exclude them from future programs.

“He (chief) wants to receive a bribe as soon as he selects someone to benefit from the program...For instance, whenever you receive some basins of fertilizers, he will ask for a share even though we know he is on a government salary. He always wants people to share with him. So, whenever someone refuses to share with him, the chief will exclude him from every support program...he will say that the individual is disobedient” (Male respondent, Village 2).

Finally, there were three allegations of transfers being siphoned off prior to delivery. Fear of losing access to aid precluded reporting of these incidents to implementers.

“When the monitors came to verify, we still 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. We just made sure they (monitors) heard what they wanted to hear. In most cases, they used to bring the oil that was either half full or three quarters full. Most people thought that those people who were employed to watch over the commodities were responsible for the insufficient cooking oil...But the truth was that the cooking oil came like that from wherever they got it. It came half or three quarters full. Sometimes people said that drivers were responsible” (Male respondent, Village 2).

“During the distribution period, people say that some bags for Likuni and other items from WFP were stolen from the distribution site through the committee. At some point, the committee was charged to pay K3000 in order to replace stolen bags of maize” (Female head, Village 3).

“It [transfer] was enough. But sometimes the bags were not 50 kg and the cooking oil sometimes was not exactly 2 liters. Maybe some people were stealing” (Village Chief, male, Village 6).

Social Cash Transfer Program (SCTP)

Implementing organization(s)	Implementation timeframe	Study area or coverage	Aid modalities, restrictions on use, and other details
Ministry of Gender, Children, Disability and Social Welfare with support from the EU, KfW, Irish Aid and the World Bank, through MASAF IV	Piloted in 2006 2009 - Present	Originally in 18 districts Being scaled up to all 28 districts and 12% of population in 2018	Targets ultra-poor and labour-constrained households; transfer amount depends on household size and # of children enrolled in primary and secondary school Average cash transfer is MWK7,000 (approximately US\$9.50) per household per month

Source: Abdoulayi et al. 2016, EP&D 2018, World Bank 2018

In the study communities, far fewer people benefited from the SCTP than other social programs. According to respondents, however, the targeting of this program was better accepted and there were fewer complaints about beneficiary selection. Many of the female-headed households in the study sample received the SCTP. Both beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries stated that the SCTP was useful and helped recipients cope with difficulty, allowing them to purchase income-generating assets like livestock, fertilizer, and seed. A small number of beneficiaries reported they purchased more diverse foods with the transfer, principally animal-source protein. However, most said that the transfer was too small to allow the household to fully rebound from shocks. The program encourages households to use money for children and school supplies, and many respondents reported spending a part of the transfer on school supplies.

The SCTP was more likely than other social support programs to be associated with punitive measures in the minds of participants. They believed that a beneficiary could be removed from the program if they used the cash transfer for something other than the intended means, such as purchasing food instead of school supplies, or if children did not attend school regularly.

The SCTP bi-monthly delivery was reported to cause problems. Beneficiaries expressed a preference for monthly delivery as it would allow for better planning and could cover intermittent expenses such as school fees. The current timing of transfers resulted in some beneficiaries taking out loans to cover expenses in between transfer receipt.

“They should improve the number of people on the beneficiary list and run the programs at least in regular basis like monthly instead of people receiving money once per every two months. Skipping a month makes the beneficiaries to have many loans which they settle soon after receiving the money because they do not have alternative means of supporting themselves” (Village Chief, male, Village 2).

In terms of sharing practices, the SCTP was less likely than other external aid to be shared with non-beneficiaries. There was some variety in terms of whether the transfer was shared: some respondents reported that the amount of the transfer was too small to share, and handful of others saying there was social pressure from chiefs to share.

“The chief ordered us to share the money from social cash transfer...most of us here grew up with the village norm that give a lot of respect to the chief. We were taught to give respect to the chief, never to argue with the chief and also never to speak back” (Female head of household, Village 3).

Farm Input Subsidy Program (FISP)

Implementing organization(s)	Implementation timeframe	Study area or coverage	Aid modalities, restrictions on use, and other details
Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Water Development	2004-Present	900,000 smallholder farmers nationwide	Each beneficiary received one coupon to buy a 50 kg bag of NPK and one for a 50 kg bag of Urea (fertilizers), as well as one coupon for 5 kg of maize or sorghum seed and another for 2 kg of legume seed.

Source: EP&D 2018.

Households showed strong preferences for inorganic fertilizers – inputs considered indispensable to high agricultural yields. Households also believed resilience was linked to fertilizer access. Households purchased or took out loans to access additional fertilizer, fearing meager harvests. Few households reported a preference for using manure - it was primarily employed as a last resort or as a means to extend limited quantities of shared fertilizers.

“Due to the village arrangements, people start sharing a bag of fertilizer because they want everyone to benefit from the inputs. Knowing that people have big gardens, they start making manure to supplement the fertilizers they have received” (Female head, Village 3).

FISP was an example of a program that recently reformed the selection process, resulting in diminishing the role of the chief during beneficiary selection. Targeting was centralized and the process was based on computerized selection. Selection processes excluding chiefs and engaging communities could help promote transparency and avoid manipulation of benefit distribution.

“In the past chiefs had to keep grudges with people that if the aid comes you will see. But that is no longer the case now because they do no longer take part.” (Female respondent, Village 3).

That said, opinions of the new FISP targeting approach were mixed. Respondents considered the computer database to be outdated, particularly in accurately tracking households who migrated in or out of the community. This also led to confusion about names being eliminated from the list and differing views on how targeting worked;

“The file that came 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 the fertilizer” (First wife of Chief, Village 6).

Inevitably, the targeting process lent itself to complaints and demands for increased coverage;

“The process of selecting people is not good because the number is so small and this brings problems in the village. Some even insult the chief that he is the one who has left people out. We also cannot say that the government should stop this because they are helping only a few people. We can only ask the government to bring more so that they can help a lot of people...a good way would be everyone should be receiving this transfer. These programs come to the villages and so everyone should take part in it” (Male respondent, Village 4).

Extension workers respondents associated with FISP demonstrated new agricultural techniques, emphasizing hybrid crop varieties over local varieties. Households noted issues with these crops, such as the fact that hybrid varieties produced flour with a shorter shelf life. Respondents also said fertilizer prices increased, so they often paid from their own pockets in addition to FISP coupons to purchase inputs.

“Sometimes we had to bribe the people selling to buy the fertilizer. Other times the fertilizer could end while we are waiting in line. There was also a time that the fertilizer was bought at a higher price than what we were supposed to pay for. It was at MK 11000 such that the elderly or the very poor could not afford it and were selling the coupons. We took all these issues to the chief. I did not see that they were resolved. Some people said that we should have gone to the police” (Female respondent, Village 5).

In one case, a different approach for FISP distribution increased access to villagers and prevented vendor capture;

“It is mainly about accessing the fertilizers. Sometimes it happens that vendors have access to subsidized fertilizers while the rest of the people [farmers] have no access to the subsidized fertilizers. This time, the fertilizers were bought through villages. Villages were called out to go and buy fertilizers on particular days. In some areas, people were assisted by the Members of Parliaments...This was very organized” (Female head of household, Village 1).

However, there were still complaints over accessibility due to vendors purchasing fertilizer at depots. There were several reports of falsified inputs associated with the program: fertilizer bags infiltrated with sand and provision of fake seeds.

Public Works: Malawi Social Action Fund (MASAF IV) & Food for Assets (WFP and Save the Children)

Implementing organization(s)	Implementation timeframe	Study area or coverage	Aid modalities, restrictions on use, and other details
MASAF IV - Local Development Fund (LDF)	Sept 2014-Present	Expected to reach 4.1 million beneficiaries nationally	Public works program provides cash transfers provides to poor households with labor capacity in exchange for work on community projects Daily wage rate is 900 MWK for up to 48 days
Food for Assets - World Food Program (WFP)	2014-2018	132,000	Public works program providing food transfers (30 kg maize, 8 kg supercereal, 1.1 kg oil, 6 kg pulses) to poor households with labor capacity in exchange for work on productive assets to build resilience
Source: EP&D 2018, World Bank 2018, Reliefweb 2018, WFP 2018.			

In the study area, public works programs supported community projects such as public works including road repair or reforestation activities. The regular schedule of work activities was appreciated by respondents because they were guaranteed payment after working the expected number of days (approximately a month).

Respondents also appreciated that the public works supported local development work and contrasted them with receiving direct unconditional food transfers. However, it was noted the projects did not always reflect village-level priorities as activities were allocated at a higher administrative level;

“The food for work program was the most important one because it encouraged us to develop our village instead of encouraging handouts which could have made us lazy...I would appreciate if they encouraged us to help each other within the village. For instance, help to repair the elderly homes instead of just focusing on the roads.” (Chief, Village 2).

For the FFA program, people were reluctant to share the food payments from the program because they worked to receive them. These payments were provided in a form similar to a food aid basket and included bulk dry goods including maize. Participants doing the labor resented the fact that people benefited from the payments without doing the work. However, encouragement from local leaders pressured some participants into sharing benefits, particularly if the labor was shouldered by both parties;

“The chief knowing that more households were at risk of dying [from] hunger if there was no sharing, decided to call [on] those people who refused to share. He asked them to share some days to their friends so that they all work on the village projects and then share the food at the end. They finally accepted and we used to share. Whoever receives something would share to a friend just like that up to now” (Male respondent, Village 2).

Some respondents reported that public works programs allowed them to do less *ganyu* and thus focus on their own gardens, because the work required was not taxing (only 2-3 hours' worth) and because they received food or cash to buy food.

For MASAF, an issue that participants struggled with was the payment schedule: it took too long to get paid in cash. Participants were only paid after finishing all the work days, which took at least one month. Additionally, cash payments were not adjusted to market price increases. In the meantime, they said they had to borrow money or take out loans to bridge the gap – realities which respondents said prevented potential improvements in resilience. Upon receipt of the transfer, the entire allotment was sometimes required to repay loans and interest, resulting in households not rebounding as anticipated.

“We were still waiting for payments so we had to do everything possible to get money for food. So, we were still doing ganyu” (First wife of Chief, Village 6).

“In the process of waiting to get the money the people get in loans. Sometimes these loans are a lot that when they receive they just pay back the loan and the money ends there. So the person do not even change they just stay the same” (Chief, Village 4).

On the whole, similar to the criticisms of FIRP, households felt the program did not sufficiently address longer-term resilience;

“It [our household] has never been resilient afterwards. We always fail to get back to where we were. Because we started buying everything for ourselves now. We went back to where we were before the aid” (Female respondent, Village 3).

In both the MASAF and FFA programs, in some cases work days were informally split into groups so more people could benefit. For example, in one village work for MASAF was split with each participant receiving MK7,000 instead of the full monthly payment of MK14,000. In an FFA village, beneficiaries shared work and food payments;

“I’m not a direct beneficiary, someone receives and gives me 3 basins...I no longer go there...It’s other people’s turn. We have given them an opportunity to also work on the program and receive. They will then share us the food” (Male respondent, Village 2).

Another case concerned the sole polygamous household. In this household, the two wives related that they were better able to control a food transfer than cash. A switch by the NGO from food to mobile cash payments resulted in the husband confiscating the phone, and ultimately the cash, for his own use;

“When we used to receive maize I was able to take it to the maize mill myself and see how we have used the flour. But when we started receiving cash my husband started getting it and I do not know how he uses the money” (Second wife of Chief, Village 6).

The Nutrition Embedded Evaluation Program (NEEP)

Implementing organization(s)	Implementation timeframe	Study area or coverage	Aid modalities, restrictions on use, and other details
Save the Children	October 2015- November 2016	1,200 households in Zomba District	Integrated nutrition-sensitive agriculture program: Promoted increased household and CBCC level production of nutritious foods (provided seeds, agricultural and nutrition training, chickens) Encouraged community contributions of labor and food at the CBCC level for pre-schoolers
Source: Save the Children			

Although respondents noted the critical importance of humanitarian aid such as FIRP, programs that were livelihoods-focused were seen as particularly helpful to improving household resilience. Households who participated in the NEEP program were interviewed so as to contrast their experiences with the humanitarian programs. NEEP households, as with the rest of the sample, were first asked to list any social support programs they participated in, and then were asked similar follow up questions for those programs and subsequently for the NEEP program.

The NEEP program was valued by participants for the focus on capacity-building and bolstering livelihood strategies;

“The NEEP program comes with extension advice while other programs bring handouts. The handouts make people to be lazy while NEEP help people to be self-dependent” (Female respondent, Village 2).

In particular, respondents reported that capacity-building activities helped them learn improved agricultural techniques (i.e. ridge spacing, use of manure) for household production of nutritious foods and improved nutrition practices (i.e. improving meals for children in the household and through preschool food provision and preparation);

“We are currently working on the ridge spacing for almost every crop because of NEEP...when we learnt the new ways of planting this maize, the yield has changed and we are currently harvesting more” (Female respondent, Village 1).

Seed distribution was also highly valued and improved household resilience through seed sharing;

“It has helped because of the seed that they distributed. They gave it to 30 households and the 30 households passed it on to other people. So, three quarters of the households in the village have the seed” (Female head of household, Village 4).

Households interviewed in treatment villages valued these investments but acknowledged problems with sustainability as weather conditions and lack of income precluded them from maintaining some practices. Further qualitative results from this sample from the NEEP evaluation can be found in Margolies and Aberman 2016.

3.5 Community feedback on resilience programs

On the whole, respondents struggled with providing program feedback. Beneficiaries felt it was inappropriate to criticize free support. *“Even a beggar doesn’t dictate what he needs to be given”* (Male respondent, Village 1). This reticence extended to giving input on preferences, such as which foods should be included in aid baskets. Respondents presumed that their feedback would not influence programming;

“We did not have any control on whatever they brought. Our role was to receive the transfers. If people spent a lot of money to organize our support, we cannot start controlling them on what to bring” (Female respondent, Village 2).

Their reluctance to provide input is notable and suggests organizations may not receive honest feedback, precluding client-informed improvements to programs. Households also reported they were rarely given opportunities to provide feedback or to report problems;

“Whenever there are some problems, it becomes very difficult to report. The problem is where to report. We don’t know where to go and report. The chief maybe the one causing the problems, how can you go there again to report?” (Male respondent, Village 3).

In those locations where transparency mechanisms like suggestion boxes existed, complaints were not submitted for the following reasons: 1) support is free thus it should not be criticized/beneficiaries should not be ungrateful; 2) fear of social repercussions/privacy concerns; 3) fear of affecting aid flow; 4) the feeling that external resources are beyond their control; 5) beneficiary opinions are not considered/programs are imposed;

“They gave us the contact numbers which we were supposed to call and report any malpractice. But there is nothing I did because sometimes you can talk about what is happening around. Alright, one day they told us that if you talk too much, one day you will lock yourselves up” (Female respondent, Village 3).

“They came to us with this program and I feel like I don’t have the right to complain about it. Maybe the chief can do that” (Female respondent, Village 5).

Those issues actually reported to NGOs were blatant cases of corruption such as people benefiting from MASAF without contributing labor or chiefs demanding bribes. An exception was the WFP suggestion box, which was used to report operational issues of delayed payments. Even chiefs feared denouncing problems, for example in reporting illicit behavior by police in the administration of FISP;

“Sometimes what happens is that people may see the problems but not have a way of reporting because they do not know where to report. We may run to the police to report this but then sometimes we could find the police there taking the vendors coupon to help them to buy the fertilizer. It was hard to report to the same police who we saw helping in the practice” (Village Chief, male, Village 4).

4. DISCUSSION

Externally driven conceptualizations of resilience are based on the understanding of a system that suffers from external shocks and stresses, and the subsequent ability of individuals, households or communities to respond to those shocks. Resilience frameworks, as well as the broader social-ecological model upon which they are based, give lesser attention to the influence of endogenous dynamics within groups or regions, factors that strongly affect vulnerability and the capacity to respond to shocks (Gaillard 2010). Differentiation between the responses of households within the same community are affected by individual and household characteristics, as seen in a case in southern Malawi where political, social and ethnic dynamics affected the response to a flood (Harrison and Chiroro 2017). These responses are also strongly affected by local system dynamics such as power relationships directing resource distribution.

Recent scholarship calls for political considerations around issues of power and the role it plays in affecting resilience (Ingalls and Stedman 2016). This leads to two observations that reflect our results and conclusions: 1) the social construction of resilience is often overlooked, with external definitions of resilience taking precedence over those of the community; and 2) local power dynamics play an underestimated, yet critical role in building resilience, both in vulnerability and responses to shocks. First, locally-constructed perceptions and interpretations of resilience may differ from external organizations’ definitions and expectations, the latter of which guide program design and targeting. Therefore, resilience programs often fail to meet community expectations conceptually or logistically. While humanitarian interventions can be effective during crises by providing important protective effects, in the eyes of respondents these interventions may not foster resilience or sustainable livelihoods. Households seek to avoid dependence on aid and problems with sustainability raise the question of how programs can effectively contribute to longer-term resilience;

“We are thankful that we receive this support. But when this program ends I will not have anything and there will be nothing that I can point to [to] show that I was being supported by that program” (Second wife of Chief, Village 6).

Programs promoting income generation activities may better align to local interpretations of resilience. A focus on livelihoods also aligns well with the revised MNSSP II, which aims to support livelihood enhancement through training, enterprise and human capital development to improve access to health, nutrition and education (World Bank 2018).

Further, better consultation and communication with communities on program timing, design features and delivery processes could improve effectiveness as well as the perception of programs in the communities they serve;

“I think these things need to be talked about. I know some departments meet now and again to talk about problems. But with this program there was no sitting down to talk about things. If there could be that chance then things would have been going well. People would sit together and figure out how best to run the program” (Male respondent, Village 5).

In addition, while coverage by several programs in similar areas may appear necessary in a crisis, program overlap creates opportunities for confusion, anxiety and discord over issues such as targeting.

Respondents felt programs were imposed upon them - and as beneficiaries, had specific suggestions for improvements. Although programs were designed to support the communities they serve, this problem originates from treating participants as aid beneficiaries rather than as clients. Programs must be better tailored to the needs of clients, including better solicitation of feedback, considering beneficiary costs and local norms. To this end, program transparency mechanisms must be greatly improved. Organizations must develop better ways to solicit this information despite beneficiaries' reluctance to provide it. Another area for improvement is to anticipate beneficiary costs during the design phase or explicitly explain these costs to beneficiaries at the outset of program implementation. For example, respondents mentioned financial and time costs such as milling, veterinary treatment, costs of transfer delays, and transport to attend trainings or to receive transfers. The opportunity costs to beneficiaries for program participation should also be examined, as activities could lessen time for household productive activities respondents see as critical to longer-term resilience. Further, NGOs could also better tailor transfers to local preferences;

“They used to give us pigeon peas, so we eat and feel good. So, they should research on the preference of the people of the areas. We liked the pigeon peas [but] not the other legumes” (Female respondent, Village 3).

To address the second concern, NGOs and the government should consider adapting to local practices and norms or acknowledge them explicitly in program design. For example, family support and sharing are important factors in household resilience and also play a cultural role in this context;

“Each time the program comes here, they usually tell us in advance that they want 80 or 90 people. Do you think we can tell them that we need 100 people? It is not possible. We just do what they want. We work according to their figure. So later, we sit down and say, what should we do in order to reach to more people? So, we make sure that two people share each bag so that everyone benefit” (Male respondent, Village 2).

Not surprisingly, most program policies that attempt to prevent sharing appear to be, on the whole, ineffective.

Still at issue, however, is the limitation of the chief's power to force sharing or to redistribute resources. Limiting resource co-optation would clearly be beneficial. In practice, however, this proves difficult without improved monitoring and a better understanding of local power dynamics. Literature focusing on the disaster response and resettlement process in Malawi in 2015-16 found that elite capture occurred in spite of measures to prevent it (Kita 2018). Another means to attempt to evade resource diversion could be through targeting that is inclusive of all households in a community or area rather than by individual household poverty status. A recent analysis found food insecurity to be concentrated in narrowly defined geographical areas in Malawi that are affected by local covariate shocks (Knippenberg et al. 2018).

One effort already underway to improve the targeting and delivery of social support programs in Malawi is the creation of a comprehensive electronic registry, the Universal Beneficiary Registry (UBR). The UBR was designed to improve the reach of social support programs to the poorest. The registry has potential to improve the verification of targeting but would not preclude resource diversion post-distribution. Recent scholarship suggests that providing public information on social programs to beneficiaries and others has the potential to increase the amount of support the beneficiaries actually receive, presumably by increasing bargaining power relative to local leaders (Banerjee et al. 2018). However, the UBR appears to centralize information on a platform accessible to those involved in distribution rather than to intended recipients. Although improved tracking of beneficiaries has tangible benefits for transparency, this could be a missed opportunity to improve service delivery by providing beneficiaries with information on the actual benefits they are assigned to receive. Public information on the quantity of social support resources to be received by each recipient, for example, could allow villagers greater negotiating power with chiefs who attempt to divert resources. Finally, further discussions on elite capture and targeting approaches can be found in other research from this project (Margolies et al. 2017; Duchoslav et al. 2018; Margolies et al. forthcoming).

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