

Malawi

February 2016: Increases in food insecurity as food prices spike

Highlights

- **Negative coping levels have worsened throughout the country largely due to February's record high maize prices.**
- **Manual labour wage is lower because the continued insufficient rain has depressed labour demand. Purchasing power has decreased in tandem with food prices spiralling upward across the country. Delayed planting and expected lower than average crop production will likely exacerbate food insecurity.**
- **Respondents' sentiment has significantly deteriorated since last month, particularly in the central region as it experiences rainfall deficits and high food commodity prices.**

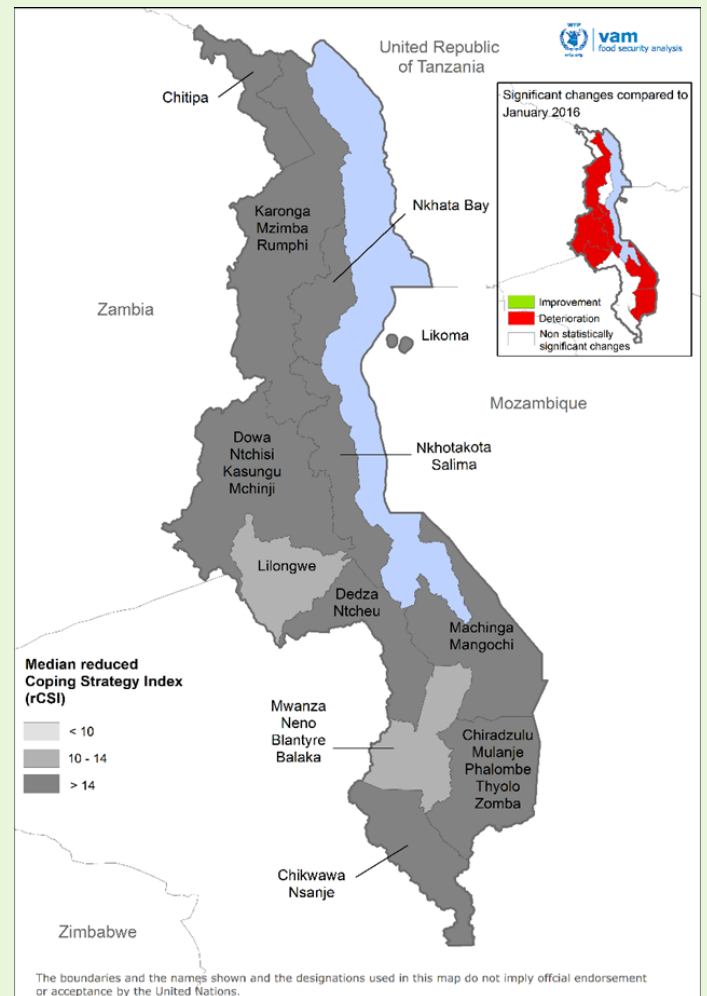
Methodology

February 2016 marked the third monthly round of remote data collection. The survey was conducted using text messaging (SMS) from February 5th to 11th 2016, reaching 3677 households. Participants were randomly selected from a national database of mobile subscribers. Respondents opted in to the SMS survey and were asked questions on socio-demographics, coping behaviour and manual labour wages as well as an open-ended question on food security. To increase completion rates an airtime credit incentive of US 50 cents was provided to respondents who successfully completed the survey. WFP Malawi's in-house call centre has been operational since the end of December 2015 and is collecting weekly information from key informants on food commodity prices (maize, cow peas, pigeon peas and beans), food availability and market accessibility. The call centre is also monitoring new admissions to nutrition programmes by contacting 70 health facilities in seven districts (Phalombe, Chikwawa, Mulanje, Nsanje, Kasungu, Balaka and Karonga). By-weekly phone surveys are conducted to capture acutely malnourished children aged 6-59 months, adolescents' and adults' admissions to Supplementary Feeding, OTP, Antiretroviral Therapy (ART) and TB Programmes. It is acknowledged that the SMS and phone surveys contain inherent response biases towards better-off and literate households. Due to the possible biases in the data, this bulletin avoids giving precise estimates of food insecurity, but rather captures patterns and trends. Additional information on methodology is available in the first bulletin and online (<https://resources.vam.wfp.org/>).

Seasonal update

El Niño is set to have a devastating impact on harvests and food security throughout Southern Africa. In Malawi, the southern region has experienced the driest rainfall season since 1981, and the central region has also registered severe rainfall deficits. The lack of rain in these two regions- the main maize producing zones- mean that a poor harvest in 2016 is likely. Maize prices were already at record highs in January in Malawi, and due to a poor harvest last year, maize stocks throughout Southern Africa are already low. The number of people in need of food assistance is expected to increase. Source: [Joint statement by FAO, EC-JRC, FEWS NET and WFP, WFP Seasonal Monitor](#)

Figure 1: Median rCSI map by aggregated district



Source: WFP mVAM, February 2016

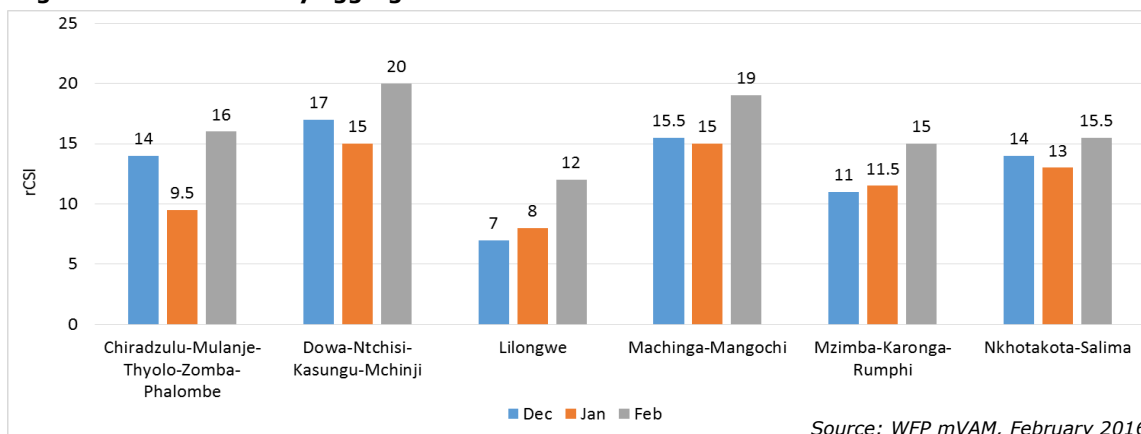
Coping levels deteriorate throughout the country

Nationally, the median reduced coping strategy index (rCSI) was 16 in February 2016, a significant increase from January's rCSI of 11 ($p < 0.05$).

The central region had the highest rCSI at 17, followed by the southern region at 16 in and the northern region at 15. Notably, most districts in the south, centre and north were observed to have experienced a significant deterioration in terms of negative coping since January.

Figure 2 shows the statistically significant rCSI changes between January and February. Chiradzulu-Mulanje-Thyolo-Zomba-Phalombe experienced the highest rCSI increase (68%) from January's 9.5 to February's 16 ($p < 0.05$), followed by Lilongwe (50% increase although its rCSI remained relatively low at 12) and Mzimba-Karonga-Rumphi (30% increase) ($p < 0.05$). Households in Dowa-Ntchisi-Kasungu-Mchinji were most likely to resort to negative coping (rCSI of 20) followed by those in Dedza-Ntcheu and Machinga-Mangochi. Chikwawa-Nsanje closely followed with rCSI level of 19 and 18 respectively. The national level deterioration in rCSI levels is likely attributable to the lean season and record high food commodity prices which will be elaborated on later in the markets section.

Figure 2: Median rCSI by aggregated district

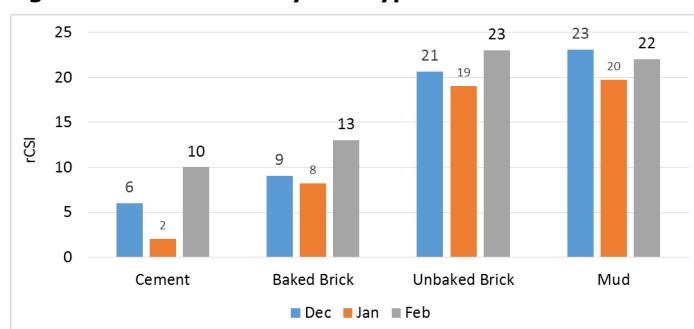


Negative coping levels rise across all wealth groups

In Malawi, wall type, based on housing in the 2008 Census, is used as a proxy for household wealth.

While in January there were statistically significant improvements in rCSI for respondents with mud and cement walls ($p < 0.05$), by February coping levels had significantly deteriorated throughout all wealth groups ($p < 0.05$). Notably, the wealthiest group (cement walls) experienced a 400% rise in their rCSI, while respondents with baked brick walls also experienced a 59% increase. This indicates that deteriorating food availability and access is now even hitting the least vulnerable households.

Figure 3: Median rCSI by wall type



High rate of maize price rises persist through February

In 17 monitored hotspot districts the price of maize rose by 37% between January and February. At district level the steepest increases were observed in Karonga and Ntchisi, which experienced 57% and 53% increases respectively. In February, prices were collected from two new districts of Thyolo and Balaka. The highest prices per 1kg of maize were observed in Thyolo (MWK 285), Balaka (MWK 270), Zomba (MWK 265), Mulanje (MWK 265) and Karonga (MWK 265), and the lowest in Chitipa district (MWK 196). All respondents from Thyolo, Balaka, Zomba, Mulanje and Karonga reported a lack of maize availability for weeks, versus none from Chitipa.

Almost all prices observed were 2-3 times higher than the prices in February last year. Several factors have combined to cause these hikes including prolonged unavailability of maize in most districts and poor harvest due to erratic rains. As seen in **figure 4**, southern districts were more likely to experience high maize prices, similar to last round.

Figure 4: Price increase of 1kg of maize across districts, 1 Feb 2016 – 8 Feb 2016

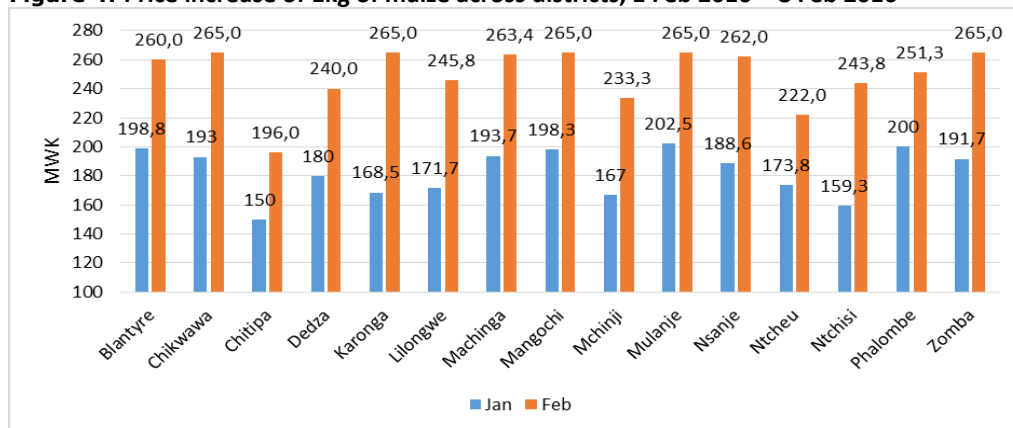


Figure 5: Food commodity prices by region, 1 Feb 2016 – 8 Feb 2016

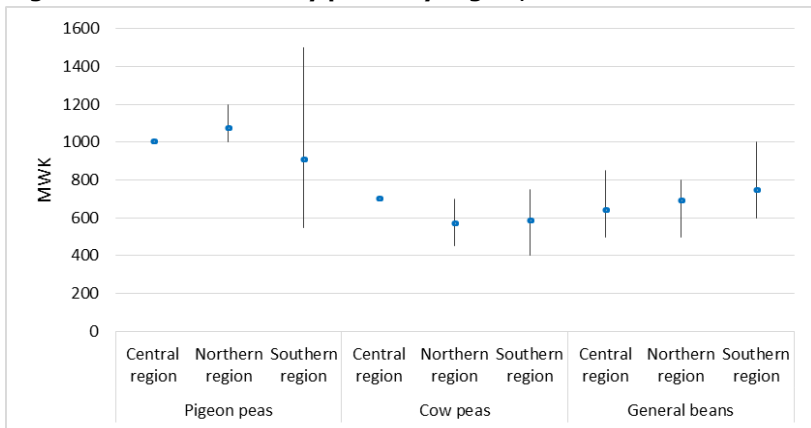
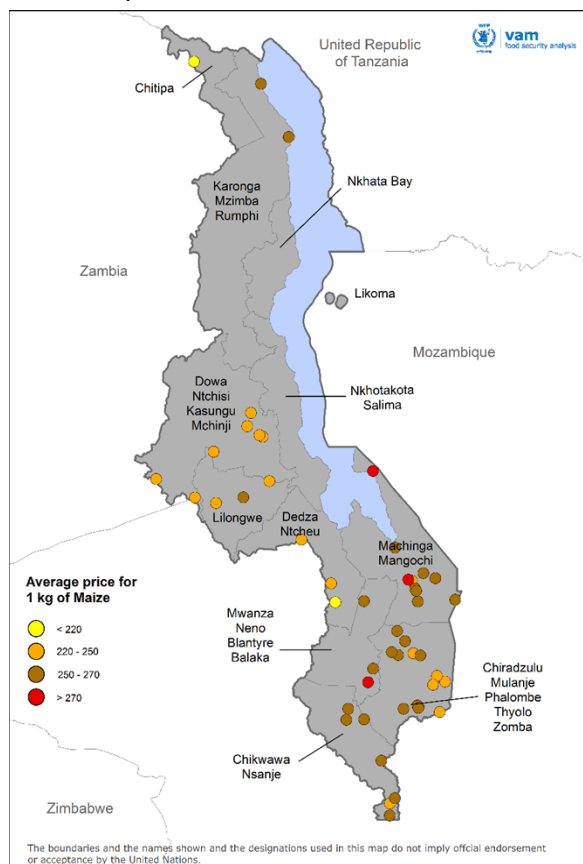


Figure 6: Average 1kg of maize price in markets, 1 Feb 2016 – 8 Feb 2016



Source: WFP mVAM, February 2016

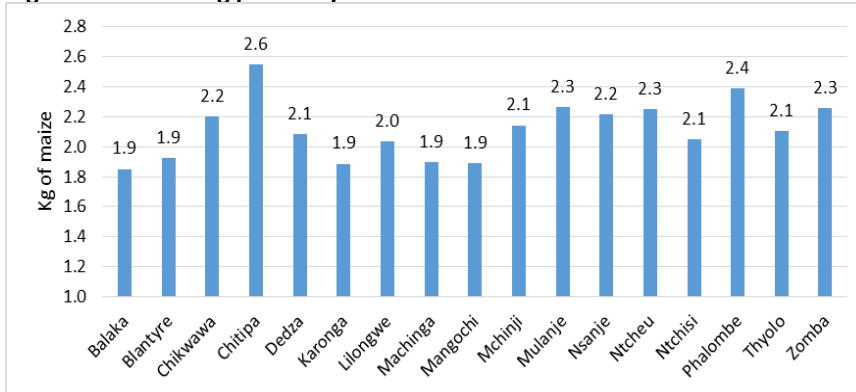
As seen in **figure 5**, southern districts, still most affected by insufficient food supplies, continued to experience higher prices of pigeon peas (reaching up to MWK 1500), cow peas and general beans (up to MWK 1000) and the largest spread in their prices. Higher maize prices can also be observed in the markets of southern districts as seen in **figure 6**.

Purchasing power falls throughout the country

The national median manual labour wage remained at the level of MWK 500, which is not a significant difference from January. Manual labour wage in Blantyre-Mwanza-Neno-Balaka decreased significantly by 10%, from MWK 552.5 in January to MWK 500 in February (p < 0.05). This fall is likely linked to the end of the peak labour demand season at the end of January.

Purchasing power has dropped by 20 to 30 percent since January, likely because of the steep increase in maize prices throughout the country coupled with the end of the peak demand for labour. Dryer conditions and poor crop development due to the continued El Niño effect have also diminished labour opportunities. The southern districts of Balaka, Karonga, Machinga and Mangochi have the lowest purchasing power at 1.9 kg of maize per day. Although Chitipa district has a lower manual labour wage of MWK 500 per day, it has the highest purchasing power (2.6) because of the relatively low maize price in the area.

Figure 7: Purchasing power by district



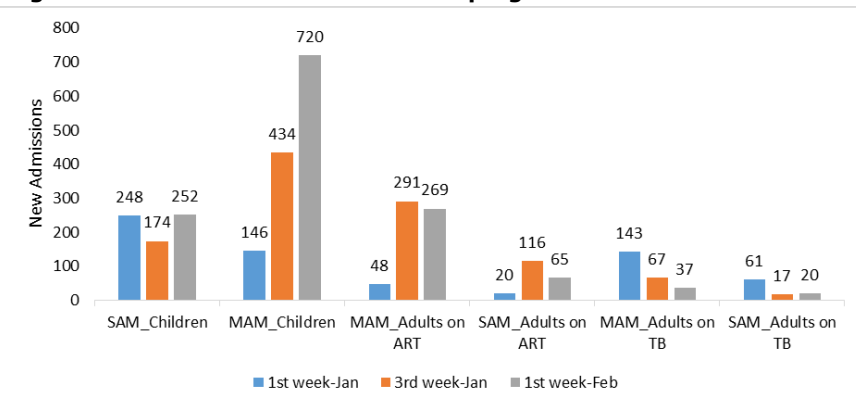
Source: WFP mVAM, February 2016

Nutrition monitoring

Figure 8 below indicates that the trend of admissions for severely malnourished (SAM) children, adolescents and adults fluctuated over the past five weeks of data collection, with high increases noted for moderately malnourished (MAM) children (quadrupling between the first and third week in January with a further 66% increase in the first week of February). Similarly, there was a drastic increase (near fivefold) in the percentage of malnourished adults on Antiretroviral Therapy (ART) between the first and third week of January.

The drastic increase in malnourished children may be explained by the increasing number of monthly mass screening started in December 2015 by the Ministry of Health after the support they received from UNICEF for the Community Management of Acute Malnutrition (CMAM) and WFP supported Nutrition Care Support and Treatment programmes to detect cases that were otherwise not reporting to facilities for various reasons. Mass screening ensures that moderate cases do not become severe. Treating severe malnutrition costs three times as much as treating moderate malnutrition (\$110 vs \$50) and for every severely malnourished child, there are 3-4 children with MAM. Both these initiatives provide useful data for monitoring the impact of food insecurity, as well as improving case finding for children requiring health and nutrition services and the additional resource required to meet the demand.

Figure 8: New admissions to nutrition programmes



Source: WFP nutrition, February 2016

Perceptions of food security

In this round as in the last round, maize was the most frequently mentioned word. In February, a striking 40% of the respondents mentioned maize in their responses, a 20% increase compared with the last round, and nearly all of the open ended responses regarding maize related to the unavailability of maize, lack of maize in ADMARC depots (2nd most mentioned), and maize prices being too expensive (3rd most mentioned). While the lack of maize and the high food price is not new, the word cloud this round suggests that respondents are suffering considerably more as a result of the prolonged situation.

Perceptions of food security decline significantly throughout the country

Significant deteriorations of sentiment score have been observed throughout the country. The central, northern and southern regions all experienced significant decreases in the sentiment score, with the latter still having the lowest sentiment score of -0.11. Notably, sentiment score has worsened by 90% in the central region ($p < 0.05$), reaching -0.10 from last round's -0.05, just behind the sentiment score of the southern region. This is in line with other observations that the central region, as well as the southern region, is significantly affected by food insecurity and drought. In particular, Lilongwe experienced a significant drop of 176% from January's -0.04 to -0.12.

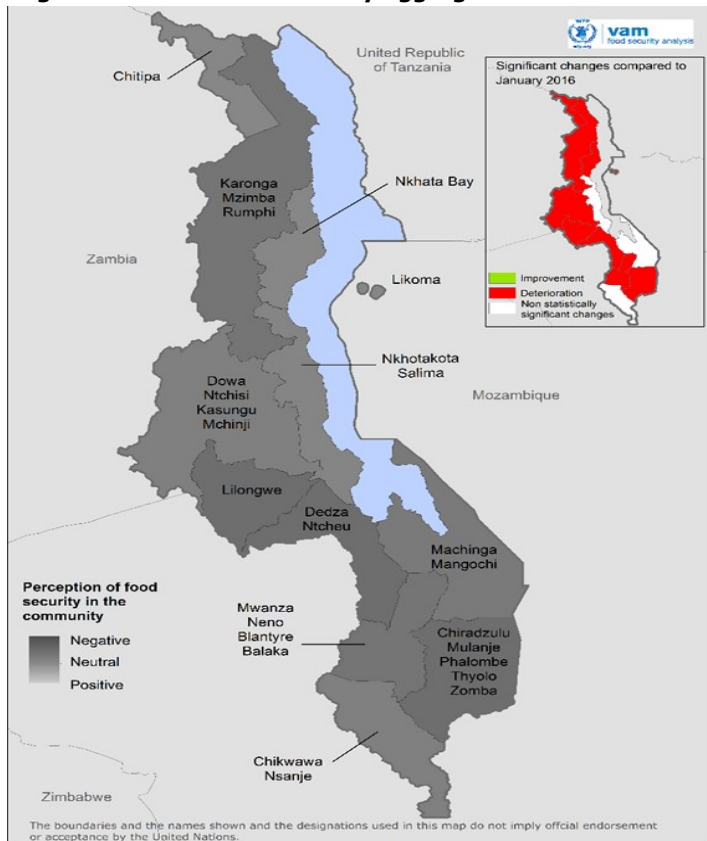
The sentiment score of the wealthiest portion of the population (with cement walls) fell by 118%, reaching -0.11 from last month's -0.05. This is in line with the observation above that the the least vulnerable in terms of wealth are also being affected by food insecurity.

Figure 9: General wordcloud



Source: WFP mVAM, February 2016

Figure 10: Sentiment score by aggregated district



Source: WFP mVAM, February 2016

In the words of the respondents

- 'A bag of maize is MWK 15,000.' – Female respondent from Mangochi
- 'One of the worst situations I have ever experienced. We are sleeping at Admarc depots but we end up not buying maize.' – Male respondent from Karonga
- 'Almost 95% have no food to feed their families. The crisis of little rainfall this year will lead to a continuous hunger problem.' – Male respondent from Neno
- 'People are eating maize husks and some have deserted to Zambia to look for piece works.' – Female respondent from Kasungu

Conclusion

Various factors are working against the food security situation in Malawi. On top of being a lean season, labour demand has decreased, and maize unavailability continues. Record high maize prices are alarming, contributing to the increase of negative coping and decrease of purchasing power throughout most districts. As harvest season approaches in April, the food security situation is expected to improve temporarily. However, with the continued El Niño effect delaying planting and affecting crop yields, a smaller than average green harvest is expected.

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