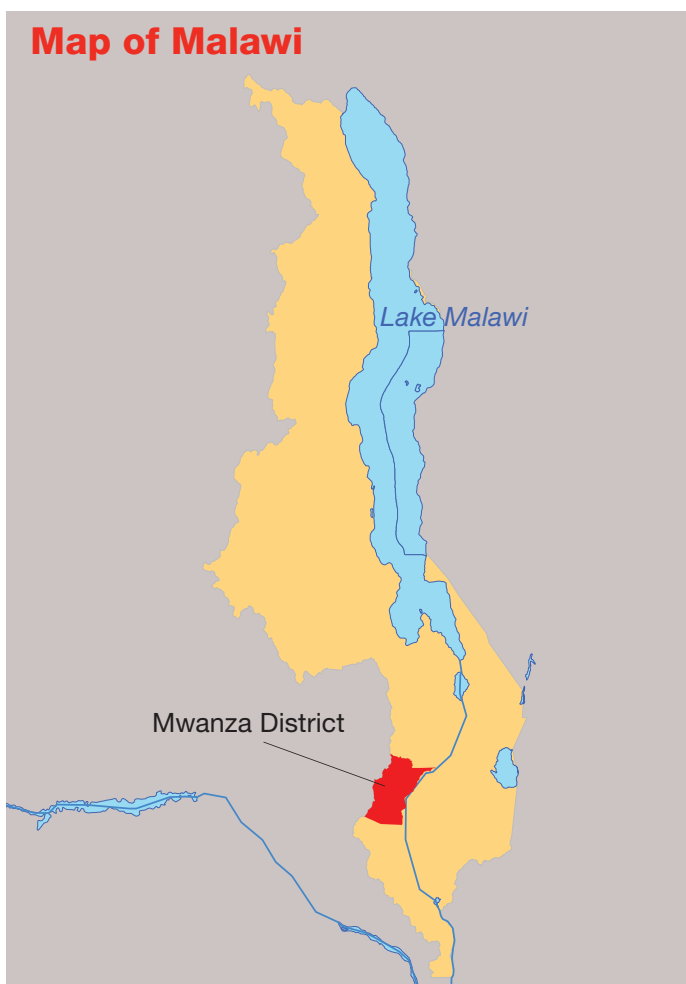




A diversified approach to fighting food insecurity and rural poverty in Malawi



Malawi: Facts and Figures

- Population: **13.1 million**
- Human development index ranking: **164 out of 182**
- HIV and AIDS prevalence: **12 per cent**
- Life expectancy at birth: **48.3 years for males and 51.4 years for females**
- Under-five mortality rate: **112 per 1000 live births in 2010**
- Poverty: **74 per cent of population live below 1.25 US dollars a day**
- Malnutrition: **47.8 % height for age for under fives**

Malawi: country context

Malawi is one of the world's poorest countries, ranking 164 out of 182 in the 2010 Human Development Index. However, over the past few years the country has made tremendous efforts towards eradicating extreme poverty by increasing food production. Approximately 74 per cent of its population still find themselves living below the income poverty line of 1.25 US dollars a day and 90 per cent below the two US dollars a day threshold. The proportion of poor is highest in rural areas of the southern and northern parts of the country. The most common shocks are weather-related, such as crop failure and increases in the price of food. Additionally, the country's 12 per cent HIV prevalence rate has had detrimental effects on household food security.

Agriculture is the mainstay of both national and household economy. Efforts by the government to strengthen food production in Malawi have somewhat maintained the sector's dualistic character, comprising both smallholders and estates. Over 90 per cent of the rural population still survives on rain-fed small-scale farming, usually characterized by low yields due to droughts. Drought, floods and inflation have exposed a large part of the population to food insecurity. Lack of diversified rural farming has also contributed to high cases of stunted growth.

Malawi Red Cross Society's integrated food security programme

The Malawi Red Cross Society introduced an integrated foods security programme in 2011 in order to contribute to the government's national strategy on food security. The National Society has been implementing food security projects for over a decade, particularly under programmes which are aimed at supporting households and community-food production for people living with HIV and children orphaned by AIDS. The programmes implemented food security projects by also addressing issues around sustainable livelihoods, water and sanitation, community-based health care, and HIV and AIDS awareness raising activities. The aims of the community-based project were to improve food diversity, reduce malnutrition and increase income generation.

The integrated food security programme takes into account lessons learned from previous experiences. "In the process of implementing the food security projects, we learned that although availability of maize had increased, there was still an high levels of unexplained malnutrition among children under the age of five. In addition some households reported lack of dietary requirements," said Joseph Ulaya, the disaster management coordinator for Malawi Red Cross Society.

"Based on this observation, we diverted from the common practice where other players distribute the same type of food, especially maize seed as a way of increasing food production. We learned that such an approach, as much as it increases maize production, has serious negative effects. Firstly, it saturates the market with the same type of food and as a result people are forced to sell the maize at much lower prices in a desperate bid to raise money to buy other foodstuffs. They can not survive on eating maize alone and they also need to balance their diet. Secondly, the main objective of any food security project should not only be limited to ensuring availability of food for consumption at

the household level, but to also build the long-term and sustainable capacities for vulnerable households,” said Mr. Ulaya.

It is this understanding that has informed the new strategy of including crop diversification, a variety income generation projects, animal husbandry, and the promotion of small-scale irrigation. This was designed to cater for household nutritional requirements, particularly for people living with HIV and establishing a local economy where people can trade different products within their localities.

The agriculture project in Mwanza

As part of its efforts to compliment the government’s food security strategy, the Malawi Red Cross Society introduced one of its projects in the Mwanza district. The district, which is located on the border with Mozambique, has a population of 140,000 and approximately 29,358 families who depend on farming. The town where most government services are centralized is also a busy market town for local agricultural produce as well as distribution market for commercial products and processed foods, such as maize meal. The agricultural economy for many years has depended on maize farming and citrus fruits, as Mwanza is one of the few areas in the country where the climate is favourable for the growth of such crops. However, for over a decade production has been falling due to droughts exposing many families to hunger.

The Malawi Red Cross Society has been working in Mwanza for over a decade mainly focusing on response to HIV and AIDS and children orphaned by AIDS. In 2009, recognizing that while HIV and AIDS remained a key challenge in this border district, there was an increase in the number of people facing food insecurity. As a leading humanitarian agency in the country, the Malawi Red Cross Society decided to expand its food security activities, which has previously been embedded in the National Society’s HIV and AIDS programme. This was influenced by knowledge that most households who are food insecure share common socio-economic, agro-ecological and demographic characteristics. Households vulnerable to food insecurity are those most vulnerable to environmental degradation, HIV and AIDS and climate change. The Malawi Red Cross Society’s food security approach has largely focused on emergency and long-term interventions, therefore those affected by HIV and AIDS remained part of the core target group. The project in the Mwanza District covers Traditional Authority Kanduku, within Mwanza Central Constituency.

Project goal:

To reduce food insecurity of vulnerable households and vulnerable communities to disasters and those affected by HIV in the Mwanza District by 2012.

Objectives:

- Improve and increase balanced and diversified agricultural production of food and cash crops by 25 per cent through small-scale irrigation to meet the food requirements of 1000 households by 2012.
- Build the capacity of 1,800 targeted households to meet their food security needs and improve their economic status by 2012.
- Increase household income of 400 vulnerable households by 25 per cent by 2012.

Methodological approach

The Malawi Red Cross project is built on a number of methodological and conceptual frameworks. It is community driven and participatory, built on the previous HIV and AIDS programme structures. Departing from traditional mode of intervention, communities organize themselves into groups and identify projects that are both sustainable and viable within their context. The Malawi Red Cross Society provides start-ups with farming inputs and arranges regular visits to the projects, including arranging technical visits by agriculture extension officers. Its team of volunteers also play a vital role in the day-to-day management and monitoring of project activities, including ensuring the involvement of men and women in the projects. Monitoring visits include checking on progress and recording data, obtaining feedback from the communities until the harvesting period. The project builds on existing local capacities such as springs for watering the gardens. That combined with high temperatures and fairly fertile soils makes a good combination for a second farming season, particularly where rain-fed farming has recurrently failed due to droughts or floods. In addition, Mwanza offers a vibrant market for agriculture produce; most people in the rural communities depend on barter trading amongst themselves. The project targets the transient poor (those with the physical capability but lacking productive resources), the vulnerable (those that have been subject to adverse shocks) and the very poor HIV and AIDS affected households who have little resources and require long-term support. The project will reach out 1,800 vulnerable households in the Mwanza District.

The Mwanza project model

The Malawi Red Cross Society's Mwanza agriculture project aims to achieve five key project outcomes which include increasing food availability and access; promotion of health living and balanced diet; economic empowerment and sustainable development; promoting local trade and exchange; and environmental management skills. In order to achieve these, the Malawi Red Cross Society has established seven interconnected project activities that are scattered within the same localities. This is to ensure easy facilitation of trade within the Red Cross projects where maize, vegetable and animal husbandry

“Nothing brings happiness than having food”

Cecilia insist that her life and that of her family has changed a lot since becoming a member of Kanthunkama small-scale irrigation scheme in Mwanza, that is being supported by the Malawi Red Cross Society. The irrigation projects allows community members to grow maize and vegetables, harvests are then shared among members.

“Nothing brings happiness to life than being in a maize project, especially in year where people did not harvest enough due to drought,” she say. She is among the founders of the group which comprise of 11 members.

“The past few years have been hard for us as the rains were erratic. Most of the time we would not harvest enough or at all. Since the beginning of the Red Cross project, we know that if we do not harvest from rain-fed cropping, we will rely on the garden project for both food and money.”

“For me the most important thing is to be able to feed the family and keep my children's dreams alive. They love education a lot and this project allows me to raise enough money to pay for their school requirements such as fees, uniforms and books. I am also able to provide enough food for the family.”

“Last year we had a good harvest from the garden. We kept some for family consumption and sold the surplus.”

farmers can economically trade and exchange produce. The first phase of the projects starts with the provision of a start-up agricultural input package which includes a range of items such as appropriate seeds, goats and pigs, tools, irrigation equipment, fertilisers and chemicals. This is combined with community-based education on small-scale irrigation, soil and water conservation. Following these lessons, community and family-based fishery ponds and gravity powered irrigation schemes have been built with the help of the Malawi Red Cross Society. During the second phase, communities with the facilitation of the Red Cross share knowledge on nutrition, balanced diet and ways of food preservation and processing. Linked to this, are community-based seed/grain banks and promotion of vegetable gardens and fruit tree seedlings. Through such initiatives communities learn how to preserve seeds and vegetables from their harvest for future use. The third phase is interconnected to phase one and two. Families and communities involved in animal husbandry and fishery projects depend on grain and vegetable growers to supplement their



Increasing food availability and access in Malawi.

Fish ponds in Malawi. The harvested fish are shared among members and the surplus is sold to raise cash.



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stock feeds, while the former will also rely on the later for protein supply. As the different projects trade and exchange produce, they have access to more than just food for family consumption but cash to buy and pay for other family households needs.

Challenges:

Malawi experienced very high inflation and fuel and foreign currency shortages which affected programme implementation in the last two years. Prices of farming inputs kept escalating and affected the budgets. In order to minimize disruption, the Malawi Red Cross Society, where possible, procured some of the requirements in abundance from local markets near the projects to cut on fuel costs. These challenges also caused delays in the disbursement of funds, and some activities were postponed. The success of the project has attracted more people, particularly those affected by droughts.



Vegetables from Red Cross gardens are used for family food or sold at local markets.

Project impact to date

For a two-year project, it is not always easy to record impact immediately, but because the project built on previously existing structures, it was possible to assess its impact.

- The project increased food availability and access beyond expectation. The target was to contribute to food security by 25 per cent but data from the field suggests that for some households, food availability is as high as 100 per cent.
- The income base for farmers has improved through the sale of their produce which has enabled them to take care of their household requirements. For instance, those involved in fish farming have been able to harvest enough fish for both consumption and sale. The proceeds from the sale are used to invest in either new ponds in order to multiply their income or towards other household requirements such as paying school fees for children, while others reported that they bought cattle.
- Mushroom production farmers have witnessed an increase in demand as it has added to dietary requirements. Mushroom is usually in short supply while the demand is high, especially during this summer season. Groups that started earlier such as Hau, Mgango and Tikondane have already started sharing profits which are distributed after every sale. harvest.
- In the absence of a nutrition survey, it is not possible to ascertain to what extent malnutrition has decreased, but it can be noted that the project has changed the eating habits for most people involved in the projects. There is an increased awareness of the need for a balanced diet and the availability of fish, mushroom, vegetables and meat has made it possible for the communities to practice balanced diet. It is envisaged that this will contribute to a reduction in malnutrition especially for children under the age of five.
- Communities involved in income generating activities were taught on how to manage their income, by investing it in a revolving fund – either by loaning it to group members or re-investing it in other projects.



Malawi Red Cross Society staff provides technical support to farmers.



Vegetable and maize growers provide feed to the animal husbandry farmers.



Women's involvement has been key to the success of the projects.

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- Those involved in small-scale irrigation schemes are making plans to expand their cultivation areas, because rain-fed planting has become unreliable, therefore they find it viable to invest in summer cropping.
- The involvement of more women has made it possible to reduce malnutrition among children under the age of five. Currently about 68 per cent of the members are women, with three groups being headed by women. The membership of two of these groups is made up of women alone.
- The intensification of data gathering and record tracking mechanisms has improved project management.



The bee project is a source of income for Malawi Red Cross Society farmers.

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Finnish Red Cross



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