# Traditional Leadership and Social Support in Southern Malawi

Amy Margolies, Noora-Lisa Aberman, and Aulo Gelli

## 1. BACKGROUND

Food security in Malawi is affected by seasonal hunger, climate change and land scarcity. Government agencies, humanitarian and development organizations provide cyclical support but longer-term food and nutrition security proves elusive. Diet and nutrition are heavily affected by access to resources at the household level and are deeply embedded in the socio-cultural context. One aspect with implications for social support programs and for food and nutrition security more generally is how families and communities informally support each other. This study presents qualitative findings on the dynamics of household and community resources for food security and nutrition in Southern Malawi. We explore how kinship and social obligations influence the allocation of social support, and focus on the role of village chiefs. We then examine the implications for state- and donor-led social programs in light of the norms that permeate village life.

## 2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is based on mixed-methods data collected from 60 communities randomly selected from food-insecure villages in the Zomba district in southern Malawi. Longitudinal survey data was collected from 20 randomly selected households within each community (detailed results of quantitative analysis in Gelli et al. 2017). In-depth individual interviews were undertaken in a subsample of 6 villages from these communities. Case study households were selected using maximum variation purposive sampling based on household composition, such as male and female-headship, monogamous and polygamous households. Households were also stratified on food security status using the Household Food Insecurity Access Scale measured at baseline. Two rounds of 38 in-depth individual interviews of household members were collected to capture differences between lean and post-harvest seasons (March and October of 2016). Interviews were also conducted with chiefs in each village.

## 3. SOCIAL SUPPORT AND RESOURCE SHARING

Traditional systems of social support are still central to how Malawian villagers cope with seasonal shocks and unexpected climate events. These rural, poor, agrarian communities possess sharing norms and moral guidelines that aid in protecting against the cyclical deprivations of the agricultural calendar as well as other shocks to household welfare. This phenomenon has been documented in peasant societies as a form of social insurance, described as a "subsistence ethic" providing a foundation for the *moral economy* of those communities (Scott 1979). This moral economy serves as a mechanism of community risk mitigation; reinforcing social obligations and duties through redistribution of scant resources. However, traditional systems of exchange, reciprocity and social insurance are being tested by increasing land scarcity, the effects of climate change, and modernization.

In this setting, community members are expected to provide support out of social obligation to help the needy. Members who do not share willingly are described as "difficult" or "stone-hearted." Villagers must regularly contribute to community social and cultural events with either in-kind or cash contributions. Funerals are important events and all members provide resources, whether in food, cash, labor, or emotional support. Giving is also expected at weddings and initiation ceremonies.

Externally-imposed development processes and social program rules clash with local interpretations of fair allocation. Social programs that select individual beneficiaries challenge community ideals of collectivism by emphasizing individualistic resource ownership. The distribution of external resources in the village is an important process—albeit a contested one.

> "*Whenever any organization comes with aid, there is need to assemble [people]. People should be told to say, 'these are not your resources. If the government is giving these resources to share to people, do not cling to them. They are not your resources...Little by little you should share to everyone'*". – Male respondent, Village 5.

Resource sharing creates relationships based on reciprocity and obligation, which plays a critical role in maintaining kinship ties and for social protection. Kinship is a key factor in sharing, but is not the only criterion. Our results suggest a general hierarchy of sharing weighted in importance based on obligations and norms [Figure 1, next page]. The strength of obligation follows a continuum beginning with kin proximity, community relationships, non-kin vulnerable groups (orphans, elderly, the disabled), and finally that of "outsiders" (*obweras*) – those born outside the community or without kin ties. The distribution of external resources from government or nonprofit sources is mediated by a local agent – typically the village chief – through the hierarchy of obligations. Internal resources, or those already

existing within the community such as household subsistence crops or wages from temporary *ganyu* labor, may also be shared according to similar criteria as external resources but are rarely redistributed by local authorities.

**Figure 1: Resource sharing hierarchy.**
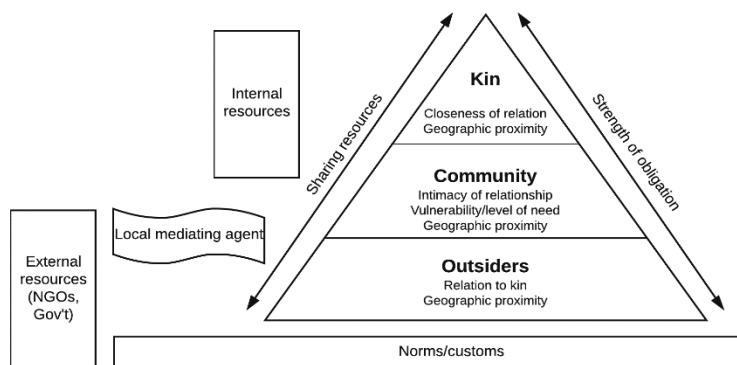


Source: Authors.

Family disputes can result in the chief barring access to benefits. While kin are prioritized, non-kin sharing expands and solidifies social networks and protects villagers against future risk; "*I share with my relatives and friends a variety of things that I have got. That is how I build relationships with people by sharing with people that I am not related to*" [Male respondent, Village 4].

Under challenging conditions, resource sharing is limited by scarcity, and desperation may lead to "begging". The agricultural seasons preceding and during our data collection were particularly poor. Households suffered from high food insecurity, and in some cases, sharing practices were reported to have weakened or been reduced to smaller kin or friendship circles. "*Especially this year, I have never seen it before. Eh! You can't even go to another household for help and be assisted! This year is too much! We don't know how to escape it*" [Male respondent, Village 3]. Some households expressed shame for having to ask for help, or tried to hide the extent of their vulnerability; "*Sometimes even if the parents hide that there is shortage of food at home, it will be the kids who will show that there is actually no food through crying for food at the neighbors' homes. Then the neighbor actually comes in to help*" [Female respondent, Village 4].

## 4. ROLE OF VILLAGE LEADERSHIP

The village chief plays the principal role in establishing and maintaining norms as well as in decision-making around community resource distribution. The chief is the primary reference in shaping other villagers' beliefs and actions, promoting good conduct and establishing or enforcing sharing customs. She/he is also responsible for establishing and enforcing sanctions. Although sharing of personal items, small goods or own production are individual decisions based on relationships or availability, the chief dictates guidelines for distribution of external resources such as food aid, cash transfers or farm inputs. Active participation in village level development projects such as school construction affects inclusion in this distribution system. This process takes several forms; 1) Clan-based distribution: allocation of benefits occurs at clan level, and clans apportion to individuals within the clan; 2) Vulnerability-based

distribution: targeting specific needy groups; 3) Equity-based distribution: chief mandates sharing to maximize the number of recipients under the assumption that all are in need; and 4) Corrupt distribution: directed to relatives or resale of in-kind resources.

Corrupt distribution appeared in several forms: "kin-first", co-option, and fraud. Kin-first practices of chiefs prioritizing wives or close relatives were common and often accepted, especially if resources were shared widely in the community. In cases of co-option or fraud, such as the resale of coupons or food aid, chiefs may be seen as corrupt depending on the severity of the offense. Despite reports of fraud, there were few instances of villagers taking action against chiefs. Chiefs retain power through this control over resources and their social mandate. This authority fosters patron-client relationships. Households may present "gifts"- such as a portion of program benefits - to the chief's household as an act of patronage.

> "*The problem is that the NGOs that bring relief aid trust the chiefs to register the beneficiaries yet the chiefs abuse the process by including many of their relatives. It would be better for these NGOs to just bring the aid and do the registration of the beneficiaries themselves - that is when many deserving people in the village will have a chance*" – Male respondent, Village 1.
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> "*They [Government] realizes that in 'umunthu' [Ubuntu, the spirit of oneness], the people help each other. It is that when you give items to those in need and others are left out, the problem is that when the time to do development work comes, those who did not receive…abscond from development works. So, it is helpful if the items are divided fairly to all people, then they feel counted and do all the works together*" – Village chief, male, Village 3.

## 5. RESOURCE TYPES AND ORIGINS

The types of resources and their origins affect sharing and distribution in the village. External resources, such as social programs, in-kind or cash transfers from Government or international organizations, are treated differently than household resources. Food or goods produced by the household or household purchases are less likely to be shared than external resources because of the effort involved in their acquisition. Cash is not commonly shared, even when received through an external program. The characteristics of each of these resources can either facilitate or obstruct sharing. For example, the visibility of resources affects whether a household feels pressured to share (cash is more easily hidden than food), and the monetary or social value of the resource is also considered (salt, soap and sundries are more easily shared than food).

Chiefs play a central role in encouraging sharing of external resources and creating an implicit, explicit, or publicly declared social imperative to share. That said, external resources are not necessarily shared among all village members; "*Everything that comes from NGOs is shared in the village but it is not everyone in the village who benefits*" [Female respondent, Village 4]. Those who disagree with sharing practices may suffer social sanctions and be left out of future distributions.

## 6. DEVELOPMENT AND GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS

External resources, particularly those originating from social programs, invoke a set of sharing norms that are often at odds with targeting guidelines or donor rules. Donor or government recipient guidelines may be at odds with local conceptions of relative poverty, where most community members consider themselves *poor*. Households and chiefs are cognizant of program guidelines, but these rules are often ignored as they do not align with village mores. For many social programs, chiefs are able to influence targeting to better align to village principles either during community-based targeting processes or through assigned sharing. Moral economy dynamics in the village assume that sharing scarce resources will help everyone.

> "*The rules are set here [in the village]. Whenever you receive from organizations, they will tell you not to share these resources. But when you get here and see how people are suffering, you will begin to share.*" – Female respondent, Village 5.
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> "*They [chiefs] want to divide everything…but the organizations that bring the aid tell us that whoever has been written is the right owner of the resources that we have distributed and discourage sharing. They [NGOs] just want beneficiaries to think on their own on what to do. So if they say that in front of someone with evil thoughts, do you think they will distribute to others? It's like the organization has given them ground.*" – Village Chief, male, Village 2.

Resources received from international aid agencies or the government have their own locally defined set of expectations. For instance, the Government of Malawi's Social Cash Transfer Program (SCTP) is targeted to the poorest of poor and is perceived to have strict guidelines and punitive external enforcement. The SCTP is almost never shared, with the exception of sharing between members of a beneficiary household. Although the SCTP is directed to the poorest, local practices have resulted in recipients being deliberately excluded from other social programs by chiefs. Although there have been recent efforts by development partners to automatically include SCTP recipients as beneficiaries of humanitarian aid (and to sensitize people on the rationale for automatic inclusion), our respondents conveyed the continued belief that such overlap of social support is unfair.

In contrast, the Farm Input Subsidy Program (FISP) is almost universally shared. Sharing of FISP is dictated by chiefs at the village level, commonly in a public assembly where actual beneficiaries are assigned 2-4 other households with which to share inputs. Villagers are aware of the assignment of individual beneficiaries but these formal rules are widely ignored. Refusing to share FISP results in enforcement or punitive measures by the chief, which could include exclusion from future social program benefits. Food aid, as part of the formal humanitarian response or from other organizations, is also mostly shared. Villagers describe sharing bags of maize between 4-6 families. Beneficiaries of food for work programs also share work days and salary for the days the labor is substituted. "*It is hard to share the aid you did not work for. For example, there is a resilience project, it's the aid which targets the elderly, so it's not easy to share the money*

*they are given. The elderly are supposed to use the money for their needs but other projects like [public works] you are supposed to share the work the same way we share the aid by half*" [Female respondent, Village 6].

In addition to these Government-implemented programs, there are a number of NGO-led programs in the study area. Of particular interest is a community-based childcare program administered by Save the Children (referred to as NEEP, Nutrition Embedding Evaluation Program). In contrast to other programs, NEEP encouraged households to share resources and labor collectively to provide for preschool meals and maintenance. Analysis shows this approach was effective in addressing child undernutrition, in spite of a lesser provision of external resources (Gelli et al., 2017).

## 7. CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Our results show that traditional social obligations, reciprocity dynamics, kin relations and village-level governance play an important role in determining resource distribution and reveal a morality of sharing during times of scarcity. Sharing norms are influenced by resource origin (internal vs. external), resource type (cash, food or farm inputs), seasonality and the influence of local chiefs. Furthermore, in the face of increasing scarcity of land and frequent shocks, tensions emerge between traditional community-based support systems and modern forms of external support. These dynamics affect how external resources are shared beyond program beneficiaries, affecting community perceptions of interventions and their ability to achieve desired outcomes. Therefore, they have direct implications for governmental and international assistance efforts to improve food security and nutrition, including decision-making around program design, targeting, beneficiary guidelines and their implied or actual enforcement, and expected impacts.

Despite studies reporting breakdowns of community social protection networks under severe conditions (Vaughan 1987) and those declaring food-sharing to be extinct (Chinsinga 2005), the communities in our sample continued to share resources, particularly those from external sources, even during significant deprivation. Resource sharing and re-allocation maintains both kin and non-kin relationships and obligations, and gives the poor relational power. However, socially isolated individuals or households are at risk of exclusion, and allocation is not necessarily efficient or based on relative need.

Local resource allocation and sharing practices can have differing effects. The reallocation of resources through sharing spreads benefits to a greater number of beneficiaries than intended by program design; but also dilutes the impacts of those programs. In the case of FISP, pervasive sharing of an already limited quantity of fertilizer results in sub-optimal levels of application. Benefits are modest, and sharing may even *displace* fertilizer that would otherwise have been purchased (Karamba and Winters 2015). In addition, analysis of humanitarian transfers suggests sharing may decrease targeting efficiency and thus diminish the effectiveness of transfers in reaching the poorest (Gelli et al. 2017). However, other programs have found a way to capitalize on sharing norms to enhance their impact by

targeting the whole village and calling for contributions, as in the case of the NEEP program.

Our results indicate that resource sharing practices are an integral part of village social and political dynamics. Inasmuch, these processes are subject to the control of local leadership. Control over resources, particularly external transfers from government or NGOs, can solidify and maintain local leaders' power. Resource distribution hierarchies may reinforce inequalities between kin groups or clans and exclusion from benefits can be a punitive tool used by leaders. This data also supports evidence that open community decision-making forums do not guarantee transparency or targeting accuracy. Significant inclusion and exclusion errors have been found in many of the key social support programs, which utilize varying targeting approaches: FISP (Kilic 2013), SCTP (Miller, Tsoka, & Reichert 2010) and humanitarian transfers (Gelli et al. 2017). Community beliefs that "everyone is poor" and all members deserve support—also documented in Chinsinga (2005)—can undermine efficiency in these selection processes and reinforce sharing obligations. These dynamics highlight the challenges of effective targeting in a low resource environment and raises questions on how to ensure that sharing does not spread scarce resources too thinly, precluding sustainability or generation of longer term livelihood improvements.

What is the most effective way to support Malawi's poor and vulnerable given the social context described here? Three possible approaches emerge from this analysis:

1) Circumvent sharing norms and control by traditional leaders. Programs that bypass chiefs in the selection process—whilst likely to generate resentment on the part of local leaders—may be seen as more objective, allowing for villagers to openly opine on beneficiary selection without fear of retribution or other negative social consequences. One potential example is the unified beneficiary registry (UBR)—an electronic registration system for program beneficiaries which is currently being rolled out in Malawi. The UBR was created with the aim of improving social program effectiveness by eliminating operational inconsistencies and fragmentation across programs. However, the UBR process, in which district staff train traditional authorities and community-level committees select households, is still vulnerable. This process could lead to the same types of capture, co-option and corruption as other programs with community targeting and sharing could continue to dilute the effectiveness of those transfers.

2) Increase the accountability of traditional leaders to community members. Greater emphasis on transparency in the selection process could help stem manipulation by local leaders. This could be accomplished through various governance mechanisms such as better communication to communities on targeting processes and by strengthening complaint, monitoring, and enforcement mechanisms.

3) Align program design and targeting with local sharing practices. For example, community based participatory approaches, such as the NEEP program, offer promise in this area by promoting mutual gains by encouraging contributions and capitalizing on sharing customs to increase program impact. Broadly, this approach builds on the idea of geographic targeting – in that village-wide approaches might be as efficient as other more time- and cost-intensive targeting approaches to individuals. Benefits distributed at the community level, such as inputs for community preschool gardens, may make it more difficult to co-opt resources to kin networks. This type of approach could lessen social costs to villagers to access benefits, align with local sharing practices, and generate less conflict over resource distribution.

## RESOURCES

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