Food security improves for the first time in three months in response to humanitarian assistance

Key points:

- Negative coping strategies decrease across the country on account of increased scale up of humanitarian assistance to almost fifty percent of the total food insecure population as of October.

- Maize prices are stable on local markets though still significantly above average.

- Admission rates for malnutrition fell slightly between September and October, except among severely malnourished adults receiving treatment for tuberculosis.

Situation Update

Following an assessment in October, the Malawi Vulnerability Assessment Committee found that an additional 200,267 vulnerable people in the central districts of Kasungu and Ntcheu will need food assistance for four months from December 2016 to March 2017. The increase is attributed to the downward revision of production figures during the third round crop estimates. The additional caseload brings the total number of people requiring assistance to 6,692,114. In October, humanitarian assistance reached 11 of the 24 food-insecure districts as per the 2016 Food Insecurity Response Plan. There has been an overall decrease in negative coping across Malawi, although levels are still high in the aggregated districts of Dowa-Ntchisi-Kasungu-Mchinji, Dedza-Ntcheu and Mangochi-Machinga (Map 1).

In a bid to stabilise maize prices, the state grain marketing body ADMARC has opened its country-wide markets and announced a new price of MWK250/kg, an increase of 127 percent from the previous marketing season. In the short-term, consumers are still opting to buy from private traders who offer slightly lower prices.

(Source: Malawi Vulnerability Assessment Committee)
Negative coping levels fall across the country in response to humanitarian assistance

The national median reduced Coping Strategies Index (rCSI) fell for the first time in three months to 24 in October (Figure 1): 97 percent of respondent households were using at least one negative coping strategy in October compared to 99.4 percent in September. This improvement can be attributed to the massive scale-up in humanitarian response, with increases in both the areas covered and the number of beneficiaries since July. While the incidence of coping remains high, there was a significant fall in the percentage of households using the most severe strategies of borrowing food or restricting adult consumption. The most frequently used coping strategies are relying on cheaper or less expensive food and eating smaller portions (Figure 2).

Fig. 1. National median rCSI

Map 1: median rCSI by district aggregation

Fig. 2. Percentage of households using negative coping strategies
Food security improves across wealth groups

The type of walls of a household’s dwelling is used as a proxy indicator to determine their socio-economic status. Between May and September, the rCSI for all wealth groups increased steadily. However in October, there was a significant fall in rCSI for the worst-off households as well as those better off (Figure 3).

Similar trends were observed between households led by women and those led by men, with a greater fall in rCSI among the latter (Figure 4). The general decrease is attributed to the increase in food assistance programmes currently underway.
Maize prices remain stable but above average

Across Malawi, maize prices continue to be stable but significantly above average levels. The stability of maize prices since June is attributed to increased grain imports and continued humanitarian response programmes.

Since June 2016, average maize prices have ranged between MWK220/kg and MWK230/kg. Current average prices of MWK227/kg are more than double the three-year average and 60 percent higher than the average price the same time last year (source: Agriculture Marketing Information System). On 19 October, the state grain marketing body ADMARC opened its maize markets across the country and announced a new selling price of MWK250/kg, an increase of 127 percent from the previous marketing season price. However, in the short-term consumers are opting to buy from private traders instead, as they are selling maize for less than MWK250/kg.

In October, pigeon peas were cheapest in the pigeon pea-growing areas of the southern region, at MWK250/kg. Beans were more expensive in the south and central regions than in the north, where they are grown in larger quantities (Figure 6).
The October national manual labour wage was MWK540, with no significant differences among the three regions. Purchasing power (measured in kilograms of maize per day of labour) remained static in most southern districts, except in Balaka, where it fell due to a price transmission effect from the neighbouring maize surplus district of Ntcheu, where prices are steadily increasing. Purchasing power also fell in the northern and central region districts. The regional differences are due to the high concentration of humanitarian assistance in the south. Prices in the north and central regions (which are source markets) are converging towards the high but stable prices in the south.
In October, nutrition and health monitoring continued in the 70 sentinel sites in the areas most affected by El Niño-induced food insecurity. The monthly mass screening exercise supported by UNICEF also continued in 10 selected districts across the country. The latter will be scaled up to an additional 15 districts with support from the World Bank.

Programmes providing treatment for moderate acute malnutrition (MAM) ran out of super cereal and super cereal plus in October. This affected 41 percent of the health facilities, which are all located in the southern region where levels of food insecurity are higher. The unavailability of the foods meant that beneficiaries referred during the mass screening were less inclined to go to the facilities. This affected the admission rates in all MAM treatment programmes and also led to an increase in default rates.

At the same time, there has been a steady rise in severe acute malnutrition (SAM) cases among adults on anti-retroviral therapy (ART) and tuberculosis (TB) treatment. This has been attributed to the fact that SAM cases on ART and TB treatment often require medical attention and therefore tend to seek assistance from health facilities. However, the gap in MAM treatment where cases should have been addressed to prevent deterioration may also have contributed to the rise in SAM cases.

Figure 8a shows trends in new admissions of malnourished children, adolescents and adults. There was a slight decrease in admissions for all categories between September and October, except for severely malnourished adults being treated for TB, whose admission rate rose by 30.6 percent.

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.

Between September and October, there was a 21.7 percent decrease in new admissions of SAM children and 9.1 percent decrease of MAM children. New admissions of ART adolescents and adults with SAM fell by 16.6 percent and those with MAM, by 10 percent. New admissions of MAM adolescents and adults fell by 25.8 percent.
Conclusion: For the first time in three months, food security has improved in Malawi, as seen through the reduced coping strategy index, in response to a massive scale-up of humanitarian assistance since July. Maize prices remain stable across the country but are significantly above their values a year ago and the three-year average. There was a slight fall in admission rates for malnutrition treatment across all categories between September and October, except for severely malnourished adults receiving treatment for TB.