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FEWS NET Progress Report Malawi, May – September 2005

FEWS NET FAMINE EARLY WARNING SYSTEM NETWORK

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FEWS NET

Famine Early Warning System Network

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**FEWS NET Progress Report
MALAWI, May-September 2005**

I. May to September 2005 period

A. Country context

Following the release of second round crop estimates in March and the subsequent reports of a worse than expected harvest outcome, FEWS Net with its partners in MVAC embarked on an assessment exercise to determine the impact of the rainfall failure on livelihoods throughout the country. The assessment took place in May and the report writing in June. The report was released at the end of June. Since the release of the report, FEWS Net and its partners have been busy with dissemination meetings to decision makers at various levels as one way of increasing their understanding of the livelihoods approach to vulnerability to help them design appropriate responses.

Given the humanitarian situation in Malawi this year, we have been actively involved in meetings to design the response by way of providing the relevant information to inform the process.

We have during the same time intensified the informal cross border trade monitoring exercise to ensure that we capture good quality data. To this effect we have supervised the enumerators closely and in June we undertook a joint supervisory trip with the Mozambican counterparts.

This has also been the time when we have been occupied with project demobilization activities by ensuring that all activities as specified by the HO are accomplished as per schedule.

A1. Food Security Context

Final crop production estimates released by the Ministry of Agriculture Irrigation and Food Security confirmed a reduction from last year in production for most crops. The drop in maize production by 29%, from 1,733,125 MT last season to 1,225,234 MT this season has resulted in the worst maize season in ten years. This is of particular concern for food security as maize is the country's main staple food in the country. An official national cereal gap of 400,000 MT to 450,000 MT is estimated.

The recent Malawi Vulnerability Assessment Committee (MVAC) analysis concluded that the compounded effects of two consecutive drought years and chronic poverty will lead to serious food shortages for households in Malawi this year. Southern Malawi, in particular, will be severely affected, as was the case last year. The MVAC analysis, which merged existing livelihood-based information with the third round of crop estimates and an estimate of average market prices during the peak purchasing period (December to March), concluded that households in the southern region, where a second poor production year has occurred, will suffer the most severe deficits. This region was worst affected by the mid-season dry spells and/or early cessation of rains. The maize crop, the country's main staple

food, was especially hard hit. Households in parts of central and northern Malawi will also face deficits, but they will be less severe both in terms of magnitude and extent. According to the analysis, between 4.2 million and 4.6 million people will require food aid this consumption year (April 2005 to March 2006). This translates into a food aid requirement of around 272,000-423,000 MT in maize equivalent terms.

Since the government does not have sufficient food aid in stock to meet these needs, and has limited commercial import capacity, urgent action is required to ensure adequate national availability and household-level access for the consumption year. There are already indications that the situation is deteriorating fast in the southern region as evidenced by high maize prices as well as frequent scarcities.

A2. Institutional Context

As a result of the poor agricultural season, the food security networks have been strengthened by a common desire to both conduct assessments and make the results available on time to those who can implement the response or to provide good monitoring information to avoid a sudden escalation of the problems affecting the vulnerable population. Since early March, when it became apparent that the country is heading towards yet another disaster as a result of failed rains, all the different networks working in the area of food security switched to crisis mode and started meeting to discuss the way forward.

The MVAC started planning assessments as early as March, culminating into the indicative assessment of April before the main 2005 assessment in May. Following the release of the MVAC report at the end of June, various networks have used the results to plan interventions, including the major WFP programme.

Generally the MVAC network is in a better shape now, thanks to DFID funding for the position of an advisor who, together with the MVAC chair are working towards the establishment of a secretariat. This is a positive step towards institutionalization of the process within government. There is dependency on donor support during this formative phase, but I guess it is inevitable that way since Gom resources are currently stretched. This support will be required for a few years before the process is fully institutionalized. Without this support, we do not see a bright future for the VAC process in the country. The Crop estimates and MIS networks are much stronger since they are already part of GOM and the support given to them over the years has helped them to do a better job than before and the level of support required is not as much as that required for the MVAC. Other networks which have come into being as a direct result of the network are doing a great job in directing the response and hopefully once the country is out of the present crisis they will disappear naturally, to be replaced, hopefully by others depending on the needs and issues.

The FEWS Net, WFP joint cross border trade monitoring network has continued to improve by way of joint supervision and report writing as well as information sharing. At this stage it is not possible to hand over this activity to Gom since they have not been very much involved. .

B. Progress Made Towards Six Expected FEWS NET Outcomes

B1. Timely and Accurate Dissemination of Early Warning Information

- Produced and circulated on time monthly food security updates to an ever increasing readership list.
- Issued an alert statement at the end of June warning of the likelihood of a humanitarian crisis if GOM and donors do not mobilize resources to assist the vulnerable population.
- Made several presentations to USAID, GOM, NGOs and other donors briefing them of the evolving food security situation, highlighting the MVAC assessment findings and the need for quick response.

B2. Improved Vulnerability Analyses

- Participated in the livelihood assessment in April/May to collect monitoring information in order to determine the types of households who are likely to face a food shortage this year, and the amount of food or cash they will require to offset their deficits. The final results were released at the end of June 2005.
- Supervised the informal cross border trade monitoring activity to ensure that reliable data is being collected in order to provide useful information to all stakeholders. Monthly updates of the informal trade are issued to interested stakeholders.

B3. Improved Decision Making, Contingency and Response Planning

- Provided regular briefs on the food security situation at various meetings
- Made presentations on the MVAC findings to various stakeholders – two important meetings involving District Commissioners and Agricultural Officers throughout the country were held in August in Blantyre and Lilongwe to sensitize them on the VAC findings.
- Participated in crucial meetings designing the response strategy following the release on MVAC report

B4. Strengthened Networks

- Continued to work with existing partners through the MVAC. The main activity during this time was finalization of the current year assessment and release of the report which was followed by several presentations to stakeholders. This was done jointly with partners in MVAC.
- Participated in a series of meetings in the joint food security task force at which various issues related to food security are discussed. Main issue during this period was the response strategy following a poor outcome of the agricultural season and the release of the MAVC report.
- Continued to work with WFP and Ministry of Agriculture on the informal cross border trade. We undertook several joint trips to assess the food security situation as well as to monitor the cross border trade initiative.

B5. Strengthened Capacity

- MVAC members participated in the analysis and drafting of the June report as one way of ensuring local ownership of the process.
- MVAC members participated in presentations of results at various fora.

B6. Efficient and Effective Project Management

- Project accounts, timesheets and pouch completed and sent to Home Office on time
- Annual staff evaluations completed on time and sent to HO

C. Problems Encountered and Proposed Remedial Actions

In a problem year like this one, there are increased demands for reliable information as well as the need to attend meetings and undertake field visits. All these pose major challenges in terms of our time and project resources. Despite all these challenges, no major problems were encountered during this quarter. However, the decision by DFID to be directly involved in food aid distribution has created some problems in the system as there are not enough resources to go round. Conflicting approaches on how to go about it have resulted in the distribution of food aid to 55% of the potential beneficiaries during the months of June to September.

II. Overview: 2000-2005

A. Introduction

FEWS NET Malawi has over the past five years focused on livelihood vulnerability analysis approach as the basis for early warning and response, and also as a tool for informing wider policy issues. To achieve this FEWS Net has worked in partnership with MVAC to ensure that local capacity to conduct livelihood based VA is built in the country, particularly in key government institutions. At the same time, FEWS Net has built a reputation of being the most reliable source and repository of food security and early warning information. Our objective analysis and reporting as well as the systematic livelihoods work have made FEWS Net a major contributor to government and donor dialogue of food security, safety nets, poverty and humanitarian response issues.

B. State of the Networks

FEWS Net has over the past five years worked with its partners in various networks with the aim of advancing the issues of food security in the country. Being loose networks, some have come and gone, but the long lasting ones are the MVAC, Market information System and Crop Estimates Committee of the ministry of Agriculture. Below is a brief on some of the networks.

1. Malawi Vulnerability Assessment Committee (MVAC)

The MVAC is a multi-agency body that studies the relationships between socio-economic conditions and people's livelihoods to gain a better understanding of where, why and for how long people are vulnerable. One of the activities associated with this is to conduct regular monitoring assessments which are aimed at obtaining an early warning forecast for vulnerability to food insecurity in Malawi for the remainder of the agricultural consumption year (April to March). The MVAC is a consortium of organizations working to assess and reduce vulnerability in Malawi; it includes Government, UN Agencies and NGO's. The Ministry of Economic Planning and Development in the Government of Malawi chairs the MVAC. Staff turn over within participating GOM institutions and NGOs has affected progress in terms of capacity building as new members are joining all the time and before each assessment time for training has to be allocated. Commitment of some of the partner institutions is sometimes not there, especially if there is no emergency. Some partners are interested in the field work but not the critical analysis and interpretation process. This means there are people trained in field data collection but lacking in analytical skills. This is one area which has to be addressed in the future. However, progress has been made in terms of establishing an MVAC secretariat within the ministry of Economic Planning and development as one way of ensuring local ownership and leadership by Government. It is hoped that with proper donor funding in the initial period, the secretariat could be sustained within the government beyond the donor funded period.

One of the major achievements of this network has been the zoning and profiling of the livelihood zones in the country. FEWS Net was at the forefront of this activity by way of providing technical assistance from FEG as well as playing a leading role in the field work. It took a while to convince partners of the value of a livelihood based vulnerability assessment approach. The final version of the profiles is yet to be released. Since 2003 the MVAC has played a leading role in ensuring that there is consensus among all stakeholders as to the magnitude of the food security problem. This was a major achievement never imagined before. To date MVAC has carried out three main assessments (2003, 2004 and 2005) whose results have been used to inform response in the country.

2. Market Information System (MIS)

The MIS in the planning division of the ministry of Agriculture has been a crucial partner in providing market price data. FEWS Net has depended on it for reliable price data. However, realizing that the unit was having problems in getting reliable data, FEWS Net decided to assist them with training as well as procurement of equipment for data collection enumerators in the form of weighing scales and calculators. FEWS Net conducted training on data collection and analysis/interpretation of the data to sensitise them on the need to collect accurate information. We have also bought several computers and printers for the unit to assist with data capture and storage. All this effort has gone a long way towards ensuring that reliable data is collected and made available to stakeholders on time. FEWS Net played a leading role in persuading the ministry to recruit additional enumerators in order to expand the market coverage. Without the FEWS Net support the unit would not have been doing a good job as they are now.

3. Crop Estimates Committee

The ministry of Agriculture which conducts annual crop estimates surveys invites a few organizations to take part in the exercise in order to ensure that they are doing their work objectively. FEWS Net has been a very useful partner in this exercise because of our expertise in data analysis and interpretation as well as our interest in food security. We have over the years taken part in supervision missions on quality control. In addition, FEWS Net has been directly involved in training some of the field staff during refresher courses organized by the ministry.

To enhance the quality of the data, FEWS Net has bought weighing scales and calculators for field staff in order to minimize computational errors in the exercise. Noticeable improvements in data quality have been observed as field staff have adequate equipment needed for the effective discharge of their duty. We have also helped the ministry improve on the presentation of results of the surveys by working with them to come up with a common template.

4. Humanitarian Response Committee

Government and donors established the humanitarian response committee to coordinate response activities in times of emergencies. FEWS Net, by virtue of being an MVAC member, is a key institution providing useful information and analysis. We attend meetings and make presentations or help to clarify technical issues which might not easily be discernible to members of this important committee. Malawi has been in emergency mode since 2002 and we have participated in the activities of this committee ever since it was established. Our monitoring information on price movement, informal cross border trade trends and synthesis of the situation forms an invaluable input to the work of the committee. One of the most notable achievements of this committee has been consensus building among all stakeholders in determining the best way to respond to an emergency situation. This consensus has helped the implementation of response since issues are quickly discussed and resolved as and when they arise.

5. Informal Cross Border Trade Monitoring

This is a very active network providing very useful information to stakeholders, filling an existing information gap. WFP and FEWS Net have pioneered this initiative which has generated a lot of interest. FEWS Net has been meeting the cost of salaries for the enumerators as well as communication costs. WFP purchased cellphones for all the enumerators and they will also be paying the salaries for the last quarter of 2005 while FEWS Net goes through the transition phase. This will avoid any disruption to the exercise, especially in a difficult year like this one.

6. Other Networks

There are several networks that have come and gone that FEWS Net has been a member of. Others are still ongoing but they aren't very active as the ones mentioned above. Some of these have dealt with food allocation, National food balance sheet, etc.

C. Major Successes and Impacts

Malawi is a country with a chronic food security problem where the majority of the poor do not produce enough even in a good year due to the underlying high poverty levels and low rural incomes. While government is working hard to put in place programs that will address these problems, transitory food insecurity has affected the country almost every year since 2002 and as a result, FEWS Net and its network partners have been working hard to highlight the issues of food insecurity and vulnerability so that stakeholders are well informed to address the relevant issues, especially in an emergency, in order to save lives as well as preserve livelihoods. Some of the major accomplishments over the last five years include:

- Creation of the vulnerability assessment committee (previously known as VAM) as a true network of food security partners that includes Government, WFP, FAO, UNDP and NGOs such as Save-UK, World Vision and Concern World Wide has fostered useful dialogue on food security among stakeholders in a manner never imagined before.
- Informal cross border trade monitoring activity has provided very useful information which has highlighted the significant role played by this trade in ensuring food security, especially in bad seasons. Despite the importance of the trade, there was no reliable data on the amounts that are involved in this trade. This had been a matter of concern, as it was difficult to have a complete picture of the food security situation in the country without understanding the dynamics of the informal cross border trade in agricultural commodities. Some efforts were made in the past to try and understand the trade in more details but these were one-off studies, often not enough to give a better understanding of trends and seasonality in the trade. It is against this background that FEWS Net developed a proposal for the establishment of an Informal Cross Border Trade Monitoring System which has been well received by partners. The system is running very well and the information is being used by many stakeholders.
- Livelihoods zoning and profiling work done since 2003 jointly with MVAC partners have significantly improved all aspects of the early warning-to-response process by providing an improved baseline understanding of livelihoods. MVAC monitoring assessments are now accepted by both government and donors as the basis for important decisions with respect to food security decisions.
- Training of market information system enumerators in data collection as well as equipping them with weighing scales, calculators and computers has resulted in significant improvements in market price data quality as well as timeliness. Similar support to crop estimates activity has also seen improvements in data quality. All this support was made possible by buy-in funds by the local USAID mission.

D. The Way Forward

FEWS Net Malawi has made a significant contribution towards a better understanding of the food security situation by providing sound leadership and technical skills in areas of

vulnerability assessment, early warning and food security analysis. There is wide acceptance and acknowledgement of FEWS Net role in advancing the need for good quality, reliable and timely information for decision makers. As the current phase is coming to the end, there is still room for improvement and areas that come to mind include:

- Review of the baselines with the aim of refining them wherever necessary.
- Solicit funding from willing donors to support the establishment of the MVAC secretariat within the government. This is the only way sustainability of the process can be assured since there will be a coordinating entity. This is the biggest problem facing not only the Malawi VAC but other VACs in the region. Without this support, the VAC risks disintegrating as members move on in their careers.
- Training in GIS and remote sensing will have to be intensified so that partner's capacities in these areas are enhanced to increase the pool of competent personnel in the country.
- Although livelihood assessment looks at the rural livelihood in the broad sense, our focus has mainly been on food security simply because we do not have expertise in the other areas. It will therefore be important for the MVAC to start looking at issues of HIV-Aids and poverty in a serious manner. The current government policy on development focuses on poverty alleviation and any meaningful contribution the networks can make towards providing useful insights into the issues of poverty will go a long way towards helping the government in its quest to reduce poverty.
- With the high rural to urban migration over the past five to 10 years, it is time to start thinking of conducting urban vulnerability assessment in the four main urban areas of the country.

III. Network Contacts

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