Food security continues to deteriorate in most parts of the country, but humanitarian assistance brings relief to Nsanje and Chikwawa

Key points:

Food security continues to worsen in most parts of Malawi. However, the start of humanitarian assistance in July in the southern districts of Nsanje and Chikwawa has reduced negative coping levels there.

Maize prices stabilized but remained high in August; purchasing power was also stable but extremely weak for the most vulnerable.

The nominal prices of maize and pulses continue to be higher in the southern districts most severely affected by the drought.

Situation Update

The Malawi Vulnerability Assessment Committee forecasts that 6.5 million people will not be able to meet their annual minimum food requirements in the 2016/17 consumption season. As per the national 2016 Food Insecurity Response Plan, humanitarian assistance to 24 districts will be phased in. Meanwhile, the food security cluster has started providing humanitarian food assistance to three districts in the south (Nsanje in July, and Chikwawa and Balaka in August) on a half-ration basis due to a funding gap.

(Sources: Malawi Vulnerability Assessment Committee, National Food and Nutrition Security Forecast: April 2016 to March 2017; and National Food Insecurity Response Plan)
Nationally, the median reduced Coping Strategies Index (rCSI) increased from 23 to 26 between July and August, with 91 percent of households engaging in at least one negative food-related coping strategy. Because of a lack of food, 94 percent of respondent households borrowed food in the seven days preceding the survey; 97 percent ate less expensive food; 95 percent ate smaller portions or fewer meals a day; and 91 percent restricted adult food consumption to allow children to eat (Figure 1).

August mVAM data shows that the rCSI increased by 1.5 to 6.3 points from July levels in almost all district aggregations, indicating worsening food insecurity across the country. In contrast, in the district aggregation of Nsanje and Chikwawa, rCSI fell 3.5 points compared to July, thanks to humanitarian assistance that began in July (Map 1).

Food insecurity rising even in better-off households

House wall types are used as a proxy indicator to determine a household’s socio-economic status. Since May 2016, the rCSI for both the worst-off households and those better-off has been increasing steadily. As expected, better-off households have been resorting significantly less to coping strategies compared with those worse-off (Figure 2).

1 The reduced coping strategies index expresses the frequency and severity of the mechanisms that households use to access food. The more negative coping strategies households implement, the higher the rCSI.
Maize prices stabilise but remain high

Average maize prices have been stable since July 2016 due to less competition for the grain in the market from state actors and private grain processors. In addition, some private traders have switched to trading pigeon peas or sunflower seeds.

As per seasonal trends, maize prices peaked in February 2016 (MK265/kg) during the lean season, then started decreasing in March as households resorted to eating green maize. However, prices started to pick up earlier than usual because of supply constraints caused by El Niño-induced low production (Figure 4). In August, maize prices averaged around MK231/kg, which was 88 percent higher than the average in August last year and 118 percent higher than the three-year average. In August, the price of pigeon peas was almost the same in central and southern regions, while general beans remained more expensive in the southern region compared to the other two regions (Figure 5).

Women headed households have had higher levels of negative coping than those led by men since April 2016. rCSI for both households led by men and women has increased continuously since April 2016 (Figure 3).
Purchasing power remains stable in most parts of the country, but deteriorates in some districts within Southern region

Purchasing power remained stable in most parts of the monitored districts thanks to relatively stable maize prices in the four weeks of August, except in the southern districts of Machinga and Mangochi. Chitipa had the highest purchasing power of 3.38 kg of maize per day’s labour, compared with 3.17 kg of maize as observed in the previous month (Figure 6).

Fewer new admissions for moderate acute malnutrition (MAM) and severe acute malnutrition (SAM)

To monitor the nutrition situation in Malawi during the emergency response, a sentinel surveillance approach was considered. While 70 sites were identified for data collection every two weeks in 7 districts, only 41 sites consistently provided data between January and June. By July, the remaining 29 sites had started reporting consistently and will therefore be included in the trend analysis. Thus, the trend from January to June is based on admissions in 41 sites, and the trend from July to August includes 29 additional sites. With support from UNICEF, monthly mass screenings were being conducted to identify cases of SAM and MAM. The screenings did not take place in June, July and August, but they are expected to restart in September.

Figure 7 shows that the trend in new admissions per month declined from March to June. However, because of the increase in sentinel sites from 41 to 70, the graph shows a rise in new admissions from June to July 2016.

Figure 8 indicates a decline in new admissions from July to August for most programme components. Among children, there was a 14 percent fall in SAM new admissions and a 5.9 percent for MAM. For Anti-Retroviral Therapy (ART) adolescents and adults, there was a 17 percent decrease in MAM admissions. For adolescents and adults with Tuberculosis (TB), MAM admissions dropped by 9.4 percent and SAM admissions by 5.9 percent. This is attributed to the fact that the monthly mass screening did not take place during these months. It is planned to restart in September.

Source: mVAM / August 2016

SAM: Severe Acute Malnutrition. MAM: Moderate Acute Malnutrition. ART: Antiretroviral therapy. TB: Tuberculosis
Households concerned about food shortages

When asked about their perception of food security in their community, many households reported shortages of food as one of the main concern. They also said that maize was expensive in local markets (Figure 9).

In the words of the respondents

- "Well the situation is unbearable, there is little food in many households and food is now expensive" - Female respondent from Lilongwe
- "Food is not enough for many families due to problems of rainfall that resulted in high cost of food" - Female respondent from Mzimba
- "In our community we did not harvest much, so we suggested to plant other crops that can resist to dry seasons, like sweet potato" – Female respondent from Machinga
- "[The situation is] chaotic since prices are going up every week and it will be worse as most families won't be able to have 2 meals a day." – Male respondent from Mzimba

Conclusion

There has been an overall deterioration of food security situation in the country as measured by reduced negative coping levels except in the districts of Nsanje and Chikwawa where improvements are due to humanitarian assistance. Although maize prices stabilized in August, it continued to remain at high levels compared to seasonal trends, negatively affecting rural household’s purchasing power. As the consumption season progresses, sustainability of humanitarian assistance and implementation of price stabilization policies remain a concern.

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Figure 9: Word cloud