

Impact of COVID-19 on Food Systems and Rural Livelihoods in Malawi

COVID-19 Country Report 2 - December 2020

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Introduction

COVID-19 continues to impact households and economies worldwide. For this reason, in June 2020 APRA started assessing its likely effects on food systems and livelihoods in Malawi. This report presents insights from the second round (R2) of data collection in October 2020. Data was collected from a stratified random sample of 111 households (59 female and 52 male respondents) drawn from an APRA household survey of groundnut producers in Mchinji and Ntchisi districts, Central Region, as well as from eight key informants. One additional round of research is planned for the first half of 2021.

Context

Since the Round 1 (R1) report covering June 2020, by October the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases in Malawi had declined and schools had reopened. Denial about the virus and perspectives of it as political propaganda had also declined. While a high level of awareness existed, perceptions that the pandemic was waning meant that less people were following preventive guidelines. The government issued rules on 7 August 2020 for prevention, containment and management of the virus. As of 17 November 2020, Malawi has had 5,999 total confirmed cases, 185 COVID-19 related deaths and 384 active cases.¹

Health and disease

While key informants stated that most people in the study communities had stopped following preventive measures, individual interviews indicated that 95% were following them. Only 39% of respondents said they had heard of confirmed cases in their district. There was a perception that the pandemic was no longer a threat, as there were no reported cases in their proximity. Health care services remained accessible to 95% of respondents.

Response to the threat of COVID-19

By R2, schools had reopened in a phased approach. About 25% of girls and 29% of boys did school work at home, but around 20% of both groups were reported to be idle. Female children were doing more care-related housework (41%)

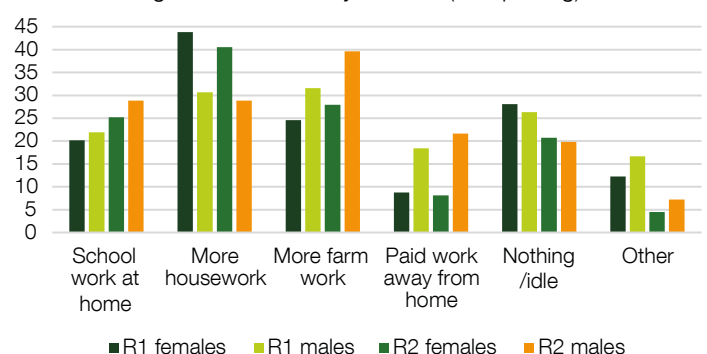
"Farm inputs are readily available in the shops. The problem is that the farmers have no money. They sold their produce at very low prices due to COVID-19. Their only hope for inputs this year is the government agricultural input program. Smallholder farmers excluded from this program will harvest little this coming season." - Extension Coordinator, Chikwatula EPA

Key findings

- 95% of local respondents reported following preventive measures for COVID-19, though key informants stated that many people were no longer actively following safe health and hygiene practices.
- More households reported running out of food (54 to 67%) and skipping meals (57 to 77%) in R2 than R1.
- Business and farming activities remained constrained with low produce prices offered to farmers.
- Access to work declined within (44% to 34%) and outside (24% to 20%) villages between the two rounds.
- Farm inputs were available, but the costs had escalated according to about 60% of respondents.
- Access to extension services and credit declined for 73% and 86% of the respondents, respectively.
- Schools had reopened, but only a third of children were doing school work at home.
- 41% of respondents reported that female children were doing more house chores and 40% reported that male children were doing more farm work.
- Many households had yet to receive any assistance, with the government only reaching a third of the respondents.
- About 70% of respondents placed themselves on the bottom of a subjective welfare assessment ladder; this had not changed between the two rounds.

compared to male children (29%), similar to R1. Males were found to be doing more farm work (40%) than females (28%) during the busy land preparation period. 62% of respondents reported not receiving any humanitarian assistance during R2. 26% said they received aid from the government, whilst religious organisations provided 14% with support.

Figure 1: Activities by children (% reporting)



1 UNICEF Malawi COVID-19 Situation Report, as of 17 November - <http://uni.cf/38Y4PDx>

Availability of services for agricultural production

There was no change in the availability of farm inputs for 50% of respondents. However, roughly 60% reported increased costs of those inputs compared to 40% in R1. Having sold their produce at a very low price, most farmers would have to rely on the new Affordable Input Program for inputs, or were likely to have lower yields due to the limited application of fertilisers and improved seeds. The government and other stakeholders need to ensure that the subsidy program succeeds because its failure will have devastating effects on food security in Malawi. The cost of land to rent had increased for 45% of respondents in R1 and 60% in R2. Access to extension services had significantly declined. The number of respondents reporting a decline in the availability of extension workers had increased from 67% in R1 to 73% in R2. Credit access was constrained for 68% of respondents in R2.

Food and nutrition security since COVID began

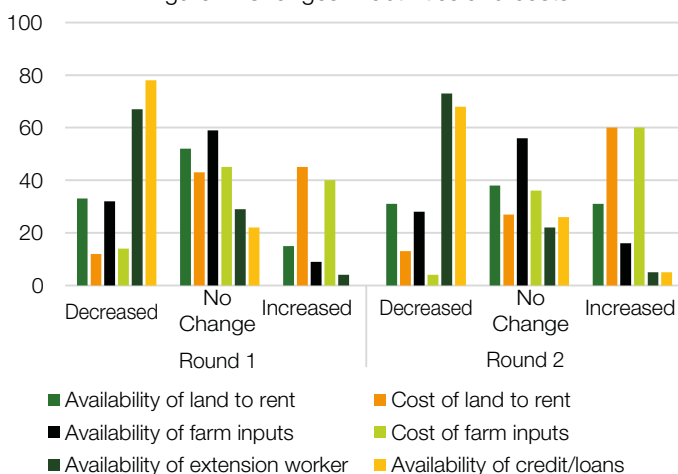
Normally, there is increasing food and nutrition insecurity in Malawi during the season in which farming households are preparing land and purchasing farm inputs. R2 research found that this situation was amplified because of reduced incomes from crop sales and depleted food stocks. At the peak of COVID-19, farmers sold a larger proportion of their produce (especially maize, the key staple) than was normally the case to raise income to fill the shortfall from other sources. More households reported running out of food and skipping meals in R2 than R1, an increase from 54 to 67% and 57 to 77%, respectively, while 34% reported spending an entire day without eating due to lack of money and other resources.

| Aspect | Proportion (%) | |
|-------------------------------|----------------|---------|
| | Round 1 | Round 2 |
| Worried about inadequate food | 76 | 87 |
| Unable to eat healthy foods | 78 | 89 |
| Ate only a few food types | 78 | 87 |
| Skipped meals | 57 | 77 |
| Ate less | 70 | 82 |
| Ran out of food | 54 | 67 |
| Hungry but no food to eat | 48 | 65 |
| No eating for the whole day | 31 | 34 |
| Food not adequate for family | 75 | 83 |

Farming, labour and marketing

The number of traders going to the study villages to do business remained low, according to 64% of respondents. This disrupted people's ability to pursue their business enterprises (reported by 62%). There were mixed views about participation in farming enterprises, with 43% reporting a decline whilst 50% experienced no change. The ability to sell produce at both local markets and at farm gate declined for over 50% of respondents. Only 14% seeking to hire farm labour were able to do so, a decline of 2% from R1. Access to work within and outside the village declined from 44% to 34% and 24% to 20% from R1 to R2, respectively. Cash transactions were still dominating sales, with only 18% (from 17% in R1) reporting an ability to use electronic transfers in R2.

Figure 2: Changes in activities and costs



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