

MALAWI Food Security Outlook Update

September 2010

Food security to improve with irrigated crop harvests and planned food aid

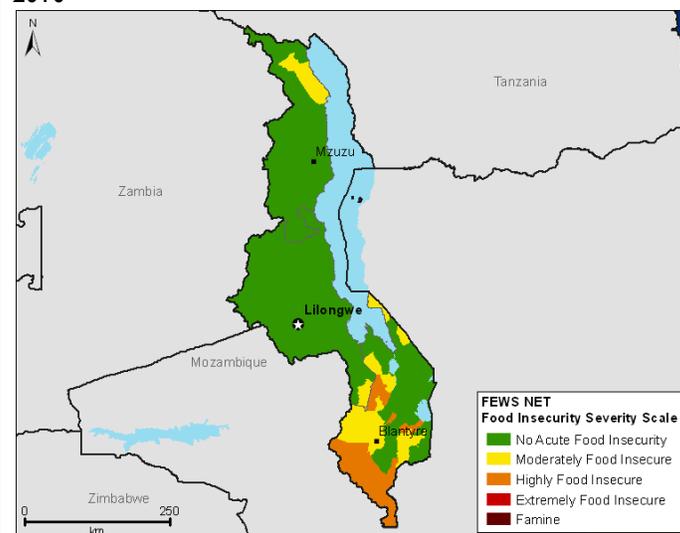
Key Messages

- Information from the field shows that the food security situation in some parts of southern Malawi is improving as a result of higher than expected harvests of irrigated maize, sweet potatoes, and cassava in food insecure areas.
- Private traders have intensified the supply of maize into all markets in the food insecure districts in the south of the country. This has resulted in increased competition which has stabilized maize prices in the food insecure districts.
- The Government of Malawi (GoM), in collaboration with the World Food Program (WFP) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), plans to start distributing food in the currently highly food insecure southern districts of Chikhwawa and Nsanje starting in September.
- The Malawi Vulnerability Assessment Committee (MVAC) is planning on conducting an assessment to update the information contained in the June 2010 report which projected that 1.1 million people would be food insecure by October. With maize prices remaining stable and higher than normal sweet potato, pigeon pea, and cassava harvests, it is more likely that the numbers of food insecure households in Malawi will be reduced from the June projection.

Updated food security outlook through December 2010

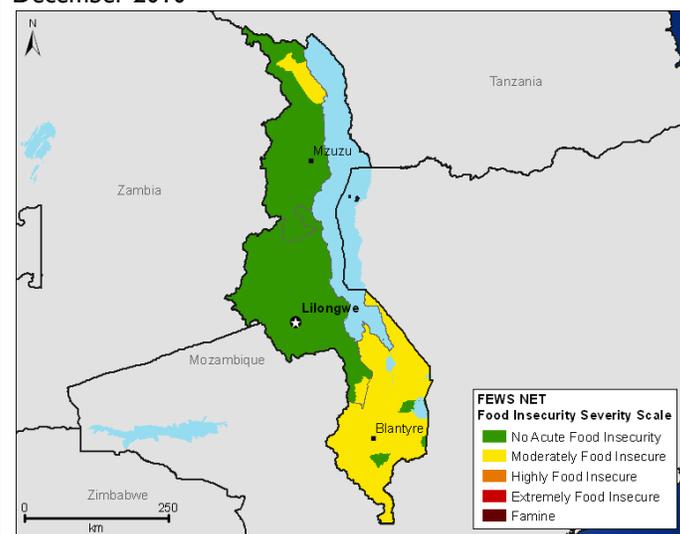
The food security situation has improved slightly in the food insecure districts in southern Malawi. This positive food security outlook is a result of three key food security indicators which have been more favorable than previously expected. Firstly, maize prices have remained stable compared to those projected by the MVAC in May. Secondly, some farmers have realized better harvests from irrigated maize as a result of a government farm input subsidy which was extended to farmer groups with access to irrigable lands. Thirdly, the government plans to start distributing humanitarian food assistance in two of the highly food insecure districts in the south. Prior to the impending humanitarian food assistance in September, some food insecure parts of the Chikhwawa and Nsanje

Figure 1. Current food security outcomes, September 2010



Source: FEWS NET

Figure 2. Most likely food security outcomes, October-December 2010



Source: FEWS NET

For more information on FEWS NET's Food Insecurity Severity Scale, please see: www.fews.net/FoodInsecurityScale

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This report provides an update to the July 2010 FEWS NET Food Security Outlook report which estimated food security conditions in July through December 2010. The next Outlook report will be released in October and will cover the October 2010 to March 2011 period.

districts remain highly food insecure. In Chikhwawa the highly food insecure Extension Planning Areas (EPAs) are Mbewe, Dolo, and Mikalango while Kalambo, Mitole, and Lizunzu are moderately food insecure in the same district. In Nsanje signs of high food insecurity are prevalent in Magoti, Zunde, and Mpatsa EPAs while moderate food insecurity is prevalent in Makhanga and Mpatsa in the same district. All of the food insecure EPAs in Balaka, Blantyre, Chiradzulu, Machinga, Mangochi, Mulanje Mwanza, Neno, Phalombe, Thyolo, and Zomba districts are all expected to be moderately food insecure through December. All of the highly food insecure EPAs in Chikhwawa and Nsanje are expected to improve to moderate food insecurity once humanitarian food assistance starts. Because of sweet potato, pigeon pea, and cassava harvests which look better than expected, the highly food insecure areas in Thyolo, Mulanje, Phalombe, Zomba, and Balaka districts have improved to moderate food insecurity. Due to an oversupply of these crops, the prices have fallen, for instance, a large bag of sweet potatoes has fallen from about MWK 600 to MWK 50 each while pigeon pea prices have fallen from MWK 100/kg to MWK 60/kg. Dried cassava prices have also fallen from about MWK 20/kg to about MWK 6/kg. The improved food security situation will therefore be realized through household consumption of these sourced foods and not through the preferred maize in the markets.

Maize is readily available in all of the markets, and prices between July and August have stayed well below the MVAC price projections of MWK 60-MWK 70/kg. However, despite the increasingly favorable maize prices, most households are unable to access maize due to lack of income. Private traders have increased maize sales in all local markets in the food insecure districts in the southern part of the country while moving maize from the central region districts of Ntcheu, Dedza, Lilongwe, and Nkhotakota. Average prices of maize in monitored markets in southern Malawi increased from MWK 32.49/kg in July to an average of MWK 34.72/kg reflecting an increase of 6.25 percent. In the northern region of Malawi, maize prices fell from an average of MWK 31.03/kg in July to MWK 30.79/kg in August. In the central region, maize prices moved from MWK 25.49/kg in July to MWK 34.72 in August. It is expected that private traders will continue to move stocks from the surplus production areas in the center to the deficit areas in the south. Despite maize being readily available in local markets at favorable prices in the food insecure areas, most of the households have little-to-no income to buy from the market.

Cotton is one of the main cash crops for southern Malawi, especially in the districts of Nsanje, Chikhwawa, Balaka, Zomba, Machinga, Mangochi, and Phalombe. Cotton production fell by about 60 percent from 72,572 MT in 2009 to 28,856 MT in 2010. The Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security (MoAFS) attributed the drop to fewer farmers producing cotton in the 2009/10 agriculture season due to poor prices in 2009 and production failures on farms in 2010 due to the prolonged dry spells that affected the southern part of the country. Cotton prices fell by about 62 percent from MWK 65/kg in 2008 to MWK 25/kg in 2009. Lack of cotton incomes for most households has prevented households from accessing maize through markets in food insecure districts despite favorable prices.

Recent MoAFS reports confirmed by FEWS NET field monitoring visits conducted in September in the south of the country revealed that farmers are beginning to harvest irrigated crops. Farmers in the Blantyre, Mulanje, Phalombe, Thyolo, and Chiradzulu districts also reported that there were winter rains in July and August which supported the maturity of some maize, pigeon peas, and sweet potatoes. These crops will provide some respite to food insecure households in these districts for about two months. Although production data on irrigated farming remains limited in most MoAFS offices, it is believed that no more than 10 percent of farmers have access to irrigable pieces of land. Irrigable fields are small and average about 0.1ha per household. Crops produced in areas with residual moisture or under irrigation will offer some respite to some food insecure households for about two months.

The GoM has planned to start humanitarian food assistance in two of the highly food insecure districts in southern Malawi. The government-initiated food distribution program will start in September in the Chikhwawa and Nsanje districts. The program is led by the GoM through the Department of Disaster Management Affairs (DoDMA) under the Office of the President and Cabinet with local government assemblies, WFP, and NGOs assisting in the distribution of food to the food insecure areas. The food will be collected from the Strategic Grain Reserve (SGR) centers located in the southern part of the country. The DoDMA plans to target about 145,000 people out of the 262,000 in the two districts, focusing efforts on the highly food insecure segment of the 1.1 million people which the MVAC initially projected to be food insecure mostly in southern Malawi by October. This government response is important because it will allow food insecure households to concentrate on farming activities and to stop relying on negative coping mechanisms during the next few months. The lean season usually starts in November to February and it also coincides with the rain-fed farming season which starts in October. It is important for the GoM to meet the food needs of the rest of the moderately food insecure households, most of whom are in the southern part of the country, so that they can concentrate on their farms. It is expected that the government will roll out the food assistance program to cover all of the food needs of the food insecure population which the MVAC update assessment of October will identify.

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID), Irish Agency for International Development (Irish AID), and other donors are jointly working with the Wellness and Agriculture for Livelihood Advancement (WALA) consortium and FEWS NET to conduct a rapid food security and livelihoods assessment. The assessment is focusing on the current coping mechanisms that food insecure households are using and the impacts of those coping mechanisms on livelihoods. The results from this assessment will provide additional information for the MVAC update analysis as well as provide a basis for making some necessary adjustments to the programs that NGOs are implementing in southern Malawi.

The MVAC is planning to conduct an assessment in October to update the June report which projected that 1.1 million people will be food insecure from October 2010 to March 2011. The upcoming MVAC assessment will update the June assessment findings and reflect the new numbers of food insecure people from October onwards. Currently, it is anticipated that there will be an above-normal harvest of irrigated maize because of the increased fertilizer and improved seed uptake due to a government input subsidy program that was extended to irrigation farming groups this year as a means of mitigating the effects of the prolonged dry spells that reduced the rain-fed output. Late winter rains in southern Malawi in June and July supported the maturity of sweet potatoes and cassava thereby increasing output from these crops. As noted above, the maize prices in all local markets remain stable. The winter/irrigated crop harvests and maize prices are two of several factors that are used in the MVAC process of building food insecurity scenarios. Among other factors, prices were more likely going to increase due to the regional deficit and weak market integration and as a result maize prices were expected to go as high as MWK 60-MWK 70/kg yet so far maize prices have stayed well below an average high of MWK 34.72 /kg. Irrigated maize, sweet potatoes, and cassava harvests were expected to be as normal as other years but seem to be higher than normal. Considering the positive outlook of these key variables, it is likely that the number of food insecure households is going to reduce.

Seasonal calendar and critical events timeline

