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Assessment of the 2016/17 Food Insecurity Response Programme in Malawi

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INTERNATIONAL FOOD POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE

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ABSTRACT

Following poor harvests in the 2015/16 cropping season in Malawi, vulnerability assessments found that nearly 6.7 million people, primarily in the Southern and Central regions, were likely to suffer from food insecurity before the next harvest. The government of Malawi and its development partners designed the 2016/17 Food Insecurity Response Programme (FIRP) in Malawi to meet the food needs of many of the households affected, mobilizing approximately USD 265 million in resources to do so. In the wake of this intervention, a team led by the International Food Policy Research Institute was contracted to assess the quality of this humanitarian response along four primary dimension:

- Assess the quality of the national food security assessments which began the response;
- Investigate the accuracy of the geographical and beneficiary targeting within selected areas;
- Conduct an operational assessment of the humanitarian response design and implementation; and
- Assess overall programme and draw technical, market, and methodological implications for the design of future humanitarian responses and their contribution to resilience building.

This Discussion Paper provides considerable detail on which facets of the implementation of FIRP were successful and where implementation fell short in addressing the needs of the affected population, in ensuring that Malawi was better prepared for future food crises, and in laying a foundation for improved resilience in the face of such shocks for both the affected households and Malawi as a whole.

The 2016/17 FIRP was largely successful in preventing disaster and saving lives and livelihoods. However, the assessment of the design and implementation of the FIRP highlighted the high level of dependency of the Malawi government on its development partners for resources to undertake such humanitarian responses and the significant deficiencies in the technical and institutional capacity of the institutions responsible for responding. Unless the cycle of food insecurity is broken and the resilience of Malawian food systems increased, the government of Malawi and its development partners will continue to depend on FIRP-type interventions to save people's lives and protect them from food insecurity and hunger.

Keywords: Malawi, evaluation, humanitarian assistance, food crisis

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ACRONYMS

ADD	Agricultural Development Division
ADMARC	Agricultural Development and Marketing Corporation
AEDO	Agricultural Extension Development Officer
AMIS	Agricultural Market Information System
APES	Agriculture Production Estimates Survey (MoAIWD activity)
DoDMA	Department of Disaster Management Affairs
EPA	Extension Planning Area
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
FBS	food balance sheet
FEWSNET	Famine Early Warning Systems Network
FGD	focus group discussion
FIRP	Food Insecurity Response Programme
FSA	food security assessment
HCT	Humanitarian Country Team
HEA	Household Economy Approach
HRC	Humanitarian Response Committee
IFPRI	International Food Policy Research Institute
INGO	International non-governmental organization (NGO)
IPC	Integrated Food Security Phase Classification
JEFAP	Joint Emergency Food Aid Programme
KII	key informant interview
LIAS	Livelihood Impact Analysis Spreadsheet (part of the Household Economy Approach)
MoAIWD	Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation, and Water Development
MVAC	Malawi Vulnerability Assessment Committee
NDPRC	National Disaster Preparedness and Response Committee
NGO	Non-governmental organization
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
SADC	Southern Africa Development Community
SCTP	Social Cash Transfer Programme
TA	Traditional Authority (sub-district administrative unit)
UBR	Unified Beneficiary Registry
UN	United Nations
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WASH	Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene
WFP	World Food Programme

1. INTRODUCTION

Malawi faced an unprecedented food crisis in 2016/17 due to a drought in the 2015/16 cropping season in southern and central Malawi that reduced crop production and made a large portion of Malawi's population vulnerable to food insecurity. Rainfall totals in southern and central Malawi were generally between 50 and 80 percent of normal, with pockets of much lower rainfall received. In consequence, production of maize, the staple food for the country, was estimated for the 2015/16 cropping season to be 30 percent below long term national production levels (DoDMA 2016).

Based on the findings of the vulnerability assessment that they carried out nationwide following the 2015/16 cropping season, the Malawi Vulnerability Assessment Committee (MVAC) released a report in June 2016 indicating that 6.5 million (eventually raised to 6.7 million) people in 24 districts of Malawi would be unable to meet their food requirements over the period to the following harvest.¹ In response, the 2016/17 Food Insecurity Response Programme (FIRP) was developed (DoDMA 2016).²

This humanitarian response was primarily built around a multi-clustered approach to addressing vulnerability and food insecurity among affected communities and households. The response included a set of multi-sectoral interventions in agriculture; nutrition; health; water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH); education; and protection, in addition to the use of in-kind food distribution and cash transfers to reduce food insecurity. Implemented predominantly in southern and central Malawi from July 2016 to March 2017, the strategic objectives for the humanitarian response were to save lives, protect livelihoods, and contribute to building the economic resilience of the affected population. Figure 1.1 shows the affected population by district, as a percentage of total district population and total Malawi population, and the duration of FIRP implementation in each district.

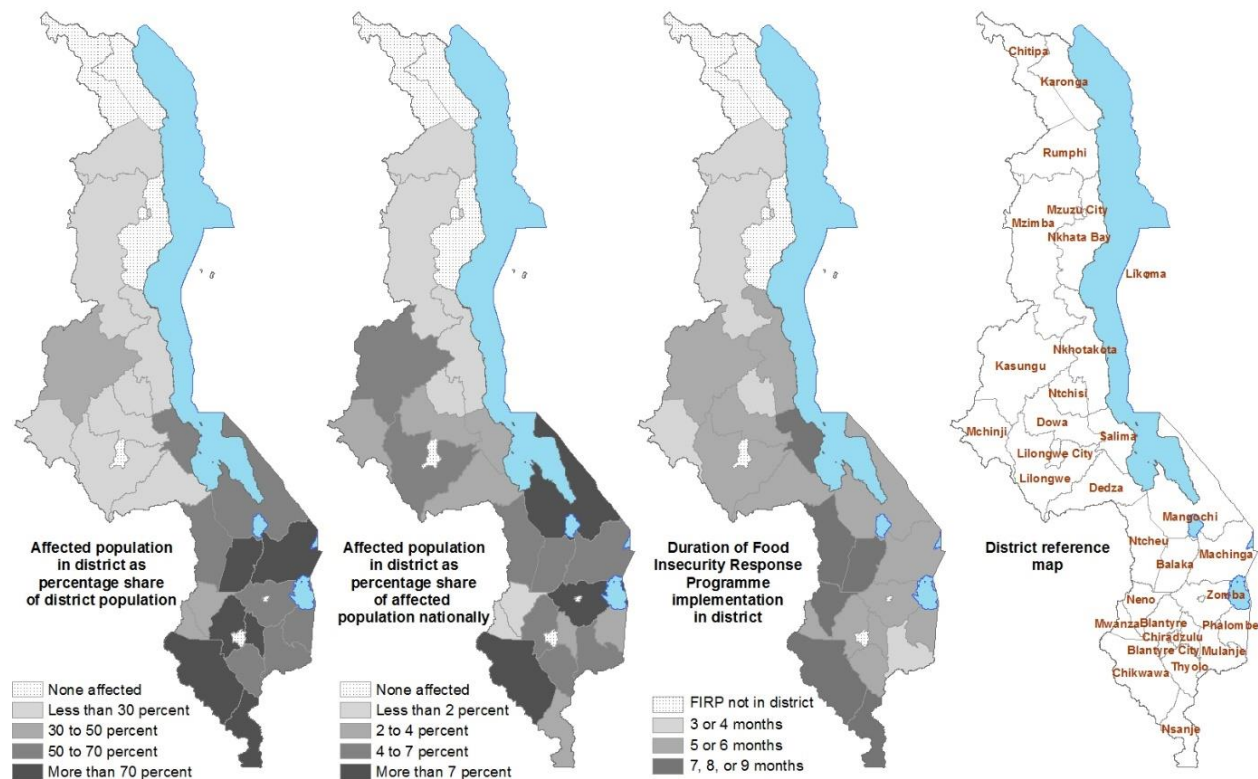
These maps show that the southern districts were the most affected and, hence, saw the longest duration of the FIRP. Areas containing significant affected populations were found in central Malawi, as

¹ The methods used by the Malawi Vulnerability Assessment Committee to annually estimate the size and distribution of the population at risk to food insecurity in Malawi are described closely and evaluated in Section 5 of this Discussion Paper.

² The full report can be found at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/malawi/republic-malawi-20162017-food-insecurity-response-plan>

well, with the northernmost provinces being the least affected and having the shortest FIRP implementation periods.

Figure 1.1 Affected population under the 2016-17 Malawi Food Insecurity Response Programme and duration of program, maps by district



Source: WFP and GoM, 2017.

Note: The maps on the affected population are based on the September 2016 second-round MVAC estimates of a national total of 6.69 million people being vulnerable to food insecurity and not certain to be able to meet their food requirements through to the following harvest.

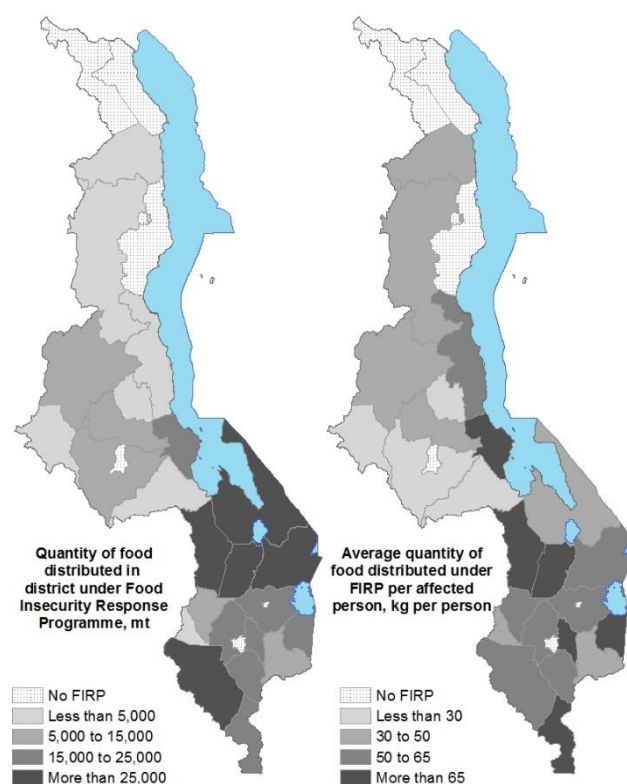
FIRP implementation began in the two most affected districts, Nsanje and Chikwawa, and eventually covered all 24 affected districts (out of a total of 28 districts in Malawi). FIRP was organized into seven thematic clusters with joint leadership for each provided by a ministry or agency of the government of Malawi and a UN agency. The seven clusters were as follows:

1. Food security (DoDMA/WFP);
2. Agriculture (MoAIWD/FAO);
3. Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) (MoAIWD/UNICEF);
4. Nutrition (Department of Nutrition, HIV and AIDS (Ministry of Health)/UNICEF);
5. Protection (Ministry of Gender, Children, Disability and Social Welfare/UNICEF);
6. Education (Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology/UNICEF); and

7. Health (Ministry of Health/World Health Organization).

Using this cluster structure, the government of Malawi and the development partners worked together to design and implement the FIRP to prevent starvation and deaths. FIRP was a large-scale program both in terms of the financial resources required and in terms of the vulnerable population covered. The first MVAC assessment envisaged 4.7 million would receive in-kind food transfers and 1.8 million would receive cash transfers with a cost of about USD 400 million. This was later modified with an increase of in-kind food beneficiaries to 5.4 million and a decrease of cash beneficiaries to 1.4 million, with a final amount of funding received at around USD 300 million. Figures 1.2 and 1.3 show the total and average in-kind and cash distributions by district.

Figure 1.2 Food aid distributed under the 2016/17 Food Insecurity Response Programme, maps by district

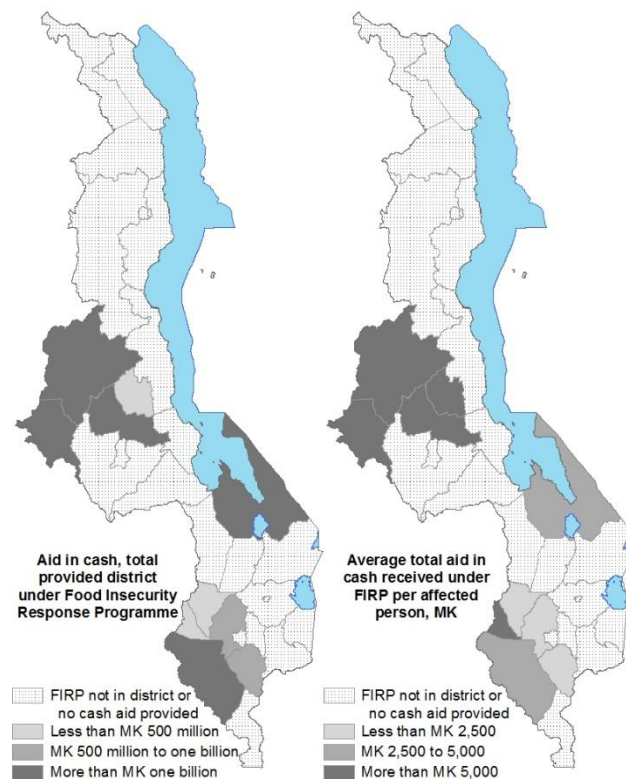


Source: WFP and GoM, 2017

These figures again confirm that districts in the Southern and Central Regions were more affected than the Northern Region. As well, we can see that food distribution was much more common in the

south, both in total and average quantities. The central areas received relatively more cash distributions than the south, while the north saw only food distributions with no cash provided.

Figure 1.3 Aid in cash distributed under the 2016/17 Food Insecurity Response Programme, maps by district



Source: WFP and GoM, 2017

Although it was generally successful as a response to a humanitarian crisis, FIRP, however, is seen by many observers as a disruption in the development pathway of Malawi, as it resulted in the diversion of resources to humanitarian assistance which could have been spent on development programs. As the occurrence of weather-induced food crises has become more common in recent years in southern Africa, there is a need to learn from the implementation of humanitarian response programs to make them more development-oriented and to use them to build the economic resilience of households and communities that are at risk of such crises. What public investments and actions are needed so that livelihood shocks, like the 2015/16 drought, do not affect the welfare of Malawian households so adversely and so that households can recover from such shocks more quickly?

The assessments for this report were carried out in two phases between June and October 2017. IFPRI's work entailed close analysis of relevant secondary data, including a review of the methods used to determine the scope and scale of the crisis and to design the response, previous studies related to food insecurity crises in Malawi, and FIRP implementation reports created by different partners in all the intervention clusters.

The information used for this FIRP assessment was collected largely through key informant interviews (KII) and focus group discussions (FGD). This information complemented secondary data obtained through the compilation of information from FIRP program implementation documents and related studies and assessments. The methods used for the assessment are described in more detail later in this report.

Assessment Objectives

The overall assessment of the 2016/17 FIRP aims to develop lessons for improving future humanitarian responses in Malawi so that those responses are more effective, are efficiently implemented, and make substantial contributions to the relief, recovery, resilience building, and long-term development of affected communities. To this end, in compiling this report, we focus on three aspects of the response:

Quality of national-level documentation establishing the scope, need, and nature of the crisis

The Government of Malawi produced a variety of documents which, taken together, established the scope, need, and nature of the food insecurity crisis addressed by the 2016/17 FIRP. These documents include the MVAC food security assessments (MVAC-FSA), the food balance sheets (FBS), and the agricultural production estimates (APES), among others. We reviewed the process through which these were generated through both interviews and technical reviews. Our analysis focuses on estimates of vulnerable populations, projections of future food prices, calculations of food balance sheets, and methods of estimating agricultural production.

The assessment also considers relevant costing methodologies, the linkages between funding and outcomes, and the effectiveness of the cluster approach in terms of mobilizing and applying needed resources and how the clusters are linked to intended outcomes.

Operational assessment of humanitarian design and implementation

The analysis of the operational design and implementation of the humanitarian response involved addressing the following major issues and questions using FGDs, KIIs, and review of program documents:

- Were the humanitarian response interventions relevant to meeting the needs of beneficiaries? Do beneficiaries perceive that the transfers were relevant to their own food needs and that of their households? Were the transfers of sufficient size to significantly assist them? How appropriate were the transfer modalities to effectively meeting their needs?
- How were accountability mechanisms utilized by all stakeholders to adequately ensure that complaints, concerns, and feedback concerning FIRP implementation were reported, addressed, and resolved?
- Institutional coordination and capacity issues, both vertically through decision-making to direct the implementation, as well as horizontally across actors at district and community levels are examined. This includes considering the role played by the non-Food Security Cluster components in the response and the effectiveness of those clusters in building household and community resilience among beneficiaries. We also examine whether institutional capacity for managing and implementing future humanitarian crisis responses was built among cluster members.
- The impact of the humanitarian response on the functioning of food markets across Malawi, including the way in which prices of maize and other foods evolved over the post-2015/16 harvest period relative to patterns in non-emergency years, is examined using time series data on market prices. The function of markets in surplus food producing areas is also examined.

As part of the design assessment, we also explored MVAC's geographical targeting process within affected districts, including making use of assessment tools and methods of the Household Economy Approach (HEA) framework, the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC), and other data sources. This was done through KIIs and a review of applicable methodologies. We also assessed the adequacy of the geographical targeting in terms of choosing Traditional Authorities (TAs)

for participation in FIRP and household targeting within selected TAs, and the choice of assistance modality used in an affected area, whether food (in-kind assistance) or cash.

Overall program impact and implication for the design of future humanitarian responses

Data collected from the above assessments was structured so that insights were gained on the impact of the humanitarian response on food security, local market performance, the economic resilience of households in the affected areas, and the capacity of the national institutions involved in the response. In addition, we involved a humanitarian expert in the team with experience in the design and operations of humanitarian responses to identify best options for the structure of the institutional framework and the technical capacity that need to be in place to effectively design and implement humanitarian programs in Malawi as future circumstances dictate.

This report is organized as follows. In the next section, we present the approaches to evaluation. Section 3 summarizes the findings concerning the cluster-based interventions. Section 4 presents our reviews of the FIRP design and implementation process and associated institutional factors. Section 5 assesses the methodological and technical challenges in the FIRP process. Section 6 highlights the issues related to the market assessments. Section 7 presents our overall recommendations, with concluding remarks forming the ninth and final section of the report.

2. APPROACHES TO EVALUATION

The conceptual framework for the FIRP assessment was partly guided by principles established by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) for the evaluation of development assistance (OECD 1991). The OECD framework for assessment focuses on relevance and appropriateness, efficiency, effectiveness, outputs, outcomes, impact, and sustainability. The FIRP assessment also uses the Core Humanitarian Standards to complement the OECD principles, with a focus on the following quality criteria –strengthening local capacity; communication, participation, and feedback; access to safe complaints mechanisms; and coordinated and complementary. Below we describe the structure of the FIRP assessment within these principles – covering the overarching organization of the assessment and the methodologies for the field assessments, methodological reviews, and market analysis.

Organization

The FIRP assessment is organized on two primary axes: (i) process, geographical, and institutional issues; and (ii) technical, market, and methodological issues. The first set of issues provides the framework for assessing the process of humanitarian response at national, district, and community levels; the capacity of the institutions involved; and program design. The second set focuses on detailed methodological, market, and technical challenges faced in designing and implementing the humanitarian response across all the seven clusters involved.

Geographical, process, and institutional analysis

Detailed field work was conducted for the assessment in five districts – Mzimba, Lilongwe rural, Dedza, Blantyre rural, and Nsanje. These districts were specified for the assessment team by the Department of Disaster Management Affairs (DoDMA), as they represent all three regions of the country, had high caseloads, and implemented both cash and in-kind modalities. Within these districts, analysis was further broken down to the TA and village level as appropriate for the given methodology, as detailed later.

Working within the framework of the five districts, the pillars for the assessment are the seven clusters of the FIRP. Given the nature of the humanitarian crisis, Food Security was by far the largest of the seven clusters in terms of scope and funding. We therefore conducted an analysis of the Food-Security cluster response in all five field study districts. The other six clusters were each assessed in between one and four of the five districts, focusing on those districts in which the clusters respectively had a significant presence. Table 2.1 shows the study districts and the clusters that were assessed in each.

Table 2.1 Examination of the humanitarian response clusters by district

Cluster	Mzimba	Lilongwe Rural	Dedza	Blantyre Rural	Nsanje	Total
Food Security	■	■	■	■	■	5
Agriculture	■	■			■	3
Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene	■	■		■	■	4
Nutrition	■	■	■	■		4
Protection		■			■	2
Education					■	1
Health	■			■	■	3
Total	5	5	2	4	6	22

Source: Authors.

During preliminary field work, two key areas of interest emerged: (i) issues within the planning and implementation process; and (ii) institutional issues within and between implementation actors. These are the focal points for the process and institutional analyses.

Process Issues

Challenges within the process of designing and implementing the response stemmed from a variety of sources. The process of assessing needs for the humanitarian response by the country's political leadership and for the government and its institutions needed better understanding as a basis for the assessment. The process of interaction among the various ministries, development partners, and various stakeholders and their respective ownership and engagement in the FIRP needed to be assessed. In addition, making requests for resources, the mobilization of those resources, their sharing and allocation among implementing agencies, and the reach of these resources to intended beneficiaries needed to be

tracked and studied. Transparency in resource mobilization and accountability of the implementing agencies to the government and beneficiaries in the use of those resources emerged as a major concern in the FIRP process. The process of cluster formation, inter-cluster coordination, and how various committees at national, district and local levels were coordinated required further analysis in the context of the interest of the government of Malawi in adopting “new ways of working and doing things differently.” The process analysis was also helpful for assessing FIRP in the context of the other related major strategies of the government.

The guidelines for the development of the interventions during 2016/17 humanitarian response in Malawi were given in the Joint Emergency Food Aid Programme (JEFAP), which was jointly prepared by the government and its development partners. The analysis of issues related to assessment of needs, conversion of the needs into humanitarian response plans, identification of beneficiaries, intervention design, implementation, and monitoring and tracking of benefits all relate to the JEFAP guidelines. For example, during the initial process mapping exercises and FGDs for the assessment (discussed in more detail in the methodology review section), coordination issues both among and within clusters were mentioned as an impediment to effective implementation. Respondents complained of both redundant programming, on the one hand, and bearing too much of the workload for other dimensions of the program, on the other. Some of this confusion and inefficiency in implementation could be attributed to a lack of clearly defined roles for the clusters themselves. This will be further explored.

Lack of inclusivity in the decision-making process also emerged as an issue in our initial discussions with those who were involved in FIRP implementation. This left some stakeholders feeling as though they did not own the portion of the implementation for which they were responsible, which subsequently affected outputs negatively. A lack of transparency within the decision-making process – both from the perspective of the actors and the recipients – was also cited as a weakness within the humanitarian response implementation. Combined, these concerns led us to place “process issues,” broadly defined, as a principal aspect of our analysis.

Institutional and Capacity Issues

The capacity for effective assessment of the severity of the humanitarian crisis and the needs of the affected population and for coordination of the humanitarian response from design through implementation to monitoring and tracking progress needed a thorough analysis.

The sometimes-troubled relationship between key coordinating or implementing institutions and some of the major international donors was also an institutional issue which emerged in our discussions with stakeholders. Respondents described a perception among some donors of a lack of capacity within DoDMA and MVAC, which apparently led to donors circumventing the channels of intervention expected by government. Rather, donors engaged directly with the organizations primarily responsible for implementing the FIRP – principally UN agencies and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). The avoidance of expected channels of communication and accountability was not perceived well by government officers and resulted in increased tension with FIRP implementing agencies at the national level. Moreover, this concern of donors regarding significant capacity constraints for program implementation among government agencies also arose at district and group village levels. Giving responsibility for some components of the humanitarian response to institutions that lack the capacity to effectively perform those roles can prove to be the “weakest link,” rendering local implementation of the response ineffective and leaving those requiring assistance with unmet needs. Were the perceptions of donors and other international partners of deficient capacity in government agencies with regard to FIRP implementation justified? We will consider directly whether this was the case.

Another institutional issue related to how the food insecurity response helped households build resilience to safeguard their livelihoods in the future, without the need for external relief, such as through a future humanitarian response program. Therefore, we also examined whether the implementation of the program had any medium-term effects on livelihoods—and ultimately on resilience— while providing short-term relief from food insecurity.

Methodological, market, and technical issues

The assessment of technical and methodological issues focused on the regular food security assessments (FSA) led by MVAC, other MVAC assessment reports, and the government's market intervention analyses. These were investigated at TA and district and national levels, respectively, and are briefly introduced below.

MVAC's initial FSA report following the 2015/16 cropping season and the initial market assessment effectively started the FIRP intervention. Given its importance, we assessed any potential technical weaknesses in the employment of the Household Economy Approach (HEA) used by MVAC in its FSA to calculate the number of affected households, the proportional distribution method used to assign total affected population at the TA level, and the overall targeting process employed by MVAC through the FSA.

We also conducted a review of the national food balance sheet (FBS) for Malawi. Along with the FSA, the FBS acts as both an impetus and a guiding document for the implementation of the humanitarian response. Potential technical inaccuracies within the balance sheet were reviewed to assess how significant they were in the resultant design of the intervention.

Technical constraints related to the market analyses also emerged through our preliminary discussions with humanitarian response stakeholders. Market analysis of staple foods was used to assess both the severity of food insecurity and the preferred modality of the response in a given area. Cash-based assistance was prioritized in areas with functioning markets, while in-kind food assistance was provided in areas where staple food markets were not functioning or were functioning poorly. For each study district, we conducted an empirical food market analysis to assess the quality of the market analyses during the FIRP and the impact of the findings of those analyses on the design and implementation of the intervention. This analysis addresses the following questions: Did FIRP do any harm to maize markets in Malawi?; Did FIRP reduce production incentives for farmers?

In addition to these methodological and technical analyses and assessments, we also more briefly examine the potential benefits of including the IPC approach to assessing food insecurity in the MVAC food security assessments.

Field Assessments: National, District, and Community Levels

The field work for the FIRP assessment specifically focused on the targeting and implementation of the response at district and local levels. This applies to all clusters, depending on the district in which they were examined for the assessment. Issues such as transparency, accountability, and effectiveness were explored through focus group discussions (FGD) with beneficiary community members. In addition, the targeting and implementation processes was mapped out through interviews with relevant district and local actors, both those inside and outside of government, involved in the response. This was done to better understand their roles and responsibilities and how their activities were coordinated. Attention was paid to specific interventions that each of the seven clusters of the humanitarian response – not only the Food Security Cluster actors – implemented at district and local levels.

Sampling

At the district level, key informant interviews (KII) were undertaken with district actors, including District Commissioners, members of the District Council, and focal NGOs that implemented the Food Security Cluster response in their respective districts. In addition, in selected districts, key actors involved in the other cluster responses were interviewed. At village level, we undertook FGDs with beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries in the TAs targeted for the Food Security Cluster response and other cluster responses where appropriate. Additional KIIs were undertaken with local leadership in the study villages selected (Table 2.2).

Villages were targeted to cover the different modalities of food response: cash, in-kind food, and vouchers. The focal NGO in each study location assisted in sampling of villages and households per the following criteria:

- At least two villages were sampled per modality and cluster activity within each district, focusing on cash and food, with select interviews at sites where cash disbursement was changed to the provision of vouchers in the course of FIRP implementation.
- Within each district, at least one village was chosen from a TA with a high caseload and at least one village from a TA with a lower caseload.
- We sampled 12 to 15 people in each village to participate in each FGD, according to the following criteria, insofar as possible:
 - Close to an even mix of males and females.
 - Vulnerable household types were included, including female-headed, elderly-headed, and households containing orphans.
 - If possible, we requested that different clans from the village were represented.
 - One-third of respondents were to be non-beneficiaries.
 - Wherever possible, we also requested that some beneficiaries who had participated in other, selected clusters be present to provide feedback on cluster activity beyond just Food Security.

Table 2.2 Sampling breakdown – an example for the Food Security cluster

District	Focus group discussions, by Food Security Cluster modality (cash, food, cash for assets) and for other Clusters	TA or village leadership	District level key-informant interviews
Mzimba	2 food; 1 Agriculture; 1 Nutrition; 1 Health		
Lilongwe rural	2 food; 2 cash; 1 Agriculture; 1 WASH; 1 Health; 1 Protection; 1 Nutrition	AEDO, ACPC, VDC, chief/GVH in all village-level interactions in the study districts	DC, DADO, DCPC, implementing NGOs in all study districts
Dedza	2 food; 2 cash; 2 cash for asset		
Blantyre	2 food; 2 cash		
Nsanje	2 food; 2 cash; 1 Agriculture; 1 WASH; 1 Nutrition; 1 Protection; 1 Education; 1 Health		
Total	27 FGDs, plus select FGDs in voucher-receiving communities	20 key informant interviews (KII)	18 or more key informant interviews (KII)

Notes:

AEDO = Agricultural Extension Development Officer; ACPC = Area Civil Protection Committee; VDC = Village Development Committee; GVH = Group village head; DC = District Commissioner; DADO = District Agriculture Development Officer; DCPC = District Civil Protection Committee; NGO = non-governmental organization.

The two rightmost columns in Table 2.2 identifies who assisted in identifying key informants and focus groups to examine the performance of the Food Security Cluster at local levels under the 2016/17 FIRP. Similar procedures were used to identify individuals and focus groups with insights on the activities and performance of the six other Clusters.

Data collection and analysis

The KIIs involved prompting the informants to describe the targeting and distribution process in detail, noting who was involved in each step, what their role was, and what their core accountabilities were. The informants were also asked to describe challenges in the overall process or to identify steps in the process

that were not implemented as planned. Finally, they were asked to reflect on coordination across actors and the extent to which it was strengthened.

The Process Net-Map method was applied to frame the interviews (Ilukor et al. 2015). This paper-based interview method visually maps complex processes. The resultant information was used in a simplified process evaluation framework, wherein the issues of inputs, outputs, and outcomes of the planning and delivery processes were documented and assessed (Rawat 2013). During the interview, the process was visually captured on flip charts to make the complexity of the process more perceivable. This allowed interviewees to more fully participate in the interviews in that respondents were prompted to physically draw the process map themselves, could see their responses emerge on the flip chart, and, thus, gained insights about the process during the mapping (Schiffer and Hauck 2010). Detailed notes were also taken during these interviews and compiled at the end of data collection. Responses were compared within and across districts to identify patterns in the data.

The FGDs covered aspects of targeting, distribution, and the effectiveness of the humanitarian response. The discussion guides for the discussions included modules on perceptions of food security before and after the response; perceptions of resilience – that is, the longer-term effects of the response; the suitability of the response, including for other clusters than the Food Security Cluster; the targeting process and the extent of transparency and accountability therein; and finally, the implementation process. Due to the rapid nature of this assessment, the FGDs were semi-structured to allow for easier analysis. However, discussion between respondents was encouraged, and deeper probing on areas of interest ensured that substantive results arose. The FGDs were digitally recorded, translated, and transcribed. Transcripts were thematically organized using NVivo software. All data collection and analysis involved a multicultural team made up of international IFPRI staff with local Malawian staff and consultants fluent in local languages.

Review of Methods Used in Preparing the Food Security Assessment

A technical review of the techniques used by both the government of Malawi and its international partners in the design and implementation of the FIRP is vital to understanding the methodological challenges faced. The technical review began with an assessment of the methodology used by MVAC in the national FSA, which was then extended to examine how the food balance sheet (FBS) was generated.

Methods

The evaluation of the FSA focused on the HEA and the secondary sources of data used by MVAC. These were assessed through KIIs and extensive technical reviews. In addition, the IPC approach, which in 2017 was tested for the first time in Malawi, was used as a comparator to the HEA in classifying the severity of acute food insecurity in affected districts.

The secondary data used by MVAC that were reviewed included the FBSs of 2016/17 and the second and third round estimates from the APES for the 2015/16 cropping season. The first-round estimates were not examined, since those estimates are based solely on farmer's cropping intentions, rather than actual planted areas. Consultative meetings were held with officials of the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Water Development (MoAIWD) responsible for APES and other key informants to better understand the data.

For our assessment of the HEA, which is the suite of methods and tools used by MVAC for the FSA, our assessment began with a review of the HEA guidebook (Food Economy Group 2015). The HEA analytical framework has two components: a baseline component and an outcome analysis component. Outcome analysis investigates how baseline access to food and income might have changed because of a specific hazard and considers the extent to which households will be able to meet their basic survival needs and protect their livelihoods following the hazard – often through coping strategies. Malawi updated its HEA baseline in 2015. Both the new MVAC Livelihood Baselines National Overview Report 2015 (FEWSNET 2016) and the original baseline report of 2005 (MVAC 2005) were reviewed.

A more in-depth understanding of the HEA and the secondary data used by MVAC for the FSA assessment was gained from KIIs with MVAC members and field officers from NGOs that contribute information to the MVAC assessments. Through these interviews, the process and details of the HEA used for the FSA were further studied. Illustrative materials, such as the Livelihood Impact Analysis Spreadsheet (LIAS) through which the size of the vulnerable population was estimated and the check-lists that are used for discussions with local informants during MVAC field visits were reviewed. From these we have a reasonably detailed understanding of the FSA and how it was developed as a basis for our recommendations for how it might be improved.

Market Assessment Review

The market analysis for the FIRP assessment studied the impact that the distribution of cash and food transfers, together with the pricing and trading decisions of the Agricultural Development and Marketing Corporation (ADMARC), the state marketing parastatal, had on the evolution of daily maize prices in selected markets during the 2016/17 humanitarian response.

Methods

We first tested the nominal maize prices series in different markets for stationarity, using the augmented Dickey-Fuller tests with and without trend and drift. We expected to find that nominal prices are $I(1)$ (integrated of order 1) but cointegrated, in which case an error correction model (or vector error correction model) is the appropriate estimating equation. We used a generic error correction model. It is often convenient to summarize price effects in the form of impulse response functions. An impulse response function, in this case, traces out how maize prices changed in the days following the release of cash or in-kind food assistance in a specific market. The hypothesis underlying an impulse response function is that cash transfers and in-kind food assistance have opposite, but asymmetric, effects on maize prices – prices in a market are expected to increase after the distribution of cash transfers, but are expected to drop immediately after in-kind food assistance is distributed, before eventually returning to their equilibrium level. This hypothesis, as well as the existence of market effects, can be tested using

coefficients from the error correction model. The extent of spatial market integration also can be tested using these coefficients.

Data

Three data sources were used in estimating the impact that different types of humanitarian assistance had on daily maize prices.

IFPRI maize price monitoring – IFPRI has been monitoring daily retail maize prices in selected markets in Malawi since November 2016.³ Data collection began in eight markets and was extended by seven more markets in mid-December 2016, bringing the number of markets to 15 across the country.

Monitoring is done six days a week, excluding Sundays. Since April 2017, prices of both old stock and new maize are reported in most markets. These are averaged to obtain an average daily price. Data is collected from market monitors by means of text messages on cell phones.

In-kind food distribution data from World Food Programme (WFP) and partners – WFP and 18 NGO partners supported approximately 5.3 million people with in-kind food transfers in 24 districts until March 2017. The data for this analysis from these activities comprises distribution dates, locations, and total volume of in-kind distribution in the districts that overlap with the markets covered by IFPRI's daily maize price monitoring.

Cash transfer distribution data from WFP and the International NGO Cash Transfer Consortium – An international NGO consortium, led by Save the Children with partners Oxfam, GOAL Malawi, Concern Worldwide, and Concern Universal, implemented cash transfers in eight districts to ensure that the food entitlements of vulnerable families were met during the 2016/17 lean season. In addition, WFP was responsible for cash transfers to another one million beneficiaries. The data used on these cash transfers comprises the distribution dates, locations, and total values of these transfers in the seven districts that overlap with the markets in IFPRI's daily maize price monitoring.

³ While other sources of maize price data for longer period exist, including AMIS and FEWSNET, these are of weekly periodicity and so are less suitable for this study.

An important variable that was omitted from this analysis due to lack of data is cross-border imports of maize. Varying levels of supply of often informal imports of maize from Malawi's neighbors are expected to be reflected in variations in maize prices, particularly in local markets close to the border over which the imported maize was transported. Similarly, levels of maize imports, particularly informal imports, may closely follow movements in maize prices in domestic markets.

3. CLUSTER LEVEL ASSESSMENTS: DESIGN THROUGH OUTCOMES

The cluster system in Malawi is the backbone through which the disaster relief system is meant to operate. Each of the seven clusters plays a role in designing and implementing a holistic disaster response. Here we explore several of the cluster responses. This is done by focusing on targeting, design, implementation, outcomes, and sustainability of the cluster response in 2016/17, using the evaluation framework of the OECD (OECD 1991). Our assessment uses primary data collected via FGDs and KIIs and documents provided to us by the various clusters and international NGOs. The analysis seeks to address the following issues:

- Did the clusters adequately recognize salient issues on the ground as they relate to FIRP?
- Did they have adequate funding to address the issues they identified?
- Did they coordinate effectively among themselves to deliver integrated benefits to beneficiaries?
- Did they have the needed technical capacity to meet the challenges on the ground?

The FIRP design document (DoDMA 2016) specified the cluster-level plans, developing budgets for each. Based on a late-April 2017 accounting by cluster of funding received, Table 3.1 shows the financial resources originally envisioned for each cluster against funding received by the end of FIRP implementation.

Table 3.1 Funding for cluster activities under the 2016/17 Food Insecurity Response Programme – budgets as per original design and funding received, USD

Cluster	Original cluster design budget	Funding reported received as of late-April 2017 at end of FIRP	Difference between budget and funding received	
			Funding shortfall	As a percent of budget
Food Security	307,505,000	237,599,269	-69,905,731	-23
Agriculture	30,800,000	18,908,356	-11,891,644	-39
Water, Sanitation, & Hygiene (WASH)	22,087,500	210,750	-21,876,750	-99
Nutrition	29,148,630	25,965,155	-3,183,475	-11
Health	1,046,500	248,119	-798,381	-76
Education	4,237,255	3,199,814	-1,037,441	-24
Protection	306,926	213,215	-93,711	-30
Total	395,131,811	286,344,678	-108,787,133	-27.5

Sources: DoDMA 2016; FIRP accounts provided by HCT.

Note: Funding that had been pledged or committed by donors, but not received is not included in this table. The late-April 2017 financial report showed undisbursed pledges and commitments totaling USD 56,591,402.

Food Security Cluster

The Food Security Cluster was by far the largest cluster of the FIRP in terms of funding and targeted population. According to MVAC and DoDMA documents, the main objectives of the cluster were to provide immediate, lifesaving food assistance and to contribute to the restoration of livelihoods and enhanced resilience through complementary activities. The budget for its activities in the FIRP design document (DoDMA 2016) was USD 307.5 million. By the end of the intervention, the cluster had received USD 237.6 million in funding and delivered aid to 6.7 million beneficiaries. The aid delivered took the form of cash, food, and vouchers.

Targeting effectiveness in the Food Security Cluster was positively affected by some factors, while negatively affected by others. At village level, targeting was carried out either using JEFAP guidelines (GoM 2010) or, in some parts of Dedza district, the Unified Beneficiary Registry (UBR) was used in an operational trial.⁴ According to KIIs with implementing partners and district officials, the UBR was used quite effectively for targeting. Many pointed out that it cut out the influence of local leaders in

⁴ The Unified Beneficiary Registry is a register of households eligible for social support services and has been developed in selected districts by government under the National Social Support Programme (<http://www.ubr.mnssp.org/>).

beneficiary selection. In contrast, implementers in areas where only JEFAP guidelines were used, such as Blantyre rural district, complained of too much local capture of the targeting process. However, participants in FGDs in UBR areas complained of a lack of inclusivity of community perspectives where the UBR was used – they felt they did not have any real participation in the targeting process, despite the use of an open forum in which to verify the names. In the FGDs, it was noted that feedback provided by villagers in communities where the UBR was used was not considered in beneficiary selection. Nonetheless, many still preferred the UBR to JEFAP as its use diminished the influence of the village chief in the targeting process. The UBR has its own potential downfalls, however, including delayed beneficiary updating.

In areas without the UBR, KIIs cited interference by local leaders as the main hindrance to effective targeting. Despite efforts to control for this problem through open verification, there were still many issues with leaders interfering. And while the cluster was successful in stepping in and redistributing aid when improper activity was detected, it could not solve all the issues. Even in our relatively small sample size of FGDs, we found two villages where the beneficiaries were completely chosen by local leaders with no repercussions. The community often did not use the feedback mechanisms provided because they either lacked the knowledge of what to do or feared reprisal. This aspect of the use of the feedback mechanisms provided is discussed in further detail later in this section.

While levels of assistance provided were calculated for individual households, reports from interviewees and FGDs of both voluntary and forced sharing were common. The level of sharing varied from one village to another depending on the number of beneficiaries in a village. Sharing of any kind naturally defeats the planned targeting process, and reported “voluntary” sharing may in fact be based on strong cultural norms rather than individual desire. According to the participants, sharing was done to prevent quarrels in the village. In essence, the fairness of targeting within communities was called into question. Sharing of benefits resulted both from perceptions that all in rural Malawian communities are poor and from fears of retaliation from non-beneficiaries. Our perceptions were that often communities participated in the FIRP community-based targeting process primarily as a means to bring the FIRP

benefits to the community, but not as the basis for how those benefits would be distributed. However, targeting within communities in a context of high poverty levels breeds suspicion, divisiveness, and accusations of corruption. Many communities seemed unwilling to sacrifice long-term social solidarity for the short-term gains which FIRP offered.

The amount of assistance programmed for allocation to a beneficiary community had a direct influence on whether a village will target effectively or not. In a context of high poverty levels, a small quota entails that the majority of the poor will be left out. While targeting effectiveness has largely focused on reducing inclusion errors and leakages, communities are more concerned with exclusion errors and under-coverages. In a context like rural Malawi where poverty levels often are already above sustainable levels, access to humanitarian assistance can be an essential and vital concern. Consequently, while sharing dilutes the intended impact of the assistance provided in a community, it is considered as better option than having no access at all to assistance particularly for the most vulnerable households. Therefore, with the FIRP ration only covering 65 percent of targeted household needs, most beneficiaries ended up with less than 50 percent of their requirements due to sharing of the rations received within the community.

Moreover, the lack of information provided beneficiary communities by FIRP implementation agencies undermined the community-based targeting processes used. While community-based targeting mechanisms have been promoted as empowering processes through which communities participate in critical decision-making process, in most of the sites where FGDs were carried out, community members were not aware of the beneficiary selection criteria that was to be used. Effective community participation and informed decision making requires information sharing. Without the provision of clearer formal guidance, in its implementation under FIRP, community-based targeting was vulnerable to manipulation and elite capture within targeted communities.

While community-based targeting is largely feasible, as demonstrated through low levels of inclusion errors during the FGDs, community-based targeting mechanisms, like other targeting methods, involve administrative, incentive, political, and social costs. To be effective, such targeting also requires

significant external technical support and facilitation so that community leaders are able to make informed decisions in a transparent, accountable fashion.

Targeting was also severely hampered by a lack of funds and rushed schedules. Acknowledging that any response to emergencies must be time-sensitive, it is still true that insufficient funds and time affected the effectiveness, efficiency, and inclusiveness of the food security targeting process. District officials explained that they had little or no budget for training their staff on how FIRP was to be implemented, limiting their ability to effectively participate in the program. Even in areas which faced frequent emergencies, the district level officials felt they were left out in the implementation process. On the other hand, the FIRP implementing partners complained about lack of proactiveness on the part of the district officials with whom they engaged.

Informants in all study districts noted that proper verification of targeting was challenging due to the abbreviated schedule at the beginning of the program. For instance, in Dedza, even if it was found that names in the UBR were incorrect, these errors could not be fixed immediately, since distribution of assistance had to begin. District officers, when interviewed, said that implementing partners did not always communicate with them adequately due to the very tight implementation schedules.

Interestingly, despite these targeting issues, the FGD participants were relatively positive regarding the targeting process. Except for two study villages for the assessment where there was blatant capture by local leaders, the communities approved of the targeting process – stating that it was transparent and was inclusive of vulnerable groups. The major complaint was consistently that the number of beneficiaries was insufficient.

This brings us to one area where transparency failed – the final MVAC figures. In every district, participants in both FGDs and KIIs expressed a great deal of frustration with not knowing how the final tally of beneficiaries was calculated. On one end of the spectrum, communities did not believe they had been properly included in the process or informed of the criteria. This led to many wondering why the final number of beneficiaries was so small when so many were needy. On the opposite end of the spectrum, because they were not included in the process and not provided sufficient information

regarding the figures, many district officials felt that the MVAC had arrived at figures that were unrealistically high. Despite being on both ends of the spectrums, these views show that the MVAC assessment process perhaps did not properly engage with local populations and stakeholders and did not respond to the needs/requirements of the local populations.

Outside of the transparency issues with the figures, participants in both the FGDs and KIIs generally agreed that information transparency and inclusion were strong. Those KIIs conducted in connection with the Food Security Cluster stated that the objectives of the cluster were clear and in accordance with the goals of their organizations. The interviewees largely believed that information was readily available throughout the planning and information process, and that their organizations were properly included. Occasionally, government officials would complain about not being included in the monitoring process (to be covered below), but those issues were isolated. FGD respondents echoed these sentiments. Excluding the villages where targeting was completely hijacked, there were no complaints regarding understanding the objectives of the program or overall inclusion in the targeting process. Interestingly, none of the villages we visited reported being involved in the selection of the food distribution point, as they were supposed to be. However, none complained about this being an issue either. The distribution points were easy to access.

FIRP explicitly included as beneficiaries households receiving that already were receiving cash from the Social Cash Transfer Programme (SCTP), who in theory should be the neediest in affected communities. According to cluster documents, this stipulation was relatively effective in targeting, with 79 percent of those receiving SCTP included as MVAC beneficiaries. However, FGDs with beneficiaries mostly showed that some SCTP recipients were left out of final targeting, with Blantyre rural specifically showing no inclusion whatsoever. FGDs also showed that villagers felt that the inclusion of SCTP beneficiaries left out some other needy families in the community, while providing others with “double” support. Some complained that, because of inclusion errors, the SCTP was not actually targeting the neediest households, exacerbating the targeting problem. In addition, others complained that the number of households to be targeted in individual villages was already small, and automatically including SCTP

households further decreased the pool for MVAC beneficiaries. Improvements in the targeting and messaging around SCTP could help alleviate these issues, as well as better communication and feedback channels regarding the program (GoM, 2017b). Alternatively, with adequate capacity strengthening, the SCTP could be used as a platform for both vertical and horizontal expansion to address emerging shocks and disasters.

In terms of the efficiency and effectiveness of implementation, individuals working in the Food Security Cluster believed that they coordinated well among themselves. Multiple respondents across districts stated that many Food Security Cluster stakeholders were present at important steps of the implementation, including distribution. This enhanced the inclusivity of the program. The DoDMA Real Time Review Report and several respondents noted that initially there were logistical issues with food distribution stemming from a lack of communication and scheduling (DoDMA 2017). KIIs believed these issues to be largely related to the NGOs and private sector organizations, such as Airtel and G4S, brought in to carry out the distributions. We received multiple complaints regarding the professionalism and capacity of these organizations early on in the intervention. However, sources stated that these deficiencies were eventually overcome through improved coordination.

FGD respondents also believed the coordination of the cluster to be strong. When asked their perceptions regarding how well the response was coordinated, the consensus was that the cluster performed well. However, when asked whether the implementation of the program effectively followed the plan described to them, many FGDs believed the cluster failed in this regard. This was largely due to issues in timing of the aid and size of the rations (discussed below) rather than dramatic changes in the plan itself. Improved communication with the beneficiaries could alleviate some of these issues.

In all the visited districts in which Food Security Cluster KIIs were carried out, respondents involved in FIRP implementation at district and more local levels complained of insufficient humanitarian resources – both in terms of quantity and timing of delivery. This affected the relevance of the aid, as restricted resources led to rations being reduced for beneficiaries. During FGDs, beneficiaries complained that rations were not sufficient and in some cases, were reduced. The design and size of the food rations

and the equivalent cash transfers were resource-driven rather than needs-driven. The food and cash transfer entitlements were not enough to meet the minimum food requirements the beneficiaries believed they needed to maintain their food security. This became critical when the rations were further reduced during the implementation phase. Beneficiaries reported that they were not provided information as to why their rations were decreased.

However, both FGDs and supporting documents from MVAC showed that most beneficiaries were happy with the modality of aid they received and felt it was relevant for their situation. Only in two instances did we receive reports of beneficiaries receiving food (often tubers) that they were unfamiliar with and did not know how to process. However, these issues were isolated and resolved as the program continued. It should be noted that, at the Food Security Cluster level, the entitlements through FIRP were meant to fill only the food consumption gaps due to the food crisis and not to meet total food needs.

Monitoring of the aid provided on the ground was also affected by a lack of funding and logistical support. Respondents in several districts noted that lack of specific funding for follow-up visits and transportation was a major barrier to proper monitoring of the aid distribution under the Food Security Cluster. One of the informants noted that district officials were not provided with funds by government to undertake monitoring activities. Instead, they had to request funds from implementers or simply ride along with the implementers during their field visits.

Market monitoring was also a key facet of the Food Security Cluster response. Adequately assessing the market situation across and within districts affected the effectiveness of targeting and delivery of food aid. Per the MVAC cash response Joint Learning Event report, market monitoring activities failed in providing accurate estimates of local food availability and did not account for dynamism in the supply and demand for food in markets, such as market responses to food aid or cross border trade (Government of Malawi 2017). Inadequate monitoring of local market conditions may have led to aid being delivered where it was not needed or being delivered in the wrong form (cash, vouchers, or food-in-kind), muting the impact that the aid otherwise would have had on the welfare of beneficiaries.

Regarding program flexibility in responding to changing market and local conditions, participants in the KIIs and FGDs were split based on their respective points of view. Respondents in KIIs believed the program was flexible in all five districts studied. The most common example used was highlighting that a switch was made from cash to vouchers in some areas once market assessments deemed this necessary (a full examination of this is provided in subsequent sections). They also believed that the changing ration amount and the ability to adjust schedules according to logistical challenges showed good program flexibility. On the other side of the equation, participants in FGDs lamented that the program was not flexible enough to provide more assistance. As the drought and intervention went on, rations were often reduced rather than increased, despite increased need, at least as perceived by the participants in the FGDs. While this might not reflect true program flexibility, it does show a breakdown in communication between implementers and beneficiaries.

There were different perceptions of the adequacy of the channels for bottom-up feedback within the Food Security Cluster. During KIIs with representatives of implementing partners and district officials, many felt that strong feedback mechanisms were in place, such as suggestion boxes and toll-free phone lines. They believed beneficiaries used these mechanisms to resolve their problems successfully. However, when discussing this with members of communities with FIRP beneficiaries, some did not know of such feedback mechanisms, did not feel comfortable using them, or did not think actions were taken based on their complaints. All three of these issues were confirmed in multiple FGDs across the field study districts. These field complaints and documents, such as the DoDMA Real Time Review Report, point toward the need for the feedback mechanisms to be further refined and calibrated to the needs of the communities – for both beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries (DoDMA 2017).

Those interviewed, both key informants and beneficiaries, perceived that positive outcomes were realized from the Food Security Cluster response in terms of the first objective of the cluster of reducing immediate food insecurity. Participants in KIIs and FGDs both stated in multiple instances that the cluster activities were successful in staving off food insecurity. Some focus groups suggested that more rations were needed, and the real-time DoDMA review document suggested that increasing food and cash

amounts to ensure that the needs of all members of affected households are met for a full month would be optimal (DoDMA 2017). Specifically, it was noted by focus groups and KIIs that rations should better account for household size. The same, standard ration (calibrated for a family of 5.5 members) would clearly not last a large household as long as a smaller household. The downside was that food rations and the cash transfer entitlements did not meet the minimum standards of 2,100 kilocalories; therefore, when this was reduced further the beneficiaries were given significantly less compared to their daily requirements. According to Food Security Cluster reports, ration size is largely dependent on the availability of resources and food quantities available for distribution at any particular point in time.

Documents from the implementation of FIRP note overall general success in reducing food insecurity. WFP (2017) observed, for example, that average food expenditures among both beneficiary and non-beneficiary households in affected areas dropped from 73 to 44 percent of income between the start and the end of the response. A review by the government of Malawi and WFP noted that targeted households saw a reduction of 68 percent in the percentage with a poor food security score compared to 8 percent for non-beneficiaries. Targeted households also saw significantly greater decreases in their use of consumption-based coping strategies versus those households that were not targeted (GoM 2017e). However, we must present a small note of caution regarding the decreased percentage of income spent on food expenditures. The baseline level of food expenditure percentage of 73 percent seems somewhat low for the very poor in Malawi, and that it eventually dropped to 44 percent, leaving 66 percent of expenditure to be spent on non-food items, is surprising. Our research and past experience would suggest that the budget share of food should be closer to 90 percent. This is especially true for drought affected areas where food/cash aid is being provided specifically because individuals should have little or no means to acquire it themselves. Instead, we see that beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries in the area were able to quickly and significantly reduce the share of the expenditures going to food. This discrepancy is counterintuitive and an indication that groups that were targeted may have not been the most severely affected by the drought. We will discuss this issue further in Section 5.

The second goal of the Food Security Cluster response – to build household and community assets to improve resilience and livelihoods – realized mixed success. Efforts to address this goal were done to a degree in association with other clusters. A WFP and international NGO commissioned case study on complementary activities found that those who were targeted to benefit from resilience-building activities, including the provision of seeds and agriculture technologies through the Agriculture Cluster, were pleased and had improved outcomes. Beneficiaries preferred to be involved in these activities rather than receiving unconditional aid and were happy to be working in their own gardens rather than for others. Moreover, the program successfully created a greater base of knowledge in the communities.

That is not to say the activities were without challenges. First, specific to the design of these asset-building interventions, only those individuals in beneficiary households with the capacity to work could be targeted by the resilience-building program. Consequently, by design no direct positive impacts from such resilience-building programs were realized for the neediest, often labour-constrained, households. Second, there was poor coordination within the Food Security Cluster and with the other clusters involved in providing the correct seeds and other inputs in a timely manner. Finally, many of the beneficiaries were not properly sensitized on the design of the resilience-building activities and the reasons for the targeting. Overall, targeting 20 percent of the beneficiaries was one step towards breaking the cycle of hunger. However, targeting additional beneficiaries would better support building resilient communities or building capacity in the longer term (WFP/INGO Consortium 2017).

In this light, the results from the FGDs did not reflect many positive results for the Food Security Cluster in building resilience. The majority of FGD participants stated that their villages were no better off this year than they were last year, and that MVAC recipients also were no better off than non-beneficiaries. Primarily, this was stated to be due to the ongoing issues related to armyworms and drought. While MVAC support allowed villagers, who otherwise would have needed to contract out their labour, to work their own gardens, the ongoing weather and pest challenges negated many of these benefits and left everyone back on the same level. Those villages without armyworm issues did note that MVAC beneficiaries were better off, however, showing some signs of potential resilience. The timing of

the phasing out of the emergency food distribution or cash transfer negatively affected the resilience of the beneficiary households because they were forced to start using their crops for consumption before those crops had fully dried.

Insufficient capacity was another aspect of the Food Security Cluster response that several key informants mentioned as being a hindrance to efficient and effective implementation and a detriment to achieving desired outcomes for the FIRP. The lack of adequate training and human capacity in district offices and civil protection committees for FIRP implementation led to sub-par implementation of the food insecurity response according to respondents in some districts. Rushed timelines and insufficient resources for training exacerbated the issue. Furthermore, documents provided by MVAC note that the lack of training at the district level involved in the program meant that little was been done to sustainably increase capacity, and therefore enhance community resilience, in local offices.

Participants in both the FGDs and KIIs were asked to describe any unexpected results or unintended consequences from the intervention. The most common unintended consequence cited in KIIs was that of local capture of the FIRP by elites. However, in Nsanje, KIIs were consistently worried that FIRP was reinforcing negative feedback loops associated with receiving aid. They feared that a culture of dependency was ingrained in the district, and, without a change in fundamental attitude in the beneficiaries, breaking the loop would be difficult. FGDs were more positive. While some did cite instances of quarrelling over who received aid, the most common response was that the intervention helped improve family and marriage quality. In addition, FGDs in two districts, Nsanje and Dedza, reported that food aid helped reduce sexual exploitation of young women, as they were no longer hungry and desperate.

Finally, the fact the Food Security cluster received only US\$ 237.6 million when the planned resource requirement for the cluster was US\$ 307.5 million raises several issues. This budget shortfall means that the implementing partners in the Food Security Cluster claim to have met their objective of reaching 6.7 million people with emergency needs with 77 percent of resources initially needed. Given the challenges faced by them in implementation, it is hard to conclude that this achievement is due to

increased efficiency in delivery of emergency aid. Rather, there is some reason to believe that the initial numbers could have been exaggerated. Further it is also possible that the numbers of beneficiaries and the original rations originally planned for were not fully met during implementation. We take up this issue further in section 5 and suggest that the Food Security Cluster objective was shown to be achieved with lesser cost partly because of overestimation of the food assistance required and not necessarily due to increased efficiency on the part of the implementing partners.

Recommendations

- More funding and time, where possible, should be allocated for the targeting process. The targeting process should start when crop failures are first assessed and funding for targeting and identifying beneficiaries should be part of that assessment exercise. While recognizing the urgency involved in mounting a humanitarian response, targeting demands greater attention if the objectives of the response are to be achieved. The late start and early funding shortfalls negatively affected the transparency and accuracy of the targeting process, as information regarding the MVAC decision making process could not be communicated properly to stakeholders and targeting errors could not be corrected.
- As part of preparedness actions under any contingency planning, strengthen the capacity of district and local civil protection committees for performing their roles and responsibilities, including beneficiary targeting and registration.
- Develop clear minimum standards on food entitlements based on international standards. Communicate them to beneficiary communities.
- Communication with beneficiaries needs to be improved in a variety of ways. This includes communication about the distribution process, changes to ration amounts, the presence of feedback mechanisms and the process through which complaints should be addressed, and the reasoning behind the automatic inclusion of individuals on SCTP in the response. There was a particular gap in communication between targeting and distribution which led to anger and frustration among beneficiaries. An explicit channel for disseminating information during this period would be helpful.
- As resources allow, the food ration or cash transfer amount should be increased to meet the needs of all members of affected households for a full month. The difficulty in making benefits last to the end of the month and the general small size of the rations was a common complaint heard in the FGDs. Importantly, provisions must be made in the transfer policy to avoid creating a harmful incentive towards increasing family sizes with the goal of receiving increased rations.
- Monitoring activities for tracking the benefits of the program was often left to DoDMA and, at local levels, the District Civil Protection Committee. However, funding for such monitoring activities needs to be provided in a timely way so that authorities can make spot checks. Moreover, greater accountability should be expected on the part of local agencies for the use of the funds that they received for monitoring – to date, accountability for funds allocated to monitoring remains poor.

- More time and funds for training and community involvement should be allocated for asset-building activities to improve program targeting and relevance. This includes resilience-building activities and, if possible, follow up visits to promote continued resilience. FGDs complained of deteriorating resilience following the closing of FIRP, and more preventative measure should be implemented.
- To strengthen resilience building, the Food Security and Agriculture Clusters should have strong linkages and coordination mechanisms.
- There are four basic requirements for an effective community-based targeting mechanism: transparency, information, accountability, and audit by external facilitators. Information structures are therefore critical for successful implementation of community-based targeting mechanisms. In the short term, the approach requires investment in community structures, such as civil protection committees, to ensure that they are strong and equitable.

However, as part of a long-term social protection policy to strengthen the livelihoods and food security of vulnerable households, strengthening local structures would have significant impact on future programming. The composition of such structures should ensure that there are checks and balances and include a mixture of agents, including religious leaders and external facilitators. Similarly, effective monitoring is required. Government should strengthen the capacity of existing field extension workers and community-level institutions in performing such roles.

Nutrition Cluster

The three main objectives laid out for the Nutrition Cluster at the beginning of the food insecurity response were to reduce malnutrition-related morbidity and mortality among children and pregnant or lactating women; to ensure access by children under five years of age to healthcare, including nutrition screenings; and to strengthen capacity for the effective implementation of nutrition interventions. FIRP documents state the Nutrition Cluster received over USD 25 million in funding, quite close to the amount of funds requested, and had over 312,000 direct beneficiaries, not including the 1.14 million under-fives who received nutrition screenings, which were done monthly.

Lack of capacity in the Nutrition Cluster, mostly in the districts, but also to some extent in the national offices, had negative implications for both targeting and implementation. District personnel interviewed noted a lack of clear instructions on FIRP nutrition activities from national-level managers within the cluster, and decisions on how to target and implement the program were described as ad hoc. Implementing partners working around the district structures was also reported. Without a clearly defined

implementation coordination structure, it was difficult for nutrition officers at the district level to effectively and efficiently implement their program as designed.

Attempts were made to include district officers in decision making, but a lack of time and resources made this almost impossible. One key informant at district level who implemented nutrition components of the humanitarian response reported being unaware of the cluster system entirely. The end of program report from the Nutrition Cluster reiterates this issue and highlights the challenges posed to the implementation of the Cluster's work plan due to insufficient health and nutrition personnel with needed skills. This needs to be addressed through further training (Nutrition Cluster 2017). Healthcare providers should be trained on the recently updated Community Management of Acute Malnutrition service delivery guidelines. However, one area where capacity was strong, according to KIIs and FGDs, was with the Health Surveillance Assistants. Within the primary data collected, it was noted that the Health Surveillance Assistants were helpful at the village level in distributing nutrition messaging and providing nutrition-related health services.

The sustainability and impact of the Nutrition Cluster interventions also was affected by poor integration of nutrition into food security targeting. According to cluster documents, 57 percent of households with acutely malnourished children or with adults with HIV and TB were not targeted in the food or cash distributions under FIRP – leaving no safety net after completing or dropping out of nutrition programs. Children in these households were more likely to relapse back into the program. That only 2 percent of households with malnourished individuals receiving nutrition supplements would have qualified for assistance under FIRP shows that nutrition issues are not always related to food access alone – emphasizing the need to integrate nutrition considerations explicitly into FIRP targeting (GoM, 2017e).

Opinions on intra-cluster coordination in the Nutrition Cluster were decidedly mixed in interviews with cluster members. As mentioned, district-level actors reported little guidance from the national level as to how to designate roles at the district level or to develop the implementation plan. At the national level, however, greater coordination occurred. The final Nutrition Cluster report highlights information sharing, transparency, and coordination as key achievements, stating that these elements were

vital in leading to positive outcomes (Nutrition Cluster 2017). This improved coordination at national level was aided by strong collaboration between UNICEF and WFP. Together, the organizations provided leadership and guidance in updating different protocols and guidelines and implementing various interventions, including use of Community Management of Acute Malnutrition and supply management, while also mobilizing what resources they could (WFP & UNICEF, 2017).

In terms of outcomes, the cluster achieved a significant portion of its stated goals. Most (99 percent) malnourished pregnant and lactating women targeted for aid received it and 93 percent of those targeted for moderate acute malnutrition treatment received aid. The monthly nutrition screenings of children 6 to 59 months old achieved a 60-percent treatment rate of planned treatments along with a 78-percent treatment rate for severe acute malnutrition. Targeting for the cluster was helped by the completion of three Standardized Monitoring and Assessment of Relief and Transitions (SMART) surveys conducted in May and December of 2016 and May of 2017. These were used to better estimate the prevalence of malnutrition, underweight, and morbidity in the affected districts.

Results from our FGDs also show a positive impact of the Nutrition Cluster. When prompted on activities taking place beyond food or cash distributions, the actions of the Nutrition Cluster were mentioned in every district – something which does not hold true across all the clusters assessed. Beneficiaries often mentioned distributions of benefits to pregnant or lactating women and health screenings as some of the most helpful supplementary activities. Distribution of soya to undernourished children was also singled out as generating positive results by not only feeding individuals but giving them enough energy to stay in school. Finally, some beneficiaries also mentioned being exposed to Nutrition Cluster messaging on how to better prepare nutritious food. While they found this helpful, they lamented the fact that the food discussed in demonstrations generally was not included in food distributions.

Results from the district level KIIs did not paint as rosy a picture for the cluster, however. District nutrition officers interviewed in two separate districts both complained of being left out of the MVAC response and of poor coordination both within the cluster and with other clusters. The main complaints

regarding coordination were that NGOs did not try to operate through the government structures but rather implemented programs on their own with little thought for coordination with the district-level agencies. This, combined with a frail reporting and management structure within the cluster itself, led to overlapping programs.

Coordination with other clusters also suffered due to this reduced role for nutrition officers. This meant there was little information flow between clusters at the district level, at least in the beginning. It was noted in some KIIs that some of these issues were overcome and better coordination was achieved by establishing explicit communication structures. Finally, KIIs for the Nutrition Cluster also complained of insufficient funding for their response, leading to breakdowns in monitoring effectiveness and the absence of any significant training to increase capacity. Despite these issues, those interviewed were happy with the final results they saw given the constraints they faced. They believed they had succeeded in shoring up the nutritional needs of the population and preventing further damage, while overcoming early obstacles.

Recommendations

- Due to significant concerns about insufficient capacity, over the medium term increased funds are required for training and response planning within the Nutrition Cluster at the district level during non-emergency periods. It is important to establish a clear emergency preparedness and response plan and capacity before an emergency begins. Planning for how the nutrition response in an emergency should link to existing programs is also required.
- The Health Surveillance Assistants were singled out as being effective by both officials and beneficiaries. The training of Health Surveillance Assistants for addressing nutrition problems at community level should be expanded. Referring acutely malnourished children to local primary healthcare centers may not always work due to distance and competing priorities within affected households.
- Regular communications between Nutrition Cluster members should be established, especially between the national and district levels, to specify roles and the necessary interactions. This should include guidance on how the NGO community is to operate within the Nutrition Cluster so that NGOs do not sidestep and go around the nutrition structures currently in place.
- The design of interventions to treat severe acute malnutrition and moderate acute malnutrition, respectively, need to be better coordinated. Severe acute malnutrition interventions were managed by UNICEF, while the moderate acute malnutrition interventions were to be managed by WFP. The children targeted for both interventions

are on a continuum in terms of nutritional status and will move from one condition to another depending on the effectiveness of the interventions. Currently, coordination at the community level between these two agencies is lacking. A better strategy for both types of interventions is needed and should be developed through more effective cluster coordination.

- Nutrition indicators should be strengthened as part of the criteria used for targeting, based on guidelines in the JEFAP. The use of these criteria would be bolstered by clearly communicating these new considerations to humanitarian response program implementers and to beneficiaries. One potential option would be to make the households of Community Management of Acute Malnutrition beneficiaries automatically included in the MVAC beneficiary lists. This will help alleviate some, but not all, of the nutrition hardships these households face.

Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) Cluster

The objective stated for the WASH Cluster in the MVAC assessment documents was to ensure that all affected communities had reliable access to protected and safe water, sanitation, and hygiene facilities.

The WASH Cluster aimed to target 775,000 beneficiaries to achieve this goal and proposed a budget of USD 22 million. Based on discussions with key informants and cluster documents, the WASH Cluster received around 0.1 percent of their overall funding.

The overall picture is that the cluster suffered from some early coordination issues and almost none of the resources it budgeted for were provided – forcing WASH coordinators to re-route core funding to carry out programs. A key challenge noted in the WASH Cluster documents reviewed is that there was limited reporting by WASH members and little communication among them during the humanitarian response. This was reiterated in interviews with WASH Cluster members in which it was noted that roles were often self-selected by WASH Cluster agencies due to a lack of oversight from the national level. These issues had a detrimental effect on the cluster’s ability to operate effectively and efficiently. As time went on, however, this was somewhat ameliorated. The office of the UN Resident Coordinator in Malawi, in cooperation with DoDMA, UN agencies, and NGOs, worked at consolidating district level reporting and information sharing via focal point agencies.

Interviews with both key informants in the cluster and a WASH Cluster Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) presentation noted that the cluster was also successful in leveraging existing partnerships to achieve its goals (UNICEF 2017). In one district, the WASH Cluster worked

closely with the Health cluster – relying on personal relationships – to achieve their outcomes. In addition, existing programs for regular development work were leveraged to respond to the emergency and to pre-position supplies for future emergencies. Both aspects helped increase the effectiveness of the cluster and its future sustainability.

The WASH Cluster also succeeded in building resilience into their interventions. Drilling and rehabilitating boreholes for providing safe, and longer-term, access to drinking water was prioritized. In addition, the cluster worked to end open defecation in targeted villages. According to interviews with district officials, villages were not targeted for borehole drilling until they were proven to be open defecation free – improving resilience and creating positive incentives (though the officials were unclear whether these programs were always part of the FIRP). Hygiene messaging was also provided to many beneficiaries with the hopes of improving behavior and long-term outcomes.

Despite the resilience success of the cluster, overall outcomes fell short of their goals. In total, 113,489 individuals were provided safe water through borehole drilling and rehabilitations, 704 villages (totaling 176,250 individuals) were declared free of open defecation, and 91,519 were provided access to hygiene messaging. This amounts to only 45.3 percent of the original target of 775,000 beneficiaries. The main reasons cited for these shortfalls are the previously mentioned severe lack of funding and early coordination issues. It is still notable that the cluster reached nearly 50 percent of its targeted population with less than one percent of its planned funding. Our interviews and desk review lead us to believe they accomplished this through reallocation of existing funds and leveraging other deployed resources.

Results from the focus groups are mixed regarding the WASH Cluster. The cluster itself was not often mentioned by the beneficiaries in the focus groups when prompted on what other activities were available in the area. This could demonstrate that the cluster was not as active as it hoped to be, something corroborated by key documents, but it could also be an issue of confusion. When prompted on what specific activities were available, some beneficiaries would mention WASH Cluster programs but misattribute them to the Health or Nutrition Clusters – making our full picture of the cluster cloudier.

In the end, the cluster was mentioned in only three districts, and in one of those districts the beneficiaries were only marginally aware of an awareness campaign. Those in the other two districts, did think quite highly of the cluster actions. They expressed significant appreciation for the construction of boreholes and lessons provided on their maintenance, the work to ensure the villages were open defecation free, and various messaging about proper hygiene. There were some requests that future interventions should include more training to build capacity at the village level.

As mentioned above, the district level KIIs for the WASH Cluster mostly lamented the poor coordination, funding, and capacity of the cluster. One interview in particular, that with an individual responsible for implementing the WASH Cluster for an entire district, stated that they have never been integrated into the MVAC process in any form, and that many implementing partners in the area had chosen to ignore the government routes for action and began implementing on their own projects, creating unnecessary overlap. This KII interviewees believed that the government had the capacity, but that the funding was lacking, leading to limited coordination and monitoring. Despite these issues, those interviewed in the WASH Cluster were still pleased with their final outcomes and believed they had helped build resilience in the communities in which they worked.

Recommendations

- Coordination needs to be improved between the national and district offices of the WASH Cluster. A working document defining roles at both levels and establishing emergency activity plans should be created. This document should also specify how the implementing partners are to work through the district level offices to reduce overlapping activities and to build government capacity.
- Funding needs to be increased across the board. This includes for training and monitoring, along with general purpose implementation. Insufficient funding was found to be a significant obstacle to effective operations. Communities are in favor of the activities carried out by the WASH Cluster, but wish to see more activities take place. Working with this desire, the government can help build future WASH resilience.

Protection Cluster

The Protection Cluster was a unique cluster in the response, given the task of integrating protection from exploitation and violence into the multiple layers of FIRP implementation. Targeting around 3 million

individuals and with funding of just over USD 200,000, its main objectives were to reduce violence, abuse, and exploitation of children in disaster-affected districts; reduce the prevalence of gender-based violence among disaster-affected communities; mitigate the protection risks of food insecurity among drought-affected populations; enhance access to justice for vulnerable persons affected by disasters; and reduce the psycho-social effects of disaster on affected communities. Much of the program of the Protection Cluster was implemented through training sessions and messaging for beneficiaries.

At national level, the cluster was successful in strengthening the coordination and capacity of the response regarding gender. Those in charge of running the cluster, notably the Ministry of Gender, Children, Disability and Social Welfare, engaged a variety of stakeholders to ensure that protection programming was properly considered during the intervention. Coordination included monthly interagency meetings, and capacity was enhanced through support for humanitarian trainings for DoDMA and Protection Cluster leadership (GoM 2017c).

On the ground, however, review of outcomes of the Protection Cluster performed through consultations in about a dozen communities by Link for Citizen Empowerment and Development found that girls in the communities were often side-lined in the design of the food insecurity response. Moreover, 63 percent of communities overall were not involved in the planning of the response in their villages (LCED 2017). With one of the stated goals of the response being the creation of an inclusive design, these results raise questions as to how inclusive the design process was. While the sample size of the study was limited, it also found that 34 percent of communities faced hardships of a protection nature because of the aid distribution. Most often this took the form of sexual abuse, seen by 17 percent of communities, and abuse of power, felt by 31 percent of communities. Abuse of these sorts usually occurred during the registration of beneficiaries and during distribution of aid.

One of the primary reasons for abuse was found to be the asymmetrical knowledge of the FIRP targeting criteria between chiefs and community members. Creating a situation where the chiefs are the primary source of information regarding who is supposed to receive aid and the process for targeting and distribution created incentives for abuse. This was corroborated in the field by both KIIs and FGDs.

Numerous stakeholders highlighted the challenges that emerged due to interference by local chiefs – interference which is made possible due to the asymmetry of information. Related to this, beneficiaries in FGDs often spoke of the food or cash received as a gift rather than an entitlement. When power abuses occurred, they then were not as likely to report abuses because they saw it as a lost gift and not as the theft of a transfer that is their right to receive. Better communication with beneficiaries of the process and their rights would again help address this.

Related to these issues are problems of inappropriate feedback mechanisms. These were noted in the review of the Food Security Cluster above, but Protection Cluster documents also made a point of noting that these mechanisms need an overhaul. There was not enough engagement with communities in designing mechanisms appropriate to their needs, leaving many beneficiaries feeling unsure of how to use them or uncomfortable in doing so. One example that sticks out is that reporting abuses to village chiefs or headmen was often believed by beneficiaries to be one of the main feedback mechanisms – one which has the potential for significant adverse repercussions for the beneficiary involved (GoM 2017c).

Positively, 71 percent of communities felt there were mechanisms available for voicing complaints. Less encouraging was the finding that 44 percent of communities believed that the complaint mechanisms did not operate correctly once a complaint was lodged – responses to complaints were seen as rare and insufficient. This was a sentiment echoed in interviews with key informants as well. Accountability in the Protection Cluster was made more difficult because the feedback mechanisms were poorly implemented for the local situations.

District-level coordination problems were experienced as well. Beyond NGOs going around the cluster to provide information to donors, the lack of funding meant that Protection Cluster members were not active at district level. The cluster was meant to operate through the district welfare office, but could not do so, according to our interviews with district officials, due to a lack of funding.

Overall, the targeted 3 million individuals across 10 districts all received protection messaging. Within these districts, 100 schools were also visited to provide messaging regarding protection issues in education settings. Resilience was improved from a protection standpoint through the training of 76 focal

personnel to provide continuing support and messaging regarding the mainstreaming of protection programming.

Due to the nature of the Protection Cluster, it was not as visible as other clusters, and because of this, FGD participants often did not mention Protection Cluster activities as being part of the local FIRP implementation. FGDs in only two districts stated that they were aware of the Protection Cluster, though others were somewhat aware of provisions to ensure vulnerable groups were protected – just not the exact Protection Cluster messaging. For those groups that were aware of the cluster, they thought the activities were important, but were not coordinated enough to have a strong impact, nor did they provide the necessary trainings to build local capacity, possibly due to funding.

The most pressing challenge for the Protection Cluster raised in interviews with cluster members was that of funding and supplies, which affected every aspect of the cluster. The budget for the cluster was not honored. This caused the cluster leadership to fall behind in implementing its plans under FIRP, since it had a limited budget to do so. And without supplies, such as kits and materials for messaging, many interventions simply could not be carried out. Implementing partners and NGOs, in turn, began to coordinate and communicate directly with donors and communities on protection activities rather than with other cluster actors – further compromising the effectiveness of the Protection Cluster.

Despite the hindrances mentioned, KIIs believed that the cluster was quite successful at mainstreaming gender and other protection messaging into the targeting and distribution process. It was noted in Nsanje especially that the cluster had been quite active and engaged in the process, leading to positive outcomes for the communities. This point was echoed during the FGDs in Nsanje as well.

Recommendations

- Funding for Protection Cluster activities within any future humanitarian response needs to be increased relative to the funding accorded other clusters. If protection is a central component for the design of any humanitarian response program, sufficient resources are required to improve capacity and leadership within the cluster.
- Efforts should be made to balance the roles that village heads have as the gatekeepers of knowledge regarding beneficiaries, targeting, and the program overall. Sensitivity training for community leaders, more extensive communication about the delivery of

benefits and the rights of the beneficiaries, and alternative targeting designs should be explored to improve transparency about targeting and the distribution of benefits in order to reduce the potential for abuse and exploitation of beneficiaries.

- Responsiveness to complaints from beneficiaries needs to be improved. Feedback mechanisms are available to the communities (though not always appropriate). However, even when community members took advantage of the feedback mechanisms, they stated that often their complaints were not addressed. Even if a complaint cannot be addressed, it should not be ignored, and the inability to address the complaint should be communicated to beneficiaries to avoid further distress to the one who lodged the complaint.
- Protection issues need to be integrated into every level of the FIRP – especially the Food Security Cluster. It appears from our results that many beneficiaries do not know about or understand the role of the cluster. This integration is being done to some extent, but needs to be increased and be done in a more explicit, pro-active manner.

Education Cluster

The Education cluster had two primary activities: reducing absenteeism during the emergency period and providing protection to learners, especially young girls, in a wide variety of formats. These goals manifested themselves in many different activities, highlights of which include a successful school feeding program, a local gardening scheme, and hygiene and nutrition messaging to learners. The cluster received funding of just under USD 3.2 million – about 25 percent less than what was initially budgeted.

The most prominent of the Education Cluster activities was the Emergency School Meals Program. Seeking to reduce absenteeism among emergency-affected communities, this program operated in four severely affected districts, delivering meals to 71 schools and nearly 62,000 beneficiaries. Cluster documents received and interviews with cluster personnel both showed that this program was effective in increasing enrolment and attendance. According to a government of Malawi draft FIRP review, school enrolment in program areas increased by 20 percent, as compared to a decrease of 12 percent in non-program areas – a swing of 32 percent. Attendance also increased, from 70 percent in non-program areas to 90 percent in implementation areas (GoM 2017e).

From a resilience and sustainability standpoint, the cluster was somewhat effective. Based on local information gathered by the cluster, the most requested resilience factor from local communities was that of livestock. The cluster therefore engaged in livestock and veterinary training activities for various age groups of learners. These learners were then linked with local value chain systems, creating markets

that will hopefully endure (GoM 2017d). Schools and villages were also encouraged to start community gardens to provide food for schools – for which some training was provided. This action that was noted as quite effective and sustainable in our interviews. Again, the cluster worked to integrate these gardens into the local markets to provide an outlet for any excess production. The cluster also provided schools and teachers with education supplies and an SMS system for recording school attendance, both of which will help improve the schools' capacity to rebound from future emergency situations.

Documents and interviews also showed that the program effectively distributed messaging and taught classes related to social issues, such as protection, along with nutrition and hygiene. Messaging was focused on improving hygiene in school to reduce disease incidence, non-attendance at school, and to teach learners how to properly prepare food for greater nutritional benefit. According to our interviews, these programs seem to have been relatively effective in terms of messaging, although we did not receive any follow-up evaluations as to their impact. From a gender perspective, the cluster also distributed menstruation kits to schools for adolescent girls. These were aimed at improving attendance for girls specifically.

The cluster was not without its issues, however. Cluster documents note that there were issues with participation from cluster members at national level. The 12-member group rarely met, and when they did, participation was often limited to a small subset. These issues were corroborated by national-level interviews. This coordination breakdown led to a duplication of activities between members, such as between government and NGOs, that hampered the efficiency and effectiveness of the cluster. Furthermore, there was limited capacity within the Ministry of Education to effectively coordinate the members. This could be the cause of, or a symptom of, the breakdown in coordination, but the clear lesson is that more capacity in the ministry would help improve outcomes. An improved ministry also would help address a complaint seen in both the documents and our interviews that there was no standing contingency plan for the cluster in the case of emergencies. Once the emergency was declared, roles were decided individually and actions carried out on an ad hoc basis. Better capacity and coordination would improve planning significantly.

Issues existed at district level as well. Funding was reported as inadequate, impeding the ability of the cluster to implement some messaging and training programs and to scale-up some of the veterinary extension and afterschool programs that had been proven effective. Late disbursement of funding, reportedly due to breakdowns in internal donor processes, was also blamed for similar issues. Capacity issues within the district councils also prevented effective monitoring of the response and reporting of implementation statistics, though this improved after the implementation of new data collection schemes (GoM 2017e). A cluster-level interviewee stated that the cluster operated at 20 percent of its potential in terms of funding, capacity, and coordination.

There was, however, some quality inter-cluster collaboration among the Education, Protection, and Food Security Clusters. As noted above, the school feeding program was successful in improving attendance, and this program would not have been feasible without coordination with the WFP and the Food Security Cluster in general. Further, the messaging portion of the response was conducted in coordination with the Protection Cluster. Without this coordination, the response would have been significantly less efficient and effective.

Overall, documents show that, despite funding and coordination issues, the cluster was successful in achieving its pre-intervention targets – and may have, in fact, succeeding in targeting more than its original goal of 208,000 learners.

Despite the success mentioned by the cluster documents, in our FGDs, however, the Education Cluster was the least-mentioned of any cluster. When prompted on what other activities were available in the areas, FGDs in only one district mentioned being aware of their activities. This may be because the cluster was not present in all the of the districts or that it is less visible to those without school-aged children and therefore did not register with all beneficiaries. The district that was aware of the Education Cluster activities thought very highly of them. The prevailing sentiment was that all children benefitted from the school feedings, making them happy and eager to go to school. They were also pleased with the school gardening activities and the benefits the whole community saw from those activities. However, there was some sentiment that they would have liked more trainings.

District KIIs where the Education Cluster was active also spoke well of the cluster's activities. While they believe that they lacked the necessary resources to take on some of the larger projects requested by communities – particularly those communities which requested new school houses – overall, projects were carried out effectively. Those interviewed believed they had sufficient capacity to carry out both the distribution of relief items and trainings, and that gender was integrated well into the response. One worry from one interviewee was on ownership. There had been some issues with gardens and schools constructed during the relief efforts not being maintained by the communities for which they were built. Work needs to be done to ensure that local ownership of these projects is effectively created.

Recommendations

- Efforts should be made to scale up activities that have shown positive effects on education during emergency situations, most notably the Emergency School Meals Program. Improving cluster funding would certainly help with scaling up these activities, but there must also be improved inter-cluster coordination to achieve these outcomes. Expanding these programs to more districts would also be helpful.
- Regarding coordination, a standing contingency plan document should be drawn up for how the Education Cluster is to mobilize during an emergency. This must include monitoring methods to ensure that all cluster members actively participate in coordination and cluster meetings. Roles must also be clearly defined from the onset of an emergency to prevent overlap and confusion.
- Capacity needs to be improved within the Ministry of Education. This could take the form of providing more funds or training to ministry members, or by providing stronger incentives and frameworks for the implementing partners and donors to actively engage with the ministry. This improved capacity should be used to better mainstream education initiatives into the overall emergency response.

Agriculture Cluster

The role of the Agriculture Cluster in the FIRP response was an important one – to protect livelihoods and to build future resilience. To this end, the cluster focused on three main activities: providing agricultural inputs to vulnerable farmers, engaging in vaccination campaigns against livestock diseases, and promoting small-scale irrigation and soil management projects. Among the seven clusters, the Agriculture Cluster had requested the second highest amount of funds in the response at USD 30.8 million, however, it only received USD 18.9 million, a gap of 39 percent. This funding deficit features frequently in the assessment below.

However, our understanding of the activities of the Agriculture Cluster is only partial. Despite multiple requests to MoAIWD and FAO for documentation on the Cluster from the start of the FIRP assessment process, no significant documentation was provided regarding the activities they carried out under the cluster, their success, or challenges. As such, this review relies on our KIIs and FGDs, while also incorporating information on the Agriculture Cluster gleaned from documents supplied by other clusters.

From documents provided by the Food Security Cluster, we know that the Agriculture Cluster worked closely with them on resilience-building activities. Earlier we noted that a combined food security–agriculture project provided agricultural inputs to a subset of farmers to help build resilience. While this program had some targeting issues, it was mostly regarded as a success with high levels of satisfaction among those involved (WFP/INGO Consortium 2017). The Agriculture Cluster also coordinated with the Education Cluster in their efforts to promote community gardens for school feeding. These were also seen as a success within the communities.

Some of the results from the FGDs echo these successes, while others are more critical. In three of the five districts visited (Blantyre, Lilongwe rural, and Mzimba), focus groups knew of the activities being carried about by the cluster, but felt they were insufficient. The most common complaint was that not enough individuals were targeted to receive the seed, cuttings, or other inputs. This could point to a need for improved cluster funding to better serve local needs. There were also complaints in two districts about targeting. One FGD stated that the inputs had been targeted solely by the village chief, leading to ineffective use of the aid. Another stated that they were not sure at all how the inputs were targeted, which points to a lack of transparency in the decision-making process.

On the positive side, FGDs in Dedza and Nsanje both rated the cluster quite highly. They felt the cluster had not only encouraged crop diversity by providing seeds and cuttings, but helped build resilience with training in soil management techniques and cash for work programs.

KIIs conducted at the district level showed some of both the positive and negative views of the FGDs. Those interviewed believed they had done a good job in improving the resilience of local

communities through the distribution of agricultural inputs. They pointed out that their targeting methodology followed that of the MVAC, but, due to limited funds, focused on providing inputs to the most vulnerable of the beneficiaries (although there was some concern in our interviews that gender was not properly considered). On the negative side, problems in coordination with other clusters during joint activities were noted, along with intra-cluster coordination issues. Inputs provided by the national-level government did not always arrive in a timely fashion and logistics remained a concern. Finally, as mentioned in the FGDs, there were issues with local capture by chiefs. Politically powerful local leaders could intervene in the beneficiary selection process and distribute inputs based on patronage rather than need, negating much of the effectiveness of the program.

Since we lack proper documentation on the program, it is impossible to provide a full accounting of the outputs of the Agriculture Cluster. Judging from our KIIs and FGDs, however, it appears the cluster was able to operate widely and with some success despite limited funds. Targeting was an issue in some areas, but that did not stop the program from building resilience in many affected communities.

Recommendations

- With a funding gap of nearly 40 percent, funds were always going to be an issue for the Agriculture Cluster. A common view in the FGDs was that the response was good, but did not target enough people – especially for resilience-building activities. Funding should be increased for the cluster, with a special emphasis on those projects proven to improve community resilience.
- Targeting for the cluster activities could be improved in conjunction with the targeting for the Food Security Cluster. This would include ongoing updates to the JEFAP system, and refining and expanding the use of the UBR. Local capture appears to have been a significant drawback in Agricultural Cluster activities. Significant attention needs to be paid to overcoming it.
- A significant portion of the activities carried out by the Agriculture Cluster were done in coordination with other clusters. More guidance needs to be provided from the national-level cluster leadership as to how district-level officers are to interact with their cluster counterparts. This could take the form of standing MOUs among the various actors or other explicit instructions for how to coordinate activities in emergencies.

Health Cluster

During the FIRP response, the Health Cluster's stated main responsibilities were to provide access to basic health services, especially for vulnerable populations and the disaster-affected, and to help build and

maintain capacity, resilience, and monitoring structures for future emergencies. The cluster received funding equal to 24 percent of their budgeted need.

As with the Agriculture Cluster, we did not receive any of the requested documentation from the Ministry of Health or the World Health Organization-Malawi office for this assessment, despite repeated attempts. As such, this section is based solely on our FGDs, KIIs, and various high-level interviews we conducted with individuals who worked in or with the Health Cluster.

The Health Cluster seems to have operated primarily through the Health Surveillance Assistants. In discussions, we found that individuals were familiar with the activities of the cluster because of the interventions and presence of Health Surveillance Assistants. Generally, the Health Surveillance Assistants were thought of as being effective both in distributing messages regarding improving basic health and in providing healthcare assistance. In areas where cholera was present, there was also success in neutralizing the spread and lethality of it, eventually containing the disease.

Key informants noted that the national-level structure of the cluster was crowded, making coordination difficult. This diminished the effectiveness of the cluster at the national level as well as at the district level, as there was little guidance left for district officers on the ground. For example, the World Health Organization apparently had developed a contingency plan for how the Health Cluster should respond to an emergency, yet, when interviewing district officers, they did not know of such a plan and complained about not having a plan.

Resourcing was also an issue. We can see from general FIRP documents that there was a 76 percent deficit in terms of funding for the cluster, second highest behind only WASH. Those interviewed believed this funding deficit was due to the nature of health responses in emergencies. Health emergencies, especially in droughts, are not always immediately visible and take time to become apparent. Without “outbreaks” of any kind, it can appear as though the health system is working normally and therefore funding does not come. A consequence of this is that the capacity of the cluster was not sufficient to effectively carry out all its duties. The Health Cluster must not only respond to the

emergency, but also maintain existing health structures on a normal operating basis. Because of this, much of the human and physical capacity needed to respond was not available without increased funding.

FGDs regarding the Health Cluster revealed that, while beneficiaries could sometimes confuse the activities of the Health Cluster with those of the Nutrition and WASH Clusters (and vice versa), many thought well of the activities being carried out by the cluster. A variety of activities were mentioned, including health messaging, village care groups, and maternal health work. Overall, the feedback from the FGDs was that the cluster was active and effective during the MVAC response. As mentioned above, individuals were often quite aware of the activities of the Health Surveillance Assistants in their communities. When asked about these activities during FGDs, respondents were likely to see the Health Surveillance Assistants in a positive light, believing them to be helpful, though at the same time wishing they could offer more training to volunteers.

District-level KIIs echoed complaints heard from national-level interviews. All of those interviewed who were responsible for health implementation in their districts noted coordination issues within the cluster – with no direction coming from the national level – and that they were poorly prepared to work in an emergency. Two of them noted that implementing partners began to work around the government structures, effectively cutting them out, resulting in some duplication of activities due to the absence of coordination. The belief from these interviews was that more funding would have helped coordination, but they particularly needed a document clearly laying out the direction and structure of the cluster along with leadership as to how activities should have been implemented.

Recommendations

- Funding needs to be increased for the Health Cluster to enable it to operate more effectively and efficiently at both national and district levels. Increased funding specifically to the Health Surveillance Assistant program is also recommended. As mentioned in the recommendations for the Nutrition Cluster, this program was well regarded throughout the response and should be scaled up accordingly.
- Within an expanded Health Surveillance Assistant program, funds for more trainings and supplies for volunteers should be provided. FGDs were keen to see volunteer health workers in the communities provided with more training to build their skills, something which would help contribute to overall resilience.

- Coordination within the Health Cluster should be improved at national level along with improved communication between the national and district levels. The cluster structure either needs to be streamlined, or made more effective by adopting a standing response plan for emergencies such as the FIRP. This plan should also include concrete protocols for how the national and district levels are to communicate and coordinate in the event of such emergencies.

National-level Cluster Activities

Several cluster-specific committees functioned in parallel at the national level. While there was regular feedback from the clusters to the national humanitarian response oversight committees, the Humanitarian Response Committee (HRC), and the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT), inter-cluster communications at the national level could have been better coordinated.

At national level, clusters were expected to work together through regular interaction and joint planning to ensure the effectiveness and efficiency of the implementation of the FIRP. However, in interviews with many national-level cluster actors, a different picture emerged. Many complained of little communication between the different clusters, highlighting that a monthly inter-cluster meeting was supposed to take place, but rarely did. Meetings that did take place often focused mostly on information sharing rather than coordination of activities. This lack of inter-cluster coordination at the national level had tangible effects on the quality of implementation on the ground. A project report on asset building concluded that coordination problems among the different clusters in the response negatively affected the program's targeting, effectiveness, and relevance in this regard (LCED 2017).

Intra-cluster coordination between the national level and the district and local levels, as noted throughout this section, was a significant challenge in some clusters. Several cluster officials interviewed noted that poor communication led to breakdowns in coordination, or a complete absence of coordination, between national and district levels. The Joint Learning Event for the cash response final report from the Food Security Cluster highlighted that vertical cluster coordination was weak and not standardized (GoM 2017a). This severely impacted all levels of the design and implementation of the humanitarian response.

Some successes should be noted, however. The same Joint Learning Event report makes the point that the cluster system did manage to engage a variety of different actors and organizations towards the

goal of preventing food insecurity. While the system may not have worked as well as possible, it is still true that successful coordination was achieved to an extent sufficient to enable the execution of a plan that helped save lives in the affected populations.

Recommendations

- Technical capacity within each cluster needs to be assessed and, where found deficient, strengthened for future humanitarian responses. For example, the Food Security Cluster was managed by DoDMA and WFP. There were serious concerns that DoDMA has limited capacity in the thematic and coordination issues related to food security. As a result, the verification of MVAC assessments as well as the appropriateness of the interventions (particularly, food versus cash) was not seriously evaluated from the government side. If DoDMA will be responsible for Food Security Cluster operations in future responses, its capacity should be strengthened in the context of food security planning in emergencies.
- Coordination needs to be improved among all clusters. Meetings across clusters to improve not only information sharing but also coordination should be more strongly encouraged, and communication channels among clusters established.
- National-level cluster officials should create more coherent communication and action plans with their district-level counterparts. There were often large gaps in coordination between the two levels of response, creating negative consequences on the ground.

Conclusions

The task faced by the clusters that make up the humanitarian response system in Malawi was immense, and success was mixed in the 2016/17 FIRP. While many vulnerable individuals were fed and resilience was built, there were also issues in the timing and resourcing of the response leading to poor efficiency and effectiveness in the targeting and implementation of the cluster programs. Coordination and communication challenges, both within and among clusters, also had a negative effect on the response. Opportunities were lost for more transparent and inclusive aid delivery due to this poor coordination.

Perhaps the most important take away from this review of the design and implementation of the FIRP through the lens of the cluster system is the significant lack of human capacity in the clusters. Over and over we heard from implementing partners, district officials, and ministry officials of the need for more capacity within government agencies not only to operate within an emergency context but also to be prepared for emergencies to come.

4. PROCESS AND INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW OF THE 2016/17 FOOD INSECURITY RESPONSE PROGRAMME

In this section, we describe the policy system for developing and implementing the FIRP. Major players in the humanitarian policy system in Malawi include government agencies, development partners, international NGOs, and decentralized decision-making systems at district and community levels, including traditional authorities and other local leaders. In the context of the FIRP, the functional relations and the mandate of these actors and players had significant implications for the way in which the FIRP was designed and implemented.

Developing successful response operations to a humanitarian crisis depends on a myriad of factors affecting the policy systems. Specific questions in understanding the policy process in the context of FIRP include the following:

- Who initially brought the impending disaster to the policy agenda?
- Which organizations were involved in the process of monitoring the development of the disaster, and how was the evidence from these organizations helpful in policy making?
- How were the roles and responsibilities in responding to the disaster assigned?
- What implications did these decisions have on the response plans and the roll-out of the interventions at national and decentralized levels?

Institutional Functions and Relationships

Here we describe stakeholder relationships and roles within the policy system relating to the FIRP. We focus on sources of information concerning the emergency, oversight on the response, design and implementation, and flows of resources, respectively. More detail on institutional roles and relationships for the 2016/17 FIRP at national, district, and local levels is provided in Table 4.1.

Information

The Malawi Vulnerability Assessment Committee (MVAC) and the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Water Development (MoAIWD) are the two most salient organizations involved in compiling and analyzing information on livelihood vulnerability for the government. MVAC has an explicit role in this regard. MVAC was established around 1990 as a multi-stakeholder committee to annually conduct

objective assessments of where in Malawi the livelihoods of households might be under threat due to drought, floods, or other shocks. Members of MVAC include government agencies, donor organizations, international NGOs, regional bodies, research institutions, and other stakeholders. Its secretariat is in the Department of Economic Planning and Development within the Ministry of Finance, Economic Planning and Development.

While MVAC is the most prominent institution involved with conducting timely applied research on household vulnerability, MoAIWD plays an important indirect role in vulnerability assessment due to its responsibility for conducting annually the three rounds of the Agricultural Production Estimates Survey (APES). This is used by government and its partners to determine whether domestic production of food crops will be sufficient each year to meet the food needs of the population. MoAIWD is responsible for computing the annual food balance sheet (FBS) for the country based in part on the crop production estimates. MoAIWD also monitors staple food prices in markets across the country, which are also a valuable indicator of food security conditions.

MVAC is also supported with information on local population estimates from the National Statistical Office and with information and analyses pertinent to their analyses by international vulnerability assessment organizations, notably FEWSNET.

Table 4.1 Institutional architecture for 2016/17 Food Insecurity Response Programme coordination, design, and implementation

Overall Coordination	• <u>Humanitarian Response Committee</u> (HRC): DoDMA, Office of the President and Cabinet; Office of the Vice-President, Inter-ministerial and Principal Secretary (PS) Committees, Ministry of Local Government, Heads of development partner agencies, MVAC							
Information	• <u>Malawi Vulnerability Assessment Committee</u> (MVAC): MVAC is a multi-stakeholder committee which annually conducts objective assessments of the population of Malawi whose livelihoods are under threat due to drought, floods, or other shocks. Members include government agencies, donor organizations, international NGOs, regional bodies, research institutions, and other stakeholders. Its secretariat is in the Department of Economic Planning and Development within the Ministry of Finance, Economic Planning and Development. • The empirical assessments that MVAC makes of vulnerable households across Malawi is dependent upon estimates of crop production and time series on staple crop prices from markets across Malawi produced by the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation & Water Development and upon population estimates from the National Statistical Office. MVAC is also supported with information and analyses by international vulnerability assessment organizations, notably FEWSNET. • During the response to any livelihood crisis, response implementers generally regularly provide updated assessments of local conditions.							
Design	• <u>National Disaster Preparedness and Response Committee</u> (NDPRC): PS, Director, Deputy Director, and several officers from DoDMA; officers from related ministries • <u>Humanitarian Country Team</u> (HRC): Coordination body for the development partners involved in FIRP. Led by the head of the UN system in Malawi, HRC members included all the UN agencies, international NGOs, and donors involved in supporting or implementing FIRP. DoDMA also participated in the HCT. As the overall FIRP design document was developed by aggregating the individual cluster-level response design documents, the HRC played something of a coordination role for the clusters.							
	Overall response coordination	<u>Clusters:</u> Food Security	Agriculture	Water, Sanitation, & Hygiene (WASH)	Nutrition	Health	Education	Protection
Lead institutions	• NDPRC, on the side of government • HRC, on the side of international partners, including UN agencies and international NGOs	• Department of Disaster Management Affairs • WFP	• Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation & Water Development • FAO	• Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation & Water Development • UNICEF	• Department of Nutrition, HIV and AIDS, Ministry of Health • UNICEF	• Ministry of Health • World Health Organization	• Ministry of Education, Science & Technology • UNICEF	• Ministry of Gender, Children, Disability & Social Welfare • UNICEF

Continued

Table 4.1 Continued

	Overall response coordination	Clusters: Food Security	Agriculture	Water, Sanitation, & Hygiene (WASH)	Nutrition	Health	Education	Protection
National-level FIRP cluster and sector leaders	•	- Director and Deputy Directors of Department of Disaster Management Affairs - DoDMA officers	- Deputy Director for Food and Nutrition in Dept. of Agricultural Extension Services (DAES) 3 Food & Nutrition Officers from DAES	Deputy Director, Water Supply Services, Dept. of Irrigation and Water Development, MoAIWD	Deputy Director for Nutrition	- Clinical Services Department Director (Nutrition) 3 nutritionists from Clinical Services	- Dept. of School Health and Nutrition (SHN) Deputy Director 2 nutritionists from SHN Department	Deputy Director for Protection
Regional and zonal FIRP activities	<i>None</i>	<i>None</i>	Crops, Gender, and M&E Officers from the eight Agricultural Development Divisions	<i>None</i>	<i>None</i>	Zonal Supervisors from the five Health zones	School Health and Nutrition (SHN) focal points for the six Education Divisions	<i>None</i>
District-level FIRP officers	- District Executive Committee - District Nutrition Coordination Committee - District Agriculture Extension Committee	- Local staff of international NGOs contracted to carry out the FIRP at district-level - District Civil Protection Committees	- District Agriculture Development officers - Food and Nutrition officers - Extension officers - Crops officers - Livestock officers	- District Environment Health officers and Water Development officers - Local staff of international NGOs contracted to carry out the FIRP at district-level	- District Commissioner - Director of Planning and Development - District Nutrition officer	- District Health officers - Nutritionists - Nursing, Maternal & Child Health officers - Environmental Health officers	- District Education manager - School Health & Nutrition Coordinator	- Social Welfare officer - Community Development officer - Assistant District Social Welfare Officer

Continued

Table 4.1 Continued

	Overall response coordination	Clusters:		Water, Sanitation, & Hygiene (WASH)				
		Food Security	Agriculture		Nutrition	Health	Education	Protection
Area-level FIRP officials	Area Development Committee	Area Development Committee	- Area Stakeholder Panel for Agriculture - Agriculture Extension Development Coordinator - Food and Nutrition Officer (if present)	- Area Development Committee - District Civil Protection Committees	- Traditional Authority - Group Village Heads - Area Civil Protection committees	- Clinical officers - Nurses - Assistant Environmental Health officers - Medical assistants - Senior Health Surveillance assistants	Primary Education Advisor	- Social Welfare assistants - Zone supervisors
Frontline workers	Village Development Committee	- Food Distribution Committee - Village Civil Protection Committees	- Agriculture Extension Development Officers - Village Stakeholder Panel for Agriculture	Village Civil Protection Committees	- Village Heads - Community Nutrition & HIV Workers - Community Leaders for Action on Nutrition	- Health Surveillance assistants - Village Health Committee	Teachers	- Community Development Assistants (CDA) - Community Child Protection workers
Community volunteers	<i>None</i>	<i>None</i>	Lead farmers for different subjects, including nutrition	Community Health Volunteers	- Community Health Volunteers - Growth monitoring agents - Village volunteers for Community Management of Acute Malnutrition	- Community Health Volunteers - Growth monitoring agents - Village volunteers for Community Management of Acute Malnutrition	- Parent-Teacher Association members - School Management Committee	- Community-based Organizations - Community-based Childcare centres - Community Child Protection workers
Community members	Community Care Group	- FIRP beneficiary households - Members of vulnerable groups						

Source: Based on interviews and information shared by the interviewees

Oversight

If MVAC raises an alarm about emerging significant pockets of vulnerable and likely food insecure households across the country, the principal government agency involved in responding is the Department of Disaster Management Affairs (DoDMA). Overall, the Office of the President and Cabinet is responsible for the announcement of the emergency and assigning roles to various actors in the policy system. However, responsibility for oversight over and coordination of any response to the crisis is the mandate of the Office of the Vice President and specifically within the Office of the Vice President, DoDMA. DoDMA is responsible for the design and implementation of disaster relief and management in Malawi. It works with the line ministries across government that are involved in and contribute to the humanitarian response.

High-level oversight over the response to the food insecurity crisis in 2016/17 was through the Humanitarian Response Committee (HRC). Convened by the President, the committee was chaired by the Vice-President, with secretariat services provided by DoDMA. Participants in the HRC meetings included Ministers and Permanent Secretaries (or their representatives) from the ministries involved in the cluster-specific responses under FIRP and ambassadors or head of missions from international partners supporting government in its response to the crisis. Representation from MVAC was also present at HRC meetings to provide information on the nature and scale of the crisis.

In the 24 districts in which FIRP was implemented, oversight of implementation was the responsibility of the District Commissioners working with the District Executive Committee and District Civil Protection Committees. At Traditional Authority, Group Village, and village levels, the authorities and local leaders at those levels had oversight on local FIRP implementation, working together with Development Committees and Civil Protection Committees and development committees at area and village levels.

However, as is discussed at several places in this report, the ability of district and local authorities to provide oversight to and guide the local implementation of the FIRP was constrained by both a lack of

information on the program and its institutional structure and insufficient resources to play such a management role effectively. In consequence, ownership of FIRP and responsibility for its implementation at district and more local levels by local communities and their leaders and by district governments was less inclusive than desired.

Design and implementation

The design of the humanitarian response and coordination of its operation on the side of government was the responsibility of the National Disaster Preparedness and Response Committee (NDPRC). This committee's membership is made up of the Ministers of the ministries involved in the response. The committee was to be responsible for bringing together technical expertise for planning and execution of disaster interventions, principally from within government. However, several informants stated that NDPRC meetings were not regularly attended by the ministers. Consequently, the committee was not sufficiently functional to meet the operational and decision-making needs of the FIRP. The limited engagement of other ministries and the use of JEFAP guidelines for the FIRP tilted the emergency response towards the Food Security Cluster.

At the development partner level, the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) brought the donor community together to work with stakeholders from various groups to design and guide the implementation of the FIRP. The HCT, under the leadership of the United Nations Resident Coordinator for Malawi, the head of the UN system in Malawi, brought together all the UN agencies, international NGOs, and donors involved in supporting or implementing FIRP. The HCT also had some responsibility for the coordination of the sectoral clusters through which FIRP was implemented. DoDMA also participated in the HCT, working closely with the UN system and development partners in the design and implementation of FIRP. Yet, the role it played and how the UN partners worked with DoDMA in coordinating activities of FIRP, including resource mobilization and use, requires further analysis.

The design of the FIRP was based on an aggregation of the designs proposed by each of seven thematic clusters, the activities of which together made up the FIRP – food security; agriculture; water,

sanitation, & hygiene (WASH); nutrition; health; education; and protection. A joint leadership structure was put in place for each cluster consisting of a ministry or agency of the government of Malawi in partnership with a UN agency (Table 4.1). Conceptually, the clusters should each have been upwardly accountable to the senior leadership of government, through the participation of the ministry responsible for the cluster in the HRC and NDPRC, and to the HCT, through the UN agency involved in a cluster also being part of the HCT. As will be discussed, this was not always the case.

Implementation of the FIRP overall, generally followed the cluster themes and made use of public agencies and other partners at district and more local levels that already had responsibilities for activities within a cluster theme. Accordingly, staff of the Ministry of Agriculture were involved in implementing the plans of the Agriculture cluster, while nutrition specialists within various government agencies were involved with the activities under the Nutrition Cluster.

The Food Security Cluster, the largest of the seven clusters by far, presented a special case, at least in comparison to the operations of the other six clusters. As the government agency involved in providing cluster leadership was DoDMA, which does not have a large institutional footprint at levels of government below the national level, WFP worked with various international NGOs and through the INGO consortium, which had a relatively deep presence in each the 24 affected districts, to implement the distribution of food security assistance to those in need. As a result, government agencies at district and community level did not have a central role to play in the logistics of the distribution of assistance to FIRP beneficiaries. Their principal contributions to the implementation of local-level activities of the Food Security Cluster were regarding information dissemination within communities and with the targeting exercises. However, the actual provision of benefits to those targeted remained primarily in the hands of the international and local NGOs that implemented the FIRP in a particular district.

Resource flows

Although additional research is needed for this assessment of the financial resources that were made available by government for the FIRP, significant donor funds were obtained by the non-state actors

involved in the response – funds over which they retained control, rather than ceding control to the government of Malawi. Malawi’s development partners felt that this retention of control was justified given significant problems in recent years in Malawi with accountability over the use of government finances. However, in several of the interviews conducted with government officials for this assessment, complaints were aired as to a similar absence of accountability on the part of the development partners as to how these donor resources for the humanitarian response were used.

As is discussed elsewhere, whether sufficient resources flowed from national to district and more local level to enable the effective implementation of cluster plans varied from cluster to cluster. The Food Security Cluster at the center of the FIRP response received relatively sufficient funds, by all indications, even if less than was budgeted. However, given the challenges with targeting at district and community levels – challenges due in part to a lack of sufficient resources early in the program to conduct a comprehensive, transparent, and rapid targeting exercise – those funds may not have come in as timely a fashion as desired. Other clusters, particularly the Health and WASH Clusters, suffered from insufficient funding for implementation of their cluster plans (Table 3.1).

Regarding government resources, the government officials involved in FIRP implementation at district and more local levels generally made use of recurrent government financial resources to fund their participation in FIRP activities. Supplemental funds for FIRP activities were not uniformly forthcoming for all government agencies involved in the FIRP. While given the emergency nature of the program, this use for FIRP of funds from government that were allocated for other purposes may be justified, there are likely significant opportunity costs to doing so. These costs related to the diversion of recurrent funds for financing the provision of regular government services would have primarily been borne by local residents who were underserved in the provision of those services while FIRP was being implemented.

Chronology of Implementation

A chronology of key events that drove the FIRP process is given in Table 4.2. This provides insight into the quality of the FIRP design and implementation process, providing a set of lessons for handling future

crises. The process began with the declaration of the disaster by the president in April 2016. This was followed by the series of events that led to interventions in 24 of the 28 districts of Malawi. FIRP officially ended in April 2017.

Table 4.2 Food Insecurity Response Programme, Issues, and Chronology, 2016/17

Month	Event / Activities
January / February 2016	First Crop Estimates (APES) released by MoAIWD (1 March)
April 2016	- President declares a State of National Disaster due to the effects of El Niño (12 April). - Second crop estimates (APES) released by MoAIWD (1 April). - End of the 2015/2016 Relief Response, which reached 2.8 million people across Malawi.
May 2016	- FEWSNET projects that maize prices per kg would reach MK350 during lean season. - MVAC carries out annual Vulnerability Assessment and Analysis (May 8-28). Estimates 6.5 million people in Malawi would not be able to meet their food requirements through to the following harvest.
June 2016	Cash-based Transfers learning event held, facilitated by WFP and international NGOs. This included adoption of plans for a series of actions (June 2-3).
July 2016	- MVAC Annual Food Security Assessment estimates released: 6.5 million estimated as food insecure in 24 districts. - Food price inflation at record high of 29 percent. Maize prices at MK300 in some markets. - Discussion begins with development partners on private sector engagement in FIRP through the distribution of maize vouchers to beneficiaries. - Initiation of FIRP in selected districts.
September 2016	- MVAC Annual Food Security Assessment report released, recommending that 2016/17 FIRP assistance consist of 73 percent in-kind food and 27 percent cash transfers. MVAC projected that maize prices would peak at MK350 per kg. - MVAC updated its estimates to 6.7 million persons affected.
October 2016	ADMARC announces that its consumer maize prices would be fixed at MK250 per kg.
November 2016	- MVAC updated market assessment released. Changes recommendation for mix of food aid and cash transfers to 82 percent receiving food in kind and 18 percent cash. Projections of maize prices of between MK270 and MK300 per kg in volatile markets. - Major concerns of challenges to access to food with start of the rainy season. - Updated estimate of vulnerable population presented to Humanitarian Response Committee (HRC).
December 2016	The government of Malawi and WFP finalize the 2016/17 National Contingency Plan
January 2017	- Information shared by private sector on their current in-country stocks of maize. - Price of maize goes down 21 percent. - Peak period for FIRP assistance provision to beneficiaries.
March 2017	- End of the relief response for the 2016/17 lean season declared on 31 March 2017, although spillover distributions continued into April. - Price of maize goes down by 16 percent.
April 2017	National maize price decreases 15.8 percent to the lowest it has been since 2012.

Source: various FIRP documents

As soon as the disaster was declared, development partners and government agencies were convened in meetings of various committees at the national level. The key committees that acted on the call from the President were the HRC, chaired by the Principal Secretary (PS) of DoDMA, and the NDPRC. These committees were attended by government agencies and development partners at different levels. HRC meetings were supposed to be attended by PSs, while the NDPRC was supposed to be attended at ministerial level. The NDPRC meetings were not fully attended by the Ministers. Consequently, the committee was not sufficiently functional to meet the operational and decision-making needs for the FIRP.

A major challenge of the HRC was the insufficient authority of DoDMA to convene the national-level meetings of PSs from the various ministries involved in the disaster response operations and expect full participation. However, during most of the FIRP preparation period, the HRC was chaired by the Vice-President himself to ensure smooth coordination and leadership from the government side. The meetings conducted by the HRC with the Vice-President as the chair were seen to be effective, producing the results desired. The leadership role that the Vice-President played was well recognized at all levels of government and by the development partners.

Agenda setting

The process of declaring a disaster initially was triggered by the low second-round crop production estimates from MoAIWD. While the drought was real and rainfall levels were low and erratic during the 2015/16 crop season, reducing crop production levels, questions continue to be raised related to the accuracy of the second-round crop production estimates and the true magnitude of the disaster that was reported to the President. The accuracy of the crop production estimates may not matter much during normal seasons, as, if there is sufficient maize, the accuracy of those estimates does not have serious implications for donor spending and interventions. As one senior official in government put it, “We have always been following this methodology for estimating crop production; its accuracy becomes an issue only during drought years.” We perceived a general belief among those involved in the crop production

estimation process that any miscalculation that results in estimates being greater than true production would be more devastating than errors that result in estimates that are lower than true production. Hence, in the face of a potential food crisis, there are incentives in the current crop production estimate system to produce low, conservative estimates.

In his disaster declaration speech on 12 April 2017, the President of Malawi noted the following:

- Based on the second-round crop production estimates from MoAIWD, the estimated national maize production was 2.43 million metric tons (mt), a 12.4 percent decline in production compared to the 2014/15 season, during which 2.78 million mt was produced.
- The country's estimated maize requirement is 3.2 million mt. The affected population would require 790,000 mt of maize above domestic production. This last estimate was from MoAIWD, and not MVAC.
- Considering these needs, it was stated that the Strategic Grain Reserve should have restocked 250,000 mt as a buffer stock, but it is not clear who came up with this figure. MoAIWD projected that ADMARC should sell 250,000 mt of maize to the public to stabilize maize prices in the 2016/17 season.
- Accounting for the above requirements of restocking Strategic Grain Reserve, providing sufficient stocks in ADMARC depots, and providing relief food, MoAIWD projected a total additional maize requirement of 1.29 million mt. Based on the drought situation, the second-round crop production estimate figures upon which the emergency declaration was based were viewed as not likely to change in the third round of estimation that would be done in June 2016.
- While calling for humanitarian assistance, the President also announced that government would call in their drought insurance and use government's existing food stocks for food aid. He stated that all people adversely affected by the drought would receive food aid.

It should be noted that the crop production estimation figures and the maize availability in the country after harvest are highly interconnected. The design and the implementation of the FIRP, however, depended on calculations of the number of people affected. This was undertaken by MVAC. Its assessment was supposed to be based on the third-round of crop production estimates conducted by MoAIWD. The third-round estimates, as indicated by the President in his speech, were not expected to change much from those estimated after the second-round of the APES. It is not clear how much re-examination of field-level data went into the development of the third-round crop production estimates, since the President had already announced that those estimates were not expected to be that much

different than the second-round estimates. As the conditions on the ground made clear, much of the crop had already been lost to drought.

Needs assessment process

In the months of May and June, MVAC developed an estimate of 6.5 million people who would not be able to meet their annual food needs. MVAC did not wait for the third and final crop production estimate to assess the number of people affected, as the MVAC teams were already deployed to assess the situation on the ground. This figure was based on the second-round estimates and was later revised in September and October 2016 to 6.7 million people, with most of the additional vulnerable population coming from two districts in Central region, Kasungu and Ntcheu. The methods of the needs assessment and possible opportunities to improve those methods are discussed in detail in later sections of this report. The process of the MVAC was participatory and inclusive of most members of the MVAC committee.

Design of humanitarian aid

Based on the district-level estimates of the vulnerable population, the Government of Malawi, with the help of WFP, donors, international NGOs, and other development partners, designed and began to implement what was the largest humanitarian response in Malawi's history, reaching close to 40 percent of the population. The decision of government to choose WFP as the principal implementer of the humanitarian response, rather than using its own structures to deliver aid, remains a debatable decision. On the one hand, there was consensus among HRC members that, given the nature and magnitude of the problem at hand, WFP would be the only agency capable of mounting a speedy implementation of the interventions at the scale required.

On the other hand, some development partners expressed some doubt about the wisdom of this decision, at least in retrospect. This is partly due to some concern that the extent of the food insecurity crisis might have been exaggerated. While WFP was an obvious choice for implementing a response program at the scale suggested by the MVAC estimates of the size of the vulnerable population, if the true numbers of the vulnerable were significantly less, alternative, less expensive approaches could have been

used. Some of the resources spent on FIRP could have been saved with better estimates of the number of people affected.

Resource requirements, mobilization, and sharing

The response plans developed by the individual clusters were aggregated into the overall FIRP response plan. These resource plans were based on the aggregated extent of needs as assessed by the MVAC in various districts. The total planned resource requirement for the FIRP was USD 395 million of which USD 307.5 million was required by the Food Security Cluster. The rest of the resources required was to support complementary assistance provided by other clusters, such as to provide agricultural inputs; malnutrition prevention and treatment; and protection, WASH, and education services. Of the USD 307.5 million budgeted for the Food Security Cluster, WFP required USD 276 million for its operations, while the international NGO consortium required USD 31.4 million to deliver food assistance through cash-based transfers. In addition, the government of Malawi supplied stocks from its strategic grain reserves for distribution under the FIRP implementation.

For the Food Security Cluster, its plans under FIRP were based on the JEFAP guidelines. These plans were presented to the HRC for approval. Although the official request for WFP to take the lead in Food Security Cluster came from Government only in August 2016, WFP and the Food Security Cluster already had taken the initiative to move ahead with the development of its cluster response plan in response to the declaration of a State of National Disaster made by the president in April. Resources for the Food Security Cluster primarily were mobilized by government, WFP, and the INGO consortium and other NGOs. The government received funding from the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the African Development Bank. Government also received an insurance pay-out from the African Risk Capacity Insurance Company Limited of over USD 8 million as a result of government having bought a drought insurance policy from the company for the 2015/16 agricultural season. All of these funds were provided to the Food Security Cluster for its operations. WFP provided implementation and financial reports according to agreed schedules to all its donors, including the government. WFP also

shared the operational and financial updates (funds received, funding gaps, and utilization) with stakeholders. The INGO consortium also raised funds independently, reporting on their use to the Food Security Cluster.

Donor response to the resource needs of the clusters varied. Donors pledges of the resources they could contribute were done in a timely fashion. However, final contributions did not always add up to total needs in each cluster. The Food Security and the Nutrition Clusters reported that they were able to raise resources relatively easier than were other clusters, since the emergency was seen as life-threatening. Other clusters was not as successful in meeting their planned requirements through donor funding. The budgets prepared for the FIRP by the clusters generally did not consider ongoing interventions already on the ground. In the Nutrition Cluster, the existing infrastructure to address severe malnutrition was used to treat the malnourished children identified during FIRP implementation. In the Agriculture Cluster, the Food for Assets Program was recognized as an ongoing intervention that could be further strengthened through new resources supplied through FIRP. Some donors were already funding programs to generate early warning information and to support agricultural activities that were focused on building resilience to future shocks. These investments, together with funding focused on emergency food security assistance, helped to preserve past development gains.

With regards to disbursement of the funds obtained, the donors provided clear signals that the FIRP resources they provided were not to be channeled through the government, as they doubted the ability of the government to be accountable for all of the resources received, particularly in the context of a humanitarian crisis. Several donors to the FIRP, following the coming to light in 2013 of the “Cashgate” scandal through which more than MK 15 billion of public funds were embezzled, have internal rules prohibiting them from channeling funds through government agencies. However, in a similar spirit of seeking full financial transparency, the government now is requesting a full accounting from WFP of the resources it received and spent during the FIRP implementation.

Implementation of Food Insecurity Response Programme

The design of the humanitarian aid delivery mostly followed the JEFAP guidelines. The fact that the JEFAP has been designed and made available to the FIRP implementing system is itself a reminder that frequent disasters call for a standard protocol, such as that of JEFAP, to be observed.

The activation of the clusters and their coordination played a crucial role in the design and implementation of the FIRP in 2016/17. In each of the targeted districts, NGOs which had prior experience and the greatest presence were selected to implement FIRP. The responsibility for implementation in the districts solely rested with the NGOs. They, in turn, reported on local FIRP progress on a regular basis during cluster-level meetings. This information was further reported to the HRC through the respective cluster leads from UN and government sides.

Review of the quality of implementation of FIRP is at the core of this assessment. We elaborate on the implementation process in terms of effective follow up, consultation, and coordination among key stakeholders in several subsections of this section. Issues related to the information sharing on the implementation plan and capacity for effective implementation are addressed below and as part of the cluster level discussion presented earlier. The assessment of the process of implementation by the clusters in terms of the “Do no harm” principles is also addressed under each cluster. The review of the process of resilience building and recovery in line with the development process is addressed in section 7.

Accountability to affected population

Multiple complaints and feedback mechanisms were put in place during FIRP to provide a platform for the affected population to raise any concerns about FIRP implementation. They included suggestion boxes, toll-free telephone lines connecting to help desks, complaints committees, pre-distribution talks, focus group discussions, and the sharing of staff contacts with communities. This notable use of complaints and feedback mechanisms among implementing partners in the humanitarian response in Malawi was driven by global initiatives around accountability to and engagement with beneficiaries, lessons from earlier humanitarian interventions in Malawi – particularly the 2015/16 flood disaster

assistance, and community consultations. Several examples of feedback received and addressed through the complaints and feedback mechanisms were reported during KIIs. They included the role of village chiefs in forced sharing of benefits among villagers and extortion of money for inclusion in beneficiary lists. Some communities also reached out through complaints and feedback mechanisms asking for more information on the response, complaining about targeting errors of inclusion of wealthy households and exclusion of vulnerable households, and asking for additional assistance. Yet the use of such facilities was hampered by the limited knowledge of the beneficiaries about their use and the fear of possible repercussions in the community, particularly by the chiefs, if individuals raised their voices against any irregularities in FIRP implementation.

Monitoring and program refinement

The allocation of resources for monitoring was identified through the individual budgeting processes of implementing NGOs. Although resources for monitoring were meant to be given to local structures which were engaged in the design and implementation of FIRP at district level, particularly the District Commissioner's office, monitoring of implementation was left to the implementing agencies, for the most part. However, monitoring reports were limited reporting by implementing partners at cluster meetings. Development partners also received monthly updates on progress made during FIRP implementation. Yet, a systematic monitoring system at government level did not go beyond the minutes of the monthly meetings. Moreover, most of the monitoring activities were related to overall process monitoring and the number of beneficiaries reached under FIRP. Limited information was made available on monitoring of the implementing partners activities, as these were meant for internal use. In our assessment, we found no specific examples of how these monitoring activities resulted in a modification and refinement of program implementation plans. However, as the FIRP came to an end, several cluster level assessments were done to retrospectively identify problems and challenges in the implementation process. They were presented and discussed as part of a lessons learning exercise.

Capacity Challenges

Strengthening capacity of national policy and program systems to enhance food security coordination is one of the functions of the UN Food Security Cluster at the global level. More specifically, the global cluster seeks to build national capacity in preparatory and contingency planning (United Nations n.d.). A review of the design and implementation of the 2016/17 FIRP provides the opportunity to take stock of the national capacity in Malawi for achieving this objective. In this section, we look at capacity challenges during the FIRP intervention in order to develop specific recommendations for better preparing the institutions and individuals involved in responding to future disasters.

In the context of the FIRP, a major challenge for the national government was its dependency on development partners for mobilizing the financial and human resources needed. In addition to weak financial capacity, government's administrative capacity to organize the design process and then implement the interventions was limited for the scale of the planned interventions, as indicated by DODMA staff themselves in KIIs. While government could play a major leading role in specific aspects of the humanitarian intervention, it lacked institutional and human capacity in other aspects. Below, we briefly analyze capacity needs, the available capacity, and the capacity gaps of the government system in Malawi in responding to humanitarian crises. The underlying premise for this analysis is that, if one could identify the capacity challenges that the government faced during the 2016/17 FIRP, one of the largest food crises in the history of Malawi, and address them through a strategic approach, the country should then be well-prepared to face future crises. We address the capacity challenges according to the various stages of FIRP process.

Capacity for needs assessment processes

Assessing humanitarian needs swiftly and accurately remains a major challenge for humanitarian agencies. In Malawi, the drought-induced emergency put people at risk of hunger and malnutrition. Most Malawian rural households depend on the food they produce themselves for their food security. Thus, the level of food insecurity depends on the food produced by households, the food stored from previous

production seasons, food available in the markets and from the parastatal agricultural marketing firm, ADMARC, and the overall national availability of food. In addition, household food security also depends on the rural employment opportunities, social support, and various coping strategies (positive and negative) that the household follow during a period of crisis.

Malawi Vulnerability Assessment Committee (MVAC)

According to MVAC reports:

“the Malawi Vulnerability Assessment Committee comprises government, inter-government, academic and non-profit member organizations that seek to provide information to inform public action. Participating MVAC member institutions include: Ministry of Finance, Economic Planning & Development; Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation & Water Development; Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development, Department of Climate Change; and the Department of Disaster Management Affairs. The key development partners and the UN agencies who participate in MVAC include SADC, the United Nations Development Programme, FAO, WFP, United States Agency for International Development, and other international NGOs. The MVAC Assessment is currently jointly funded by the SADC Regional Vulnerability Assessment & Analysis Programme (RVAA) and the Government of Malawi.”

While the MVAC as a committee has collective capacity based on the expertise which individual committee members bring to it, the MVAC secretariat itself has only one full time technical adviser to support its operations. It borrows the time of the chairperson, who is also the Director of Monitoring and Evaluation in the Ministry of Finance, Economic Planning & Development, and the time of four staff economists during the annual assessment period. This capacity level, with additional support from MVAC members from other institutions, is probably sufficient if the MVAC is carried out as planned in normal years. However, during a period of crisis there is need for additional support, such as in the form of supporting consultants from local research institutions and think tanks.

Institutionally, MVAC has full support from participating agencies. The main form of support is through participation in the MVAC assessments that happen directly after the harvest. This involves MVAC members forming various teams which are given the responsibility of visiting selected districts and preparing reports based on their field assessments. The UN has also seconded staff to build MVAC capacity on IPC and has also directly paid for a technical advisor within the MVAC secretariat to boost technical capacity. The cost of participation (time and travel) of the members from the development

partners and the UN system is contributed by their agencies. Government staff, however, must be compensated for their contributions in the form of per diems and other allowances, but funds have not been provided by government to cover these costs. The value of such field visits for the MVAC estimates should be critically assessed, both in terms of the technical capacity that is needed to make them of any use and in terms of the recurring financial resources they require. We discuss this further in the methodology assessment section of this report.

A common thread in interviews with the MVAC secretariat and with members of MVAC was that the institutional and human capacity of MVAC must be strengthened. For some respondents, the increased capacity needs for MVAC primarily stem from a need to better manage the rather complicated annual process of developing the final estimates of vulnerable populations. The cost effectiveness of the MVAC approach, as opposed to government and its development partners commissioning rapid appraisal surveys of food and livelihood security when circumstances require, should be studied in detail. Although there is a commitment on the part of MVAC to conform to the methods and approach of the regional vulnerability assessment system within SADC, local sustainability and the utility for the Malawi context of the vulnerability assessment methods employed should be considered in the design of MVAC and its operations.

A draft strategy paper for the MVAC secretariat recognizes these issues and makes several suggestions for reform that show considerable potential for improving the operations and efficacy of MVAC. These suggestions include greater integration of other MVAC information systems at national and community levels, proper planning for impending emergencies, achieving a better balance between rural and urban coverage, and the complexities of the use of MVAC assessment in conjunction with the other vulnerability assessments. Such strategies will likely increase both the cost and human resource needs for MVAC – going beyond current levels and institutional arrangements. These reforms, however, should be seen in the light of recent thinking that MVAC and DoDMA activities should be better coordinated, and that MVAC would be better placed in DoDMA than in the Ministry of Finance for improving its efficiency and cost-effectiveness.

Agricultural Production Estimates Survey (APES)

MoAIWD has expertise under their Department of Agricultural Planning Services that coordinates the annual national-level APES over three rounds, using crop cutting procedures on sample farmer plots – a traditional approach to crop production estimation – and qualitative assessments on crop growth performance from almost 2,000 Agricultural Extension Development Officers (AEDOs) in the field. The AEDOs are trained to contribute to the production of the estimates through fortnightly crop reports which are compiled at district, Agricultural Development Division (ADD), and national levels. The crop estimates are then used to provide early warning of impending reductions in the production of various crops. While the institutional capacity for APES is in place, it can be improved further through specific areas of human capacity strengthening at all levels and through improvements in the data collection and estimation methods used. Further discussion is provided later in this report on MVAC assessment methods and recommendations for improvement.

National Food Balance Sheet (FBS)

The FBS is another tool used for projecting food consumption needs in Malawi. It has implications for how the prices of food commodities, mainly maize, are estimated and used in the context of the Household Economy Approach (HEA) in the MVAC Food Security Assessment (FSA) calculations. Besides this particular use, the FBS also helps in decision making at MoAIWD regarding the market intervention activities of ADMARC and the strategic grain reserve managed by the National Food Reserve Agency. The FBS, in essence, is a statement to help decision makers act upon and intervene in the markets when maize prices rise sufficiently to increase the vulnerability of the population to food insecurity. The capacity for generating food balance sheets has suffered in MoAIWD, partly due to frequent staff turnover. However, the process has been well established and the FAO has been providing technical assistance to MoAIWD for the continued production of the annual FBS.

Institutional considerations related to the development and use of the FBS, however, need further debate. A strategic approach to the management of the information used in the FBS and the modification of that information that may result from political economy considerations should be analyzed. Further, assessments are needed of the best practices that can be used to construct the FBS – whether based on

maize equivalents, food group approaches, and dietary gap approaches. These studies are needed to better understand how the Malawi annual FBS can be used effectively for national food planning, both in normal years and when food systems are under crisis. Finally, capacity in the Ministry could be made more institutionalized if a committee for the FBS is established involving experts from outside the ministry, including specific food-oriented NGOs. This would create a well-established system that would not depend on specific individuals. The process of developing the FBS should be transparent and verifiable.

Capacity for humanitarian response design and resource planning

The President declared a food insecurity emergency in April 2016 based on the second-round APES crop estimates released the previous month. Humanitarian agencies and the government conducted a food security assessment in June to assess and determine the affected population. The response started in July with WFP distributing food to around 20,000 people, while the cash component started in August. The overall response peaked in October when 38 percent of the targeted population (2.6 million people) received assistance.

The seven month-gap between the declaration and significant distributions of humanitarian assistance demonstrates that adequate preparedness capacity and systems were not in place to respond to the crisis. This is surprising, regional early-warning organizations in 2015 had predicted droughts or dry spells as one of the likely scenarios for the 2015/16 season. This means that there should have been adequate time to try to mitigate the risks of drought before they could manifest into shortage of food or hunger or put in place preparedness measures to ensure timely response. Apart from external resources, there was lack of clarity on government's own preparedness in resourcing and financing. Despite troubling early warnings, government's allocations of resources to mitigate or prepare for a disaster response were limited or inadequate – both to sector ministries and to the National Disaster Preparedness and Relief Fund, which was established by the National Assembly in the 1990s for the development,

promotion, management, and administration of civil protection, disaster preparedness, and disaster mitigation.

Assessing the requirements for the FIRP intervention in terms of activities and their costing was jointly done by the cluster teams – the design of the FIRP was based on an aggregation of the designs proposed by each of seven thematic clusters. Preparation of the cluster response plans and budgeting for the various activities identified under them was jointly prepared by the UN system in Malawi and the government ministries.

However, in interviews for this assessment, a general feeling was expressed among officers of the government departments that collaborated with their UN counterparts in various clusters that there could have been more interaction and consultation in the development of the cluster response plans. Partly because of the nature of the funding process, in which the UN system approached donors directly to raise the resources for the process, the government departments had little understanding of the process through which funds were raised for the interventions. In addition, the process of how these funds were allocated to implement the activities through local and international NGOs also was unclear to the government counterparts. This becomes important given the ongoing process of decentralization in which the local governments and local assemblies are increasingly to be responsible for responding to emergencies. Not adopting a more forward-looking approach consonant with the decentralization of government processes in designing and implementing the FIRP may have been a missed opportunity for developing national capacity at the district and local government levels to manage future emergencies.

Some of the capacities built during and after the 2015/16 flooding in the southern districts provide examples of effective local capacity strengthening. However, such capacity strengthening did not happen to a significant extent during the 2016/17 FIRP. In 2015/16, NGOs made efforts to build local capacities. For example, the Red Cross implemented a project which built the capacity of Village Civil Protection Committee members and local Red Cross volunteers to prepare for and effectively provide first aid services during flooding situations. Implemented in Nsanje, Mangochi, Chikwawa, Phalombe and Zomba districts, the project was funded by DfID through the United Nations Development Programme. A

key lesson from this exercise is that local capacities need to be part of humanitarian interventions. The members of the Village Civil Protection Committees and their area and district-level counterpart committees, along with DoDMA officials and the District Commissioner and district staff, require training ahead of an intervention on all aspects of it. This would help improve coordination and provide both local government officials and local implementation organizations and personnel with an understanding of the various roles they must play for the humanitarian response to be effective. Doing so can also help in improving communication of planned activities at district and community levels, as this is identified as one of the weaknesses of the FIRP implementation (DoDMA 2017).

Addressing capacity constraints within the Department of Disaster Management Affairs and the Malawi Vulnerability Assessment Committee

How state agencies function within government and build their technical competence matters for building long term sustainability. The challenges faced by DoDMA and MVAC in performing their coordination and technical roles in the lead-up to and implementation of the 2016/17 FIRP show this quite clearly.

The capacity of DoDMA to respond to emerging crises came under discussion during the FIRP. Given that DoDMA is responsible for responding to a wide range of emergencies, its institutional and human capacity needs a thorough review. The somewhat inadequate performance of DoDMA during the FIRP implementation is partly a reflection of this low human capacity. In addition, DoDMA suffers from funding challenges. There are increased calls for a line item in the annual government budget to cover the costs of DoDMA's operations. DoDMA's capacity requirements have been analyzed in a recent report (Capacity Strengthening Strategy for DODMA – unpublished internal report). During this assessment, we were able to corroborate the recommendations of that report in a series of meetings with DoDMA officials.

MVAC received donor support for its functions in the past. However, much of this support stopped after irregularities were found in the use of donor funding. The director of MVAC became a national consultant whose salary was covered by donor funding. According MVAC and DoDMA officials, the MVAC process continues to depend on donor support. Without this support, assessments

will not happen. In the 2016/17 vulnerability assessment process, MVAC managed to obtain some funding from the donors. In addition, FAO provided resources to facilitate the process of switching to the IPC approach. WFP also supported this process through their funding of a regional consultant. In the absence of such uncertain funding streams, there is currently no mechanism to pay the national consultant at MVAC on a regular basis. Efforts are being made to make this national consultant position a permanent position at the level of deputy director with the salary being paid directly from the government budget allocation.

However, in addition to funding uncertainties, several other issues contribute to the unsustainable nature of the MVAC operations. At the core are the institutional arrangements for and the governance of the MVAC secretariat. It is currently attached to a unit in the Economic Planning and Development Department of the Ministry of Finance, Economic Planning and Development. This department has no real mandate for vulnerability assessment in the context of disaster preparedness and management, except that MVAC is seen as part of the M&E function of the department. The justification given for this arrangement is that there is no trust in the organization which is supposed to develop an implementation plan and execute interventions in response to a disaster – DoDMA in this case – if the same organization will be given responsibility to assess the nature of the problem. There is no reason to believe that DoDMA would exaggerate figures or will be subject to political pressure any more than would be the case under the current situation. Moving MVAC to DoDMA could result in better coordination and a speeding up of the intervention design and implementation process.

Another serious challenge is the capacity of the individuals involved in the MVAC process. MVAC currently depends on a few M&E economists to be part of the team from government, although their role is not entirely clear except for their participation in the MVAC missions for the rapid assessments. This arrangement can continue even if the MVAC secretariat is moved to DoDMA, since their participation is paid for through external funding that MVAC receives. With similar external funding, one could hire the same individuals for future MVAC assessments. With the MVAC secretariat in DoDMA, the choice of individuals called upon to participate in the field assessments could be made

more competitive, and need not be restricted solely to the staff of the Economic Planning and Development Department.

To strengthen the aggregate capacity of the individuals participating in MVAC assessments, the involvement of local research and academic institutions should be ensured for independent verification of the assessment results. After testing their competency, the monitoring and evaluation offices of key ministries involved in the resilience-building process should be trained and used for the MVAC assessment. MVAC should involve the M&E officers posted at district-level agricultural offices. In the long-run, the district agricultural offices should be able to develop MVAC assessments for their districts with some limited supervision from the MVAC secretariat. This should be part of their regular work schedule. In addition, involvement of the National Statistical Office will increase the technical oversight of the MVAC assessments. Finally, the process and methods of vulnerability assessment should be taught in undergraduate programs as part of the course related to agricultural development. The current process will be unsustainable without building such capacity at the national and at district levels. Resilience building will require such broad capacity development and utilization.

Mainstreaming MVAC assessment will also require reducing its dependency on per diem-based incentives for the staff to contribute their time and expertise to the process. Staff dedication to MVAC-related tasks is always a question. Given there are no dedicated staff, they have to be recruited for the time of MVAC assessment by paying per diems and taking them away from Lilongwe. The justification for doing so is that if they are not taken from Lilongwe, they will be called back to their normal work during the assessment period and the assessment will not be completed. Hence, they should be taken to a faraway place, accommodated and paid their per diems to perform the activities assigned to them. This practice will not lead to institutional strengthening of MVAC any time soon. The staff given the responsibility for the MVAC assessment should meet in Lilongwe in DoDMA offices as part of their regular jobs. Development partners interviewed for this assessment called the current arrangement as an outcome of the “per diem” culture that is common in the civil service of Malawi. In the long run, when any function which is part of the regular work schedule of government staff requires additional payment

for its performance, that function will not be sustainable irrespective of whether it is paid through government funds or through donor funding.

Finally, for the MVAC process to be sustainable, it should be integrated into the National Early Warning system. Given the cost of MVAC and IPC, it would be useful to institute a food security and nutrition monitoring system that manages early warning, policy advocacy, and program management and contributes to national resilience-related policy making. In the context of Malawi, which has a well-developed National Statistical Office, there is no need for depending on ad hoc processes of vulnerability assessments, such as MVAC and IPC, although they can help in the short run. In the long run, the sampling framework developed by NSO should be used for conducting cost-effective vulnerability surveys through a modern data collection and analysis system for quick generation of results. In terms of costs, the resources collectively spent on MVAC or IPC, along with related surveys, such as Standardized Monitoring and Assessment of Relief and Transitions (SMART) surveys and household food security surveys required for IPC, should more than pay for a systematic household vulnerability survey that will be more reliable for designing interventions. Countries which face food-related emergencies similar to Malawi's have managed to go beyond MVAC and IPC, particularly when they have a system of national-level statistical data collection system like Malawi's.

Community-based Targeting

Community-based targeting was the principal household-level targeting method used for the FIRP. This targeting approach has been heavily utilized by humanitarian agencies in targeting and delivering emergency aid, gaining popularity because of its perceived advantages in addressing information asymmetries affecting most other targeting approaches. It is argued that involving community groups in identifying beneficiaries leads to better targeting and screening. Community groups are perceived to have better information about the needs and vulnerability or poverty status of members of their own community. Similarly, communities may use locally appropriate definitions of poverty that are appropriate and relevant to the context. Where statistical formulas to determine poverty status fail to

properly distinguish the poor from the non-poor, contextualized and culturally appropriate definitions of poverty may be more useful since they take into account household resources, needs, and their causes. Through the use of local agents, the mechanism is considered to be cost effective for targeting as it reduces transaction costs associated with time and information gathering and processing (Conning and Kevane 2001). Malawi, like most developing countries where information on poverty and vulnerability is not readily available, community-based targeting has been championed for dealing successfully with such information asymmetries. As part of the decentralization policy, community targeting is championed as a process of empowerment, transferring power to grassroot institutions. In this regard, community targeting is perceived as a long-term development process of enhancing participation and social capital (Chinsinga 2005). Similarly, as a concept of participation, community-based targeting is considered as means through which community members build their capacity to participate in critical decision making about the local allocation of scarce resources.

Findings from FGDs on the hurried nature of implementation of the FIRP raises concerns as to how community leaders could successfully target beneficiaries. With limited guidance on the criteria to use to select FIRP beneficiaries from among community households, the communities on their own were unlikely to find appropriate criteria that would represent the multidimensional nature of poverty food insecurity and be acceptable to all interest groups. For example, in Dedza, FGD participants reported that all beneficiaries under the Social Cash Transfer scheme were left out of FIRP beneficiary lists because they were considered to be benefitting from another scheme. In this example, community priorities and definitions of vulnerability did not fully correspond with externally defined JEFAP guidelines as to the criteria to be used for selection of beneficiaries. The major selection priority among the community leaders involved in the community-based targeting for FIRP was equality of opportunity – the community leaders were more concerned with inclusiveness rather than reaching the poorest of the poor.

The application of any household targeting mechanism within a community assumes that there is an agreement between the implementing agency or government and the community that some community members will be included while others will be excluded. From this it is apparent that community-based

targeting is not a complete devolution of power to the community since community leaders are provided with a specific set of procedures, rules, and regulations to follow in the targeting exercise. Such rules may be in conflict with the equity values of societies. Communities may have their own perceptions about needs and entitlements and may be more concerned with preserving a sense of inclusiveness rather than following the targeting criteria established for the program. In FGDs from Zomba, participants reported beneficiaries were asked by the village chiefs to share the food such that some received only 25 kg of maize (Gelli et al. 2017). The village in question is composed of two clans. Targeting in this context was viewed negatively, equated to discrimination and segregation. Targeting by the village head is interpreted that he or she ranks other households higher and closer to him than those left out as the comments here on whether sharing was fair demonstrate:

“I can say that on this side of the village it was fair. Because this village has two tribes; those from the chief and those not related to the chief. So if they need eight people then they will take four from each side.” *Female recipient from Zomba*

This demonstrates a dilemma with community-based targeting as to whether it should be left to the communities themselves or, rather, whether it should be strictly adhere to officially established guidelines. If left to the communities themselves, there is ample evidence that the poorest of the poor are likely to benefit less than planned as the assistance is diluted and spread across the community. In the Zomba example, participants were reluctant to select all beneficiaries from the same clan in order to ensure that all corners of the village were covered. It was clear that some people were chosen not because of the poverty status but to represent their clan or other social identity group. However, if the official guidelines are strictly followed, there is a risk that such social considerations might be overlooked, which raises the risk of tension among community members.

The question of community-based targeting revolves around community governance. Community-based targeting creates formal institutions to manage the process of beneficiary identification and delivery of benefits. However, traditional local leaders have little incentives to share power and allow others to participate in decision-making. There are bound to be errors of inclusion and exclusion, resulting

in leakages and under coverage. Targeting in general has hidden costs and people frequently underestimate how difficult it is to target. Therefore, adequate resources should be made available to ensure that the targeting and verification processes are conducted in a transparent way. For the FIRP, targeting was largely conducted by different institutions ranging from Village Development Committees, Food Committees, or Civil Protection Committees, where they existed. The range of actors involved demonstrates that there was a lack of systematic approach to the targeting process despite the availability of the JEFAP guidelines.

There was a common perception that targeting was likely to lead into tension within the village. Participants argued that those left out are unlikely to accept the status quo without a fight, which could lead into confrontation with village head or the beneficiaries. In this regard, discussion on targeting in the FGDs was commonly associated with the following terms: anger, *maudani* (hatred among villagers), envy, and division. Small leakages of benefits, in this context were perceived to be good for the poor themselves to avoid backlash from those that have the resources and political power. In the context of increased economic shocks, communities are sensitive about alienating the people on whom they rely. Therefore, to maintain their support, communities will try to include the better off in beneficiary lists, even though there are some vulnerable people who should have benefited first. Consequently, a strict focus on reducing leakages without a proper understanding of the local dynamics would have detrimentally long-term effects on the poor (Dutrey 2007).

In all sites in which FGDs were carried out, targeting was perceived to play a divisive role in the communities. Even where targeting had been transparent, the fact that some equally poor households have been left out created an attitude of inequality and rejection. Targeting caused widespread resentment among the non-beneficiaries. The points was made in discussions that community leaders are reluctant to target because non-beneficiaries threaten that they will not take part in future community development activities. This is a major concern for local leaders because most of the beneficiaries are old and weak people while the non-beneficiaries are largely the young and energetic.

“Omwe anawasakhawo ndi omwe akagwire ntchito.” (Those that are liked by the village head will do community development work.) *Focus group participant, Dedza.*

Cost-efficiency of the 2016/17 Food Insecurity Response Programme

One of the common issues raised during key informant interviews was the cost-efficiency of FIRP. The key question is whether the FIRP operations, particularly the food and cash distributions, could have been implemented more efficiently by other entities than through the cluster structure and the associated international NGOs or by government functionaries themselves. There was general agreement that the FIRP needed massive capacity to mobilize resources and logistics, which the government does not possess. While local departments of government were able to step in during the 2015/16 flood response, they were not ready to face a disaster such as the 2016/17 food crisis. Yet, were there opportunities to reduce costs and wastage during the 2016/17 food crisis?

One of the criteria used in the procurement of food was to compare the costs of local purchase of food with that of purchasing in regional and international markets. The decision to combine several sources of food procurement and the cash and voucher disbursements proved in this comparison to be more cost effective. A “zero loss” tolerance policy and insurance mechanisms used by WFP in reducing risk of loss of food during transit ensured recovery of any food losses and helped in increasing overall cost efficiency.

WFP’s involvement also permitted the pre-positioning of the food needed to meet requirements. This was feasible due to the WFP’s access to internal WFP advance financing and funds being made available from its headquarters in Rome even before forecast FIRP contributions had been confirmed. This forward thinking on financing enabled the timely provision of assistance to beneficiaries than would have been the case if planning for stock procurement only would have started when funds were in hand. In the 2016/17 MVAC response, WFP advanced USD 40.7 million through advance financing mechanisms. The single agreement approach that WFP used in deploying partner organizations for FIRP implementation through consolidated field-level agreements also helped to reduce overhead costs. Finally, the Global Commodity Management Facility that WFP used helped them to ensure that food

commodity purchases were made at favorable prices using the shortest lead time from local and regional markets, keeping those commodities readily available for immediate drawdown as soon as funding was made available. For example, interviews with WFP officials revealed that for the 2016/17 FIRP, WFP saved USD 1.11 million against what was budgeted, even though it bought 2,160 mt of maize more than was initially planned.

Despite the cost-savings that were achieved through these means, it is difficult to compare this approach for the 2016/17 FIRP to those that would have been used using other organizations or mechanisms. Similarly, it is unclear how effective government could have implemented the response program if it had taken full responsibility for FIRP design and implementation. The logistics of importing food and distributing it within the country would have to be handled solely using government resources, which would have been a major challenge, given the magnitude of the crisis and the clear capacity constraints government faces. In addition, the capacity to manage 20 to 30 international and local NGOs and to supervise their field activities under FIRP does not currently exist in DoDMA.

However, if government were to undertake future FIRP-type operations through its functionaries, a major cost-saving that needs to be recognized would be the overhead-related costs that WFP headquarters charges for its operational support at the country level. This business model needs further understanding if the government of Malawi is to move towards taking responsibility for the design and implementation of any future humanitarian responses and reduce the roles played by external agencies, such as WFP. Under these conditions, external agencies are likely to employ their own business models, even at the expense of building future capacity of the government to face and manage similar disasters.

Comparative Analysis of the Cash and In-Kind Response

Within the food insecurity response plan, 4.7 million people were expected to receive in-kind food assistance, while 1.8 million would be targeted through cash transfers, a total which was reduced in October to 1.4 million. The choice of cash or in-kind delivery mechanism was largely based on the MVAC and WFP market assessments, which included some predictive modeling. Apart from food

distributions, WFP was expected to reach 980,000 million beneficiaries through cash transfers, with the remaining 700,000 being assisted through cash transfers from the international NGO consortium. The amount of the household cash transfer benefit was calculated based on the 65 percent of total food needs ration entitlement distributed by WFP. The calculation of the value of the cash transfer based on the WFP food basket ration significantly reduced the role the cash transfer might have played in addressing non-food needs of beneficiary households, which would have helped them to recover more quickly and strengthen their resilience.

Operational Set Up

The setting up of the cash transfer mechanism was slow with cash distributions only peaking in January 2017, while food distributions had peaked in November and December 2016. Apart from delays in community mobilization and beneficiary registration common to both cash and in-kind distribution, the contracting process for cash transfer service providers took longer than anticipated. However, the WFP review found that the cash-based transfer operations tended to be easier to set up, since the logistics requirements were less cumbersome. In contrast, for food transfers, identification of locations for distribution and warehouses for storage took much more time and was labor intensive.

Cost-efficiency

According to WFP's internal program review, it cost about \$292 to transport one metric ton of food from overseas to Malawi, \$224 from regional markets, and \$130 from local markets. Where food was sourced locally, it means there is a saving of \$162 on transport costs per metric ton. This means that for every bag of maize sourced overseas, it costs about K10,804 (Malawi Kwacha) to transport the food to the beneficiaries. However, if cash rather than food was provided, the savings in food transportation costs would permit the provision of benefits to one additional beneficiary based on the prevailing market prices.

While the cash transfers are dependent on markets, service providers felt, according to the WFP program review, that “cash assistance was the most cost-efficient modality ... On average, in-kind assistance was ... 9 percent more expensive than the cash transfer modality”. If food markets were shown to be sufficiently robust to handle the increased demand resulting from cash transfers, the greater use of

cash as a modality to provide benefits could have increased the cost efficiency of the overall humanitarian response.

Cost-effectiveness

Assessing the cost effectiveness of the response is largely dependent on the outcomes of the response.

Based on program assessments conducted by implementers, both the in-kind and cash transfers had similar food security outcomes for beneficiary households based on measures such as food consumption scores, dietary diversity indices, and coping strategies. Comparatively a hybrid modality consisting of a voucher for one 50 kg bag of maize plus cash for the remainder of the ration showed slightly better results (success rate of 67 percent) than the in-kind ration (success rate of 47 percent) in terms of improvements in key food security outcomes. Based on anecdotal evidence, the cash-only modality was the less cost-effective amongst the three. However, this could be attributed to its design, as the cash value was solely based on the value of the in-kind transfer food basket and did not take into account other non-food needs of beneficiaries. Therefore, with limited sources of income, beneficiaries were forced to use some of the cash transfer to pay for other costs such as medicine or school-related costs.

Cost-effectiveness can also be assessed in terms of the local impact of the transfer modality on the local economy. While there were some sporadic price hikes or fluctuations during the days of distributions, market assessments showed that, in general, cash transfers did not have significant impacts on local markets compared to in-kind transfers. On the positive side, the large injection of the food distributions contributed to maintaining lower prices of maize than expected. On the negative side, the WFP review found that the large injection of food by Rab Processors pushed out local traders who lost business. Secondly, according to the focus group discussion, the lower prices are also affecting the beneficiaries negatively when they sold some of their produce to buy farm inputs.

Beneficiary Preference

While most households tend to prefer the form of assistance that they currently receive there is generally a strong preference for in-kind, followed by the hybrid modality. Very few households preferred pure cash transfers. The hybrid modality was attractive because it secured the main staple for the household,

while at the same time allowing flexibility to use the cash portion to cover other food and non-food needs. That the cash component of the hybrid modality could be used in part to cover milling costs also was highly valued. However, several FGDs were of a different opinion. These groups were in favor of cash, such that when cash benefits were switched to a voucher, most of them were not satisfied with the change, presumably due to the loss in their ability to use the benefit in a flexible manner.

Process and Capacity: Lessons and Recommendations

Several broad lessons emerged from this review of processes related to the design and implementation of the 2016/17 FIRP and the capacity required in participating institutions for such processes to proceed smoothly.

- **Leadership.** The declaration by the President of the food insecurity disaster in 2016 was timely. This helped to begin the disaster response in a high-profile manner. However, some development partners would have liked to have seen this happen somewhat earlier. There is a general feeling among the development partners that their prodding was needed for government to act on the emerging food insecurity crisis. Yet the final crop production estimates are only released in June at the earliest. Government had to work with the information it had available.

A key process lesson learned was that when the political leadership of the country shows a high level of commitment to the disaster relief, the coordination of the process of designing and implementing the disaster response functions effectively. In the case of FIRP, the role of the Vice President was recognized by government officials and development partners alike as a significant factor in accounting for the successful implementation of the 2016/17 FIRP. The Vice President presented himself as a champion for the humanitarian response and took special interest in driving the process of providing assistance to those affected in response to the disaster declaration from the President. Leadership at this highest level played a key role in the successful disaster response.

However, important institutions, such as DoDMA, could have taken more effective roles in the planning and design stage of the interventions. Although DoDMA chaired the HRC meetings in the beginning, the meetings were mostly driven by the agenda set by the non-governmental members of the HRC. This is partly due to the human and institutional capacity weakness of DoDMA and partly due to the emergency with which the operations have to be designed and implemented. The non-governmental actors and development partners often had to push the government agencies in the disaster response system to act.

- **Vulnerability assessment.** Many of the government officials and development partners interviewed stated that the annual process of estimating the vulnerable population in Malawi could be done more transparently and accurately. The MVAC estimations of 6.5 million affected people, later increased to 6.7 million, remain debatable. The MVAC secretariat is now making a serious attempt to strengthen its vulnerability assessment methods. Recent efforts to improve these methods using the IPC approach to measuring

food insecurity are welcome. The current capacity of MVAC to sustainably implement a revised assessment process is questionable given the institutional and funding issues around MVAC operations. This point will be elaborated further in the section on evaluating the MVAC methodologies. The effectiveness of including the IPC approach in the estimation of the vulnerable population needs further analysis, although three SADC countries are already implementing this method.

Once the MVAC figures were accepted and announced by the government, they were accepted as correct. There was little further analysis of these figures nor was there a process through which they could be vetted before government and development partners acted on them. It is not clear why an independent verification team could not have been appointed to check, over a maximum period of a few days, the methods employed and data used through which the size of vulnerable population was estimated before the numbers were accepted for mobilizing action. This is a process issue, since a large amount of resources were mobilized for the humanitarian response using these numbers. While relief must be provided where required, unnecessary provision of relief results in an undesirable diversion of development funds and other resources. This point will be discussed further in the section on the assessment of MVAC methodologies.

Information sources and their use in the MVAC calculations should be coordinated and consolidated, and data based on various household and market survey sources harmonized. Inaccurate or non-representative data and low technical capacity in the institutions generating information based on such data will undermine the design of any future humanitarian response plans and their implementation. Collection of high quality data and sharing it among key institutions involved in identifying emerging humanitarian crises and responding to them should be a priority. For example, institutions collecting data and producing information on the availability of food in Malawian markets should act and disseminate that information according to a strategic information management plan. In this way, that data can contribute to policy decisions centered on stabilizing markets and protecting the vulnerable from market price volatility.

- **Information on food stocks.** In the context of the role of markets in responding to a food insecurity crisis, it is imperative that information on the private sector storage of maize in the country is gathered and made available to decision-makers. This requires building trust between the private sector and the government. This is a long-term process, but the challenges faced by implementing agencies in any response to food insecurity in avoiding market distortions show that such information is a key input in determining whether assistance in a specific area should take the form of food or cash.
- **Food balance sheet.** The development and use of FBSs for deciding whether to intervene in the market needs to be depoliticized. Several respondents noted that technical numbers used in the FBS required political clearance before use. This creates the perception that political decisions are behind the numbers rather than objectively obtained data. These perceptions could be avoided through a more transparent, well-documented process of creating the FBS.

The generation of FBSs and revisions to the process through which they are generated should be based on updated information drawn from surveys of private firms and the monitoring of trade in food. Food balance sheets should consider crops other than cereals in calculating food gaps. Data on non-cereal food sources needs to be collected to strengthen the data on food availability, food needs, and food gaps.

- **Crop production estimation.** The crop production estimates are based on long-standing methods that have generally proven useful in normal years, but during crisis periods have

been found inadequate. Serious efforts need to be made to strengthen the crop estimation process. The evaluations of the pilot tests of alternative approaches to estimate crop production show that it is possible to improve upon the existing traditional method for better accuracy and transparency.

- **Markets and the private sector.** The role of the private sector in implementing the response plan needs further analysis to understand how the sector operates during crisis periods. Given the important role that private firms can play in improving access to food for food insecure households, transparent and rules-based approaches to market interventions are needed.

Greater transparency is needed in the marketing and trade of food commodities. A particular need is better real-time monitoring of food imports, since these food stocks have a potentially important role to play in guiding humanitarian responses to food insecurity crises.

Several more miscellaneous recommendations emerged from this process and capacity focused review of the 2016/17 FIRP:

- Most FIRP interventions were conducted as activities of the Food Security Cluster. Yet, other clusters implemented a significant amount of activities with often sharply limited resources. A better balancing of resources among clusters is needed, although provision of food will still be the central intervention undertaken to assist those vulnerable due to food insecurity.
- Use of market price information and the methods behind price projections need further analysis. As this information feeds into the MVAC calculations, the process of price information sharing and use at various levels needs transparency and monitoring.
- To develop local capacity for implementing interventions, at national level, counterpart departments should be trained in costing and resource mobilization for such interventions. At district level, strengthening of district councils to work with the NGOs that are active in the districts is required to develop capacity for designing locally-appropriate interventions and to estimate the cost of such plans.

5. TECHNICAL REVIEW OF VULNERABILITY ASSESSMENT METHODS

The declaration of a food insecurity crisis in southern and central Malawi was based on several sources of information. These included weather data from the Department of Climate Change and Meteorological Services, food supply and demand information from the second-round APES crop production estimates, which MoAIWD undertook in late-February and March 2016, and the national food balance sheet (FBS) for Malawi. Based on this information and applying it to vulnerability assessment using the Household Economy Approach (HEA) framework, MVAC estimated that about 6.5 million people would be food insecure for the April 2016 to March 2017 consumption period, a figure later updated to 6.7 million.

To assess the quality of the data and other information used in conducting the MVAC assessment of humanitarian need, we reviewed the HEA and the methodologies used for the MVAC assessment, the Malawi national FBS, and the second-round APES crop production estimates. The IPC approach to assessing the severity and causes of food insecurity, which is now being rolled out in Malawi, will also be briefly explored.

Food Balance Sheet

Though not used in HEA, the national Food Balance Sheet (FBS) acts as both an impetus and a guiding document for the design and implementation of food security humanitarian responses, along with the food security assessment (FSA). As part of this evaluation, potential technical inaccuracies within the FBS were reviewed to assess how significant they affect the design of the FIRP intervention. Some of the assumptions used in the construction of the Malawi FBS have been questioned.

In this section, we change some of these assumptions and see how the final FBS and “Total Food Gap” are affected. This analysis is based on the Malawi National FBS version of 30 September 2016. shows how the numbers in the Malawi FBS are affected by changing assumptions about maize caloric weight, post-harvest loss, and adding wheat into the FBS.

Table 5.1 Changes in total food gap due to change in maize caloric weights, change in post-harvest loss shares, and addition of wheat into Food Balance Sheet

	Original (Sept. 2016 version of FBS)	(1) Caloric weight	(2) Post- harvest loss	(3) Add wheat	(4) All
Maize caloric weight, %	73	66	73	convert wheat imports to maize	66
Food use (maize), mt	2,788,086	2,520,735	2,788,086	equivalent and add to original net production	2,520,735
Maize post-harvest loss, %	12.9	12.9	10.7		10.7
Net production (maize), mt	2,063,828	2,063,828	2,115,957		2,115,957
Total food gap, mt	(834,083)	(666,034)	(781,954)	(682,118)	(446,393)
difference from original, mt	-	168,049	52,129	151,965	387,691

Source: Malawi FBS, Trade map, IFPRI-Malawi.

Note: The added wheat amount is based on total Malawi wheat imports (Trade Map mirror data). The caloric weight of the various cereals needs to be revised when adding the wheat. This is why the figures in column (4) do not correspond to the total of columns (1), (2), and (3). Mt = metric tons.

- **Maize caloric weight** – In the calculation of the Malawi FBS, it is normally assumed that 73 percent of the calorie consumption in Malawi comes from maize. According to a recent IFPRI study based on the Integrated Household Survey–round 3 (IHS3), this weight is only 66 percent, and the calorie weights for rice and other cereals become 2.5 and 3.6 percent, respectively. IHS3 is the national household survey conducted in 2010/11, which was a normal agriculture year. If we use 66 percent as the maize caloric weight, the maize food-use estimate decreases from 2.79 to 2.52 million metric tons (mt), and the total food deficit decreased from 0.83 to 0.67 million mt.
- **Post-harvest losses** – MoAIWD recently revised the post-harvest loss figure for maize from 12.9 to 10.7 percent, which is currently used in the 2017 FBS.⁵ If we use this figure in the 2016 FBS, net maize production will increase from 2.06 to 2.12 million mt. It should be noted that the FBS version of September 2016 that MoAIWD developed did not take the post-harvest loss of rice and sorghum/millet into account.
- **Above two scenarios, plus adding wheat into Malawi FBS** – Wheat is becoming an important part of urban Malawian diets, even though wheat is not grown in Malawi. The main source of wheat is imports which average about 106,000 mt per year in the last 10 years.⁶ It is a significant cereal food source and cannot be excluded in the calculations of the national Malawi FBS in which the food consumption of both urban and rural populations is considered. A recent IFPRI study using IHS3 showed that the caloric weights for maize, rice, sorghum/millet, and wheat, respectively are 66, 2.5, 1.5, and 2.1 percent. When we apply all the scenarios (the updated caloric weights, post-harvest-loss, and wheat imports), the total food deficit dropped by 387,691 mt, which is a significant change.

⁵ Malawi FBS as of 14 June 2017.

⁶ <http://www.trademap.org/Index.aspx>

Since FBSs are used as one of the decision-making tools for assessing the food deficits in Malawi, the above analysis indicates that care should be taken in their calculations. Often the FBS is used as a starting point for discussions leading to announcement of food disasters. Thus, assumptions used in the development of the FBSs have serious implications for the nature and extent of the humanitarian responses.

Household Economy Approach (HEA)

Using the HEA analytical framework, MVAC conducted the 2016 Vulnerability Assessment and Analysis (or Food Security Assessment) between 8 and 28 May 2016. The results of the assessment showed that a total of 6.49 million people would not be able to meet their annual minimum food requirements of 2,100 kilocalories per person per day during the 2016/2017 consumption period. This estimate of the vulnerable population of Malawi unable to meet their survival threshold⁷ represented 39 percent of the total population of Malawi. The results also showed that the affected population required 375,393 MT of food assistance with a cash value of about MK113 billion. The MVAC updated the assessment in October 2016, increasing the affected population to 6.7 million due to decreased production estimates in certain areas of the country. This update used the final, third-round APES crop production information.

The Household Economy Approach framework

The HEA that the MVAC uses consists of two main parts: a baseline analysis and an outcome analysis. At the heart of the HEA is a depiction of how people live from year to year and the connections they have with other people and places that enable them to do so. This is called the baseline analysis. It has three

⁷ The survival threshold is the total food and cash income required by an individual or household to cover the food and non-food items necessary for survival in the short term. It includes (i) 100 percent of minimum food energy needs; (ii) the costs associated with food preparation and consumption; and (iii) where applicable, the cost of water for human consumption.

The other commonly used threshold, the livelihood protection threshold, is the total income required to sustain local livelihoods. This means total expenditure to: (i) ensure basic survival, i.e., all items covered in the survival threshold; (ii) maintain access to basic services, e.g., health and education; (iii) sustain livelihoods in the medium to longer term, e.g., purchase of seeds or veterinary drugs; and (iv) achieve a minimum locally acceptable standard of living, e.g., purchase of basic clothing or coffee/tea.

components: a livelihood zoning, a wealth breakdown, and an analysis of livelihood strategies for each of the identified wealth groups.

The outcome analysis which follows is an investigation of how that baseline access to food and income might change because of the incidence of a specific hazard, such as drought or flood. It consists of three steps. First, the translation of a hazard, such as drought, into economic consequences at the household level, which is referred to in the HEA as the “problem specification”. Second, an analysis is conducted of the capacity of households in different wealth groups to cope with the hazard. Finally, access to food and income at the household level is predicted for a defined future period and compared to two critical thresholds: the survival and livelihood protection thresholds.

The data for the baseline analysis and the outcome analysis are stored in two separate spreadsheets. The baseline datasheet contains the general information for the livelihood zone for the reference year, e.g., wealth breakdown, seasonality effects, market data, livestock numbers, population, and data on food sources, cash income, and expenditure for each wealth group. This information was developed by summarizing individual interviews conducted during baseline assessment field trips. The baseline data for Malawi was updated in 2015 from an original baseline prepared in 2003.

To carry out the outcome analysis, the baseline data is used in the Livelihood Impact Analysis Spreadsheet (LIAS). Besides the baseline data, information input into the LIAS includes that from a range of secondary sources, such as the crop estimates from the most recent APES from MoAIWD and population projections from the National Statistical Office. Annual assessment field visits by MVAC committee members also provide data for use in the LIAS.

The Malawi Vulnerability Assessment Committee annual assessment

In 2016/17, the MVAC field assessment teams included individuals from government, NGOs, UN agencies, and donors. The assessment teams visited all districts, except Likoma, having earlier been introduced to the HEA framework. In each district, the team first met with the District Commissioner and District Agricultural Development Officer to obtain a general picture of the food situation. Based on

information such as crop production, prices of commodities in the previous fortnight, and annual reports from the District Agricultural Office, the District Agricultural Development Officers helped the MVAC assessment teams identify Extension Planning Areas (EPA) with potential food problems.

The protocol for their field work was to visit the two worst affected EPAs in a livelihood zone. The more livelihood zones that there are in the district, the more EPAs that must be visited to represent all livelihood zones. The data and information in the reports from the district agricultural office were triangulated in interviews and focus group discussions during the EPA-level field visits. Next, the each MVAC field assessment team met in the selected EPAs with the Agricultural Extension Development Coordinator (AEDC) along with the Agricultural Extension Development Officers (AEDOs) to get information on, for example, crop production and income generation activities within the EPA in order to triangulate that information with the information collected at the district level. At the end of the EPA-level meetings, two villages are identified based on their potential vulnerability to hunger. These were to be surveyed in detail.

A big task for the MVAC team is breaking down the village into four wealth groups (very poor, poor, middle, and better-off) with help from the village chief and other local community leaders. Because the same process was done in the baseline assessment in 2015, the criteria of the wealth breakdown in this process should be similar to the baseline. Then, for each wealth group, FGDs will be arranged. The FGDs were conducted using checklists to collect information on food sources, income sources, and expenditures. The data collected from the FGDs is triangulated with information from other sources obtained during the assessment trips, and the data is cleaned before being used to calculate food sources, income, and expenditures for each wealth group within a livelihood zone.

The results of the FGDs are compared with the food source and income data entered into the LIAS from official secondary data, such as crop production estimates and livestock production. If there is a big difference in the data from the two sources, further investigations are required to determine whether the official results should be overridden with information obtained from the FGDs. Generally, more

weight is given to official secondary data when there is a difference. Overriding only happened for some small items in the LIAS, such as a price change for minor crops or livestock.

Other information collected during the MVAC field assessment trips are directly used in the LIAS. For example, data on wages for agricultural labour are not officially available, so such data depends on the MVAC field assessment to collect and insert into the LIAS.

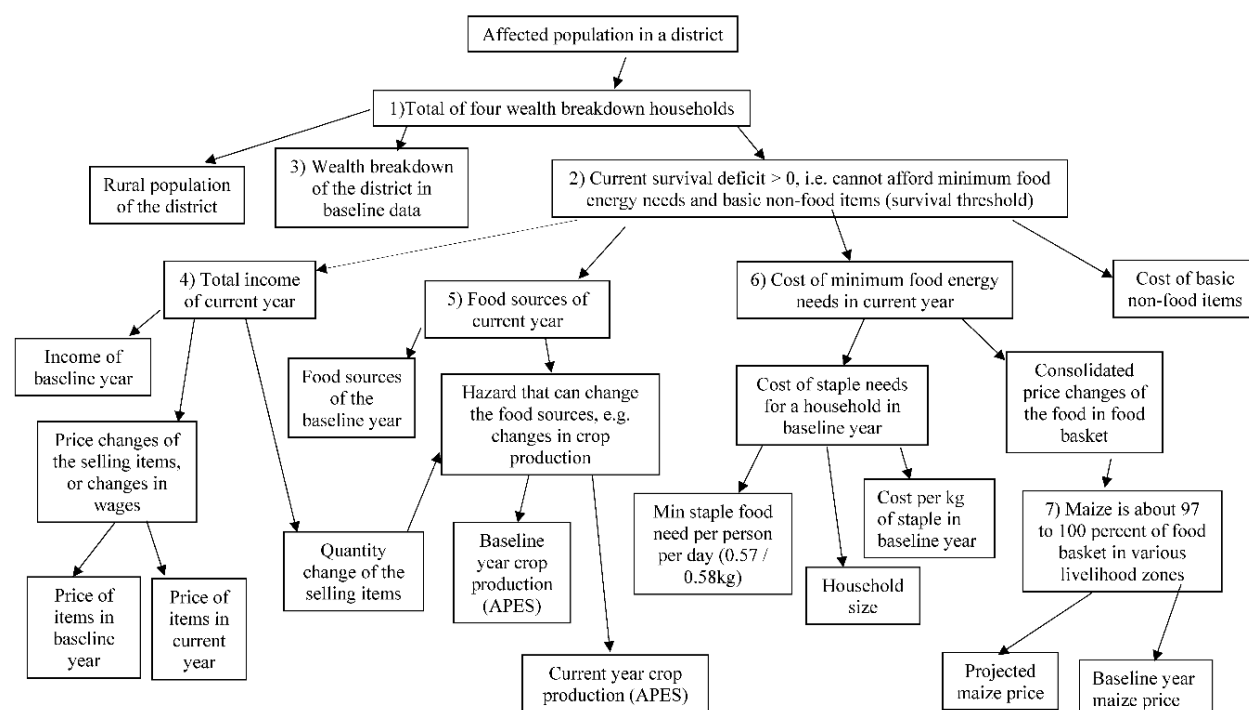
Outcome analysis and the Livelihood Impact Analysis Spreadsheet

Based on the baseline data and the data collected from the MVAC field assessments, the MVAC conducts an outcome analysis using the three steps of problem specification, coping capacity analysis, and predicted outcome.

- Problem specification involves translating hazards into quantified, economic consequences that can be mathematically linked to household-level baseline information on food and income options or expenditure items.
- Coping capacity analysis is a quantitative analysis of a households' ability to diversify and expand access to various sources of food and income, and thus to cope with a specified hazard.
- The predicted outcome step is to determine where different households fall in relation to clearly defined intervention thresholds. In Malawi, the estimate of the total food and cash income of a household, with hazards and coping strategies accounted for, is compared to the survival threshold for that household. The survival threshold consists of the costs of 100 percent of minimum food energy needs and basic survival non-food items.

The tool for the outcome analysis is the Livelihood Impact Analysis Spreadsheet (LIAS), the outputs of which are estimates of the numbers of individuals facing food and livelihood protection deficits – the affected or vulnerable population – by district and livelihood zone, and the amount of food and cash assistance required to address these deficits. The LIAS includes the baseline data and data for the current year, such as crop production, livestock production, and market prices, which mostly is drawn from official secondary data sources. Other data, which are not available in official sources, such as the value of gifts received and wage rates, are primary data collected during the MVAC field assessments. The schematic (Figure 5.1) shows how the affected population of a district is calculated in the LIAS by tracking all the way back to the raw data and various estimated parameters.

Figure 5.1 Flow diagram of the Livelihood Impact Analysis Spreadsheet



Source: Compiled by authors from review of the Livelihood Impact Analysis Spreadsheet.

The major steps in utilizing the LIAS are the following:⁸

- The affected population in a district is the total of the affected population within each of the four wealth groups – very poor, poor, middle, and better-off.
- For each wealth group, the whole group will be classified as part of the affected population when the estimated current total food sources and income, including produced and purchased food, is lower than the survival threshold for the aggregate wealth group. In the other words, the population cannot meet their minimum food energy needs and basic non-food items. In the LIAS, this means the calculated survival deficit⁹ (the gap to meet the survival threshold) is greater than zero. The magnitude of the survival deficit for each type of wealth group is affected by total income, the size of all current food sources, costs of basic non-food items, and the costs of meeting minimum food energy needs in the current year. The non-food costs of survival are derived from baseline data on these costs, taking inflation into account.
- The breakdown of wealth groups within the total population of an affected livelihood zone is taken from the baseline data.
- Total income depends on income in the baseline data and any changes in prices and quantity related to income generating activities.

⁸ Our understanding of how the LIAS works is based on the LIAS for South and Central regions for 2016/17 that was made available to the team. This was the version which estimated an affected population of 6.5 million.

⁹ Survival deficit: When total income is insufficient to cover the cost of survival, even if all the money usually used to protect livelihoods is switched to the purchase of staple foods.

- Price changes can be calculated using differences in prices of items in the baseline and in the current year. During the 2016/17 FIRP, the projected maize price used by MVAC was 350 and 300 MK per kg for the Southern and the Central regions, respectively. These prices were the maximum monthly projected maize prices computed for each region by MVAC and FEWSNET-Malawi for the period April 2015 to April 2016.
- Food sources of the current year are affected by the food source data in the baseline year and the changes in these food sources in the current year, e.g., changes in maize production. Such changes can affect both food sources and income. This change in food sources is calculated as the difference between production in the baseline year and in the current year, using the APES crop production estimates.
- The cost of the minimum food energy requirement in the current year is determined by the cost of minimum staples needed for a household in the baseline year and the consolidated price changes of all the items in the food basket, in which maize has a weight of 97 percent.

We classify the type of data used to calculate affected populations as depicted in Figure 5.1:

- Baseline data: wealth group breakdown of the population; income; household size; cost of basic non-food items;
- Secondary data: population in livelihood zone; APES crop production estimates for baseline and current year; prices of items in baseline and in current year; unit cost of maize in baseline year; unit cost of other staple foods in baseline year;
- Parameters: minimum staple food needs per person per day; composition of household food basket; and
- Assumptions and external information: projected maize price.

In the following sub-sections, we explore how changes in the data used with the LIAS affect the resultant estimated affected population size.

Scenarios using different maize prices

The size of the estimated total affected population can change if prices of food items in the food basket rise significantly. Higher prices will result in more people being unable to purchase sufficient food to meet the survival threshold for their household. With higher prices, those households will be classified as part of the affected population. The price of maize is the most significant factor in this regard – the LIAS maize makes up between 97 and 100 percent of the composition of food basket in the livelihood zones of Southern and Central Malawi. Consequently, the size of the vulnerable population is most sensitive to price changes of maize among food items

In computing the size of the affected populations in a livelihood zone, the LIAS uses the ratio of the projected maize price in the coming year to the price over the reference year. The projected maize price is the maximum projected price over the period of interest – here, April 2016 to April 2017 – while the price of the reference year is the average price for that year. Early in the 2016 Food Security Assessment process, MVAC received support from FEWSNET headquarters in Washington, DC, and from their Southern Africa office in computing projected maize prices. However, the decision on which project price to use was made by MVAC and FEWSNET-Malawi. Details on how the projected prices used in the LIAS for the 2016 FSA are not clear in currently available documentation from MVAC.

In Table 5.2 is presented the estimated size of the vulnerable population in Southern and Central regions based on using different projected maize prices from those used by MVAC. First, we discuss the different price scenarios evaluated:

Table 5.2 Estimates of the vulnerable population in the central and southern Agricultural Development Divisions in 2016/17 based on different maize prices

	Machinga	Blantyre	Shire Valley	Salima	Kasungu	Lilongwe	TOTAL
Maximum actual maize price in ADD in year, MK/kg	MK295	MK291	MK309	MK269	MK312	MK264	n/a
Estimated vulnerable population	1,718,000	1,382,000	730,000	318,000	715,000	957,000	5,820,000
Average actual maize price in ADD in year, MK/kg	MK216	MK221	MK244	MK209	MK195	MK195	n/a
Estimated vulnerable population	1,188,000	936,000	672,000	318,000	632,000	957,000	4,703,000

Source: Authors' calculation using LIAS. ADD = Agricultural Development Division; MK = Malawi Kwacha.

- Average, rather than maximum, of the monthly maize prices projected by FEWSNET and MVAC:** The two agencies projected for the period April 2016 to April 2017 monthly maize prices. For this scenario, rather than using the maximum monthly projected prices, we use the average of those monthly projected prices. All other data used in the LIAS is based on averages, rather than maximums, such as the cost of purchasing minimum food energy needs and non-food items. The average of the monthly projected prices for the period of interest is about 262 MK/kg (Table 5.3). Under this scenario, the total affected population in Southern and Central regions, the two regions most affected by the drought of 2015/16, decreased by 1.0 million from 6.3 million to 5.3 million.

- **Maximum of actual maize prices in the 2016/17 reference year at region and at ADD levels:** The actual maize prices for the projection period of April 2016 to April 2017 are now available. We use data from the Malawi Agricultural Market Information System (AMIS) to compute the maximum of actual maize prices at region and at ADD levels. Using these prices as the projected maize prices in the LIAS, the affected population in the Southern and Central regions decreases from 6.3 to 5.8 million. The result is similar when we use the maximum of actual prices at ADD level. Details on the size of the affected population in each ADD based on these ADD-specific prices are presented in Table 5.3.
- **Average of actual maize prices in the 2016/17 reference year at region and at ADD levels:** When we use the average of the actual price at the region level, the affected population in the Southern and Central regions decreased by 1.4 million from 6.3 to 4.9 million. When we use the average of actual maize prices at ADD level, the estimate of the size of the affected population decreased to 4.7 million.

Table 5.3 Estimates of the size of the vulnerable population in Southern and Central regions in 2016/17 based on the use of different projected maize prices

Scenario	Southern	Central	Total
MVAC projected price of MK 350 for Southern region and MK 300 for Central, maximum of monthly projected prices	4,342,000	1,999,000	6,341,000
Average of monthly projected prices for the year (MK 262)	3,344,000	1,989,000	5,333,000
Maximum of the actual price at regional level in the year (Central MK 312; Southern MK 309)	3,837,000	1,999,000	5,837,000
Maximum of the actual price at ADD level in the year	3,831,000	1,989,000	5,820,000
Average of actual price at region level in the year (Central MK 199; Southern MK 227)	2,914,000	1,989,000	4,903,000
Average of actual price at ADD level in the year	2,796,000	1,906,000	4,703,000

Note: Prices are Malawi Kwacha (MK) per kg.; ADD = Agricultural Development Division.

The source of the projected maize price is MVAC for the price projection period of April 2016 to April 2017. The source of the actual maize price is the Agricultural Market Information System of MoAIWD.

Estimates of the size of the vulnerable population in Malawi to projected maize price levels are highly sensitive. The projected prices used for the 2016 FSA were considerably higher than the prices that were actually realized in hindsight. Although they reflect consideration of a worst-case scenario, there are significant costs associated with the use of such prices, particularly through inclusion errors in targeting FIRP benefits.

A reasonable alternative to using the maximum monthly projected maize price for the coming year is to use the average projected maize price by region. Doing this would be consistent with the use of average prices – rather than maximum prices – in any cost estimations elsewhere in the LIAS. If this had

been done in the 2016 FSA, the estimated size of the vulnerable population in Central and Southern regions would have been 5.3 million, one million less than the MVAC official estimate of 6.3 million. However, we recognize that it is particularly the price of maize during the lean season of December to February which is most important in determining the cost of accessing maize for vulnerable households. This is when many households will have depleted their own-produced maize stocks and go to the market to obtain maize for their households. The maximum monthly projected maize price reflects more closely the prices over the lean period than does the annual average of monthly projected prices.

Price projections are based on evidence. With insufficient data on informal trade and the private trader activities, these food inflows were not considered when FEWSNET and MVAC made their maize price projections. FEWSNET price projections normally incorporate the expert judgment such as the private sector traders, but that step was missing last year. Given that the affected population is very sensitive to maize prices, MVAC should adjust their projection methods to account any indications of higher-than-normal imports and the dramatic increasing supply from the private traders. Moreover, during the food insecurity response, MVAC should also update the FSA results based on price movements that vary from those projected to provide a more accurate picture of the scale of the food insecurity crisis as it progresses. The maize price normally increased sharply from December through March. Beginning in November, the projected price was much lower than the actual market price. The huge difference between the projected maize price and the actual was partly caused by food aid. However, the higher-than-normal supply from informal trade and the private trader also played important roles. If some adjustments could be made on the maize price projections when the difference between the projected and actual price became very large since November, a more accurate picture of the scale of the food insecurity crisis could be provided. When the actual maize prices are significantly and constantly different from the projections in the beginning of the lean season, i.e., November, FEWSNET and MVAC should update their price projections using FEWSNET's Integrated Price Projection methodology. More help from FEWSNET DC and Southern Africa office can also be requested at this stage.

In addition to the maize price projections by FEWSNET and MVAC, WOTECH Investment, a consulting firm, was commissioned in July 2016 to provide a market assessment report as part of the FIRP implementation (Msiska 2016 – this report is critically reviewed in the section below on market assessment). The consultant conducted maize price projections using two different methods. The first was based on data collected from traders in 234 markets across Malawi. The other made use of an additive Holt-Winters seasonal forecasting method with the AMIS maize price series data. The projected maize prices estimated for the period January to March 2017 were MK264 and MK250 per kg for the two methods, respectively. These prices are closer to our second scenario based on the average of the monthly projected maize prices and to the actual prices observed compared to the price projections used. However, these price projections from WOTECH Investment were not used in the LIAS by MVAC, even for sensitivity analysis. Such supplementary information germane to the FSA should be exploited by MVAC as it becomes available to update its estimates of the scope of the food insecurity crisis.

Scenarios using different agricultural production estimates from APES

A valid question asked in the discussions related to the use of APES figures in the calculation of MVAC estimates of the size of the vulnerable population in Malawi is “What will happen if we increase the accuracy of the APES annual crop production estimates.” The APES results, including crop production and livestock production for both the current year and the reference year under the HEA framework, are used in the LIAS for calculating the size of the affected population in Southern and Central regions. The ratio of current year production data over that for the reference year shows changes in different food sources. Combined with food source data for the four wealth groups from the baseline data, the amount of food energy available for the current year can be calculated. This is one of the factors used to define whether a wealth group in a livelihood zone will be classified as affected.

In Table 5.4, we look at scenarios that assume the rain-fed maize production estimation is over or under estimated by 10 percent and 20 percent. We do this though changing the maize production data used in the LIAS. The amount in parentheses in the row headings for Table 5.4 would be the true maize production under those assumptions. For the scenarios based on different maize production estimates, we

find that the size of the affected population will change by between 200,000 and 600,000, or between 3 and 10 percent of the estimate of the size of the vulnerable population used for designing the FIRP. If we consider changes in production for all crops, the affected population changes by between 300,000 and 700,000. Relative to the sensitivity of the estimates of the size of the vulnerable population to changes in maize prices, estimates of the size of the vulnerable population are not as sensitive to changes in the annual crop production estimates. Nonetheless, more precise crop production estimates under APES would be beneficial to the MVAC vulnerability assessment process.

Table 5.4 Estimates of vulnerable population in Southern and Central regions in 2016/17 based on the use of different crop production estimates drawn from the Agriculture Production Estimates Survey

Agriculture Production Estimates Survey scenarios	Southern	Central	Total
Second-round APES estimates (maize 1.70 million mt)	4,342,000	1,999,000	6,341,000
Maize under-estimated 10 percent (1.89 million mt)	4,191,000	1,999,000	6,190,000
Maize under-estimated 20 percent (2.13 million mt)	4,126,000	1,917,000	6,043,000
All crops production under-estimated 10 percent	4,028,000	1,999,000	6,027,000
All crops production under-estimated 20 percent	3,744,000	1,917,000	5,661,000
Maize over-estimated 10 percent (1.55 million mt)	4,418,000	2,307,000	6,724,000
Maize over-estimated 20 percent (1.42 million mt)	4,470,000	2,499,000	6,969,000
All crops production over-estimated 10 percent	4,455,000	2,307,000	6,762,000
All crops production over-estimated 20 percent	4,497,000	2,579,000	7,076,000

Note: For the 2016 FSA, the second-round Agriculture Production Estimates Survey data was used, in which the rain-fed maize production was estimated at 1.7 million mt in Southern and Central regions (1.9 million mt nationally). mt = metric tons

Scenarios of using different survival deficit thresholds

The MVAC method currently in use aims to identify as vulnerable the members of all households who do not have sufficient total food and cash income required to meet their *survival threshold* – the food and non-food items necessary for survival in the short term. The survival threshold includes 100 percent of minimum food energy needs; the costs associated with food preparation and consumption; and, where applicable, the cost of water for human consumption. The *survival deficit* is the difference between the survival threshold and the total food and cash income available to household members.

In Table 5.5, we show what would happen to the estimated size of the vulnerable population in Southern and Central regions if we loosen this criterion on the size of the survival deficit for vulnerable

households. In this part, we are not suggesting the use of different survival deficit thresholds. Our main objective of this part was to show whether the size of the affected population is sensitive to the different deficit threshold. As such, we conduct a sensitivity analysis to better understand how estimates of the affected population will change if we exclude from this population people with survival deficits that are smaller than 2, 5, and 10 percent cut-off levels. At the 2 percent cut-off, the total affected population decreases by only around 5,000 individuals. However, if the cut-off is reduced to 5 percent, 290,000 people are no longer categorized as affected, while if reduced to 10 percent, over 750,000 people in the Southern and Central regions will no longer be categorized as affected. Relatively, the sensitivity of the estimates of the size of the vulnerable population due to changes in maize prices is higher than the sensitivity of estimates of the size of the vulnerable population using different survival deficit thresholds.

Table 5.5 Estimates of the vulnerable population in Southern and Central regions in 2016/17 based on the use of various survival deficits across different wealth groups

	Total	Very Poor	Poor	Middle
Southern Region				
Survival deficit > 0%	4,342,000	2,065,000	1,876,000	401,000
Survival deficit > 2%	4,336,000	2,065,000	1,876,000	395,000
Survival deficit > 5%	4,063,000	2,065,000	1,749,000	250,000
Survival deficit > 10%	3,673,000	2,065,000	1,430,000	178,000
Central Region				
Survival deficit > 0%	1,999,000	1,708,000	292,000	nil
Survival deficit > 2%	1,999,000	1,708,000	292,000	nil
Survival deficit > 5%	1,989,000	1,708,000	281,000	nil
Survival deficit > 10%	1,906,000	1,625,000	281,000	nil
Total of Southern and Central Regions				
Survival deficit > 0%	6,341,000	3,772,000	2,168,000	401,000
Survival deficit > 2%	6,336,000	3,772,000	2,168,000	395,000
Survival deficit > 5%	6,052,000	3,772,000	2,030,000	250,000
Survival deficit > 10%	5,579,000	3,690,000	1,711,000	178,000

Note: The *survival threshold* is the total food and cash income required by an individual or household to cover the food and non-food items necessary for survival in the short term. It includes 100 percent of minimum food energy needs; the costs associated with food preparation and consumption; and, where applicable, the cost of water for human consumption. The *survival deficit* is the difference between the survival threshold and the total food and cash income available to household members to meet their survival needs in the short term.

Southern region was more vulnerable than Central region

These analyses demonstrate that the affected population in Southern region is more sensitive than Central region to changing assumptions and parameters in the LIAS. This likely is due to different vulnerabilities between the two regions. Table 5.6 shows the proportion of the food basket that was not purchased for the typical very poor and poor households in the baseline year and the current year in Southern and Central regions. Households in the Central region generally produce significantly more of the food that they consume than do households in the Southern region.

Table 5.6 Food consumed that was not purchased in baseline and current year for very poor and poor wealth groups in Central and Southern regions, percent of minimum food energy required

	Southern region		Central region	
	Very Poor	Poor	Very Poor	Poor
Baseline, 2015	72	77	83	100
Current, 2016/17	46	42	59	75

Source: Author's calculation using LIAS

The food source data of the current year presented in Table 5.6 is based on the baseline year data, taking “hazards”, such as price changes and drops in crop production, into account. In the baseline year, typical poor households in Central region could meet their minimum food energy needs without any purchasing, while very poor households there need to purchase food equivalent to 17 percent of their minimum food energy needs. On the other hand, the poor and very poor households in Southern region needed to purchase an additional 23 and 28 percent of their minimum food energy needs, respectively, to meet their minimum food energy needs under baseline conditions. In the current year, the hazards worsened non-purchase food sources, i.e., own-production of staple foods, in both the Southern and Central regions. However, changes in reliance on purchased sources of food were larger in the Southern region.

Integrated Food Security Phase Classification

The Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) is a set of protocols developed by a broad set of actors in humanitarian responses around the globe that is used to classify the severity and

causes of food insecurity and provide actionable knowledge by consolidating wide-ranging evidence. It brings together data from various sources, sectors, and methods. The IPC methods contribute to building technical consensus about the severity of food insecurity crises at local levels among key stakeholders including national governments, NGOs, UN, technical agencies, and civil society. Malawi started using IPC for all districts earlier in 2017, archiving all documents generated through the classification process in a restricted online portal. We explore how the IPC approach can be used to improve food insecurity assessment in Malawi compared to the HEA used in the 2016/17 MVAC needs assessment process.

According to the IPC Technical Manual, the purpose of classifying the severity and causes of household vulnerability is to consolidate diverse data and methods into an overall food security statement that is comparable over space and time, answering the following questions: How severe is the food insecurity situation? Where are the geographic areas with food-insecure populations? Who are the food insecure? How many are food insecure? Why are they food insecure? When will people be food insecure? The IPC protocols result in a classification of acute food insecurity into five phases based on common reference indicators: none/minimal, stressed, crisis, emergency, and humanitarian catastrophe/famine. Each step in these phases represents an increase in the household food consumption gaps and/or depletion of livelihood assets even with the presences of humanitarian assistance. The final phase, catastrophe, is characterized by an extreme lack of food (or other basic needs) even with full employment of coping strategies.

Each of these phases has different implications for response objectives. For Phase 1, the objective is solely resilience building since no vulnerability is detected. In the second and third phases, actions should focus on reducing risk/protecting livelihoods and reducing food consumption gaps along with acute malnutrition, respectively. In the emergency scenario of Phase 4, saving lives and livelihoods takes priority. While the catastrophe of Phase 5 entails preventing widespread death and the total collapse of livelihoods.

The tools for classifying the severity and causes of food insecurity include the Acute Food Insecurity Reference Table for Area Classification, and the Acute Food Insecurity Reference Table for

Household Group Classification. The Area Classification is directly linked to the Household Group classification. The main strength of the Reference Table for Area Classification is that it provides nutrition and mortality data for the population in a given area, while the main strength of the Reference Table for Household Group Classification is that it provides a detailed breakdown of the severity of food insecurity for different household groups within a given area. This information supports strategically designing a humanitarian response that is tailored to the needs of different household groups.

In the IPC analysis for Malawi in 2017, the analysis was conducted at district level, rather than at household group level, so only the IPC Area Classification Table was generated.

Procedures for Classifying Severity and Causes

There are eight steps in the procedures for classifying the severity for each district, which were conducted on the IPC online portal. The procedures discussed below are based on the interviews with IPC analysts in Malawi and the IPC manual.

In the first four steps, some basic information of the district, such as the estimated population, is obtained. The IPC core team then collects more detailed information, in this case from the LIAS using HEA, and the IPC core team creates tables which provide survival deficits, livelihoods protection deficits, and the shares of population facing the two types of deficits for each district. The evidence in the tables is then analyzed and given key statements. Then, they are categorized into contributing factor elements (e.g., hazards, food availability) and outcome elements (e.g., food consumption, livelihood change). Each contributing factor element and outcome element is summarized with a brief narrative conclusion.

The fifth step is of most interest to us and is when the overall phase classification happens. The multi-sectoral experts forming the Technical Working Group discuss the evidence as a team, building consensus based on the results of the food security outcomes and the contributing factors. For the analysis of each district, the share of total population for each phase (i.e. “harmonized average”) is agreed by the Technical Working Group based on the appropriate indicators that they chose. Then, the overall phase is

obtained using the “20 percent rule” (A district is in a phase if 20 percent of the population must be in that Phase or worse). The “20 percent rule” is based on the IPC manual. In the IPC analysis for 2017, however, the analysts applied a “10 percent rule” – the population requiring humanitarian assistance would include the population in Phase 3 or worse in the district if the share of population in Phase 3 or worse is higher than 10 percent.

The final three steps consider the potential effects of the humanitarian assistance if it is very likely to happen, list the key risk factors to monitor and the monitoring period (in Malawi these include maize prices, levels of cross-border trade in maize, and nutrition status), and identify which combination of food availability, access, utilization, and stability are limiting people from being food secure.

Population Requiring Humanitarian Assistance based on IPC results

According to the “20 percent rule”, the population requiring humanitarian assistance includes the population in Phase 3 or worse in the district if the share of population in Phase 3 or worse is higher than 20 percent in that district. However, because some districts have much larger population than others, the IPC analysts in Malawi worried that this method would miss some districts that have a small share of the vulnerable population but have a large absolute vulnerable population in Phase 3 or worse. Therefore, they applied a “10 percent” rule instead. Table 5.7 shows the size of vulnerable population in Phase 3 or worse applying different rules for identifying the size of total vulnerable population for the projection period of October 2017 to March 2018.

Using the original default “20 percent rule” according to the IPC manual, only four districts (Balaka, Chikwawa, Mwanza, and Nsanje) meet the criterion. Some other districts such as Mulanje, that has very large size of vulnerable population (102,472, second largest in Malawi) but has the share smaller than 20 percent because of its large population, was excluded. To deal with this problem, the IPC analysts in Malawi adjusted the criterion to apply the “10 percent rule”. Then, another eight districts fall into the group that requires assistance, and the projected population that require assistance increase from 289,672

to 836,766. However, this adjustment would also include more relatively less severe areas, and some districts with large size of vulnerable population and with large population would still be excluded.

Table 5.7 Integrated Food Security Phase Classification Acute projected food insecurity analysis for the period October 2017 to March 2018

District	Total rural population	Population phase 3 or worse	Share of population in phase 3 or worse, %	Share of national population in phase 3 or worse, %	Original IPC 20% rule	Malawi IPC 10% rule	Our recommendation
Balaka	378,164	83,294	22	8	❖	❖	❖
Blantyre	406,157	69,046	17	7		❖	❖
Chikwawa	557,543	117,065	21	11	❖	❖	❖
Chiradzulu	327,150	39,258	12	4		❖	❖
Chitipa	207,929	0	0	0			
Dedza	745,228	0	0	0			
Dowa	805,018	0	0	0			
Karonga	297,055	14,852	5	1			
Kasungu	831,171	41,558	5	4			❖
Lilongwe	1,510,579	0	0	0			
Machinga	612,759	91,913	15	9		❖	❖
Mangochi	1,017,790	50,889	5	5			❖
Mchinji	609,956	0	0	0			
Mulanje	569,294	102,472	18	10		❖	❖
Mwanza	88,444	22,111	25	2	❖	❖	❖
Mzimba	921,621	36,864	4	4			❖
Neno	163,175	17,949	11	2		❖	
Nkhata Bay	270,325	13,516	5	1			
Nkhotakota	369,246	11,077	3	1			
Nsanje	268,809	67,202	25	6	❖	❖	❖
Ntcheu	581,924	29,096	5	3			
Ntchisi	284,996	0	0	0			
Phalombe	386,293	57,943	15	6		❖	❖
Rumphi	194,853	7,794	4	1			
Salima	407,329	0	0	0			
Thyolo	641,778	89,849	14	9		❖	❖
Zomba	655,534	78,664	12	8		❖	❖
Total	14,110,120	1,043,000	7	100	289,672	836,766	948,128

Source: Author's calculation using IPC result as of August 2017.

An alternative adjustment that we recommend that is based on the “20 percent rule”. This is that if the share of the vulnerable population, i.e., Phase 3 or worse, in a district is larger than the average share of all the districts (3.02 percent this year), the vulnerable population in this district would also be recognized as requiring humanitarian assistance. Compared to the current adjustment, our method would exclude Neno district, which has 11 percent of its population as vulnerable but only has a small absolute number of vulnerable persons in its population of under 18,000. Our method would also include three other districts (Kasungu, Mangochi and Mzimba) that have large vulnerable populations. The current adjustment method (“10 percent rule”) is arbitrary and cannot be applied across countries. In contrast, our method more adequately covers the vulnerable population and also can be applied across countries so that the IPC results can be comparable across them.

Comments on the IPC methodology in Malawi

Because the IFPRI team was not provided access to the IPC online portal of Malawi for this assessment, we are not able to do a more in-depth analysis on the IPC methodology in Malawi. Rather the analysis on the methodology here is based on relevant documents, such as the IPC manual, as well as on the interviews with the key informants, including the IPC core team members. Below are some comments on the IPC approach followed in Malawi.

- IPC classifies the severity of food insecurity on different areas, which can be a good guidance for the humanitarian assistance. HEA, however, only shows the size of affected population.
- IPC uses various indicators including HEA, and the indicators with strong evidence in the contributing factors should be given more weight. In the meantime, the indicators which do not make sense and are not supported by the contributing factors should not be used. This can increase the accuracy of the IPC results.
- IPC provides all the data and the documents used on the online portal. This increases the transparency and is also good for record keeping. On the other hand, some data used in HEA were not well maintained.
- IPC monitors the key risk factors such as maize price and can update the classification if the factors change significantly. HEA does not have such monitoring system.
- IPC is not a food security data collection system or method for directly measuring food insecurity. It does not change anything about the indicators even if those indicators have

some potential problems. This can create some bias in the IPC results if improper indicators are used.

- In the process of summarizing the overall share of population in each phase in the fifth step, the IPC analysts need to summarize the “harmonized averages” based on the contributing factors and the outcomes for each phase. The results may vary based on the judgement of the analysts. The process is unclear and the results can be subjective. Also, this process requires expertise from the analysts, so that good practice and training is necessary for the analysts.
- To include the districts with large vulnerable populations and with small shares of vulnerable population, IPC analysts in Malawi adjusted the “20 percent rule” to “10 percent rule” while calculating the total size of vulnerable population requiring humanitarian assistance. This adjustment seems arbitrary and cannot be applied across countries for comparative purposes.

Improving Malawi Vulnerability Assessment Committee (MVAC) Assessments

Recommendations on MVAC field assessment

- How the data and information collected from the MVAC field assessments is used is not clear, being only briefly described in documents such as the MVAC Operational Guidelines. Our understanding about the sources of those data and information were mainly from the interviews with key informants. Greater clarity is needed in this regard to permit triangulation of data from the MVAC field assessments with other results. Table 5.8 shows an example of how such a triangulation process could be documented in validating MVAC field assessment results.

Table 5.8 Example of a triangulation table for Malawi Vulnerability Assessment Committee field assessment results

	MVAC field assessment results	Other results for triangulation (LIAS, baseline data, and APES)
Sampling method	Not random, worst affected EPAs were chosen according to District Agriculture Development Officer	Simple random sampling, such as used by APES, may show different vulnerability patterns.
Wealth group breakdown	Wealth breakdown results from the villages in Nsanje	Compare to baseline data from Lower Shire Valley
Type of crops and their production, livestock	Maize production results from villages in Nsanje	APES shows a 97 percent reduction in rainfed maize production in Nsanje
Quantified results of source of food or income	Calculated food sources and income results for four wealth groups in Nsanje	Compare to baseline data from Lower Shire Valley

Source: Authors.

- The MVAC assessment teams should increase the coverage of their field visits. The teams currently identify a few badly affected EPAs in a district to visit – two to six, depending on the number of livelihood zones in the district. An underlying assumption is that each EPA can represent a livelihood zone in the district. With potentially significant differences between EPAs, the results of the field assessment might vary from the true situation in the livelihood zone.

However, with limited time and human resources and using the current methodology, it would be very difficult to cover more EPAs and villages. Only with more time and resources – both human and financial – will increased coverage be possible for the MVAC field visits.

- The method of the processing the data obtained through MVAC field assessments is not clear. That data should be processed in a manner that will make it comparable to related information in the baseline data sheet for the LIAS. If such procedures are not standardized, the inferences made for how to respond to quite similar situations of vulnerability can be inconsistent. Moreover, without such information, the data derived from the field assessment cannot be effectively triangulated with other information sources. The field assessment data cleaning and validation procedures should be documented for transparency. The method of cleaning (summarizing based on the average of values excluding the maximum and minimum) was not rigorous.

Recommendations for the Livelihood Impact Analysis Spreadsheet (LIAS)

- A detailed list of the data used in the LIAS and their sources should be produced. Currently, it is not clear which data are from secondary sources, and which are from the MVAC field assessments, especially in the LIAS sheets of “M.” Without this information, it is difficult to corroborate the quality of the data to validate the LIAS results. And the recording keeping of the data used needs to be improved, for example, the files of the maize price projections were not well kept. LIAS results should be updated as newer information, such as the third-round APES crop production estimates, is made available, rather than waiting for updated MVAC field assessments to be done.
- Projected maize prices for use in the LIAS should incorporate additional maize supply factors beyond production alone, like estimates of informal trade, and estimates of supply from private traders.
- Because estimates of the size of the affected population are sensitive to projected maize prices, the MVAC should pay attention to this component of their assessment protocol, strengthening their price projection methods and incorporating significantly more price-based sensitivity analysis into their use of the LIAS.
Because the reference year price is calculated as an average, MVAC should consider using the average of monthly projected maize prices at regional or ADD levels rather than the maximum monthly projected maize price.

Other recommendations regarding MVAC

Two other issues should be noted. First, documentation of the assessments used by MVAC can be done more rigorously. All this documentation should be made available to the public online, including the actual spreadsheets used in past FSAs. This is important, particularly if the independent verification of the assessment could be done by any donor organization.

Secondly, the MVAC is a small agency within a department within the Ministry of Finance. The committee secretariat includes one full-time staff member, plus seasonal support from other staff from

within the department. The salary and operating costs for MVAC are not secure from year to year, being dependent on erratic funding flows from international or regional partners. Despite strong efforts by those involved in MVAC, the professionalism of the committee suffers due to high staff turnover and the related loss of institutional memory. A more stable funding stream is needed for MVAC staff and the operations that they manage.

Recommendations on the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification

- Before the fifth step of the IPC online portal, more details should be provided on how the “harmonized averages” were obtained. In the other words, the process of how the results in the fifth step were obtained based on the various indicators via technical consensus building should be presented.
- Because the process of the technical consensus building based on the contributing factors and outcome elements requires expertise, more training on that process should be provided to the IPC analysts to prepare for the future analysis.
- Instead of changing the “20 percent rule” to the current “10 percent rule”, we can adjust the method of calculating the total size of vulnerable population by adding another rule onto the “20 percent rule”: if the size of the vulnerable population of a district is larger than the average among all the districts, the vulnerable population will also be included in the total size of vulnerable population that require humanitarian assistance.

Conclusions

Although FBS did not directly affect the result of the size of the affected population, it acted as a guiding document for the implementation of the humanitarian response, especially in the early stage. Our analysis showed that the total food deficit can significantly decrease if we change the assumptions used in the 2016 FBS.

The MVAC vulnerability assessment methods, broadly, remain cumbersome for the MVAC members to fully understand, especially for those non-technical members from different organizations. A couple of MVAC members we met did not fully understand the methodology. Further, due to high turnover rates of MVAC members, the methods and procedures for their use are not fully institutionalized. If the current technical advisor for MVAC leaves for another position, there will be a hole to fill and the quality of future assessments, in what may be years of crisis, will suffer. The recent

turnover already caused the loss of part of the LIAS files during the past year, including the price projection files.

The simulation exercises with the LIAS presented here illustrate how small changes in the information used can significantly change the estimates obtained. This highlights how critical the accuracy of the information used is to ultimately determine the accuracy of the MVAC estimates of how many Malawian households are vulnerable to food insecurity. Our sensitivity analysis shows that estimates of the size of the vulnerable population is very sensitive to changes in maize prices. Membership in the MVAC is inclusive and participatory, but this does not mean the numbers produced by the MVAC methodology are accurate and should be accepted without further analysis. Further analysis of the validity of the MVAC vulnerability estimates requires debate among well-informed policy analysts and policy makers. For example, more debates and discussions on the maize price projections were important and necessary last year. This currently is a major missing element in the MVAC process. This lack of discussion on the accuracy and acceptability of the estimates of the size and location of vulnerable populations in Malawi produced under MVAC has major implications for designing and implementing the right level of humanitarian response.

The IPC method takes various indicators, including HEA, into account. In the meantime, using more information and applying a convergence of all available evidence approach based on contributing factors and outcome elements can possibly increase the accuracy of the results. However, the process through which “harmonized averages” could be developed via technical consensus building is unclear, and the results can remain quite subjective. The method analysts used to calculate the total size of vulnerable population requiring humanitarian assistance also needs to be revised. Our recommendations provide opportunities to further improve the IPC process.

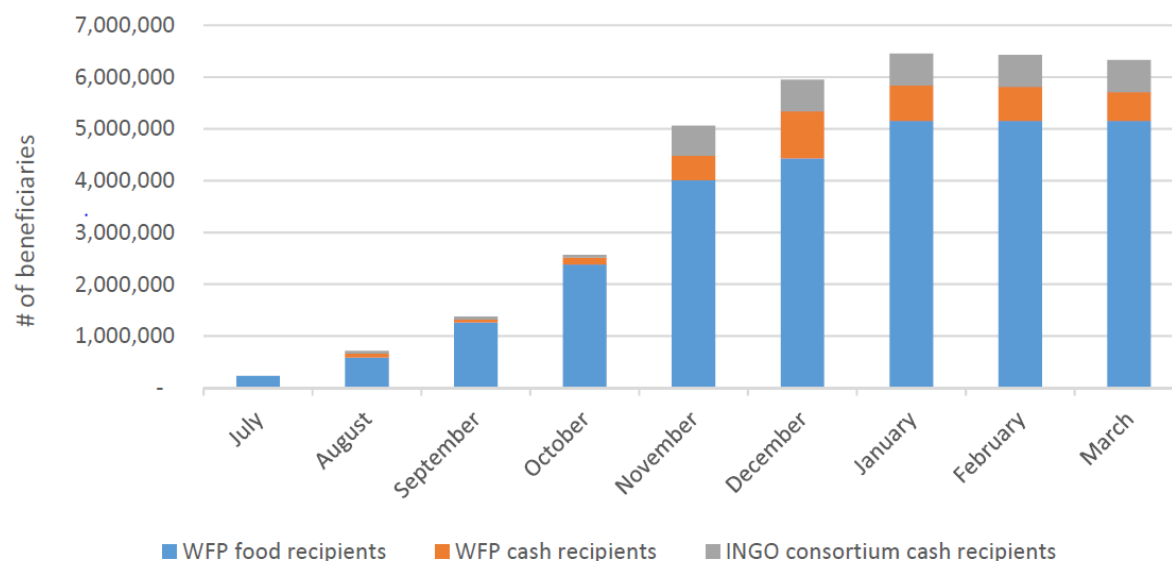
6. MARKET ASSESSMENT AND PRICING ANALYSIS

Various phases of the 2016/17 FIRP relied on market assessments. These assessments were carried out or commissioned by MVAC with the intention of ensuring that the response plan was needed and continued to be appropriate where implemented. In this chapter, we briefly describe the nature of the market interventions during the FIRP, provide an assessment of the MVAC's market assessment reports, and conduct a quantitative analysis of maize price formation in selected district-level markets with particular reference to the impact of food and cash distribution on prices and linkages between maize markets at the district level.

The 2016/17 Food Insecurity Response Programme and the Maize Market

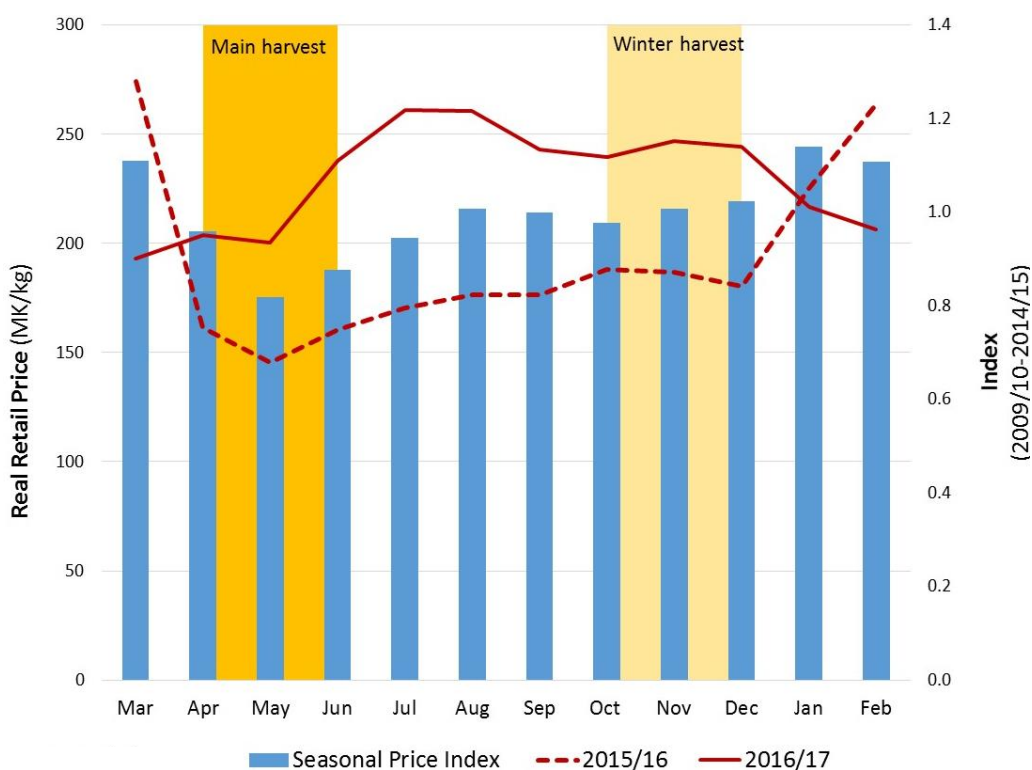
The FIRP was of an unprecedented scale for humanitarian interventions in Malawi and was dominated by in-kind food transfers. As mentioned before, the original MVAC assessment of May 2016 envisaged 6.5 million beneficiaries, of whom 4.7 million would receive in-kind food transfers and 1.8 million would receive cash transfers. This was modified to 6.7 million beneficiaries in October 2016, with in-kind food beneficiaries increased to 5.4 million and cash beneficiaries decreased to 1.4 million. In addition, a hybrid modality involving maize vouchers plus cash for the non-maize component of the ration was introduced from December 2017 onwards. All in-kind food distribution was coordinated by WFP while responsibility for the distribution of cash transfers and maize vouchers was split between WFP and the International NGO (INGO) cash transfer consortium. Figure 6.1 shows the number of beneficiaries by mode of assistance over the entire FIRP implementation period by month.

Figure 6.1 Beneficiaries assisted monthly during the Malawi 2016/17 Food Insecurity Response Programme



Source: WFP 2017b

Figure 6.2 Seasonal price patterns for maize compared to maize prices in 2015/16 and 2016/17 in Malawi



Source: Baulch, Gondwe, and Chafuwa 2018

Note: The seasonal price index was developed from monthly average maize prices (real) collected nationwide over the period 2009/10 to 2014/15.

Figure 6.2 compares monthly retail maize price patterns in real (inflation adjusted) terms during the 2016/17 response with those of the previous year and a seasonal price index based on the preceding five years. Maize prices reached their highest level of MK 260/kg in July and August 2016, and then declined. This is contrary to the usual seasonal price pattern in which maize prices peak during the lean season from January to March before the main maize harvest. For example, real maize prices peaked at MK 274/kg in February 2016.

The private sector's participation in the FIRP began mid-2016, when the major private sector grain traders, e.g., Export Trading Group, Farmer's World, Mulli Brothers, and Rab Processors, started actively procuring maize both locally and from neighboring countries. Most of the 100,000 mt of "local" maize purchased by the National Food Reserve Agency, which manages the Strategic Grain Reserve, and 95,000 mt purchased by ADMARC came from these large private sector traders.¹⁰ These purchases, along with an estimated 85,000+ mt of speculative purchases by the grain trading companies themselves, drove the real maize price up to a seasonally uncharacteristic peak in July and August 2016 (Figure 6.2). At this time, maize in the border town of Mchinji, much of it from cross-border imports, was selling at a MK 35/kg premium over prices in the neighboring Zambian town of Chipata.

Between June and December 2016, ADMARC made several attempts to import substantial volumes of commercial maize from, among others, Zambia, Ukraine, Bulgaria, Mexico, and Argentina using funds obtained from high-interest loans from three Malawian commercial banks. None of the imports came to fruition, with the exception of a 100,000 mt contract with the Zambia Cooperative Federation, which was later split equally with Transglobe Produce Exports Ltd. Less than 5,000 mt of maize were delivered on this contract, which became the subject of both a presidential inquiry and an investigation by Malawi's Anti-Corruption Bureau. The ensuing "Maizagate" investigations led to the sacking of both the Minister of Agriculture, Irrigation and Water Development and the Chief Executive

¹⁰ According to sources familiar with the operations of the National Food Reserve Agency, much of the 100,000 mt procured for the Strategic Grain Reserve (and possibly some of WFP's 'local' procurement) came from informal imports from Zambia despite that country's maize export ban.

Officer of ADMARC in February and April 2017, respectively. While the presidential inquiry was concluded in February 2017, in December 2017 the Anti-Corruption Bureau was still conducting investigations.

Having accumulated substantial stocks, the private sector was unable to sell a substantial portion of these stocks at the high prices they had anticipated to either ADMARC or WFP during the last quarter of 2016. Liquidation of their maize stocks by these firms on the open market combined with continuing unofficial cross-border imports, contributed to falling prices for maize during the pre-harvest lean season in the first quarter of 2017, contrary to the usual seasonal pattern (Figure 6.2). These price trends, along with the extensive nature of the humanitarian response, led FEWSNET to revise downward its rating for central and southern Malawi to “Stressed” (IPC classification 2) in January 2017.¹¹ By March 2017, the average real maize price in Malawi was MK194, which was well-below the peak reached at the height of the lean season in 2016, as well as being a relative price level uncharacteristic of the usual seasonal price pattern.

One of the factors influencing the unexpected decline of real maize prices from November onwards may have been the switch to maize vouchers following the MVAC update of October 2016. This updated assessment had recommended that the number of beneficiaries receiving cash transfers be reduced from 1.8 million to 1.4 million, with a hybrid modality consisting of a voucher for one 50 kg bag of maize plus cash for the remainder of the ration. Consequently, WFP changed its mode of transfer from cash to the hybrid modality in 33 Traditional Authorities (TAs) and to in-kind food only in 18 TAs starting in December 2016. Meanwhile, the INGO consortium signed an agreement with Rab Processors, one of the large grain traders in Malawi, to supply maize in the 51 TAs where the NGOs had first provided cash only from January 2017. These arrangements are reported to have worked relatively smoothly, despite problems with the verification of electronic vouchers in the field and some roads being impassable during the rainy season.

¹¹ The January FEWSNET report also notes that: ‘Were the humanitarian response not present, these areas would experience Crisis (IPC Phase 3) and Emergency (IPC Phase 4) outcomes.’

The MVAC Market Assessment Report – A Critical Review

A careful reading of the report on the market assessment for the 2016/17 FIRP response period that MVAC commissioned in July 2016 reveals several issues of concern with the way the market assessment was done (Msiska 2016). We highlight these here as points of discussion for strengthening future assessments.

The analyses underlying the market integration and storage sections of the report do not adjust prices for inflation. Neglecting to do such adjustments biases the results in favor of finding greater market integration than may really be the case and also exaggerates intra-seasonal variations in food prices.

Both the traders' perceptions reported and the statistical (univariate time series) analysis predicted that the 2016/17 season would see substantial increases in the price of maize and of other staple foods. The price projection presented in the June report suggested that maize prices would exceed MK 250/kg in most areas and reach MK 340/kg in Nsanje during the lean season in late-2016 and early-2017. However, the section of the report on traders' perceptions made no mention of the upward pressure imparted by generalized price inflation, which was 23 to 24 percent per annum at the time the market analysis was being prepared but subsequently slowed. Moreover, while the Holt-Winters (triple exponential smoothing) method used to forecast maize prices allows for an upward trend in prices, changes in the rate of inflation from month to month are not permitted.

Given that high levels of market integration were detected in the market assessment for 2016/17 FIRP, as well as the willingness of private traders to supply more food (response capacity), it is not clear why the market assessment recommended that 73.4 percent of the humanitarian response be in-kind and only 26.6 percent of it be in cash. While the four criteria for the choice between in-kind and cash distributions – accessibility, caseload size, presence of active traders with diverse sources of supply, and storage facilities – are laid out clearly, the relative importance (weights) attached to each of these criteria and the scorings for each TA or district are not spelt out.

The switch during the humanitarian response of 22.8 percent of the cash caseload to in-kind transfers was predicated on 'shaky food source markets', despite the market assessment asserting the

presence of vibrant private traders. While the TAs where this switch was to take place were clearly identified, how ‘shaky’ food markets were defined was not clearly stated. There is also just one mention of a possible switch to a maize voucher system, which was subsequently implemented by the International NGO Cash Transfer Consortium from January 2017 onwards.

At various points in the market assessment, the possibility of informal maize imports from Zambia – which had experienced an above-average harvest in 2016—are mentioned. Yet, there is no subsequent analysis of what impact such imports might have on both food availability and prices in Malawi. Some analysis of relative prices on different sides of the border would have been instructive in determining the likelihood of large unofficial imports of maize from neighboring countries.

Finally, in many of the tables in the market assessment report, there is an overreliance on (presumably unweighted) averages. For example, the June assessment stated that the average distances that traders travelled to source maize and pigeonpea was 33 km and 56 km, respectively, but that it costs almost twice as much per trip to transport maize as it does pigeonpea. Such inconsistencies in the data and analysis need to be addressed.

Pricing Analysis

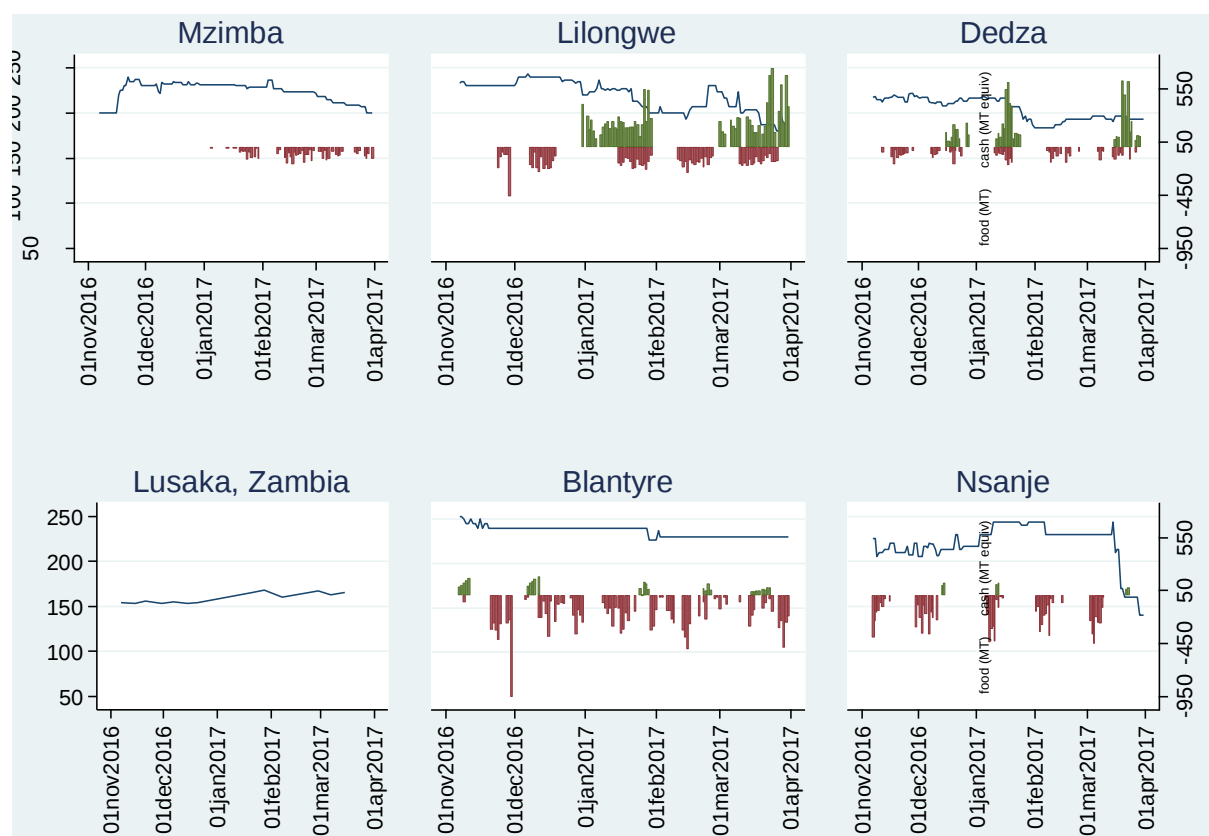
This section presents the results of a quantitative analysis of maize price formation in selected markets for which we have daily maize prices and information on in-kind food distribution and cash transfers during the height of the 2016-17 humanitarian response. It aims to investigate two questions. First, to estimate what impact different modes of humanitarian assistance (food, cash, and vouchers) had on daily maize prices in selected markets in Malawi. Second, we seek to establish the extent to which maize prices in one market influence prices in another market to determine how widespread any price effects of the humanitarian assistance might be.

We used four sources of data covering the period from November 2016 to March 2017. Retail maize price data was obtained from IFPRI’s maize price monitoring in 15 markets covering six days in a week, excluding Sundays. In-kind food distribution data was obtained from the WFP and comprised of

distribution dates, locations, and total volume of in-kind distribution in the districts that overlap with markets covered by IFPRI'S daily maize price monitoring. Cash transfer distribution data was obtained from the INGO consortium, led by Save the Children. The INGO data comprises the actual distribution dates, locations, and total value of cash transfers distributed in the seven districts that overlap with the markets in IFPRI's daily maize price monitoring. Finally, weekly maize prices in Zambia were obtained from the Indaba Agricultural Research and Policy Research Institute (IAPRI) in Lusaka.

As an initial step in answering the first question, we present graphs of maize prices and distribution data in the five districts selected for the FIRP evaluation plus maize prices in Lusaka, Zambia (Figure 6.3). The five Malawian markets all show a clear downward trend in prices between November 2016 and March 2017, while the Lusaka price series shows a slight increasing trend. The brown downward bars show the quantities of maize distributed in each district daily. The green upward bars show the amount of cash transfers distributed in the same districts on a daily basis converted into metric tons at the prevailing market price. Maize vouchers are included in the kind-kind food transfers, while cash distribution include both cash and mobile money. In-kind food distributions were most important in Blantyre, Nsanje and Lilongwe, while cash distributions were most important in Dedza and Lilongwe. In Mzimba, which did not receive any cash distributions despite the initial FIRP plan, food distributions were relatively small and did not start until January 2017. It can also be seen that, except for cash in Lilongwe, food and cash distributions tend to be concentrated towards the end of each month. While there are some instances in which food and cash distributions coincided with significant changes in maize prices (for example, Dedza in the second half of January 2017), it is difficult to graphically distinguish a clear pattern between changes in maize prices and distributions of either food or cash in any of the districts.

Figure 6.3 Daily maize prices, cash and food distribution in selected markets



Source: IFPRI and IAPRI Maize Price Monitoring. WFP and INGO Cash Transfers Consortium.

To investigate the effects of food and cash distribution more rigorously, we estimated an econometric model in which maize prices in one district were regressed on maize prices in another district plus food and cash distributions in the first district.¹² Both today and yesterday's maize price were included to take account of possible lags in price adjustment. The results, presented in Table 6.1, indicate that the volumes of cash and food distributed in the last two days had little percentage impact on daily maize prices. The impact of the food and cash transfers in this table are all very small, and statistically are not significantly different from zero in all cases. These results are robust to several different specifications of the empirical model. Given the scale of 2016-17 humanitarian response in Malawi, this finding is surprising.

¹² To take proper account of the time series properties of the maize price series, an autoregressive distributed lag model was employed. Further details on model specification are available on request.

Table 6.1 Impact of food and cash distributions on maize prices in selected markets, percent change in prices

Market pair	Food	Cash
Chimbiya-Mchinji	-0.01	0.02
Mitundu-Mchinji	-0.01	-0.04
Chimbiya-Mponela	0.01	0.03
Mitundu-Mponela	-0.02	0.03
Chimbiya-Lunzu	0.02	0.00
Nsanje-Chikwawa	0.04	0.02
Chikwawa-Mulanje	0.00	-0.05

Source: Author's estimation

One possible explanation for this finding may be that food in-kind beneficiaries – who were deriving 67 percent of their maize consumption needs from food distribution and another 19 percent from own production (WFP 2017b) – probably had little need to rely on maize purchases. In addition, because in-kind maize transfers were provided along with other commodities (cooking oil and pulses, plus fortified cereals for households with children under two years old and/or pregnant and lactating women), there was less need for MVAC beneficiaries to sell maize in order meet to their non-maize needs. Similarly, those who received maize vouchers after the switch in January 2017, still received cash for their non-maize needs. Since most of the households who received in-kind food transfers or maize vouchers had extremely limited purchasing power, food transfers enhanced their direct entitlements, thereby reducing hunger and saving lives, while having little impact on markets and trade as only a small fraction of the maize distributed was sold.

For cash, which accounted for less than 18 percent of the value of transfers provided in the five districts we examined, the negligible impact of cash distributions is a little easier to understand, especially given the switch to maize vouchers in late 2016 and early 2017. In addition, sharing of cash transfers by many beneficiaries, of which there is some qualitative evidence, will also have diluted the inflationary

impact of cash transfers.¹³ It is also important, however, to note that these price impacts are relative to maize prices in the second market over the last two days and so may miss longer-term price effects.

The second question of linkages between markets requires that we compare how maize prices track one another using selected market pairs. The statistical tests which were performed establish that prices between markets are correlated imperfectly. The correlations between daily maize price changes in selected market pairs presented in Table 6.2 show correlations which are positive and statistically significant for seven out of 10 market pairs. However, these correlations are all less than one, and for the three market pairs (Lunzu-Mzimba, Nsanje-Chimbiya and Nsanje-Lunzu) are statistically not significantly different from zero. Meanwhile the correlations between weekly prices in these five Malawian markets and in Lusaka, Zambia are all less than 0.4.

Table 6.2 Pairwise correlations between maize price changes in selected markets

	Mzimba	Mitundu	Chimbiya	Lunzu	Nsanje
Mzimba	1.000				
Mitundu	0.4419*	1.000			
Chimbiya	0.2598*	0.7917*	1.000		
Lunzu	0.1510	0.7474*	0.8504*	1.000	
Nsanje	0.4943*	0.2753*	-0.0225	0.0864	1.000

Source: Author's estimation; * indicates statistical significance at 5% level

Additional tests show that most of the market pairs exhibit uni-directional linkages except for two market pairs, namely Chimbiya-Mponela and Lunzu-Chimbiya, which exhibit bi-directional linkages. These linkages are visually presented in Figure 6.4. It is noticeable that the direction of most linkages is from the Central to the Southern region.

¹³ See Margolies et al. (2017) for an analysis of sharing during the 2015-16 MVAC in Zomba.

Figure 6.4 Direction of linkages between maize markets



Source: Authors

Although it is not a particularly large market, Figure 6.4 suggests that Chimbiya market near Dedza occupies a strategic position in the price formation process. Chimbiya's importance in the price formation process is also confirmed by interviews with traders in southern Malawi, who state that they regularly procure from Chimbiya rather than nearer wholesale markets (such as Lunzu or Mulanje) because traders in Chimbiya offer more competitive price and will arrange for delivery to locations. This is also indicated by the large and significant correlation coefficients between Chimbiya and other markets in Table 6.2. Mchinji and Mwanza also play important roles in the formation of maize prices. Both are border towns, through which significant, though unquantifiable, flows of maize are known to have entered Malawi during the period of late 2016 and early 2017 (FEWSNET 2017). In contrast, Mzimba

and Nsanje exhibit rather weak linkages with other markets. There is only weak linkage from Mzimba to Mchinji and from Mwanza to Nsanje. Furthermore, no linkage is found between Chikwawa, which received the most in-kind food of all the districts considered here, and any other district market markets. Curiously, maize prices in Mulanje affect prices in Mchinji in central Malawi, but not the neighboring markets of Chikwawa, Lunzu (Blantyre), and Nsanje.

Despite the linkages found between selected markets, overall, we find rather limited evidence of market integration between maize markets within Malawi and even weaker evidence of integration between Malawian maize markets and Lusaka, the main market in Zambia. Thus, it appears that while private traders responded to price differentials, they did not move sufficient quantities of maize to equalize prices in different districts after taking account of transportation costs. This suggests that caution should be exercised in relying on the private sector to deliver food in major humanitarian responses in the future.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on this review of the MVAC-commissioned market assessment report for 2016/17 and pricing analysis, we make the following recommendation for strengthening future market assessments as part of the vulnerability assessment process in Malawi and the design of any humanitarian responses.

- The many underlying, and often unexplained, assumptions used in any market assessment need to be clearly laid out and discussed. An example of this would be the weights given to accessibility, caseload size, presence of active traders with diverse sources of supply, and storage facilities when determining whether to supply food or cash. An understanding of the assumptions is necessary to create a more transparent and inclusive process – one that is less vulnerable to rent-seeking and capture.
- Conclusions offered in the market assessment report also need to be further elaborated. Conclusions, such as switching to in-kind transfers based on “shaky food source markets,” despite asserting the presence of vibrant private trading, are not adequately explained in the report. Leaving conclusions such as this without the necessary elaboration is detrimental to the credibility of the report.
- Greater attention needs to be paid to the distinction between nominal and real, i.e., inflation-adjusted, prices in food market assessments and analyses. Failure to do this may have accentuated fears of maize price rises during the 2016/17 response.
- It should not be assumed that in-kind food distributions have negative impacts on food prices, while cash distributions are inflationary. Contrary to expectations, daily food and

cash distributions during the peak of the 2016/17 response had minimal and statistically insignificant impacts on daily maize prices in the district-level markets we examined.

- Maize price formation is a complex process. Greater attention needs to be paid to identifying linkages between maize markets in different districts before deciding on how food and cash distributions are to be allocated. While the private sector appears to be responsive to price differentials, it may not have the capacity to move sufficient quantities of maize to ensure market integration.

7. OVERALL RECOMMENDATIONS

We have made numerous specific recommendations throughout this report. Here we bring forward important recommendations which we feel will help to improve any future FIRP processes in Malawi.

General recommendations

Improved coordination and accountability

Malawi faced an unprecedented food crisis due to a major drought in the 2015/16 cropping season. Yet, the crisis was effectively addressed through effective senior leadership and swift action with the support and close engagement of Malawi's development partners. However, the review showed that, although leadership and ownership of the problem on the part of the government was demonstrated, there remained substantial room for improving coordination of the humanitarian response efforts at national, district, and community levels.

Even with high-level political support for and ownership of FIRP, the government of Malawi depended on donors and other development partners to design and implement FIRP both operationally and financially. As a result, although the government was in the "driver's seat," development partners took the initiative in most areas of FIRP design, financing, and implementation. Government departments need to be more proactive, even as implementing partners could have engaged more with government agencies.

Financial resources for the FIRP from the donors for the most part were mobilized and managed by the development partners. The recent adverse governance experiences related to public finances in Malawi – the Cashgate scandal – and the consequent limited confidence that the development partners had in government safely handling the funds for the large emergency response were often cited as the reason for channeling funds purely through the development partners. Yet, there remains a need for better transparency in how the funds from donors were mobilized, how much of pledged resources were received, and how those resources were spent by the implementing agencies. Better reporting between the

implementing agencies and the government may partly address this. However, more transparency and accountability is also needed from the implementing partners.

Improved communication and coordination among those involved in the FIRP response is vital to improved functioning. This applies horizontally across ministries and clusters and vertically at both national and district levels. Better coordination will help provide greater efficiency in future responses and enhance inclusiveness and transparency for all stakeholders. To achieve this, improved lines of communication need to be developed that include more standing meetings with strong incentives in place for attending those meetings.

Capacity

While the government may have the logistical capacity to address most emergencies, as shown by the effective response to the 2015/16 floods in southern parts of the country, the humanitarian crisis faced in 2016/17 went beyond that capacity. WFP was given overall responsibility for the response to food insecurity under FIRP. In consequence, most government officials at district level, particularly the District Commissioners, and officials at more local levels were largely left out of the implementation process. The assumptions of likely delays in implementation if local government staff were used and inadequate accountability in government institutions at these levels does not justify the lack of effort by national government agencies and development partners to build their capacity for the next round of emergencies.

Across all facets of the MVAC assessment, capacity deficiencies were observed. These issues are revealed in high staff turnover, a lack of funding, or no training or general level of preparedness. As MVAC depends on information sources generated by other institutions, such as crop estimates, capacity issues associated with these other assessment systems have implications on the quality of MVAC assessments. An integrated approach to capacity development is needed.

Capacity issues are also pervasive vertically throughout the whole process – from national ministries to district officials to implementing officers in the TAs at sub-district level and in communities. Building capacity throughout the process must become a priority to ensure future food insecurity response

programs are more successful and to eventually make them obsolete. Measures towards this would include increasing funding in general and, in particular, for staff training during non-emergency periods and increasing incentives to prevent excessive staff turnover.

Objectiveness and transparency of vulnerability assessment

The vulnerability evaluation methodologies and processes used by government and its partners, especially by MVAC, in estimating the number of affected people and, hence, the level of humanitarian response needs to be subjected to close review and revision.

Many respondents expressed concern that the process of estimating the size and location of the vulnerable population in 2016/17 was subject to political capture. Technical numbers should not be at the mercy of political approval for their use in decision making. Transparency in the development and sharing of the information used in determining where the livelihoods of households are vulnerable and for what reasons is a first step in the improved management of future crises.

Beyond political issues, there are significant technical issues with the assumptions and methodologies underlying the current vulnerability assessment approach used by MVAC. Subjective changes in assumptions can substantially change estimates of the vulnerable population and the magnitude of interventions needed. These processes need to be made more transparent and improved methodologically not only to provide more confidence in the results, but also to provide more accurate results. Innovations are needed in the vulnerability assessment methods used.

The market assessments used in guiding decisions over food versus cash aid interventions also need methodological upgrading. Frequent updates of the market assessments during FIRP implementation are needed to improve resource use efficiency. Regular updates of the MVAC results, more broadly, also are needed during FIRP implementation to take into consideration any new information of relevance.

Although the MVAC methodologies are currently under revision, particularly through the inclusion of the IPC framework, the revised process may not guarantee open and transparent assessment. Institutionally, MVAC needs to be highly independent in its operations. In addition to making

improvements to the methods used, the final annual MVAC estimates on the size and location of vulnerable populations in Malawi generated using those improved methods need to be vetted by an independent technical committee before official release.

From the perspective of the government's Humanitarian Response Committee and the Humanitarian Country Team of the government's development partners, further verification of MVAC figures is required. Accepting the figures released by the government as final may lead to over- or under-estimation of humanitarian needs and resources. While MVAC operates in a participatory manner involving various stakeholders, several MVAC members admitted in interviews that they do not fully understand the methodology and assumptions behind the MVAC vulnerability assessment process. Inclusion and participation does not guarantee accuracy.

Clusters

The cluster approach to FIRP design and implementation needs further debate and discussion. While the Food Security Cluster took a major share of resources due to the nature of the emergency, other clusters received limited resources with which to operate. This has implications for the integrated approach through which FIRP-type interventions could be implemented. The Food Security and Agriculture Clusters, for example, were split and coordinated by two different ministries, and implementation of integrated activities, particularly in developing resilience, suffered as a result.

The coordination of activities among and within clusters has also been a challenge. For example, in the case of acute malnutrition, issues related to severe acute malnutrition were the responsibility of UNICEF under the Nutrition Cluster, and those related to moderate acute malnutrition were the responsibility of WFP under the Food Security Cluster. Such inter-cluster interactions and coordination calls for greater intervention of local government officials to coordinate action at community and district levels, while also raising questions on the value of the cluster approach for FIRP implementation.

Planning and implementation

General communication among the implementing partners, government agencies, and beneficiaries needs to be improved. This includes improving the transparency of the MVAC assessment, but also communicating better regarding delays to implementation, changes in the food rations, and improving the feedback mechanisms from beneficiaries. Better communication to the public in affected zones regarding what aid is to be provided and how the overall process will run will help to avoid political capture by local elites. A major cause of the dissatisfaction with the FIRP implementation expressed by beneficiaries in FGDs stemmed from the fact that the local chiefs are the gatekeepers of knowledge on FIRP for the community. Expanding and improving communication channels will destroy this monopoly and encourage more effective distribution of FIRP aid.

Beneficiary targeting at the community level was problematic for the clusters. Targeting, by its nature, will be contentious, as it involves excluding some community members from receiving benefits. While recognizing that some negative opinions on the quality of FIRP targeting processes are a consequence of the fact that there will be losers in any targeting exercise, several informants reported that the community-level targeting processes were not completely transparent and inclusive of the opinion of all stakeholders. As a result, they were not always effective in identifying the households most in need of assistance. Reasons for this were varied, but often boiled down to two factors: a lack of funding and insufficient time. Targeting processes were often rushed and follow-up for verification was often constrained by a lack of funding. Therefore, more time and funding needs to be allotted to the targeting process. Otherwise, past challenges related to targeting will only repeat themselves in the future.

Managing food markets during emergencies and beyond

Managing food markets during emergencies requires a strong market and price information system that is reliable and generates evidence for effective decision making on food policies and programs. In the context of emergency and in the context of resilience building, the market information system needs to be streamlined and coordinated by a single agency. The data should be made available on a regular basis and

any decision making that follows be based on transparent and validated analytical approaches. It should not be assumed that in-kind food distributions have negative impacts on food prices, while cash distributions are inflationary. Contrary to expectations, daily food and cash distributions during the peak of the 2016/17 FIRP had minimal and statistically insignificant impacts on daily maize prices in the district-level markets we examined.

Strengthening early warning systems

Developing effective institutional capacity to provide warning of impending disasters requires mobilizing all aspects of disaster assessment, including MVAC, under DoDMA. Transparency and accuracy in assessing which households in the population are needy can help in developing interventions that are more cost effective and directly linked to resilience building.

Human capital, livelihoods, and social protection

The role played by the Nutrition Cluster during the FIRP provides an example of how existing institutional structures could be used to expand assistance during emergency operations with additional capacity building for specific needs. Although there is room for improvement and improved coordination, the joint efforts of the Nutrition and Food Security Clusters in treating and preventing acute malnutrition provides an example of the multisector coordination needed in building resilience.

Natural resources and sustainability

The Complementary Productive Asset Creation activities implemented as part of FIRP provide a potential base for a larger productive social safety net program that could prevent hunger and starvation in the short run, while building resilience of the food system in the long run. While further refinements are needed, the Complementary Productive Asset Creation activities, along with modifications to the Social Cash Transfer Programme (SCTP), could provide opportunities for the sustainable use of natural resources and their management contributing to more resilient food systems in Malawi in the long run.

Specific Recommendations for Action

Considering these findings, we propose the following key recommendations, classified based on the timeframe for implementation in the short term, medium term, and long term:

Short-term recommendations (1–2 years)

- Government departments engaged in FIRP need to be more proactive in their roles, and implementing partners should be more engaging with government entities at national, district, and community levels. Accountability for the resources mobilized and used under FIRP by the implementing partners is an important immediate step to build trust between the government and the development partners.
- Information sources used for making decisions related to impending disasters needs to be made more transparent and widely shared. Needs assessment after disaster requires technical independence and critical review by a group of independent experts constituted jointly by government and development partners.
- Clearly define the respective roles for each of the clusters involved in any humanitarian response and specify the avenues for communication between them. This should be done as part of the process of designing and strengthening the disaster management system for Malawi well before any emergency begins. The clusters should be linked to the relevant sector coordination mechanisms to promote linkages between humanitarian response and development, which are necessary for building resilience.
- Within each cluster, well before any emergency begins, the cluster members should define and document the respective roles each will play in responding to future emergencies, specifying the avenues of communication between them.
- Communication among the clusters should be strengthened with formal inter-cluster coordination meetings at both district and national levels. Communication technology should be leveraged to provide more avenues for coordination—without sufficient communication, coordination will not follow. This could be achieved through strengthening of the district Civil Protection Committees.
- Strengthen the role of Civil Protection Committees in high risk districts to support the process of targeting and beneficiary registration, and distribution of emergency assistance should be an immediate priority.
- With frequent emergencies in the Central and Southern regions, coupled with increasing vulnerability, a systematic, unified and coordinated targeting methodology for the different safety nets and social protection interventions should be developed and implemented. To learn lessons for guiding targeting in future crises, appraisals should be made at the end of any humanitarian response of the errors of inclusion and exclusion in targeting beneficiaries.
- Ongoing triangulation of the MVAC field assessment results with other data relevant for identifying vulnerable populations and implementing the humanitarian response should be formalized and documented. Validation of the MVAC field assessment results would strengthen their contribution to guiding the design and implementation of humanitarian response activities. As the principal information node for future humanitarian responses to crisis, the MVAC should have terms of reference that explicitly include continual

evaluation of all new information relevant to its vulnerability assessments as it becomes available. Continual evaluation would ensure a more robust understanding of the evolution of crises.

- The underlying and often unexplained assumptions used in the MVAC market assessments need to be clearly described and discussed. Such documentation is necessary to create a more transparent and inclusive process, and one that is less vulnerable to rent-seeking and accusations of political interference in the design and implementation of humanitarian responses. Criteria used for needs assessment process through MVAC and for targeting of the households during interventions should be more integrated.
- Funding should be better distributed among the seven clusters that implemented the FIRP. While the Food Security Cluster is quite clearly a priority in any emergency food crisis, the lopsided funding it received in the 2016/17 FIRP led to significant funding deficits in the other clusters, severely hampering their ability to operate at scale and to contribute to building the food security and livelihood resilience of beneficiary households.
- Market information system needs to be revived in a coordinated manner for collecting, processing, and effectively using reliable markets and prices data and information of managing food markets during emergencies and in normal years.
- The Farm Input Subsidy Programme should be more closely integrated in its design into social safety net programs.

Medium-term recommendations (2–5 years)

- The coordination of FIRP activities among government departments, the development partners, and the implementation agencies and among the seven clusters in the preparation, design, and implementation of activities was deficient. Improved coordination requires better governance and accountability at all levels. In designing and strengthening the disaster management system for Malawi, attention must be paid to ensuring improved quality of interaction and communication among those involved in humanitarian response and instilling a greater sense of responsibility for the decisions and actions taken and resources used in responding to crises.
- While recognizing the urgency in providing assistance to those in need, more time needs to be allocated for targeting the response. Timelines are rushed in emergency situations, but poor targeting can result in more harm than good. Allowing sufficient time to design and communicate the protocols for the targeting of the intervention will ensure greater accuracy and effectiveness. Likewise, to ensure that the most good is done, more funding needs to be dedicated to verification and monitoring of the needs of affected populations as the crisis progresses. Staff involvement from the government departments at the national and district levels should be part of a medium and longer-term effort to build their capacity so that they will be better positioned to effectively manage the implementation of future responses to similar humanitarian crises.
- The MVAC market assessment reports are primarily descriptive. Stronger, actionable conclusions also are required from these market evaluations. Such reports are of limited value if the implications of the findings for the design and scale of any humanitarian response are not elaborated upon.
- New feedback mechanisms should be developed that are better suited to the needs of communities and current ones need to be improved. This includes ensuring toll free lines

are operational early in the activities. Only if the residents in beneficiary communities can easily and effectively provide feedback to the agencies involved in the humanitarian response can those agencies know of any local-level challenges and beneficiary concerns in a timely and accurate manner. In addition, greater efforts are needed in providing information to beneficiaries of the humanitarian response on their rights as beneficiaries.

- Scale up the Social Cash Transfer Programme (SCTP) as a means for vertical and horizontal expansion to respond to emergencies. The Complementary Productive Asset Creation program should be scaled up with improved monitoring and linkages as a pilot for future safety net programming.
- Greater attention needs to be paid to identifying linkages between maize markets in different districts before deciding how food and cash distributions are to be allocated between them. While the private sector appears to be responsive to price differentials, it may not have the capacity to move sufficient quantities of maize to ensure market integration.
- Disaster risk management should be mainstreamed into sector activities including allocation of resources for mitigation and preparedness.
- The government should strengthen the National Disaster Preparedness and Relief Fund as a means for mobilization and coordination of resources.
- With droughts becoming more frequent due to climate change impacts, there is need to strengthen early warning mechanisms to predict, mitigate, prepare for and trigger emergency responses. In the context of drought, a shift in the design of responses away from treating the consequences of drought and toward a focus on mitigation measures is needed.

Long-term recommendations (5–10 years)

- While the government demonstrated political ownership and some effective leadership during FIRP design and implementation, the capacity of government institutions to fully implement a large-scale humanitarian response program needs to be improved. Without such skills and resources in place, the government of Malawi will be unable to take on greater responsibility in implementing future emergency responses on the scale of the 2016/17 FIRP and will remain significantly reliant on its development partners.
- More analysis on maize price projections should be carried out by MVAC as part of its market assessments. MVAC should not simply use FEWSNET maize price projections. Real-time price monitoring is also necessary, drawing on existing data sources, such as from MoAIWD. When there are large deviations between the projected maize price for a future point in time and the actual maize price realized at that time, MVAC should conduct an updated maize price projection analysis and revise the results in LIAS. The results of such updated analyses should be used to revise estimates of the size of the vulnerable population and the form of assistance they require.
- Food Market and policy institutions such as Agricultural Development and Marketing Corporation (ADMARC), National Food Reserve Agency, and the MoAIWD need effective coordination of their information and evidence for policy interventions. Systemic capacity building is needed to make them more transparent and less influenced by conditions of political economy.

- Stronger institutions that forewarn impending disasters, and design and implement disaster intervention programs are needed. DoDMA and the related ministries need capacity strengthening in both for mainstreaming emergency operations and for resilience building in the long run.

8. CONCLUDING REMARKS

This report has provided an assessment of the quality of the implementation of the 2016/17 FIRP in Malawi. This considers nearly all facets of the response from its political inception through targeting to implementation and monitoring. There were many important successes in the FIRP responses, notably the historic amount of aid delivered in a timely manner to food insecure households.

However, as noted, there were also many missed opportunities that provide room for further analysis and improvement. These include opaque methodologies, significantly deficient capacity, poor coordination, and political-economy issues, all of which hampered the effectiveness of the program. We have provided recommendations for addressing these issues and improving future food insecurity response programs. We believe that these recommendations provide a strong base for action on the part of stakeholders who seek to build a more resilient Malawi, one in which the recurring shocks that the country experiences do not result in a sharp and persistent decline in the welfare of such a large share of the population.

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