

## Lifestyle and Poverty in Malawi

Malawi is a landlocked country located in South-eastern Africa. The current population of Malawi is around 19.7 million people<sup>1</sup>, with most of its population residing in rural areas. Malawi is considered one of the poorest countries in the world despite its efforts in development. Malawi is an economy built on agriculture with its main exports being tobacco, tea, and sugar, making more than a third of its population household farmers<sup>2</sup>. Since it's an agriculture based economy, Smallholder farmers make up more than 80% of the population “but only 13% of agricultural output is sold by Malawian family farms, highlighting the sustenance oriented nature of the countries' smallholders”<sup>3</sup>. Farmers grow their own food to survive which leaves many “vulnerable to external shocks, particularly climate shocks”<sup>4</sup>. Low productivity in agriculture, and lack of diversification in production in addition to a growing population has contributed to great poverty in Malawi. The population in Malawi suffers from malnutrition, inadequate sanitation, poor education, and lingering poverty.

Households in rural Malawi are made up of 4.5 people on average. The life expectancy in Malawi is 64 years. A typical house in rural Malawi is built using local materials such as water, mud and mud bricks for the walls. The roofs are made using poles, bamboo, grass and reeds. 85% of households are owner occupied. The houses often lack a stable foundation, running water and electricity. Almost half the households uses pit latrines while 6% have no facilities at all<sup>5</sup>. In addition to limiting development, lack of electricity results in an increase in environmental degradation. This is because around 75% of Malawian households use wood and charcoal in order to cook food<sup>6</sup>. This has contributed to deforestation as well as health issues as a result of indoor burning of wood to cook. Total survival minimum expenditure basket in Malawi including both food and non-food items such as fuel wood, milling soap for laundry costs 44 dollars for an entire family per month<sup>7</sup>. More than a third of Malawi's population are smallholder subsistence farmers which grow maize, groundnuts, cassava, sweet potato and rice<sup>8</sup> on whatever small land they have. Most of these farmers attracted small scale traders in rural remote areas<sup>9</sup>. Additionally, they sell maize which they don't consume to other households. However, poor soil, erratic rainfall and dry spells have contributed to crop failure. In a documentary called Village in a Hotspot, Chief Kambudzi, a farmer by profession works to prepare his farm for rain<sup>10</sup>. But due to the erratic rainfall, it is unclear whether he will be able to grow his crops. Near his village was a river where they used to grow crops, however due to the dry spells, the river now runs dry. One of the villagers explains saying “Rain used to start in october and end in april, now even if it the rain starts in october, it stops completely in february”<sup>11</sup>, meanwhile it was “November, and theses no sign of rain in the sky”<sup>12</sup>. This makes it difficult for farmers to earn a living as well as put food on their table. Previously, when rainfall failed them, villagers would resort to selling firewood, however they no longer have that option as the village chief forbade them to do so in order to restore the forest. This was because when they cut those trees the soil lost humidity and its fertility, and as a result “we lost the basis of our livelihoods”<sup>13</sup>. This is the typical struggle of a Malawian farmer. Moreover, climate change and climate related shocks contribute greatly to the increase in poverty, droughts and floods. According to Ganizani a Malawian Farmer as the rainfall patterns changed, “The floods and dry spells quickly resulted in dwindling yields, leading to food shortages and subsequently taking us into extreme poverty”<sup>14</sup>. Similarly, in villages like khulungira, where there is no irrigation and changing rainfall patterns, food supplies begin to dwindle and households are forced to suffer hunger seasons from December to February<sup>15</sup>.

Rural Malawians spend 80% of their expenditure on Food. The average Malawian diet consists heavily of maize, potatoes, cassava, beans and cereals. Malawi remains a producer of abundant supplies of Maize as it provides around 70% of a Malawians calorie intake. Similarly, foods such as Cassava and potatoes are prominent in diets due to their low costs. On the other hand, typical Malawian families rarely eat meat, chicken and eggs since they are more

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/malawi-population/>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.google.com/search?q=main+exports+in+malawi&ocq=main+exports+in+malawi+&aqs=chrome..69j57j0j22j30j7j0j39j0j2\\_3421j0j7&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8](https://www.google.com/search?q=main+exports+in+malawi&ocq=main+exports+in+malawi+&aqs=chrome..69j57j0j22j30j7j0j39j0j2_3421j0j7&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.fao.org/3/i8912en/i8912EN.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/malawi/overview>

<sup>5</sup> <https://malawi.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/2018%20Malawi%20Population%20and%20Housing%20Census%20Main%20Report%20281%29.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2017/dec/13/malawi-power-cuts-national-blackouts-poor-hungry>

<sup>7</sup> [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/WFP\\_MEB%20Monitoring\\_30June\\_Round30.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/WFP_MEB%20Monitoring_30June_Round30.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.new-ag.info/en/country/profile.php?a=2488>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.future-agricultures.org/blog/do-farmers-benefit-when-they-sell-to-small-scale-traders-in-the-rural-market-in-malawi/>

<sup>10</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qjb\\_bRWthm0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qjb_bRWthm0)

<sup>11</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qjb\\_bRWthm0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qjb_bRWthm0)

<sup>12</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qjb\\_bRWthm0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qjb_bRWthm0)

<sup>13</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qjb\\_bRWthm0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qjb_bRWthm0)

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.mountainresearchinitiative.org/news-content/africa/addressing-climate-change-poverty-and-flooding-in-malawi>

<sup>15</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_641vhviW10](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_641vhviW10)

expensive. The minimum expenditure basket is based on the needs, behaviors, and preferences of Malawian households. For the average central rural Malawian household with a size of 4.5, the minimum food expenditure basket per month is 31,283 Malawian Kwacha<sup>16</sup>. This means that a household would spend 38.58 dollars per month, and around 1.286 dollars per day. That is assuming they are able to afford luxuries such as fish and eggs for that month. In a documentary following Memory, a teenager living in rural Malawi, it is clear that their family's food consumption consists of mostly starchy food, such as potatoes for breakfast, and Maize porridge for lunch. According to Memory they "rarely eat eggs, meat or milk because they are so expensive"<sup>17</sup>. Although maize and other starchy foods prominent in Malawian diets are high in carbohydrates, they are also low in vitamins, proteins and minerals. This means that the average Malawian reaches the adequate calorie-intake needed, while lacking consumption of important nutrients at larger amounts. Additionally, food security in Malawi is measured by a Malawians harvest and access to Maize<sup>18</sup>. This puts emphasis on the quantity rather than quality of food consumed. This lack of diversification in dietary habits and disregard for quality of food has resulted in malnutrition, disease and food insecurity in Malawi. Around 66% of Malawians in rural areas were considered to have "low quality, variety, quantity and frequency of food consumption"<sup>19</sup>. Some families lack sufficient food for their kids. According to James a boy in Malawi, when he comes "back from school, sometimes my home doesn't have food to eat, so it's very hard to study"<sup>20</sup>. This therefore, impacts their ability to perform in school. James explains saying "If I had a constant meal schedule, I feel like I would be very happy, I can work extra hard on my education and I can also live a healthy life. I can't concentrate at school because sometimes, I get very hungry and I have low energy"<sup>21</sup>. As a result, malnutrition and weak immune systems are common in Malawi.

Education is an essential aspect of development. Educational opportunities in Malawi are limited by poverty. Schools in Malawi lack materials, teachers, and the appropriate facilities for a good education. Although primary education has been free since 1994, secondary education remains costly for the poor population, leaving many unable to attain it. While primary enrollment is at around 98%, completion of primary school is only 77% and enrollment in secondary school remains very low at 15% of the population<sup>22</sup>. This has a significant impact on socio-economic development in Malawi. Since the free primary education program has been implemented, many still do not complete their primary education. A major factor is the exclusion of additional education materials in order to send children to school since many families cannot afford adequate clothing, and supplies. Additionally, many families rely on their children to help with household chores and farming. In the documentary following Memory, a teenage girl in rural Malawi, it was clear the struggles Malawians had to face in their daily life. She, like many other girls, has had to miss years of education in order to work in the field and market so that she can earn enough money for her family to eat<sup>23</sup>. After years away from school she decided to go back and continue her primary education knowing that she might not make it to high school, since her family can't afford to pay for herself and her siblings. Therefore, she considers dropping out after primary school in order to earn money to support her sibling's education by working on the fields with her parents. Similarly, many families are reluctant to send their kids to school as they help with chores and earning a living. In an interview with Chalizamuzi Matola, a project coordinator in an education center in Malawi, she says that parents "are not aware of the importance of education, and they are not aware of child rights"<sup>24</sup>. As a result, many young children stay at home to help their parents with farming. Moreover the student to qualified teacher ratio in rural Malawi is one of the highest in the world at 82 children per teacher. This is double the target of 40:1 recommended by UNESCO's education for all<sup>25</sup>. The lack of textbooks and qualified teachers compromises education in Malawi. Insufficient facilities and poor infrastructure is another issue in Malawi. Like many other schools in rural Malawi, Memory's school lacks electricity, desks and chairs. Students also have to travel long distances to schools and daycare centers. This makes it difficult to attend during the rainy seasons<sup>26</sup>. For example, Tito, a four year old boy living in Thundu Malawi, has to walk two kilometers everyday alone in order to reach the children's daycare center<sup>27</sup>. There, they receive their education in an open-air crash from childcare workers who have not yet received training and depend on volunteers from surrounding villages to help. Since there is no clean water and hygiene facilities in the center, clean water has to

<sup>16</sup> [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/WFP\\_MEB%20Monitoring\\_30June\\_Round30.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/WFP_MEB%20Monitoring_30June_Round30.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VrPLQuY\\_PGs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VrPLQuY_PGs)

<sup>18</sup> [https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Household-level-outcomes-by-agricultural-involvement-2010-11\\_tbl2\\_321713571](https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Household-level-outcomes-by-agricultural-involvement-2010-11_tbl2_321713571)

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2211912420301395>

<sup>20</sup> <https://storytimeedu.org/stories/2017/7/21/james-fighting-for-a-future>

<sup>21</sup> <https://storytimeedu.org/stories/2017/7/21/james-fighting-for-a-future>

<sup>22</sup> [https://www.epdc.org/sites/default/files/documents/EPDC\\_NEP\\_2018\\_Malawi.pdf](https://www.epdc.org/sites/default/files/documents/EPDC_NEP_2018_Malawi.pdf)

<sup>23</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VrPLQuY\\_PGs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VrPLQuY_PGs)

<sup>24</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NR0OHcY5\\_4M&t=203s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NR0OHcY5_4M&t=203s)

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.acer.org/au/discover/article/improving-girls-education-in-malawi>

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.acer.org/au/discover/article/improving-girls-education-in-malawi>

<sup>27</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NR0OHcY5\\_4M&t=203s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NR0OHcY5_4M&t=203s)

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be carried to the center in buckets. For lunch, students eat maize porridge, and for many it is their first meal in the day. They do not have enough spoons so they have to share plates. The children in the daycare have no toys, playgrounds or equipment. For example, in order to paint children would use clay and sugar as paint as well as grass as brushes. Also, since only 4.5% of Malawian schools have hygiene facilities and many lack a secure water source<sup>28</sup>. This has contributed to the decrease in attendance of girls once they hit puberty. Overall, the lack of money prevents families from sending their children to school, while the lack of facilities, electricity and adequate schooling environment limit the quality of education in Malawi.

Malawi remains one of the poorest countries in the world with more than 53% of the rural population living below the poverty line. Poverty has caused serious challenges for children in Malawi, leaving them multidimensionally poor and deprived of their most basic needs. Poverty has led to a deprivation of nutrients. As a result of poor diets and infectious diseases in the region, has led to stunted growth of children in Malawi which stands at around 37%. According to UNICEF “Stunted children are more likely to drop out of school and repeatedly experience lower productivity later in life”<sup>29</sup>. Malnutrition therefore prevents kids from performing well in school. For example, in a video made by UNICEF following Nyamiti, a Malawian girl living in poverty she explains saying, “Because I leave home without eating, when our teacher gives us a test, I am unable to focus. I feel tired and can’t concentrate”<sup>30</sup>. Her school meal is all she has until the following day. Malnutrition has also contributed to child mortality in Malawi is at 41.6 deaths per 1000 births<sup>31</sup>. Additionally, the majority of families in Malawi lack adequate healthcare. This is because healthcare is very costly for these poor income earners and poverty has placed barriers to health. Additionally living in remote locations such as rural villages with no means to travel has prevented gaining medical attention needed. There are also only 2 doctors for every 100,000 people, leaving many with no medical attention.<sup>32</sup> For example, in the village of Khulungira, there are no doctors or cars and motorcycles for people to get to a hospital. This is a major issue for any country let alone one that’s facing high rates of HIV, malaria and diarrheal diseases. Many children in Malawi are orphaned due to HIV/Aids. This has left women such as Delia, also diagnosed with HIV, having to take care of her own child along with four orphans after they lost their parents due to HIV<sup>33</sup>. Another major issue in Malawi is water security. Women scrambling and fighting for water at wells early in the morning is a common sight for people such as Elbuy Matengula<sup>34</sup>. Although kiosks were made to distribute water, their taps often run dry and their attendants don’t show up leaving people to turn to drinking dirty water as the most “reliable”<sup>35</sup> source is a muddy well followed by the river. Also, many people such as Elbuy Matengula cannot afford water from the Kiosk. Lack of clean water and poor sanitation has led to poor health in the community. According to Eliza Ziadana, “Although some boil water before use, the majority of us just use it as it is, dirty as it is. This often causes water borne diseases like cholera”<sup>36</sup> which has killed many.

To conclude, a typical Malawian farmer household experiences immense challenges on a daily basis with regards to earning a living, food, education, and health since most of them are multidimensionally poor. Erratic rain, deforestation and dry spells have contributed to soil erosion and left many hungry. While primary education remains free, many do not complete it in order to help their family earn a living, while many lack the money to continue to secondary school and even afford stationary and books. School supplies, teachers and facilities are limited, causing a decline in the quality of education. Additionally, dietary norms in Malawi, leaves many lacking essential proteins, nutrients and vitamins needed causing many to become malnourished and prone to diseases. Similarly, lack of clean water and sanitation facilities has led many to drink dirty water, causing the spread of waterborne diseases such as cholera. Malawi remains multidimensionally poor, requiring initiatives and further government intervention to better the living standards of its people.

<sup>28</sup><https://borgenproject.org/10-facts-about-sanitation-in-malawi/#:~:text=Unfortunately%2C%20hygiene%20in%20schools%20often,have%20a%20secured%20water%20source.>

<sup>29</sup> <https://borgenproject.org/child-poverty-in-malawi/#:~:text=Child%20poverty%20in%20Malawi%20has,to%20rise%20out%20of%20poverty>

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ATWG2kPqkoE>

<sup>31</sup> <https://data.unicef.org/country/mwi/>

<sup>32</sup> <https://www.infoplease.com/world/health-statistics/physicians-100000-people-country>

<sup>33</sup> <http://www.fao.org/economic/ptop/stories/malawi/en#.YTOd6xMza3I>

<sup>34</sup> <https://ccij.io/article/lilongwe-water/>

<sup>35</sup> <https://ccij.io/article/lilongwe-water/>

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