Food insecurity rising, mostly in areas yet to receive humanitarian assistance

Key points:

- Negative coping levels increase across Malawi. However, humanitarian assistance in Nsanje, Chikwawa, Balaka, Salima, Ntcheu and Neno has reduced coping levels in these districts.

- Reduced Coping Strategies Index (rCSI) has increased steadily across poor and better off households since May.

- Maize prices remain stable but higher than last year’s average and the three-year average.

- Increase in cases of children and adults suffering from moderate and severe acute malnutrition.

- Two-month commodity supply to contribute to addressing the increasing caseload for both MAM and SAM.

Situation Update

The Malawi Vulnerability Assessment Committee (MVAC) forecasts that 6.5 million people (39 percent of the population in 24 of Malawi’s 28 districts) will not be able to meet their annual minimum food requirements in the 2016/2017 consumption season. This is mainly due to prolonged and severe El Niño-induced dryness that sharply reduced maize production in 2016, causing an estimated deficit of 770,000 mt. Based on the national 2016 Food Insecurity Response Plan, humanitarian assistance will be provided to the 24 food-insecure districts in phases. In September the following six districts received assistance: Nsanje, Chikwawa, Balaka, Salima, Ntcheu and Neno. However, funding challenges meant that the in-kind support was provided on a half ration basis for cereals. By January 2017, all 24 food-insecure districts will receive assistance.

(Source: Malawi Vulnerability Assessment Committee, National Food and Nutrition Security)

1 The full basket comprises 50 kg of cereals, 10 kg of pulses, 2 litres of vegetable oil and Corn Soya Blend (CSB) for pregnant and breastfeeding mothers. A half ration comprises 25 kg of cereals, 10 kg of pulses, 2 litres of vegetable oil and CSB.
Negative coping levels increase

The national median reduced Coping Strategies Index (rCSI) increased from 26 to 27 between August and September. About 96 percent of respondent households were using at least one negative coping strategy in September. The most frequently used strategies are relying on cheaper food and eating smaller portions (Figure 1). In September, negative coping increased significantly in areas where humanitarian assistance has not yet started, notably in Lilongwe and Thyolo, Phalombe, Mulanje, Zomba, Chiradzulu districts. However, improvements were noted in the six districts that have started receiving support, as well as in the northern districts of Chitipa and Nkhata Bay which had relatively good harvests (Map 1).

![Figure 1. Percentage of households using negative coping strategies](image)

![Map 1: Change in median rCSI by district aggregation](image)
Food insecurity persists even in better-off households

The type of walls of a household’s dwelling is used as a proxy indicator to determine their socio-economic status. Since May 2016, the rCSI for the worst-off households and those better-off has been increasing steadily. In fact, with the persistent food insecurity, the worse-off and better-off households seem to be converging (Figure 2). The increased food insecurity even among better off households could be attributed to high cereal prices that are eroding their purchasing power.

From the trend analysis, households led by women have had higher levels of negative coping than those led by men since April 2016. However, as food insecurity persists, the rCSI for both household types is increasing and seems to be converging (Figure 3).

Figure 2: Median rCSI by wall type

Figure 3. Median rCSI by sex of household head
Market uncertainty keeps maize prices high

This bulletin focuses on maize prices as maize is the main staple in Malawi. Rice is a substitute in one or two districts but it remains very expensive. Cassava is a staple for less than 8 percent of the population, the majority of whom are not food insecure. Millet and sorghum used to be staple foods in the worst-affected districts of Nsanje and Chikwawa in the south, but production has been decreasing over the years and is now almost insignificant.

Average maize prices have been stable since August 2016 mainly because private traders are opting to offload maize into the local markets rather than stockpile it (Figure 4). They were uncertain as to when the grain marketing body would open its markets and the body’s price setting behaviour however the parastatal opened its market last week at MK250 per kilogram. Since June 2016, maize prices have been stable at between MK220/kg and MK230/kg. Nonetheless, current prices are more than 100 percent higher than the three-year average and 65 percent higher than the average price the same time last year (Source: Agriculture Marketing Information System).

In September, pigeon peas were cheapest in the southern region at MK375/kg as the harvest season reached its peak. However, beans were more expensive in the southern and central regions compared with the north (Figure 5).
Purchasing power improves with humanitarian assistance

The September national manual labour wage was MK 520, with higher mean wage rates observed in the north at MK557 compared to MK 500 and MK 525 in the central and southern region. Purchasing power (measured in kilograms of maize per day of labour) varied across the monitored districts with improvements in the districts of Nsanje, Chikwawa, Machinga and Mangochi in the south, where the food insecure population is receiving humanitarian assistance. The higher daily wage rate of MWK613 coupled with cheaper maize resulted in Karonga having the highest purchasing power of 3.3 kg of maize in September. This was followed by Chitipa at 3.1 kg where the maize prices was also comparatively cheaper. However, this was lower than last round, which was 4 kg of maize per day’s labour (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Purchasing power by district (kg of maize per day’s labour)

Source: mVAM September 2016
Rise in new admissions across nutrition programmes

Nutrition data continued to be collected every two weeks in September 2016 through 70 sentinel sites in seven districts, one in the north and central region while five are in the south where there is 80 percent of the cases. In the 2016/2017 emergency response, starting in July 2016, trend monitoring has been done through all 70 sentinel sites, which include the 41 sites used from January to June 2016 when monitoring had just been introduced. Mass screening was introduced to increase programme coverage and improve case identification, with support from the World Bank and UNICEF. This started in some districts in September, targeting children under 5. The failure to roll out mass screening to all districts has been caused by a lack of funding, especially in the districts under the World Bank which are awaiting approval processes on these funds.

**Figure 7a** shows that new admissions were declining from March to June. In contrast, monthly new admissions increased from July to September 2016 (**Figure 7b**). The data shows that new admissions rose among all the programme components from July 2016. Among children, new admissions for severe acute malnutrition (SAM) rose by 56 percent and those for moderate acute malnutrition (MAM) went up by 37.6 percent. Among adolescents and adults on anti-retroviral therapy (ART), SAM admissions rose by 23.7 percent and MAM by 46 percent. Tuberculosis (TB) patients increased by 36 percent for SAM and by 54.8 percent for MAM. Although some of the increase may be attributed to the mass screening, it is also largely the result of deteriorating food security. This is shown by the rise in admissions of adolescents and adults on ART and TB treatment, as well as of children enrolled the community management of acute malnutrition (CMAM) programme in other districts that were not covered by mass screening.

**Food commodity prepositioning**

WFP is currently implementing a two month commodity supply to contribute to addressing the increasing number of cases for both MAM and SAM as the food security situation continues to deteriorate.
“There is food insecurity in our area where people are living without food and this results into malnutrition” - Female respondent from Zomba

“People have difficulties to eat because the harvest is low per year this makes children to drop out from school” - Female respondent from Lilongwe

“This year we experienced poor rain we even planted three times but the crops wilted because there was no rain, the water table was just low for the crops to survive” - Female respondent from Mzimba

“Food is very difficult to find here in our community because we are buying maize at a high price” - Male respondent from Blantyre

“The situation is dire. We are starving because there is no food. We are relying on tubers, mushrooms and sometimes just leafy vegetables” - Male respondent from Nsanje

Conclusion: Food insecurity in Malawi persists as measured by the increased levels of rCSI, notably in areas yet to receive humanitarian assistance. Even though average maize prices remain stable, they are still significantly higher than the past seasonal trends. This is also being reflected in increase of new admissions among adults suffering from severe acute malnutrition and moderate acute malnutrition.