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Trapped in underdevelopment: The Permanence of Poverty and Food Insecurity in Malawi

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1. Introduction

Reviewing Malawi Government development policy documents gives the impression that poverty and underdevelopment is a permanent feature. Earlier development plans, namely the *Statement of Development Policies 1971-1980* (GOM, 1970), and *Statement of Development Policies 1986-1995* (GOM, 1986), both declared that poverty – manifested through hunger, illiteracy and disease – were main enemies they intended to fight. Forty years on and in the new millennium, Malawi's most recent development strategies, namely the *Malawi Growth and Development Strategy 2006-2011* (GOM, 2006) and *Malawi Growth and Development Strategy 2011-2016* (GOM, 2011), still have poverty reduction as their goal.

The permanency of poverty is confirmed by scientific studies conducted in Malawi since 1998. For example, the *Malawi Poverty and Vulnerability Assessment* (GOM and World Bank, 2007) showed that Malawi's poverty status did not significantly change between 1998 and 2005. In 1998 the poverty incidence was 54%, while in 2005 it was 52%.¹ The latest poverty rate of 51% reported in the *Integrated Household Survey 2010-2011: Household Characteristics Report* (NSO, 2012) is also not statistically different from 52% estimated for 2005.²

Again, between 1998 and 2012, poverty has been associated with the same household characteristics. Table 1 presents some of the characteristics that have lingered on as close associates of consumption poverty. Low education, unemployment, lack of household assets, and poor housing are some such characteristics. However, the poor are consistently shown to report fewer incidence of illness than the rich, reflecting possibly high tolerance or threshold for declaring oneself ill enough to seek medical help. Preliminary analysis of the latest IHS data also shows that the poverty correlates have not changed between 2005 and 2011 (NSO, 2012).

¹ With a margin of error between 52.4% and 54.3%, the difference between the two poverty rates was considered insignificant.

² The margin of error ranges between 48.9% and 52.4%. This implies that the poverty rate for 2011 is not statistically different from that of 2005.

Table 1: Common Poverty Correlates from the 1998 and 2005 Poverty Studies

Characteristic	1998	2005
<i>Demographic factors</i>		
Large household size	✓	✓
Having little or no education	✓	✓
<i>House head characteristics</i>		
Household head has little or no education	✓	✓
Household head is female	✓	✓
Households head not in wage employment	✓	✓
<i>Socio-economic characteristics</i>		
Households with low education children - out of school	✓	✓
Households reporting not being ill or not seeking medical care	✓	✓
Household with little or no livestock	✓	✓
Low per capita landholding size	✓	✓
Low prevalence of non-farm businesses	✓	✓
Household with low value dwellings/no bike/furniture	✓	✓

Source: GOM (2000) and GOM & World Bank (2007)

The official assessments show that poverty manifested in various and unchanging forms is a permanent feature. Is this reflected in the perceptions of the people of Malawi? This policy brief tracks responses to a question asked by Afrobarometer about the most important problems respondents think government should deal with. This brief reports on those problems that comprised at least 5% share of all responses given in each of four Afrobarometer surveys between 2003 and 2012³. Based on the findings, the permanency of poverty as shown in the official assessments is consistent with popular perceptions captured by the Afrobarometer. More important, though, is the question of whether government efforts, if at all they exist, adequately address the problems confronted by Malawians.

2. Afrobarometer Surveys

The Afrobarometer is a comparative series of public attitude surveys, covering 35 African countries in Round 5 (2011-2013). It measures public attitudes on democracy and its alternatives, as well as evaluations of the quality of governance and economic performance. In addition, the survey assesses the views of the electorate on critical political issues in the surveyed countries. The Afrobarometer's main goal is to produce scientifically reliable data on public opinion in Africa while strengthening institutional capacities for survey research, and sharing research findings to inform policy and practice. The Afrobarometer also provides comparisons over time, as four rounds of surveys have been held from 1999 to 2008 and Round 5 is currently underway.

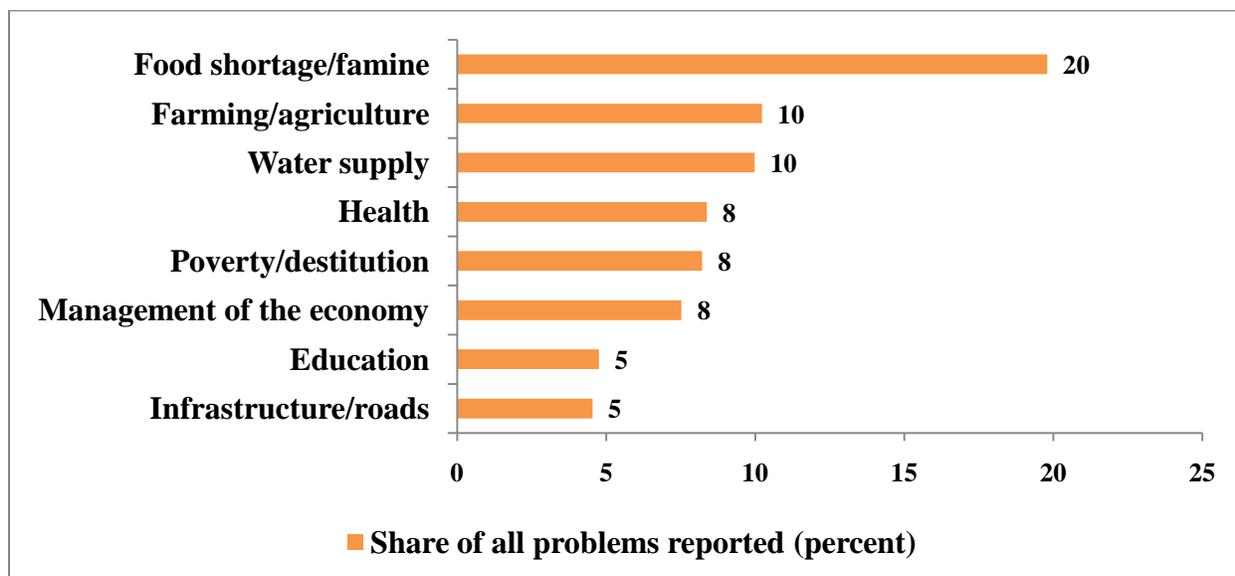
³ Data from the first survey, "Round 1", conducted in 1999, are excluded because the response categories are not the same as those used in the subsequent rounds. When asked about the most important problems that government should address, respondent could give up to three responses. Percentages reported here for each round are the proportion of all substantive responses received in that round, calculated by employing multiple responses analysis in SPSS. We also consider the average level of response across the four rounds.

During Round 5, Afrobarometer surveys are being conducted in 35 African countries using a common survey instrument and methodology. The instrument asks a standard set of questions that permits systematic comparison in public attitudes across countries and over time. The methodology was based on a national probability sample of 2,400 adult Malawians selected to represent all adult citizens of voting age, allowing for inferences with a sampling margin of error of +/- 2% at a 95% confidence level. The sample was drawn randomly based on Probability Proportionate to Population Size (PPPS), thus taking account of population distributions and gender, as well as rural-urban divides. The sampling process ensured that every adult Malawian citizen had an equal and known chance of being selected in the sample. Fieldwork in Malawi was conducted by the Centre for Social Research between 4th June and 1st July, 2012. Previous Afrobarometer surveys were conducted in Malawi in 1999 (Round 1), 2003 (Round 2), 2005 (Round 3), and 2008 (Round 4).⁴

3. Frequently Mentioned Problems, 2003-2012

The standard question that has been posed by Afrobarometer since Round 2 asks respondents to identify up to three problems that most urgently require government action. Calculating the aggregate average of the proportions given across all four rounds reveals the topmost problems of the last decade (i.e., those with at least 5% share of all responses since 2003) which are presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Most Important Problems, 2003-2013 (aggregated)



In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address?

⁴ In earlier rounds sample size averaged 1200 respondents, with a sampling margin of error of +/-2.8% at a 95% confidence level.

Thus the topmost problems include food shortage or famine, farming or agriculture-related issues, water supply, health-related issues, poverty or destitution, management of the economy, education-related concerns, and infrastructure or roads. This overall picture masks some subtle differences over the rounds in the intensity as well as permanency of some of the problems. We will use the share of the problem in the total responses as an indicator of the intensity of the problem, and the ranks of the problems in each round to follow up on the permanency of the problem

4 Intensity of Problems, 2003-2012

Table 2 presents the topmost problems across each of the four rounds.

Table 2: Proportional Share of Topmost Problems, 2003-2012

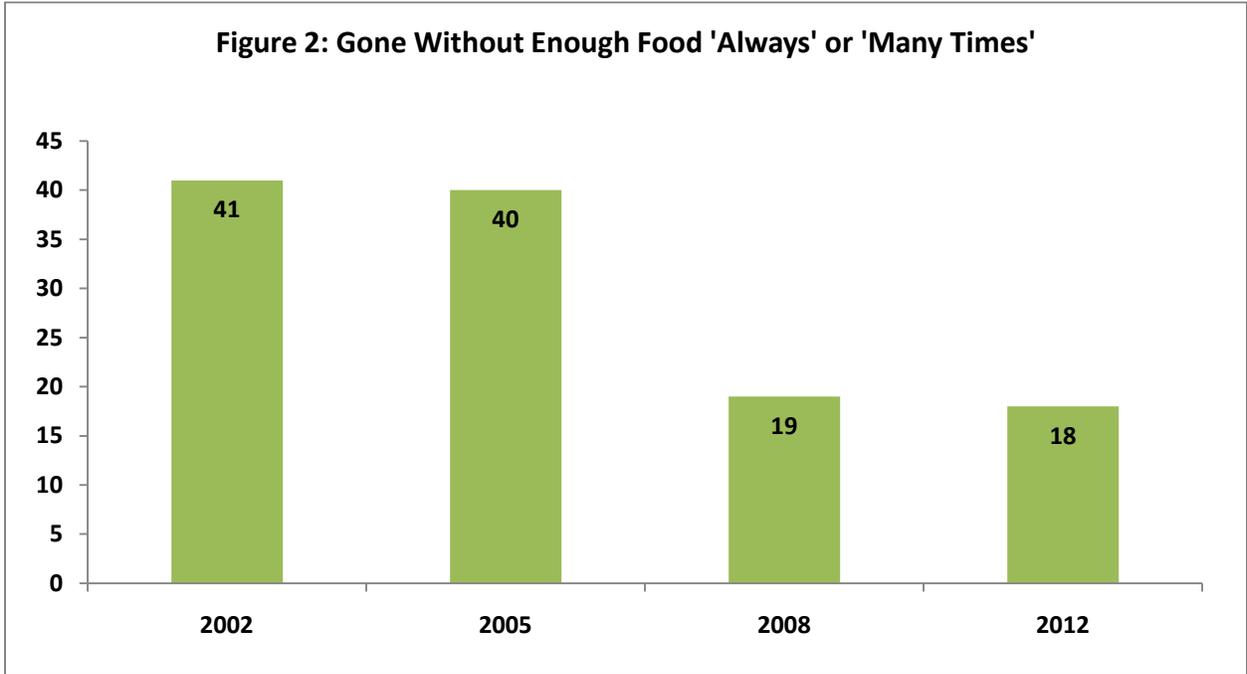
Problem	2003 (Round 2)	2005 (Round3)	2008 (Round 4)	2012 (Round 5)
Food shortage/famine	19%	26%	21%	16%
Poverty/destitution	12%	6%	9%	7%
Farming/agriculture	11%	13%	10%	9%
Management of the economy	8%	3%	5%	11%
Health	8%	6%	8%	10%
Unemployment	7%	3%	3%	3%
Water supply	6%	12%	12%	11%
Education	6%	6%	4%	4%
Loans/credit	3%	6%	2%	1%
Infrastructure/ roads	2%	4%	7%	5%
Wages, incomes and salaries	2%	2%	4%	5%

In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address?

In all the rounds, household food security has the highest share. However, food insecurity was most serious in 2005 when over a quarter of the responses identified it as a priority issue. This was a year when the normal food insecurity was worsened by poor weather. The situation has improved ever since until 2012, when a low of just 16% of the responses concerned household food insecurity, a drop of 10 percentage points. Poverty was the second most commonly cited problem in 2003, but its intensity has declined subsequently. The intensity of the problems to do with agriculture have remained high over the period, although the Fertilizer and Inputs Subsidy Programme (FISP) introduced in 2005 seems to have taken some steam out of the problem, as there has been some decline since 2005. Economic management problems featured highly in 2003 but were under control in 2005, only to come up again from 2008 to 2012. Health problems have remained high but since 2005 (when there was a drop in the intensity) the situation has steadily worsened, albeit not very significantly. Unemployment that featured in 2003 has been drowned by other problems in intensity and has remained at 3% ever since. However, water supply problems, which were apparently not very intensive in 2003, have doubled in intensity ever since. Education has shown the opposite trend: problems were intense only in 2003 and 2005, and have dropped off somewhat since that time. Infrastructure problems, in contrast,

became somewhat more prominent in 2008 and 2012, while lack of access to loans or credit only featured prominently in 2005, and lack of or low income has only featured prominently in 2012.

Do some of these findings match with what is reported elsewhere? Let us start with food insecurity. According to the second *Malawi Growth and Development Strategy* paper, food insecurity in the period 2005 to 2009 went down due to the FISP. According to annual economic reports, national maize production in Malawi since 2005 has been well above the national requirements. The official maize production increased from 1.7 million metric tonnes (143 kg per capita) in 2003 to 2.6 million metric tonnes (204 kg per capita) in 2005 and to a record high of 3.8 million metric tonnes (269 kg per capita) in 2008, though it declined to 3.6 million metric tonnes (249 kg per capita) in 2012 (GOM, 2010; GOM, 2007). There was reportedly a 500 metric tonnes maize supply surplus in 2012. With this maize surplus since 2005, we might expect fewer households to report going without food, and indeed, this is what we find (Figure 2). There was a sharp decline after 2005 in the number of respondents who reported that they or someone in their family had gone without food in the past year. But food security remains the number one problem respondents identify, reflecting the fact that despite the gains, the *Malawi Food Security Outlook for August 2012 to March 2013* still reports that in 2012, between 13% and 20% of Malawi households in the Southern Region were likely to face food shortages (FEWSNet, 2012). Even in years government considers to be years of plenty, food insecurity remains the number one problem according to the Malawian public.



“Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family gone without food”

This points to the possibility that national food security does not necessarily translate into household food security for every household, due to access problems arising from shortage of cash to purchase the maize, or distribution bottlenecks. Indeed, access to cash was reported to be a problem over this period for many households. For example, over the period 2003-2012, the proportion of people who said they or a member of their family went without a cash income

always or many times in the previous year has remained fairly high: 52% in 2003, 61% in 2005, 51% in 2008 and 47% in 2012.

On general poverty, there have been indirect poverty studies and two main official poverty studies in the period between 2005 and 2009. The pseudo poverty studies, titled Welfare Monitoring Surveys, showed that poverty declined from 49% in 2006 to 36% in 2009 (GOM, 2011). However, the main poverty studies have found that poverty declined insignificantly, from 54% in 1998 to 52% in 2005 and 51% in 2011. In other words, if there were any changes at all, they were very small. This is not very different from the Afrobarometer findings over the period. In 2003, 12% of the responses cited poverty as a leading problem. Since 2005 the share of poverty has been somewhat lower, but holding relatively steady in the range of 6 to 9%.

The prominence of agriculture or farming problems since 2003 is paradoxical since agriculture, like education and health, are the sectors that get the lion's share of the budget. In recent years, though, the agriculture sector budget has been dominated by the FISP. Reviews of the programme show that it has rarely, if at all, worked properly. The programme excludes deserving households, but also includes those that can afford to buy the inputs (Doward, et al. 2008).

5 Permanency of Problems

In this section we rank each problem by round to determine whether it has been among the topmost identified across all four rounds (Table 3).

Table 3: Ranks of Topmost Problems, 2003-2012

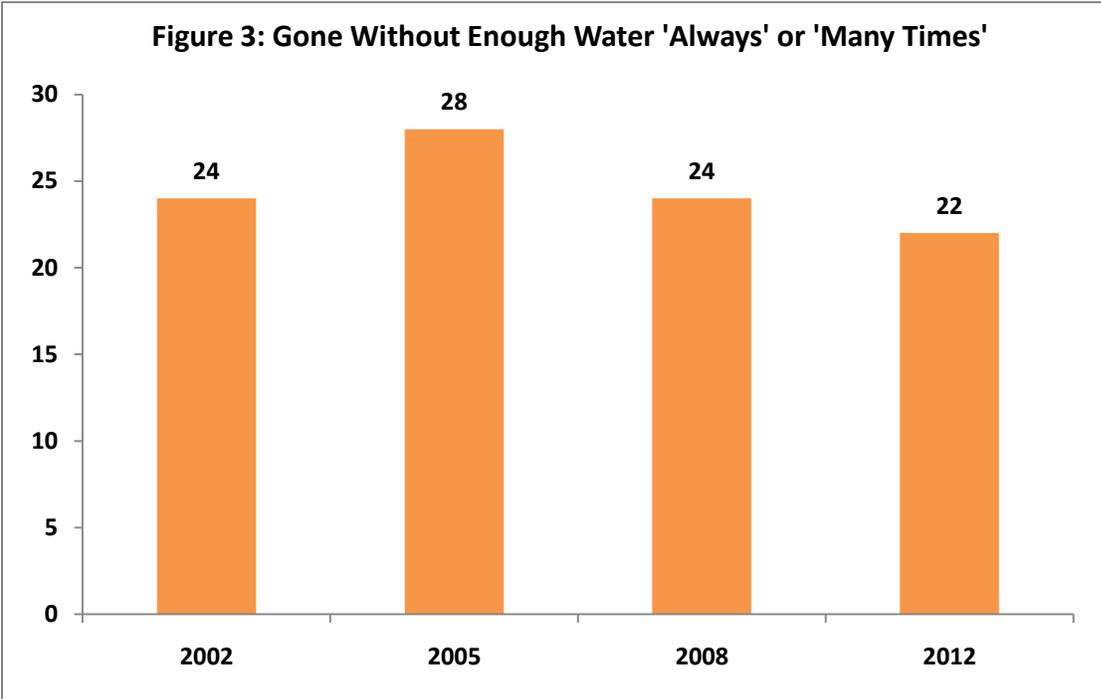
Problem	Rank in the year				Average
	2003 (Round 2)	2005 (Round 3)	2008 (Round 4)	2012 (Round 5)	
Household food insecurity	1	1	1	1	1.0
Farming/agriculture	3	2	3	5	3.3
Water supply	7	3	2	3	3.8
Poverty/destitution	2	5	4	6	4.3
Health	5	7	5	4	5.3
Management of the economy	4	9	7	2	5.5
Education	8	6	8	9	7.8
Infrastructure/ roads	11	8	6	7	8.0
Unemployment	6	10	10	12	9.5
Loans/credit	10	4	12	16	10.5
Wages, incomes and salaries	13	13	9	8	10.8

In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address?

Food shortage has always been the number one problem identified by the public in Malawi. The fight against hunger that started at independence, if not earlier, has not been won. One of the possible reasons is that Malawi has not been successful in transforming the agriculture sector. People still have the same farming implement used at independence – the hoe. They still cannot

afford to purchase improved varieties of food crops like hybrid maize. Even if they could afford to purchase the improved maize seed, this variety requires the farmer to purchase fertilizer, which many smallholder farmers cannot afford. The failure to improve food security is also linked to another problem, poverty, which is both a cause and consequence of the non-productive farming practices. Thus the fight against poverty has also been unsuccessful, hence the permanency of poverty as one of the topmost problems in Malawi.

One other enemy Malawi has been fighting against since independence has been ill-health. Just like hunger and poverty, disease or ill-health has been a permanent problem cited at least since 2003. One of the reasons for this is the perennial poor nutrition occasioned by the permanent food insecurity and poverty. Another cause of ill-health has been the perennial lack of potable water. Again, this has consistently remained one of the topmost problems cited since 2003. The use of poor quality water leads to water-borne diseases. According to the *Malawi Demographic and Health Surveys of 2010*, 20% of Malawi households use unprotected sources of water (NSO and ICF Macro, 2010). Indeed, during this period over 2 in 10 households reported going without potable water always or many times in the previous year (Figure 3).



One of the causes of poverty in Malawi has been poor economic management. Poor economic management is manifested through high inflation as well as depressed economic growth. People have cited this as a topmost problem in every round except in 2005, when they saw how well the new president at the time, Dr Bingu wa Mutharika, started managing the economy. That was, however, short-lived, as by 2008 poor economic management again became a prominent issue, and it had risen to an even higher priority by 2012 when poor economic management became second only to food insecurity. Thus poor economic management has also been a persistent problem in Malawi. This finding is consistent with the International Monetary Fund's (IMF)

assessment, because there have been several suspensions of IMF programmes during this period. For example, between 2003 and 2005 Malawi had no IMF programme. Likewise, there was no programme in 2012. It is during these same periods that people considered poor economic management as one of the most important problem the government needed to deal with.

Although illiteracy is still a problem, education is not consistently cited as one of the topmost problems. Most likely it is drowned by even more pressing problems. Likewise the other problems that have featured as topmost problems in some rounds have not been permanent. What is clear though is that although these have not always reached the 5% threshold (an arbitrary cut off point), they have still roamed around the permanent problems, and in some cases they are actually related to the problems that are more permanent. For example, lack of credit and loans is related to farming problems and food insecurity, and therefore also to poverty. This is true for low incomes, poor education and unemployment. These all affect poverty both directly and indirectly. Poor roads and infrastructure also affect the ability to move out of poverty as they limit market access as well access to health facilities and income generating points.

Conclusion

The list of most important problems by importance reveals that most of the issues that feature highly relate to meeting basic needs or obtaining basic social services. For example, out of the eleven most frequently cited ‘most important problem’, food security and poverty are the topmost. Others include water supply, health services and education. There are also others that been discussed like lack of employment or wage income that have very direct bearing on poverty reduction because they are considered necessary for accessing basic needs, especially in urban areas. Thus as long as Malawi remains underdeveloped, the most important problems will remain basic.

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