



A MULTI-PHASE ASSESSMENT OF THE EFFECTS OF COVID-19 ON FOOD SYSTEMS AND RURAL LIVELIHOODS IN MALAWI

Miriam Matita and Masautso Chimombo

APRA COVID-19 Country Report
June 2021

Acknowledgements

The authors are grateful to the study participants including farmers, community leaders and district officials from both the government and non-governmental organisations who took the time to respond to our questions. Research assistance provided by Rosaria Muhome, Noel Chilobwe, Simeon Gunsalu and Chancy Medson is greatly appreciated. We also thank Agricultural Policy Research in Africa consortium members, specifically Marco Carreras, Amrita Saha and John Thompson for making this research possible.

Miriam Matita is a lecturer at the Lilongwe University of Agriculture and Natural Resources (LUANAR) but currently pursuing PhD studies with the University of Malawi, Department of Economics. Masautso Chimombo is a sociologist at LUANAR in the Department of Extension.

This country report forms part of a series presenting results from three rounds of mixed-methods, comparative assessments conducted by the APRA Programme on the effects of COVID-19 on local food systems and rural economies covering over 800 households and 65 key informants in eight countries (Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Nigeria, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe), beginning in June-July 2020 and ending in May-June 2021.

This country report is generously funded with UK aid from the UK government (Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office – FCDO, formerly DFID). The opinions are the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of IDS or the UK government.

Key findings

- The COVID-19 pandemic has affected important aspects of food systems and rural livelihoods in Malawi.
- Access to health for nearly 90% of respondents has been possible during the pandemic.
- Closure of schools, as one containment measure, has resulted in reduced learning for children. Only a third were doing school-work at home, with increases in household chores for girls and farm work for boys. There has, however, been no changes in caring responsibilities of households due to COVID-19.
- Most households have not received any COVID-19 specific assistance. The government is only reaching out to about 30% of the respondents.
- Participation in farming activities has largely been unaffected, though decline was reported for nearly 60% of respondents in the second round (October 2020) when households were preparing land and purchasing farm inputs. This reduction, however, was a normal off-season reduction.
- A general decline in economic activities was experienced, with participants reducing their participation in business enterprises.
- Throughout the three rounds of assessments, the price of farm inputs and cost of land rentals has substantially increased.
- Produce marketing has been hit hard, with reduced ability to sell farm produce both at the farm gate and in local markets as the influx of traders declined and transport costs escalated.
- Only a third of households seeking work in their village, and nearly 20% outside their villages, were able to find work, suggesting limited off-farm opportunities.
- The availability of land to rent had not changed but associated costs increased for a quarter of the surveyed households.
- Increasingly, more households reported a reduction in the availability of extension workers and access to credit.
- Food insecurity increased, with a third spending the whole day without any food in all three rounds.
- Households reported no changes in food item prices, or their availability in local markets.
- The cost of living increased in all three rounds, with many households facing difficulties in taking care of themselves since the COVID-19 pandemic began.
- Cash remains the main mode of payment, but electronic transfer use increased, with 33% (up from 17%) of the respondents using it.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused disruptions to national and global economies with devastating effects on food systems and livelihoods across the globe. The Lancet Global Health (2020) argues that it is an impending 'natural disaster', particularly because of the likely unprecedented outcomes of the pandemic on poverty, hunger, and malnutrition among others. These effects are likely to be greater, especially among low and middle-income countries like those in sub-Saharan Africa, including Malawi. This is because even before the COVID-19 pandemic began the proportion of people facing poverty, and food and nutrition insecurity were already high (FAO, 2020). It is, therefore, imperative to understand the effects of COVID-19 on food systems and rural livelihoods.

Using a multi-stage '*rapid assessment*', this study provides real-time insights into how the COVID-19 crisis unfolded in Malawi and how rural people and food and livelihood systems respond. This has been achieved by documenting and understanding the differential impacts at the household level in terms of changes to crop marketing, food and nutrition security, labour and employment, and poverty and well-being. Different outcomes are expected in the epoch of COVID-19 because of the likely changes in the way in which households use their capabilities, assets, and main economic activities to secure necessities of life as they manage, adapt and mitigate the effects of the pandemic on their livelihoods. The choice of spheres of interrogation is grounded in the sustainable livelihood framework about different livelihood strategies or their combination that people use (Scoones, 1998; Mclean, 2015).

The first confirmed case of COVID-19 was registered in Malawi on 2 April 2020 (Reuters, 2020). At that time, the world had experienced an exponential rise in COVID-19 cases since late 2019. However, even before the first confirmed cases of COVID-19 were registered in Malawi, the Government of Malawi had declared a state of national disaster on 20 March 2020. The closure of schools, colleges, and universities was announced together with the declaration of the state of national disaster (UN Malawi, 2020a). On 8 April 2021, the government launched the National COVID-19 Preparedness and Response Plan which detailed interventions that needed to be undertaken by the government and the resources that were to be raised if COVID-19 was to be contained and controlled (UN Malawi, 2020b). In addition to the closure of learning institutions, early COVID-19 containment measures

included an immediate ban on formal meetings, workshops, gatherings and conferences. Gatherings at funerals, churches, and mosques were restricted to a maximum of 100 people per gathering. Furthermore, public, and private vehicle seating capacity was reduced by 40% (Chinsinga and Matita, 2021).

On 1 April 2020, the government announced the closure of all international land borders and suspended international flights to and from Malawi (GardaWorld, 2020). However, medical personnel, medical equipment, emergency relief cargo and returning citizens and residents were being given exceptional passage to enter the country. The ban on international flights was lifted by the new government of Malawi on 28 August 2020 when the number of daily confirmed COVID-19 cases had significantly reduced, and life was beginning to return to normal.

On 14 April 2020, the government announced its plans to lockdown the country for 21 days from 18 April 2020. However, the high court of Malawi injunction obtained on 17 April 2020 by the Human Rights Defenders Coalition (HRDC) halted the process and the lockdown was never implemented (The Times Malawi, 2020). The HRDC accused the government of failing to make wide consultations on the lockdown and for not adequately explaining how poor and vulnerable populations, especially in cities who live hand-to-mouth, were going to be protected from starvation and destitution during the lockdown. This was despite the government announcing plans to provide emergency social cash transfers to urban poor households in Malawi's four cities of Lilongwe, Mzuzu, Blantyre and Zomba for three months. Further, the proposed lockdown was perceived as an opportunistic attempt by the then ruling party to run away from holding court-sanctioned presidential elections after the courts nullified the presidential elections that were held in May 2019 due to what the court called massive electoral irregularities (Chinsinga and Matita, 2021).

Daily COVID-19 infections in Malawi remained very low during 2 April 2020 to 25 May 2020, averaging 1.33 new confirmed COVID-19 cases per day (Chadza et al., 2020). However, Malawi experienced an upsurge in daily confirmed COVID-19 cases from 26 May 2020 to the end June 2020. Most of these cases were imported cases from South Africa as Malawian migrants started returning home, fleeing economic hardships that were induced by COVID-19 restrictions. Upon arrival at the main entry point of Mwanza border, the returnees had to undergo mandatory COVID-19 testing, and higher proportions of the returnees began to test positive for COVID-19.

New daily COVID-19 infections slowed down significantly again during the hot summer period running from August 2020 to late December 2020, flattening the COVID-19 curve in the process. Despite the flattening of the curve during this period, the newly elected government under the banner of the Tonse Alliance announced new enhanced measures for managing COVID-19. The new measures included mandatory wearing of face masks in public spaces and a further reduction in the maximum number of people allowed at public gatherings, meetings, and workshops, from 100 to 10 (Voice of America, 2020). For funerals and church services, the government restricted attendance to a maximum of 50 people, though the number was later increased to 100 for churches after pressure from the religious community who equated the restriction to banning worship. Furthermore, entertainment service providers like bars and restaurants were only allowed to provide take away services and stores that sell alcohol were further restricted to opening for only six hours per day from 2PM to 8PM.

The flattening of the COVID-19 curve during the summer of 2020, and zero reported daily COVID-19 hospital admissions and deaths during the same period, saw public and social life returning to normal in Malawi. In fact, most people stopped observing social distancing and it was a rare sight to see people wearing face masks. The festive season of Christmas and new year in late December 2020 and the first week of January 2021 saw shops, bars, restaurants, hotels, lakeshore resorts and beaches packed with people enjoying the festivities, with a total disregard to COVID-19 preventive measures. However, Malawi paid a huge price for the relaxation of COVID-19 measures, and by the end of the first week of January 2021 there were exponential increases in daily confirmed cases of COVID-19. From under 50 daily reported confirmed cases of COVID-19 in December 2020, daily cases rose to over 1,000 most days in January 2021. This marked the start of the second wave for Malawi. It was during the month of January 2021 that Malawi also lost influential and powerful politicians (including two cabinet ministers), musicians and radio personalities to COVID-19 (Aljazeera, 2021). An atmosphere of fear and sadness engulfed the whole of Malawi.

In response, most work-places, including Capital Hill – government headquarters – implemented work-from-home policies, with few essential staff working at offices on shifts. Additionally, offices were regularly disinfected. The government, through the Ministry of Health, increased bed spaces in hospitals by opening several temporary field hospitals in the main cities to meet the growing demand for COVID-19 admissions. Additional

medical workers were recruited as an emergency response to strengthen the health system that was becoming overwhelmed with the pandemic. The COVID-19 curve started flattening mid-February 2021, with the COVID-19 infection rate dropping from 30% in January 2021 to 16% in February 2021 (Chadza et al., 2020). This saw the reopening of learning institutions on 22 February 2021 after their second COVID-19 induced closure on 17 January 2021.

Overall, the COVID-19 pandemic has amplified the vulnerability of livelihoods and agri-food systems in Malawi, with people reporting increasing difficulties in accessing produce markets, limited access to extension and credit services, and widespread concerns about food insecurity. There was also a failure of government social protection to cushion households.

The rest of the paper is organised as follows. Section 2 describes the survey strategy and data analysis methods employed. Section 3 presents findings about COVID-19 awareness and preventive measures at household level. Section 4 provides results on business and farming livelihood changes during the pandemic. Section 5 reports about the changing food and nutrition security situation among the study respondents. Section 6 presents findings related to perceived poverty and well-being changes. Finally, concluding remarks are provided in Section 7.

2. Data

The methods for data collection were mixed, employing household and key informant telephone interviews. The households were selected as a sub-sample of households participating in an Agricultural Policy Research in Africa (APRA) wide study in Malawi, focusing on Mchinji and Ntchisi districts. The APRA study is investigating the pathways to commercialisation and its outcomes in these rural Malawi districts which focus on the cultivation of groundnuts, tobacco, and maize (Matita et al., 2018). The selection of enumeration areas for the COVID-19 impact assessment surveys was based on their proximity to trading centres in Central Region. Thus, in Mchinji, Mavewre and Zulu were selected; in Ntchisi, Chiloko, Chikho and Nthondo locations were selected. The sites selected in Mchinji were close to Kamwendo and Walranji trading centres besides being in proximity to Zambia's Chipata District, which facilitates local and cross-country trade. On the other hand, in Ntchisi, the centres were near Mwansambo – an area with vibrant traders that tend to purchase soya beans and groundnuts locally and transport by road for export to East African countries. There is also active selling of potatoes from the centre of Ntchisi District to Mponela trading centre, which

supplies hotels and lodge businesses in Central Region and Lilongwe.

Data were collected in three rounds with household heads or their representatives and key informants. The first interviews in June-July 2020 were conducted face-to-face with respondents, but the subsequent two rounds used telephone interviews. Whilst telephone interviews lack important observation of body language and facial expressions (McNiell and Chapman, 2005), initial-face-to-face interaction with respondents was used to create the required rapport and clearly explain the procedures for the conduct of future telephone interviews to minimise biases. This is in addition to using a team of well-trained research assistants. A stratified sample of 114 respondents was drawn (64 female and 50 male respondents) in the first round (R1) of data collection. The second round (R2) conducted in October 2020 interviewed 111 households (59 female and 52 male respondents). The third round (R3) was conducted in February 2020 and interviewed 107 households (58 female and 49 male respondents). The key informant interviews involved eight respondents within the areas of the study. These were largely knowledgeable agricultural extension officers from government and non-governmental organisations, and local community representatives familiar with, and resident in, the study locations. Accordingly, the data collection tools were a semi-structured questionnaire and a checklist. Respondents were asked about their awareness of and the incidence of COVID-19 cases, its effects on livelihood activities, access to health, children's schooling, food availability and its price changes, among other questions. The data were captured using the Qualtrics Programme on tablets and processed using STATA.

The data were analysed using descriptive statistics drawing trends and cross-tabulation patterns over the survey period. Further, qualitative data obtained in the key informant interviews was analysis using content analysis, and focused on emerging themes, patterns of narratives about changes in food systems and livelihoods due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Whilst more advanced econometric analysis would provide the

cause-and effect relationships, we are not able to delve into that due to the relatively small sample size collected on account of fiscal space. Instead, triangulation of the quantitative and qualitative data used here offers a rich mixture of data types to assess the observed patterns in quantitative data within their wider context.

3. COVID-19

Over 90% of the respondents in the surveys reported following preventive guidelines for COVID-19. This may be a result of an increasing trend in reported COVID-19 symptoms among respondents at the time of the survey, including greater awareness of confirmed cases in the districts as reported in **Table 1**. The observed pattern is consistent with the high numbers of Malawians worried about themselves or their family members becoming seriously ill with COVID-19 (World Bank, 2020a). Despite the ravaging effects of the pandemic on the health system in Malawi, access to health services remained possible for most study households (95%) over the three rounds of the survey. Interviews with key informants, however, revealed that people were shunning hospitals and medical workers for fear of catching COVID-19 or being falsely declared COVID-19 positive, and risk being placed under isolation measures.

One government response to COVID-19 was the closure of schools. **Figure 1** presents reported activities of children during the pandemic period. Overall, girls engaged more in housework relative to boys while the later did more farming work. The increases in agricultural work for male children was more pronounced in R2 when households were preparing land for the 2020/21 agricultural season. Only a third of children did school work at home in all three surveys. Key informant interviews during R2 and R3 in both districts found that the school closures resulted in an increase in the number of girls that were becoming pregnant, a trend that was worrying parents, community leaders and school authorities.

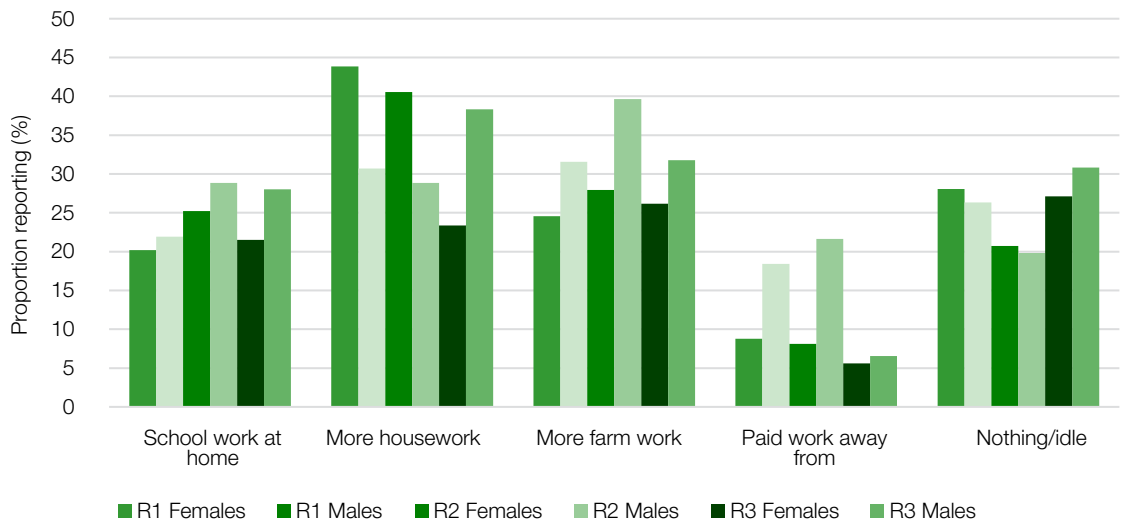
Further, restrictions on movements were gazetted to control the spread of COVID-19. Largely, about half of the households reported reducing movements within

Table 1: Proportion reporting COVID-19 incidence (%)

	Have you or anyone in your household had COVID-19 symptoms?	Has anyone else in the village that you know had COVID-19 symptoms?	Have you heard of any confirmed cases of COVID-19 in other villages in your district?
Round 1	9.6	4.4	48
Round 2	12	7.2	39
Round 3	20	33	84

Source: Own calculations from APRA COVID-19 Rapid Assessment surveys in Malawi

Figure 1: Activities by children (% reporting)



Source: Own calculations from APRA COVID-19 Rapid Assessment Surveys

and outside their villages (**Figure 2**). However, in R2, households relaxed which was consistent with the observed prevalence of the disease at the national level and misconception about the risks and their vulnerability to the disease (Chimombo and Matita, 2021).

The government, together with telecommunication companies and banks, developed measures to ease the use of mobile money platforms and electronic transfers. However, they remained widely unused (see **Figure A1**). The most used mode of payment in business transactions was cash but the use of electronic payment has been increasing, from 17% in R1 and R2 to 33% in R3.

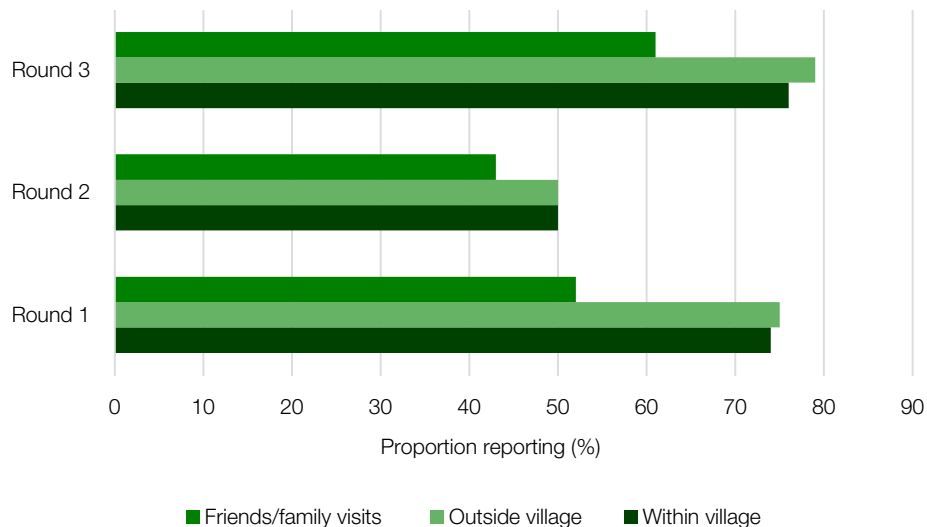
Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, there have been

“Cash is the dominant means of exchange here. People would love to use mobile money services but being poor as most of the households are in this community, they find the transaction charges to be a waste of their money. Perhaps all service charges could have been suspended. And phone signal too can be very unreliable here.”

Extension worker, Mchinji, February 2021

no changes in the caring responsibilities of households of over half of the respondents. Different organisations, including the government, developed assistance measures to ease the effects of the pandemic on

Figure 2: Movement restrictions due to COVID-19



Source: Own calculations from APRA COVID-19 Rapid Assessment Surveys

“No COVID-19 relief assistance has been given to households in my area nor any other areas in the district. The only assistance I am aware of is that of handwashing facilities that have been distributed to schools, markets, and district council offices. I hear the government is planning cash transfers targeting poor households in the cities alone.”

Traditional chief, Ntchisi, June 2020

households. Our findings reveal that not many households received COVID-19 related assistance. In R1, 31% reported not receiving any assistance related to COVID-19. This number rose to 62% in R2 and 66% in R3. The government, specifically, only reached out to about 30% of respondents with COVID-19 social assistance (**Table A1**). Key informants reported that those that were receiving assistance were not doing so because of COVID-19 but rather it was a continuation of the pre-COVID-19 social safety nets programmes.

4. Farming and business livelihood changes

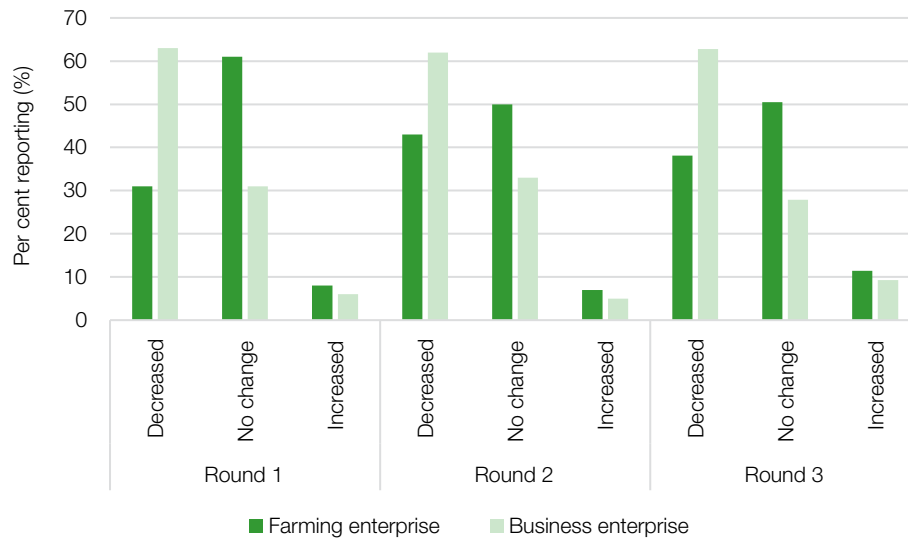
The COVID-19 pandemic has posed challenges to the participation in business activities for households, with an overall decline seen across the three rounds of data collection (**Table 2**). Farming activities, however, seem to have been largely unaffected. Specifically, in R1, most households had not yet felt the impact of the COVID-19 on their farming enterprises with about 60% reporting no changes. This period of data

collection coincided with harvesting of produce from the 2019/2020 farming season and was also a period before Malawi experienced a surge in cases. However, these sentiments slightly changed in R2 and R3, with an increase in the proportion of households reporting a decline in farming participation. Explaining the high numbers reporting no changes in farming activities, key informants observed that rural life continued as normal with minimal disruption as most cases and deaths related to COVID-19 happened in urban areas and the major cities. Nevertheless, produce marketing was hit hard as displayed in **Figure A1**. A higher proportion of households reported a reduced ability to sell produce, both at the farmgate and in local markets, as traders and brokers became scarce because of COVID-19. In addition, transport costs escalated, making it difficult to carry farm produce to market destinations. Increased enforcement of border closures greatly affected demand as informal export markets are significant produce outlets for both districts with Mchinji trading more with Zambia and Ntchisi with Tanzania. The disruptions in

“Produce buyers from nearby Zambia often offer competitive prices to both organised and unorganised farmers here. However, COVID-19 necessitated border closures, blocking the Zambians from crossing into Malawi. Farmers could only sale to local vendors at low very prices. To meet their usual income needs, they had to sell more produce than normal.”

National Smallholder Farmers’ Association of Malawi official, Mchinji, February 2021

Figure 3: Changes in farming and business activities



Source: Own calculations from APRA COVID-19 Rapid Assessment Surveys

agricultural value chains were widespread as alluded to in the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa's (AGRA, 2020) rapid study of COVID-19's impact in several African countries including Malawi.

Rural economies in Malawi are largely characterised by limited off-farm employment opportunities (Ellis, Kutengule and Nyasulu, 2003). We found mixed results on the ease of access to off-farm work. For instance, only 44% of those seeking work in their village were able to find it in R1, which declined to 34% in R2 and 30% in R3. The difficulties were greater for those seeking work outside their village as only about 20% reported finding work in each round of data collection. Hiring of labour for continuation of farming and business activities was also limited, with only 16, 14 and 22% of the households able to hire labour in R1, R2, and R3, respectively. Reduced incomes from sale of produce at low prices and school closures, which released children's labour into farming for extended periods, meant that households could only hire less farm labour than is usually the case.

Table 2 provides the proportion of households with access to farm inputs and services. The availability of land to rent had not changed, especially in R1 and R3 for 52 and 47% of the sample, respectively. The associated costs, however, escalated for over a quarter of the households in all three rounds. The increase was felt for a substantial proportion (60% of sample)

"Children are home because schools have closed. They are fully participating in farming activities. Most households can therefore afford to forego hired labour. Those that survive by hiring out their labour are finding it increasingly hard to get hired and are accepting even less wages."

Extension coordinator, Ntchisi, October 2021

"We use a group approach to reach out to more farmers. With one extension worker being responsible for thousands of farmers, one-on-one contact with individual farmers is unattainable. However, COVID-19 has forced us to stop group extension meetings or drastically reduce the number of participants. Fewer farmers are accessing extension services now than they were during pre-COVID-19 times."

Extension coordinator, Mchinji, June 2020

in R2 when households would normally engage in land preparation and purchase of farming inputs. Similarly, the cost of farm inputs increased, which will likely have consequences on 2020/21 farming season outputs. The only consolation has been the increase in the number of beneficiaries of the Affordable Inputs Programme (AIP), from the previous 900,000 farmers under the replaced Farm Input Subsidy Programme (FISP) (Nkhoma, 2018) to 3.8 million under AIP (GoM, 2021). In all rounds of the survey, there was a declining trend in the availability of extension workers. Attempts in Ntchisi to provide extension services using information and communication and technology (ICT) platforms have not registered much success due to poorer farmers' limited access to mobile phones, and weak and unreliable phone network signal. A similar declining trend is observed for access to credit services.

5. Food and nutrition security

The conditions related to food access among households shows increasing food insecurity over the three rounds of data collection (**Table 3**). In all data collection rounds over 70% of households worried about having inadequate food. The proportion skipping meals has increased from about 57% in R1 (during the marketing period) to 77% in R2 (during the pre-planting period), and to 76% in R3 (during the lean period).

Table 2: Access to farm inputs and services (proportion reporting - %)

	Round 1			Round 2			Round 3		
	<	=	>	<	=	>	<	=	>
Availability of land to rent	33	52	15	31	38	31	35	47	18
Cost of land to rent	12	43	45	13	27	60	15	35	50
Availability of farm inputs	32	59	9	28	56	16	21	46	33
Cost of farm inputs	14	45	40	4	36	60	23	36	41
Availability of extension worker	67	29	4	73	22	5	59	34	7
Availability of credit/loans	78	22	0	68	26	5	70	26	4

Note: < Decreases; = No change; > Increased

Source: Own calculations from APRA COVID-19 Rapid Assessment Surveys

“COVID-19 came when farmers had finished all farming activities for the 2019/2020 farming season. Food production was not disrupted. Irrigation farming has also not been interrupted. However, low produce prices forced farmers to sell most of their food harvests to raise a meaningful income. This is what will cause hunger among farmers.”

Extension coordinator, Ntchisi, October 2021

Thus, households that normally face perpetual food insecurity were likely to be affected in R1, irrespective of the COVID-19 situation. During R2, food insecurity could have been amplified by COVID-19 related restrictions on produce traders that resulted in farmers selling their produce at lower prices and therefore experience reduced incomes. It may also be the case that farmers sold more of their maize stock than would normally be the case to supplement other sources of income considering the low prices received. Besides this, R2 coincided with a period when households channel funds towards land preparation and purchase of farming inputs, which was also likely to have had a negative effect on food purchases. During each round, close to half of the respondents reported running out of food or being hungry and not having food to eat. About a third of respondents spent the whole day without eating. These findings about worsening food security situation are corroborated by WFP (2020) in its surveillance of the food security situation in the COVID-19 epoch. Further, FAO (2020) found that by the end of August 2020, 17.4% of households were implementing extremely negative strategies to cope with food insecurity, relative to 15% in the previous month. Relatedly, elsewhere in Kenya and Uganda, the COVID-19 situation has been associated with a worsening food security situation and dietary quality on account of loss of income, reduced market

access and low purchasing power (Kansiime et al. 2021). In terms of food availability, **Table A1** shows that there were no significant changes in food availability because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Most food items did not change in terms of availability, except for grains, white roots and tubers, pulses/nuts and seeds, milk and milk products, and fruits that were reportedly equal or less available for at least 40% of the respondents in R1; access to grains and pulses/nuts and seeds were similarly equal or less available for about half of the respondents in R2; and in R3, grains and vegetables were reported to be equal or less available for nearly 40% of study participants.

With regards to prices of food items, we obtained mixed views with respect to grain price changes in R1 and R3 which sharply contrasts with R2 where grain prices increased for about 60% of respondents. Largely, prices have remained the same for nearly half of respondent in local markets for various food items. During R2, which took place in October 2020, 60% of respondents reported that grain prices increased. But United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) surveillance reports from about the same time period indicate that the prices of maize, the staple grain, had remained stable during the COVID-19 period of April to August 2020 (WFP, 2020).

6. Perceived poverty

To assess poverty status changes due to COVID-19, several questions were asked to respondents. First, at least half of the respondents reported a rise in the cost of living (COL) – about 50, 67 and 60% in R1, R2, and R3, respectively. But, across the surveys, close to 26% reported no changes in their COL whilst the rest reported decreases.

Secondly, households placed themselves on a ladder ranging from 1 to 9, to indicate their perception of their ability to control their own lives, with 1 representing

Table 3: Household food insecurity access-related conditions

Aspect	Proportion reporting (%)		
	Round 1	Round 2	Round 3
Worried of inadequate food	76	87	83
Unable to eat healthy foods	78	89	88
Ate only a few kinds of food	78	87	88
Skipped meals	57	77	76
Ate less	70	82	82
Ran out of food	54	67	68
Hungry but no food to eat	48	65	59
Went without eating for a whole day	31	34	31
Food not adequate for family	75	83	86

Source: Own calculations from APRA COVID-19 Rapid Assessment Surveys

“COVID-19 has forced smallholder farmers to sell their produce at very low prices. This has resulted in increasing income poverty among the farmers.”

Local leader, Ntchisi, October 2020

households unable to change their lives and 9, referring to those with full control over their own life (Ravallion, 2012). **Figure 2** shows that before COVID-19 many households placed themselves on the bottom steps of the ladder, a situation that did not change during the pandemic. However, the proportion of households reporting destitution increased, especially in R1. In contrast, those reporting being able to control their lives drastically declined, suggesting increasing difficulty in living conditions. Projections by the World Bank on Malawi, however, indicates that due to a good harvest in two consecutive seasons of 2019/2020 and 2020/2021 and the agrarian nature of the economy, the rural economy in Malawi will not suffer significant losses, with the worst case scenario seeing rural poverty increasing by 2.2% (World Bank, 2020b).

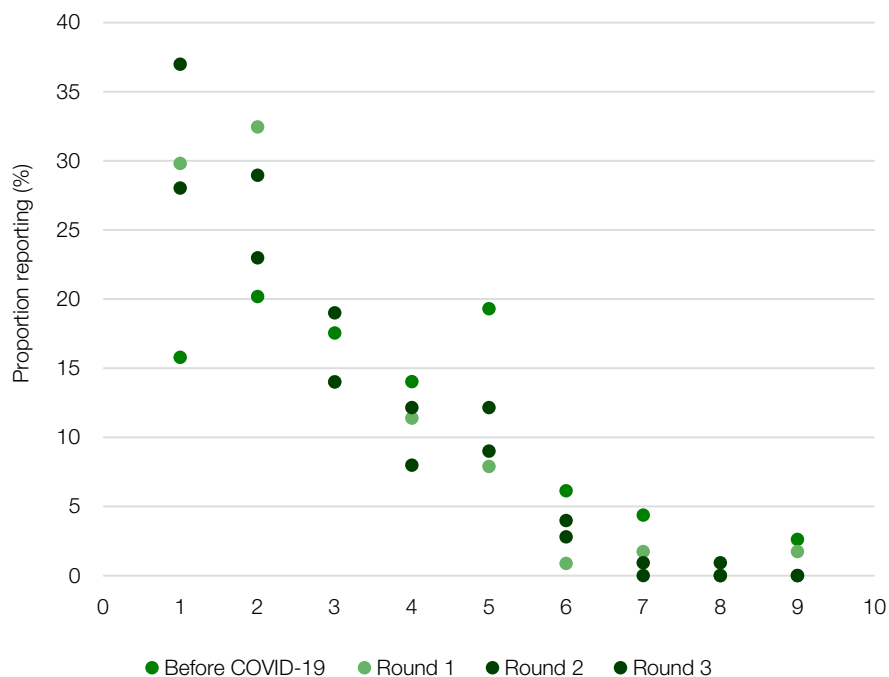
7. Conclusions

This study assessed the effects of COVID-19 on agri-food systems and livelihood in rural Malawi. The data was collected from smallholder farmers and complemented with key informant perspectives about

observed changes. We found that the pandemic has disturbed formal learning for children because of closures to contain the spread of the virus. Evidently, a lower number of children were doing schoolwork at home, with likely repercussions on learning. Additionally, the increase in workload for children during this period have generally matched the well documented gender division of labour in Malawian households with household chores and farm work increasing for the girls and boys respectively, indicating that there is still need for more sensitisation on the importance of gender equity and gender equality.

While farming activities have remained unaffected throughout the three rounds, there are fears that reduced access to extension services may have a negative impact on productivity. Deliberate efforts to enhance smallholder farmers’ access to and use of ICT platforms, like mobile phones for extension and advisory services, are needed as a mitigation measure against COVID-19. As noted, farming households are willing to use digital transactions through mobile money services as one way of reducing the risk of contracting COVID-19. This emerging trend could be explored for both extension services and mobile payments. However, high services charges, and poor and unreliable networks remain a big disincentive in this direction. Significantly reducing the transaction charges and expanding network coverage and capacity by the telecommunication industry may go a long way to increasing the proportions of agricultural and non-

Figure 4: Perceived control over own lives



Source: Own calculations from APRA COVID-19 Rapid Assessment Surveys

agricultural transactions that are done electronically in rural Malawi.

Households that depend on hiring out their labour are finding it increasingly hard to secure on-farm and off-farm employment. The scenario is worsened by reduced incomes due to low produce prices offered to farmers as agricultural marketing has been subdued by COVID-19 restrictions. Moreover, most households had excess labour due to the presence of children at home due to school closures. Social protection interventions like public works programmes could ensure that households that subsist on hiring out labour can gain an income, especially given the general absence of COVID-19 related social assistance.

We find that the food security situation has worsened, with likely implications on hunger, undernourishment, and malnutrition in the communities surveyed. However, food prices and availability have not substantially changed suggesting that household that rely on purchases may still be able to access diverse foods. However, declining incomes and purchasing power commonly associated with the reported increases in COL and perceived poverty threatens households' resilience to access and sustain livelihoods. In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic calls for concerted efforts to safeguard and protect fragile livelihoods, especially of the poor to avoid retreating on progress made towards shared development aspirations like the Sustainable Development Goals.

References

- AGRA (Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa). (2020) *A Rapid Analysis of the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Selected Food Value Chains in Africa*. Nairobi: AGRA.
- Aljazeera. (2021) 'Malawi Declares State of Disaster as Two Ministers Die of COVID-19', Aljazeera [online], 12 January. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/1/12/covid-19-kills-two-malawi-cabinet-ministers> (Accessed: 21 May 2021).
- Chadza, W., Muyanga, M., Burke, W.J. and Nyondo, C. (2020) *Impact of COVID-19 on Agri-Food Systems in Malawi: Farm Level Analysis*. Working Paper No. 20/02. Lilongwe: MwAPATA Institute.
- Chimombo, M. and Matita, M. (2021) 'Perceptions and Misconceptions of Smallholder Farmers of COVID-19 in Central Malawi', *Future Agricultures Blog*, 28 January. Available at: <https://www.future-agricultures.org/blog/perceptions-and-misconceptions-of-smallholder-farmers-of-covid-19-in-central-malawi/> (Accessed: 21 May 2021).
- Chinsinga, B. and Matita, M. (2021) *The Political Economy of the Groundnut Value Chain in Malawi: Its Re-Emergence Amidst Policy Chaos, Strategic Neglect and Opportunism*. APRA Working Paper 56. Brighton:
- Future Agricultures Consortium. Available at: <https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/handle/20.500.12413/16679> (Accessed: 21 May 2021).
- The Lancet Global Health. (2020) 'Food Insecurity Will Be the Sting in the Tail of COVID-19', *The Lancet Global Health* 8(6).
- Ellis, F., Kutengule, M. and Nyasulu, A. (2003) 'Livelihoods and Rural Poverty Reduction in Malawi', 31(9): 1495-1510.
- FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations). (2020) *Emergency Agriculture Food Surveillance System (EMA-FSS): Evidence Based Decision Support in Emergency Situation through Provision of Data and Information, COVID-19 Rapid Response*. Rome: FAO.
- GardaWorld. (2020) 'Malawi: Authorities Suspend International Flights by April 1', *GardaWorld* [online], 2 April. Available at: <https://www.garda.com/crisis24/news-alerts/328586/malawi-authorities-suspend-international-flights-as-of-april-1-update-1> (Accessed: 23 May 2021).
- FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations), IFAD (International Fund for Agricultural Development), UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund), WFP (United Nations World Food Programme) and WHO (World Health Organization). (2020). *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2020. Transforming Food Systems for Affordable Healthy Diets*. Rome: FAO.
- GoM (Government of Malawi). (2021) *Press Statement on Affordable Inputs Programme (AIP)*. Lilongwe: GoM.
- Kansiime, M.K., Tambo, J.A., Mugambi, I., Bundi, M., Kara, A. and Owur, C. (2021). 'COVID-19 Implications on Household Income and Food Security in Kenya and Uganda: Findings from a Rapid Assessment', *World Development* 137: 105199. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2020.105199>.
- Matita, M., Chinsinga, B., Mgalamadzi, L., Mazalale, J., Chimombo, M., Kaiyatsa, S. and Chirwa, E. (2018) *A Longitudinal Tracker Study on Groundnuts Commercialisation and Livelihood Trajectories in Malawi*. Brighton: Future Agricultures Consortium. Available at: <https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/handle/20.500.12413/14006> (Accessed: 20 May 2019).
- McClean, J.E. (2015) 'Beyond the pentagon prison of sustainable livelihood approaches and towards livelihood trajectories approaches', *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* 56(3): 380-391. <https://doi.org/10.1111/apv.12097>
- McNiell, P. and Chapman, S. (2005) *Research Methods*, 3rd edition. New York: Routledge.

Nkhoma, P.R. (2018) 'The Evolution of Agricultural Input Subsidy Programs : Contextualizing Policy Debates in Malawi's FISP', *World Development Perspectives* 9(December 2017): 12-17. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wdp.2017.12.002>.

Ravallion, M. (2012) *Poor, or Just Feeling Poor? On Using Subjective Data in Measuring Poverty*. Policy Research Working Paper Series 5968. Washington, DC: World Bank.

Reuters. (2020) 'Malawi Registers First Confirmed Cases of COVID-19', *Reuters* [online], 2 April. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/health-coronavirus-malawi-idUSL8N2BQ6ZI> (Accessed: 21 May 2021).

Scoones, I. (1998). *Sustainable Rural Livelihoods: A Framework For Analysis*. IDS Working Paper No. 72. Brighton: Institute of Development Studies. Available at: <https://www.ids.ac.uk/publications/sustainable-rural-livelihoods-a-framework-for-analysis/> (Accessed 24 May 2021).

The Times Malawi. (2020) 'No Lockdown', *The Times Malawi* [online], 18 April. Available at: <https://times.mw/no-lockdown/> (Accessed: 24 May 2021).

United Nations Malawi. (2020a) 'Declaration of State of Disaster by Malawi President Peter Mutharika', *United Nations Malawi* [online], 20 March. Available at: <https://malawi.un.org/en/46778-declaration-state-disaster-malawi-president-peter-mutharika> (Accessed: 25 March 2020).

United Nations Malawi. (2020b) 'National COVID-19 Preparedness and Response Plan', *United Nations Malawi* [online], 8 April. Available at: <https://malawi.un.org/en/41854-national-covid-19-preparedness-and-response-plan-8th-april-2020> (Accessed: 25 June 2021).

Voice of America. (2021) 'Malawi Setting UP Field Hospitals to Cope with Virus Surge', *Voice of America* [online], 3 February. Available at: <https://www.voanews.com/covid-19-pandemic/malawi-setting-field-hospitals-cope-virus-surge> (Accessed: 26 March 2021).

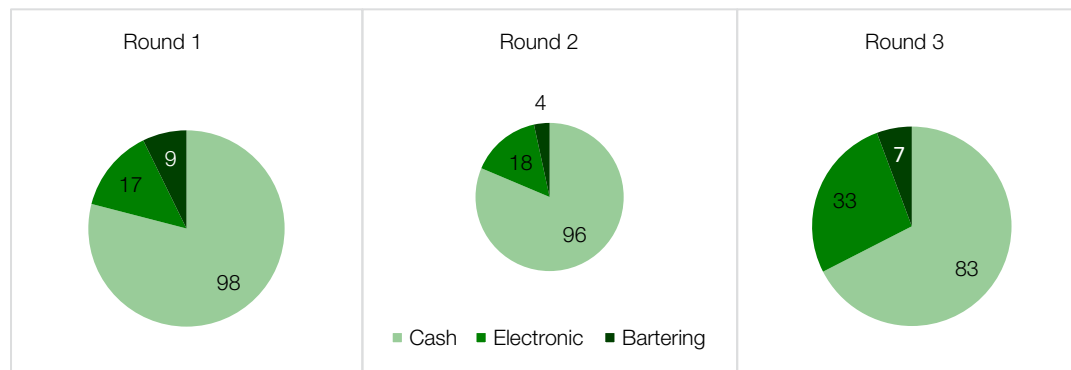
WFP (United Nations World Food Programme). (2020) *Mobile Vulnerability Analysis and Mapping (MVAM) on the Effects of COVID-19 in Malawi*. Washington, D.C: WFP.

World Bank. (2020a) *COVID-19 IMPACT MONITORING*. Washington, D.C: World Bank.

World Bank. (2020b) *From Crisis Response to a Strong Recovery*. Washington, D.C.: World Bank. Available at: <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/835161595529532367/pdf/Malawi-Economic-Monitor-From-Crisis-Response-to-a-Strong-Recovery.pdf> (Accessed: 20 June 2021).

Appendices

Figure A1: Means of paying for business transaction (proportion reporting - %)



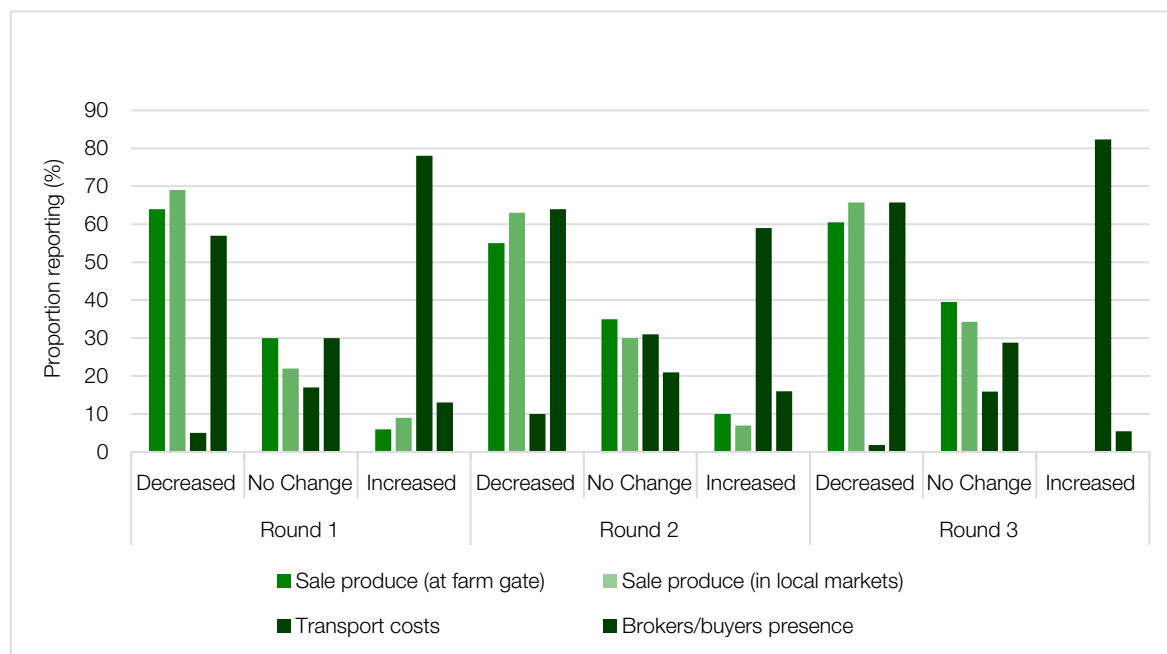
Source: Own calculations from APRA COVID-19 Rapid Assessment Surveys

Table A1: Proportion receiving COVID-19 related assistance (%)

Source of assistance	Round 1	Round 2	Round 3
Family members	30	6	12
Government	46	26	28
Religious organisation	26	14	21
Local village organisation	20	4	15
Other external organisation	12	7	15
No assistance received	31	62	66

Source: Own calculations from APRA COVID-19 Rapid Assessment Surveys

Figure A2: Changes in Marketing activities (Proportion reporting)



Source: Own calculations from APRA COVID-19 Rapid Assessment Surveys

Table A2: Availability of food items and price changes (%reporting)

Food item	Round 1			Round 2			Round 3		
	<	=	>	<	=	>	<	=	>
	Availability								
Grains	46	43	11	49	47	5	25	44	31
White roots and tubers	32	49	19	33	58	9	30	49	21
Pulses, nuts and seeds	40	53	7	45	52	3	39	60	1
Milk and milk products	44	56	0	28	70	2	14	84	2
Meat and poultry	30	65	4	20	73	8	15	85	0
Fish and sea food	35	53	12	21	62	17	21	74	5
Eggs	13	81	5	7	87	5	8	92	0
Dark green leafy vegetables	21	67	12	13	52	35	8	43	49
Other vegetables	17	72	10	12	64	24	6	45	49
Fruits	44	53	4	41	52	7	21	62	17
Processed foods	26	68	6	10	89	1	5	94	1
	Price changes								
Grains	32	31	36	5	36	60	39	30	31
White roots and tubers	14	51	35	10	51	39	14	51	35
Pulses, nuts and seeds	8	44	48	1	48	51	3	50	47
Milk and milk products	4	61	34	2	70	28	1	72	27
Meat and poultry	6	50	43	4	53	43	2	70	28
Fish and sea food	5	60	35	2	59	39	0	70	30
Eggs	3	70	27	5	72	23	1	77	22
Dark green leafy vegetables	9	76	15	11	69	20	34	58	9
Other vegetables	4	84	12	8	67	25	38	58	5
Fruits	6	61	33	4	54	42	24	60	16
Processed foods	4	65	32	0	71	28	1	68	31

Note: < Decreases; = No change; > Increased

Source: Own calculations from APRA COVID-19 Rapid Assessment Surveys

Matita, M and Chimombo, M. (2021) *A Multi-Phase Assessment of the Effects of COVID-19 on Food Systems and Rural Livelihoods in Malawi*. APRA COVID-19 Country Report, Brighton: Future Agricultures Consortium

© APRA 2021

ISBN: 978-1-78118-874-3

DOI: 10.19088/APRA.2021.035



This is an Open Access report distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Non Commercial No Derivatives 4.0 International licence (CC BY-NC-ND), which permits use and distribution in any medium, provided the original authors and source are credited, the work is not used for commercial purposes, and no modifications or adaptations are made.
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode>

If you use the work, we ask that you reference the APRA website (www.future-agricultures.org/apra/) and send a copy of the work or a link to its use online to the following address for our archive: APRA, Future Agricultures Consortium, University of Sussex, Brighton BN1 9RE, UK (apra@ids.ac.uk)

Agricultural Policy Research in Africa (APRA) is a programme of the Future Agricultures Consortium (FAC) which is generating new evidence and policy-relevant insights on more inclusive pathways to agricultural commercialisation in Sub-Saharan Africa. APRA is funded with UK aid from the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) and will run from 2016-2022.

The APRA Directorate is based at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), UK (www.ids.ac.uk), with regional hubs at the Centre for African Bio-Entrepreneurship (CABE), Kenya, the Institute for Poverty, Land and Agrarian Studies (PLAAS), South Africa, and the University of Ghana, Legon. It builds on more than a decade of research and policy engagement work by the Future Agricultures Consortium (www.future-agricultures.org) and involves more than 100 researchers and communications professionals in Africa, UK, Sweden and USA

Funded by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office



Foreign, Commonwealth
& Development Office



This report is funded with UK aid from the UK government (Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office – FCDO, formerly DFID). The opinions are the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of IDS or the UK government