

## **Socio-Economic Causes of Food Insecurity in Malawi**

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The food crisis that Malawi experienced in 2002 led to hundreds – maybe thousands – of hunger-related deaths, which is more than any famine in living memory. During this famine, maize production fell by over 30% and maize prices rose by over 300% (Devereux, 2002). At the peak of the crisis, nearly a third of the population were dependent on food aid (USAID/Malawi, 2004).

Malawi has experienced food shortages previously in recent decades and indeed in the longer historical past, for example during the famine of 1949/50 and the drought of 1991/92. However, although the 'production shock' was worse in 1991/92, there were many more deaths in the 2002 famine. How could this happen? In seeking to answer this important question, we explore the changing reasons behind famines and food insecurity in Malawi and connect these to various political and socio-economic conditions of the time.

### ***Social and political reasons for food shortages***

Discussion of famines and food security often centres around agricultural production as well as environmental and climatic conditions and trends. However, as Vaughan (1987:155) observes in relation to the 1949 famine in Malawi, 'we need to look more closely at the nature of economic differentiation in the area in which the famine occurred, and see how this meshed with social relations and, most crucially, with government famine policy'. Thus, livelihoods and food security issues cannot be understood outside of socio-cultural, macro-economic and political contexts.

In Malawi, according to Frankenberger et al. (2003), there has been an ongoing decline in rural livelihoods over the past three decades, which is related to an exposure to macro-economic shocks, weather-induced production short-falls and demographic pressures, although van Geenen et al. (2005) claim that there was some improvement in food security prior to 2002. Devereux (2002) notes that several different socio-economic changes have taken place that together led to increased rural vulnerability during the 2002 famine – such as reduced access to agricultural inputs, deepening poverty, erosion of social capital, the effects of the AIDS pandemic and the relative neglect of smallholder agriculture in the policy sphere over many years.

The first of the six key priority areas of the Malawi's Growth and Development Strategy is 'agriculture and food security' (Government of Malawi, 2005), emphasising how important the issue of food security is in present-day Malawi. Sahley et al. (2005) observe that food security is a highly politicised issue in Malawi and that state legitimacy depends heavily on the availability and affordability of maize. Indeed, 'Food security is perhaps the most visible and sensitive public policy issue in Malawi' (Sahley et al., 2005:2). There are thus plenty of incentives for the Malawian government to allocate extensive resources to combat famine and food shortage. However, because food aid is provided by donors, food security issues have become 'externalised' – i.e. the Malawi government has to allow donors a substantial role in determining policy on the issue. One example

of this situation is the decision to sell Malawi's strategic grain reserve in 2001<sup>1</sup>, which was taken after advice from the International Monetary Fund (although not entirely in accord with that advice) and was a clear contributor to the food crisis that ensued (Devereux, 2002). A more long-term effect of international advice on structural adjustment is that the task of buying maize from small-scale farmers and consequently ensuring adequate supplies of maize for people in the deficit season has been partially passed on from the governmental level through ADMARC (the agricultural marketing board) to various private traders who can stock-pile grain and sell it at inflated prices when demands are high (Peters, 2006).

The general state of the economy is crucially important to both household and national level food security, which includes not only national policies and donor conditionalities, but factors such as international trade agreements that influence access to foreign currency. At the community and household level there are also many socio-economic factors that influence people's vulnerability to shocks such as crop failures. As Sen has pointed out (1981), famine can be understood either in terms of *aggregate food availability*, or the diminished capacity of some people to *access* adequate food, no matter if it is generally available or not. Famines can thus be related more to socio-economic factors that make certain groups in the population poor and vulnerable, rather than just to environmental factors such as droughts or agricultural factors (which tend to be targeted in aid programmes) such as inefficient farming techniques or inadequate access to fertiliser and seeds. Rubey (2003) observes, in accordance with this reasoning, that the primary cause of the 2002 food crisis in Malawi was a decline in purchasing power of rural households, rather than problems with food production.

We thus claim that there has been a governmental as well as international neglect of several important socio-economic factors, which made people highly vulnerable to the crop failures of 2002. We will focus on two important issues here – firstly the problem that rural livelihoods continue to be conceptualised as based almost exclusively on subsistence agriculture, which leads to interventions focused on agricultural aid, and secondly the problem that the effect of the AIDS pandemic on rural livelihoods that has been unduly neglected in assessments of rural situations.

### **Diverse livelihoods in rural Malawi**

Rural livelihoods often are constructed as consisting mainly of subsistence agriculture, which is a highly simplified way of looking at rural situations. As van Geenen et al. comment (2005:19):

'Household food security in Malawi is usually equated with own-production of maize. Efforts to eliminate poverty have therefore focused on intensifying maize production by furthering the adoption of hybrid maize seed and chemical fertiliser. ... The focus on maize production overlooks the diversity of livelihoods, particularly in the southern region. ... From a livelihoods perspective ... the roots of poverty in the rural south lie as much in low income-security as in low maize productivity'.

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<sup>1</sup> Efforts are now being undertaken to re-establish national grain reserves, e.g. new grain silos were opened in Mangochi in 2007.

This echoes Vaughan's (1987:155) observations that the 1949 famine was not a crisis of subsistence agriculture: 'Subsistence, in Southern Malawi, had long been predicated on some degree of exchange'. By 1949, many communities were no longer attempting to grow more than a small proportion of their subsistence needs, indicating that livelihoods were more diverse historically than what is often assumed.

Nevertheless, most research and policy attention in Malawi has so far focused on agriculture when it comes to rural livelihoods. As much as 78.6% of economically active people aged 10 and over are categorised as subsistence farmers, a figure that rises to 90.2% among girls and women, but falls to only 65.7% of boys and men (National Statistical Office, 2000). This suggests that other livelihood activities are neglected in official conceptualisations of rural livelihoods, creating a limited understanding of access to food security. Although most Malawian households do report engaging in subsistence agriculture, it is important to note that this is seldom their only livelihood activity. Indeed, in any year, 70-85% of households run out of food stocks several months before the next harvest (Kerr, 2005b), and during these times, other livelihood activities, that sometimes take place elsewhere than in the rural villages, assume a larger role. Fishing is an livelihood strategy in proximity to Lake Malawi (Mvula, 2002) and other water bodies such as Lake Chilwa and along parts of the Shire River. Labour migration to South Africa brought wealth to rural areas in the past, although it declined substantially in the 1970s following Malawian independence (Englund, 1999). However, migration to tea, coffee and tobacco plantations in southern and northern Malawi continued (Kydd and Christensen, 1982), and the plantations continue today to offer income earning possibilities for many. Temporary migration to Malawi's urban areas also happens on a large scale (Englund, 2002a, ; Englund, 2002b). In southern Malawi there is also significant informal cross-border trade with Mozambique, entailing an exchange of consumer goods from Malawi for farm produce from (relatively sparsely populated) Mozambique (van Geenen et al., 2005).

More informal, local livelihood strategies are also important. As many as 61% of households are deemed to have a member skilled in some income generating activity, the most common being traditional house building, thatching, brick making and mat/basket making (Tsoka, 2003). Furthermore, 25% report having a member with entrepreneurial skills, engaged in trade (Tsoka, 2003). Also, for many of the rural poor who need income to obtain food, the only option is *ganyu*, or piecework labour on the land of other small farmers. *Ganyu* has indeed gained in importance in recent years, according to Bryceson et al. (2004). However, several authors have pointed out that high reliance on *ganyu* tends to indicate vulnerability and can be a poverty trap rather than a positive livelihood contribution (Kerr, 2005b; Pinder, 2003).

These patterns of livelihood diversity are not unique for Malawi, but have been found in many African settings. During the 1990s, research around 'livelihood diversification' in rural Africa concluded that rural households tend to depend on a diverse portfolio of activities that provides insurance against crop failure as well as cash for necessities that cannot be produced by farming (Ellis, 2000). The realization that rural households in Africa rely on more than just agriculture for their livelihoods has come slowly, and Ellis (2000) claims that this has to do with the massive policy focus on agriculture while other livelihood activities have been ignored. Bryceson (2004) also claims that a rapid deagrarianisation and depeasantisation is now occurring in Africa, which is affecting rural livelihoods on a large scale. As an example, Hajdu's (2006) research in an isolated South African

rural study area showed that various non-agricultural money-generating activities were about 20 times more important to local livelihoods than agricultural activities.

It is thus important for policy-makers to take the diversity of rural livelihoods seriously when discussing and targeting food security issues in Malawi. Interventions cannot focus solely on agricultural production, when other livelihood strategies are so important to local people both in general and especially as coping mechanisms in difficult times.

### **The effects of AIDS on livelihoods**

One of the largest recent socio-economic shocks that rural Malawi has experienced is the AIDS pandemic. Though the pandemic has profound impacts on livelihoods and food security in many different ways, research has tended to neglect this linkage. Shah et al., (2002) points out that little research has yet examined the impacts of AIDS on rural households and livelihoods in Malawi, and yet, as Palamuleni et al. (2003) note, AIDS is said to be the main factor contributing to food insecurity at household level. In the studies that have been carried out, AIDS has been found to affect livelihoods through loss of labour; decreased agricultural productivity; and increased dependence on *ganyu* (Shah et al., 2002). Kazandira (2002) points out that AIDS significantly impacts on the availability of labour in rural households, and that labour constrained households are more vulnerable to food insecurity since they might not be able to make full use of available land and other resources to secure their livelihoods. Malnourished people tend to be more susceptible to HIV infection and die earlier with AIDS, and thus the vicious circle is completed.

Due to the effects on families (sickness, employment loss, death of breadwinners) many children are withdrawn from school, to take on caring responsibilities for sick relatives, additional work within and outside the home (as found in neighbouring countries e.g. Robson 2000; Robson 2004; Robson and Ansell 2000; Robson *et al* 2006), or to undertake migration, often to unfamiliar rural places, to join alternative households (Ansell and van Blerk 2004; van Blerk and Ansell 2006; Young and Ansell 2003). AIDS also impacts on future livelihood opportunities for young people, when hindering children and youth from accessing education and learning essential skills necessary to support themselves in the future. Livelihood strategies involving small informal businesses are especially vulnerable since parents might die prematurely, before handing over the business to their children (Mann, 2001).

It is also important to note that AIDS impacts not just on households where sickness and death occurs, but on extended families and entire communities as well (Shah et al., 2002). Having to look after sick relatives and orphaned children puts immense strain even on otherwise healthy families. Community interaction suffers as the number of distressed households increases, and theft in rural areas has escalated (Bryceson et al., 2004). Also, it is important to remember that AIDS affects all layers of society, and thus extension workers, nurses and other persons doing work in rural communities on AIDS and livelihood related issues are dying from the disease as well.

Doubtless, AIDS is impacting on all aspects of rural livelihoods in Malawi. It has significantly increased the vulnerability of households to acute food insecurity through marked reductions in food production and income generation, according to the SADC-FANR Vulnerability Assessment Committee (2003), and its impacts on food availability, food access and coping capacity are cumulative. It is therefore problematic that both research and policy has so far given only limited

attention to AIDS' impacts on diverse rural livelihoods in Malawi. This issue might well be one of the key factors for understanding the severity of recent famines and food security crises in Malawi.

Internationally, the issue of AIDS and its relation to food security and livelihoods have led to a wider discussion and debate over the 'New Variant Famine' (NVF) hypothesis. De Waal and Whiteside (2003) point out that six southern African countries with high HIV prevalence have experienced recurrent severe food shortages, and propose that this is a new type of famine caused by the pandemic. The significance of AIDS relative to other factors is disputed (Ellis 2003; Gillespie 2005), but evidence exists that AIDS is damaging agricultural livelihoods (Gillespie and Kadiyala 2005) and AIDS-affected households proved particularly vulnerable in the 2002 food emergency (SADC-FANR 2003).

In Malawi, there is some evidence that supports the NVF hypothesis (Gibbs, 2006), although the issue is still not widely researched (Shah et al., 2002). There is however a recognised need for organisations involved in agricultural research to have fuller understanding of how AIDS affects agricultural systems (Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation and ISNAR, 2002), and AIDS is said to have a particular impact on food security in places where land is limited such as Thyolo district (Kadale Consultants, 2003). Empirically informed analysis is thus still needed to substantiate the NVF hypothesis for Malawi or elsewhere (Murphy *et al* 2005).

### ***Interventions and policies – which way forward?***

Above, we have given details about why the two issues of diversity in rural livelihoods and the impacts of AIDS on rural livelihood opportunities should be taken into account when discussing food insecurity in Malawi. In which way have policies in Malawi then tried to target the issue of food insecurity?

The Malawian government continues to see its main strategy for alleviating poverty as investment in the agricultural sector (Government of Malawi, 2002b). It is regularly stated that 'agriculture ... offers the best prospects for stimulating broad based, poverty reducing growth in rural areas' (Dorward and Kydd, 2004, cited in Peters, 2006:322). Although few government programmes in agriculture have taken AIDS explicitly into account (Ngwira et al., 2001), such programmes in Malawi as the 'starter pack scheme' (later called the Targeted Input Programme) of inputs for small farmers, and the subsidisation of fertilizer are aimed at the most vulnerable, among whom are many AIDS-affected households. The new Department of Nutrition, HIV and AIDS under the Office of the President and Cabinet, established in 2004, might in the future also prove to be a major step in the direction of a greater recognition of the complex links between food security and AIDS. However, a recent study of various Malawian policy documents on food security, nutrition and HIV/AIDS shows that the policies on food security and nutrition tend to lack in depth when it comes to AIDS impacts while the policies on HIV/AIDS rarely mention the nutrition and food security issue (Jumbe, 2007).

Rural livelihoods have so far been addressed at the national policy level mainly through economic liberalisation policies. These are intended to boost demand for agricultural products, by generating more effective markets. Orr and Mwale (2001) claim that these have succeeded to some degree - following structural adjustment the majority of households considered themselves better off, yet the poor households became poorer. In particular, rises in fertiliser prices have led to an increased reliance on *ganyu* among the poor, undertaken at the expense of farmers' own fields, which thereby

damages their own farming based livelihoods (McDonagh, 2002). This is particularly significant given that many of the poorest families are those affected by AIDS. Similarly, research in the Shire Highlands found that vulnerable households headed by women had experienced a decline in maize production associated with market liberalisation, and were dependent on low-paying micro-enterprise and income transfers (Mwale et al., 2000). Again, many of these will be AIDS-affected. Thus, market liberalisation has tended to increase rural inequality (Frankenberger et al., 2003). The review of the Malawi Poverty Reduction Strategy has also shown that poverty has not changed significantly during the time period that policy addressed, and that domestic debt had increased (Government of Malawi, 2006), which also suggests the limited success of continued reliance on liberalisation policies.

Agricultural productivity is also being addressed through land reform policies. Formal and informal land markets are appearing across Malawi (Holden et al., 2006, Peters, 2006b), but the rural poor are disadvantaged due to illiteracy and innumeracy (Bryceson et al., 2004). Land scarcity is a problem, even though landlessness is uncommon, but land reform has hitherto tended to advantage the wealthy at the cost of the poor (Holden et al., 2006). The purpose of land reform relates not only to agriculture, but also to enabling farmers to access credit to allow them to invest in other livelihood activities. Yet, it is not realistic to believe that land registration and land titling quickly leads to better access to credit for poor rural households (Holden et al., 2006).

In his PhD Thesis, Kutengule (2000) questions the effectiveness of rural development strategies that assume rural people are just farmers, arguing that there are strong inter-linkages between farm and non-farm livelihood activities in Malawi and the majority of the poor in rural areas depend on non-farm activities that have received little attention. It is important, though, to recognise that farm and non-farm activities are interlinked, and that macro-level policies in the agricultural field might assist the rural poor to pursue alternative livelihoods.

Beyond agriculture and macro-economic policies, the Malawian government has been less engaged in addressing the livelihood needs of the rural poor. Social service delivery has tended to have low priority, be geared to the needs of the urban population and lacking in horizontal coordination between the sub-sectors (Kalembe, 1997). The government has furthermore tended to shift the burden of various grassroots activities relating to food security and/or AIDS onto NGOs (Ngwira et al., 2001). NGO interventions are however often localised and specific and thus difficult to spread or scale up. The recent surge in the promotion of Community Based Organisations (CBOs) also shows a perhaps disproportionate reliance on the potentials of these organisations to improve rural situations. Rural communities are usually seen to be relatively easy to mobilise (Kadiyala, 2004), and there has been a large increase of externally-funded CBOs over the past decade, yet these are seen as short-term by communities (Bryceson et al., 2004). There are also limits to what communities can do for each other in times of crisis. Bryceson et al. (2004) found that only 15% of households had received any assistance from their extended family during the recent famine and only 19% from external agencies, which shows that large gaps in local safety nets exist. Similarly, churches and headmen offer little material support to rural people, according to Shah et al. (2002).

There is thus a need for government to take a larger responsibility for co-ordinating responses to problems relating to rural livelihoods, which would however also require donors to put more trust in the government's ability to do so. There is also a need to look much more closely at the two issues

discussed in this paper, i.e. the fact that rural livelihoods are more diverse than what is often assumed, and the fact that AIDS is severely impacting on livelihoods at the household level.

## **Conclusions**

Food shortages in Malawi have been a recurring phenomenon, though this does not mean that the reasons for food insecurity have remained constant. We have tried in this article to explore various reasons for food insecurity and to show that these reasons are often closely linked to various political interventions and changing socio-economic conditions. In Malawi's case, many such interventions are strongly linked to outside influences, international financial institutions and donor conditionalities, which is a problematic context for national policy formulation. Furthermore, rural livelihoods tend to be conceptualised as less diverse than they actually are, which has led to mistargeted interventions.

The current AIDS pandemic is a recent and major socio-economic condition, likely to have major impacts on food security. Internationally, it has been proposed that several countries in southern Africa, including Malawi are experiencing a 'New Variant Famine', caused by the AIDS epidemic, leading to rural people being unable to access food even if it is available locally or nationally. The mechanisms through which AIDS is currently impacting on livelihoods and food insecurity in Malawi are complicated and diverse, and have so far not been given sufficient attention. Thus, more research on this topic is needed, and policies geared at improving rural resilience to famines need to move away from a narrow focus on agricultural production and address the issue of AIDS and its close connection with livelihoods and food insecurity, if future famines are to be averted.

## **Autobiographical note:**

This article has been written by a team of academic researchers who are currently undertaking a research project on AIDS, Livelihoods and young people in Malawi. The project is a co-operation between two UK universities, Brunel and Reading, and Chancellor College in Malawi. More information on the research and the researchers can be found on the project website:

[www.brunel.ac.uk/about/acad/sse/chg/research/cygrg/nvf](http://www.brunel.ac.uk/about/acad/sse/chg/research/cygrg/nvf)

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Hajdu F, Ansell N, Robson E, van Blerk L and Chipeta L (2009) 'Socio-economic causes of food insecurity in Malawi' *Society of Malawi Journal* 62(2) 6-18

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